Homecoming
by ineffable_wren

Summary

This is my post S5 fic. To understand some of it you should really read my S5 re-write, Reverberations. Some of the things that come up in Homecoming are based on substantial differences to canon.

It starts approximately seven months after Justin left Pittsburgh to seek fame and fortune in New York.

The first chapter was originally published in June 2005.

The overall story is followed by Homework, which I am still working on.

There are also a few odd one offs that fit roughly into the Homecoming universe, most of them future!fics.
Notes

Justin and Brian have different views on a couple of things.
Homecoming

Justin

I try to remember how it felt to be an artist - to think of myself as an artist. Not as a “personality”, a commodity, but as a creator, a person who could take line and color and use them to express feelings, passions, ideas.

But I truly can’t remember how it felt to think of myself that way.

For weeks, months, I feel like I’ve been caught between the twin pressures of having a “For Sale” sign suspended permanently, if metaphorically, over my head, while at the same time the sale room is empty, bankrupt of stock.

I’ve been here for nearly seven months now. The first couple of months weren’t too bad. It was still a joy to me to create. And after each of Brian’s visits, I’d paint for days like a madman, barely stopping to eat or sleep. I felt like an “Artist”. I felt like I was living the dream. Then, of course, reality set in.

To start with, Brian’s visits have gradually become less frequent.

Originally, we’d agreed that every second weekend, one of us would make the trip. And that we’d alternate visits. So once a month, each of us would make the trip to visit the other.

But in the first months there’d always been a “reason” why I couldn’t go back to Pittsburgh. At first, I was busy “settling in”. Actually, I did that fairly quickly. Thanks to that cun … critic’s article, I found an agent in the first few weeks, and she found me somewhere affordable to work. Of course, after that, there’d always been some showing or opening that I was advised I simply “must” attend. I had to get my face seen in all the right places, with all the right people. I had to make sure that the right people knew who I was.

It didn’t matter, it seemed, if they liked me or not. It didn’t even matter if they liked my work. I just had to be a “face”; a personality, someone who was seen to be part of the scene. Someone whose name was familiar enough for their work to sell. In other words, a commodity.

At first, Brian … he just fitted in with all that. When I couldn’t get back to Pittsburgh, he’d fly to NY instead. If he thought that some of the reasons I didn’t go back were spurious, he just let it slide. I was grateful for that at the time. Because I couldn’t tell him the real reason.

He’d been so proud of me. When he stood with me that last day in the loft, and told me that I’d become the best homosexual I could be, I knew that he said it because he thought I was strong and brave, because I wasn’t scared to take risks and go for the whole lot, not just settle for what I thought I could have …

But … I thought my heart would crack. I felt … It was too much, almost. I didn’t know how to tell him that I was terrified. Not of NY. Not really. Well, a bit … but …

I was terrified of losing him.

And just as scared of losing his respect if I didn’t take this chance. He’d already taunted me, that terrible, wonderful afternoon when we decided to call off the wedding, with being scared. That afternoon was one of the most difficult times of my life, but it was also one of the best. Because Brian and I really communicated. We lay in that bed and talked and really worked out what was
important to us. What would work for us.

And he made it clear that he believed that I’d always regret it if I didn’t take this chance, and that he didn’t want either of us to have to live with that. Just like I didn’t want either of us to have to live with us trying to become some sort of model gay couple, with the home and the garden and all the other crap that for a while I seriously thought I needed. What a moron I can be.

So took the chance. I came here to New York. And, doing that, I tore something loose inside me. Something that made me who I am … who I used to be, anyway. Something that made me an artist, a creator. Something that made me alive.

I left him, and leaving, I left so much of myself behind that I …

I’ve been too scared to go back. That’s the truth.

It was bad enough when he came here. He’d be here for two days - three nights, and two days, and then … he’d be gone. He always tried to get the 5.45 flight from Pittsburgh which was scheduled to land at 7.08. I’d be at the airport from 6.30 onwards. Too keyed up to eat, or even have a drink, just pacing around the arrivals bay. Waiting. Waiting to come alive again. Waiting for the moment when he’d be there, and I could start to breathe again. Start to feel again. And then Monday morning … he’d leave. On the bad weeks, when he had some meeting on the Monday, he’d have to get up before dawn to catch the 6.15 flight. Those weeks I didn’t sleep at all that night. I’d just lie there all night, feeling him there, breathing him in, trying to store it all up inside me to last me till next time. If I was lucky and he didn’t have any meetings - or none in the morning, anyway, he’d take the 9.15 flight, and I’d have three precious hours more. Three more hours to touch him, smell him, taste him, drown in him.

Then he’d be gone and for days I’d madly try to put everything I’d felt down on paper or canvas, before it all drained away again into the nothingness I felt all the rest of the time.

So the simple truth is that if I’d gone back … I’d never have been able to leave again.

And I had needed to do this. I’d needed to prove to myself that I could do it. That I could be the man he thinks I am. Or thought I was. Or …

I don’t know anymore.

It all seems so foolish now.

But that was why I’d come here … to be the person he believed me to be. I loved that he believed in me. I loved that he respected me, respected us, so much …

I loved it so much that I put everything at risk rather than let him down, rather than be less than he wanted me to be, less than he believed I could be.

And now … now I’m left wondering why.

Wondering whether it was worth it.

Because …

Because now I’m afraid that it was all too high a price to pay. That, in trying to have it all, I might be left with nothing. Nothing that means anything to me, anyway. Sure my name is starting to get known here and there, and my paintings are starting to sell? But so what?
I feel like a complete fool. I wish I’d thought back further to the first time Brian gave me advice about my career; the time when he told me “it’s easier doing what’s expected”. Because ain’t that the truth? And what was expected, was that I’d come here. What would have been the smart, the wise, the brave thing to do, would have been to say “fuck it! it’s not what I want”.

But I couldn’t. Because I didn’t want to let him down, to have him think less of me. And because I was just plain fucking stupid. Stupid enough to buy into the bullshit, the hype.

And now, now that I know that. It might be too late.

Because, after those first few months, Brian stopped coming here on “my” weekends.

He’d had a client in town the first time, someone he needed to entertain. It was Remson’s. They’d gone with their idiotic wishy-washy campaign, and of course it bombed. So Remson had come back to him. If it was anyone but Remson’s I think Brian would have let them sweat. But they’d been his first big client. They’d made the whole thing possible. And Remson himself had coughed up the money for the Bike Ride, the money that made the whole Vic Grassi house thing happen.

So Brian feels some sort of loyalty to him, and he wanted to mend fences, I guess. I could understand that. I’m not the silly boy who threw a temper tantrum and ran off to Vermont and spent the most miserable week of my life there all alone, because I couldn’t cope with Brian taking care of business.

I might have smoked an extra joint or two that weekend. Tried to drown my sorrows in JB and vodka. Hell! I even tried to paint my misery out … put it all on canvas … like that was going to work. But I understood.

But it happened the next time, too.

That time, he didn’t even make an excuse, just let it go. Let it slide. Let the weekend slip away.

I felt like it wasn’t just the weekend. I felt him, us, slowly slipping out of my grasp. I felt him letting me go.

But what could I say?

I had an open ticket. I could have flown home.

I didn’t.

And he didn’t come here.

And it was another two weeks before I saw him.

I don’t know what was worse, the fear before he arrived that things would be different, that there would be some sort of gulf between us. Or the fear that descended after he arrived. The fear that came because it wasn’t different. It was close and warm and whole and healing. It was being able to breathe again, able to see, and hear, and feel. It was being alive again. And it was going to end again, I was going to die again, on Monday morning.

I think that weekend was the worst of all.

Then, the weekend before last, he cancelled his own visit. More business that needed to be taken care of.
We’ve spoken on the phone since then. Emailed every day, like always. But the phone calls are difficult, painful. Neither of us knows what to say. Both of us fear the silence, fear what’s behind the silence. But neither of us can break it.

And the emails say nothing.

I know that he believes I’m moving on. Moving away from him. And I know he’s gearing up to let me go.

So, before he can find a Kinney cliff to throw me off, I have to find my own cliff, find my own courage to jump over the edge.

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Brian

When the door starts to slide open, I breathe out a volley of curses. I’m just getting the outline for the fucking Remson’s presentation finished, and once that’s done …

Once that’s done I can try to work out what to do about the weekend.

It’s Thursday night. If I want a flight tomorrow night, I have to book it now.

If I want it …

That’s fucking funny. That’s hilarious.

I want it like I want to go on breathing.

More.

But should I take it? that’s the question, boys and girls. Should I head back for one last taste, maybe try to find the courage to do this thing face to face. To …

But I can’t think about that now because some fucking do-gooder is here, wanting to make sure I’m okay. Mikey. Or Deb. I haven’t been to the diner for a few days, a week, maybe. So of course, I must be dead, or dying, or drinking myself into a stupor, or just fucking pining away.

I take my time saving the presentation.

For some reason, just the idea of what I have to do this weekend, or next, or whenever I get up the fucking courage to do it, has …

If he were here, I’d tell him I’d caught his fucking allergies.

If he were here.

Fuck it, Kinney, don’t go there! Not now. Not while there is a guest to entertain. Or to be entertained by the sight of Brian fucking Kinney falling apart at the seams because he finally has to face reality.

Funny, I’ve hidden from it for so long, and now it’s here, right here in my refuge, my safe place, my home; it’s finally found me, here where I’ve been trying for weeks to pretend that it doesn’t exist. To pretend that everything’s okay. Well, as okay as it can be when all the parts of me that matter are stretched to the breaking point, to the screaming point, over the three hundred miles between here and New York. It’s so ironic that the final face off with reality comes here, where
I’ve been trying to burrow down into memories and dreams and never let reality in through the door. But it’s found me all the same.

Somehow, then, I know before I turn around who it is who’s come me.

And I know why. He always has had more balls than I do … even if you count my plastic one. It figures that he’s the one who’s had the courage to seek me out, to face me, to do this right. I can only try to match his courage, and not fall into a screaming fucking heap.

I turn and face him, and try to stand up straight and tall, and not let the pain show. I can’t let him down. I have to be able to do this. I have to let him go easily; free and clear and guilt free. I have to be able to say goodbye.

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Justin


Fuck! He looks terrible.

No, he looks stunning. He always looks stunning - especially when he’s not trying, when he’s just in jeans and tee and bare feet. God! how I love his feet.

But his face … the pain in his face.

Then he gives one of those twisted grins, and says, “Hey, Sunshine.”

Like I just went out the door this morning.

But his eyes …

Oh, God! what have I done?

I want to run to him. Make him take me into his arms, take me to bed, take me, anywhere, anyhow, just take me back.

But I know already that it’s not going to be that easy. This time apart has done too much damage. I’ve done too much damage. Or, at least, I’ve let too much damage happen. I should have known this was how it would go. I know him. I know how hard it is for him to believe in anything, let alone believe in something as ridiculous as love.

But damage can be fixed. I believe that. I have to believe that.

I smile at him.

“Hey, yourself.”

Then I go to him. I feel, rather than see, him stiffen as I walk towards him. And not, as he’d say himself, in a positive life-affirming way. But I don’t let it stop me.

He braces himself, and, very gently, I start to touch him.

As soon as I do, I almost lose it. I want to throw myself on top of him. Throw myself into his arms and drown in him. I feel like I could do that happily if it meant that I’d never have to leave the haven of him, of being his, again. But I’m not there yet. Right now, that haven is still out of my
reach.

So I touch his arms, and run my fingers up to his shoulders.

He sticks his tongue in his cheek, and looks down at me like he’s trying to work out what I’m up to.

God! Brian, just reach for me already!

But he doesn’t. He stands there, with that look on his face, and that pain burning in his eyes, and suddenly I know what to say.

“I hope that drawer’s still empty, because I bought a lot of shit in New York.”

He gives a strangled sort of laugh, and shakes his head. Not in denial, but in disbelief.

I put my hands on his face.

“I’ve come home,” I say. “It’s time for me to come home.”

His face changes, then. His lips twist, and his eyes fill, and he gives a sort of gasp.

Then, of course, being Brian, he pushes me away.

He stands there, shaking his head.

“No,” he says.

That’s all, just ‘no’.

I smile at him.

“Yes,” I say.

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Brian

He’s standing here, right in front of me, saying that he wants to come home. Just throw it all away. All these months. Throw away everything he’s worked for.

I can’t fucking do this. I want to scream at him. I want to take him and throw him down the fucking stairs. I want …

I want …

Then he smiles at me, and I’m lost. Just … lost.

His hands are touching me again.

His hands.

And suddenly, none of it matters. Not the pain, not the loneliness there’ll be once he’s gone again. Once I’ve had to make him leave again. Nothing. Only this. Only the feel of his skin on mine.

Fuck!
My hands find their way into his hair, and my tongue is probing at his mouth, and then I’m home. He’s home. He’s here. Fuck me, but he’s here.

And then it’s all just heat and need and him. Him. Justin.

Oh, fuck! It’s Justin. It’s Justin.

Justin’s hands on my body, Justin’s spit in my mouth, Justin’s cock in my hand. Justin. The smell, the taste, the everything that’s Justin.

And right now, that’s the only thing that matters.

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Justin

I guess that some people would say that we should have talked first. Should have got things out into the open, discussed them, reached some sort of understanding, before we fell into bed together. Well, technically we fell onto the sofa, and then the table, and then we fell into the shower … but you know what I mean.

But they’d be wrong. There was a time when I’d get frustrated that Brian would try to use fucking to make me feel better about things instead of “really” communicating. That was before I realized that he doesn’t do that. He uses fucking to communicate. Which is a very different thing.

Now, I use it too.

I let my body - my mouth, my hands, my tongue, my toes even, tell him how much I’ve missed him. How much I need him. How much I love him.

And then, to make sure he gets all the messages, when we’re finally just leaning against each other in the shower, I say, “So, about that drawer …”

He sighs, and starts to pull away. “Justin, you know …”

He breaks off and takes a breath. “I know that you think … I know that …”

“Brian,” I say firmly. “You don’t know shit.”

He blinks at me, and I get out of the shower and hand him a towel. I grab one for myself, start drying my arms. All the while looking into his eyes.

He tries to look away, but I move in closer, and don’t let him. I stand there, until he meets my eyes again.

Then I say, “Everyone told me that I needed to go to New York. Needed to take advantage of the moment. Needed to make the contacts. All of that crap.”

“Justin … it takes time, that’s all. You have to keep …”

“No. I don’t. I got what I needed to out of New York. I got an agent. She’s good. She’ll make sure that I get invitations to all the right shows. The “important” ones. The ones that I “have” to be seen at. And I’ll fly up for them.”

He looks at me now, like he might be starting to see some light at the end of a very long tunnel, but he’s afraid to trust in it, afraid to believe it might be daylight, in case it’s just some stray, short lived
will-o-the-wisp.

I smile at him, suddenly longing to share this news with him. The news that I’ve been hugging to myself for the last few days. The news I couldn’t share with anyone but him, and couldn’t tell him over the phone. The news that is, I hope, going to reassure him, make him understand, make him know it’s alright. That he doesn’t have to let me go so that I can fly. That I can soar as high as the sky without ever leaving his arms.

“And in October I’ll have to go up for a few weeks, for my show.”

There’s a moment of absolute stillness, silence so deep that the sound of the shower dripping seems to echo through the loft.

Then, for the first time, his eyes light up. He pulls his lips into his mouth for a moment, and then he says, the pride already there in his voice, “Your show?”

I smile, and nod, and that’s when I do what I’ve been longing to do ever since I walked through the door. I throw myself into his arms and kiss him and kiss him and kiss him. Not with hunger or need or anything except the sheer joy of being able to do it.

He grins, and hugs me. His arms tight around me, he picks me up, right off the floor, and sort of shakes me. Then he puts me down and, cupping the back of my head in one hand, he looks deep into my eyes.

I beam at him, and let him see it all. See my longing and my need and my over the moon happiness to be here, to be home.

And then he kisses me. Long and deep and sweet. And I lean into him and I feel my eyes stinging, because now, at last, I am home.

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Brian

I hardly know how to hold it all in … all the aching loneliness, all the months of missing him, all the … the joy, at having him here. Having him home.

Home.

He means it. He’s come home. He is home.

And now that he is, I realize two things.

One is that I never thought this would happen. Never believed that it would.

The other is that I’ve been hoping for this to happen every moment of every day since the day he left. Clinging to that hope somehow with bleeding fingertips and all the while berating myself for not just letting go.

But I didn’t. I somehow didn’t. I held on. Well, till this last couple of weeks. And even then … I still called him, although hearing his voice made my gut ache. I sat and emailed every day, though my fingers stumbled on the keys and sometimes I could hardly see the screen to be sure what I’d typed wasn’t a plea for him to get his ass back here. I didn’t walk away. I didn’t give up on us. I held on.
Somehow I believed enough in him, if not in us, to try to hold on.

I wonder if he’ll ever know how much that says about how I feel about him.

Then I stop thinking about that, because it doesn’t matter any more. What matters now is all the other stuff. The stuff about why he went in the first place.

“Your show?” I say again.

He grabs the robe off the back of the door, the one that’s been hanging there all these months, and pulls it on. “It’s just a small one. A small gallery. But ‘it has a very good reputation’.”

He says that in a snotty New York accent, so I know that he’s quoting his agent. She’s okay, really. Well, she’s a shark, but that’s a good thing, since she’s on his side, is invested in making him a success. But, fuck! she’s on the premium scale of pretentiousness when she wants to be.

I can feel my pride in him swelling up inside me, even as I pull on some sweats and follow him, inevitably, to the fridge.

A fucking New York show.

I take a breath and try not to get ahead of myself. He pulls open the fridge door and makes a face. Of course there’s no fucking food, Sunshine, I didn’t exactly plan on having to feed you this weekend. I reach past him and open the freezer. That is crammed with stuff that either Deb has put there, or Emmett has. If it was up to those two I’d be the size of a damned mammoth by now.

He grabs out some stuff and dumps it into the microwave.

“So … how many artists are in the show?” I ask. I want it to be just him. I want this for him so badly. But I can’t let him see that. Can’t let him see me disappointed if …

He grins at me. I’m not fooling him for a minute, and I can read the answer in his eyes, in his smile, before he can get the words out.

“Just me,” he says, doing his best to sound cool about it, but his pride and pleasure are bubbling in him like good champagne.

I smile at him and nod. And then I grab him and kiss him again. So he knows. Knows how fucking proud of him I am. Knows that it was all worth it. Knows that it’s okay to want this. To want this success. And knows that somehow we’ll find a way to patch our lives around it.

“So,” I say, needing suddenly to get this out the way, “shouldn’t you be in New York putting some work together.”

His smile fades, and I wonder what I’ve said. Then he sighs. So deep, it’s like a death rattle. I put my hand round his neck and pull him close, squatting a little so I can look in his eyes. They’re dark and sad, and I feel …

I feel cold, and I feel anger pushing at me, burning in my gut, in my throat, on my tongue, trying to get out.

What the fuck! He just told me … told me in all the ways there are, that he’s come home. Now what? He’s going to tell me that’s what he really wants to do but he just can’t? Well fuck that!

I step back, away from him, and he gives a little gasp, and then he’s pressing against me, arms
round me, tying himself to me.

“I can’t, Brian. I’m sorry. I tried. But I can’t. I won’t.”

His words are choked and I can hardly hear them, can’t understand even what I can hear.

“Justin …”

“I just can’t do it there. I tried. I did try. I did. I didn’t want to let you down. To have you think I couldn’t do it, didn’t have the balls to even try. But it’s not me. Not who I am. Not what I want.”

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Justin

I feel like howling now. Just a moment ago I was so happy, so proud that I’d made him proud, and now …

Now I feel like a child. A silly child who’s tried to take on something that is way beyond their strength and skill and now’s the time that everyone is going to know it.

I might have made the right contacts. I might even have an agent who’s conned someone into giving me a show. But I can’t cut it there. Not on their terms. I’m not … strong enough … or shallow enough, or something. Not … something. Not whatever it is that lets you be part of that scene. Really be part of the whole New York experience.

I don’t even want to be. I want to be an artist on my terms. I want my life. My whole life. The life I could have with him.

And now Brian’s angry with me. Disappointed in me. And I want to say “fuck him!”. But I don’t blame him. Because it means all this, all these last months, it’s all been for nothing. All the pain and the loneliness, and it’s …

I can feel myself choking.

And then he’s holding me. Just holding me. His cheek against my hair. His arms so warm around me. And suddenly, it doesn’t matter. I’m sorry if he’s disappointed in me, but …

I need this. I need him. I need to be with him. To sit in our home, wherever that is, and eat and talk and laugh and fuck and be with him.

I hug him, and then I look up at him, and touch my hand to his face so that he’ll listen to me.

“Brian, listen to me. Are you listening?”

I go on before he can answer, the words spilling out of me like tears.

“I can’t go on living there, Brian. I don’t live there. I just survive. It’s not where I want to be. I want to be here. With you. I miss you so much that I feel like … I’m so empty inside most of the time, and I feel like there’s nothing of me there that’s real, that’s me … I feel like a stranger in my own body. I don’t know who I am. I only know who I want to be … and it isn’t someone I can be there.”

My words trail off and, as the microwave beeps, he stares at me, head slightly tilted to one side.

“Then why the fuck didn’t you just come home?” he asks.
Brian

Of all the fucking stupid little twats!

I don’t know whether to slap him silly or kiss him senseless. All these fucking months …

Then I laugh.

What does it matter? He’s here now. And we’d better find somewhere for him to work. If he’s got a show coming up, he’ll need something to put in it.

I take the plate he hands me, and open the fridge to grab a couple of beers. We sit at the counter, stools close together, his knee pressing against mine. I take a mouthful of food, suddenly feeling for the first time in months like maybe I could eat something and not feel it choking me.

He inhales a fair portion of his serve, and then says, “So … you don’t mind? I mean, I know you wanted me to …”

I cut that bullshit off right away. “Justin … all I wanted was for you to take your chance when it came along. And you have. You’ve got a fucking New York show coming up for chrissakes!”

He looks at me, that little worried frown still between his eyes, but I know that all he can see in my face is pride in him … and happiness. And relief. That most of all, probably.

He dips his head and then raises it again, and now the frown is gone and the light is back in his eyes, and who needs fucking food? I could just feast on this for weeks, months. Not taking my eyes off him, I take another mouthful of Deb’s damned tuna thingy and gulp down some beer.

“So … what do you need to do?”

He sighs … not sad this time, but … relieved, I guess. Like he’d just put down some heavy burden he’d been carting around for a long long time, and then he grins.

“Well, first I think I need to suck you, and then I need to fuck you, and then I need …”


But it’s bullshit, and he knows it. I don’t bottom often. But for Justin … well, that’s different. That’s not like … It’s not like giving up control. Or maybe it is. But that’s alright. With him, that’s alright. Occasionally. Like in about half an hour maybe, when this damned pasta has had time to settle. Meanwhile …

I look around for his bag. It’s just a carry on.

“Doesn’t seem like that’ll take up too much space in the drawer,” I say.

He grins. “Oh, I wouldn’t count on keeping all the closet space just yet. The rest should arrive on Monday.”

He looks at me, and I meet his eyes. There’s just a tiny question in them. So I stick my tongue into my cheek and grin at him. Then I fucking swear someone switches on every light in the loft as he smiles back at me. And I figure maybe it’s time for dessert.

I reach for him, and he comes into my arms and I just bury my face in his hair, in his neck, in
Justin. I hold him, and he holds me. And I finally believe it. Really believe it.

He’s home.
The boys decide to make a run for it, to hide away for a few days to get used to their reunion.

Brian

I hadn’t planned on sleeping at all, there are more urgent things to do with the night, but something happens and somehow it’s morning and the fucking buzzing that’s cutting through the warm haze of Justin-in-my-bed-where-he-belongs and waking-up-next-to-Justin is the damned phone and while I’m ready to rip it from the wall, I am not moving out of this bed, so it can go fuck itself.

But of course, he wakes up then and after a sleepy smile in my direction, says pathetically, “Can you get that, it’s making me want to puke?”

Wuss!

We didn’t even have that much to drink. Just cracked a bottle of champagne to celebrate his show - well, that’s what I said at the time, anyway. He saw right through that and laughed and kissed me again. That was after our third go round, I think.

And then there was the joint after the fourth - or was it the fifth?

As I get up I realize that my cock is damned sore. I bet his ass is smarting too. I finally find the damned phone and press the button, heading for the bathroom. I find what I’m looking for on the shelf as Cynthia’s voice babbles in my ear about ‘where the fuck am I?’ and ‘did I forget the presentation at ten?’.
I toss the tube of cream onto the bed and tell her that I’m taking the day, and she and Ted will have to do the presentation. She’s still babbling as I click the off button. Tough shit. I pay them enough. They’ll have to deal. Truth is, they’re more than capable of handling a not all that critical presentation for a smallish client. I should just have had one or other of them take it on right from the beginning. I’ve been clutching on to every piece of work that crossed my desk in a desperate attempt to fill up the hours. But not anymore. I don’t have to anymore.

I fall onto the bed beside the reason for that, and he rolls into my arms.

“I didn’t mean to make you play hookey,” he says.

I kiss him and turn him onto his stomach, holding up the tube when he starts to murmur something that might actually be a protest. His hole looks a little red and tender, so I kiss it better, then I smooth in some of the cream, easing it into him. He hisses in satisfaction, and relief, and I roll him onto his back and lick my way up his stomach to his neck, paying just a quick visit to his nipples on the way.

I nuzzle into the place where his neck meets his shoulder, soaking in the warm morning-Justin smell of him. He gives a long sigh, and reaches up to stroke my hair. For a moment, I pull back to look at him, to make sure that the sigh is as happy as it sounded. He tangles his fingers in my hair and smiles at me.

Then I can’t look at him any more. I might go blind. I close my eyes and find my way to his mouth. I catch his delicious, full bottom lip between mine and suck at it a little. His tongue moves across my upper lip and then my mouth is opening and his tongue is finding its way inside and he’s warm and hungry and real against me. For a moment I remember all the times I woke up dreaming this moment, only to have it vanish into cold empty sheets the moment I opened my eyes.

But not this time. I grab his hair and tug it hard, biting at his lips and the little fucker laughs at me, and bites back, his own hands strong and possessive on my shoulders.

I can feel my own smile, and I want to hide it, want to hide at least some of what I’m feeling, try to have some shred of dignity left, some scrap of pride, just in case. Then he says, “If you knew how many times I dreamed of waking up next to you …”

His eyes swim for a moment, but he blinks the wetness back.

“I don’t want to do this any more, Brian. I don’t care how good the chance looks, how much sense it seems to make to take it. If it means not being able to wake up like this … I just don’t want to do it.”

He looks into my eyes for a long moment.

“Yes?” he asks.

I can feel something stinging my eyes. Must be something to do with the light that shines from him. I clench my jaw to try to get back some control.

What does he think? How much of this fucking Justin’s-leaving and will-he-ever-come-back? does he think I can take?

I remember that first night with him- well, the part before my sonny boy’s birth sent me diving for a pharmaceutical cureall for the loud ticktickticking of my youth slipping away, anyway. I remember standing in front of him asking, “Are you coming or going? Or coming and then going? Or coming and staying?”
Shit!

If I’d only known then that the answer to that was going to be so damned complicated and drawn out and fucking painful, I would have kicked his ass to the curb on the spot.

I thank whatever God would believe in me, that I there are some things that even the smartassed bastard I was then didn’t know.

“Okay,” I nod.

He smiles up at me, his eyes swimming again, and breathes, “Thank you,” as he pulls me down into his arms.

***

Justin

Okay. He said, ‘okay’. And I think he means it. I think he gets it. I think he finally understands that careers come and go; if you’re lucky, you might “make it” - whatever that means. But if making it costs you everything you really want, everything that makes you whole and happy - then what sort of luck is that?

I know he’s always wanted me to be free to make the choices I needed to make. But now I think he finally understands that if I am really free to choose, then I choose this. I choose him. He’s never given me that much freedom before, but I think he’s ready to now.

I feel him wince against my shoulder as my fingers brush his cock, and I realize that he’s sore. So am I. So I wrap my arms around his neck instead and we just lay there making out for a long time.

Eventually, though, I have to get up to go to the bathroom. So he pulls on some sweats and puts the coffee on and when I stumble out to the kitchen, wrapped in his robe, he’s raided the freezer for some frozen waffles that must have been there since before I left, and is foraging in the cupboards looking for the syrup.

I make a mental note that we can’t live entirely on frozen food, so sometime soon we’re going to have to do some shopping, and then he straightens up and looks at me.

His lips twitch as he notices the way I’m walking and he’s trying not to laugh, the asshole. I go to him and punch him, hard, on the arm.

“Like you’re going to be any better off once you try to stuff that evil … thing … into some tight jeans.”

He shakes his head. “Not happening, Sunshine. Sweats or a robe for me. I’m not planning on leaving the premises any time soon.

I feel myself grinning like a fool. “Me either,” I say happily.

***

Brian

He comes to the counter and perches on the edge of a stool. I suppose I should feel some twinge of remorse, I might, too, if he hadn’t just about worn out my dick. The microwave bings and I heap waffles on a plate for him. He smoothes them with syrup while I pour myself a coffee and then I
come round and sit next to him and I can’t help it, I haven’t had my hands on him for over ten minutes so I reach for him and we kiss. Again. And again. And then some more.

It’s as if I just can’t get enough of him.

My hands are tangled in his hair, and his are wrapped around my arms and his breath is in my mouth and his scent in my nostrils and I feel whole for the first time in months.

The times we were together in New York … they were like brief fragile moments when I got a glimpse of what wholeness was; but the return ticket burning my pocket made sure that I knew those glimpses were of an illusion. A beautiful, dearly held illusion; but one that was going to collapse in on itself as soon as I stepped through the security gate alone.

Now, though, now is real. This is real. As that thought swamps me with relief once again, I wrap my arms right round him and hug him so tightly that I nearly pull us both off our stools. That breaks the kiss, and we right ourselves laughing. I think I’d forgotten what laughter was until last night.

He attacks the waffles, and I sip my coffee and watch him. I feel joyful, content even. And the relief is so potent that my whole body feels relaxed, all the misery of the last months, all the tension of these last weeks when I was so sure I’d lost him, they’re all just washed away by his presence, by the knowledge that, against all my worst expectations, he’s come home.

As I watch, filling my hungry heart with the mere sight of him there eating his breakfast, he forks another piece of waffle and waves it in my face. I try to push it aside, and he brushes it across my lips. The syrup is sticky, and instinctively my tongue darts out to lick it away. As soon as my mouth opens, he deftly slides the waffle inside.

There are all sorts of ways I should react to that little piece of sentimental fucking nonsense, and none of them include sucking the soggy pastry off the fork, and making a big show of savoring it before swallowing slowly, and then sensuously running my tongue over my lips.

But he’s here. Right here. Looking into my eyes and watching me. His own tongue joins mine to lick away every last drop of the syrup. They tangle for a while, twisting together, stoking each other, and we kiss, gentle and slow and happy.

Then he smiles at me, and feeds me some more waffle.

I smile back.

And let him.

***

Justin

Unbelievably, neither of us is up to fucking this morning, so we just dawdle over breakfast and a shower, and then we do some housework together.

We talk a little along the way … mainly silly things like who should get to wear the robe, and which sheets we should put on the bed, and whether we really need to get some food. Brian is convinced that we can live on takeaway and the frozen stuff, I want real food. No surprises there. We finish making the bed, and reach a compromise on the groceries - we’re going to get some, but order them online. Brian is at the computer looking for his favorite delivery website, and I’m putting my clothes (what little I brought with me) in the drawer, when the phone rings. He ignores
it, so I do too, and it goes to voice mail. Mikey, of course.

“Brian … Brian are you there? I called the office and that blonde bimbo you keep there said that she couldn’t put me through to you but she wouldn’t say why. And you’re not answering your cell. Where are you? Are you alright? Please tell me that you’re not going off to New York again. Brian … I know it hurts, but it’s obvious he’s never coming back here, so…”

Brian’s face is awful, and I walk over and turn down the sound. If he wants, he can listen to the rest of the message later.

“So … no surprises there,” I say, trying to keep my tone light.

He gives a sort of half laugh. But it’s a sad sound.

I walk over to him and wrap my arms around him from behind, rubbing my face against his. “Fuck him,” I say. “FUCK all of them if they just don’t get it.”

He puts his hands over mine but says nothing for what seems like a long while. Just sits there, his cheek still warm against mine. Finally, he says softly, “Does anyone know you’re home?”


Somehow I feel his smile. I can only see the very corner of his mouth, but I know he’s smiling. He puts his hands over mine. He’s silent again for a moment, then he says, “Let’s get out of here.”

I twist my neck to try to get a look at his face. “I thought you were the one who …”

“We could go to the house.”

His words fall into a deep pool of silence.

The house.

The house he bought for me, for us, and instead of living in it with him, I left him and went to New York.

The house was the only thing that we nearly fought over. I wanted him to sell it. It was a symbol of the whole … To me it represented a sort of madness that I’d fallen into. A time when I’d given importance to a whole lot of things that just didn’t matter at all really. It was almost another Ethan time. Or Cody time. I fall into these things, fall sick with them. That’s how it feels, as if they’re some kind of illness; I suffer from it, I make Brian suffer along with me, and then I recover and I have no idea why it happened, what I was thinking. I just feel incredibly stupid, and unbelievably lucky that when it’s over somehow he’s still around.

That’s how I felt about the house, and all that it represented to me, what all that shit cost us. And now he’s suggesting that we go there. Now. When we’re finally …

I stop thinking and look at him, moving to sit on the edge of the desk, so I can see his face.

“I thought it was rented out,” I say slowly.

He shrugs. “Hockey player,” he says. “Got traded at the end of the season.”

All of a sudden it makes some kind of sense.
If we stay here, there are going to be more of the phone calls. Or “friends” dropping around. And I don’t want to see anyone else yet. I just don’t.

But if the car is gone, they’ll all just think Brian has gone to New York. And they know neither of us ever answers our phone on our weekends together. Brian has a special beeper if there’s an emergency with Gus, but I don’t think that Linds has ever used it. Which is good, I guess.

“We could get some food on the way up there,” he wheedles, walking his fingers up my thigh.

The way he says it is so … well, cute. Although he’d kill me for even thinking that. Suddenly I find myself laughing. “You could have thought of this before I unpacked,” I grumble. He laughs with me and pulls me onto his lap.

“What makes you think you’re going to need any clothes?” he asks.

***

Brian

I knew it was pushing things, suggesting the house. But I want to get out of here. I feel that at any moment someone else’s opinions are going to come crashing through the door and pouring all over us, and I’ve had enough of those to last me a lifetime. We both have.

Hard to say why I’ve been hanging onto the house. I mean, in one way it doesn’t make much sense. But, it’s not like it’s been sitting empty the whole time. It was rented out at a fucking exorbitant rate to some hot shot hockey player for most of the time. More than covered the mortgage payments. And … well, keeping it made sense to me. Even if we’re not ready for that yet, either of us, maybe some day we will be. And when that time comes …

Anyway, the house is still ours. For now at least. So we might as well take advantage of that. It’s the perfect place to get away from everyone. And the last place any of them would think to look for us.

So I exert myself to persuade him, but it only takes the promise of food, and he’s mine. Well, that and I let myself do the fucking pathetic cute thing while I worked him. That’s okay. I don’t feel pathetic doing it. Today I feel like I could take on the world, we could take on the world. And win. I’m just not sure about taking on the Liberty Avenue gang. It’s going to be bad enough whenever we surface and they find out he’s been back here for a while, and we didn’t let them know. Too fucking bad.

We deserve this. We’ve earned it. Seven fucking months apart have sure as hell earned us a few days together without them all over us.

I kiss him one more time for luck, and push him off my lap.

He’s laughing, and so am I and we wander around putting a few things in a bag, and then we go down to the car. I realize that we’re both moving slowly, peering around corners and acting like we’re making some sort of sneaky getaway.

Well, I guess we are.

Finally, we’re in the car, and then we’re gone, and we’re free, and they can’t catch us, can’t judge us, can’t get all over us about why Justin’s back, and whether he should be, and what we’re going to do now. Can’t look at me like they’re telling me I’m holding him back. Can’t make me feel like I’m letting him down. Can’t let me know that I’m the worst thing that could happen to someone
who should be out taking the world by the balls.

But he …

He …

***

Justin

Brian takes off like the demon dogs of Hell are after us. At first I don’t understand why, then I get a look at his face, and realize that he’s already starting to beat himself up about letting me come back, letting me come home. Or else he’s afraid that’s what they’re all going to do when they find out I’m back.

Well, fuck that!

I put my hand on his thigh, and give a little sigh of happiness. We pull up at a red light, and he sneaks a quick look at me. I give him one of my real smiles. The ones that always make him smile back at me. Sure enough, the corners of his mouth turn up, and that damned tongue wanders into his cheek. I love that look. It can get me hard in about half a minute. Right now though, it just makes me happy.

I reach out and fiddle with the radio - he’s got the damned thing on some news station. I can’t find anything that’s anywhere near decent, so I feel around under my seat for the cd holder that we keep there. I flip through them, and he has some of my favorites still there. I blink back a sudden allergy attack, and shove one of them into the player.

His grin gets a little wider, and I squeeze his thigh in gratitude.

We drive without talking for a while, until finally he says, “There’s a turn off somewhere here that’ll take us down to the mall. I think there’s a supermarket there.”

I grin and pull my sketchpad out of the backpack at my feet. Turning to a new page, I say, “Okay, what do we want to get?”

I can hear the look on his face. I swear I can hear it, although his silence is ricocheting all round the car.

“Are you planning on making a fucking shopping list?” he asks finally, as if it’s the most outrageous thing he’s ever heard.

“Well … duh!” I answer, starting to write down the basics - bread, milk, coffee, sugar, juice, cereal. Some bananas. And peanut butter. Well, and Beam and beer. And …

“Brian are there any glasses and stuff?” I ask.

I know that he organized some basic furniture. Not a lot … if someone wanted to move in with their own stuff, all that was at the house could have been stored in the stables.

He nods, without saying anything.

I go on with my list. Some chicken, maybe some seafood. Onions, tomatoes, cream, potatoes, rice, pasta, salad greens, dressing.

“Justin,” he says. “If we’re only going to be here a few days, it would make more sense …”
“No.” I shake my head. For some reason, having everything we want right there, being able to cook a meal together, it’s important to me. If this is the only time we ever spend at the house together, I want it to feel … even if it’s just for a few days, I want it to feel like our home. But I can’t say all that to Brian, because he’d think that it meant that I’ve gone back to wanting that whole domesticated deal. And I don’t. That’s not it. I just want us to feel like we have a home together.

I don’t care if it’s the loft, or the house, or some damned shack on a beach somewhere. I just want it to be a home. I need it to be a home.

I take a deep breath.

“Whatever we don’t use, we can take back to the loft with us,” I say reasonably.

He gives me a look as he waits to pull into the parking lot. Then, after he’s parked the car, he turns around and grabs my chin. He looks deep into my eyes for a long moment. Then he smiles and kisses me lightly on the lips.

He tangles his hand in my hair, which is fairly long again, and says with a shy sort of smile, “It’ll be good to have a home-cooked meal again.”

That does it. I have to kiss him. Now.

So I do. Long and slow and deep. We hold each other awkwardly in this stupid fucking car, and kiss and kiss and kiss.

When we finally stop we just look at each other for a while. Then he nods.

“Come on then, Martha,” he says. “Let’s do it.”

I punch at him, but he’s too quick for me, diving out the car before I can reach him, and dodging away when I get out and try to pursue him. We’re both behaving like teenagers, horsing around and laughing, and suddenly, for the first time ever in my life with Brian Kinney, I feel like this is it. Whatever it means for us to “make it” together, this is it. We’re doing it. I grab him and pinch his arm to let him know I haven’t forgotten the “Martha” wisecrack, and then I wrap my hand around his.

He looks down at our linked fingers for a moment, then he steps ahead, pulling me along with him.

“I’m hungry,” he says.

He's hungry? The world must be tilting on its axis. But, come to think of it, I'm hungry too. Guess all this happiness gives even Brian an appetite for food. Guess I finally get to cook in that huge fucking kitchen. If I can prevent him from killing anyone in the supermarket, that is.

I scurry to keep up with him, and he pulls me close to his side. Right where I belong. Now what's first on the list?
The boys spend some time at last in the mansion Brian bought for his prince.

Justin finds a few surprises.

Brian

I swear that he buys half the fucking supermarket. It’s a good thing we didn’t bring any luggage to speak of with us, because the car is piled to the roof with groceries by the time I finally get him out of there. I’m trying to be pissed about that, but something inside me is …

It feels like he’s nesting. It feels like he’s come home to roost. It feels like he’s planning to stay awhile. More than a while. And I can’t help but feel good about that.

We’re going to have to talk about his work soon. About how much he needs to get done for his show - fuck! his show. At that thought, all my pride in him surfaces, and I find myself grinning like a complete idiot. I sneak my hand across and pinch his thigh, just because I can. He yelps and bats my hand away, and suddenly we’re both laughing again. We seem to have done a lot of that this morning. More than I’ve done for months. Maybe it’s the same for him.

As we pull up at the house, I wonder if he’s going to give me grief over what I’ve done here. Not that I’ve done much, exactly. But …

The house came with a whole batch of furniture - some of which I liked, some not so much, but I kept it all and even added some stuff just so that it could be rented out as “furnished” if necessary. And that’s all that’s in most of the rooms. I can feel my throat getting tight, and I’m already trying
to work out what bullshit excuses I can come up with to explain away … And then we’re here, and it’s too late to invent anything. I’ll just have to wing it. Maybe he won’t even notice, won’t figure it out.

I pull around back, and zap the garage door open. The ‘vette slides in as if it knows it’s home. While Justin starts getting all the bags out of the back, I open the door through to the house. There’s a short passage that passes the laundry and goes through to the kitchen. I make sure the kitchen door is propped open and go back to help with the hundreds of bags of fucking groceries.

But while I’m doing all this, my eyes are always on Justin, and, as soon as he puts down the first lot of bags and looks around, I know that he’s onto me.

He stands staring about him for a moment, then he gives me one quick look. I look away and try to pretend that there’s nothing going on, nothing about the kitchen that could possibly indicate how much time I’ve been spending here. Nothing that could give away …

He takes a breath, and I brace myself. But then he just goes and fetches in some more bags.

Once they’re all in, scattered across the floor and the counter tops, he closes the kitchen door.

He walks over and looks at the coffee machine, and then at the Phillipe Starke juicer. He opens the cutlery drawer and peers in, then checks out one or two of the cupboards. He still doesn’t say anything, just gives me another look.

Then he starts unpacking the bags.

The big double door refrigerator is on, and when he opens the freezer, he finds a couple of Deb’s fucking meals inside. He still doesn’t say anything, and I don’t know what’s going through his head, but he’s got this tiny smile on his face, so I’m not too worried. He hands me some milk and juice and I put them away meekly.

Now that I’ve been sprung, and the worst is over, I want to take him off to see the other parts of the house. I haven’t furnished it all yet - most of the furniture is still the “rented property” stuff. But there are a couple of rooms that … well, that aren’t.

*****

Justin

I don’t know exactly what’s going on here, but I’m not stupid, and I do know that Brian has been up here, at the house, since it was last rented out. The coffee machine is the top of the range type that he has at the loft, so is the juicer. Ditto with the cutlery and crockery. And there are Deb-type meals in the freezer for fuck’s sake! How dumb would I have to be not to realize that he’s been here. Probably even spent some nights here, by the look of it.

It’s all I can do not to burst out laughing at the look on his face. He’s trying to be so nonchalant about it, but he’s nearly bursting, waiting for me to make some sort of comment.

I make him wait until all the groceries are put away. I know him. If I’d even blinked, he would have had me out of the kitchen and off to see what else he’s been up to, and fuck knows when we would have gotten back to the groceries. So I make sure that they’re out of the way first.

Then I say, real casual, “I haven’t seen it without all the dust covers and shit. How is the place looking?”
I’m rewarded with something that’s damned near a blush. Then he gives me that lips-pulled-in look that always makes me want to kiss him, and takes my hand to lead me out through the dining room to the hall. After that, he lets me decide. I wander through the ground floor to the big room with the fireplace where we first made love in this house. There’s a thick rug in front of the fireplace now - not a fur rug, but something richly colored and thickly piled. I look over my shoulder at him and grin. His answering smile warms the whole room.

I realized that I’d expected him to have furnished this house like the loft … but he must have decided that style wouldn’t suit this place so well. The look here is no less elegant, but it’s warmer - more color and more textures.

“I haven’t done much,” he says suddenly. “I just wanted … I needed …”

He breaks off and when I look at him now, he’s not smiling. His face is full of remembered pain; I feel my own surge up to meet it. I turn to him and open my arms; he comes into them with a lurch, and I hold him tightly. We cling together for a long time.

Eventually, we manage to loosen our death grip on each other, although I find myself still holding on to his hand as he walks me through the rooms that he’s furnished: this room, the small room that opens onto the garden that we’d thought would make a good study or home office for him, the room above it with the huge windows that he’d thought would make a studio for me. He hasn’t done much to that room, but he’s had some stands placed around the walls, to display any work that I want to think about, had some racks installed so that I can store canvases, and there’s an easel and two work spaces - one of which could serve as a computer desk. Three’s also a long chaise, a lot like the one in the loft, and a couple of deep armchairs, placed so that they look out the window. As I walk around studying it all, he follows me and all the time we remain constantly in touch, his hand on my back, mine twined through his, or resting on his arm. Just touching. Reminding ourselves that we can. Reminding ourselves that the months of starving for those little touches are over. Reminding each other that we’re here, we’re together, we’re okay.

“We can change it … anything you want …”

I turn to him and let him see my happiness. I touch his face and look deep into his eyes. I don’t say anything. I don’t have to. He knows. He knows how much this means to me.

*****

Brian

I can hardly hold it together when he smiles at me. I want to tell him, I want to scream at him that I never thought that he’d actually stand here and see this. I never really believed that he would ever lift a brush or put a single line on paper or canvas here. I put this room together because it was the only thing I could do. I had no words to express how much I wanted him, needed him. And even if I did - there was no one I could tell.

Linds isn’t here. Mikey … Mikey, when he hasn’t been totally fucking caught up in his own problems, and Ben’s, has been trying to help me face “reality” - the reality that Justin wasn’t ever coming home. He thought he was helping me. He doesn’t seem to have any idea how much it all hurt. It was as if the fact that I was in such pain somehow took the edge off his own dramas. Deb’s been worried about me, I know. So have Ted and Emmett. And they’ve helped. Sort of. In a way.

But I couldn’t … if I didn’t believe he was ever coming back, how the fuck was I supposed to admit to anyone how much I needed him to?
Least of all to him.

So, in this last couple of months, while I felt him slipping further and further away, the only thing I could do was to come out here and spend some time in fantasy land. Making believe that one day he’d be here; one day I’d show him this room, and he’d smile at me, just like he’s doing now. Because he’d know what this says about how much I love him, how much I need him, how much I want to have a life with him.

*****

Justin

Love, sheer blazing love for him, is surging through me. I don’t think that I’ve ever felt it so strongly. I don’t think I’ve ever known so absolutely how much he loves me. I can feel the joy of that fizzing through me. I almost expect to see sparks sizzling from my fingertips where they touch his face. I’m filled with light and wonder and happiness so bright, so dazzling, that my whole body crackles with it.

But at the look in his eyes …I want to weep for all the pain this separation has caused him. Well, caused us both. But it was on my account. He went through it all for me. He knew that all he had to do, all he ever had to do, was ask me to stay, ask me to come back, and I would have been here. But he didn’t. He suffered all this just to let me have what he thought I wanted, what he believed I needed.

Somehow, someday, I have to find a way to repay him for that. But first, and most importantly, I have to make sure that he knows that this is what I want, what I need. He is what I need. And most definitely what I want.

Then, just like that, the energy between us changes.

It happens, as it does with us sometimes, so fast it takes my breath away. I reach for his belt, and he’s already pulling at my sweater. I lean away from him as I get his pants undone, and sink to the floor at his feet. Even before I touch him, before I have time to free his cock from its prison to the warm welcome of my mouth, he gives a funny little sigh of contentment, and I feel his hands tangle in my hair.

My own cock hardens at the smell of him, and, as my tongue begins to trace its favorite paths over the veins and ridges of his, I take it in one hand and jack myself. He has his eyes closed, and for a while, he doesn’t realize what I’m doing. When he does, he puts a finger under my chin to make me look up at him. Or maybe he just wants a better view of his dick moving between my lips.

“I could make it worth your while to wait,” he offers with that sideways grin.

I give a choked laugh, pull away from his hand, and deep throat him, breathing deeply though my nose; the smell of him, the feel of his cock down my throat and the feel of his pubes against my nose and face making my balls tighten. I jack harder and suck deeply and he comes, tangy-salty-hot and delicious. I swallow hungrily, and the action and the taste trigger my own orgasm.

*****

Brian

It takes me a moment or two to get my breath back, to stop my knees from buckling and keep myself from falling to the floor beside him. Instead, I pull myself together and help him up.
Christ! I didn’t want to fuck him today. I know he’s sore from last night. But if he keeps doing things like that … damned if I mightn’t have to let him fuck me. Again. He did that last night, too. But only the once, so I guess I could go again this afternoon.

Little shit!

I pull him to me, and whisper in his ear, “Are you trying to seduce me, Sunshine?”

Just for a moment he pulls back, he must be sorer than I’d thought. Then he gets what I’m asking, and laughs.

“Well,” he says, sliding a hand round to cup my ass, “I wasn’t … but if that’s what it takes …”

I grin at him, and he grins back and bumps his shoulder against mine.

“You going to show me the bedroom?” he says with a wanna-be leer.

I laugh at him, and he grins even wider and then I have to kiss him.

He’s in my arms, and I hold him, just hold him, and I don’t know how to let him go. But he solves that problem by wrapping his arms around me, too. He rests his chin on my collar bone and looks up at me with a smile that makes me believe. It actually makes me believe in this. In us. In a future that has us together. I can’t … there aren’t words. I cup the side of his face in the palm of my hand and rub my thumb over his cheek.

His smile is so bright it dazzles me. Or maybe there’s something in my eyes. But that smile. It’s been so long since I’ve seen that smile.

I should have known he wasn’t happy in New York. I should have fucking known. Because I never saw that smile there. Smiles, yes. But not this smile. There was always something in his eyes. Fear, or pain, or … just something.

“Why didn’t you just tell me you wanted to come home?” I find myself asking him.

His smile wavers for a moment, and he ducks his head, burying his face in the hollow of my shoulder. He doesn’t say anything for a moment. And when he does it’s so muffled I can hardly understand him. But finally I make it out.

“I couldn’t, Brian.”

That’s what he says. Then, when I’m about to ask him why the fuck not, he goes on, “I needed you to be proud of me. Not to think that I’m some pussy little faggot who didn’t have the balls to go for it.”

While I’m trying to wrap my brain around that, he says even more quietly. “I needed to know that about myself, too, I guess.”

He gives a big sigh, and wraps his arms around me even tighter. “But it was so fucking hard.”

He looks up at me then and finally says, “I meant what I said this morning. I don’t want to do that any more. It isn’t who I am. And it isn’t what I want.”

He looks around the room, and then at me.

“This is what I want.”
Then his face sort of … crumples and loses all that glow he had just a minute before.

“If it’s still on the table, that is,” he whispers.

Fuck!

*****

Justin

I think for a moment that I’ve made him angry. He puts his hands on my shoulders and shakes me. Really shakes me.

And I’ve never seen his face look like that. Never.

So bright and fierce and …

Happy.

My breath just stops in my throat when I realize that.

He’s happy. He’s so fucking happy he looks likely to burst with it. He gives a funny little gasp, and tries to bank it down, but I’m not having that. I reach for his ribs, for his ticklish spot.

“None of that, you fucker,” I growl “I’m onto you. Remember?”

And for some reason that strikes us both as hilarious and suddenly we’re laughing like a pair of hyenas. Holding onto each other and laughing. And then we’re kissing. And then he’s leading me down the hallway to the master bedroom.

He flings open the door, stands back and I walk in expecting … well, I don’t know what I was expecting, but it sure as hell isn’t a completely bare and empty room. Not even a fucking futon on the floor. Nothing. A few odd wisps of that dust ball stuff that congregates everywhere - where the hell does that stuff come from, anyway?

But nothing else.

I turn my head to stare at him.

“You expect us to sleep here?”

It’s the first thing that comes into what passes for my mind.

He shrugs. “There are beds in the other rooms,” he says.

Then he falls silent.

And that’s when I realize. He couldn’t do this room. It was too close, too personal. How could he do this room for us, and then sleep in it alone?

I back up against him and his arms come round my chest, holding me in place. I put one hand over his, and wave the other towards the window. It’s raining now. The cold hard spring rain that always comes as a shock.

“Don’t want to be driving back in that,” I say.
I feel the huff of his laugh against my hair.

“No, don’t want to be doing that,” he says.

I turn in his arms, and smile at him. It was raining the first time he brought me here, too.

“Let’s light the fire,” I tell him and love the way his eyes light - with love and with memories and with hope. Hope for us. For our future. Together.

I still think this house is way too big. We’d need a fucking army of servants to keep it clean, and there are definitely way too many rooms for uninvited guests.

But that’s an argument for another day.

For today. We’re here. We’re together. And that’s enough to make this Home.
This chapter alludes to one of the changes from S5 canon that is in Reverb. After the vigil, in canon Ben happily drove off into the sunset and there were no further consequences to him going berserker over the heckler. But in Reverberations, Ben was arrested and charged with assault.

We stand there for a while, in a shared silence that is warm with contentment. The rain gets harder and becomes spattered with hail. We can see it bouncing off the stone coping round the window. Somehow the sight increases our pleasure, makes us appreciate even more the warmth that exists here, in the little sphere that we share.

Then my stomach gives a loud rumble. I feel the answering rumble of Brian’s laugh against my spine and smack his hand.

“Time to light that fire,” he says, “and make use of some of that mountain of food.”

So we kiss one more time and wander downstairs.

As he brings in some wood from a store outside (another clue to how much time he’s been spending here), I put on some pasta to boil. I can make a quick smoked salmon sauce, and toss a salad. Add some crusty bread and open a bottle of wine and “Shazzam!” - instant feast.

I’m stirring the sauce when he comes into the kitchen. He starts tearing up lettuce, and adding olives and cherry tomatoes. Then he mixes some dressing while I drain the pasta and toss it in the sauce. We move around each other easily. You’d think that we’d lived here together for all the last long months instead of it being our first meal in this house he’d bought to be our home.
I really want to talk to him about that, but … not right now. We’re both still too raw. We need some time to let things settle. To let the feeling of being together sink in. Then will be the time to talk about what we’re going to do about this place.

Once the fact that I’m back for good, that we are going to be living together, that no matter what building it’s in, we’ll have a home together; once all these things have sunk in, have become reality, have banished the loneliness and the fears, then we can talk about this place as just another building, not the symbol it’s become.

At the moment, though, the symbol is too potent, has too much power. I’m not sure that I can make it clear to him, on the emotional level he works on far more frequently than he’d like to admit, that not wanting to live in this house does not mean not wanting to live my life with him. I won’t take the risk of hurting him over something so pointless.

So, as we take our seats in the breakfast nook, and Brian opens a bottle of crisp white wine, we talk about our friends.

About how things are going with Mikey and Ben. That has been such a mess. And of course, for some bizarre reason Michael is somehow blaming Brian for not being able to fix it. Despite the fact that when Brian offered to help in the only way he could, by offering money to pay for a decent lawyer, Michael threw the offer back in his face. It’s as if Michael still hasn’t realized how really serious this is, and that it could get worse.

Deb, of course, is worried out of her mind. Which means that she’s more schizoid than ever in her attitude to Brian, leaning on him one minute, looking for ways to blame him the next. Brian just accepts all that, of course. It’s a damned good thing I’m back to try to deflect some of that shit.

Anyway, there’s not really a lot we can say about that situation, so we move on to talk about Emmett. He’s still single. Still pining a bit over Drew, I suspect. But his business at least is booming. Now that Babylon has been reinvented yet again, Em is getting a lot of work catering events in the function room on the upper floor.

I haven’t seen the redeveloped building, but I know all about it. Brian brought the plans with him on more than one NY trip, and I know all about the hassles of getting the permits and the building delays and how successful it looks like being. Although, it still seems weird to me to think of Babylon as being anything but the club.

But things have changed. Downstairs … downstairs is still Babylon. Complete with the go-go boys, the back room, and of course, the eternal thumpa thumpa from the dance floor. But on the ground floor, as well as the club entrance and the upper level bar of the club itself, there’s another bar and a coffee shop, plus two small specialty stores. And on the second floor is a beautifully designed function room, complete with industrial kitchen.

The brains trust that funded the redevelopment decided that if the queers were going to lose access to the city’s function facilities at the whim of a few bigoted power brokers, then they’d build their own. Ironically, the function room has become the trendy place for businesses to hold events. If a company wants to be viewed as young and hip, they need to have their company dinner or whatever at the Rainbow Room. Just thinking of the straights having their nice dinners only a few feet above the back room is enough to make Brian and I share a wicked grin. It will definitely add spice to our next visit there.

Meanwhile, Emmett is making out like a bandit. He has an agreement with the manager so that Em offers discounts to Rainbow Room clients who use him as their planner, and the Rainbow Room reciprocates with discounts to Em’s clients who use the facility at his recommendation.
Brian is doing alright out of it too. Once he’d gotten the club re-opened, he had some development plans drawn up and got Ted into looking for investors. He sold all but 20%, but with the profits from the club, the other bar, the coffee shop and the function room, as well as the ground rents from the two stores, he’s apparently making more from that 20% than he did from owning the whole club outright. Yet, as Ted keeps saying, he’s spread the risk, and doesn’t have any of the management hassles. Of course, his deal had him keeping owner privileges, including to that Private Room he added to the club.

The best part about it is that Ted found out about this incentive scheme to bring more business back to the inner city, and made damned sure that the redevelopment qualified. So the investors got their funding at a really low interest rate, and also get a deal for the first five years on rates and taxes. Courtesy of Mayor Deakins.

All this leads us, of course, to talking about Ted - for a minute, anyway. Brian dismisses that topic quickly with a pungent, “He’s still 12-stepping with the Crystal Queenex. They’re planning on taking a tour of the fucking Opera Houses of Europe or some bullshit. I obviously pay him way too much.”

But underneath his bluster, I can hear that he’s actually happy for Ted.

Brian did a good thing in helping Ted get his act together when he got out of rehab. But Ted has been there for Brian, too. I think it was one good outcome from the cancer thing, that Brian actually showing weakness and needing help allowed Ted, for once, to be the strong one, the go-to guy. And he was. He really came through for Brian. So now, he feels more … equal, I guess, in a way. And that’s been good for their friendship. Ted knows Brian trusts him, and Brian knows he can rely on Ted - even to keep his secrets, which, in our crowd, is actually pretty rare.

Which pretty much brings us to the really tough one.

Gus.

*****

Brian

If we’re going to talk about this, I need more wine.

I open another bottle, and we take it with us to drink in front of the fire. In some ways, I don’t want to open this topic at all. In others … well, Justin … I can tell Justin without really having to say much. Especially about Gus. I guess he really is onto me. Always has been.

We sit together on the couch and he talks about the munchers and their little family, and I grunt, and, if I occasionally snuffle, he doesn’t draw any attention to that, just rubs his shoulder against mine, where they lean together, and says that it’s been ages since he’s seen Gus. So I grunt again. And then he knows how much I miss my son.. Like he would ever have been in any fucking doubt.

I mumble something about Mel and fucking munchers and then he knows that I’m worried. He even knows what I’m worried about. I’m shit scared that my son will forget me. That the child I never wanted, the one who was only ever supposed to be some jizz in a cup to me, will forget who is Dadda is, will forget that he has a Dadda even. Will forget, or never know, how much his Dadda loves him.

I wonder if they tell him about me. When he comes home from play group and asks how come he doesn’t have a Dadda like other little boys, I wonder if Linds gets out the photos of me, and tells
him that he does. That he has a father who loves him, who fought to keep him here with me till I was made to feel like a completely selfish shit for doing it. Who let him go because he loves him, and wants him to be safe.

Or does Mel stick her oar in and just say that he has two mothers instead. Maybe even tells him that he has a father, but that his father is an asshole who never wanted him.

Justin’s arm goes up round my shoulders then, and he whispers, “Gus knows you love him. He won’t forget you.”

So I know he’s understood me.

I shrug, of course. Then I manage to get out something about Linds not seeming to be keen on me visiting. How I’ve suggested it a couple of times, and she’s put me off.

He listens, takes it in, then he says, “Well, maybe we should invite her down here.”

I give him a sideways look. So he knows that I don’t want to appear like I’m begging here.

He grins. “Leave it to me,” he says.

I pull my lips in and look down into his eyes. His grin turns into a soft smile, and he pulls me down for a kiss.

“It’s your birthday soon,” he says. “She can bring him down for your birthday.”

I feel something that had been wound tight inside me relaxing a little. That would work. Linds is a sucker for all that shit. And having Mel and JR visit might help Mikey and Deb feel better too. I take a careful breath. And another, till I’m sure that the tears that have been pressing in my eyes are not going to fall.

Okay.

****

Justin

I can only imagine how hard that conversation was for Brian. It was hard for me, too, in a different way. I have to bottle up so much anger sometimes against Mel and Linds because of the way that they treat Brian over Gus. But it’s Brian’s pain that I have to focus on, not my frustrations with his so-called friends. So, once it’s settled what we’re going to do, and that he’s going to get to see his son soon, I figure that he’s due for some distraction.

I slide down off the couch to kneel at his feet, and begin to pull down my sweat pants, keeping my eyes locked on his.

He seems to hesitate for a moment, but then he stands and slides his down as well. I grin, and crawl over to the rug, glancing back over my shoulder at him to make sure he’s watching my ass. Sure enough, before I can even get myself settled, he’s there with me.

I’m still sore, but I need him, need him inside me. But when he stretches out next to me, his cock inches from my mouth, his mouth already going down on mine, I don’t object. While his mouth is working magic on me, mine is filled with him, my tongue is reacquainting itself with every ridge and bump on his dick, and I’m drowning in his taste and scent. Nothing could better remind me that I’m home than this.
Afterwards we curl there for a while, lazily kissing and stroking each other’s hair. Then I really need to piss (wine does that to me every time) so I get up and pull on my pants, and he puts some more wood on the fire.

When I come back, I head for the kitchen. He follows, saying that I can’t be hungry again already. I grin at him and tell him I want to get dinner going, that I’m going to make something that will cook slowly, for a long time, because I have plans for the rest of the afternoon. He raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t ask - just loads the dishwasher with the lunch things and then helps me peel and cut the vegetables. I put together a stew that will cook on the stove top for hours on a very slow heat and wind up tender and tasty and absolutely right to eat on a cold wet night in front of the fire.

Then I go find my bag, and pull out the dreaded sketchpad. He shakes his head, but his eyes are grinning at me, even while he tries to look bored and fed up at the whole idea.

I put my hand in his back and push him towards the stairs. He laughs, and dodges around me, but only to go bank the fire, and put up the fire guards. Then he comes back to me and lets me take his hand and drag him up the stairs to my studio.

Once I get there, and actually start looking around, I realize that I don’t need the sketchpad. He’s equipped the place with everything an artist could need - including large sheets of thick art paper, and some canvases. As soon as I see those, all thoughts of a sketch vanish. I pull out a blank canvas, and after getting Brian to drape himself over the couch, I start to block out what my next painting will be.

He gets up at one stage to put on some music, and at another to make us some coffee, but for the most part he lays there and, as he puts it, suffers for my art.

We talk a little bit as I work. I tell him how the crazy guy who used to live on my landing kept insisting that my dog was messing on his lawn. (Not bad, considering that the nearest stretch of grass was at least ten blocks away.) He tells me about some of his more cretinous clients. We laugh a little, and talk a little, but mainly we’re just together.

It’s wonderful. It heals sore places in me that I’d become so accustomed to, I didn’t even know where the hurt was coming from. By the look of him, laying there so relaxed, with contentment sort of shimmering all around him, it’s the same for Brian.

Then, out of the blue, just as I’d finally admitted that the light was going and was packing stuff up, he says, “You should know. I’ve had an offer on the house.”

*****

Brian

I probably should have given him some sort of warning, not just blurted it out like that. He nearly spills some of that expensive fucking paint.

He just stares at me for a moment.

Then, very quietly, carefully, like he’s afraid just that syllable will break something, will break me, he says “Oh.”

I laugh. What else can I do?

“I know you don’t want to live here,” I say.
He watches me, making sure that I’m not falling to pieces. Then he says, “I just think it’s too big.”

I nod.

He watches me some more, while he goes on putting away his stuff. At least he got to use this room once, I guess.

“Is it a good offer?” he asks at last.

I shrug. Then I sigh. He’s fucking right about the house. It is too damned big. I know that. It’s just … I bought it for him, for us.

He comes to me, and wraps his arms around me.

“Brian, it doesn’t matter. We can live here, if it’s …”

I look down at him and he breaks off. Then he tilts his head up and I think to myself ‘here comes trouble, now he’s going to come out with the truth’.

Then he says, “It’s just that it’s so damned big that we’d spend half our time running around trying to make sure that all the fucking maintenance was done, and done right, and done at the right price. I don’t want that. I don’t want to be that person. As if the fucking house defines us, defines what we are to each other. I don’t want that.”

Then he drills me with those baby blues of his, and says, “And neither do you. You’re just too fucking stubborn to admit that you bought the place to prove a point, not to live in. You can’t even admit that to yourself.”

Then he hugs me and kisses my chin and I have to force myself to stop grinning from ear to ear because as usual he’s totally nailed it, nailed me.

So I do the only thing I can and sweep my tongue into his mouth to shut him up, and to let him know that he’s right. Again. And that I’m not going to queen out because my prince doesn’t want to live in this fucking palace with me. As long as he wants to live somewhere with me, that’s okay.

The truth is, I don’t know if I could live here now. It’s got too many painful memories. I look around, and then I smile at him. Of course, it’s got some good ones, too. And getting better by the minute.

“After taxes and fees and all that shit, we should make around one fifty,” I tell him.

He blinks. “Well, it’s better than a loss, I guess,” he says.

I grin at him, and let him see the devil in it, “One fifty kay,” I smirk.

He stares at me. “No fucking way!”

*****

Justin

I cannot believe that we could make that much money just by buying a place and holding onto it for a few months. But Brian shrugs, and gives me that wicked grin again.

“Some hotel chain wants to buy it,” he says. “Turn it into some kind of fucking conference center or something. Your ma and I have been haggling.”
I look around me. Well, that makes sense. That’s probably the only use that these sort of places have now - unless you’re some sort of celebrity and think you have to live a celebrity lifestyle. Dickheads.

“So … what do you think?” he asks.

And I suddenly realize that that question is a lot more complex than it sounds. I think we should get rid of this place, yes. But at the same time, I don’t really want to sell the loft. But then again … I did like the idea of Brian and I having … somewhere that was ours. Well, … to be honest, I liked the idea of us having a house. Somewhere we could have Gus to visit without having to turn into monks for as long as he’s with us.

But the whole having-Gus-to-visit thing is such a hot button with Brian that I don’t want to mention it. It was bad enough when they were living in Pittsburgh, but I don’t know how he’d react to that suggestion right now. For that matter, I have no idea how Mel and Linds would react. Except a sick feeling in my gut tells me that they wouldn’t go along with it, and that all that bringing the subject up would do is help them find new and better ways to drive it home to Brian what a total loss they think he is at being a father.

I can’t afford to think about that right now, because it just pisses me off, so I play for time and say, “Well, what do you think?”

He gives me a look as he heads for the door, “Oh, no, Sunshine. I asked you first.”

“Briii-an!” I say. Sometimes it works. But this time he just laughs and heads downstairs. I finish cleaning up and go down to find him opening a bottle of red in front of the fire. Outside, in the gathering darkness, the rain is coming down even harder, but in here the room is warm and the flickering firelight turns the red in the bottle to a rich dark crimson, full of its own light and somehow brimming with the promise of warmth and life.

“It needs to stand for a while,” he says.

I nod, and go to check on the stew. It’s more than ready, the meat so tender it’s falling apart. While I’m putting some bread in the oven to freshen it up a little, he comes into the kitchen and starts getting plates out.

He looks at me sideways; then, after I’ve closed the oven door safely, he nudges me. I turn to look at him and he grins for a moment, then turns serious. “I know it’s not really the right place,” he says. “If we sell it, we can look around for something that’s …”

“… us,” I finish, beaming at him.

Once he sees my smile, his own slides shyly into place. I go to him, wrap my arms around him and kiss him. Hard. I feel his hands in my hair and my arms tighten even more around him.

We stand holding each other for what might be a long time, or might only be a few minutes. When you feel eternity in the moment, it’s hard to tell.

Then he gets the bread out of the oven, while I serve up the stew and we carry the plates into the room where the wine sits waiting and sink down onto our couch in front of our fire, and eat our dinner in our home and it’s all good.

Tomorrow, or someday soon at least, the couch, the fire, the home may all have changed. But we’ll still be eating dinner together somewhere. And that’s all I care about right now.
Chapter Summary

Brian and Justin get an unexpected interruption.

Justin

We’re both really mellow after dinner and neither of us wants to move. We just sit tangled together, talking about everything and nothing. About how long the painting will take to finish (I tell him it depends on how co-operative the model is), about whether we should have dessert (something a little sweeter than the high protein kind he suggests), about where we should look for a house. Neither of us have any firm views on that, but we agree that a view of one of the rivers would be nice.

It doesn’t matter what we talk about, it’s all good. We’re relaxed and happy and together and what’s even better is that no one knows we’re here, and no one has a key, and no one can interrupt us.

We’re so relaxed and content we might have fallen asleep right there, but then, like somehow I’d jinxed us by even thinking about how good it was to be there alone and undisturbed, the fucking phone rings.

We both sit and look at it a while in disbelief, and by the time Brian gets up to answer it, it’s gone to voice mail.

It’s Mom.
Brian

I can not fucking believe that anyone would fucking track us down here. Least of all Jennifer. I’m so pissed off that at first I don’t take in what she’s saying. Then, after all the apologies for disturbing me, and the stuff about all the fucking phone numbers she tried first, she finally gets to what she actually called for, and it registers that it’s about the offer on the house. Apparently the prospective buyers are getting antsy.

I’m about to walk away, and just let it go, when she says, “Brian, they’re willing to add another twenty thousand if we can get the deal signed off on the weekend.”

I hear a soft gasp from the couch and turn to grin at him. I raise an eyebrow in question and he breathes, “Fuck yes!”

I pick up the phone.

She’s in the middle of something about, “Well, I’ve left messages everywhere I can think of. Even on Justin’s phones. I can’t get him either, so …”

When I answer, she gives a sort of cough and then says, all astonished, like I’ve called her out of the blue, instead of her fucking tracking me down, “Brian! Oh … oh, I didn’t think you’d be there.”

I grin at her baby boy, sitting all bright eyed and eager on the couch. A man after my own heart, he knows when it’s the right time to take care of business.

“Well,” I say, “here I am …”

“Yes, yes, well, I don’t know if you …”

“An extra twenty thou,” I cut in. “They’re more anxious than I thought.”

“Well,” she says, “I’ve been asking around, just running it by a few people I thought might know …”

Sometimes I forget that she must have a few connections of her own, even if her and dear Craig are no longer a nice country club couple.

“It seems that they have the finances all lined up, but they’ve already had one property fall through, and they’re worried that if they don’t sign this one quickly their major investor could get cold feet and move his money on to something else.”

There’s a pause and then she says, “I think you could probably push it up a little further, if you don’t mind taking the risk that you’ll scare them off.”

I give a chuff of laughter. Looks like Sunshine isn’t the only one with a brain in the family. Well, he had to get it from somewhere, and it sure as fuck wasn’t his dickwad of a father.

I nod, and then, since she can’t see that, I say, “Tell them to make it fifty grand, and they’ve got a deal.”

Justin’s eyes go very wide at that, and then he gives me that fucking wicked grin of his.

She hesitates. “Brian, they would need all the papers signed this weekend. I don’t know if …”
She stops and takes a breath, and then says, “I don’t know if you need to discuss it with Justin.”

Her voice sounds shaky, now, and I say quickly, to stop any big emotional thing, “That won’t be a problem.”

Instead of stopping the hissy fit, it seems to send her into tears. I can hear them in her voice when she says, “So … so, we’ll need to get the papers to him for his signature. I guess I could fly …”

Then she gulps and says, very soft and sad and teary, “Brian, I am so … I wish …”

And she breaks off then and I can hear the real pain in her voice while she tries to stop crying. Who the fuck would have thought? I ask her to hang on, and flip the phone onto mute. “She’s having a meltdown … I guess she figures this is “The End”.”

I try to trivialize it, but he knows damned well that it means something to me that Jennifer wants this, wants it to work, wants me to be The One for her precious baby boy. It fucking shouldn’t. But it does.

He grins and gives a little shrug, both hands towards me palm out, raising his own eyebrow.

I stifle a sigh. We’d have to break cover anyway, to get the fucking papers signed. The thought that we could both fly up to New York, and then I could pay for his mother to come up to get his signature does cross my mind, but it’s fucking ludicrous, so even though I don’t want to give up this time alone, I realize there isn’t a lot of choice.

I switch the mute button off, and say, “Jenn, I think that you need to …”

And then I just hand the phone to Justin and walk away to open another bottle of wine. There should be some Veuve here somewhere. I’d bought it to christen the house with him, and we never got the chance. Seems a fitting drink to say ‘farewell’ to it.

*****

Justin

I take the phone and hear my Mom saying something about, “I don’t want to interfere …”

Yeah, right. And Bush doesn’t want be a bigoted dickhead with a mania for power and a Daddy complex thrown in for bad measure. He just is. She’s just going to.

I can hear that she’s genuinely upset here, though, and for once it’s for Brian, not with him. So I just say “Hi Mom” instead of some of the other things I’m thinking.

She gives a gasp, and then says, like she totally can’t believe it, “Justin?!”

“Well, do I sound like Molly?”

“Justin,” she says and now she really sounds like she’s going to cry. “Oh, sweetheart, I didn’t know you were there. I would never have …”

“Mom, it’s okay. It’s good that you called. We were going to call you next week to tell you about the house, anyway.”

“Oh, Justin!” she says, like it’s the saddest thing she’s ever heard.

“Mom, it’s okay. I mean it. We’re fine. And please don’t tell anyone I’m here. Please. I mean it.
Brian and I need some time to ourselves."

I try to sound really serious, because I want her to get the message. She’s caused us problems before by letting other people in on our business. I don’t want that to happen this time.

“Oh, no. Well … of course not, if you …”

I can hear the wheels turning, and I know that we won’t really get any peace until she gets the message clear and unmistakable.

“Mom, Brian and I are fine. We’re working some things out. The thing with the house is just … it’s good timing, that’s all. But we need some time to ourselves. We’ll let everyone know I’m here when we’re ready.”

Brian comes up behind me then, and hands me a glass that is already frosting over from its icy cold contents - contents that fizz with a golden glow.

His arms are around me, and he clinks his own glass against mine. “Tell her the fifty grand will go to a down payment on our next place,” he says into my ear. “So she should start looking for something with a river view.”

I twist to meet his eyes and he tilts his glass to me. “Sláinte.”

I grin at him, clink my glass against his, and say, “To a river view.”

“Justin!” I hear squeaking at me from the phone.

“Sorry, Mom, I got distracted.”

She gives a nervous little giggle, like she has some idea of what form the distraction might take, and doesn’t really want to know the details. So I put her mommy mind at rest.

“Brian just poured some champagne to toast the deal … and our new place.”

She’s silent for a moment and then says, sounding both hurt and anxious, “You have a new place?”

I realize she’s afraid this means that we’re moving to New York or something.

Brian has had his ear close to the phone though, while he’s been licking my neck, and now he takes it from me.

“We’re relying on you to find us something, Mom,” he says grinning outrageously. “Sunshine here wants something with a river view.”

I’m too busy kissing his throat to hear her response, but he cuts her off, saying, “Mother Taylor, much as I’d love to chat all night, I have some important business to take care of here.”

I laugh. That will get her off the phone quickly, in case he starts giving her details on what that “business” might be. He arranges for her to call his cell and leave a message about their response to the price increase, and tells her that if they agree we can go in tomorrow to sign off on the paperwork, and we’ll get all of our stuff moved out of the house by Monday.

I sigh and lean against him. I don’t want to live in this house, not really. But I thought that we’d get to share time here for longer than this.

He kisses my head and says good-bye to her.
Then he puts his hand under my chin to make me look at him.

He doesn’t say anything, just looks into my eyes for a long time, and eventually we both start to smile.

“So,” he says, “That will make a nice little profit of two hundred kay.”

I get worried then that they might not go for it, but Brian tells me what Mom said about them needing to seal a deal quickly or risk losing their backers.

I nod. “Seems mean,” I say.

He shrugs. “It’s business. If they’re investing this much, they expect to make big bucks. I wouldn’t worry about it, Sunshine.”

I grin. “I’m not,” I say. “I mean, I know that the rent you were getting here meant you didn’t have to sell the loft ... and maybe with the extra money ...”

He sucks his lips in like he does when he’s working out exactly how to say something, and then comes out with, “I’ve been thinking about that.”

I look at him expectantly. Maybe we could rent the loft out. I know people would change it, and it wouldn’t be like we still lived there, but at least ... Before I can say any of that, though, he gives a little shrug, and opens his mouth to speak again.

“You’re going to need some studio space ...” he starts.

My face falls, and then I say, “Brian, I have some money. I’ve sold a couple of things, and if this show goes well ...”

“The loft’s got those big windows,” he says. “I thought maybe if we installed better lighting, you could use that.”

I can only stare at him.

*****

Brian

He just gawps at me. Then, like the fucking twat he can be sometimes, he says, “But, Brian, the loft’s yours.”

I give him a look and he blushes and says, “Well, you know what I mean.”

I hook an arm round his neck and kiss him till he gets the fucking message that if we’re going to do this right, then the whole yours/mine thing becomes ...

It doesn’t fucking matter. It can’t matter. If we’re really going to do this, then it can’t be like that.

I feel his arms tighten around me and he presses even closer to me, and when we finally break the kiss I can see from the tears spilling all down his face that he’s got the message loud and clear. I pull away from him, and go to find some tissues.

I love the little twat, but I still don’t want his snot all over me.

*****
Justin

He walks off, the bastard, and I know he’s going to get tissues. For someone who likes down and dirty sex as much as he does, he has a ridiculous aversion to other bodily fluids.

But I guess he also wants to give me some time to pull myself together.

I wouldn’t normally melt down like that, but suddenly, it all hit me. We’re going to do this. We’re going to really be together. We’re going to own things together, and share things and … really build a life together. This is so new … so overwhelming. Not just that we’re going to do it, but that …

It’s what he wants.

It really is what he wants.

The fucker brings me the box of tissues then so I mop myself up, blowing my nose ostentatiously, just to gross him out. Then I can’t resist shoving the dirty tissues down his pants. He yelps like they’re red hot, or he’s going to catch weepy cooties or something and spends the next couple of minutes hopping around till he’s got rid of them into the waste bin in the kitchen. I hear him washing his hands loudly, muttering curses and threats the whole time.

By the time he comes back, I’ve topped up our champagne and after giving me an evil look, he grins suddenly, and we settle back onto the couch.

“What do you think?” he says.

I try to imagine it. He’s clearly way ahead of me though, because he goes on.

“I thought we could use the area in front of the big window for your actual studio space. Leave the kitchen as it is so you don’t die of starvation. Make the part at the end, at the back, into a small office, and set up your computer stuff there. Then you could use the dining area as a sort of reception space if you have any clients, or agents or whatever that you need to meet and greet with.”

I feel myself blushing when he says that. It feels so weird and at the same time so fucking good to have him taking me, my career, so seriously. I find myself creeping my hand into his. He doesn’t really acknowledge it, but I feel his fingers tighten around mine slightly, as he keeps going.

“That way, you could keep the bedroom area as private space. You could keep the panels closed. Even leave the bed there, if you wanted …”

I smile at him. This plan is sounding better and better.

“We could install some really kick ass lighting, and use the place as a gallery. Mount and light your stuff properly, so you can show it off.”

I stare at him.

This is … it’s fucking brilliant. The loft would be the best, the coolest, place to have as my home base. And it means we get to keep it. Even if it does get all changed, and isn't really “Brian’s loft” anymore. On that thought I feel my eyes stinging again, and he tilts my face to his once more.

“We can’t live there,” he says. “I mean … we will, till we find somewhere else. But …”
He shrugs. “You know we can’t live there,” he says again.

“I know,” I agree. “It’s just …”

“It’ll be great,” he says, more enthusiastic than I’ve heard him in a long while. Maybe ever. “You’ll be great there. It will make a statement.”

I nod. It will.

It will tell everyone who’s ever been there, every other man who’s ever shared that bed with him, that things are irrevocably different now.

He might never be monogamous. So what? I’m not sure I want him to be. Or that I want to be either.

But he’s mine, nonetheless. That’s the statement that he’s prepared to make.

And by agreeing to this, I’m telling him that I’m his - in all the ways that count. I’m telling him that this time I’m not going anywhere. This time, we are going to do this and do it right, and fuck anyone who gets in our way.

I reach up and hug him. “There’s just one condition,” I say.

He gives me a look. I laugh.

“I want the blue lights back. I want you to promise that every now and again you’ll fuck me on that bed under the blue lights.”

He sticks his tongue in his cheek and grins at me. “For old time’s sake?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“For my sake,” I tell him as I stretch to kiss him.

“For our sake,” I mumble against his lips.

“Because you love me,” I whisper as he begins to pull my pants down.

“Because I love you,” I sigh as I reach for his cock.

“Because it’s our past,” I say as he fumbles around to find the condoms and the lube we left down here earlier.

“And our future,” I gasp as his fingers push into me.

“Our forever,” I groan as his cock takes their place.

“Will you shut the fuck up!” he snaps as he grabs my dick.

I giggle. “I wondered how long you’d let me …”

Then with a feral growl he kisses me, and pushes into me in earnest, and I stop saying anything coherent. Stop thinking. Stop doing anything but feeling. Feeling right and happy and loved. His eyes are on mine and in them I see those same things mirrored; see that he feels the same; see that he knows what I know.
We can sell this place, get another. Sell the loft, keep it, change it. None of it matters. Not really.

This is home. This.
Brian

When we finally get around to checking, there’s a message from Ma Taylor that they’ve accepted the offer.

I guess that’s a good thing.

I mean, I know it is. I know he’s right about us not living here. And I’m damned if I’m going to get all lesbionic over some heap of bricks and mortar.

So I make a call to Cyn, and after telling her that if she breathes anything to anyone about it, I’ll string her up by whatever private parts are available, I give her the challenge of finding decent movers who can get all our stuff out of here on Monday, and also somewhere to store it.

She pretends that she doesn’t know anything about the house having any furniture apart from the stuff that was here when I bought it that is part of the sale, which is bullshit. I think. Ted still handles all my bills, private as well as for the company, so either he’s a lot more close mouthed than I give him credit for, or she’s missed out on a career on stage. Doesn’t matter. She’s going to deal with all that shit, so Justin and I can just . . .

I put down the phone and turn to look at him.

He looks surprisingly emotional, given that he’s the one who’s always insisted that we can’t live here.

I walk over to him and, grabbing his shirt, pull him against me. I brush my nose across his and he
smiles, even if it is a bit wobbly. I lean my forehead against his, and say softly, “Sunshine, if we’re going to try to hold onto every place that we ever live in together, then one of us seriously needs to consider a future in the rented property market.”

He laughs and pushes at me, but I hold on tight and he leans back into me and wraps his arms around me.

“Can I at least take some photos?” he asks.

I shrug.

“I mean, without you giving me shit about how sentimental I am.”

Little shit.

I grin at him, and say, “Depends on what’s featured in the photos.”

He pokes my ribs and says, “You know …”

His eyes drift to the fireplace and I give a long-suffering sigh.

“With or without my dick?” I say.

He giggles.

Shit! How did I ever think I could live without hearing that sound? In anyone else it would annoy the fuck out of me, but in him … in him it stands for home. And once again I get this squeeze around my heart and I want to grab him and hold him as the realization washes over me once more that he’s fucking home.

Justin’s come home to me.

***

Justin

We goof around taking some photos of the fireplace, the couch, the windows. He’s in some of them. He makes me pose in others. All family friendly. Then he sends me off to make coffee while he figures out how to work the timer on my camera. He sneaks up and takes another snap of me making the coffee, then he settles me on the couch, sets up the camera and timer, and experiments taking photos of us drinking our coffee, smiling mock-sweetly at the camera, and at each other. Then he sets the camera to keep shooting automatically, and there are a few of us with those fake smiles, and then they fade away and are replaced by shots of us simply staring into each other’s eyes.

After that, the smiles are real ones, warm and loving, and full of tenderness. I can hardly wait to download these images because I want to paint them. Or at least capture in paint the feeling in them. Because our faces show the shadows of pain, and loneliness, even despair but while you look at them, you see the pain being replaced with joy, the despair with hope and the loneliness with a recognition of togetherness so profound that it’s like a solid presence, a living entity, sharing the image-space with us.

We review what we’ve taken while we drink our coffee, and fight over whether some of them get deleted. Of course, Brian wants to delete any photo where he looks less than model-perfect, and I want to keep them all. The fact that he doesn’t suggest deleting all of them because they’re so
fucking mushy makes me smile down to my toes. I try not to let him see that, but he knows, and mumbles something about “privacy” and “deny” and “photoshop”. I laugh at him and he sticks his tongue into his cheek for a moment and then gives in and laughs back.

He takes the coffee cups out to the kitchen, and by the time he gets back I’m waiting for him on the rug. These are photos that no one else will ever see; but they capture what will always be my main image of this house: the firelight flickering across Brian’s body, turning the natural sheen of sex and sweat to a deep glow, making him impossibly beautiful, other-worldly, as he makes love to me; making us somehow immortal, as if somehow this part of us, of Brian and Justin, is captured and held safe some place outside time, so that somewhere we will always be like this - our union, our passion, our love caught and held forever in the flickering firelight.

Eventually we go upstairs and pull bedding from one of the other rooms into “our” room. Then, for the first and last time, we fall asleep there, curled together, his long body spooned around mine.

Sleep comes easily, as it did last night. I’d forgotten what that was like. For months now, sleep has been something to be fought for; brief, fragmented, so hard-won that the night’s struggles always left me more tired, more depleted by the time morning finally came.

But not this time. Instead we both sleep like the dead, and in the morning we make love at last in this room that we’ll never really get to use. Although in some ways I feel impatient now to get moving, to get a start on this new stage of our being together, yet this still starts out slow and leisured. And all the time, under the heat and passion and need, I feel a deep still kernel of peace at the heart of the “harder”, “more”, “now!” urgency.

We lie there for a while afterwards, side by side. My head is on his shoulder, and his hand is dangling down over mine. His fingers idly stroke my arm, mine lightly rub his hip - small touches that somehow satisfy a need deeper even than the passion we’ve just shared. I feel like I’m floating with pleasure, with relief. The absence of stress and longing and fear and regret leaves me feeling so relaxed I could float off into the ether. Part of me wants to get up and moving, but mainly I just want to lie here with him forever.

***

Brian

The back of his head is resting on the junction where my are meets my shoulder, so my arm is crooked awkwardly behind and around his head and it’s starting to go numb. His elbow is resting on my chest and every time he moves his hand it digs into my fucking ribs a little. My leg is trapped under his calf, and that’s going numb as well. It’s fucking uncomfortable, and I’m damned if I want to move a muscle.

It takes me a while to recognize this feeling and when I do it’s a shock; it’s contentment. That’s what I’m feeling. I’m content.

Part of me is fucking offended by that. Straights and boring old farts are content. Not people like me.

But … it feels so fucking good. For the first time in a long, long time … so long that maybe it’s forever, there’s nothing that I’m scared of, nothing that I have to push to the back of my mind, the deepest parts of my psyche, in case its power tears me apart. The worst has happened. He left me. Again. And now he’s home.

He’s here. He’s fucking here. And this time he’s really planning to stay. This time it’s not “till he
gets better”, or “till he wakes up to what a total fucking disaster of a man you are”, or “till he finds out all the great things that are out there waiting for him”. He’s been there, done that, sent the postcards, and still come back to me. This time he knows what all the options are, and the option he wants has me in it.

So while the next few days are going to be chaos - packing the stuff we need from here, working out what has to be sold, what has to go into storage, not to mention dealing with all the crew once they find out he’s back … It doesn’t matter.

None of it matters.

He’s fucking here.

And whether we live here, or at the loft, or on a fucking street corner … it just doesn’t fucking matter.

Because …

Well, because.

For some reason that thought suddenly fills me with energy, so I roll him off my arm, slap his ass and head for the shower.

He follows of course. Little nympho.

***

Justin

I suppose that I should be surprised that he behaves as if he’s had this all planned for months, but I’m not. He’s such a damned control freak that he probably spent last night planning it all out in his sleep. So I find myself not even arguing much as he details what we’ll take back with us this trip, what we’ll try to take in the next trip and what can be left to the movers.

He wants to take the painting I was working on yesterday, but there’s no way … it needs at least some time to dry.

I suggest the food, but he hums and haws over that and I finally realize that he wants to leave it here in case we want to spend tonight here as well. I manage to convince him that we can take at least some of the stuff back with us and that way we’ll have food both here and at the loft. Cyn calls at one stage and tells him that some moving boxes will be delivered today. He tells her that the garage will be open and they can be left in there. She says the movers will be here by eight am Monday, and anything we don’t want to pack ourselves, we should just leave with labels on them saying where they have to be delivered. She’s organized a storage facility, so we can have the personal stuff like my art stuff delivered to the loft, and everything else can go into storage, at least for now.

While he’s getting the details, I cook us some breakfast and we sit and eat it in the kitchen. Probably the only meal we’ll ever eat here. I’m beginning to feel a bit nostalgic over that, but then Brian is dragging me upstairs. He goes to my studio, throws open the door and I see the room lit by sunlight for the first time. It's beautiful, and I start to second guess myself and wonder if we really should stay here. The thing is, if the house was just this room, the lounge area and kitchen, with a couple of bed and bathrooms, it would be perfect. But it isn’t. It’s fucking huge. And I can’t even imagine the effort it would take to keep it clean and well maintained. I know we could get people in to do that, of course, but they still have to be managed and paid and all that shit, and they go on
holidays and leave and have to be replaced, and I just don’t want all that hassle.

While I’m going through all this in my head again, Brian digs out the camera. I smile and suddenly know that this is the right move. What I need from this place isn’t the bricks and mortar, it’s what it’s already given me, the promise of a home together. And the other things, the things particular to this place, those are in my heart, and I can keep them with me always - the words Brian said to me when he asked me to marry him; making love with him by the fire, eating together downstairs, spending time with him in this room that he made just for me … all those things, the essence of them, I will always have, no matter where we live.

So we take some photos and then head downstairs to finish packing the car.

He’d arranged for us to go to Mom’s office to sign all the papers, so, after dropping the food off at the loft, we do that. We’re working out just what to do next, when Mom gives a funny little cough and says, “I don’t want you to think I’m interfering …”

Which puts me on the alert right away.

Brian just gets this look, almost amused, like he finds the situation of actually having someone who is almost a mother in law kind of hilarious.

“Interfere?” he says, grinning so she knows he’s joking - almost. “You? Ma, the thought would never have crossed my mind.”

They look at each other and she blushes a little. There have been times when she’s interfered in both big ways and small, but she holds her ground (this is my Mom after all) and says, “I don’t know how serious you are about finding another place …”

I stiffen a little and look at Brian. He goes still and his eyes meet mine. I guess the hope shining in mine gives him a good clue to what I think about that, and by the way he suddenly drops his eyes, trying to hide his smile, I know we’re on the same page. I move closer to him, and feel his hand on my back. “We’re serious,” he says.

Mom looks for a moment like she’s going to cry, but she’s got this big smile on her face at the same time. I brace myself to head her off from smothering us both in a big hug, but she gets a grip and says just a little shakily, “Well, we do have something on the books that …”

Then she stops and bites her lip. “I … perhaps I shouldn’t … I don’t know if …”

She finally stammers to a stop. Brian looks at her like she’s losing it, and maybe he’s right. I mean, what the fuck? Is there some big state secret about this place or something?

“I don’t know if he’ll even let me show it to you,” she says. “But I could call and ask him.”

Brian shrugs, a little irritably. I know what he’s thinking. It sounds like the owner’s some fag-hating nut job, who’ll go ape over the idea of two queers living there, and who wants to live in a place that’s going to remind you of something like that?

“He ..” Mom sighs. “He’s very difficult. But the place is beautiful, and right on the river.”

I cut in before Brian can say anything, “Look, Mom, if he’s some fag hater then …”

“Oh, no!” she says. “No, nothing like that. In fact, he’s gay himself, I think. At least, he lived there with another man for years, so …”
Brian and I exchange a look and a little grin. So, not a fag hater then.

“So what’s his story?” Brian asks.

Mom sighs. “The place has been on the books for months. Nearly a year. He says he wants to sell, but every time we call to tell him we have someone who wants to view he gives us the third degree, and even when we do take them out there, he is just so rude, and flatly refuses to even consider their offer. And just about everyone has made an offer. It’s an amazing place.”

I frown. “Mom, we’re not looking for another mansion,” I tell her.

“No, no. It’s nothing like that. It only has three bedrooms and one of those is tiny. It’s … unusual. They took a really old, quite small two-story cottage, bought up the land next door, knocked down the house there and extended. You’d have to see it. I can’t explain it to you.”

Brian shrugs. “Well, if you think we’d like it, give him a call.”

She looks really scared for a moment, and then nods. She gets out her book and dials a number from it. We sit and listen to the conversation.

***

Brian

Don’t know what all the fucking fuss is about, if this old fart doesn’t want to sell, fuck him. We’ll find what we want elsewhere. But Justin’s got that look … the one that says his interest has been caught, so if we don’t at least see the place he’ll bug the living shit out of me, with all his “I wonder what it was like” and “I wonder why he’s like that” and all that bullshit. So it’s easier just to let his curiosity have its say and at least get to see the house and maybe meet the guy and after that … well, who knows? If Justin likes it, then it’s probably just down to the money, and that’s not a problem.

Ma Taylor sounds a little rattled when she first gets on the phone, but when he starts to give her a hard time, she digs her toes in and insists ever so nicely that he should let us see it. I have to stifle a laugh. I could tell the guy now to give it up. Watching her in action, it isn’t hard to see where little Sunshine gets his pit bull qualities. This guy doesn’t stand a chance. If Justin likes the house, he’ll have both of them after him. Suddenly I find myself looking forward to the contest. I think this is going to be amusing.

***

Justin

Mom gets the guy to agree to her taking us to the house this afternoon. Which means we have time to get some lunch. I’m wondering if we should go to the diner, when I hear Brian inviting Mom to eat with us. I nearly choke.

She gets all flustered, and says she doesn’t want to intrude, and she knows I’ve only just got back and all that, but Brian just smiles one of his inscrutable (he thinks) Brian smiles and we wind up in a nice restaurant up on Mount Washington. Once we get there, he pumps her about the guy and the house, in the most laid back way. I mean, he behaves as if he’s not at all interested which somehow makes her all the more determined to tell us everything she knows.

It’s not really a lot.
Apparently the guy is really wealthy. I mean, seriously. He owned some big engineering firm or something, and sold it at the right time, so he has more money than he knows what to do with. But the guy he was living with got sick right around the time he sold up. Mom doesn’t know, but it sounds like it might have been AIDS. Something that made him really weak, anyway, so they just lived together in that house till the other guy died. Now the owner wants to sell up and go back to England.

I prick up my ears at that. I hadn’t realized he was a Brit. I have a thing for Brits. It’s the accent, I think. But of course, this guy is old, so …

I catch Brian’s eye. He knows just what I was thinking, because he grins at me, and then grins even wider when Mom says, “You mustn’t mind if he’s rude to you. He’s like that with every one. Or at least, he’s been like that every time we’ve taken anyone there.”

I think about that for a moment, about what it must be like to have strangers wandering through your home, through your life, almost; through the place you’d live in with someone you loved, someone you’d watch fade away and die; what it would be like to have people trampling all over your memories, and suddenly I don’t blame him. I think I’d be rude too. I think I’d have to be, or else I’d just burst into tears or something.

I feel Brian’s hand on my knee, suddenly, and for a moment when I look at him, I see him through a mist. Then I blink, and the mist is gone, but his hand is still warm on my leg and I feel better.

It’s not a long drive to the house, and of course we do it faster than Mom, so we pull up across the road and sit and look at it.

From the front, it actually looks a little weird - lop-sided, almost. It’s hard to believe there was ever another house next door. It must have been the same kind, kind of narrow looking, with a high, sloping roof. Maybe they were joined or something. Now there’s nothing on that side, but a garage, and then some trees between this house and the next. On the other, the land falls away down to the river in a sort of curve. The river must cut back this way down there, and I guess the land must fall right away, because there’s a sort of gap with only trees, and then the road curves round with the river, and it’s a little while before the houses start again. The ground seems slightly higher just here, too, as if the house stands on the highest point. It makes it seem isolated, remote. Even on this suburban street.

Looking at it, just from the outside, gives me shivers, and without even seeing the inside, I suddenly know that this is where I want to live, this is where I want us to live, this is where I want to build my life with Brian.

I try to batten down that feeling because I know that I have to appear really calm, and maybe not all that interested, so that Brian can negotiate on the price. I can’t let anyone see what I am really feeling.

Mom arrives, and as we walk across the road to meet her I can feel my heart beating so hard it’s making me feel sick.

Brian takes my hand and gives me a look, so I smile at him as well as I can and try not to jump when Mom rings the doorbell.

***

Brian
I can feel him ready to jump out of his skin beside me. I wish now I’d never got Jennifer to talk about this place and the guy who owns it. I should have known better. One look at his eyes in the restaurant and I knew he’d gone all soppy over the place before he’d even laid eyes on it.

Well … fuck it! If it’s what he wants, who fucking cares why he wants it? We can buy it, and if he changes his mind, we’ll just sell and buy something else. Whatever he wants. I don’t care. As long as he’s in the deal, I just don’t care about the rest.

Meanwhile, we’re standing here waiting to see if this guy is going to condescend to even let us see the place.

Fucker!

He finally opens the door and we’re face to face with a walking corpse. He’s tall, thin and beyond old, fucking ancient, 80 at least, with that prune look that the Brits seem so good at - as if he’s simultaneously got a bad smell under his nose and a poker up his ass. I can feel myself bridling and instinctively, I move closer to Justin. If this guy thinks he can be rude to …

Well, I’m not regarded as the consummate asshole for nothing.

Justin’s nervous “Hi!” reminds me that I should work out the lay of the land though, before I go into asshole mode. If he really wants this house, I might have to fucking play nice to help him get it.

The guy, who Jenn introduces as Mr. Dickinson, just stares at Justin’s hand and then he looks up and his eyes meet mine. There’s no mistaking the hostility in them, and to be honest, it sets me back on my haunches a bit. I mean, what the fuck’s his problem? I haven’t even opened my mouth yet.

“You’d better come in,” he says, as if the only thing less welcome would be root canal surgery.

We step through the small porch into a narrow hallway. It should be dark, but it’s not, and it actually takes me a minute to realize why. The wall at the end, instead of being solid, is made of glass bricks. You can’t see through them, but they let enough light into the hall to take away some of the closed in feeling that the narrow walls give the place.

He doesn’t ask us where we want to start, or offer to let us wander around on our own, instead he just opens the door to the left, and we get a glimpse of what seems to be a small parlor or something. On the right is a study - library maybe. I get a glimpse of a hell of a lot of books, anyway. The rooms look okay, but they’re small and the whole place so far has a pokey look that doesn’t appeal at all. There’s stairway down from the study, with a small bathroom tucked in behind it.

Dickinson grunts a word or two as he shows us each room. But you can tell he’s not comfortable with us being here. He just wants us gone.

He stands almost blocking our way to the stairs, so we keep going down to the end of the hallway.

On the right, just before the glass bricks, there’s an open archway into a formal dining room, the main body of which comes back towards the front of the house. Again it’s small. At least the glass bricks continue along, forming the wall of the whole room, which prevents it from being dark as well; which it would be, because there are no other windows. We poke our heads in and see that there’s another doorway right at the end of the bricks that leads out past them into what I suppose is the back of the house. I’m getting fucking curious now, as to what those bricks are hiding. But
Dickinson is somehow past us, waving us back, and so we move to the room on the other side of the hall.

This time the archway leads into a kitchen. It’s a big warm room, and I can tell Justin loves it. This room has huge side windows that give a glimpse of a lot of sky, but we’re too curious now to even stop and look through. Again, the glass bricks continue along until at the end, just before the far wall, there’s a doorway through.

But before we can get to it, Dickinson is there, in our faces, saying, “Well, you’ve seen enough. It’s obviously not your kind of place. I’ll see you …”

And that’s when he gets the full barrage of Justin’s blue eyes turned on him, and has to watch as they slowly fill with tears.

I can’t see them, but I can picture them, it’s a sight I’ve seen more than enough - a reaction I’ve caused more than enough. I can hear how upset he is in the way he’s breathing and can feel it in the way he reaches for my hand and clings to it.

“Please …,” he breathes, and I feel something knot inside me. He wants this, he fucking wants it, and I have to find a way to make this bastard let him have what he wants.

I search inside for the right approach, for the way to sell Justin, to sell us, to this guy as the buyers of his fucking house. I move forward a little, and feel Justin nestle closer to my side; I squeeze his hand and look up to find Dickinson looking not at Justin, but at me.

He just stands there for what seems like fucking forever, and then he gives the faintest ghost of a smile, that makes him look even more of a corpse, and stands aside. I give him a glance as we pass him, trying to work out what he’s thinking. Then, for a moment, I forget him entirely.

We walk along the wall, and through the archway into … light. Fucking amazing light.

And space.

Fuck this space is huge!

***

Justin

It’s amazing. Beautiful and amazing and I have to fucking live here. I have to.

It’s like the front half of the house is like it used to be when it was built, a number of small, dark rooms. But here …

There are no rooms, its just space.

And light.

The wall to the left is all windows. So is the wall in front of us. Or rather … the bottom half seems to be huge sliding doors made mainly of glass. The top … oh, my God! the top!

And that’s when I realize. That’s when I know whom Mr. Dickinson used to live with.

“William Arkwright!” I breathe.

“What?” Brian asks.
I’m taking a breath to tell him that the guy who designed the stained glass windows that stretch above the glass doors, right to the high arched rafters of the roof could only be William Arkwright, when a hoarse voice answers for me.

“That’s right. My Billy designed those.”

I turn to him, my eyes brimming again.

“They’re …” I break off. Words are totally inadequate for the wonder of color and light that “his Billy” has created here.

To my astonishment he gives me a little smile, and then nods, as if he’s heard perfectly all the things I can’t find words for.

***

Brian

O-kay. So the guy he used to live with was some sort of designer, or craftsman. Something of the sort, anyway. And if he designed these windows he was a fucking good one. Somewhere in the caverns of my mind, there’s an echo of a memory and I finally manage to track it down.

Of course! William Arkwright. He was a designer, and a sculptor. But he specialized in glass. He designed glassware that was so beautiful it would be criminal to use it, and almost as much of a sin not to. I remember seeing a glass coffee table he’d made once. The legs were like tree trunks - literally, thick and veined and twisted with knots that looked so real you’d swear you could smell the wood and then at the top they branched to form the base for the table top to rest on; and the table top was green, all different shades of green, seemingly woven out of intertwined leaves, all hand-crafted out of glass.

Not my style at all, but fuck! it was beautiful.

I stare up at the windows.

And then I look around the room. And finally manage to make sense of what I’m seeing.

It’s as if they’ve cut the house in half.

In the front half, they’ve left all the original rooms.

Here, they’ve taken out everything, even the upstairs floor, opening it out completely to one amazing space.

I glance across to the other end of the room and smile as I see a huge fucking fireplace. I look up again at the windows, and realize that our rug, the rug I’d bought for our first house, would work well here, in front of the fire. The colors would glow in the light from those windows, and would bring the colors of the windows into the room.

For a moment, I’m distracted, picturing Justin spread out on the rug. Then, for the first time, I look out through the clear glass doors to what’s beyond.

There’s decking that runs right across the back of the house, and below that the land must fall away, because I can see only a glimpse of green between the deck and the river which shines below us. I walk over, and peer through the window. There’s a series of rock garden terraces with a path going down through them and past those there’s a gentle grass slope, stretching down to the
riverbank. At the end there’s some sort of wooden jetty, even a boat tied to it. Just a small one. I
know fuck all about boats, but I guess it makes sense if you have a place like this to have one. I
think of taking off down the cool of the river on hot humid Pittsburgh nights, and it’s a damned
appealing thought.

I turn around and look back into that amazing room, and realize for the first time that the wall
above the glass bricks, the wall of what must be at least one of the bedrooms upstairs, is in fact a
window. So the rooms up there would look out to this space, with its light and color and the view
of the river beyond.

Suddenly, I want to get up there, I want to see. I look around for Justin. He’s standing with
Dickinson, talking to him. There are no tears now, he’s all animation. They must be talking arty
stuff. I walk up and get one of those blinding smiles. He practically throws himself at me.

“Well, you like it?” he asks.

I hesitate for a moment, about to play down my amazement and the fucked up feeling I have that
somehow this house was made for Justin and I. I’m about to shrug it off, when I look at him and
realize that I can’t. I can’t do anything to dull that fucking glow.

So I just nod. He’ll know what that means.

He does, too, because he laughs with delight and turns to Dickinson as if he’s known him for years.
“Those he loves it,” he says, smiling so fucking brightly that it makes even this room look
dim by comparison.

I’m about to try for some sort of dignity, something, by commenting on how hard it must be to
keep the place warm in Pittsburgh’s winters with all that fucking glass, when Dickinson totally
blows me out of the water, by smiling at Justin like he’s his favorite nephew or something and then
taking his hand and pulling it through his arm, like he’s in some old fucking movie.

“Well, me show you upstairs,” he says.

Jenn and I exchange looks behind him. I can tell she’s excited. Maybe no one else has got as far as
being taken upstairs.

“I’ll wait down here,” she says, obviously not wanting to jinx anything or spook him.

So the three of us make our way up the narrow little staircase.

Upstairs is, in some ways, a lot like the front of the house downstairs. Another narrow hallway
running from the front of the house to the dividing wall. On one side of the hall there’s the
stairwell, with a bathroom behind it. At the front of the house on that side is a tiny bedroom, and
on the other side of the stairwell is the guest bedroom, which is a reasonable size, I guess.

The other side of the house is taken up entirely with the master bedroom its bathroom. What makes
it different from downstairs is that here, there are no opaque glass bricks forming the end wall,
there are clear glass windows, so the hallway, and the two bedrooms all look directly across to the
stained glass, and down to the room below, and the glass doors onto the deck.

By now, I’m starting to get curious about the engineering. I mean, some of these should be load-
bearing walls.

While Justin unabashedly kneels on the floor at the foot of the huge bed and peers through the
glass to the stained glass windows immediately opposite him, Dickinson smiles at me.
“Reinforced steel,” he says.

I raise an eyebrow.

“All the main structure is reinforced with steel,” he elaborates. We did all this over forty years ago, and it’s as solid now as the day we moved in. You don’t have to worry about it falling down on his pretty blond head.”

I feel uncomfortable with that comment, which he picks up on and for some reason it makes him laugh, a hoarse sound, as if he hasn’t had much practice at it lately.

“Let him wander around, and we’ll go downstairs and I’ll show you some of the house’s other features that you’ll want to know about.”

Justin has got that “I really wish I had my sketchbook” look, so I leave him there, soaking in the color and light and follow Dickinson downstairs.

We find Jennifer in the kitchen.

“You can go,” Dickinson tells her bluntly. “We’ll let you know if we need you.”

She stares at him for a moment and then says, a little anxiously, “Justin?”

I smile at her. “Upstairs enjoying the view. Memorizing it, if I know him. He’ll be painting all fucking night by the looks of it.”

Dickinson gives me a sharp look, and I think that he’s pissed off at the thought of Justin mimicking his lover’s designs. I can respect that.

“He’ll just want to catch the feel of them,” I tell him. “It won’t be like a photo image. It will be about how he sees them, how they make him feel.”

Jenn mumbles something about “Well, if you’re sure”, and I nod at her, encouraging her to go.

It seems like Dickinson may be willing to talk turkey, if I can refrain from fucking it up.

She walks out and he rubs his hands together.

“Let’s have coffee,” he says, and starts to make it. I stand leaning against the table feeling fucking awkward if the truth be known, until he growls at me to sit down.

“You don’t have to worry about the heating,” he says, as if we’d been discussing what I’d only been thinking. “The central heating is very efficient, and the glass itself is heated, so you don’t have to worry about running around like a lot of brass monkeys looking for a welder, no matter how cold it gets.”

I stare at him. He gives me a grin over his shoulder. “I’m an engineer, Mr … er …”


“Brian,” he says. “Brian,” he says. Then, the coffee at last on the go, he turns and holds out his hand. “Dan,” he says. I shake it and as I look into his eyes, I’m surprised to see in them warmth and sympathy and something that looks very like amusement. The look becomes even more pronounced, when we hear Justin thumping down the stairs, and his eager, “Brian!”

“In here,” I answer automatically.
He bounds in and throws himself down next to me, reaching over to take my hand and then leaning in even further for a kiss.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it? I mean, you really do like it, don’t you?”

I pull my lips between my teeth and then Dickinson … Dan … laughs.

“You might as well give in to it,” he says. “It’s what he wants, and that means you want it for him.”

I bite my lip. I don’t like anyone being able to read me like this, especially someone who can gouge me for my last dollar to try to get Justin what he wants.

Dan laughs and actually fucking pats me on the shoulder.

“It was the same for me,” he says. “Whatever Billy wanted … I never could bring myself to say ‘no’ to him.”

Then he sighs, “Well, not after I pulled my head out of my arse and admitted he was all I wanted, anyway.”

He turns then, and takes some time to get cups and cream and all that shit. Justin gets up to help him, and asks softly, “Were you together for a long time?”

Dan sighs again, and gesturing for Justin to fetch the coffee, he sits down. “Sixty years, just on,” he says.

Justin puts the coffee on the table, and draws his chair closer to mine as he sits down.

Dan looks at him and smiles. “He was a lot like you. Well, dark, where you’re fair, but the same deep blue eyes, the same … smile. The same way of looking at me as if …”

He turns his head to me then, “And you are a lot like me, maybe. Too bloody proud and stubborn for your own good, but … “ his eyes drift to Justin for a moment and then back to me.

“Well, you’ve your own road to travel, and it might not be an easy one. Nothing worth having was ever all that easy. At least not for me.”

Justin tilts his head at him, and says bluntly, “We want the house. We want to travel our journey together in this house.”

Dan nods. “I know you do.”

Then, with a mocking look at me as if he knew what I’d think of it, he goes on, “I’ve been keeping it for you. I knew you’d find your way here sooner or later.”
They spend some time getting to know Dan

Brian

I should treat that remark with the contempt it deserves. “Saving it for us”? Fuck! That is such a blatant attempt to add a few bucks to the price that it’s laughable. But beside me I feel Justin’s reaction, feel it gut deep. And for some reason that triggers some sort of visceral response in me, so that the ability to mock those idiotic words just fucking deserts me.

“What do you mean?” he breathes, his voice a little higher than usual. He suddenly sounds very much like that seventeen-year-old stalker I used to know.

The old guy, what’s his name … Dan .. smiles at him and reaches over to pat his hand.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he says, getting up to open a cupboard and pile some fat and carb ladened fucking cookies on a plate. “The subject is making Brian uncomfortable.”

The old bastard gives me another one of those darkly mocking looks as he tops up my coffee and his own. Then he sits down opposite my partner, who has already started on the cookies, and smiles at him again. “Brian tells me you paint, Justin. Is that your favorite medium?”

The guy is fucking lucky he’s a walking corpse or I’d seriously have to think he was hitting on Justin right in front of me. My hand seems to wander of its own accord to rest on Justin’s knee and he turns to me with one of those smiles. I almost reel from the force of it.

It takes me back to a night a long, long time ago, in a galaxy far fucking far away. Overcome by
that memory, I lean in towards him and then hesitate, just like I did then. And just like then, his smile reassures me, and I kiss him.

Kiss him soundly, right in front of this old reprobate who seems so intent on baiting me. Take that, fucker! Dream of it tonight!

But then I remember that this old guy’s partner, the man he’d lived with for over sixty years, died not all that long ago, and I feel suddenly ashamed of my thoughts. I sit back and give him a look, pulling my lips in while I try to work out how to apologize, without actually apologizing.

Before I can say anything, though, he smiles at me. A real smile this time; and I see that the kiss hasn’t offended him or made him feel his loneliness even more than he must always do; see that in some way it might even have eased it for a moment or two. So then all I need do is to make sure my lips don’t slide into a smirk when I smile back.

I’ll say this for him, he might be old, he might be grieving, but he’s not bitter enough to resent our happiness. In fact, he seems to share it. He sits back in his chair and takes a contented sip of his coffee, while Justin turns to him to belatedly answer his question. I sit back myself, turning slightly so I can watch my Sunshine as he waves his hands around and talks about oils and watercolors and then moves on to computer graphics, words tumbling out of him about working with tools this guy has probably never seen. Dickinson might have used Correl or one of the other design packages in his engineering work, but nothing like the latest art programs that Justin has mastered.

It gives me a shock to realize while I sit and watch and listen, that I already feel at home here, in this house. We haven’t even begun to discuss the nitty gritty yet, but unless dear Dan simply refuses to sell to us, which doesn’t seem likely the way he’s behaving, it doesn’t matter what the price is. Justin wants this place; and so do I.

We seem to have found our new nest already.

***

Justin

I suddenly hear my own voice going on and on and can feel myself blushing as I stumble to a halt. I wish Brian had shut me up a little sooner. He didn’t have to let me make an idiot of myself like that. The old guy was only being polite to ask me, I should have just told him “oils” or something and shut up.

I give Brian a little glare and he raises an eyebrow at me and grins. Mr. Dickinson laughs.

“Don’t worry, Justin,” he says. “I knew what I was likely in for when I asked the question. My Billy was the same. Ask him about his work, and he lit up like a bonfire and could talk all night about it.”

“Sorry,” I tell him. “I’ve just got back from a while in New York, where you can’t talk about it like that. You can only talk in abstractions and it’s all “post modernist referencing of earlier forms” and shit. I hate that. That’s not what it’s about for me. But no one there wants to know how you feel about anything - they only want to spout their own theories, and over-intellectualize it. It’s been ages since …”

I break off then, and sneak a glance at Brian who has gone very still beside me. He gives me a look, another of those, ‘you should have told me you weren’t happy’ looks, and once again I feel like an idiot. He’s right. I should have told him. I should have come home months ago. I put my
hand out towards him, and he takes it. Then I move my chair to sit closer to him. He huffs a soft
laugh, a little rueful maybe, but still a laugh, and ruffles my hair.

I look back to Dan and he’s watching us closely. Or rather, he’s watching Brian.

Then he gives a bit of a laugh himself. “You and I seem to have even more in common than I’d
thought, Brian Kinney,” he says.

He doesn’t explain what he means, just stands up and says, “You’d better see the rest of the
house.”

It’s a bit abrupt, but I guess we should see whatever’s left to see. I mean, there can’t be much - just
the garage. Although I guess they might have done something with the basement. At that thought, I
get curious all over again, because what they have done with the rest of the house is so amazing
that it could be anything.

Dan takes us once more to that fabulous space at the back of the house, and crosses to a little door
beside the fireplace that I hadn’t seen before. He opens it and steps aside to let us pass through. In
front of us those green glass bricks form the outer wall, and the ceiling is also made of green glass,
or plexi-glass maybe, so much of the light in here is green tinged, giving the place a foresty feel.

That feeling is increased like a million times by the fact that the space seems full of plants. They’re
everywhere - in tiers all along that glass wall, hanging from the ceiling, growing all up the end the
wall on our right that I guess is the wall of the garage. Only the other end wall to our left, the one
that looks down to the river, is relatively clear of them. Like the wall in the main room, it’s made
almost entirely of glass, clear this time, and the plants all seem to be leaning towards it; because
that’s where the brightest light is coming from, I guess. It’s heading towards late afternoon now,
and the most amazing golden flood is steaming in through that huge window. In the center of that
light, surrounded by this indoor forest, is a big, beautiful wooden Jacuzzi.

We so have to have this house.

***

Brian

If he wasn’t sold on the house before, he certainly is by the damned hot tub. He loves the things.
Mind you, sharing a hot tub with Justin isn’t exactly a hardship for me either; although the word
‘hard’ definitely comes to mind thinking of our experiences in them.

It’s as if he hears me thinking that, because he bumps my shoulder with his, and gives that
mischievous little fucking giggle that I love. It’s so damned misleading because it makes him
sound like an infant, and it always comes when he is thinking things that mark him as anything but;
to those in the know that childish giggle is a definite fucking giveaway that he’s thinking the
thoughts of a hot and horny man. For some reason, I always find that contrast an incredible turn on,
and I can’t resist pinching his ass as he moves in front of me.

He yelps, and Dan gives us another of those indulgent looks and tells us that the space is heated, or
can be cooled in summer, and that, as in the main room, the glass doors open right out, so in the
summer it has almost an outdoor feel.

“But the plexi-glass in the ceiling has UV filters,” he adds, with a glance at Justin’s fair skin. “Billy
turned red as a lobster in the sun.”

Justin grins at him, but doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have to.
I’m starting to wonder what the heating costs are going to be in this place, but before I can frame the question, Dan takes us out through the glass doors. The decking stretches right across the front of this room, and he walks to the end and heads down the steps. I’m making a mental note that we’ll have to install some sort of gate at the top for Gus, and don’t immediately take in what I’m seeing.

“Are they all solar panels?” my more observant partner asks, and I look where he’s pointing. There are three terraces to the rock garden before it reaches the grass slope down to the river, and each is lined with what do, indeed, turn out to be solar panels.

Dan reaches the ground and turns to smile at Justin, as he skips down the last few steps to join him on the bluestones which form a type of patio across the width of the house before curving round to begin the path down through the terraces.

“State of the art,” he responds. “The system is designed to store the power and use it when needed. They provide nearly all the heating for the house, and,” he says, opening yet another glass door immediately under the edge of the deck, “for this.”

The doors here concertina open, and although he only pulls them part way, it’s obvious that they fold back completely on each side. Theoretically, this is the basement; but because of the slope, it’s actually ground level on this side of the house. It’s bigger than I expect and my guess is they took out the original wall and extended the space so that the decking now forms part of the roof.

Then they installed a fucking swimming pool.

“We always kept it slightly heated,” Dan says. “Even in summer, because being under here it’s always shaded. But the heating can be turned off during the summer months if you prefer.”

O-fuckingKay. Dan’s talking as if he really means to sell us the house, and judging by Justin’s delighted squeak, he really means for us to buy it.

“It’s only five feet deep,” Dan says, “but it’s long enough to swim laps.”

Damned right! And it’s deep enough for Gus to drown in.

“Are there any other doors?” I ask, wondering just how much drama it’s going to be to keep it always closed off when Gus is around. If Gus is around.

Dan shakes his head. “No. No. We didn’t want any accidents so we made sure we could lock it up easily.”

I nod. That’s a relief, anyway. Now all I have to worry about is the river. And if we put some sort of gate at the top of the deck, then Gus shouldn’t be able to get down here at all without one of us with him. At least for the next year or two.

“Brian has a young son,” Justin confides for fuck knows what reason. “He’s nearly five now. He’ll be coming to visit us sometimes, so we need to make sure he’ll be safe.”

Dan doesn’t seem phased by the information, he just nods. “The gates that we used to use on the stairs are still in the storage room, next to the jacuzzi.”

I feel suddenly weary of dancing around the subject. I need to get this deal done.

“So, what’s the asking price?” I ask abruptly.
Dan grins, one of those mocking grins that make me sorry he’s too fucking old to take on. “Do you mean the asking price I told the estate agents, or the price I’d give to you?”

I can feel myself bristling, because now he’s just gaming us. Justin, though, smiles at him and says, “It’s our first real home together, Mr. Dickinson.”

He’s all but purring and batting his eyelashes.

“Dan,” the old buzzard murmurs.

“Dan,” Justin breathes. And if I’d thought that maybe Dickinson was coming on to him, Justin is definitely flirting. But hey! if it gets a few thou off the price, he can charm all he wants - up to a point. And with someone this old, it’s never likely to get to that point. Not unless Viagra is even better than I remember it. Doesn’t mean I have to enjoy feeling like the third wheel, though.

Dan gives another mocking glance at me, and, drawing Justin’s hand through his arm, starts leading him literally down the garden path. I follow feeling like fucking Queen Victoria: not at all amused.

***

Justin

I can feel Brian’s glare on the back of my neck, but I concentrate on smiling up at Mr. Di… Dan.

“Did you mean it when you said you were saving it for us?” I ask. Brian might think that I’m the easy touch here, but he should remember that I’m also the clever little devil he taught me to be.

Dickerson hesitates for a moment, and when he speaks I think that even Brian, who seems to think he’s a devious old bastard, must hear the pain in his voice.

“Billy would have said so.”

It’s awful. I think about how I’d feel if this were me forty years from now, talking about Brian, and wish I’d never mentioned it. I can only give his arm a squeeze, and sort of rub my head against his shoulder to show how sorry I am. I try to apologize, but he cuts me off.

“No, no!” he says, briskly. “No … I was the one who brought that subject up.”

He gives a long fucking sigh, and steers me to a seat on the second terrace. It looks out across the river, and I squeeze up to let Brian sit next to me. He puts his arm around my shoulders, as if he senses that what Dan is going to say might not be easy to hear and that I might need to feel him close.

But Dan doesn’t say anything for a long time, just sits and stares at the light playing on water. Finally, just when I can feel Brian getting really antsy beside me, he says, “We talked about it, Billy and I. About what would happen when he was gone. We had months and months to talk about it.”

He breaks off for a moment, and then says, his voice all hoarse and scratchy, “He was worried about me. Worried about what I’d do. So we made plans together. Planned out how I’d go back home to England. Go to the places there that we used to know. Say goodbye from both of us.”

He stops again and I feel dreadful, because he’s obviously finding it hard not to cry, and I can tell he’s like Brian - it would hurt his pride in a major way to cry in front of us. Especially in front of
Brian. I touch his arm, and he gives me a twisted smile.

“We talked about what to do with the house,” he finally goes on; and then he gives a sort of laugh. “I told him I didn’t want any fucking fag haters living here. He told me it couldn’t be that hard, even in Pittsburgh, to find a decent pair of fags to take over the tradition of upsetting all the neighbors.”

Now he really does laugh. “I told him I didn’t want any of those fucking heads up their arses so-called ‘A-gays’ either.”

Brian gives a snort of laughter himself at that, and, over my head, their eyes meet. They really are alike. I can see it in them. Some sort of … I don’t know … ‘outlaw’ sounds lame, but it’s something un-tamed. Something that doesn’t see any need to live by anyone else’s rules - gay or straight.

I feel my pride in Brian, my pride in being Brian’s partner bubble up in me.

The best thing Brian has ever done for me, and he’s done a lot, is to teach me that lesson. To teach me that the only person whose rules I must live by is myself. It’s when I’ve broken my own rules that I’ve fucked up my life; not when I’ve broken anyone else’s.

Of course, I guess I’ve made Brian break most of his, but that’s different. Most of those were bullshit anyway. He needed to outgrow them. And he has. We’re ready now to make our own rules, and not like those pathetic things we came up with in Babylon that night. This time they need to be real rules; rules that aren’t about putting limits on each other, aren’t a whole list of ‘thou shalt nots’; rules that are creative, that are about things ‘we must do’ to build a life together. Things like ‘we must communicate when we’re not happy with how things are’. And ‘we must make sure our partner’s fucking opinion counts for more than anyone else’s’ (otherwise known as the ‘we must tell Them to butt the fuck out’ rule).

I’m mentally promising myself to talk to Brian about that, but the way Dan grins at Brian then breaks my train of thought. His eyes gleam just the way Brian’s would as he says, “It narrowed the field a little. I didn’t want straights, I didn’t want mincing pansies, and I didn’t want ball-less fags who were trying to pretend that their shit didn’t stink. I told Billy it would be hard to find anyone who’d fit the bill, and he said …”

There’s the slightest quaver in his voice, and then he goes on, “He said, ‘They’ll come. The right couple. And you’ll know them when they do.’”

He drops his eyes to the ring on his right hand, and says softly, “I didn’t really believe it, but I learned long ago that it was best to listen to Billy when he gave me advice if I didn’t want to fall on my arse.”

He looks up. “So I waited,” he says simply, “And you finally showed up.”

He gives a real smile now, and says, “Where the fuck have you been?”

I open my mouth to say something, when he goes on, “Oh, yes, farting about in New York.”

He gives Brian a look that’s almost a glare and says, “And don’t tell me … you told him he had to go. Told him he’d regret it if he didn’t. Told him he had to give his career a chance. Didn’t you?”

I don’t have to look at Brian to know he’s got his tongue stuck in his cheek and is about to come out with something outrageous. Before he can, though, Dan says, “Oh, don’t bother! I can hear the conversation now. It’s the same fucking idiocy that I spouted to Billy fifty years ago.”
He looks at Brian, who has the sense to shut up and not say anything. Dan nods.

“Thought as much. It’s like I said … we’ve a lot in common, you and I.”

Then he smiles at me and pats my knee before he slowly pushes himself to his feet. “But you’re a lot like my Billy, too, I think. He had the right good sense to come home to me, and not let either of us make that mistake again. It strikes me that you’re the one with the sense in this relationship.”

I feel myself blushing, as I hear Brian snort behind me. I get up and turn to tell him to behave himself, but although he’s trying for his cynical face, his eyes are shining at me like he agrees with Dan, and for some reason that makes me blush more. He stands up, laughing, and makes a small movement of invitation that lets me rest my forehead for a moment against his chest. I feel his hands on my arms and his cheek brush my hair and then he’s letting me go and we’re both following Dan as he makes his slow, painful way back up the steps towards the house.

Watching him, I realize that he must find it almost impossible to get around this house and garden these days. Not only is he stuck here without Billy, he can’t even enjoy the place itself the way he once did. I feel my hand seeking Brian’s, and the warmth of his fingers around mine banishes the fear I suddenly feel that this is what life is going to be like for one of us, fifty years from now.

“The listed asking price is one point five,” Dan says, suddenly all business like. “You can have it for half that if you can settle in the next two weeks so I can get the next boat out of New York. I promised Billy I’d sail back, the same as we came over.”

Holy fuck!
Old Friends and New

Chapter Summary

After a little more time with Dan, the boys head for the Diner.

Brian

Fuck! That’s crazy. The listed price is twice that, and he could probably get more if he put it up for auction.

I start to work out what’s wrong with the place. White ants? Dry rot? Land erosion? Maybe that’s it, maybe it’s slowly sliding into the river.

As the wheels turn in my brain, the old bastard turns his head and grins at me with that death’s head grin. “I have money,” he says, “and it’s no fucking use to me. What I need is to know that this place is in good hands, in hands Billy would have wanted.”

“You could always just fucking give it away!” I snap. He laughs.

“I could,” he agrees. “But I’m a great believer in the idea that you only really value what you have to work for, what you earn.”

Our eyes meet, and we share a moment of complete understanding that scares the shit out of me. I don’t want some old buzzard to be able to read me this way. It’s even more fucking annoying that I know he knows that.

Justin, in one of his 'I'm so onto you' moments, gives me a look that tells me if I want his ass tonight I should keep my mouth shut right about now, and puts his hand on the old fucker’s arm.

"We'd look after it, Mr. Dickinson,” he says.
It should be fucking corny, but somehow it's not. He means it, and the old buzzard knows it, because suddenly his eyes start to swim.

I look away.

***

Justin

I don't know if I should have said that, because now Mr. Dickinson looks really upset. But then he pats my hand.

"Dan," he reminds me.

I smile at him.

"So … can you close in that time or not?" he asks. He still has his hand over mine, but he's looking at Brian.

Brian was looking down at the solar panels, but he turns and looks into Dan's eyes.

Then he nods.

I have to stop myself shouting out loud with delight, but I must have made some noise, because they both turn to look at me. Brian has his tongue stuck into his cheek, but his eyes are bright and Dan is smiling.

"The realtors had all sorts of surveys done on the place – to prove that it's structurally sound and isn't going to slide down into the river any day soon," Dan says briskly, ushering us up the steps in front of him.

I move ahead of him, but Brian insists on waiting till Dan has started up, pretending to take one more look at the solar panels. I hope Dan doesn't realize that it's really because Brian wants to be there in case Dan slips or something. Hardly anyone else would pick up on it; but Dan … I don't know. But if he does, the way Brian's done it means that he doesn't have to acknowledge it; and when Brian stops half way up to ask him something about the boat, they both stop and look down towards it, so that gives Dan the chance to pause for a minute to get his breath back before tackling the rest of the stairs.

It makes me want to throw myself into Brian's arms and hug him to let him know how onto him I am, and how much things like that say to me about him, but I can't make any fuss about it without doing exactly what Brian is being so careful not to do and hurting Dan's pride, so I just go on up the stairs and then, when they're still a while behind me, I go back into the house and once more stare up at the windows that Billy designed.

They're not representative in any way. I mean, they're not pictures of things or people, but there seem to me to be two interwoven themes. One theme, mainly along the bottom and towards the right hand side, is expressed in fairly stark straight line sections in deep shades of blue and green, red and purple. The other theme, straying across the top and down the left side, is expressed more in curved shapes and the colors are lighter – vivid, but airier, less solid. Here there are swirls of pale blue, bright green, yellow and even pink.

But as the two themes meet, they gradually merge, so that the lighter colors and drifting shapes are given solidity and weight and a firm foundation, while the heavy qualities of the first theme are lifted and made buoyant by the lighter shades, and the stark edges are softened into curves. Right
at the center there is a small shape that could almost be an elongated heart, or, I realize with a grin, a slightly curved inverted phallus in a vibrant, almost pulsing, scarlet.

Dan and Brian, after stopping a few moments on the deck outside the windows to continue their discussion on price, come in now and I find myself blurting out, "It's you, isn't it? You and Billy."

Brian raises a 'wtf' eyebrow, but Dan, after a long intent look at me, nods very slowly and then smiles, really smiles, and I see the relief and gratitude in his eyes even before he speaks.

"Yes," he says softly. "Yes."

And that's when I really know that he's right. The house has been waiting for us.

Because it's Brian and I as well.

***

Brian

By the time we leave the house I don't know whether to smack the little shit sitting next to me or … something else. Not content with flirting outrageously with that old fossil, he's invited him to come out to dinner with us one night next week.

Twat!

The old bastard had actually asked Justin to dinner at the house. Or us. Maybe. I'm not sure whether I was included or not. I'd sort of tuned out while they nattered away over yet another coffee and more fucking cookies. When I came to, Justin was insisting that he be our guest for dinner instead. At least the little fucker didn't invite dear old Dan over to the loft.

Although I guess I wouldn't mind him seeing it; let him know we're not currently living in some dump. But I heard Sunshine telling the old reprobate about the house, the one we're selling; the one I bought for him, to convince him …

I glance across the car at him, and he grins back at me.

"If you fuck the waiter, you are seriously looking for trouble," he tells me.

I grunt a laugh, and have to fight back a silly fucking smile, as his hand comes across to rest lightly on my thigh. Whatever I was trying to convince him of back then, he's here now, so somewhere along the way, I must have fucking succeeded.

For maybe the first time in my life I feel … I feel okay.

This thing we have mightn't last. There are no fucking guarantees. But for the first time I feel like that's okay. That I can face that risk. Because I don't have to hold my breath waiting for him to realize what everyone's been telling him since day one – that I'm a total asshole and he'd be better off without me.

For the first time, really, I feel like that's not true. He wouldn't be. Not now. Not tomorrow. Not next week, or next month. Maybe not ever. That what we have is good. It's good enough for him, which means it's actually fucking fabulous. And I can accept that I've helped make that happen. Helped make us happen. So I can't be the total fuck up everyone thinks that I am where relationships are concerned. Which means that maybe it is fucking okay if he plans on making a future with me, that it doesn't mean he's selling himself short if he does that.
"Brian," he says, breaking in on my thoughts thank God, before I become a total pussy and start saying any of that stuff out loud. Anyway, he's been totally onto me all day, so I wait for him to say some ridiculously fucking romantic thing to let me know he feels the same way, and then I won't have to say anything, I can just grunt my usual charming agreement.

"I'm hungry," he says.

Little shit!

***

Justin

He gives me one of those 'you have to be fucking kidding me' looks and then he grins.

I should have known right away that was a bad sign.

"Let's go then, Sunshine," he says.

Before I know what he's up to, he's turned the car and is heading towards Liberty Avenue.

I find myself freezing up. I don't know if I'm ready for this yet. Things have been good, better than good, better than wonderful, without all of them being involved. I don't want to …

I sneak a glance at him. He pulls up at a set of lights and looks across at me. Then his hand snakes out to cup the back of my neck. He gives it a squeeze, then the lights change so he lets go and turns to face the road again.

"Might as well get it over with," he says.

I take a deep breath and nod. He's right. The longer we leave it, the worse it will be. Especially if Deb finds out I've been in town for days and haven't even called her.

He kind of pushes in front of me as we walk in. It's late afternoon, so even the stragglers from the lunch crowd have left, and the dinner crowd aren't in yet. There's no sign of Deb. Or of Michael. But Ted and Emmett are there, sitting in the usual booth.

Brian moves to the table and slides in next to Ted, and it's not till he's just about sitting down that Emmett sees me. He gives a squeal and jumps up, grabbing hold of me and hugging me almost as hard as Debbie would. I'm just about suffocating when I hear Brian growl, "Don't make me have to get up again, Emmett."

Ted snorts, not sure if that's because he's read a double meaning into what Brian has said, or whether he's still amused by Brian's attitude to Emmett hugging me. I guess that is funny. I mean, for a long time, Brian was happy to watch me fucking other guys, but let Em come near me with a hug and Brian was all 'hands off'. I guess it's kinda nice to know that some things haven't changed.

Emmett makes some lame attempt to get Brian to swap seats which Brian just shakes off, so I push Em back into his seat and sit next to him, opposite Brian. And Ted.

Ted snorts, not sure if that's because he's read a double meaning into what Brian has said, or whether he's still amused by Brian's attitude to Emmett hugging me. I guess that is funny. I mean, for a long time, Brian was happy to watch me fucking other guys, but let Em come near me with a hug and Brian was all 'hands off'. I guess it's kinda nice to know that some things haven't changed.

As I watch the little look Ted gives Brian, and am trying to work out exactly what it means, Em asks The Questions – the ones about when I got here, and more importantly, how long I'm staying.

I watch Brian steal a fry from Ted's plate, and see how relaxed he is, compared to Ted who's tense and seems to be … not giving me the evil eye, but certainly not accepting my presence with the
unqualified approval Emmett is showing either, and I feel a wash of gratitude steal over me. Because it's clear that Ted is concerned about what my visit might mean for Brian. That's he's worried about Brian.

Which means that he's gone right on being Brian's friend while I've been gone.

That's something that you can't really judge from a distance. I mean, Brian never says much about anything, let alone telling me how Ted's been supporting him. But I can tell he has. Not just because he's clearly worried about my "visit", but because of how easy Brian is with him.

He steals another fry now, not in the 'let's goad Theodore' way he once might have, but in the happy, teasing way he would once have used with … with Michael.

When Em asks the million dollar, 'how long are you in town for?' question, I try to catch Brian's eye. He leans back and grins at me, chomping into his fry with wicked precision.

I raise an eyebrow at him, trying to work out how much he thinks I should tell them. He sticks his tongue in his cheek, clearly leaving it to me – a sort of private truth or dare.

I take the dare and tell the truth.

"I've come home," I say. "I'm staying."

Emmett gives a squeal and wraps his arms around me in an awkward lop-sided hug, undeterred by Brian's suddenly stern glare. Until Brian reaches across the table and flicks his hand hard with one long finger.

Then Emmett laughs and lets go.

Ted moves his eyes from Brian's profile to smile at me.

"I'm glad, Justin," he says.

We share a look in which he tries to tell me not to fuck Brian around any more, and I try to let him know that I'm not about to, that this time I'm home for good.

Then Emmett pipes up, "So when are you going to move into the mansion? You can give a faaabulous housewarming party."

Brian gives me a private grin and drawls, "Not going to happen."

When Em opens his mouth to protest (because the thought of giving up that faaabulous party is obviously totally not acceptable in Em World), Brian cuts him off.

"We've sold it," he says simply.

***

Brian

I'm watching his face when I say it, so I see his eyes light up. They look into mine for a moment and then he looks away; he's smiling and if I didn't know better I'd say he's almost blushing.

It takes me a second, but then I get it.

"We've sold it."
We.

'We' made that decision. Just like 'we' decided to buy the new house.

I feel that I should be more freaked out by that than I am. Instead, it feels like such a fucking relief.

For so long, I made my decisions, and he made his, and, looking back it doesn't seem like there were that many good ones. The good things mainly just happened when we weren't making any real fucking decisions at all.

And all the time, there weren't very many that I can remember us making together. Maybe what fucking toilet paper to buy, or what take out to order.

I guess it's all too fucking ironic that the first real decision I can remember us making together was to call off the wedding.

But that, and all that drove it, all that came from it, are gone now. Over. He's home. And today we've made two huge fucking decisions together. We've decided to sell the place I bought – even if it was for him. And buy something that's ours.

It's not a matter of who pays for what that will make the new place "ours". It's a matter of who makes the decisions.

I know that's what's put that light in his eyes. And if I'm honest, I feel pretty fucking good about it myself.

Meanwhile, our friends – and they are that, I have to reluctantly admit – are just about having a cow trying to figure out what selling his damned mansion means. They're afraid to say anything in case selling our fucking "honeymoon home" is some huge symbol of what's going on between us.

Well, it is. But not the way they think.

I leave them hanging for a moment, until he looks up at me again, his eyes with a question in them now. I grin at him, and he smiles back. I feel a wave of … well, some corny fucking emotion sweep over me as it hits me all over again that he really is home.

Yeah, selling that place is a symbol alright. It's a symbol for the end of that bullshit phase of our lives – abandoned fucking weddings, and living on the other side of the damned country (well, too fucking far away, anyway).

But the new place is an even bigger symbol. It's a sign that we're going to do this. We're going to make it happen; we're finally going to let us happen. On our own terms, in our own way, we're going to fucking make it work. We're going to have a life together.

I let myself smile at him in a way I just don't fucking do in public.

"You can organize some fabulous do at the new place," I say. "Once we've moved in there."

***

Justin

I can't get the smile off my face for a long while after that.

Emmett starts to get all emotional just at the look on Brian's face, but, thank God, he stops himself, and instead gets all hyper over the new place, wanting to know all about it, and how we found it,
and when we decided.

Brian lets me describe the place, and while I'm telling Emmett about the jacuzzi, and the pool, he talks quietly to Ted. I hear Ted gasp, "They upped it by how much?" so I know Brian's talking finance to him. I keep Em occupied by describing the house, although I don't tell him anything about the windows or that amazing back room – I want that to come as a surprise to everyone. I want to see the looks on their faces when they walk in there for the first time.

Eventually, Brian draws something about the jacuzzi room even having filtered glass so I won't fry while I'm boiling (which is just so lame), so I know he's finished talking money to Ted. Emmett oohs and ahs some more and then we figure that it's about time somebody came to take our order. (You can tell Deb's not working.)

Brian's glare finally gets some attention and we all order. Brian just sighs loudly when I order pancakes, but that doesn't stop him helping himself to some once they arrive. I swear he figures that anything that doesn't actually come from his plate doesn't count, weight wise. Not that he needs to worry, he's still what my Mom thinks is too skinny.

We're all still just catching up on all the goss, and it's all very relaxed and comfortable and familiar. It makes me feel even more happy to be home, because I realize that I've missed this as well, although I maybe didn't know how much till right now. It was hard to consider anything other than how much I missed Brian; there just wasn't room enough on my pain meter to register anything else.

But then Ted says something that just shatters that feeling of comfort and the conversation stops dead.

"Have you seen Michael yet?" he asks.
So what is the story with Michael? And remember, just about all my fics come with anti-Michael warnings.

Chapter Notes

Note: I make no claim to any legal knowledge, and, for reasons to do with how I wanted to deal with this little arc, I didn't seek advice from any of the legal eagles in the fandom. Having said that, I can't help but feel that this presents a more likely outcome than anything in canon. However, if it's totally outside the boundaries of the probable, or even the possible, then apologies. I claim artistic license. *g*

Brian

Ted – it would be fucking Theodore – asks, "Have you seen Michael yet?" and that pretty much puts paid to the nice little vibe that was going.

Justin shakes his head and sneaks a look at me, but I become suddenly absorbed in checking out the totally not hot waiter as he brings a refill for our coffee.

Emmett is giving Ted 'shut up, Teddy!' looks, but Ted, although he's got one eye on me like he's getting ready to dodge quickly if he has to, goes on, "He's been trying to reach you."

I can imagine. I just shrug. So there's going to be fucking drama with Mikey when he finds out Justin's back, what else is new.
Ted bites his lip and looks at Emmett as if for help.

Em sighs, and then says to Justin, rather than to me, "The thing is, sweetie, it might be a good idea if you didn't talk too much about the new house in front of Michael right now."

"Or Deb," Ted adds.

That gets my attention all right

"What the fuck's happened now?" I demand.

Ted takes a deep breath, and drops his voice so low we have to lean forward to hear it. As I do, somehow Justin's hand winds up over the top of mine, and then I find myself leaning towards him, rather than Ted, and I feel the ghost of a touch as his hair brushes against mine across the table. It surprises me how good it feels.

"They've reach an out of court settlement," Ted says, breaking through that moment of comfort.

"Fuck it, Ted! I fucking told you …!"

Ted shrugs. "He just won't take the money, Brian," he says apologetically. "And I might be a wiz with figures, but he knows damned well he doesn't have that sort of cash lying hidden anywhere for me to miraculously find."

Justin looks confused, because Emmett says, "Michael's going to have to sell the house, honey. To pay the hospital costs and everything for that guy."

I see Sunshine shake his head. Even after all he's been through, he still expects the world to make sense.

I find myself standing up abruptly. "Fuck!" I say.

Emmett looks up at me. "Brian, honey, we know … we all know you would have given him any money he needed, but … he's got a right to look after his man himself, you know?"

I stare down at him for a moment, then, just as Justin starts to get up I sink back into my seat, feeling suddenly exhausted.

Mikey loves that fucking house.

There's silence for a moment, then Ted says, "He was really upset."

He bites his lip and looks at Emmett for a moment like he's hoping that he won't have to say whatever the fuck is coming next, then blurs out, "They showed him the list of witnesses the complainant was going to call on in court."

He pauses for a moment but I'm already way ahead of him before he says even more softly than before, "Brian, you were on it."

***

Justin

What the fuck?

For a moment all I feel is confusion and then I look at Brian.
His eyes are blank.

Oh, fuck!

Emmett is saying something about how everyone knows that Brian wouldn't really have testified for the guy, and Ted is saying how he would have to if he was summoned to court, and all the while Brian is sitting there and I know he's in agony.

I thought this whole thing was past – or, at least, that the issue of Brian's testimony was. When Ben accepted a plea bargain I thought it was all over. It never occurred to me that Brian could be called in the civil suit.

What a fucking mess!

Neither Deb nor Michael are ever going to let him forget this. As if he had any sort of choice. They both think Brian should have just lied, even though everyone from Carl to their lawyer said that was the worst thing he could do because of all the other witnesses.

But Brian's testimony, would have had impact, because he was the one who pulled Ben away; the friend of Michael's who didn't join in the assault, but hauled Ben off instead.

Deb's still angry with him for not somehow rescuing Ben and racing him off somewhere, like that would have solved anything.

The thing is, it all might have gone quite differently. Originally, they were going to let Ben plead to some minor thing on the grounds that he was an upstanding citizen who'd been unbearably provoked. Then he would have got off with community service or something. Just like Hobbs.

That's what Brian said at the time, and it's stuck in my mind ever since. Because it made me realize that Brian didn't think Ben should have got off with a slap on the wrist, any more than Hobbs did.

But it didn't matter anyway, because while the police were collecting statements that everyone thought would prove what a model of patience and non-violence Ben was, they uncovered a whole lot of stuff that made them change their minds.

It seems Brian wasn't the only one that Ben had had run ins with back in his Steroid Mary days. The police found two guys at the gym that Ben had got into shoving matches with or thrown punches at, and someone else who'd seen him shove Brian into that locker, (something I didn't even know about until all this started to come out and Brian had to tell me), and even a student that Ben had thrown up against a wall when he'd argued with Ben about a grade.

So then instead of being Mr Squeaky Clean, all of a sudden Ben was a guy with a drug problem and a tendency to violence.

In the end, he'd accepted a plea which meant six months jail time. He's been in for over four months now, and there's a good chance he could be out any day now, with good behavior and stuff.

But it looks like he won't have a house to come home to.

***

Brian

Fuck!
I thought this whole fucking issue was dead. Especially when Ted said they'd agreed to settle.

I've been telling Michael for weeks that I can find the money.

Fortunately, it became obvious that it was pretty much going to come down to just the hospital costs and some limited slap-on-the-wrist damages, because we dug up a whole lot of stuff about the complainant. The fucker's not even a practicing Christian; what he is is a professional provocateur. You can actually fucking hire him and others like him to stir up trouble.

Once we found that out, Deb threatened him with a counter suit for the emotional damage he'd caused her with his comment, and the fucking lawyers said that she might even have some sort of chance of winning it. How fucked is that?

They could have both sued each other for millions and the only winners would have been the lawyers.

Once they knew we'd found out who the guy was, the "legitimate" protesters who were mainly from some fucking right wing evangelical church group, suddenly disappeared. They didn't want it to come out that they'd hired these trouble makers, so they backed off and were no longer ready to fund his legal fees or have anything more to do with it.

Once he knew that, the guy was a lot more willing to take what was on offer.

All up, around $200,000.

And I could have found that easily. Hell, it's only what we made on the fucking mansion. Mikey doesn't have to sell his damned house.

Mind you, that's better than his fucking brilliant original idea which was to sell the comic store.

Ben's going to be unemployed, they still owe money on the house, and if they can't pay, they'll lose it anyway, and Mikey's planning to sell their sole source of income.

Fuckwit!

The thing is that, even without this latest wrinkle, he and Deb still somehow blame me for Ben being in prison.

Never mind that Ben beat the living shit out of some old guy just because Ben didn't like what he said; or that he did it in front of a crowd of witnesses including Deb's police officer boyfriend. No, it's all my fault because I didn't get him off the old guy sooner, or didn't lie my ass off over what happened (like no one else had seen it), or didn't rescue him and take him away somewhere safe. Just where, or what that was going to solve, who the fuck knows?

I don't. They don't. They just want someone to blame, and, of course, it can't be Zen Ben, because he's the fucking good guy. So let's find a way to blame Brian, because he's the asshole, and if he was there, then it must have been his fault somehow. Of course, if I hadn't been there, that would have made it my fault as well.

Mikey even said to me at one point that I'd helped Ted when he got arrested, so why couldn't I help Ben?

I seriously think that sometimes he does think I'm some sort of fucking super hero. And when it turns out that I'm not … then I'm the devil incarnate.
He even blamed me for letting Ben shove me into the lockers that time in the gym. He said it looked really bad because I was supposed to be a friend of Ben's.

It's not like I told the fucking cops about it. Some other gym bunny saw us, and when the police started asking questions, he couldn't wait to have his moment of drama and tell the cops all about it.

Fuck!

***

Justin

I'm trying to work out what I can say or do to make things at least a little better, when Emmett takes his life in his hands, and leans over the table and pats Brian on the hand.

"Honey, don't you let them get to you," he advises. "We all know how much you've tried to help. Now you take our little Sunshine, and you high-tail it out of here. You two shouldn't even be thinking about anything but the fact that he's back, and you're back together. You should be celebrating, not worrying about Michael's little dramas."

For a moment, I think Brian might really lash out. He's looking down at the table top, but his lips are tight and he looks beyond angry. But then he raises his head and meets Emmett's eyes, and he sort of gives this little huff, and suddenly, surprisingly, he's okay and the tension drains out of all of us.

Then Ted says quietly, "Emmett's right, Brian. You two should get out of here. We'll talk to Deb, and see if we can get her to talk some sense into Michael."

Brian sighs, but then he nods.

"Good luck," he says dryly, as he climbs to his feet.

I scramble out of my seat, and Emmett gets up as well. He gives me another hug, and then moves past me to put his arms around Brian. Brian doesn't exactly respond, but he lets Emmett's arms stay round him for a moment or two, and sort of leans into him a little, before he pulls away.

Meanwhile, Ted has got up, and while we hug he whispers, "I am so glad you're back. He really needs you here right now."

I nod, and tighten my arms for a moment to let him know how grateful I am that he's been there for Brian, then I step away. Brian gives him a look, and growls, "You even think about embracing me, Theodore, and you're fired."

Ted just smiles, and Brian puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes, which, by the look on Ted's face, he recognizes as the real honor it is.

And then we leave.

I'm really quiet as we walk out to the car. There isn't much that I can say.

I had so hoped all this about Ben's thing was over. It was bad enough when they decided to charge him. I nearly came home then. The only thing that stopped me is that there wasn't anything I could have done; except maybe make things worse by trying to defend Brian, or by getting him all defensive over me wanting to and not being able to because of all the unwritten Kinney rules about
getting into it with Michael and Deb. But the main thing was that my being in New York gave Brian an excuse that even Debbie couldn't argue with for getting away from all their bullshit. He was coming up every weekend during that time, and it meant that for a couple of days anyway, he could get right away from it all and we could just be together and forget them.

Plus, he would have totally freaked out if I'd come back because of that.

He would have been looking for some damned Kinney cliff to throw me off to stop me.

But I'm here now, and I'm way past the point where I'm prepared to hold my tongue where they're concerned – either Mikey or Deb. So they need to fucking watch how they treat Brian, because I am so not letting them put the blame for this onto him.

Ben brought this on himself. I don't say I didn't sympathize with him, with how he reacted to what that guy said. But he'd be the first one to say that violence never solves anything. And Deb was the one who told me that, when I was getting hassled so badly at St James.

So they all need to get over trying to find ways to blame Brian, and let Ben take responsibility for what he did.

Still, it sucks that they could lose the house. I know that Brian would give them the money – or at least lend it to them. Why the fuck can't they just let him? It's like they want to be able to lay that on him as well.

'Oh, we could have saved the house, but we just couldn't take the money from Brian, knowing he thought that Ben only got what he deserved.'

I can just hear them. It's like they'd rather find another way to claim Brian has messed up Mikey's life than actually let him fix things.

Stupid fucking assholes!

***

Brian

I can hear him thinking as we get into the car. And the more he thinks, the madder he's getting.

Suddenly, it's almost funny.

My ex-best friend is behaving like a total prick, and my surrogate Mom is going to blame me when poor little Mikey winds up on the streets – like I'm going to fucking let that happen. But that won't stop her berating me for days and doing her best to make my life a total misery.

But somehow none of that is all that important right now.

It'll get sorted out somehow. Ted can usually get Debbie to see sense, and then she can beat it into Mikey. They'll take the money and keep the fucking house. The professor will come home, and take up writing full time, or open a fucking half way house for little hustlers, or some other worthy enterprise, and Mikey can support him with the damned comic store and they can all live happily ever after.

But right now, I barely give a shit.

Because my own happily ever after is sitting in the car with me, plotting revenge for all the hurts
he thinks I've suffered over all that shit, and just that thought wipes away all the other dramas and reduces them to fucking pin pricks that hardly register in the scheme of things.

Before I start the car, I reach out and grab his neck. He looks at me, and I let myself smile at him.

For a moment, his eyes stay angry, then, when I go on smiling at him, that changes. He starts to smile back, and ducks his head a little, and if I didn't know better I'd say he was fucking blushing.

Guess he heard all the things I was thinking and didn't want to have to say out loud.

"We need to call your Mommy," I tell him, letting go of his neck. "And then we need to get the hell out to the house and start packing."
Interlude

Chapter Summary

A short one.

Brian

Judging by the buzz I can hear coming from his cell phone, Mother Taylor is over the moon about the fact that the old bastard has accepted our offer. After a few minutes chatter, I hear, “I’ll ask Brian.”

I raise an eyebrow and he says that she’s asking if we want to head straight over to do the paperwork. I guess she wants to lock it in before dear ol’ Dan has a chance to change his mind, so I nod and that’s what we do.

She looks like she’s going to have a cow when I tell her the price.

“Don’t worry, Maw,” I tell her, “We’ll make sure you get your full commission.”

She gives me one of her best ‘don’t mess with me, I’m a mother’ looks and says all snooty WASP, “Don’t be silly, Brian.”

Then the snooty look fades into a grin so mischievous that I can see yet again where Sunshine gets his devious streak from, and she says, “Anyway, the agency has offered a considerable bonus to anyone who can shift … er, sell … that property.”

She immediately seems to think twice about what she’s said, and hurries on, “Of course, there’s nothing wrong with the place. It’s wonderful, and structurally completely sound. We have all the reports. It’s just …”

I grin back at her, and our eyes meet and we are in complete silent agreement about the old
buzzard who owns it. Owned it. Well, almost.

“But it’s an amazing price,” she says. And you can tell by her voice that she’s wondering.

Justin gives her a look and I half expect him to spout out all the “waiting for you” crap that the old guy came out with, but he just smiles. “He likes it that I’m an artist. And he thinks Brian’s a lot like him.”

She nods. Then she looks all … allergic (maybe he gets that from her as well) and says, “Oh, Justin!” and hugs him.

I try to edge away, but before I can escape she’s turned to me.

***

Justin

I’m not quick enough to get my cell out and the photo opportunity is lost, fuck it! I would have given my favorite easel to get evidence of that look on Brian’s face. It was like a cartoon where the elephant sees the mouse. He was sort of backing up and … well, it was hilarious. And all because he thought Mom wanted to hug him.

In the end she just pats him on the face and smiles at him.

“I’m so happy for you both,” she says, her voice wobbling a little bit.

Brian sucks his lips in that way he does when he’s trying to work out exactly how to respond to something. Then …

Something happens, it’s … again, it’s like a cg effect, when you see someone’s face change before your eyes into someone else. Except this time, it’s not so much that it changes, as that you can actually see the emotion spill across it. One moment it’s the face of someone who’s buttoned up tight, and the next it’s the face of someone who is … his face is full of joy. Just shining with it.

“Thanks, Ma,” he says, and his smile blurs as my eyes dazzle.

I move closer to him and he turns his eyes to me. The affection in them draws me even closer, and I wrap my arms around his waist.

It hits me suddenly that …

I’m home.

I’m fucking home.

After all the months of loneliness and separation …

I turn more fully towards him and bury my face in his neck, drawing in the scent of him.

From now on I might go away for a few days, a few weeks even, but I’ll be staying somewhere else temporarily, I won’t be in a new home. This is home, this, right here in his arms. The only home I ever want, ever need. Everything else, even that lovely house we saw today, is just walls and furniture. And I’m home, I’m here. He’s let me come home to him.

I feel rather than hear his little huff of bemused laughter as I press closer and my arms tighten around his waist. Then I feel his hand wrap around my neck. I turn my face up to his and after one
brief moment where he seems to look right down into the corners of my soul, he gives another little
huff of laughter and brushes his lips over my mouth before resting his forehead against mine.

“Ready to go home?” he asks.

I smile at him and let that answer everything.

***

Brian

We head back to the loft.

There are huge fucking amounts of things that need to be done out at the house, but …

Suddenly we both seem to be in need of a little down time. Not to fuck, amazingly enough. Just to
come back here to familiar territory; to sit over a cup of coffee and discuss what needs to be done
and how we’re going to do it and … to shut the door and lock everyone else on the other side for a
while.

I put the coffee maker on (for all his culinary skills he makes lousy coffee) and as I hear him
moving around - going to the bathroom, exclaiming over an old sketch book, checking out the
dvds, generally re-acquainting himself with the place - it hits me all over again that he’s home.
Less than forty eight hours ago I was sitting over there at my desk trying to gather up some fucking
shred of courage so I could fly off to NY for one last time and try to end it cleanly and set him free
with no regrets, no guilt, and now …

He’s home. He’s fucking home.

As if he hears me think it, he looks across and smiles at me, and not for the first time I wish to fuck
I was as talented as he is so I could fucking capture how he looks, how it feels when he looks at
me that way. That’s when I realize that what’s fucking amazing here isn’t that he’s home.

It’s that this time I believe he’s going to stay.
Brian

He didn’t really react at the time, so I don’t know if he noticed my little slip up with Emmett. I don’t know whether to hope he did, or he didn’t. He’d have a right to be pissed. I should have discussed it with him … with my partner … first … at least to establish what it means. If we go ahead and do it, would it still mean the same thing? Could it? But at the time I was floating a fucking mile high and my mouth ran away with me. Which should fucking say something about how fucking amazing I feel at the moment with him here beside me.

While I’m wondering whether or not to bring up the subject, not to mention what the fuck to say, he does it for me.

We’re sitting on the couch, close enough to be able to ‘accidentally’ brush our arms, our thighs together fairly frequently while we eat our dinner. I can’t seem to fucking stop needing to touch him. And he’s not exactly objecting.

He sucks a stray noodle between those full soft lips, and while I’m mesmerized by the sight of it disappearing into his mouth, he looks up and catches me watching.

He runs his tongue sensuously over his lips in the cheesiest fucking tease routine I’ve ever seen, then grins at me.

“So … a housewarming party, huh?” he asks.

Fucker! This is fucking huge and he’s just pulled a major distraction.
I shift in my seat a little and look down at my plate, trying to get my dick to behave and let me get my thoughts together; trying to work out whether I’m ready, whether I have the fucking balls to go for it … again. Then I look up into his eyes.

I take a deep breath and say, hoping my voice is steady, “It seems … like the right time for one.” I struggle with my vocal cords for a second, and then put it all on the line and ask, “Don’t you think?”

His eyes swim and I know he hears what I’m really asking. His fingers somehow wrap themselves around mine. Then he smiles.

“Yes,” he says.

***

Justin

I want to leap around and cheer and laugh like a maniac and at the same time I want to weep for all the time that has passed since we gave up on our first attempt at celebrating what the housewarming party represents for us.

When I came home on Thursday night - just a couple of days ago - I hardly dared hope we’d ever get back to this point. Let alone get there so soon.

But …

It all feels so right, so natural. Like this is the way it was meant to be all along. I sure as hell feel more … linked … to the new house than I ever could imagine feeling to the mansion - fond as my memories of that are always going to be. Although I’ve enjoyed the short time we’ve spent there, it was hard to picture us really living there.

But the new place, Dan’s place, it really does feel like it’s just been waiting for us.

And in a way, I feel like we’ve been waiting for us, too. Which is weird, because the time just before I left for New York - the time after the bombing - that was the best things have ever been with Brian. Till now. I thought we had it all worked out and that we could just get on with our lives. But I guess there was this one more thing that we had to learn - or else it could have tripped us up even more badly later.

We had to learn - both of us - that there is only so much that is worth sacrificing for your “career”. That your life is more important. That having a good life, a whole life, is far more important than selling more pictures - or more advertising either come to that.

I think if I hadn’t gone to New York then something else would have come along eventually, and I would have chased that, or been pushed to chase that, or like with New York, both, really. And it could have been even worse than it has been.

At least this way, we both know now. I’m not going to let him push me off any Kinney cliffs in the future in the name of my career. And more importantly, he’s promised that he won’t do that.

So now we really can get on with things.

I left him for someone else, and came back - a bit battered and bruised inside, but much much wiser - and he took me back. I think he knows that I won’t do that again. I left him for LA and came back with my tail between my legs and maybe he felt that if things had worked out in LA I
might never have come back. But this time ... this time, I left him, I did what I needed to do, and I came home because home is where he is and the only place I want to be - and I think he gets that now. I really think that we both get it.

Just like I know that I can't keep doing this to him. I mean - I knew that he missed me, of course I knew that. But I will never in all my life forget the pain in his eyes when I walked in that door the other night and I will never, never fucking do that to him again. I couldn't live with myself if I did.

From now on, he comes first.

Which reminds me ... I made him a promise last night. It's time I started following up on it.

I pick up his phone and dial while he raises one of those eyebrows in that look of his wondering what the fuck I'm doing when we should be discussing the housewarming and all it means, should be planning our future, or at least fucking our way into it. Well that will have to wait just a little. I am working on our future. This is part of it.

She sees the number and thinks it's Brian of course. When she answers her voice is that weird mix of syruppy tender and defensive that she so often uses with him.

“Hi, Linds,” I say.

*****
Opening Negotiations

Chapter Summary

Justin takes a hand in addressing the situation with Gus.

Brian

I snatch up the coffee cups and shit and take myself off to the kitchen. I’m not sure that I want to hear this conversation. I know I should have done something about the situation with Gus long before now. I should never have let them taken him out of the country without some formal agreement about me still being able to see him. That was just fucking stupid. But I was still reeling from Justin being gone, as well as dealing with the whole fucking mess over Ben, not to mention all the crap that was involved just with trying to clear away the ruins of Babylon, and I couldn’t … I couldn’t argue with their insistence that Gus would be better away from here.

I mean, it’s like Mikey says, at best I was a drop in father. I might have been seeing Gus more for a while, but the fact is that Linds and Mel are his parents. They have to be seen as his parents or what the fuck are all the battles about? What was I fucking about when I signed away my rights to him? So, between them yammering on about his safety, and my own fucking principles at the time it seemed like I was doing the right thing to let him go.

It was only after all the dust settled, after Ben accepted his plea bargain for simple assault (which at least saved him from being charged with anything worse) and we finally got the site cleared and the plans accepted for the new club and all the other businesses there (and thanks to Ted and, to my fucking amazement, to Mayor Deakin that all happened months earlier than anyone - especially me - expected), that had time to realize that there is a huge fucking difference between being a drop in Dad, and being a Dad who never sees his fucking kid at all.

The phone calls were the worst. He’s a smart little fucker, and he figured out how to use the speed dial on Lindsay’s cell to reach me. I’d hear his voice and my heart would fucking squeeze so hard I
felt like I was having a heart attack and he’d be saying shit like, “When are you coming to see me?” and even fucking worse, “When can I come home?”

I wanted to go up there, but Lindsay kept on about how it would be better if he was given a chance to settle, and all that shit, and I was so fucking busy, with Kinnetic, and trying to get the new place built - and with heading off to New York to see the little blond twat who’s over there trying to sweet talk Lindsay and at least get her to agree to let me see my son …

But I should have gone. I should have fucking ignored her, and just gone. Justin could have flown up and met me there. We could have spent a few days up there instead of in New York …

But I didn’t. And the phone calls stopped coming - guess he finally gave up on me. Smart kid.

And even though I’ve rung him at least once a week, every week, gradually, he’s seemed to get quieter and quieter and to want to talk less and less.

Sometimes I think I should just fucking let go. Let him go. Let him get used to a life without me.

The only thing that stops me is … of all fucking things, Jack.

Michael grew up without a father, so he’s been fucking free all his life to idealize what a father is, could be, should be, would be. Forgetting that fathers are just guys - most of them are dumb as shit, a good percentage of them are assholes and there are damned few that qualify for any sort of father of the year award, let alone sainthood.

Justin … Justin’s father was busy making out like he was the perfect Dad - until the day he stood in an alley way and told his 17 year old son that he had to choose - he had to turn his back on everything he was learning about himself, walk away from the man he was growing into, or never go home again. Fuck! I have never been so fucking proud of anything in my life, as I was of Justin that night. Because he’d done what I’d never had the fucking guts to do - lay it on the line for his father just who he was.

And you can fucking bet that that played into why I wound up telling good ol’ Jack about me. And look how well that went.

But the thing is … it didn’t end that day in Jack’s fucking garage.

Because Jack did the fucking amazing thing, and came to me. Came to me bringing that damned photo. So much like the one that still sits on my desk in the loft. Pathetic attempt as it might have been, he at least tried, at the end to reach out to me. (And as someone who has a long history of making pathetic attempts at any sort of emotional connection, I could hardly fucking fault Jack for being no better at it than I am.)

So I told him about Gus. Introduced him to his grandson.

And that makes some sort of fucking difference.

Nothing could ever make right the fucking things that happened when I was a kid. Nothing.

But at least he didn’t die with us completely hating each other, it didn’t end with me believing that all he felt for me was hatred and loathing.

At least, at the end, Jack gave me that.

Now I want the chance to give Gus more than that.
I don’t fucking want him to hate me for just going missing from his life. I want him to know me, to at least know that I love him, that I want to be there for him if ever he needs me. At least that.

I …

People die every day.

I have a lover who was nearly killed in front of me - twice.

I’ve had cancer.

I don’t want to die with Gus not knowing me; not knowing, not being sure, that I love him. I want the chance to makes sure that he knows that. And that I miss him; that it wasn’t my idea to separate us so completely; that his father might be a fucking idiot, because I should never have let him go, but that it didn’t happen because I just didn’t give a shit.

But thank fucking God, Sunshine is off the phone and he’s smiling.

I might still have that chance.

*****

Justin

I make sure that I’m smiling when I go to Brian. He’s standing in the kitchen area, sort of frozen with his empty coffee cup in his hand, like he doesn’t know what to do with it.

I come close and say the best thing first. The thing that he needs to hear. The rest is just shit that we’ll deal with later.

“She says she can’t take the whole week off, but she’s going to fly in on your birthday and stay for the weekend.”

I can almost see the wheels turning in his brain as he calculates it. His birthday is next Wednesday week. Today is Saturday - so that means that if you don’t count today which is nearly over, he’s just ten days away from seeing his son.

As that sinks in I see some shadow that had been haunting his eyes for months start to lift, although all he does is suck his lips in and nod.

He seems to finally notice the cup in his hand and turns to put it in the dishwasher.

“She give you any grief?” he asks and I can hear his struggle to keep his voice even.

I say nothing for a moment, trying to work out how to answer and something in my silence sets off his alarms, so he turns to me, eyes now sharp as rapiers.

“What?” he asks, the word not loud, or even sharp, but still somehow cutting through any possible temptation to try to hide things from him. Which I wouldn’t anyway. Where it’s about Gus, I would never try to hide anything from him.

It’s just that it’s hard working out how to put into words the feeling I had on the phone.

I describe Lindsay’s initial surprise (I’m not sure she was all that thrilled to hear I was home although all I’d told her was that I was here till after Brian’s birthday), and her hesitation over my original suggestion that she fly down for the week - from the Saturday before Brian’s birthday to
the Sunday afterwards. I’d told her I’d pay for their flights, and arrange accommodation. I’d made it clear the invitation was for Mel and JR as well as her and Gus, and that’s when … I can’t explain it clearly but, I tell Brian, I’d just had the feeling that something changed. She’d gone quiet for a moment, then she’d said that she couldn’t make a whole week. Maybe for a weekend. I’d told her that I really wanted Brian to be able to see Gus on his birthday, so perhaps we could fly up and bring Gus and maybe JR back with us.

She’d gone absolutely silent for a moment - I thought the connection had dropped.

Then her voice had gone very soft, but at the same time sounded really intense, “No. No, that wouldn’t be a good idea. But I think I could get a few days off, so I could fly down on Brian’s birthday.”

She’d gone quiet again for just a moment, and then said in that same soft, intense voice, almost as if to herself, “Yes. That’s what I could do. I’ll bring Gus down with me on Brian’s birthday.”

“And JR,” I’d reminded her.

“Oh,” she’d said, almost sounding surprised. “Oh, well, that’s up to Mel. But maybe … maybe.”

Then she’d seemed to pull herself together and we’d agreed that I’d book the flights for her and Gus straight away, to make sure that they could make it on the day at least, and she’d let me know about Mel and JR and when they could get away.

“I don’t know, Brian,” I tell him. “It was just … strange.”

He nods. Then says slowly, “Yeah, she’s been like that sometimes when I’ve called - like there’s something fucking going on that … she just doesn’t want me to know about.”

He bites his lips for a moment, and then says, “But you do think she’s coming?”

I think about that for a moment and then nod.

“Yes, yeah, I do. She sounded … almost relieved. Like she really wanted an excuse to come home for a while or something.’

He nods, looking relieved himself.

Then his cell rings.

I pick up the other dirty cup off the counter to put it in the dishwasher while he answers.

I know who it is even before I hear the excited chirping coming from the phone. Only Gus can bring that look to Brian’s face.

*****

Brian

Whatever has been wrong with my Sonnyboy in our last few phone calls sure as hell isn’t bothering him now. He talks for nearly five minutes hardly fucking drawing breath, telling me about how he’s coming down to see me, and how he’ll be on a plane this time, and that he’s going to bring me something he’s made in school for my birthday present, but he can’t tell me what because it has to be a surprise and how he’s going to help me blow out my birthday candles and all sorts of other shit before he finally slows down and asks me how long it will be before he comes. So we work
out how many sleeps it is, and he gets all fucking chokey because it’s more than he can count on both hands, but I promise I’ll call him tomorrow night and then it will be one less sleep and he’ll be able to use his fingers to count how many are left. He makes me fucking promise to call him every night, so I tell him I’ll try and he tells me, “Don’t try, Daddy. Just do it.”

Demanding little shit thinks he’s fucking Yoda.

His mother finally gets the phone out of his clutches and then does her own version of the “so much looking forward to seeing you” shit. But by the time she hangs up, I’m at least fucking convinced that she plans to come. She wouldn’t put Gus through the disappointment if she was planning to back out. For that matter, she wouldn’t put herself through the grief he’d obviously give her, because the kid is fucking over the moon at the thought of coming back here - and of seeing his old man.

I just sit for a moment, perched on the stool at the kitchen counter where I’d propped myself during Gus’ onslaught of words, to savor that fact. For once I don’t shrug it off, or push it away, I just let myself absorb and appreciate the fact that my son misses me, that he hasn’t forgotten me, that he’s fucking over the moon excited at the thought of seeing me. Well, and at the thought of going on a plane, and of my birthday cake - but I know he meant it when he said, just before Lindsay took the phone and shooed him off to get into his pyjamas, “I love you, Daddy. I wish I was there tomorrow. I wish I was there with you right now.”

And I hope he knows I meant it when I whispered back to him, “Me too.”
Almost Ridiculously Romantic

Chapter Summary

It's Saturday night and time for the boys to have some play time.

Justin

Whatever issues I might have with Lindsay, right now I could hug her. Getting Gus on the phone to Brian is the best thing that she could have done - it’s probably the only thing she could have done to make him really believe that they’re coming.

Even Lindsay wouldn’t get Gus’ hopes up if she didn’t intend to follow through.

By the time he puts down the phone, Brian’s whole being has just … lightened. If I didn’t want to send him into a complete hissy fit, I’d tell him he looks ten years younger. Well, five at least. But having a healthy regard for my own skin - not to mention my sanity, because he’d obsess for days about it - I don’t mention that. I just give him a hug and then for a while I don’t want to let go because it feels so good to just be able to do that.

I’m about to say something totally lame about it when he sticks his tongue into his cheek, cocks his head on one side and says, “Fancy a night out, Sunshine?”

That’s when it hits me that it’s Saturday night. So much has happened in the two days since I got back that I’m losing track.

I look at him and his eyes are glinting with mischief and I know we have a full day tomorrow packing and shit; but it’s Saturday night, and suddenly I want to dance. I want to go to the new Babylon and hit the dance floor, and the bar, and the back room with Brian and really celebrate being back. Celebrate us being back together - on our terms; no one else’s. Ever. And I want to
shove that in the faces of all the people who thought that we were over; that when I left it meant
the end, that I was fucking “moving on” from Brian. Like there was any place that would be worth
leaving this to “move on” to. And by the look on his face he feels the same way, has the same
desire to show everyone exactly who we are. To fucking flaunt ourselves, not in the faces of the
straights, but in the faces of all the people in our so called “community” who would have loved to
see us crash and burn – if only to give them something to gossip about.

Well, we’ll give them something tonight alright. And by tomorrow, every fag in Pittsburgh will
know that I’m back, and we’re back and we’re better and badder than ever.

I give him a grin and let him see that we’re pretty much on the same page about this and without
any further discussion (except him bitching about the fact that I didn’t bring any clubbing clothes
home with me in the one small bag I figured would last till my stuff arrives by carrier on Monday)
we head off.

He surprises me though, when he parks nearer the diner than to Babylon and asks if I want to fuel
up for the evening.

I guess seeing that Deb wasn’t working this morning, it’s a given that she’ll probably be working
tonight. In fact, that’s probably the real reason we’re here. In the past two days we’ve sorted out a
lot of the shit in our lives. We’ve figured out that despite our worst fears - mine and his - we’re
back together, stronger than ever in what every fucker who has ever doubted us is going to have to
admit is an honest-to-fucking-God long-term relationship; and we know that from here on
wherever we go and whatever we do, we’re doing it together. We’ve sorted out where we’re going
to live – just about sold one place and bought another. And we’ve taken at least baby steps towards
sorting out what’s going to happen with Gus. That leaves two biggies – Deb and Mikey. And as
they sort of come as a package, and knowing that if we can sort Deb out she’ll probably do a lot
towards fixing things with Michael (as much as they can be fixed, anyway), it makes sense to start
with Deb.

But I don’t want to. Not tonight.

I just don’t want to have to put up with her shit and try to wheedle and placate her when really I
figure that it’s she who should be apologizing to Brian for all the crap that dear Mikey has heaped
on him and that she has no doubt added her bit to as well. I’m tired of all this shit – Mikey and Deb,
Lindsay and Mel. I had to play nice with Lindsay because of Gus, but I’m damned if I see any
reason at all why either Brian or I should have to cop any more flack from either of the Novotnys
over things that have absolutely nothing to do with us.

I know that they both need someone to blame for what has happened to Ben – but you know what?
The only person to blame is Ben. He’d be the first to say that violence is wrong and that it never
solves anything. And that’s exactly what Deb told me way back when I was going through all that
shit at St. James. So the fact that as soon as someone said something that upset him, he forgot all
that, and just lashed out – that’s down to him. No one else. Not even the bigoted bastard who made
the comment – because no one deserves to be bashed and kicked just because someone doesn’t like
what they say.

But of course, Saint Ben can’t possibly be the bad guy in any situation, so the easiest thing to do is
play the ‘let’s blame Brian as usual’ game.

And that is so fucked that I just don’t want to deal with it.

Not tonight.
So I stand beside the car for a moment, and then walk around to him and hooking my fingers into his belt loops, tug him towards me a little.

“Not tonight, okay?” I say.

He sucks his lips in and looks at me for a moment, then nods, and twisting me round so he can wrap his arm around my neck, he just walks us down the street to the new Babylon.

*****

Brian

Truth is, I’m fucking … relieved, I guess, when he lets me know he doesn’t want to deal with Deb and all that shit tonight.

I mean, she’s going to be pissed that I didn’t rush little Sunshine round to see her as soon as he fucking landed in Pittsburgh, and the longer we leave it the worse it will be, but … it’s been a fucker of a day and tomorrow will probably be worse. All I really want to do tonight is to have a few drinks, a dance or two, maybe a backroom blow job for old times’ sake and to see the looks on the faces of all the fuckers who thought he’d fucking left me forever, thought I was some pathetic loser, desperately fucking holding onto some dream of him coming home to me that was never going to happen. I want to watch them salivating over the sight of him heating up the dance floor and then choking on their own fucking drool and envy when they see us together.

Then I’ll take him home, and fuck him into the mattress and tomorrow we’ll wake up and get on with our lives.

But tonight - we party.

*****

Justin

I’d seen photos, of course. Brian had even sent me some footage of the rebuilding and the new stores and stuff. And there had been footage of the opening up on youtube. But I still wasn’t prepared for what it was like.

This is exactly what I meant when I told Brian it should claim more for itself than just a spot in the alleyway.

The building is fucking huge. At least, compared to the old site. The stores look kind of interesting too. And I like the look of the new street-side bar. It looks like a cool place to hang out if you just want a quiet drink. Not as noisy and stuff as Woody’s. More … sophisticated, I guess. Not that there’s anything wrong with Woody’s if you want to hang out and play pool and stuff. Just that this place is classier; somewhere I can imagine going for a drink before dinner, or after a show, sort of thing. It’s more New York than Pittsburgh, but walking past I can’t see many free tables, so I guess maybe there’s more class in Pittsburgh than people give credit for.

The club itself seems bigger, too.

There are three bars, I remember. One on the ground floor entrance level, and two downstairs, one of which is almost inside the backroom. Well, it’s got two counters - one facing the dance floor, and the other facing the short corridor that leads right into the backroom. So you hardly even have to leave the backroom to get a drink. The second downstairs bar is across the other side of the club. There’s a slightly elevated area with some seats and stuff. Not couches or anything - just bar stools, but there’s a long counter along one wall, and a couple of pillars with counters built around them and so you can take a breather and sit with your drink and enjoy watching all the hot guys.
We hand our coats over to the cloakroom attendant - who is a very hot young twink; I hope he’s older than he looks. Then Brian waves his hand around.

“Where to first, Sunshine?” he asks.

It’s funny. I should have been nervous about coming back here, I guess. But somehow … I don’t know how he’s done it, or how the designers have done it - but this place is so different from the old Babylon, and yet at the same time so familiar, that I don’t even think about the last time I was on this spot. I just feel the old tingle of anticipation and tug at his hand.


I run my tongue over my lips and lean close to him as I say, “And then we can try out the backroom.”

I can feel the eyes on us as we get our drinks, and a few guys say ‘hello’. Then we hit the dance floor and everything else fades away in the beat and the heat and the sheer fucking joy of being home.

Later he fucks me in the backroom - like he says, ‘for old times’ sake’, and then we take a visit to the VIP lounge which is hidden away on the ground floor. There is a door from the back of the lounge that opens into a hallway and then out into the alleyway behind the club, but the entrance customers use is from the dance floor, up a small stairway near the dj’s booth, and it’s guarded by security.

VIP passes aren’t handed out all that freely. Some people have like lifetime passes. Some get them with special memberships or some shit, and a couple of ‘night passes’ get handed out each night allowing the owner and a guest access to the VIP lounge for the night. They are really highly sought after, Brian tells me. I believe it. The security guards, bar and cloakroom staff take turns to pick one lucky guy each night (and I can just imagine how they choose) and the djs get to pick one. So if the dj sees someone on the floor who’s really hot, or dancing up a storm, then they can “reward” them with a VIP pass. Brian says it all works pretty well. They’ve made sure that the security - both the staff and the systems - are top notch, so if there’s even a hint of trouble it gets dealt with quickly.

The lounge also has its own bar - which is really an extension of the main ground floor bar - although you can’t see it from the main bar. There are some couches up here, a corner with two huge flatscreen TVs - one showing porn and the other close ups from the dance floor - with remotes that let you change the angle and zoom in on the hottest action and stuff. There are also five cubicles set along one wall which are each fitted with a padded bench and a couch and these kind of wooden blinds that roll down and you can lock them in place - so if you want to fuck, you can do it in comfort, and in public or in private just as you choose. There are even condoms, and wet wipes and stuff to clean up afterwards.

Of course, some guys just fuck on the couches in the TV corner, and that’s okay too.

We get another drink, and some water - we’ve both had half a tab of E so we need it - and then Brian raises an eyebrow at me and gestures to the center cubicle. The blind is down, with a ‘reserved’ sign on it, but when I grin at him and nod, he just walks over and yanks the blind up - “Owners’ privileges”, he says.

I leave it to him to decide whether or not he wants to pull it down again and walk over towards the bench. It’s at just the right height that if I kneel on it and stick my ass out, it will be perfect for Brian.
But before I can get into place, he grabs me and pushes me down on my back. My ass is right at
the end of the bench, and he kneels and yanks my pants down. Something in his urgency, in the set
of his mouth and the way the muscles in his arms are so taut and hard, makes my cock jump and
my mouth go dry. Almost as if he reads my mind he hands me another bottle of water that seems to
come out of nowhere, and then my pants are jerked off my feet along with my shoes and my legs
fall open and I’m just lying there, splayed on the bench, naked from the waste down while he
kneels there and looks at me.

I’m vaguely aware of other faces beginning to hover just on the edge of my sight, somewhere
beyond the doorway of the cubicle, but all I can focus on is Brian. His face is so intent, staring at
me, that my cock feels it like a physical touch and starts to thicken and swell. His mouth is a
luscious swell of deep red flesh - like some wickedly succulent fruit, and his eyes - his eyes are
mesmerizing, huge and darkly glowing, with gold flecks like sparks deep in the peaty green. I try to
raise my knees, to find purchase for my heels on the bench, but he pushes my feet off the bench to
the floor again and just spreads my knees wider.

Then his tongue, moist dark reddish purple, almost the same color as his cock when it’s erect and
hard and wet with pre-come, slides out of his mouth and I watch it mesmerized till his head dips
and it disappears between my legs and I feel the first soft wet touch on my balls.

What follows after that is like a master class in giving a blow job and I can only hope that the guys
watching appreciate it. I sure as fuck do.

When he finally lets me come, it’s so intense that I think I maybe black out for a moment. When
the blood finally starts flowing to other parts of my body I manage to prop myself up on my elbows
and stare at him. He’s sitting back on his heels, looking as fucking smug and self-satisfied as he
deserves to. I push myself up and reach out for him. He grins and dodges, standing up more easily
than someone who’s been kneeling for that long has any right to be able to do. Then he holds out
his hand to me and when I take it, he pulls me up and into one of his kisses. One of those kisses.
One of the ‘long, slow, deep, soft, wet kisses that last three days’ - or at least seem to.

And after that I, for one, need another drink.

He helps me clean up and get dressed and I can only try not to blush at the sly looks and catcalls
and the round of applause that we get when we finally emerge from the cubicle.

Brian of course, just treats it all as his due and completely ignores it. But from then until we leave
his arm is snug around my waist, or my shoulder, or else his hand is firmly gripping mine, and I’m
so fucking happy that I feel like flying or laughing or singing. It reminds me of the night we went
to see Wicked. I feel kind of the same way.

Him. Him loving me makes me feel like this.

It’s just like …

“The best night of my life,” I say softly as we get to the car.

And feel him freeze beside me.

*****

Brian

What the fuck?
Where the fuck did that come from?

I stand and stare at him and he smiles at me.

I swallow hard, trying to choke down the … fear, panic, terror - all of those - that those words bring back to me.

But he’s still fucking smiling at me. And although I don’t look round, can’t tear my eyes away from him, I somehow know that at least this time there’s no fucking psycho with a baseball bat about to lurch out of the shadows and smash this smile to pieces.

Then he reaches out and takes my face in his hands and rescues me again. The way he did when he came looking for me and told me he at least didn’t blame me, didn’t hate me for letting that bastard near him; the way he did when he whispered, “I need you inside me”; when he had the balls to tell me I should take him back; when he fought through my pride and fear and force fed me chicken soup; when he stood waving his ass at me as I struggled in agony on that fucking stationary bike; and most of all when he walked in the door three nights ago and said, “I’m home.”

His touch somehow cuts through all the terrors and leaves me free to reach for him. He comes into my arms and his are somehow wound around me and his face is hot against my neck and I don’t know if I’m shaking, or he is, but gradually it stops, and then he whispers, “I remembered the dance a while ago. But I didn’t know if I should tell you. And just then - just then I remembered that, saying that to you.”

Something hot and bitter and sweet swells in my throat, choking me, and he goes on, “And you said something about it being ‘ridiculously romantic’."

Then all I can do is hold him and try not to fucking fall apart.

*****

Justin

It’s a while before he lets me out of a death grip that seriously rivals Debbie’s, but finally he lets go enough for me to get an arm up round his neck and pull him down for a kiss.

“I love you,” I whisper against his lips.

And hear a thousand answering ‘I love you’s’ in his ragged breathing and feel them in the tremors that are still shaking us both.

*****

Brian

I guess we should talk about all this shit, but he doesn’t seem to need to, and I don’t think I can. I need some time to process this. This is fucking huge. Something so big that …

For a long while I was almost glad he couldn’t remember. Not that he got hurt, fuck no! But if we couldn’t go on from where we’d been in those moments, then it was better that he didn’t have any … expectations, hope, whatever, that we could get it back. It was better that he couldn’t remember, because I knew I’d never be able to put myself out there for him like that again. I knew I’d never have the fucking courage to try again.

Then I guess in a way I fucking resented it. He was pouting around, demanding fucking romance,
when he couldn’t even remember the most ridiculously fucking romantic moment in his whole fucking life. I almost got the courage to try again with the Vermont trip - and look how well that turned out. If he’d been at the loft when I got back, when I walked in with the champagne and announced myself as his fucking partner, who the fuck knows? But he wasn’t, he’d pissed off to Vermont without me on my fucking dime and left me looking and feeling like a total twat.

So after that any fucking chance that I was going to let him dick me around with floor picnics and all that bullshit he was learning from the fucking fiddler was never going to fucking happen.

And, hell, yes, I resented the fuck out of the fact that I’d really put myself on the fucking line for him and he couldn’t even remember it.

But since then we’ve … we’ve somehow got it together. On our own fucking terms. And okay, a blow job in the VIP lounge might not be a fucking bouquet of roses, but … it’s what I can do to show him how I feel about him, and tonight, the way he’s been lit up like fucking Times Square on acid - tonight he heard what all that was telling him - fuck! telling everyone - about how I feel about him. And he understood the message. And it was enough.

So … I don’t know how I feel about him remembering that fucking dance, and those moments after it. Those moments when we were fucking in love or some shit like that anyway, and we were happy about it, and we both knew that. Those moments we were both ready to see what came next without queening out over it, to take some next fucking step into our future.

Those moments that got blasted out of his brain, I’d thought forever.

Leaving me alone with them, with all their fucking sweetness and hope and devastation. Trying not to remember them - although the thought of losing them, of me not being able to remember them someday when he was long gone and the memories were all I’d have nearly tore me to shreds. And feeling both resentful and relieved that he’d forgotten.

But he’s sitting beside me while I drive to the loft, his hand resting lightly on my thigh, like it usually does, and he’s quiet and … happy.

I can see it in the corner of his mouth and in the way his eyes crinkle at me when I pull up at a stop sign and turn to look at him.

“Stop worrying about it, Brian,” he says suddenly. “I don’t want to go back to being that fucking stupid kid any more than you want me to. I just … remembered, that’s all. It doesn’t really mean shit any more. Just … I’m glad to have that night back, you know? The good things about that night.”

I can only nod and grunt agreement. And then we’re at the loft and he’s heading upstairs and into the shower and I follow and he asks what time we need to get up to get out to the house and whether he should set the alarm and then we’re in bed, and although on principle I know I should be fucking him senseless, somehow we just fall asleep, still damp from the shower instead of from sweat and cum.

*****

Justin

The next few days are just crazy.

Between the packing and shit out at the house, and bringing all the stuff we need back here and trying to find room for it - including the painting I started, and then trying to find more room for all
my stuff when it arrives from New York - it’s a wonder we don’t wind up killing each other a dozen times over.

But finally we have most of the stuff that we need right now crammed somewhere into the loft, and one of Brian’s minions has arranged storage for everything else, so there’s really only the painting which is propped on an easel in front of the big windows and Brian is so right - this place is going to make a kick-ass studio.

We’ve organized all of Lindsay’s travel. Although she still seems not to be sure if Mel is coming or not, we’ve booked tickets for her and JR as well just in case. And we’ve booked them a suite at the Marriott.

I also found time to call Dan and arrange to take him out to dinner on Wednesday night. Brian did a lot of eye-rolling over that, but I just told him to suck it up. I thought Dan was … interesting. Sad, of course, and lonely, and unbelievably ancient. But with spark and steel still there, at the core. I can imagine that when he was younger he must have been really a lot like Brian. And an amazing face. I’d love to paint him, but I guess if he’s leaving soon there won’t be time. Maybe he’ll let me take some photos …

Plus I caught up with Mom again, and with Molly and even Tucker. I mean, seriously, if she had to get herself a boy toy, couldn’t it have been someone with a real name. “Tucker” sounds like a fucking dog. But he’s okay I guess. Mom seems happy, anyway, so I guess that’s all that counts, really. And Mol likes him.

So now it’s Tuesday night, and I still haven’t seen Debbie - although she’s been leaving messages. I did try to call her, but she wasn’t home, and it’s no good calling her at the diner. But I have the feeling that if we wait any longer she’s just going to go ballistic, so we call and when she says she’s not working tonight, we invite ourselves for dinner and head over, stopping on the way for a few bottles of wine. I think we both feel like we’re going to need them.

I still don’t really want to do this because I don’t want to get into the whole Mikey-Ben-the house-the money thing, but it’s got to be faced sometime so may as well get it over with.

But surprisingly it goes okay.

Emmett’s there, which helps. He’s about to move out, he tells me later while Deb’s in the kitchen, because he’s found a little place that he can afford a mortgage on. It’s in an old house that has been split into three apartments, not all that far from Liberty Avenue. Seems a pair of old queens own the ground floor place, and a retired lesbian school teacher (’just like some old English actress’ he says) owns the second floor, and they’ve been dreading who was going to buy the top floor place because the last owners were a psycho pair who were always having screaming dramas on the stairs. Apparently they’re ready to welcome Em with open arms, and both the queens and the lesbian have already invited him for dinner and offered to supply him with all he needs to know about the neighborhood - from where to get the best fish to where to get his leather chaps mended.

I’m really glad for Em. I hope it works out because he’s a good guy and he deserves to have some good things happen to him for a change.

So between catching up on what’s been happening with me and why I’m home and all that, and talking about Em’s new place, and what’s been going on at the diner and how Carl is still hoping Deb will change her mind and marry him, and how she thinks maybe she should because she doesn’t want to have to deal with his family if anything happens to him and they’re not legally married, and she can’t be selfish and just think about her own feelings she has to do what’s best for him … and so on. So with all that, not a lot is said really, about Michael. Or Ben.
Only when we’re putting on our coats and about to leave she comes and puts her hand on my shoulder. “I’m really fucking glad you’re home,” she says. She jerks her head towards Brian and lowers her voice as if that will stop him hearing what she’s saying when he’s only a couple of feet away.

“He needs you,” she goes on, “even if he’d never admit it. And with Michael behaving the way he is - well, he needs you even more.”

I stare at her in surprise for a moment, unable to figure out what to say.

She gives me a sad little smile. “He’s my son, and I love him,” she says, “but he can be the most stupid, self destructive stubborn asshole I have ever met in my life.”

Then she raises her voice a little, “And that includes you, Kinney, you asshole.”

Brian just gives her a sort of sheepish little grin, and she smacks his ear, but gently. “I love you, kiddo,” she whispers into his ear before giving him one of her huge smoochy kisses on the cheek.

“Love you too, Maw,” he says softly.

“She knows you do, kiddo,” she answers. “And I know you love him too. And that you don’t deserve the way he’s been lately. But he’s in pain, you know?”

She looks up at him, and I realize that she’s looking old. And tired. All this shit has really taken it out of her. Realizing that, I find the anger that had started to simmer in me slide away. No point in being angry with Deb. I might just as well save it up for Michael. He’s the one who’s really earned it.

Brian hugs her awkwardly, and then she turns to me and I’m engulfed in one of her death hugs. For some reason that makes my eyes go all watery and I find myself hugging her back. There are things that drive me crazy about Deb, but I can’t just forget that she was a mother to me when my own mother didn’t know how to be. It’s why I understand so well the hold she has over Brian – because there are strong echoes of it in my own psyche.

So although I’m not Brian and the hold with me doesn’t go as deep, and though I’m not blind to how much she and Michael are alike in the way that they use people’s affection to manipulate them, I am suddenly aware of how much I’ve missed her.

I kiss her cheek and tell her I’ll come into the diner one day later in the week and see her and then we make our escape.
Memories and Mementos

Chapter Summary

Brian is on the verge of a queen out of epic proportions before Justin takes steps to head it off. Later, they have dinner with Dan.

Brian

Well, that could have been a lot fucking worse.

Now if we can just get through the dinner tomorrow night with little Sunshine’s latest admirer - that old fossil who’s selling us his house - then I might get through this week without killing anybody.

We still haven’t talked about the bombshell he dropped the other night. There’s been so fucking much to do and to sort out. Physical stuff - like trying to find room for all the shit he just can’t do without for the next few weeks till we move into the house, and some financial stuff that he doesn’t need to worry about; freeing some money up for Mikey, and making sure there’s enough there for the new place.

Fortunately the group that are buying the fucking mansion want a quick settlement as well, but there still might be a week or so between the time we have to have the money ready for the old fossil and when the check for the other place clears. It’s not a problem but it does mean that I have to sign shitloads of fucking forms and have had Theodore buzzing around like a demented mosquito till they were done.

Thank God we sorted out all our other legal shit before he left for New York. We’d got living wills and survivor stuff all signed and sealed before the New York offer came up - practically as soon as
we got off the plane from Chicago. Just because we’d decided not to get married didn’t mean that we could get by without all that stuff. If something happened to me then I wouldn’t trust Joanie and Claire an inch not to try to circumvent whatever I’d put into a will, unless it was accompanied by a whole lot of other iron clad contracts that clearly signified that I fucking meant him to have everything - except what would go into trust for Gus. And I sure as fuck didn’t trust that if he had some kind of accident or illness, his father wouldn’t turn up at the hospital with the sole intention of keeping the ‘pedophile’ away from his little boy - the son the asshole has pretty much ignored for the last three years, except when he was trying to have his ass thrown into jail.

So getting all that shit sorted was our first move when we got back from the trip where we decided not to get married. And the irony of that wasn’t lost on either of us.

I almost regretted we’d done it when the New York thing happened, but I didn’t have the balls to tell him we should turn around and reverse it all, and it’s been a fucking godsend this week.

Plus, of course, I do have an actual business to run; and although Cynthia and Ted can handle most stuff, there’s a big presentation coming up next week that I need to oversee personally.

Then there’s the problem of finding him some temporary studio space. Long term, he’s going to be using the loft. But there’s shit loads of stuff that will need doing first and he’s got a fucking show coming up in a few months.

A fucking New York show.

The thought, which once would have had my gut twisting with - I don’t know - anxiety, or some shit, now just leaves me feeling fucking proud. That’s how fucking solid it feels we are right now. Like for once I know, fucking know, that he’s home and this time to stay. And more importantly, this time I know that’s the right thing for him. Meanwhile, I’m so fucking proud of him I’ve had to just about chew my tongue off to keep myself from telling everyone we know.

He wants to keep it quiet for a while. Partly because things can go wrong (though I’ve seen the offer and if they fucking try to cancel on him, I’ll sue their asses off), but mainly because everyone will be all over him once they find out.

Questioning why he’s here and not there, questioning why he’s not working every minute, questioning whether now is the right time to take on a new house - all that shit that he can do without. He knows where he wants to be. And if I’m finally ready to let him make that decision for himself, then they should pay him the same fucking respect. And he works in his own time. Always has. But that won’t stop them with their fucking ‘shouldn’t you be …?’ bullshit.

So he hasn’t even told his Mommy. But he did manage to persuade her to find him some studio space. Not that fucking rat hole he was in before but an apartment that’s empty at the moment, part of the wreckage of yet another divorce battle. It’s not far from the loft and has some great windows and the owners seem to be relieved to have found someone who just wants it on a short term lease so there won’t be any problems selling it with vacant possession when they finally get their shit together.

So everything is just fine and dandy and we’re both busily putting together the building blocks of a future.

Assuming we have one and I don’t manage to fuck the whole thing up over something so fucking ridiculous that I can hardly believe it’s even a blip on my radar.

The fucking problem is that all the while I’m dealing with all the shit that’s about our future
together, bubbling away underneath ready to explode like a fucking retarded volcano, is some bullshit sense of resentment over his-so-casual dismissal of the fact that he’s remembered his Prom. Remembered the most romantic fucking thing I’ve ever done in my whole fucked up life. Remembered the way I fucking put it all on the line for him.

Remembered all that and then just shrugged his shoulders and dismissed it as if it was fucking nothing. Zero. Nada.

And I know that’s fucking bullshit. I know it that in the grand scheme of things, he’s right. It is nothing. It means jack-shit compared to what we have now. I know that.

But …

It means something to me.

It means … it means feeling hope and joy and fucking love for maybe the first time in my life and then having them horribly smashed in front of me in one fucking instant.

It means not being allowed one single fucking hour to relish those feelings, or even be allowed to remember them except with fucking guilt and self-loathing.

No one else ever had any clue about what those few moments were like for Justin and me - what they represented, what they could have led to. And all I got from any of them afterwards wasn’t any sort of attempt to share in that joy, however brief it might have been - it was just blame - blame for going, condemnation for having those moments with him.

But no one, not even Jennifer Taylor, could blame me as much as I blamed myself.

For months, while he struggled to recover from what that bastard Hobbs had done to him, I had to bury all those feelings, bury my guilt at bringing that violence down on his beautiful head, bury my anger at Hobbs for what he’d fucking stolen from us, from me; and bury my resentment. The resentment I felt towards the poor fucking kid who was so fucked up he could hardly bear anyone, even me, to touch him, because he didn’t remember the most … the most stupid idiotically fucking ridiculously romantic moment of either of our lives.

There was nothing else I could do with those feelings, except bury them deep. But I guess I didn’t do a good enough job.

Because right now that resentment is just oozing its way to the surface, ready to fucking blow and spread its shit all over this new fucking happiness that’s right here in my reach.

And I don’t know if I can stop it.

*****

Justin

Things have been really busy, and I know that it’s been even worse for Brian, because he’s had to deal with all the money and legal stuff as well. But he’s been edgy about something all week and I think I know what it is.

I hope I do.

Because if I’ve got it wrong he’s likely to think I’ve lost my fucking mind, or worse … that I want us to turn into some romantic “couple” or something.
That’s not it. Not at all.

I don’t want that.

I might have thought I did, once.

But now I know that what we have, what we give each other, is worth a million stupid fucking romantic gestures that mean nothing, because they have no integrity behind them.

I keep getting these comments about my art - about its maturity, its sense of authenticity, and I’ve been asked about where that comes from.

I just shrug and say things like, “Being gay in a world that’s often hostile to you means that you have to develop finely tuned senses to what’s real, what people around you are really thinking.”

But what I really want to say is that I learned it from my partner; that what I know about authenticity and integrity I learned from Brian. Because beneath that façade that he’s constructed and wears like armor, he is the most authentic person I know. He has more integrity than anyone else I’ve ever met. Knowing Brian has made me see that most people do the “nice” things on a surface level but when it comes to anything that requires sacrifice or takes a real effort, they go missing. Whereas with Brian - the surface things can sometimes be pretty shitty. I should know. I’ve been the victim of them enough. But when it comes to anything real - whether it’s taking me in after the bashing, or giving up his rights to Gus to help Mel and Lindsay or even taking Ted on after he came out of rehab - Brian’s there. That, to me, is authenticity. That, to me, is someone for whom loving isn’t about empty gestures, it’s about how you deal with people when it takes some effort, when it requires more of you than just dishing out the symbols.

So empty gestures mean nothing to me now. I can’t believe that I fell for them ever. My brain must have been more scrambled from that damned bat than anyone, even Brian, understood.

But I need to do this. I need to give him this gesture. And hope that he sees it for what it really is, and doesn’t read it as some sort of meaningless bullshit.

Because it isn’t.

To me, it’s the most real thing I can give him to show that I understand what my remembering that night means. Means to me, means to him, means to us.

I’m nervous. And, waiting for him, here in the loft, where I’ve waited for him so often, I feel like … like this moment is huge.

I don’t want to feel like this.

But I do.

I feel like if we don’t get this sorted now, get it straight between us - then someday, sooner or later, it’s going to turn on us and trip us up big time.

I hear the elevator pull up and take a deep breath.

As he opens the door, I turn on the CD.

I made it deliberately with a little blank space at the start, so he has time to get his head around what I’m wearing, and how the furniture is all pushed back before the music starts.
He stands staring at me and shaking his head, I can see one of those major Kinney queen outs about to erupt, but I move towards him and, taking the silken tether from around my neck where it shines against my tux, I toss it up over his head. The white scarf settles softly, gleaming against the dark grey Armani jacket as I slide the briefcase from his hand and toss it over onto the couch.

He’s still staring at me, like a rabbit caught in a headlamp, but when I take his left hand in my right, and putting the other on his shoulder start to sway with the music, he finally moves. At first it’s jerky and awkward, but then suddenly he is holding me more firmly and then we’re moving the way I remembered in my dream back in the hotel in Chicago. We’re gliding together so fucking smoothly and easily and when he dips me I laugh, and when he lifts me and holds me to him while he spins us round I am breathless with sheer exhilaration. And when he kisses me, it lasts a long time.

When we finally ease apart a little, the music has long since stopped. He presses his forehead to mine and whispers my name. Just my name. But it says so much - tells me of so much hurt, so much loss, so much lonely pain and so much love that my heart nearly breaks.

“I love you,” I tell him, and take his face between my hands. “I am so fucking glad that I remember - at least something of what that night was like.”

His eyes are the muddy color they go when he’s upset and I go on quickly. “I know ‘sorry’ is bullshit … but I am so fucking sorry that I left you alone with those memories for so damned long.”

He shakes his head, shrugs, looks away, so I know how right I was that this has been eating at him.

“Brian, I never meant to make you feel like it was nothing, like it didn’t matter.”

“You didn’t remember.” His tone is balanced somewhere between exoneration and accusation.

“No. No, I didn’t. And maybe if I had …”

He shrugs again, and this time moves away.

“But Brian …” I go on, forcing the words out, willing him to hear me. “I know it meant … huge things at the time. Back then.”

He turns now, and almost glares at me, but I force myself to go on.

“But nothing like what other things have meant since.”

“I fucking know that!” he snaps.

“Do you?” I ask. “Do you really know what it meant to me when you took me in after the bashing? When I felt so useless and damaged and you brought me here and made me feel … not just safe, but … like I could learn to be myself again?”

He looks away again, but stands still and lets me come to him. I touch the scarf around his neck - this one white, pristine, not pocked with rusty stains.

“Do you know what it meant to me when you were so gentle and patient with me, so loving that night?”

His eyes almost meet mine then.
“Do you know how it made me feel about myself when you stayed friends with me during the
Ethan thing? Do you know how … how valued you made me feel - that you didn’t just toss me
away like the piece of garbage you had every right to treat me as?”

He meets my eyes now, alright. He glares at me.

“How many fucking times do I have to say it?” he demands. “You had every right to get the fuck
out if your needs weren’t being met.”

It’s my turn now to shrug and look away. But he grabs my chin and forces me to look at him.

“Sunshine … you had to do something. We were fucked. And we were digging ourselves deeper
into the shit every day. I was fucked.”

He touches his forehead to mine again briefly. “Something needed to change. And I didn’t have the
balls to do it. Even then,” he finishes with a breath of a laugh.

His hand circles my neck and he gives me the wry grin that can twist my heart inside out, “You
always were the fucking brave one,” he says softly.

I let myself press close to him then, and nuzzle into his neck.

“Brian,” I tell him as his arms come round me. “It was a special night. It was magic. We were
magic. I wish I could remember properly - all in one piece instead of in sound bites.”

I pull back a little then, so I can look into his eyes again. They’re clearer now. Closer to green than
brown.

“But compared to giving me back myself after the bashing, and letting me give you chicken soup
after the cancer and taking me back after Ethan and being here when I came home from LA. Brian,
compared to everything we’ve been through since, compared to all that it’s …”

I run out of words and stop, not able to find the ones I want; the ones that will make it clear to him
that I’m not dismissing that night, and what it should have meant to us, but that I’m trying to put it
into perspective.

He gives a sad, silly little grin. “Just a fucking dance exhibition, huh? Something to make the
straights wet their pants in envy.”


Then I wrap my arms around him and fumble his shirt from his pants so that I can slide my hands
up the smooth skin of his back. “But I was going to say it was just a ridiculously romantic evening.
Maybe the most romantic thing anyone will ever do for me.”

“You think?” he asks with that tongue in cheek smirk.

I nod. “’Fraid so. My boyfriend isn’t really into all that romantic stuff.”

“Ah,” he nods understandingly. “Well, that’s sad.”

“Yes,” I sigh. “He’d never take me away for a romantic weekend, and wine me and dine me and
take me to a show, or go on a boat trip with me or anything like that.”

He laughs then and grabs me, pulling me hard against him and then he stops for a moment and
looks at me, intense and direct, and gives me the smallest nod of acknowledgement before his
mouth is pressed against mine.

And I know then that we’re going to be alright.

That he’s heard what I was trying to tell him.

That I’ve given him back at least a little of the magic of that night that Hobbs had stolen from him.

And later, when just before he comes he breathes my name again, so soft and deep it seems to come right from the inner core of him, I say his back to him.

“Brian,” I whisper. “Oh, Brian.”

Because that word is all of it - our first night and our Babylon nights and my Prom and the time after it and being away from him and him taking me back and nearly losing him for real to that fucking cancer and mornings in the diner and dinners at Deb’s and days spent drawing or painting or on the computer and night after night after night spent here, in his arms.

‘Brian’ is everything I could possibly say about all of that in one word.

And I know it’s the same for him.

*****

Brian

Okay - so it was incredibly fucking schmaltzy and stupid - almost as stupid as the queen out I was building up to.

But at least now I know he …

I know that he fucking cares … that he understands … or at least acknowledges what it was like to be the only one left standing who could remember how ridiculously fucking perfect everything was in those moments in that cheesy ballroom.

So now we move on, boys and girls.

By the time we fuck and then have something to eat and then talk about where we are on all the various timelines we’ve got running simultaneously, and then fuck again, it’s after midnight and too late to go out even if I wanted to.

Which I don’t.

We haven’t opened the ‘monogamy’ discussion again. I guess neither of us really wants to. And for once I don’t mean that we’re avoiding the issue. I just mean that we don’t feel the need anymore to set things down in rules that … that are fucking pointless, really. Because if one of us wants to break them then … then even if they don’t, the damage is still there. So the rules don’t achieve anything except give you a false sense of security. It’s like doing a high wire act with an imaginary net underneath you. It might give you some sense of comfort while you’re up there, but if you come crashing down it does fuck all to stop you.

There are some things that we both just know aren’t going to happen anymore. No more tricking as a way of life; and definitely not in front of each other. Unless maybe it’s a three way or something that we’re both involved in. (Wouldn’t shut the door on that. With the right guy - or guys - it might be hot.) No more looking outside for something that we’re not getting at home - not unless we
make some sort of effort to deal with what the real problem is. And definitely no more violin music - and all that that shit represents. That sort of stuff we both just know now. Anything else, we’ll work out when it comes along.

We’re not Mikey and Ben. I’m sure as fuck not - but neither is he (despite what all the ‘Sunshine is a saint’ brigade think, he’s just about as sexually voracious as I am).

But we don’t have to be a pair of Stepford fags to know that we’re as much “together” as anyone else who’s committed to the long haul. And to be honest, I think we’ve got a better shot at making it than most. Because we’ve already been through so much shit.

I’ve been a total dick and he’s managed to forgive me. He cheated on me and then left me and I managed to … not forgive him, there was noth … well, yeah, maybe forgive him. Not for leaving me. But for dicking around with Ethan behind my back and against all his own fucking rules - that I needed to be able to forgive before I could trust him again. We’ve dealt with all the physical traumas of the bashing and the fucking cancer; all the emotional traumas of him going to LA, of the bombing and the wedding that didn’t happen and him going to New York. Not to mention the minor little problems of the fact that when we met he was an infant and I was … damaged … I was a sorry excuse for any sort of human being who could only tell his ass from his elbow because no one had tried to fuck his elbow.

But after all that - we’re still together, and I feel like we’re stronger than ever.

So I think we’ve got a shot. Especially when he can pull rabbits out of the hat like he did last night. Now if only he hadn’t made these plans for dinner tonight with the old fossil who’s selling us the house we could maybe take a breath and appreciate that fact.

But, as things are, I have to get my ass home on time or he’ll be fucking prissy all night - and hiding it under all these airy fairy sunshiny smiles that make me want to puke.

*****

Justin

I know Brian doesn’t understand why I want so much to go out to dinner with Dan before he leaves for England. But I … standing in that house, looking up at that amazing window space and realizing that it was a representation of Dan and his Billy - and at the same time recognizing that it was also Brian and I … it just … it was so intense. Like for a moment I could almost feel Billy there with us. I felt like they were … I don’t know … friends … family … something. Connected to us somehow.

And tonight is probably the only chance I’m ever going to have to get to know them.

Brian gets home more or less on time, thank God because I totally didn’t want to have any sort of row with him tonight. Not after last night. Last night was just so perfect - so how I want us to be together. I don’t mean the soppy romantic bit at the beginning. I mean in how honest we were with each other, and that he let me talk about how I felt and even tried to express some of his feelings - even if not in a whole lot of words.

He shrugs out of his suit jacket and tries to persuade me to join him in the shower, but we’re supposed to meet Dan in forty minutes, and if we get in the shower that’s not going to happen.

I wanted to pick him up, but he insisted that he’d meet us at the restaurant. I let Brian pick somewhere and he chose a restaurant up on Mt Washington. I haven’t been there before, but Brian
says it has good seafood dishes, or chicken if I prefer and that I’ll like the desserts. He likes to pick on me for my sweet tooth, but the truth is he enjoys that stuff just as much as I do, he’s just too paranoid about putting on half an ounce to eat it. Unless it’s off my plate, of course - that doesn’t seem to count.

I keep an eye on the time, but he doesn’t even fight to be deliberately late for a change - just gets us down to the car and off to the restaurant.

To my relief, we get there before Dan. I know Brian would make one of his snarky comments about my “country club manners”, but he is a lot older than us and … it would just be rude to keep him waiting.

Instead, we’re sitting in the bar waiting for him when he walks in. He walks very slowly, but … he looks so much different from the man who first opened the door to us that I’m almost not sure that it’s him.

I risk Brian’s snarking and stand up to greet him, but a little bit to my surprise, Brian stands up as well.

Dan gives us a smile that somehow reminds me of Brian, and then he sits down to join us for a drink before we go in to dinner.

*****

Brian

The old fossil looks less, well, fossil-like tonight. He gives a slow smile when we both stand to greet him and holds himself a little taller. I guess you never do get over enjoying the attention that being with a hot guy gives you. And even more so when it’s two of them.

Talk is a little stilted over our drinks, but once we get seated on the higher level of the tiered dining room, with its view out across the rivers, somehow things go more smoothly. Justin asks about his trip home - where the boat stops (it doesn’t till it gets to England), how long it takes, what the boat will be like, all sorts of shit.

Then Dan asks about his painting, and Justin tells him about his New York show later in the year. Dan smiles and says that he’s sorry he’ll miss it. Justin promises to send him a catalogue and then blushes like a fucking girl and stammers out something about “if you’re interested”.

Dan laughs and pats his hand and says, like some fucking old movie star, “I’m always interested in beautiful young men who take time to be kind to an old fossil like me.”

I roll my eyes which makes little Sunshine frown at me, but Dan laughs; one of those laughs that makes me feel like I’m fucking transparent, and that he’s fucking enjoying that fact.

To my surprise I hear myself asking if he has everything organized for his trip, or if he’d like me to get my admin staff to take care of any details for him.

He looks surprised himself, but then gives me a real smile, not one of those snarky ones that make it clear that he thinks he can fucking see right through me, and says, “Brian, that would be very kind. There are so many issues with shipping all my goods and chattels that I can hardly bear to think about it.”

I nod. I can imagine. I fucking hate all that paper shit, and I bet he does too. But what Ted can’t take care of, he can delegate to one of the countless fucking admin staff I’m told we need. Fuck
knows what they do most of the time. They can earn their keep for once.

Then Justin says, very tentatively, like he knows where this is going to take us, “You said that you wanted to go back by ship because that’s how you came over.”

Dan’s face clouds for a moment, but then he smiles, like he’s remembering, and nods. “Yes,” he says. “Although I think this trip might be a little different.” His mouth tightens in a way that’s familiar from too many fucking hours spent looking in a mirror, and goes on, “It had better be. Given what I’m paying for it.”

That makes me laugh, and we share a look that puts us both on the same page with that.

Then he says, “We came out just after the war. The ship was full of troops coming home. And the wives they’d picked up along the way. My father had to pull all sorts of strings to get us passage, but …”

His eyes lose their sparkle and he says flatly, “He was happy to do it. He was more than glad to see the back of his faggot son.”

Justin touches his hand, and Dan looks down at him blankly for a moment, and then pats his hand again, smiles.

“Oh, it was a long time ago. And to be honest, I was just as glad to get away.”

Justin nods, and I find myself reaching out to touch his other hand. He looks at me, his eyes swimming a little, at both Dan’s pain and his own.

Dan’s story might have happened a long fucking time ago, but things haven’t changed all that fucking much.

*****

Justin

I try to get the tight feeling in my chest under control. This night isn’t about me. And I can feel Brian getting all antsy the way he does when he goes into protective mode.

Dan picks up on it, and gives Brian a look that’s almost an apology, then says, “You’d think for a young queer that being on a boat filled with men would be some kind of heaven, but you wouldn’t be taking into account the fact that Billy and I had just really found each other. Well, we’d known each other a good while, but it had taken me a bit longer than Billy to come to terms with the fact that we were going to be together.”

I find myself grinning a little and trying not to look at Brian. Especially when Dan continues.

“With all that temptation everywhere, of course I fucked up. It was inevitable. I’m lucky that that ship didn’t stop either or Billy might have got off and left me. As it was, I’m surprised he didn’t toss me overboard.”

“But you worked it out,” Justin prompted.

“Oh, I fought it. Told him we weren’t a cozy married couple, all sorts of idiotic shit, made a complete arse of myself.”

I really can’t look at Brian now.
“But the closer we got to New York, the more I realized that there was every chance he’d leave me on the docks and lose himself in a city neither of us knew and I’d never see him again.

“I didn’t have any choice but to get my shit together.”

He raises an eyebrow at Brian.

“What did it for you?” he asks.

Brian sucks his lips in and for a moment I’m almost holding my breath, trying to work out in the jumble that my brain has suddenly become, what I will do if he just gets up and walks out.

But instead he laughs, and relaxes, and says, “He left me. For another guy. And then for a job that took him off to Hollywood, and then I fucking got cancer and whatever fucked up ideas I still had about how I didn’t need anybody and all that shit pretty much got kicked to the curb by that - either cut out with my ball, or tossed into the toilet with all the other crap I threw up when I was puking my guts up every day for weeks.”

Dan looks a little shocked by that, and then he seems to look at Brian with new respect. So he should. Brian is … it’s easy just to dismiss him as someone who has always been really self-centered. In some ways he was. But, if you don’t have anyone you can really rely on to be there for you, no matter what, what choice do you have but to rely only on yourself?

I find myself putting my hand over Brian’s and meeting Dan’s eye in a way that I hope he knows, hope he sees, how proud I am of my partner. How much I respect him.

Dan smiles at us both, and before he can say anything else, they serve the appetizers and after that the conversation just flows really easily.

Dan tells us a little about those early years in New York with Billy. His eyes light up a little when he talks about him, and I realize that even after all this time, even after Billy’s gone, Dan still loves him. And I also realize that he probably never gets to talk about him, so I encourage him to tell us more.

But it’s pretty obvious that by the time we get to dessert, he’s getting tired. I look at the dessert menu - there are so many things I’d like to try. But I say that I’m full.

Brian gives me a ‘yeah, right’ look but doesn’t say anything. Dan pats my hand and gives Brian one of those wry smiles of his that I’ve gotten used to over dinner.

“He’s a treasure. You keep close hold of him.”

Brian sucks his lips in, but then he nods. “I plan to,” he says.

Just when we’re getting ready to go, asking the wait staff to call a cab for Dan because he refuses to let us drive him home - well, I guess Brian would have to drive him, and I’d have to either get a cab myself or wait for him to come back - one of those cheesy photographers comes around.

Dan doesn’t say anything, but I ask if he’d mind if we had a photo taken. I can feel Brian’s eye roll, even though he’s standing behind me because he was getting ready to help Dan into his coat, but Dan smiles…

“I would like that very much,” he says. “It’s not often at my age that you get the chance to have your photograph taken with two beautiful young men.”
That makes Brian smile, of course - partly because of the flattery, but mainly because he knows it’s something he might say. Or maybe not. It’s hard to imagine Brian letting anyone take a photo when he’s as old as Dan - he’s bad enough about it now.

But we stand together behind Dan’s chair and the guy takes the photos.

Dan had given me an address in England so I can send him the catalogue of my show, so I promise that once we get the shots I’ll send him a copy. And I’ll email one to him as well.

We see Dan into a cab, and go home, and I know that Brian must have wound up really liking Dan and enjoying the evening, because he doesn’t make a single snarky comment.

Just when we’re in bed, he pulls me close against him and says, “If you die and leave me alone like that, Sunshine, I’ll kill you myself.”

Which doesn’t make any sense, but I know what he means.

So I just nuzzle even closer and kiss him with everything I am.
Chapter Summary

Brian gets an unexpected phone call.

Chapter Notes

Just wanted to reinforce the warning about this fic being considerably anti-Lindsay and even more so anti-Melanie. I could tolerate Mel in S1, irrational attitude to Brian aside. But by the end of S5 I pretty much thought she’d become a rabid bitch. (BTW, I still admire, respect, even adore Michelle.)

I can tell when Linds is really losing it because she reverts back to her WASP roots and projects a deafening silence about whatever it is that’s got her knickers in a knot. So when she calls and asks me to authorize changing the plane booking for her and Gus to that afternoon without offering a single fucking word of explanation I can tell something has gone severely ass-up again in that fucked up mess she and Mel call a marriage.

Back in the day, I was both cynical and inexperienced about relationships. So theirs didn’t seem to me to be any more or less fucked up than I’d expect from any attempt for two people to live together in fucking coupledom.

But that was back then. Now I have more perspective. I’ve tried it myself. I know it’s fucking tough, and God knows Justin and I aren’t poster boys for “Couple of the Year”. But compared to the shit Linds and Mel put each other through, we’re right up there. Justin is my best friend; my closest friend; the one I can absolutely rely on - as much as anyone can rely on anyone else anyway. We talk about just about everything in our lives - maybe just in the occasional grunt or
two word sentence, but somehow it gets the message across, we fucking “communicate”; we share
the same sense of humor, the same ‘no bullshit’ attitude to things. He’s supported me through so
many of my fuck ups, so many dramas – up to and including force-feeding me chicken soup and
cleaning up my puke; and I’ve tried to do the same for him, tried to make sure that he took
advantage of all the chances that came his way, tried to support him in doing that.

And much as thinking about it makes me want to start puking all over again, those things have
bonded us. The bashing might not have fractured us, but helping him put his life back together,
working with him to get back his confidence, help him find the way to express his talent again, that
made me see myself, and how I could be with another person in a completely different way; and
having his support trying to put my career back together after Stockwell, and then to recover from
the fucking cancer – those things … they make a fucking difference. They’re not things you just
shrug off and forget about, they’re things that change you; and they sure as shit fundamentally
change the way your relationship works, change the way you think about yourself and your partner.
They’re things that cement you together – or break you apart. With us, they pulled us together and
it’s hard now to imagine what could fucking blow us apart.

But who the fuck knows what keeps the Munchers together? It sure as shit doesn’t seem to me that
it’s anything as fucking … real … as Justin and I have. Which is a sure sign that the world should
be reeling on its axis.

I used to think Mel made Lindsay happy; but after their last bust up, and all the shit that went down
then, I don’t see that any more. She was a complete fucking cow to Lindsay for months. Justin and
I at our worst have never treated each other that way. Even when he was just the little twink who
could and I was the resident asshole of Liberty Avenue, and would have denied that we had any
relationship at all, I don’t think I ever treated him with the fucking contempt that Mel showered on
her “wife”.

So I’m not surprised when Linds doesn’t even acknowledge my “What the fuck’s gone wrong
now?” It just makes it pretty damned obvious that their so-called “marriage” is imploding yet
again. Good to know the gay girls can fuck things up as badly as any het couple who have a
quickie marriage in Las Vegas.

I tell the red head who’s supposedly my latest PA (although the fucking “assistance” element
leaves a lot to be desired) to change the hotel booking and call Sunshine to let him know that our
guests - or at least two of them - are arriving earlier than expected. Like I’d figured, he wants to
come to the airport with me, so I shuffle a couple of meetings and head off to pick him up.

I’d had Ted organize a Jeep for when Gus is here - complete with booster seat, although he barely
needs that now. It’s good to use it though - still safer for a while yet - so it’s just a matter of getting
that a few days early. There’s some ridiculous shit over that which seems to be beyond Miss
Carrot-top, but Ted gets it sorted. Sometimes I’m almost willing to believe he’s worth what I pay
him.

I’m just leaving to collect Justin when Ted sticks his head out of his office.

“Just thought I should let you know … Mel called, and she’s pissed.”

I shrug. What else is new?

Of course if there are problems in Muncher-ville big bad Brian must be to blame. Fucking stupid
cow! If she’d put half as much energy into her so called loving relationship with Linds as she does
into hating me, they might stand some sort of chance of making things work.
Justin

On the way to the airport, I ask Brian what's going on. He shrugs.
"Who knows? Another fucking muncher meltdown."

I sigh. It figures. And of course Linds comes running to Brian, which somehow winds up making him the bad guy. That pisses me off.

But at least it means that he'll get to see Gus. And nearly a week earlier than we expected - that's the main thing. We'll deal with the rest of the shit as it comes.

By the time we find a parking space at the airport, the plane has landed but we catch sight of Linds and Gus just as they get off the shuttle. Gus starts running as soon as he sees Brian and Brian, after one moment when he just looks stunned by Gus' joy at seeing him, swoops down and snatches his son up into his arms for the first time in months.

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" Gus shrieks, squeezing his arms tightly round Brian's neck, and then leaning back to look into his father's face.

"We went on a plane!" he says. "We flew. Like Batman. And now I's here. And I'm big. Aren't I big?" he demands.

"Huge," Brian responds, "and f... heavy."

Gus throws his head back and laughs.

"I'm the biggest in my class," he says proudly. "I'm like my Daddy - bigger 'n' anybody!"

Brian smirks and I have to nudge him in the ribs to let him know that even when he doesn't say anything I'm still onto what he's thinking.

Gus looks at me kind of doubtfully for a moment, but then he squeals, "Dus!" and throws himself at me. And my heart just melts. Seriously. I feel like he's just given me the most amazing gift. I can only hold him and smile and smile and smile.

Brian

See, this is why I fucking call him Sunshine. Standing there holding my son, he's lit up like a million fucking Christmas trees.

Holding our son.

Fuck it! If Mel can claim him, so can Justin. He's been there since the night Gus was born; he fucking named him for fuck's sake. And he's had more influence on my son's life than anyone else could understand. Because he's been there at really critical points in Gus’ life. Right from the beginning.

It was Justin who made me realize that I didn't want to give up my rights to my son; helped me see that I wanted to be Gus' father - maybe not in the maudlin fucking way Mikey obsesses over JR,
but in some way, some new way that Gus and I would work out together. And then later he helped me make the decision to finally sign away those rights. Something that, if I did regrets ... well, fuck that! No fucking regrets.

Justin's also the reason ...

I almost caught that plane to Ibiza. Almost went through with my half-assed plan to dodge the bullet on the whole cancer thing by offing myself in some fucking way that no one would even know about. But ...

I could tell myself that Mikey and Linds and even Gus would be better off; that they wouldn't even really know what I'd done. If I drove my car off a cliff or into a tree they'd put it down to drink or drugs and eventually they'd be relieved that I wasn't around to fuck with their heads anymore.

But little Sunshine ... he would have fucking known. He knows me too well, so much fucking better than any one of those losers. And he would never have forgiven me. Or himself. And I just couldn't fucking do that to him. So instead of going out in a blaze of glory - or at least, dying young and beautiful, I went to John Hopkins and let them cut out my ball, and went through the fucking radiation and puking and all that shit.

And here I still am, pushing this fucking luggage trolley (why do I think there's way too much shit for a week's holiday?) and trying simultaneously to watch my son with my lover, and to get Linds to meet my eyes so I can try to figure out exactly what the fuck is going on. Because something (apart from the obscene amount of luggage) tells me that Linds is not planning on going back to Toronto any time soon.

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Justin

I can tell that Lindsay is avoiding any discussion about why she's arrived so suddenly. But as far as I'm concerned, she needn't bother, I don't really care. Who gives a fuck? So her and Mel have crashed again? Big surprise.

I mean, what did they expect? Did they really believe that all the horrible shit they said and did to each other when they broke up the last time was just going to disappear and be forgotten? Like it had never happened?

As if!

See that's the thing ... Brian and I fight. We queen out at each other. He bails on me emotionally; or I walk out. There are times he's been a complete asshole to me; and as for me, I fucking cheated on him and then left him. But at our worst, we have never treated each other the way Mel and Lindsay did. We might lash out at each other, but we're not coldly deliberately spiteful, and we don't treat each other with the ... contempt ... that Mel used towards Lindsay when they split over Linds fucking that guy. I mean, even the night that Brian shredded us both letting me know that he knew about Ethan ... it was hurt, not spite that drove him. After that night, he treated me with a lot more respect, a lot more kindness than I probably deserved. He didn't go out of his way to make me feel like total shit; just the opposite really. And I did my best not to make him feel worse as well.

But Linds and Mel ... and especially Mel ... I'm not saying she wasn't entitled to be hurt, to be devastated even. I'm not even saying she was wrong in how she behaved. But I don't know how anyone could get past that and just carry on as if it had never happened. I could never have looked at Brian the same way, could never have gone back to him if he'd gone on treating me that way
over Ethan. And he would never have looked at me the same way if he had, and I'd gone back to him anyway.

I know people say love is about forgiveness - and they're right, in a way. But there have to be limits. I mean, it's not like Mel and Linds had one big knockdown fight and screamed obscenities at each other on the spur of the moment. Mel treated Linds like shit for months; plus made her lie to all their friends about what was going on. And then did everything she could to exclude Lindsay from JR’s life.

Then the bombing happened, and bingo! they're all lovey dovey again; and pretending like none of it ever happened.

Well, that's just bullshit.

I mean, Brian and I had been having a few shaky moments before the bombing. There was that rumor about that stupid fucking competition for a start, and the way everyone's meddling almost convinced him I was leaving him. And we were having trouble trying to work out how we were going to be together, what being “together” actually meant for us. So there were some shaky times.

As it turned out, we worked through all that pretty well. But it might have gone differently; we might have got so shaky that we needed to separate for a while to really figure it out. So if we’d been apart when the bombing happened, then hell, yeah, it would have been a major wake up call to stop fucking around and get on with it. So in those circumstances, then yeah, I guess the bombing would have driven us back together. He would still have come looking for me in the smoke and the ashes, and I would still have clung to him like he himself was the air I needed to go on breathing. And that would have made sense, because even if we’d been apart, we would still have been loving each other, still caring, still treating each other with respect and affection.

But Mel and Linds … I just don’t believe it was like that for them. I don’t think it drove them back together because it made them realize how much they love each other. Because I’m not sure they do. I don’t even think they like each other very much. I think it just made them afraid. Shook their cozy little white bread world and sent them into reaching in panic for some sort of illusion of security. I think that’s what was behind the whole Canada thing. They just want to believe that they can find some way where nothing bad will ever happen. Well, I can tell them from experience, that’s just a bullshit way to live.

So though Lindsay is here now and has that locked down tight look of distress that always gets Brian all fucking protective, I honestly don’t give a shit.

She was stupid to fuck that guy. She was even more stupid to let Mel get away with all the hypocritical shit she put Linds through over it (if they’ve both conveniently forgotten the time they split because Mel got it on with some other dyke, I sure as fuck haven’t - it’s what finally led to Brian signing over his rights to Gus, to get them back together). And she was totally beyond fucking stupid to not only go back to her, but to waltz off to another country with no jobs, no guaranteed income, a fucked up relationship and two kids in the middle of it.

*****

Brian

We get to the Marriott, and after they’re checked in, Justin takes Gus who’s both over-active and over-tired - a killer combination, out for a drive to get something to eat. We’re all hoping being in the car will settle him down, maybe he’ll even crash. And it gives me the chance to talk to Lindsay.
“So what’s the deal?” I ask her as she fusses around with the fucking mountain of bags she’s brought with her.

She shrugs. “You invited us down. I thought I’d take an extra few days. You said you didn’t mind, but if it’s too expensive, I’m sure we can find somewhere else to stay.”

I suck my lips in, thinking about exactly how to crack through the walls of bullshit she’s hiding behind.

“So why the sudden urgency?” I ask. “And why the fuck has Mel been burning up the phone lines threatening my remaining ball?”

Well, okay. I didn’t actually speak to her and I don’t know that’s what she said, but it’s a fair fucking bet. Lindsay gives an impatient WASP huff, and says, “She’s over-reacting. I told her I needed a few days away.”

“Linds. Have we met? You don’t have to bullshit me. Just tell me what’s going on.”

For the first time she meets my eyes. “She didn’t want me to come. And she refused to let me bring Gus. As if I needed her permission. He’s my son.”

I stand silent for a moment, playing with all the bits of paper - room service menus, movie menus, fucking pillow menus yet - that hotels scatter like confetti all over their guests’ rooms. So now, suddenly Gus is no longer Mel’s kid? Then why the fuck did I give up my rights to him?

“She didn’t want me to come. And she refused to let me bring Gus. As if I needed her permission. He’s my son.”

She breaks off then and looks at me with one of her pathetic little sighs of distress. Only the fact that Gus is here, in Pittsburgh, being chauffered around by my partner, stops me from tearing her to fucking shreds. What the fuck did she think was going to happen when she forced Mel to accept me as the father of “their” kid, and then did abso-fucking-lutely nothing to defend my place in his life; to insist that the shrew she fucking “married” shows at least some respect for the fact that, no matter how much she might resent it, I am Gus’ father?

I take a breath and force that all back into the inner pit of fire that bubbles in me constantly, the not-so-happy place where so many hurts and resentments live. There are more important things here. I’m no lawyer, but something tells me this could get very ugly.

“So she specifically said she didn’t want you to take Gus out of Canada, and you brought him anyway?” I clarify.

She pouts. “He’s my son!” she repeats.

Fuck me!

I pull out my cell and call the lawyer I’ve been talking to about the possibility of getting some sort of recognized place in Gus’ life, some guarantee of access to my son. She actually takes the call, and after hearing my outline of the situation suggests that I should come to see her later this afternoon. And that Linds should seek immediate legal advice.

When I suggest that we could both come to her, she says firmly, “Brian, we need to be very clear here. I represent you and your interests. That’s all. I am not concerned with Gus’s mothers or their problems except in how they impact you and your aim to have some legal rights to your son.”
She’s said that before. Warned me that there may come a point where my interests are in direct opposition to the munchers’, and that I have to be prepared for that.

She goes on now, “In the meantime, you should have no contact with Ms Marcus. If she manages to get through to you, you should refer her to me and tell her that I have advised you that any communication between you should go through your attorneys. But I would prefer that you do not speak to her, or communicate with her in any way, at least until we’ve spoken. Is that clear?”

I resist the urge to salute and hear myself mumble ‘yes’, and she warns me again and ends the call.

She’s a fucking ball breaker. The guy I sought advice from initially recommended her, not just because of her reputation which is that she’s one of the best, but also because it helps derail any feminist bullshit, which he said might be a problem if the case comes before some woman judge with a bee in her bonnet about that shit - two wealthy anglo men ganging up on a couple of helpless women.

Mel is about as helpless as a fucking raptor, and Linds has her moments, but I could see where he was coming from, and as Ms Hershell is as tough as nails and doesn’t flutter her fucking eyelashes at me, I can deal. I want the best, and it seems like she’s it.

Which right now is just as well, because she seems to think that Lindsay could be in a shit load of trouble; and worse, that it might complicate my own case to gain rights to Gus.

Fuck!

*****

Justin

But the time I get back, Gus has fallen asleep in the booster seat. I call Brian, and he meets us out front and carries Gus up while I deal with the valet parking attendant.

When I get upstairs, Gus is sleeping, Lindsay is crying and Brian is on the phone instructing reception to block the line and not put through any calls.

Just then my cell rings.

Brian’s head snaps up. “Don’t answer unless you’re sure who it is!” he barks.


He nods.

“Is Brian there?” Ted asks. “He’s not answering his cell.”

I hand my phone to Brian and he listens for a moment and then, “No,” he tells Ted. “No! I’m not speaking to her, and I’d prefer that no one from Kinnetik did either. Which includes you, Theodore. I’m seeing my lawyer this afternoon, but meanwhile she’s instructed me to have no communication with her at all. Refer her to my attorney if she keeps calling, but have reception do it.”

Shit!

He’s silent for a moment, listening, then he says, “I’d like you to find a family law specialist for Lindsay. If you’re not comfortable doing that, then ask …”

A faint flush creeps up his neck then, and he drops his voice and says very quietly, “Why, thank
you, Theodore.”

He’s obviously trying for his usual snark, but somehow sincerity creeps through despite his best efforts, and I can tell that whatever Ted has said, it’s something which has surprised Brian, and for which he really is grateful.

Just for a moment I want to hug Ted.

Then I go back to wanting to throttle Mel and Lindsay.

The next couple of hours are exhausting. I’m surprised Brian doesn’t just bail, or at least wring Lindsay’s neck. He needs her to tell him exactly what’s going on, not just so he can pass that on to his attorney, but also so he can make plans, organize a more permanent place for them to stay if they’re going to be here more than a few days.

But all Lindsay will do is cry and get huffy and tell him he just doesn’t understand. Till finally, finally! he cracks it and says “Fine! Since all this shit is beyond our limited fucking comprehension, Gus can stay with Justin and I and you can change your return flight to this evening so you can go back and sort things out with the bitch queen.”

She nearly loses it then. Says Mel will kill her if she goes back without Gus, and it will just prove that Mel was right all along that if they came back to Pittsburgh, Brian would cause problems over Gus.

“What the fuck does that mean?” I demand. I’ve been pretty much quiet up till now, but that is too fucking much.

She jumps like she’d forgotten I was there. “Justin … please … you don’t understand …”

“What don’t I understand, Linds? That the only role you’ll allow Brian to have in Gus’ life is as a banker to finance whatever fucked up idea you and Mel come up with next?”

Brian shoots a look at me, and opens his mouth to say something, but after seeing how fucking pissed off I am, he wisely shuts it again.

“I’ll tell you what I really don’t understand. I don’t have a fucking clue why you would ever have thought that taking two kids off to another country where you have no jobs lined up, no support network, and no fucking family was ever going to work - except of course, that you did have support, didn’t you? You always had Brian’s money to fall back on.”

She’s looking at me like I’ve grown fucking horns, but I am so sick of this shit.

“Tell me, Linds,” I say. “Just how much has Michael been contributing?”

She mumbles something incomprehensible, but I don’t wait for a translation, I go on, “Not fucking much, I bet. But he’s still got rights to JR, hasn’t he? He can visit whenever he wants, have JR come visit him. But Brian … Brian’s the one whose money makes your lives work, but he’s an asshole if he wants a legally recognized place in his son’s life.

“That’s fucked, Lindsay. I’m sorry, but it is. And if you were really Brian’s friend, if you truly respected his place as Gus’s father, you’d be prepared to help do something about it.”
Swimming with Sharks

Chapter Summary

Well, at least Gus is back in Pittsburgh.

Chapter Notes

The next chapters will include a fair bit of legal stuff over Gus. I'm not a lawyer, and chose not to ask advice from the lawyers in the fandom. However, I did a fair bit of online research into the laws relating to child custody in Pennsylvania and also into Canadian immigration requirements. I'm not saying I've got everything right, but nothing in the story contradicts anything I read, so I can at least say that I did make an attempt to get it right. I figure that in that regard I'm way ahead of the canon writers.

Brian

Well, fuck! I guess he’s put it out there now.

Wriggle as she might, Lindsay’s WASP ass is not going to be able to sit comfortably on the fence for much longer - not with little Sunshine shaking things up like a major earthquake.

Should I be pissed that he’s sticking his nose into my relationship with Gus? Not to mention with Linds herself. Maybe I should be. Back in the day I certainly would have been. And I would have let the little twat know it in no uncertain terms. But the thing is - I can’t have it both ways. Either he has a place alongside me in all of this, or he doesn’t. If I want everyone else to recognize that and pay him the respect he’s due, then it has to start with me. I have to show him that respect; which means I sure as hell can’t pour shit on him when he’s stepping up and claiming that place.
So instead, I walk over to him and wrapping my hand round the back of his neck, I turn to face Lindsay, so she sees how it is; how we are.

Together.

*****

Justin

It totally says where we are with each other that I’m not over surprised that he doesn’t turn on me for daring to say for once what I actually think about this “friend” of his treats him. I just lean back against him a little, and watch to see how Lindsay reacts.

At first she seems stunned, then she flushes a little and gets that pursed mouth WASP thing happening. Guess what, Linds? Grew up with that look; my Mom owns the copyright. If she doesn’t intimidate me with it anymore, it sure as Hell won’t work for you.

“Justin, I know you mean well, but …”

Like we couldn’t see that “but” coming.

“One of the things we’re concerned about is that Gus might become even more attached to you, and then …”

As Brian tenses beside me, I say silkily, “And then what, Linds?”

“Well …” she looks from me to Brian, and although she’s speaking to me her eyes are on him when she says, “You’ll be going back to New York soon.”

I swear to God it’s like she wants to watch those words go home, wants to see the pain she thinks they’ll cause him. So she’s kinda thrown for a loop when I laugh.

“What makes you think that?” I ask.

She looks at me then, alright, her eyes bulging a little.

“Well, of course you are! You have to!”

I just grin at her as Brian’s arms snake around my waist.

“The program’s not over yet!” she protests. “You can’t just bail, Justin. You’ve signed a contract.”

“He signed shit!” Brian cuts in. “He bailed on that asshole of a fucking program as soon as he got a look at their shitty contract.”

He’s right there. The “wonderful, once in a lifetime's opportunity” New Artists' program I'd put my future with Brian on hold to participate in turned out to be, as far as I could see, a major scam. If I’d signed, they would have held the rights to anything I’d created during the time I was with them. If they’d sold anything of mine, I would have received an “honorarium” of “up to” 25%.

Fuck that!

The only good thing about that fucking bullshit rip off exercise happened the first night. Because I was a last minute addition, I only arrived just in time for the introductory soirée - a total wanna be affair where they parade their new captives in front of some people who might conceivably be interested in buying the stuff they screw out of their “participants”.
I’d just walked into the damned thing, after some incredible amount of time spent listing to some dickhead telling me that we’d “catch up with the paperwork in the morning” when I nearly crashed into Kellie McQuaid, the woman from Eyekonics who’d liked my “orange is the new blue” idea.

She did one of those “do I know you?” things, and since if there’s one thing I learned from my time in LA it’s that you if you behave like you’re nobody that’s how you’ll get treated, I introduced myself. She eventually remembered me, but hadn’t put my face together with the newspaper stuff, which she’d seen and been interested in. She did now, and was really nice about it, joking that if she’d known that she’d had a budding genius working on her account, she would have been willing to pay Vance almost as much as his first quote for that campaign. Then she introduced me to her husband who is some sort of dealer, specializing in buying work by young artists cheaply and then selling them on later when they make a name for themselves. He’d actually bought one of my things from the Bloom gallery exhibition.

Both of them seemed surprised to see me there. They gave me the impression that they thought I was kinda beyond this type of program, and ... something else, like there was something I should know about the program itself. I said I hadn’t officially signed up yet, and they both acted relieved. Peter, the husband, gave me his card and said I should call him in the morning, that he could maybe introduce me to an agent I should talk to before I signed anything.

That made me wonder about exactly what I would be signing on for with this program, so I’d gone through the contract (which had only been given to me when I arrived) with a fucking fine tooth comb when I got back to my room, and in the morning I called Brian to discuss it with him. He agreed that it sounded like a rip off and said I should stall on signing until I’d at least spoken to Peter and maybe this agent.

Long story short, I’d bailed on the program and signed with the agent. She is a total shark, always on my case about producing more work, and being seen more and all sorts of shit, but she’s also really good. Among other things she found me part time work at a small gallery, doing cleaning and other grunt work in return for studio space (which it turned out was a great deal - certainly a hell of a lot cheaper than paying for the space).

She also struck a deal with them that they got first refusal on anything I created, at a mutually agreed price. If they didn’t want it, or didn’t agree with the price I wanted and I could sell elsewhere at a higher price than they were prepared to offer then that was fine. So they hung an occasional painting for me and I sold a few things, more than I expected; enough with my Rage money to support myself.

I worked; I learned a lot about the business end; I created some things that I didn’t hate; and by the time I left, I’d started in a really small way to get known, so I guess it was all worth it. But mainly I just missed Brian.

Which is why I am home now, and I can bask in the warmth in his eyes, and the quirk of his lips when he looks at me, and the feel of his arms around my waist right now. So I just smile at Lindsay and say, “Never got hooked into that shitty program, Linds. I’ve been working independently, and I can do that as well here as there.”

I can do it better, in fact, since my main inspiration is here, but I’m not full of glib bullshit like Ethan, so I’m not going to say that out loud, not even to Brian.

“But Justin …” she sounds almost desperate to convince me that my future is in New York, which totally pisses me off and makes me wonder about a lot of the advice she and Mel have given me over the years. But this isn’t about me, so I don’t let her derail the discussion.
“Linds … stop worrying about my life, which is working out just fine, thank you. It’s yours that we need to discuss. Or at least Gus’s.

*****

Brian

Linds looks like someone just killed and skinned her pet rabbit. Someday I might have to have a little talk with her about just why she’s so invested in Justin playing artiste in New York. But not today.

Justin’s right. Today is about Gus, about us needing to find out just what the fuck has been going on up in Toronto so we can best work out how to deal with it; and as the pit bull is at Lindsay’s throat, all I have to do is sit back and watch. Most people would find it totally un-fucking-believable but in this scenario, I’m the good cop. I just don’t know if Linds has figured that out yet.

By the time he’s finished with her though, she probably gets it - finally. Because despite her best efforts to dodge and evade and cry her way out of it, he keeps at her till it all comes out: the fact that she and the bitch queen actually fucking split up not long after they arrived in Toronto; that Mel got so abusive and unreasonable (one minute insisting that they didn’t need any money from “that fucking asshole”, and the next demanding Lindsay ask me to send more) while they both struggled to find work that Linds eventually moved out on her; that for the last couple of months Linds and Gus have been living in some bullshit shelter because Mel got so out of control over the break up that she kept coming round screaming and banging on the door and trying to break in to the shitty little apartment Lindsay had managed to find; that Mel has now apparently moved in with some dyke lawyer she met while she was trolling round trying to get work and that the cunt was threatening to take Gus away from his mother because Lindsay couldn’t offer him a proper home - which apparently Mel now could do courtesy of her new fucking bitch lover.

And that Mel has told Linds that she could move back to the States anytime she liked but that Mel wouldn’t let her bring Gus back.

Except, of course, that she has.

Fuck!

I’m about to call Ted to tell him to pull out all the stops in finding a fucking lawyer for Lindsay before she winds up on some sort of Federal kidnap charge when a text comes through on my cell. He’s not only found her an attorney, he’s got her an appointment for this afternoon.

That’s good in one way, bad in another. Our separate appointments overlap, so though I’d wanted Justin to come with me, he has to stay and look after Gus.

He promises to be careful, not to answer any calls except from me, and not to let anyone into the suite. And I head off to meet with my very straight female lawyer.

We discuss everything that’s happened. She asks me over and over if I’d known what Linds was planning. Finally I lose it and tell her that I’d not only not known, I’d fucking paid for tickets for the she-bitch and her spawn to come down to Pittsburgh on my dollar, including hotel expenses.

At that she sits back with what might on anyone less prissy look like a smile.

“Excellent! I would strongly recommend, Mr. Kinney, that you do not under any circumstances cancel those arrangements.
I give her a look and her smile widens.

“Since you advised your office staff to refer any callers to me, I’ve already been contacted by lawyers representing Ms. Marcus. She is claiming that you conspired with Ms. Petersen to bring Gus to Pittsburgh without her knowledge. Your booking the flight and hotel accommodation for both her and her child refutes your knowledge or participation in any such plan.”

I shift uncomfortably. I suspect that Linds could be in a shit load of trouble and I don’t want to make that worse. But fuck it! Whatever games she and Mel have been playing have nothing to do with me and she’s been keeping me in the fucking dark about them for months. I can’t let their bullshit affect my relationship with Gus. If I have to choose between Gus and Lindsay, there isn’t really any fucking choice. So I spill that I have all the emails to and from Lindsay in which we organized the trip - including my repeated offers to pick up the tab for Mel and JR and Lindsay’s fudging on whether or not they would be coming down.

This time there’s a definite smile - which really does make her look like a fucking shark, no wonder lawyers have got that reputation - and she asks me to provide her with copies.

We’d already gone over the history of my parental rights - when I signed them over and why - when I first met with her, so this time we stick to what this whole mess will mean to my attempts to gain guaranteed access rights to Gus. She asks me if Linds and Mel went through a legal marriage ceremony in Toronto. From what Lindsay said today, I’m assuming not, but I promise to find out. She says that she can do that more reliably. It’s a not so subtle reminder that I shouldn’t be believing everything - or anything - Lindsay tells me. She asks when they went through the formal adoption process here. I don’t know. She looks puzzled at that, and says that, parental rights papers notwithstanding, I should have received a notice from the court about the adoption hearing. Again, she says that she’ll check it out.

She tells me that since Lindsay and Mel do not have anything close to permanent residence status in Canada, let alone citizenship, the Canadian courts will most probably be more than happy to resign any custody case hearing to the US courts, especially if the Munchers haven’t legally married while they’ve been in Canada.

Then she asks me the killer question: whether, given the break up of the Munchers’ relationship, I want to go for custody as Gus’s primary care giver.

Once the answer to that would have been laughably easy; fuck! once I wouldn’t have been here at all. But now the answer isn’t easy at all. Not, as most people would probably think, because I’m afraid to take on that commitment. Hell! in some ways Justin and I are the most able to provide a stable home for Gus. (And isn’t that a fucked up thought?) So part of me wants to say ‘yes’; yes, let those two cunts learn what it’s like to have to deal with a gatekeeper before being able to spend time with Gus; and if they think Mel’s tough, they are completely kidding themselves; they’ve yet to really meet tough - it comes in a small blond package that looks all sunshine and light but has more sharp edges than a food grater and is more immovable that the fucking Rockies.

But it’s not about me, and I can’t get caught up in playing games about this. It’s about Gus and what’s best for him. Lindsay has been the one constant in his life since he was born, and I can’t just snatch that away from him to suit my own fucked up agenda.

I explain that as best I can. It’s fucking hard to talk about this shit. My throat is as tight as a virgin’s ass, and for some reason I find some fucked up part of my brain wishing Justin was here.

For one instant I think I see a gleam of something almost like sympathy - even approval - in the eyes of the shark, but then she’s back to her normal waspish self - reminding me to have no contact
with Melanie, and to insist that all communication go through her. And not to spill any details of what we’ve discussed to Lindsay either. Says that if, after further consideration, she believes there’s any advantage in Linds and I mounting a joint case she will arrange a meeting with Lindsay’s attorney.

I can hear the cash register ka-chinking in the background, but who gives a fuck about the money, as long as we sort out something that will ensure that no matter what fucked up hoops the Munchers jump through, Gus will always know that he has Justin and I to fall back on, that we can always be there for him.

That’s what really scares me - not just that I might lose all contact with Gus, but that he might need me, and not be able to find me. He’s only a fucking little kid, he has no way to fight for the right to see his father or his Dus when he wants to. I have to do that for him; I have to fight for his rights.

And I will.

No matter what it takes.

*****
Gus spends some time with Daddy and Dus.

Justin

Brian looks wiped out by the time he gets back from his appointment with the attorney. Linds is not back yet, still with her lawyer, I guess, so when Brian arrives Gus and I are playing a sort of version of that game where you have to draw the clues. He comes up with a word, and I have to draw it, then I give him a word and he does a drawing.

I don’t think he’ll have much career as an artist, but his vocabulary surprises me. He seems to have grown up all of a sudden. We’re laughing over my efforts to draw “because” when Brian walks in.

Gus jumps up and runs to him, clutching all his drawings. Brian sits down and while I call room service for some decent coffee and some fresh milk for Gus, Gus is pressed up against his father asking him what he thinks all the drawings are. Brian looks so exhausted I wonder if I should try to distract Gus, but even as I watch, something in Brian seems to relax, and by the time the coffee arrives, he and Gus are giggling together over Brian’s identification of a bus (a Gus drawing which might not be great on perspective, but is definitely a rectangular shape with wheels) as a horse, and another of a dog (definitely four legs and a tail) as a seagull.

“Don’t be silly, Daddy!” Gus says, laughing and laughing, his mini-Brian face joyful and full of life and love for his father; while gradually Brian’s face relaxes and reflects the same joy, the shared love.

When Lindsay finally gets back she seems really upset and of course wants to talk the whole thing to death (and of course have Brian magically fix everything that she and Mel have spent months, maybe years fucking up in a matter of hours). But fuck that! The whole point of inviting her down
was to give Brian a chance to spend time with Gus. It’s supposed to be something he enjoys, not something he suffers through.

So I suggest that we could take Gus for a few hours, give him dinner and then bring him back to the hotel and watch him while she catches up with her old friends. She’s reluctant at first, but Gus is wildly excited by the idea, and I guess she doesn’t have the energy to deal with him so she eventually agrees. Guess she’s not all that happy with me about it but tough shit.

She can make some other muncher’s ears bleed with the tale of how Mel has done her wrong, while Gus gets to spend some guy time with us.

*****

Brian

He’s fucking brilliant and deserves some kind of medal for getting us out of there before there was actual bloodshed. Or at least before I lost it completely and tore into Lindsay in a way that would have fucking destroyed any hope there might be of us working together to sort out the situation with Gus.

But thanks to him, we can make a getaway. We hit the road as soon as we’ve got Gus’ stuff down to the car. We’re on our way back to the loft when a voice from the back seat pipes up, “Diner, Daddy.”

Justin turns around to him. “You want to go to the diner, Gus?”

“Yeah!” He bounces excitedly. “Let’s go to the diner.”

Justin’s got this look on his face like he’s about to go all dykey over how cute it is that Gus remembers the diner. I’m not thrilled, but hell! why not? It’s still early, not much after five, so no one we know will be there. Except Deb, may be.

Deb.

That gets me back to what I’ve been trying not to think about all afternoon, ever since Linds finally spilled her guts about what’s been going on north of the border.

I wonder just how much Mikey and Deb know about that.

*****

Justin

Gus is a bit shy at first which isn’t surprising because Deb goes nuts when she sees him, and that’s enough to scare anyone. But by the time she’s sat him down with a hot dog and a milk shake - totally ignoring Brian’s order of juice and a sandwich, he’s more than happy to be fawned over and told how much he’s grown and all that shit.

At least she waits until he’s eating before she says to Brian, “So where’s my grand daughter? Where are the girls?”

Something in Brian’s face relaxes then, and I realize that he’d thought she must have known. He just shakes his head and says, “Sorry, Deb. Mel didn’t come down this trip.”

She pouts and goes off on one of her rants (sheesh, no guessing where Mikey gets his whiney-gene
from) but Brian shuts her up by saying simply, “We paid her flight and even booked her into the
fucking hotel, Deb, but short of kidnap, we can’t fucking force her to come down here.”

She sighs. And then starts on about how Mel isn’t even taking her calls, and Michael won’t tell her
what’s going on, but she knows there’s something and all she wants is to see her little JR and all
that. Gus looks up at one point, as if he’s going to say something, but then he seems to change his
mind and goes back to drinking his milkshake and Debbie, thank God, at last goes back to work.

I have a burger with Gus, and Brian steals some of my fries, but that’s all he eats. I know he’s
upset - not just about whatever’s going on with Mel and Linds and that whole mess, but about the
way that his family has disintegrated around him. But just when I’m trying to work out what I
could possibly say to cheer him up I hear a squeal behind me and although Brian’s trying for his
best ‘what have I done to deserve this’ look, his eyes have suddenly lightened, lost that deep peaty
look they get when he’s not happy. I squish over and Emmett slides in beside me.

He gushes for a few moments over Gus - how much like Brian he is, how much he’s grown. When
I prompt Gus to say “hello” he gives Emmett a shy smile and then says, “I remember you. You
used to live with us.”

Emmett beams all over his face and I realize then that Gus has the same gift that Brian has for
making people feel special without even really trying.

Emmett doesn’t ask about Linds or Mel which I guess means that he must already have spoken to
Ted. But he does say kind of pointedly that he’s really glad that Gus is back in Pittsburgh, and that
he must be looking forward to spending time with his Daddy. Brian gives him a look, and then a
nod and a ghost of a smile while Gus nods emphatically and then says, “And my Dus.”

“Oh, that’s so cute,” Emmett says. “He still can’t say your name properly.”

*****

Brian

Fucking Emmett. Things had been okay up till then. Both of them were happy and I was starting to
unwind after the whole shitty day. But as soon as Emmett opens his mouth, they both look upset.
Justin is kind of mortified that Gus can’t pronounce his name properly, and Gus … Gus looks
almost as if he’s ready to cry; his face is red and he’s obviously close to a full on hissy fit.

I give Emmett a patented Kinney death glare, but before I can say anything, Gus bursts out, “I can
too say his name. He’s my Dus.”

Something in the way he says it strikes me, and I put my hand over his on the table. “Of course he
is, Sonnyboy,” I say quietly.

A few tears trickle down his little face then, and I put my arm around him. It’s easy to forget that
this must be a fucking nightmare for him too, and he’s been coping with it pretty well, all things
considered. I hug him gently and then reach for a napkin and wipe his face.

“There’s nothing to cry about, Gus,” Justin says, reaching across the table to pet his hair.
“Honestly. I’m happy to be your Dus if that’s what you want to call me.”

“You are my Dus,” Gus insists insists in a wail, frustration in his voice as if we’re just not getting
it. "You are, you are!"

Fuck me!
“Gus,” I say, hugging him a little tighter to calm him down, hoping that I **have** got it, that I’m not about to screw up big time. “What’s my name?”

He gives a gulp and looks puzzled. “Daddy,” he says, his voice shaking.

“No. That’s what **you** call me. Only you,” He looks happier when I say that, so I keep going, “Just like I call you ‘Sonnyboy’. But what’s my name?”

He smiles then, and tilting his head a little to the side, whispers shyly, “Brian. Brian Kinney.”

“That’s right,” I tell him. “And what’s Mommy’s name?”

“Lindsay Peterson,” he says, more confidently now.

“And what’s Dus’ name?”

“Jus’in Taylor.”

He stumbles a little over the ‘st’ in Justin, but it’s clear enough.

Of course he can say Justin’s name. He just doesn’t call him ‘Justin’ any more than he calls me ‘Brian’.

Because to Gus, Justin is his ‘Dus’. Just like I’m his ‘Daddy’.

I look across the table at “Dus” to see if he’s got it now. Judging by the way his eyes are swimming I’m pretty sure he’s finally got the fucking message.

Poor Sonnyboy. Dealing with all these stupid fucking adults who are too thick to see what’s right under their noses. Linds and Mel lived together, and they’re Mommy and Momma. I’ve been with Justin just about all of Gus’ life, and as far as he’s concerned, we’re Daddy and Dus.

“Oh, my God!” Emmett says, eyes fluttering and hands clapped to his mouth like Joan Crawford in full flight. He looks as if he’s going to cry as well. I have visions of being trapped in the fucking diner of all places with three weeping divas - or else getting washed out the door on a flood of tears, like fucking *Alice in Wonderland*.

So I do my best to stem the fucking tide, starting with the one who at least has some excuse to be on the verge of a meltdown. I pat Gus on the head and hand him a couple of fries of Dus’ plate.

“That’s right, Sonnyboy,” I tell him. “Justin is your Dus. And if anyone tries to tell you different you tell them your Dad said so, so it must be true.”

The eldest drama queen heaves a big emotion-filled sigh and stands up - after giving little Sunshine a huge fucking hug of course.

“You three will want to talk,” he says, “So I’ll just leave you alone to get on with it.”

Then he fucking tries to hug me. Stupid faggot. I stand up to try to fend him off, but while he’s got his arms all tangled around me, he whispers, “I never thought I’d say this, but God I wish my Daddy had been just like you.”

Then he fucking walks out and leaves me to try to disguise the fact that my eyes are suddenly running. Must be the fucking crap they put on the fries in this place - or else just the fumes from all that damned grease. It’s time we got out of here.
It’s nearly dark by the time we leave the diner, so we decide to just go back to the hotel. First though, I get Brian to make a stop so we can rent a couple of Gus-friendly DVDs. We take him into the store with us and let him choose. He picks *Peter Pan* and *The Wiggles*.

Brian starts off trying to pull a whole lot of bullshit about persuading Gus to choose “something more butch”, but then I take myself out of the way, checking out some new animation stuff, and when I turn back, he’s squatting down next to Gus solemnly helping him choose which *Wiggles* DVD he wants.

He’s such a fraud. And while in a way that’s kind of hilarious, it’s also really sad that he’s almost ashamed to be seen being such a good Dad. Because it’s pretty much not that he’s still worried about his “stud” image. That’s not the fucking problem. The problem is that so many people have spent so much time dissing him as a father, that he doesn’t have a clue how good at it he is when they’re not around undermining him. So he’s embarrassed to be seen trying in case he isn’t getting it right.

I listen to his conversation with Gus, and, aside from the fact that it’s so damned cute that if I recorded it and played it back to Brian he’d probably want to puke, it’s also like an object lesson in how to treat your kid with respect and encourage him to be able to make good decisions for himself. In the background I can hear some woman snapping at her kids to “just pick something for God’s sake!”; but Brian is letting Gus take all the time he needs to choose properly. Brian reads all the cover notes out loud to him, and they talk about which ones Gus has seen before, and what he liked best about them, and use that to work out what he’d like to get this time. Brian is respectful of Gus’ opinions, and doesn’t talk down to him or belittle him, just encourages him to think about what he likes and what he doesn’t and to make the decision based on that.
Gus looks really happy and proud that his Daddy is giving him so much responsibility and trusting him to get it right. I hear him tell Brian that Mommy got him one once because she liked the cover, but it wasn’t very good.

Which pretty much says it all, it really does.

We get back to the hotel, and Gus has a bath and then we all settle down with a hot drink - coffee for us, milk for Gus, and watch the Wiggles DVD. At least, we all pretend to. Gus is fighting hard not to fall asleep, and I suspect he does for a while. Brian sits and watches and does his best to keep his attention on his son, if not on the show, but I can tell that he’s starting to brood about all the shit that’s gone on today. Guess that’s not surprising. And I pretty much just watch them and wish I had a sketch book.

We’ve just tucked Gus into bed where he goes straight to sleep (after a promise that we’ll come see him again tomorrow) when Lindsay gets back. She’s more than a little tipsy, so it doesn’t take a lot to persuade her that she needs an early night as well. And then, thank God, we can get out of there and go home.

Brian slides open the door of the loft and then makes straight for the bedroom, pulling off his jacket on the way, and tearing at his tie.

I head for the freezer and take out one of Em’s dishes. It’s a Moroccan-style vegetable terrine - slightly spicy and just big enough to make a light meal for the two of us, because of course Brian barely ate anything at the diner. I turn on the microwave and have just pulled a couple of beers out the fridge when Brian comes down, looking like he might finally be ready to start to relax. He’s pulled on an old pair of jeans, and his bare feet slap softly against the hardwood floors as he comes towards me, tugging a t-shirt down over his chest.

I feel my lips tingle, almost as if they already taste his sweat and cum, and then I’m moving towards him, the beers spilling from my hands to clatter and roll on the tiled floor. By some miracle, they don’t break, but I don’t even think of that right then. I’m just thinking of him. No. No, I’m not thinking at all. I’m just reacting again to the sight of him right in front of me after all these months apart - so lean and beautiful and …

Brian; want Brian; want Brian now.

Before the edge of the t-shirt can cover the hairs at the top of his happy trail, I’m grabbing it, tugging it from his hands and pushing it back up his chest.

My tongue snakes out and swipes at one nipple but before he can even react to that, I move my head and my teeth clamp on the other, nipping hard. Suddenly I want to mark him, to claim him. It’s not about who fucks who, but it sure as hell is about the fact that he’s mine. He’s fucking mine.

I grab his fly and jerk it open. The buttons pop from the holes with satisfying ease and for the first time I look up into his face.

For a moment he looks - I don’t know - amused, or some shit, then suddenly he seems to catch my mood and his hands grab my head and hold it in place while he crushes his mouth against mine.

This isn’t a kiss. Kisses are sweet, gentle; sensual at least. This is just some sort of brute force expressed with lips and teeth. I bite back at him and he pulls back a little. For a long moment I stand staring up into his eyes. I can feel my cock swell and harden to the point where it’s almost painful inside my jeans and I grind it into him, into his groin. My breath is heaving and everything
except my need for him is fuzzy and unreal to me.

*****

Brian

One minute he’s doing his almost perfect impersonation of a sweet little domesticated house fag; the next …

He’s rutting against me like a fucking stag and panting into my face.

And it’s so fucking hot that I want to ravish him on the spot. That thought fuels the heat and any idea I might have had of getting to the bed vanishes. I grab him, holding his head in one hand, and wrapping the other arm tight round him, just under his armpit, lifting him a little, so that when I hook his foot out from under him with one of mine, I can control our fall - at least a little.

It’s not like in the books or the movies. We don’t sink gently to the ground; we thump down hard. Him on his ass, me on my knees - and somewhere I’m aware that I’ll pay for that tomorrow. I push him back, my hand on the back of his head making sure that he doesn’t bang it on the floor, but once he’s down, I let him worry about that and use both hands to drag off his pants.

Fucking zips! When is he going to fucking learn that button flies take far less fucking time?

He’s dragging at my fucking shirt again. It will be stretched as hell and …

Then his teeth are back to savaging my fucking nipple and I forget about the shirt and lean down and force my mouth against his again. His pants are finally off thank God and I start lifting his legs, but he fucking struggles, “No! No!” he pants, and twists out from under me, to get up on all fours.

He practically shoves his ass in my face and I take time to land one hard slap on that perfect rump, where a satisfyingly red handprint flares immediately.

He yelps but then he’s shoving a condom at me, and making these mewling noises of frustration while I pause long enough to get it on. When I start pushing into him, the mewls grow louder while I push through the first burn of resistance, but any thought I might have had of slowing things down goes out the window when he reaches back and sinks his nails into the back of my thigh, trying to force me to thrust harder.

Fine.

I move his other hand out from under him, forcing him down onto his face, only his ass arched high against my groin and I thrust all the way in.

He grunts as his face slaps a little against the floor, then pushes back at me, his nails still clawing at me.

As I fuck him, deep and hard, I feel hyper-aware, like I’ve taken something. I can feel the heat of his ass against my thigh, smell his sweat and arousal and my own, I’m aware of the hairs on his forearm brushing my body as he still grips my thigh with those fucking strong fingers. I lean forward and feel a bead of sweat drop from my chest to land on his back. I lean further forward, thrusting into him even harder now, angling for just the right spot, that place that will cause him to lose it completely. I feel his ass clamp harder on my cock and hear his breathing change and know I’ve found it. I push in hard and fast, a series of short jabs on the same spot and he rewards me with a harsh little barking noise every time I push against it. These get deeper and deeper in pitch, as if
they’re being dragged up from the very depths of him, and then he’s bucking against me, shuddering all over, and I reach under him and feel the hot splash of cum against my fingers.

My mouth closes on his shoulder and I bite down hard.

Then my own orgasm rolls through me, hot and almost unbearably intense. By the time it ends, my arms and legs feel like fucking jelly. I have to fight not to just collapse down on top of him. I struggle to pull out without hurting him and try to roll aside, but our legs seem tangled together somehow and I can hardly control my limbs enough to do it.

Fuck!

Fuck!

Fuck!

No one can do it to me like he does.

No one.

No one ever has.

*****

Justin

I guess I just about black out for a moment or two, or at least kind of white out. Everything’s just a haze, while I try to suck in oxygen and get it flowing through my blood to all the parts of my body that missed out on it for a while. What finally jerks me back to reality is when Brian kneels on the back of my leg while he’s trying to get off me.

“Ow!” I complain, kicking vaguely at him with my other foot and trying to get my arms under me so I can dislodge him. He might look skinny enough, but he’s fucking heavy.

He grunts and awkwardly rolls off me, then gives this weird kind of groan as he straightens out his legs.

“You fucking broke my dick!” he moans, tossing the used condom aside somewhere. I guess he expects that I’ll tidy that up later. Fat chance.

“You bit me!” I tell him, gingerly feeling the dint in my shoulder with my left hand. I inspect my fingers, but there’s no trace of blood so I guess he’s off the hook for that at least.

“Well, you fucking clawed my thigh to shreds.”

I snort, but then rolling painfully onto my back I bring my right hand up to brush the hair out of my eyes and catch the trace of red under one finger nail.

I stare at it for a moment, mesmerized, then I’m moving, trying to get Brian to roll onto his side so I can see what I’ve done.

He resists of course. Asshole!

“Brian I scratched you!” I tell him, still trying to get him to move.

“I know you did, Sunshine,” he tells me, a smug little grin surfacing near the corner of his mouth,
and any desire to play nursie is lost as the haze of sated lust washes over me again.

I give up and lie back.

“That was hot,” I comment lamely.

He gives a soft snort of laughter. “What did you score on your fucking verbals? That’s like saying that the fucking North Pole is a little chilly.” He reaches out a finger to rub it over the back of my wrist. “That wasn’t hot, Sunshine, that was incendiary.”

“Braggart!” I challenge him.

There’s another soft laugh. “It takes two,” he says.

And people think he isn’t romantic.

There’s silence for a moment while we both just lie there on the hard floor. My knees hurt - they’re going to be sore tomorrow; my asshole is stinging and the bite mark on my shoulder is sort of hot and maybe throbbing a little; my lips feel sore and swollen - I bet they’re bruised, and they’re going to be all puffy in the morning. I hate that look. And I bet I’ve got bruises on my hips from where his fingers were digging into me.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt so totally and utterly fucking contented in my entire life.

Then he groans and starts hauling himself to his feet, and I figure that at least if my knees are sore his are probably going to be worse. I mean, there have to be some advantages in being twelve years younger. So I try to bounce up, just to rub it in. But there seems to be something wrong with my bouncing mechanism, because the best I can do is a sort of weak-assed stumble.

He gives me a look and then laughs.

“What?” I demand.

“You look like you’ve been stung by a whole fucking hive of bees,” he says.

Have I mentioned he’s an asshole?

*****

Brian

He’s a fucking mess. His lips are so swollen they look bee-stung; he’s limping a little, and he keeps feeling at his shoulder where he claims I bit him. I’m guessing I’m not much better off. But we make it to the bathroom somehow. I’m trying not to limp, but fuck my knees hurt. Too much more of this and I could seriously consider getting carpet for at least some of the rooms at the new place. Or at least a big thick rug for in front of the fireplace.

As we shower, he’s wincing a little too much for my taste even though we’re only touching gently, just soaping each other and rinsing each other off; so, despite his protests, once we get out and dry off I bend him over and check him out. His asshole looks slightly red and puffy, but there’s no sign of bleeding and it doesn’t look like anything’s torn, so I just get some anti-inflammatory cream and ease it into him. Then because he’s still rubbing at his shoulder, I check out the bite mark. I’m a little shocked by it to be honest. I didn’t break the skin, but you can definitely see the tooth marks. I’m normally more careful than that. There’s some antiseptic cream in the medicine cabinet so I use that just to be on the safe side.
But then he demands that I let him check out what he’s done to my thigh. It is kinda sore, so after one attempt to push him away and look after it myself, I let him do his thing.

“Fuck, Brian!” he says. “I really have scratched you. I drew blood.”

“I fucking told you that,” I remind him. “You clawed me.”

He tuts and fusses and puts on some of the cream. He wants to find a fucking plaster but I tell him to forget it. It’s not that bad. I’ll fucking live. Well, unless he had paint under his nails like he usually does, and in that case he’s probably already given me lead poisoning or some shit and my leg will drop off, but it’s too late to worry about that now.

He’s less than impressed when I point that out to him and I’m sure I catch some sort of mumble about “drama queens” as he heads out to the kitchen, splashes from his still-wet hair soaking the neck and shoulders of his silk robe. I pull my own robe on but take some time to at least towel my hair dry enough not to drip all over it.

By the time I get there, the microwave is buzzing softly, there are two fresh beers on the counter and he’s swearing softly trying to clean up the results of opening one of the bottles he’d dropped earlier which have been distributed all over the walls, the counter and the door of the fridge. The wet patches on the silk have expanded now to cover most of the front of his robe.

I take the roll of paper towels out of his hand and steer him towards the bedroom. He comes back wearing a pair of sweats that should have been trashed years ago and a fuck-ugly long-sleeved tee. I have no idea how I managed to wind up living with the only fag in Pittsburgh who lacks even the most limited pretensions towards any fucking clothes sense.

*****

Justin

Still pissed about the way the whole fucking bottle of beer had erupted all over everything, I drop the robe on the floor of the bathroom, take a few moments to wipe myself clean of the smell of beer, and just grab the first clothes I can find that look comfortable. Then I go back, pick the robe up and put it in the clothes hamper. If he makes one more comment about how I don’t look after decent clothes I’ll kill him. The fucking label queen out there sneers if I wear stuff that’s comfortable and old so it doesn’t matter how I treat it, but has a hissy fit if anything decent gets even a tiny mark or a crease.

By the time I get back, he’s put the beers back in the fridge and taken out a bottle of Chablis. Wine is usually a sign that he’s ready to talk, and I guess that after today there’s a lot to talk about. So even though part of me just wants to lie in his arms and wallow in the afterglow of one of our most stellar fucks ever, I try to get my head back above my navel so that I’ll be ready when the talking starts. For a while though, we just go on with getting dinner in comfortable, sated, silence. I quickly toss a salad, he uncorks the wine; while I serve the food, he sets the table.

It’s not until we’re settled with our food, and softly frosted glasses of the chilled wine that he sighs, and says, “Lindsay’s created a huge fucking mess.”
Preparations for Battle

Chapter Summary

Brian and Justin deal with the legal implications of the situation with Gus.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Slowly we go through everything the lawyer said to him, and what he’d told her about Lindsay and the games she’s been playing - not telling us about the split with Mel, or that Mel had pretty much forbidden her to bring Gus back home. He also says that his lawyer thinks that maybe they never did go through with Mel’s formal adoption of Gus, and for some reason that pisses me off more than anything.

I mean, she’d made such a big deal out of it, out of how important it was that she be Gus’ legally recognized parent and she told everyone we know what an asshole Brian was for standing in the way of that happening. But then, once Brian had signed away his rights, she didn’t even fucking bother.

Which means it never was about her being recognized as Gus’ parent, it was just about excluding Brian. And that’s just fucked. It’s the sort of thing Michael would do and I can’t say worse about anyone.

Brian knows I’m pissed, but he just shrugs and says, “If she hasn’t, she’s done us a major favor.”

I bite my tongue, swallow down all the things I want to say, then sigh and nod.

“Ms. Hershell,” he says in that voice he uses whenever he talks about this woman lawyer I can’t wait to meet, “says that since I’ve been paying a shit-load of cash ever since Gus was born - including all the times they were separated and Mel contributed jack shit, that most judges will be inclined to recognize that I should have some sort of rights - at least to be able to see Gus.”
He sighs, and I know that whatever’s coming I’m not going to like it.

“She said that …”

He takes a breath and gulps down most of the glass of wine.

“… it might be supervised visits. At least at first.”

The next pause is a long one, like he really has to struggle to get the words out and when he does they’re filled with the bitter, self-mocking tone that I really hate; the one that tells me that he’s really hurting.

“Given my lifestyle,” he spits, half-choking.

Then he takes another deep breath.

“She warned me that I’m likely to hear a lot about how my fucking “lifestyle” makes me the last person anyone would fucking trust with a child.”

I feel my face flush; I’m so fucking mad I want to hit somebody. But Brian is going on …

“But if I want access to Gus, I just have to suck it up and work to prove that I’m a fit fucking father.”

I try to contain my own anger. There’s no point ranting about how totally un-fucking fair this is. Brian needs me to be smart, not just fly off the handle.

So I take a sip of my own wine, and then nod.

“Well, if we have to jump through some sort of hoops to make sure that we can be there to look after Gus, then that’s just what we’ll have to do.”

He’d been looking down into the bottom of his wine glass with that horrible sneering look twisting his beautiful mouth, but his head jerks up at that. His eyes meet mine for a long long moment and then something in him seems to relax and his mouth softens and he nods.

Then he takes a mouthful of food and I refill his glass and we go on with our meal.
Brian

So yet again he manages to totally blow me away. I could see his face getting red, read the angry belligerence in the way his shoulders hunched, and his jaw clenched. But he didn’t let it spill, didn’t feed my anger with his own.

He just cut to the chase and reminded me what all this fucking circus is about. It’s not about me, or Sunshine, or what we want, or what we think is fair. It’s about Gus. It’s about him needing someone who is just on his side. Someone who’s prepared to fight for what he wants, what he needs.

So, after I eat a few bites of my meal to keep the food warden across the table happy, I take another sip of wine.

“She’s going to get an interim restraining order to prevent Gus from being taken out of the state, and she’s filing for my parental rights to be restored.”

He stares at me.

I shrug.

“Lindsay’s a mess,” I tell him. “Do you want to bet that if Mel talks to her she just won’t pack up and take Gus back to fucking Toronto?”

He looks really horrified for a moment. Then he shakes his head. But he’s not disagreeing with me; he’s just trying to get his head around what a total fucking idiot the mother of my child is.
“So what else do we need to do?” he asks.

“She wants to meet you,” I tell him. “She seems to think that having a fucking “stable relationship” must mean something.”

He gives me a look that lets me know that, like always, he’s onto me.

Much as it goes against the fucking grain to admit it, we do have the closest thing to a stable relationship in Gus’ world. We’ve been together four years now, even if you count it from when he came back after the fiddler.

But that’s enough of this shit. It’s all in the hands of the professionals now, and all we can do is wait and take their advice, and hope that they’re worth the shit loads of money they get paid.

I take another bite or two, actually enjoying the food. At the back of my mind somewhere I’m amazed at how much I’m consuming. I think I’ve eaten more in the week or so that he’s been back than I did for months before that. I make a mental note that I’m due some time at the gym.

*****

Justin

It really kills me that you can bet that Mel is busy preparing some sort of case to argue about how Brian should never be allowed near “her” son because he’s some selfish, narcissistic asshole; and Lindsay will, if Mel pushes, probably just go along with that while she plays her pathetic games trying to both pacify Melanie (instead of telling her to take a short trip to Hell) and to keep Brian on a string. Which leaves Brian as the only one who is actually thinking of Gus. He’s the one trying to work out what’s best for Gus in all this mess, and push towards that.

Fuck, it makes me mad!

While we clear the table, I’m quiet, trying to work out what bombshells Melanie will be willing to throw. And what we can pitch back at her. Because she’s a long way from being some fucking snow white innocent, that’s for sure. And if she plays dirty, well, so can I. And I will. Even if it pisses Brian off.

I’m stacking the dishwasher, when the big one hits me. The card that Mel is most likely to play to argue why Brian shouldn’t be allowed any contact with his son.

I don’t know whether to mention my fears to Brian. Maybe he’s already mentioned this to the lawyer, and me bringing it up will do nothing but hurt him. But maybe he hasn’t, and if Mel drops it on us in the hearing about his parental rights without his lawyer being prepared …

He’s sitting at the computer when I go to look for him, at least pretending to work. I guess he has taken a lot of time out of the office this last week, with one thing and another. He probably does need to at least feel like he’s caught up with what’s been going on. I sit on the couch and wait for him to finish what he’s doing. I’m deep in thought, and I jump when he suddenly speaks.

“You’re too fucking quiet. I can just about hear the gerbils scurrying.”

I bite my lip for a moment, sitting looking across at him. After a moment, he swings round on his chair to face me with one eyebrow raised.

I take a deep breath, trying to get my thoughts together, trying to find a way to raise this that won’t bring all his fucking Kinney-centered self-doubts crashing down on him, destroying his confidence
in himself, and in the rightness of what he’s doing for Gus.

But there isn’t one.

There just isn’t.

I can only ask.

*****

Brian

“Have you told your lawyer about the thing with your nephew?”

For a moment, it’s almost as if I haven’t heard him, as if he’s talking some other language and the words just don’t make any fucking sense. There’s a sort of rush of white noise through my head, and the edges of everything around me become kind of blurry. Just for a moment.

Then pain comes crashing in like a tidal wave and I feel myself drowning in it.

I can’t look at him. Can’t be in the same room as him. Can’t be near anybody.

I’m on my feet, stumbling towards the door when he gets in my face.

“No!” he says, grabbing my arms. “No, Brian, don’t you fucking do this. Don’t do this to yourself.”

I try to take a breath, somehow surprised that my lungs are still working. His voice comes from a long way away, and my instinct is just to push him aside and somehow get past him, get away from him, from everything. I can’t fucking …

‘No!’ he says again, and this time his hands are on my face, forcing me to look at him. It’s fucking ridiculous. He’s half my size. If I wanted to I could just bull-doze past him. But somehow I don’t have the strength. It’s a struggle just to stand upright. All the strength there is in me is flowing from his hands. I finally give in to him and let him turn my head to meet his eyes.

For a long moment I fight against letting myself see his expression, try to find some protection from whatever’s there … pity, disgust, anger … it doesn’t matter … I don’t want it, won’t see it, won’t let it affect me. I can do that, at least. It’s like riding a bike … there are some lessons you learn that you just never forget.

But as usual he surprises me, he does the thing that I least expect. Without closing his eyes, keeping them fixed on mine, he wraps one hand round the back of my neck and drags me down to his kiss. It’s no gentle consolation either; it’s hard and fierce and demanding and somehow it pushes the pain back enough to allow me to start thinking again, not just reacting.

Once he realizes that I’m not going to run out of the loft like some hysterical little pussy, he lets me go and walks over to the counter to pick up the bottle of Beam. I watch him snatch up a couple of glasses and somehow find the strength to sink down onto the couch, just as he joins me. He hands me the glasses to hold while he pours a good measure into each of them. Then he sets down the bottle, and raises his glass.

“To us,” he says. “To you and I and Gus.”

Still finding it hard to look at him I stare off into the distance for a long moment.
“To us,” I finally manage. And swallow down the whole glass.

Wordlessly, he picks up the bottle, and holds it out. I take it and pour another, even larger, measure.

“I just think that she needs to know,” he says calmly, as if he hasn’t just single-handedly waged a one man battle against years of Kinney conditioning, which by some miracle he somehow seems to have won. “So she can be prepared. In case Mel …”

In case that cunt tells the court that I was once accused of sexually molesting my nephew. A kid not a lot older than Gus.

*****

Justin

I watch the shadows of pain pass like clouds across his eyes and wish there was something I could do to stop that, to prevent all that old hurt being stirred up for him. But I can’t. All I can do is try to keep him focused on what’s important right now. Which is Gus. And Gus’ right to have his father in his life.

For a long long time he sits there cradling his drink without saying anything, just staring off into space. Then suddenly he knocks back half the glass, stands up, drinks the rest and goes over to his computer. As I sit, trying to work out what I can do, what I can say, he types an email and sends it.

Then he comes back and pours another drink.

Well, hell! Why the fuck not? So I hold out my glass and after a moment’s pause he gives a soft laugh and tips the bottle so that what’s left in there spills down, splashing a little over the sides, over my fingers, although most of it makes its intended destination okay.

I start to lick at the spilled drops and all of a sudden he’s on his knees in front of me, his tongue replacing mine, snaking around my fingers then tracing a path to my palm. It’s warm and wet and incredibly sensual. I can feel my cock stirring, and when he starts sucking my thumb into his mouth, in and out, the tip of his tongue fluttering against the sensitive pad, I feel like I’m going to come in my pants like a fucking teenager.

I’m just about paralyzed with pure desire and can’t even make a move to get my pants undone. That doesn’t matter though, because he’s way ahead of me, and before I can even moan out the plea that’s gathering in my gut, his head is bowed over my cock, my thumb abandoned as his tongue starts a dance round the head and down across the ridges and veins, urging me to full arousal.

I would have thought that given our pre-dinner activities, it might take a while, but there’s magic in Brian’s mouth and right now there’s some kind of need driving him - I don’t know what - but I can’t find it in me to complain when the results are like this; this, that is maybe the most incredible blow job in a history that includes a lot of incredible blow jobs.

It’s over almost too soon, but as I am reaching for him to return the favor, he dodges, struggling to his feet.

“Bed!” he grunts out, and as he goes towards the steps, limping a little, I hear him mutter, “We are getting fucking rugs in this new fucking place.”

*****
Brian

He comes quicker than I would have thought; which is fine by me, because by half way in my fucking knees are killing me. They were already sore from our earlier efforts, and … shit! they hurt. But he comes and I can get up and head towards the fucking bedroom where we can fuck in comfort. I’m over this minimalist shit. There are going to be rugs in the new place. Great thick comfortable fucking rugs.

I’m hoping he’s right behind me. I trust him to be. I … I need him to be. I need to fuck him. I need to be buried deep in his tight beautiful ass and …

I have to remind myself that …

I need to remind myself who I am. I’m a faggot. I suck cock. I fuck asses. I even take it up the ass occasionally.

And anyone who doesn’t like that can …

They can go to Hell … where they’d all like to send me. And him. God, and him.

I need to remember all this, because it’s the only thing I’ll have to hold onto when they start to flay me alive over who I fuck and who I am and what I am.

I can’t even tell them to go fuck themselves, because …

It’s for Gus.

For Gus I have to go through this. If they tell me that I’ll never be able to be alone with my son because I’m some kind of pervert, then I’ll have to swallow and take it. If they tell me that I can only have “supervised” visits and all that shit, then that’s how it will have to be. Because I can’t walk away. I can’t say ‘fuck them to Hell’ and walk away because if I do, Gus will have no one. No one who puts him first.

Fuck!

If I’d known being a father was going to be like this, Gus would never have been born.

Maybe it’s as well I didn’t know.

Or maybe I should have. Maybe it would have been better if …

I can’t even tell any more.

But he’s here now.

And it’s up to me.

And Justin.

Thank God there’s Justin.

Because I couldn’t do this on my own. I just fucking couldn’t. I’d have fucked things up already if it wasn’t for him.

I hope he knows that, because there’s no way on earth I can tell him.
Justin

Brian doesn’t say much when we make it to the bed. No words, at least. But he’s all over me. Not just hot and urgent like it was before dinner - although that’s there too - but just … all over me. His tongue in my mouth, circling my ear, teasing my nipples; his hands on my ass and my cock and in my hair and … it’s like there are about five Brians and they’re all focused on giving me pleasure. It’s fucking incredible. I have never felt so overwhelmed by him. And that’s saying a lot. It really is.

All I can do is to respond and try to give him back at least a tiny bit of what he’s giving me.

Afterwards, after we’re both finally exhausted and the condoms have been disposed of, and we’ve cleaned up at least a little with the little towel we keep in the drawer, before I can turn towards him he curls into me instead, and I wrap my arms around him and just hold him.

I’m almost asleep when he says so softly it’s right on the edge of hearing, “Tell me I’m right to be doing this. Tell me I shouldn’t just walk away.” Then, even softer, “That Gus wouldn’t be better off without me.”

I hold him tighter, trying not to let my voice waver and tell him.

Brian

It’s only a little after fucking eight o’clock when the fucking phone rings. Who the fuck calls at this hour on a Saturday morning? Once I would have known it was Mikey. But those days are past, so my bet is on Lindsay. I’m less than my charming best when I growl a ‘what?’ into the receiver.

It’s not Lindsay. It’s my fucking attorney who puts on her most acidic voice and responds, “Good morning, Mr. Kinney. Did I disturb you?”

If they could capture that fucking voice they could use it to cut diamonds.

I run my hand through my hair and try to get my thoughts together. I guess she got my email. I didn’t think she’d see it till Monday, but I guess I’m not the only one who puts in office hours on the weekend.

She doesn’t wait for me to answer, just goes on, “I have some further information on your case, which I think we need to discuss. Can you and your partner meet me in my office some time this morning?”

I don’t fucking like the sound of this, but my attempts to get her to tell me what’s going on just get drowned in a wave of “I don’t think we can really discuss these matters on the phone”.

So I tell her we’ll be there at ten, and get to work waking Justin.

That boy is either the lightest sleeper on the planet, waking up as soon as I set so much as a toe outside the sheets, or he sleeps like the dead. There’s no half way with him.

Not in anything I guess.

I finally manage to get him up and moving, and into the shower, although if he thinks I’m really
going down on my fucking knees on those tiles to give him a morning blow job he is seriously delusional. His knees are younger than mine anyway.

*****

Justin

He’s doing his best to be Brian Fucking Kinney about the whole thing, but I can tell he’s really worried, so after I blow him, I head out to make coffee. If he has coffee he might survive. If he doesn’t, then he might blow and take all of us with him.

One cup and some toast and we just have time to get dressed before we have to head out.

If I’m honest, Brian’s not the only one who’s nervous.

Aside from being worried about what might be happening with Gus, I’m fucking shit scared of meeting this woman.

Brian acts like she’s a total shark, and she clearly makes even him think twice before he gets her annoyed. Walking down the hallway to her office after she buzzes us in, I have to stop myself clinging onto Brian’s hand like a little kid, but to my relief, he must feel the same because he reaches out and grabs hold of mine, so we walk into her office linked together.

She asks us to sit down and gives each of us a long look. Then she takes up a piece of paper on her desk and goes to say something. Before she can, Brian says suddenly, “So … you got my email?”

She looks a little surprised, and then says, “Yes. And I appreciate you letting me know. I called this morning and spoke to the police officer involved … er Detective Horvath. He confirmed what you told me and provided assurance that it was an entirely false and malicious accusation. He said that if necessary he would be prepared to testify to that in any court that might hear the issue.”

Beside me, I can feel some sort of shock wave go through Brian. Like he didn’t expect that anyone would believe him, or think that anyone would take his side. Well, except me, I hope.

She doesn’t seem to realize how affected he is by what she’s said, because she’s going on, “From what I can gather you would have very solid grounds to pursue a civil case against your nephew, or at least against your sister for the pain and psychological damage these allegations might have caused you.”

He looks completely dumbstruck by that, and just waves it off.

She tilts her head on one side and looks at him, really looks at him.

“Mr. Kinney, I’m sorry if you’ve been worried about that issue. Believe me, I would never have let it get as far as any judge.”

Brian is still side-swiped, but he clears his throat and says, “I thought that’s what you wanted to talk about.”

“Oh, no,” she says. “No. Not at all. But I do have news for you.”

At that she leans forward a little and smiles.

*****

Brian
It’s fucking scary. All of a sudden she’s smiling. I’m almost scared to hear what might have put a smile on that face. It can’t be good news for someone.

She takes a little breath and says almost happily, “I received the results of my inquiries into the status of Ms. Marcus and Ms. Petersen as far as their Canadian visas are concerned. It seems that they have each received at least two letters from the Canadian Immigration authorities which Ms. Marcus, at least, has chosen to ignore, advising them that they were on the verge of outstaying their temporary visas and that their applications for permanent residency would not even be considered unless they left the country and re-applied.

“In that event,” she pursed her lips and read from the paper, “they would face at least a twelve month waiting period before their application would be processed. In the most recent round of letters they were advised that their failure to leave the country immediately on receipt of the letter would have a deleterious effect on the outcome of any subsequent applications.”

She put the paper down and this time there is no mistaking the shark quality in her bared teeth smile.

“Even if Ms. Marcus had status as Gus’s parent, this puts Ms. Petersen’s actions in bringing Gus back to the States in a very different light, since in doing so she was complying with a directive from the Canadian government.”

I feel a deep sense of relief at those words. I don't think I was aware how worried I’d been about what legal nasties Lindsay might have stirred up by bringing Gus home without Mel’s agreement, in fact, against Mel’s stated wishes.

“In point of fact, however,” Ms. Hershell is going on, “it would seem that Ms. Marcus does not have any status as Gus’s parent.”

I can only sit and stare at her.

What the fuck does that mean?

*****

Justin

Brian looks even more dumbstruck, and I’m sure I do too.

What does that mean? Well, I guess it means she didn’t go ahead with the adoption. But there’s still the papers Brian signed. Don’t they mean something?

Ms. Hershell gives me a look for a moment and then fastens her eyes back on Brian’s face. For a moment, she’d looked really scary and I understood why she gives Brian the heebies a little bit, but now she’s really smiling.

“T’m delighted to tell you, Mr. Kinney, that since Ms. Marcus neither registered the agreement she asked you to sign with the courts, nor applied for formal adoption of Gus, we don’t have to petition to have your rights re-instated, since those rights were never legally terminated.”

It takes a moment to sink in, but almost before it has, I’m turning to Brian.

He’s sitting there staring at her. Just staring.

Then he puts his hand up to cover his lips, like he does sometimes, when he’s just overwhelmed
and can’t find any words to say.

So I step into the breach.

“Does that mean that we don’t have to go to court at all?” I ask.

It seems like she has to tear her eyes from Brian, but then she looks at me and smiles some more.

“I would imagine that there would be no need for the court to be involved,” she says. “Providing that you can come to an agreement with Gus’ birth mother about access and the like. I’ve already spoken to her attorney and he’s suggesting that we all meet on Monday to discuss that, and hopefully to finalize all details.”

I can only sort of stare at her. It sounds like it’s over. Just … over. Without any sort of a fight, really.

She suddenly becomes serious again, that cold look coming back into her face, as she turns back to Brian.

“I have to advise you Mr. Kinney that in asking you to sign such a document, and in presenting it as having a legal status which she must know that it completely lacks, Ms. Marcus has behaved in a completely unethical fashion. Should you wish to sue her for every cent she has to cover your costs and damages I would be most happy to prepare the case. Which I assure you, you would win.”

Brian seems to come alive then and shakes his head. “No. No. I couldn’t … I couldn’t do that to Gus.”

She nods as if she’d expected this response.

“I understand. However, I should advise you not to give any assurances on this matter. It will be a very powerful negotiating tool to discourage Ms. Marcus from any further legal actions aimed at in any way getting legal rights in your son.”

Brian bites his lip, but nods. He doesn’t like it, but he knows that it’s best for Gus that Mel, who has behaved more and more like a complete and total whacko, let alone a bitch, doesn’t have any say in what happens with Gus.

“If she should return to the States, as I believe she will have to, then you should be prepared for her to apply for access visits.”

He nods. I know he thinks that it’s not right to just keep her away from Gus completely.

“I have to advise that any access should be supervised visits only - and I mean supervised by either yourselves, or by an Officer of the Courts, not by Ms. Petersen. At least until Ms. Marcus’ residency status has been cleared up, and until you have confidence that she won’t do something extremely foolish. Her behavior, and in particular her attitude towards you, seems to me to verge on the unbalanced. I would not like to see your son hurt or imperiled in any way by her taking some extreme action.”

Brian goes to say something, almost as if he’s actually going to defend that bitch, then seems to think better of it.

“We’ll make sure of it,” I say.

I want him to know that I’m not putting up with any more shit from either of those women where
Gus is concerned. Or where Brian's concerned either.

*****

Brian

I can tell he’s in a fucking ‘take no prisoners’ mood, and I’m so exhausted, really just completely fucking emotionally depleted, that I’m happy to let him lead the charge.

Ms. Fucking Hershell, after one quick look at me to see how I'm reacting, smiles at him like he’s her favorite nephew. What is it with cute blonds and the fucking oldies? She’s saying something else about the meeting with Linds and her lawyer on Monday but I can hardly take it in. I know he will, though, so it doesn’t really matter.

All I can hear in my head are her words, just going round and round: I don’t have to go to court to fight for my son. He’s mine. Or at least part mine. And no one is going to take that away from either of us.

I can hardly fucking believe it. I want to see him. I want to hold him, and know that no one is ever going to rip him away from me again. I want to tell him how much his father fucking loves him. And that I'll never let anyone convince me again that being apart is better for either of us.

I want to get out of here, so we can get to the hotel and I can see him. That's all I can think about.

It’s only right at the end, as we’re leaving, that anything else she says really penetrates. She walks with us to the elevator and as we step inside, she holds the doors open for a moment and looking straight into my face says, “I have to tell you that Ms. Marcus’ conduct has been so egregious that I intend to report her to the Bar Council. I hope you understand, Mr. Kinney, that I don’t believe I have any choice.”

The doors slide closed before I can respond.

Chapter End Notes

As I said in an earlier note, I'm not a lawyer but I did do some online research into Pennsylvania law about the relinquishment of parental rights and responsibilities and also about third parent adoptions. As I understand what I found there are three key elements. The document relinquishing parental rights needs to be signed before a notary. It then needs to be registered with the Courts in a formal hearing. The adoption also requires a formal hearing and the "relinquishing" parent would be notified and given a final chance to effectively change their minds. I understand why the canon writers wouldn't want to deal with that drawn out process, but their failure to do it is very convenient for this story.

Similarly, Canadian immigration law makes it very difficult to move from a temporary visa to a permanent resident status. Everything I read seemed to indicate that a full permanent resident's visa would take approximately 12 months to process,
so in the canon timeline it is highly unlikely that they would have received a permanent visa. If the girls had entered Canada on a temporary visa there would most likely be restrictions on what work and how much they could do which would have meant that long term it wasn’t going to be enough. And of course, they would be required to leave once the temporary visa expired. If they entered on a temporary visa and then applied for permanent the most likely outcome seemed from my research to be that if they wanted to make it permanent they would need to leave and then apply for the permanent. Again - canon writers sacrificing any shadow of reality to convenience. Useful for me.
Justin considers the heritage he and Brian share - the one that comes not from their parents but from who they really are.

Brian is quiet when we leave Ms. Hershell’s office, but he’s really wired as well. His whole body is zinging like a finely stretched piece of wire when you run your fingernail along it; you can’t actually see or hear the vibration, but somehow it still seems to fill the air around him. When we get to the car he just hands me the keys, gets in the passenger seat and sits looking out the side window.

I could tell he was hardly taking in a word his lawyer said after the bit about how he still has his parental rights. That’s okay. I did, and he knows that.

It feels incredible to have him trust me that way; like he totally knows that I’ve got his back, and he’s happy to let me see that. More than anything, it’s those things that tell me how things really are with Brian and me.

From the outside it might look like I’m some trophy blond, a hot little twink who’s just around to boost Brian’s ego or something; and that I’m too dumb to even know it. But that is so not how it is. When he trusts me to be over everything he needs to know about what the lawyer said, or when he stands back and lets me deal with Lindsay, he’s telling me that no matter what anyone else might think, he sees me as his partner. His equal.

I’m not as old as him, not as successful; maybe I never will be. But in the ways that count with him he sees me as someone who is worthy of his trust and his respect. I can’t help being shorter than he is and blond into the bargain. But I’m no trophy twink and he knows it. Other people, especially ones who’ve known me since I was a kid, might always under rate me. Brian won’t; doesn’t; never has, really. That’s why he’s always demanded I be the best homosexual I can be. Because he
knows that the whole young-blond thing will play against me. Unless I refuse to let it, unless I fight for every bit of respect that I’m due.

And in his own Brian-esque way he’s prepared to fight for me too. Linds mightn’t know that’s what he was doing when he stood aside yesterday and let me take her on. But I know.

And it means more than any fucking pathetic “romantic” gesture he could ever make. Because it’s real.

Anyway, I drive back to the hotel. I know that he’ll want to see Gus. Hell, I do myself. So if I feel like I have to see him to reassure myself that it’s all real, I can bet Brian feels that way about a million times over.

Ms. Hershell said that she’d filed some sort of motion to prevent Melanie pulling any shit and trying to claim that bit of paper Brian signed years ago gives her rights to Gus now. And she’s let Mel’s lawyer and Lindsay’s know that. She’s also set up some sort of court mediated session on Monday so that we can formally sort out the details of how access is going to work and shit. And she’s already petitioned to make sure that the most Melanie could have is limited supervised visits with Gus.

She wanted to know about our living space – whether Gus would have his own room and stuff – so I told her about the new house. She said the court officer might want to see it, or at least the deeds and photos, so after we see Gus I think I’ll call Dan and see if he’d mind if we came over.

Maybe we could even take Gus with us. I bet he’ll love the house.

******

Brian

I can hardly fucking sit in the car, there’s no way I could drive. I feel as if my skin is splitting into shreds and crawling off me. Like I’m about to shed it or something, and some other creature is going to emerge out of it. Someone new. Someone who has a partner, and a son. A fucking family. A family who loves him.

And maybe this new creature will even deserve it.

Who the fuck knows?

Does a caterpillar get a clean slate when it turns into a moth? Maybe. Maybe it does. Maybe it gets to move on, fly away and leave all its past and its history and its fucking pathetic mistakes and fears behind it.

I wonder if it knows what it’s going to become; if the process is as fucking terrifying for the caterpillar as it is for me. I have no idea who I’ll be after today. No idea who I want to be.

No. That’s fucking bullshit. I know. Of course I fucking know. I’m just fucking scared I won’t be able to do it, and I’m such a chicken shit that even now I’m almost ready to jump out the car and just fucking take off. Fuck it up now once and for all, so I don’t have to worry about fucking it up later.

But I don’t.

Somehow I don’t.
Instead, caught like that damned insect in a metamorphosis over which I have no control, I squirm, fighting to breathe, while little Sunshine drives me ... us ... into this new future.

Fuck! How fucking symbolic is that?

So I sit here and let some small fucking terrified corner of my brain acknowledge what I want, hoping to Hell that just thinking it won’t call down some ancestral Kinney curse on my head.

I want to be a good father. And a good partner to the little twat next to me who at least deserves that I admit that much; and while I’m at it I want to be fabulously successful and hot as Hell and as sexually active as I am now until I’m too old to care. That’s what I want.

The heavens don’t immediately rain fire down on me and we’re pulling up at the hotel now, so I climb out the car and, taking his hand, I walk with him into my future.

Justin

Lindsay’s a complete mess when we get up to the suite. Apparently against all advice and despite all her promises, she’s been talking to Melanie.

Given that Brian’s just about been crawling out of his skin all the way here I expect him to totally lose it, but instead he goes all calm and cold. If I were Lindsay I’d totally freak, but she’s too busy playing for sympathy; which is for once wasted. There’s no way she’d get any from me and Brian ... instead of caving like he usually does as soon as she goes all teary eyed, he goes to Gus who is looking really upset, picks him up and carries him into the next room. He spends a few moments talking to Gus quietly, till Gus is giggling, then turns on the TV and leaves him to watch cartoons. Once Brian is sure he’s happily settled, he comes out, giving me a look on the way to make sure that I know to stand near the door and keep an eye on him, then he stalks over to Lindsay who has sunk down onto the couch ostentatiously wiping her eyes and heaving these great big sighing sort of wails and totally drills her.

“What part of ‘let your lawyers do the talking’ did you not fucking understand?” he says, his voice as angry as I’ve ever heard him with Lindsay; but it’s a quiet, cold, cutting anger that drills through her self-pitying wails and gets her to at least reduce the volume.

“You don’t understand,” she snivels. “Mel and I have been together a long time.”

“And now she’s fucking someone else,” he says relentlessly. “So most people would conclude that whatever bullshit relationship you had cobbled together up in the frozen north, it’s pretty much over. Caput. Finito.”

“We still care about each other,” Lindsay falters.

“Oh, yeah, she cares so much she calls and abuses you for daring to let me find out you’ve been fucking lying to me for the last five years.”

“I didn’t lie!” Lindsay protests. “We just ...”

“Didn’t tell the truth!” he snaps. “You fucking let me think all this time that she’d filed the papers, gone ahead with the adoption.”

“We were going to,” Lindsay tries to explain. “But it was so expensive and Melanie wouldn’t let me ...”
She peters off, aware that her next words could only make things worse."

"Wouldn’t let you ask me for the money,” he finishes for her, his eyes dark, the hurt he refuses to show sounding in his voice.

I can only stare at the woman in front of me. At one time I thought I’d known Lindsay, thought she was basically a good person. But what sort of woman, knowing how reluctant Brian had been to sign over his rights to Gus, knowing that he’d only done it to try to make things better between her and Mel, try to give Gus the family he’d never had, would even think about asking him for the money to make his sacrifice legal and permanent?

Brian also stares at her for a moment, then he nods slowly. When he speaks, his voice is very calm, but absolutely certain. Implacable; that’s the word.

"Gus is coming with us,” he states. “Justin can you go and get his things together?"

"Brian,” Lindsay protests weakly, “I don’t think ..."

"No,” he says, “you don’t. But if you did, and if you thought for one moment that I’d leave him here with you, trust you that he’d still be here on Monday for the hearing, you are seriously fucking kidding yourself.”

I’m stunned. Brian never stands up for himself this way, never fights back against all the shit they throw at him. I want to fucking clap and cheer and do a happy dance. Instead, I head into the other room to grab Gus’ stuff before he can change his mind.

"Get it all,” he says after me, raising his voice a little. “He’s staying with us for a while.”

Gus starts jumping up and down. He doesn’t know what’s going on, but he heard that he’s going to be staying with his Dad and he’s beside himself with excitement. He “helps” me pack, chattering all the time so that I can’t hear what’s going on in the other room, but when we come out clutching all these bags, Lindsay has at least stopped crying. She looks as if she’d be angry if she dared.

Brian still has that cold look, but it melts when Gus runs to him shouting, “Can we go now, Daddy, can we? Can we?”

Brian snatches him up and says, “You bet, Sonnyboy.”

“We’ll see you on Monday,” he tells Lindsay and just walks out.

"Justin,” she says, trying that sweetly reasonable voice on me, “You have to persuade him that this might not be a good thing.”

"Why not, Linds?” I ask. “Gus was always going to be spending a few days with us on this trip. Wasn’t he?”

She sighs.

"Justin, I have to think about how Mel will see this. I have my own status with Jenny to consider.”

“Yeah?” I respond. “Well, we don’t have to worry about Jenny. We only have to worry about Gus. And unless you are going to accuse Brian of kidnapping him or something ...”

She makes a weak sound of protest.

“... then I can’t think of any reason why he can’t stay with us. Can you?”
She sighs, but shakes her head and comes with me to the door to say goodbye to her son, who’s still jumping up and down in excitement, totally unfazed at the separation that seems to be reducing his mother once more to tears.

Five minutes later we’re in the car, and while Brian drives, I call Dan.

He sounds a little surprised, but also kind of pleased that we want to come over no matter what the reason. I can’t really explain to him on the phone, so I just say we need some photos. He must think that they’re for decorating or something.

Will he be surprised when he meets Gus! I mean, we’d told him Brian has a son, but I bet in his wildest dreams Dan has never pictured Brian as a completely doting Dad.

I can’t wait to see the look on Dan’s face when he sees Brian and Gus together.

I don’t know why it’s important to me, but somehow Dan seems like part of my family. Our family. Mine and Brian’s. And he’s leaving soon and I guess we’ll probably never see him again so I just want us all to spend a little time together in what is going to be our new home. I want Dan to be able to picture us there, so he’ll know that the place is in good hands and that it will be filled with love, just like it was for him and his Billy.

I know that will mean something to him.

Maybe it will mean something to Billy, too, wherever he is.

Who knows?

And it will mean something to us, to me and Brian, to know that we’re the future in that house, but that the future we’ll be building has its roots, not just in our individual pasts, with all their miseries and experiences of homophobia and hatred and lack of love – as well as their triumphs – but in a past that we share with others like ourselves; with other men who’ve fought the same problems and who have won over them to live out the love they have for each other with courage and joy.

That’s the foundation we’ll be building on in this new home; and it’s the heritage we will share with Gus - a heritage of love and acceptance and support. Whatever challenges we might face in the future, I know that Gus is never going to experience the pain that our fathers caused Brian and me; he is never going to doubt that he is loved, and he is never going to suddenly have his father reject him because of who he loves. Neither of his fathers, because that’s how I see myself as well; I’m his "Dus" and no one is going to take that away from me - or from him.

So while Gus munches on a cookie and chatters to Dan about how he's going to be staying with his Daddy and Dus, I slip my hand into Brian's and when he turns his head to me, I smile at him. He does his best not to smile back but I am so onto him, and I squeeze his fingers. Then I see that he's finished his coffee, so I get up to pour some more for him and for Dan, and fetch some more milk for Gus. I realize suddenly that I'm acting like I'm the host here, but when I look at Dan, he's just sitting smiling a quiet little smile, kind of like Brian does when he's really happy, but doesn't want anyone to know it.

I sit back down at the table and Gus slides off his chair and climbs up onto my knee. I hold him and he leans against me, rubbing his foot along his father's thigh. I think he's just testing to see what his father will do. Brian gives him a look, and Gus stops for a moment and then does it again. This time Brian grabs his foot, twists off his shoe and starts tickling. Gus squeals and says, "No, Daddy, no!" but he's laughing and obviously loves having his father's attention.
I catch Dan's eye across the table and he is really smiling now. I grin back at him and think that I should get out my cell and take a photo. But it doesn't matter. When we get back to the loft I'll make a drawing, and maybe one day I'll paint this scene - or how it makes me feel. Meanwhile, I just sit here listening to Gus' laughter and Brian's quiet chuckles, sharing Dan's enjoyment and realizing how much I already feel at home here.

I can hardly wait till we can move in.
Brian looks at the influence of the generations.

Brian

I have no fucking idea why the little twat I live with decided that coming out to see the old fossil would be a good idea, but he's beaming as we walk up the pathway, so obviously he's happy about it at least. Gus is walking between us, holding onto our hands. He's excited and picking up on Justin’s good mood so he's doing little hop-skips and laughing up at us. I feel my heart do some ridiculous flip thing.

There must have been some moments even in my fucked up childhood when I was that happy, but I seriously don't remember any. Some pathetically lesbionic part of me wishes I could frame this moment in time so I could keep it safe for Gus forever. Getting to the front steps gives me the excuse to pick him up and although he squirms at first, when dear old Dan opens the door, Gus suddenly decides that he wants to cling like a limpet to my neck.

Dan actually smiles at us all and leads us down the hall to the kitchen, leaving Justin, who's already nattering away, to close the front door. The sight of the plate of cookies on the table detaches Gus' arms from around my neck and before long he also is chattering away as if he's known Dan all his life, telling him about the flight down from Toronto and how he's going to be staying with Daddy and Dus and wanting to know what's the other side of the glass wall and all sorts of shit.

Dan doesn't say much in response, just sits and listens to the two of them, occasionally throwing in some comment in that clipped British voice of his.

Gus climbs up on Justin's knee at one point and starts testing the waters with his old man by
scraping the sole of his probably filthy shoe all over my D&G pants. I give him a look, but I don't expect it to stop him for long, and it doesn't. When I feel his foot nudge my leg the second time, I realize I have a decision to make. I can let old Jack win, and give Gus the chance to learn to fear his father, or I can try another way to stop him. Even as my fingers start tickling the sole of his foot while he wriggles and squeals and laughs, his little face not afraid, but full of something damned like joy, I have an epiphany.

Not being Jack is really that fucking simple. I just have to choose not to be; every fucking time Jack starts forcing his way into my head, into our lives, I just have to choose not to let him win.

Put like that, it's a fucking no brainer and I'm left wondering why I was afraid for so long; afraid of turning into a weak bastard who took out all the disappointments and frustrations of his life on the nearest person who was smaller than him. Smaller, not weaker; I was never weaker, I realize suddenly. I was always tough enough to at least survive. And now I'm tough enough to resist, to fight, not to let him win. In part that's due to the two who are sitting at the table with me, but I don't have to think about that. I know it, it's part of me, part of who I am now, who they've helped to make me.

And maybe, some tiny weird-assed part of my brain considers, maybe this is the way I can turn even Jack's life into some sort of victory - by moving past the limits he set - hell, the limits that were probably set on generations of hard-drinking Irish Kinneys - and setting Jack's son and his grandson free of at least some of the curses that have formed a good part of our heritage - till now.

But that's way too fucking maudlin a thought and I banish it, putting Gus' shoe back on and standing up.

Justin, who has been spilling a whole lot of private business to the old buzzard about why we need the photos, helps Gus down and then stands up himself.

"Let's take Gus upstairs first," he suggests, "and take photos of his room."

Dan stands up also but says quietly, "I'll just let you get on with that while I clear up down here."

Justin goes to protest, but I cut him off. The old geezer probably doesn't want an unnecessary trip up the stairs. If picking up a few coffee cups saves him the climb, it seems like a good trade off to me. Besides, it gives us a chance to check out the rooms upstairs without him hanging over our shoulder like a fucking living ghost.

*****

Justin

I want to clean up for Dan, but Brian cuts his eyes at me and I realize, much slower than Brian did, that clearing up gives Dan an excuse not to have to climb up the stairs; and that by accepting that with no fuss, means that Dan's pride doesn't get tromped all over.

People who think Brian is an asshole all the time really don't know him at all. He's actually one of the most thoughtful people I know; it's just that the way he does things doesn't let people see that most of the time. Like, if Debbie or Michael were here, they'd be all over Brian for not helping to clear, and then all over Dan about helping him up the stairs and shit, and Dan would hate it. But Brian, although it might look like he's just too thoughtless to offer to help, is, in fact, protecting Dan's feelings, especially his pride, which is really important to him. As an artist, I'm fairly observant about people, I need to be, but sometimes, like this time, Brian is miles ahead of me. Of course, it's also what makes him a great advertiser - because he really does understand what makes
people tick. And with the people he cares about, he uses that knowledge to go out of his way to look after them.

That’s when I realize that despite all his growls about “ geezers” and “the old buzzard” and shit, Brian must really care about Dan. For some reason that makes me really happy, so I give him a little bump with my hip as we go out the door and, although he shrugs and sort of pulls a face, he also wraps a hand round my neck and squeezes, which makes me grin at him like a loon, and he gives one of those tongue-in-cheek grins back at me.

And just like that I have this profound revelation - this is what “happy” is like. It really is.

Anyway, we go upstairs and leave Dan to just clear up the few cups. The rooms are nearly all empty now, which sort of shocks me. I’d never thought about it. I mean, I know that Dan is leaving, obviously. And that the place has to be cleared out before we can move in. But it’s still weird. Makes it all real, I guess.

Gus looks around the empty rooms with his eyes wide.

I guess Brian and I had sort of assumed that Gus would have the second bedroom, but as soon as we get to the top of the stairs, he runs into the tiny room at the front of the house, and says, “Is this my room, Daddy? Is it?”

Brian shrugs. “If you want, Sonnyboy, sure. But wouldn’t you like the bigger room across the hall?”

We both try to coax Gus to at least look at the other room, but he won’t budge.

“No, Dus!” he protests when I try to pick him up to carry him to the other room. “I want this one.”

“Maybe he’s afraid of the glass wall,” I say, mindful of how the two larger bedrooms have floor to ceiling glass walls that look out onto the miracle of light that Billy created in the stained glass window of the great room of the house. As I’m speaking, Gus kneels on the little window seat and peers out over the front porch.

Brian shrugs again. “Whatever. He can always change his mind later if he likes.”

I nod. That’s true, of course.

Gus turns to us then, his eyes all lit up and his face flushed to deep rose pink with excitement.

“It’s like a pirate’s room,” he claims. “On a ship. And I’m the cap’ain.”

Brian laughs. “I think Dus is the captain on this ship,” he says unexpectedly, and I feel myself go pretty much the same color as Gus.

*****

Brian

Every time I hear one of those things come out of my mouth, I wait for the thunderbolt to strike. The thing is that I’m determined this time round that I’m not going to let my fear of that stop me saying them. I decided a long while back that if we crash and burn again it will not be because I’m so fucked up scared that I don’t have the balls to lay myself on the line and do all the things that are in me to do to make sure that Justin has no cause to doubt how I see his place in my life. For a fraction of a heartbeat there’s absolute stillness, but no lightning rains down from the Heavens, so
we get on with what we came for.

We take some photos of Gus’ room, including one of him on the window seat laughing at Sunshine’s lame-assed attempts at being a pirate. Then we take photos of the rest of the house, including the security around the pool, and the safety gate at the top of the outside step.

We talk about how we should fence off the end of the garden so Gus can’t run straight down into the fucking water and finally the little twat agrees to a chain mesh fence as long as we disguise it with a hedge. Fine. That will, apparently, give the garden itself more privacy from people on the river without making the place look like a fortress.

It’s fairly clear that we’re going to need a gardener anyway; it’s not like either Justin or I are into the whole dirt under the fingernails thing - well, unless, in his case, it’s paint, or charcoal or whatever shit he’s working with this week. We’re standing on the deck talking about it when Dan joins us so I ask him who he uses. He says they’re reliable so I’ll probably give them a call. It makes sense to use someone who knows the garden, I guess.

Gus starts kicking up a racket when he sees the boat down on the river, but I’ve never driven one of the damned things before and I’ll be fucked if I’m going to make my first attempt with Gus on board, so Sonnyboy will have to wait. He’s easily distracted, though, there’s so much new to see.

Dan insists that we stay for lunch, and since Gus is apparently dying of starvation with Sunshine probably ready to join him in his death throes any minute, I figure ‘what the hell?’.

*****

Justin

I’m kind of surprised that Brian agrees to stay for lunch with Dan, but I’m really glad he does. Dan is pleased too. And Gus is having a great time. He really likes the house and he tells Dan all about how he things his room is a cabin on a pirate ship.

I start thinking about how we could decorate it in that theme … maybe paint a mural on the walls. Brian and I haven’t had a chance to talk about what we’d like to do with this house generally. But we should soon, before he goes off on some high-handed Kinney kick. Maybe that’s not fair, and he wouldn’t now anyway, but I’m prepared to make it clear that I want us to talk about this shit, make plans together.

Brian goes outside at one point - maybe for a cigarette, maybe to call Ms Hershell and let her know that we have Gus, or maybe just to get away for a while. By the time he comes back we’ve finished eating and I get up to clear.

Dan starts to object, but Brian reminds him of his promise to give us the contact details for the gardeners he uses. While he writes those down, Brian asks him if everything is organized for his voyage. They talk about some details that Brian has had his PA dealing with and before they’ve finished, the dishes are washed and put away.

For one moment Brian meets my eyes and gives me - not anything as soft as a smile - but a look that somehow lets me know his approval. I guess we make a good team.

It occurs to me suddenly that this time when we say goodbye to Dan it might be forever, and I realize that I’m not ready yet. But as ever, Brian surprises me.

“So we’ll pick you up around six on Monday evening and take you to the hotel,” he says. “And Justin can go through the house with you one last time on Tuesday and then take you to the
airport.”

Dan doesn’t even try to object, so I guess this must have been one of those things that they’d already talked about earlier.

They shake hands, and when Dan turns to me I step forward and stretch up to kiss him on the cheek. He looks … well, kind of stunned for a moment, then he smiles and stands a little straighter and his fingers brush my face as he reaches to pat my shoulder. I feel Brian’s hand in the small of my back and their touches are benedictions - blessings and thanks and recognition of the kinship I feel with this man whose experience so far outrrips my own, while at the same time in some way paralleling it.

*****

Brian

Just when I think little Sunshine might have one of his famous allergy attacks, it’s derailed by my son - our son - who’s obviously feeling that he’s being ousted from his rightful place as the center of all attention and starts dragging on my jacket, demanding it back. I pick him up and his stretches his arms out to Dan, offering a kiss goodbye. Dan looks like he’s about to join Sunshine in the meltdown stakes and fuck me if I don’t feel my own eyes stinging.

The only explanation I have for that is that fucking lesbionic behavior is catching. I blame it all on the little blond twat. All I can do is get us out of here before this fucking degeneration goes any further, so I head for the door. As we stop for one final fucking farewell, I’m sure I don’t imagine the look of gratitude the old buzzard gives me for keeping it short and ushering the two main culprits down the steps.

On the way back to the loft, Gus is soon chattering away, but Justin is uncharacteristically silent. I sneak a look at him, and then reach out to grip the back of his neck.

“If he wasn’t leaving, Sunshine, we couldn’t have the house.”

He nods, then says, “I know. I just wish …”

He doesn’t finish the sentence, but he doesn’t have to; I know what he’s saying. He wishes we’d somehow met Dan years ago, when his Billy was still alive maybe. Got to know them; got to learn what they could teach us.

The fuck of it is that for some fucked up reason … I feel the same way.
Justin ponders the nature of love and hate and the boys have an unexpected and not entirely welcome visitor. Or two.

Justin

Fuck me!

I thought that dealing with Kinney senior was a challenge!

By the time we finally get Gus to sleep for the night, Brian and I are both exhausted. I mean, I guess the poor kid was a bit over-excited just to be staying with us, and I know he’s had a lot to deal with … with the way things have apparently been with Linds and Mel and all that shit. But by the time we were trying to get him ready for bed, he was acting out big time, challenging every single thing either of us said to him. I was seriously ready to unload on him, but miracle of miracles, Brian just stayed calm and quiet and somehow we got him undressed and eventually settled down on the futon.

Of course, that means that we pretty much have to stick to the bedroom, because the last thing either of us wants is to wake him up again. I don’t feel really comfortable with the idea of fucking with Gus just down the steps, and we don’t want to shut the panels around the bedroom in case he wakes up and is scared. I mean, he is in a strange place. He’s hardly ever slept here - not since he was a baby, I don’t think. So Brian brings his laptop up and I get out my sketch book.

There are a whole host of images from the last few days that I want to try to get down so I can work on them later - Brian crouched in the DVD store helping Gus choose which Wiggles DVD he
wanted, both of them so intense and serious about it; Brian tickling Gus this afternoon, Gus
laughing, and Brian looking so … for some reason he looked relieved, like some incredible weight
had been lifted from him as well as happy; the look on Dan’s face as he watched them; even the
look on Lindsay’s face when she realized that Brian wasn’t just going to cave to her tears the way
he usually does; and most of all, the look on Brian’s face … no, not the look, the feeling … the
feeling that flooded through me, flooded the whole world it felt like, when Ms. Hershell told us
that Brian is still Gus’ legal parent, his father. Because that was one of the most amazing moments
in my whole life; I mean, the whole world seemed to change in that moment - as if somehow Brian
(and by extension, that somehow included me as well) was given some whole new identity. And if
it was like that for me …

Anyway, I want to try to capture that feeling now, before it all gets washed over with all the usual
shit of just living.

I get really into it, and before I know it, Brian is closing up his laptop and seems to be getting
ready for bed. I glance at the clock and it’s nearly midnight. I guess that’s early for us - especially
on a Saturday night - but tonight is special. And tomorrow we have another day of learning how to
parent Gus to face, so reluctantly I put down my pencil and close the sketch book.

*****

Brian

Debbie and her precious fucking “Sunshine”! If she only knew it the sweet little blond she fucking
thinks she knows is really a moody bitch with a passive aggressive streak a mile wide.

Right now there’s no fucking trace of “sunshine” - he’s more like a sullen summer day - the kind
where the sky is gray and heavy and they’re predicting thunderstorms.

He’s always bitchy when he gets woken up before he’s ready, and he can’t take it out on Gus who
was the one who started bouncing on the bed at some God-awful fucking hour this morning, so
he’s taking it out on me. After pointedly ignoring my attempts at getting a morning kiss, and
maybe a bit of a grope, he proceeded to make like he was a total martyr over the incredibly difficult
task of putting on the coffee maker, and when it was ready and I poured him a cup and put it on the
counter in front of him, he took it with an almighty huff and sulked off to the couch to drink it.

Fucking twat!

I’d love to suggest that we could leave Gus to watch cartoons while we take a shower, but that
would just hand him the ammunition to shoot me down in flames. Instead, I pour some cereal into
a bowl and get Gus to sit down at the table and eat it while I drink my own coffee, and wonder
how the fucking hell I’m going to keep them both happy for a whole fucking day.

Gus is one thing, but the other problem child is the tricky one.

What he really needs is to get some serious painting time. Not only does he have a show coming up
in a few months that he fucking needs to prepare for, but he’s been putting his life on hold to
fucking “be there” for me, and the frustration is beginning to get to him. I saw the look on his face
last night … if it had been up to him, he would have kept sketching all night … at least until he
succumbed to temptation and set up a fucking easel and started to do really get down to work.

But if I just tell him to go off and do what he needs to do, he’ll fucking dig his toes in, stubborn
little shithead that he is. I have to do it right.
Oh, fuck it. I’ve never been any good at pussy-footing around things.

“You should get your ass down to your studio and do some f … work,” I tell him, remembering just in time the little ears that are listening to everything that’s going on.

His head jerks up, but then he just gives a sort of irritated shrug, without even looking at me.

“Justin …”

“Brian, I’m not leaving you alone with Gus all day, so just f … forget it,” he snaps.

I walk over and shimmy my way between his knees, ignoring his huffs and puffs, and attempts to squirm away.

I don’t say anything, just stand there till finally he looks up at me.

“What?” he bitches. “I’m f … fine. We should get out of here … go to the zoo or something.”

For a moment I don’t respond, then finally I let myself say quietly, “I’m going to need you tomorrow … with the lawyers.”

*****

Justin

It’s fucking pathetic that I can’t even maintain a bad mood, just because he fucking admits once in a hundred years that he needs me for something.

He’s standing in front of me waving his crotch in my face and I seriously want to bitch him out for thinking that that’s enough to distract me, but when I look up at him he’s standing quiet and serious, sucking his lips that way he does when he’s trying to work out what to say. That makes me want to bitch at him even more, but then he says … that …

I can feel the bad mood slipping away even as he sits down next to me.

I sigh. I know that my frustrations don’t really have anything to do with him … well, except that he comes with fucking baggage, like a kid and this stupid fucking legal situation and shit. But I’ve always known all that, and I mean, it’s not like that’s even the worst of it; the fact that he’s close to being a fucking emotional cripple sometimes is much fucking worse. But he’s battling with that. I mean, he’s really trying. Like I battle with my hand. And he’s not fucking perfect, but he’s trying.

It’s just … I feel like all his stuff is so important that it has to come first. I mean, what could be more important than making sure that Gus is okay? And the only way we can do that is make sure that we … or at least Brian … has some kind of legal say in what happens to him. I get that.

But I have things that I need to take care of as well. And last night, when I was sketching, it suddenly dawned on me that I’ve had my new studio for nearly a week, and I’ve hardly spent any time there. And I need to. I mean, really need to. Something inside me feels almost like it’s breaking when I don’t have the chance to paint when my emotions are charged like this. It’s fucking ironic. When I was in New York, there weren’t any distractions and I could have painted for days on end and no one would even have fucking known that I didn’t have any kind of life, let alone cared. But I had absolutely zero fucking inspiration. I had to force myself to stand in front of an easel and try to paint something, anything; and the only hope I had of doing anything that wasn’t a complete waste of time was if I let myself think about Brian, about my life here, about what I’d walked away from. When I let all that pain loose I could paint like a bitch. But … it was so fucking
hard to let it loose, to let myself feel it that I fought against doing that until there was absolutely no other choice.

Now I’m home. And that pain is finally fading. Now it’s not pain I feel when I think about Brian it’s … it’s joy and pride and lust and … and … fucking ecstasy … and my whole being aches with the need to get that feeling out there, to splash it about in paint or in charcoal or even in fucking clay and marble if that’s what it takes. But just because I am home, just because I no longer lie awake every night aching for just the sight of Brian beside me, for the smell of him, for the warmth of his body heat radiating across the bed at me … just because now that’s all here, I don’t have to long for it any more, I just have to reach out my hand …

Now I have no fucking time to express what I’m feeling.

Fucking shitty fucking shit!

*****

Brian

I fight against the urge to reach out and touch him - just because I can. I haven’t yet got to the stage where I’m able to take the ability to do that for granted; but I’m not some fucking lesbionic wimp who has to dwell on what these last months have been like, how bad they were.

Instead, I shrug, and just say, “Don’t be a twat! You’ve got work to do and Gus and I can keep ourselves amused without your assistance for a few hours.”

He gives me a look then … like he’s not so sure about that, but doesn’t want to start a fight about it. Instead he runs his hands up the outside of my thighs to my hips, and grasps them to help himself stand up. That brings us very close together and this time I don’t feel any need to restrain myself. I pull him even closer and, finding his mouth open and ready and welcoming, I stroke my tongue over his and kiss him till we’re both breathless. Only the sudden recollection of who is watching cartoons only a few feet away keeps me from pulling him down to the ground to fuck him senseless.

Finally we pull apart and he says, “Well, we’d better have a proper breakfast then, if we’re both going to be busy.”

And then he heads for the kitchen to start making some fucking carbs and fat laden shit for us all to eat.

Why is it that when he’s in a bad mood my fucking sex life suffers, and when he’s in a good mood he punishes me by force feeding me shit?

*****

Justin

I suppose I should feel guilty and be all like worried about what Brian and Gus are up to and how Brian’s coping and all that shit, but instead …

I just forget about everything once I close the door of this lame apartment that I’m using as a studio behind me.

No wonder the couple who had it split up, it’s so totally horrible - I mean … the bedroom is all fucking pink! And the bathroom has got these cutesy little cherubs on the tiles and … it makes me
want to puke.

But the living area has great windows and a skylight which makes it perfect for what I need and I just close my eyes when I go to the bathroom and hope I don’t miss the bowl.

By the time I start to come back to some sort of consciousness of the world around me, it’s dark outside and I realize my stomach has been growling for the past hour or more.

I race through cleaning my brushes, and head off home.

That’s the blessing of having my own space - except for the brushes, I don’t have to clean up after me. Everything can just stay as it is till I get back to it.

I did some good work today, I think.

I thought that I’d work on some of the sketches I did last night, start putting on paper some of the images of Brian and Gus and our life together, but instead I started another painting, something completely different from what I’d intended. I’m not sure what to make of it. I don’t know what Brian will make of it.

I’m going to call it “Love and Hate”.

In the foreground, two figures are embracing. At the moment I’ve roughed out the background in an angry red; but later I’ll work on it - I’m seeing it as dark slashed with fire, sort of smoky, but lit with these disturbing red and blue lights - the way I remember Liberty Avenue after the bombing. Brian hates it when I paint that sort of stuff. But sometimes I need to; I need to get it outside me. Then it’s not as scary, not as poisonous.

And the last couple of days …

I had a dream last night; a nightmare really, I guess. I couldn’t really remember any details when I woke up - just that it was full of this dark stifling anger and hatred. I woke up feeling as if I were choking on it. And there was something about the feel of it that made me think of Hobbs; and the bombing; and, for some reason, Melanie. It made me realize how angry she must be. I mean, she’s always angry at Brian, and right now … Right now, for some reason, she makes me think of the bigots who set off the bomb.

That’s how Mel’s anger feels to me … the same sort of threat. It’s not rational, the way she feels about Brian. It really isn’t. Even if he was as big an asshole as she thinks he is, he’s never actually done anything to justify the hate she feels for him … except just exist. So the only difference between her and Hobbs, and the people who blew up Babylon is that she hasn’t really acted on her hatred yet. Well, except to take Gus to Canada in the first place.

But that’s what scares me … that she might.

And it could be just as destructive … even if it’s not expressed in physical violence. And I wouldn’t put that past her, either.

So I’m scared. And the fear brings back all kinds of memories, and the only way I know how to deal with them is to paint them out of my mind because once they’re out there on the canvas, they’re easier for me to deal with.

But it’s not like that for Brian, the only way he knows how to deal is to just refuse to even acknowledge that there’s anything that could frighten him. That’s what he needs to do to deal, to
survive so much hate without going crazy; so I guess I’ll wait a while before I show him this one.

****

Brian

I’m fucked if I’m taking Sonnyboy to the zoo, with all the other screaming idiots and their offspring. Instead, after we finally pack Justin off to deal with his shit, and I deal with Sonnyboy’s tears and tantrums because his fucking “Dus” is leaving him with the monster, we go to the park. Surprisingly, we have a good time. At least Sonnyboy seems to. He spends a while running around screaming “Daddy, catch me!” and laughing his head off whenever I do and then a while on the swings where I nearly die of terminal boredom pushing him. But I spend some time teaching him how to swing himself higher, and once he gets the idea, he’s all “Don’t, Daddy, I can do it”, even if he can still barely make the swing move at all. Stubborn little shit. Wonder who he gets that from.

After that we’re exhausted, so we go get something to eat and then head home. He conks out watching his damned Wiggles DVD, so I put him into the bed and settle down at the computer to get on with some work.

When he wakes up, he spends a few minutes fussing because “Dus” still isn’t back, and a few more demanding food and drink, but once he’s had some juice and an apple, he agrees to settle down with me and do some “work”.

Justin found these educational computer games for him, so he “works” on Justin’s laptop, while I
finish off the outline of a proposal I need to send to a client next week. I get interrupted every few minutes because he wants to show me what he’s learned to do, but that’s okay. It’s good to get the feel of where he’s at in terms of his literacy and numeracy skills and half an hour of watching him tackle some of these programs tells me far more than any damned school report ever could.

When my cell rings, I’m tempted not to answer, but it could be the lawyer about tomorrow, so I really need to.

In fact, it’s Linds.

By the time I hang up, part of me is concentrating on dealing with her shit, but the other part is wondering how my fucking partner is going to react.

I’m guessing he’s going to be pissed at me - or at least disappointed. But Linds sounded so down, so fucking lost and I caved and asked if she wanted to come over for a while - have an early dinner maybe, so she can eat with Gus.

It’s not entirely altruistic. I might legally still have rights to Gus, but getting any sort of agreement on access visits and shit could still turn out to be a bloodbath, and it will go a lot more smoothly for me if Lindsay’s in my corner. Or at least, not in Mel’s.

Because she’s the big unknown. Just what sort of shit is she likely to pull? How far is she likely to go to keep me away from my son?

That’s what scares me.

*****

Justin

By the time I get back to the loft, it’s getting pretty late and I find myself hoping that I haven’t missed Gus. It must be nearly his bedtime.

But when I get home, Gus is still up. He’s sitting on the damned couch telling his mother all about his day at the park with Daddy, while Daddy looks on trying not to let on how much he loves it that Gus clearly loved spending time with him.

It’s all so nice and family friendly that it almost makes me want to puke. Especially because of all the thoughts that have been going through my head all afternoon.

Thoughts about love and how vulnerable it is; how vulnerable it makes you. Because I know that if either I’d died in that fucking bombing - or if Brian had - that the one who was left would never have been able to get their lives back together - whatever we might have managed to cobble together for ourselves afterwards would have been some damaged patchwork shell - like trying to stick an exquisite piece of glasswork back together after someone had smashed it to pieces. There are times when I can totally understand why Brian fought so hard against loving me.

But also thoughts about hate - and how what makes it really able to survive in the world are the people like Lindsay who just close their eyes to it when it’s right in front of their faces. She’s lived with Mel’s hatred of Brian for years. Hell! She even made it worse, by insisting that Brian be the one to father her child.

So to see her sitting here, all cozy, playing Mommy and Daddy with him while all the while that she-bitch of a partner of hers is somewhere plotting to try to destroy him makes me seriously sick
to my stomach.

I so don’t want to have to deal with her right now.

But before I can say anything, Brian looks up at me and smiles, and there’s something in his smile … some sweetness … some glimpse of a happiness that I know he’d never ever expected to find that seals my mouth shut and I take a deep breath and try to shrug off the ghosts that have been haunting my afternoon. Just like he’s finding ways to shrug off the ghosts that haunt his fatherhood.

*****

Brian

I can see he’s wound really tight when he comes in, but he makes an effort to shake it off and I guess that’s made easier when Gus catches sight of him and practically leaps into his arms shrieking “Dus!” at the top of his voice. You’d swear the kid hadn’t seen him for months.

“Dus” lifts him up and carries him back to the couch, sinking down with Gus on top of him, and I can practically see the clouds lifting from around him as my son fills him in on what we’ve been doing all day without him.

I hear the downstairs buzzer and get up to find my wallet so I can pay for all the food I had to order to try to feed both Sunshine and Sonnyboy - with hopefully a few crumbs left over for Lindsay and I.

But it isn’t the delivery man, it’s Michael.

I stare at him, while part of me is thinking that the fucking storm clouds will be back in full force as soon as Justin sees him, but before I can say anything, he blurts out, “I know you’re probably going to tell me to fuck off, but I need to tell you something.”

I know that look on his face. I know this is something I don’t want to hear. But before I can stop him, he goes on, “It’s Mel. She called me this afternoon. She says that if I don’t help her keep you away from Gus that she’s going to take JR and just disappear and no one will ever find them.”

His lip wobbles and he says in a voice that sounds broken now.

“I’m so fucking scared, Brian. I don’t know what to do.”
Friends in Need

Chapter Summary

Melanie makes her move.

Justin

You’d think by now I’d be used to Michael’s uncanny ability to make a bad situation worse by applying sheer unadulterated stupidity and then rush to Brian expecting him to magically make it all better. But somehow he still manages to take me by surprise.

Leaving Gus to watch his Wiggles DVD yet again, we all move into the kitchen area to discuss this latest little bombshell. It takes a while to finally piece it all together because Michael a) couldn’t tell a coherent story to save his life (and I should know, trying to keep the Rage storylines on track was a fucking nightmare) and b) is such a totally self-absorbed shit that he has to edit anything that might possibly look as if he was admitting that anything that had gone wrong could in any way be considered his fault. But I finally get the gist of it, and I’m totally pissed.

Seems like Lindsay’s lawyer called him to set up an appointment to discuss what was going to happen with JR. She told him to call his attorney and not, under any circumstances to speak to Mel until he’d taken legal advice. So, of course, Mikey being Mikey, he did nothing about contacting a lawyer, he just called Melanie instead.

Fuckwit!

Even Lindsay is pissed with him; which is pretty hypocritical, I guess, since she basically did the same thing. Talk to Melanie, I mean, when she’d been instructed not to.

At least he did come to Brian. Which is kind of more than I would have expected of him. I’d have expected him to just do whatever fucked up thing Mel wants, and then when it all went to shit to
come running to Brian crying that it wasn’t his fault and still expecting him to fix it.

Like usual.

But this time I guess we have a fighting chance to keep things on track. Or at least as on track as they can be in this totally fucked situation where somebody just has to get hurt. I know that Brian wants most of all to make sure that isn’t Gus. And I guess I do too.

But mostly I want to make sure it isn’t Brian.

For once, I just want it not to be Brian that winds up being the fall guy for everyone else’s fucking stupidity and selfishness.

Especially Melanie’s.

Because this time she really has gone too far. Trying to use Brian’s “best friend” against him is a really cuntish thing to do. And no matter what else happens here, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forgive her for it.

In the past I’ve turned a blind eye to a lot of what has gone on between Mel and Brian. Mel was good to me, right back in the beginning. Although looking back on it, I wonder now if even that was just a way of getting at Brian. But anyway, she’s really used up whatever credit that might have bought her with me. Aside from all her constant bitchiness towards Brian, I know that she was the one behind the move to Canada. And I know it wasn’t just about getting away to somewhere “safe”; I know damned well she took the opportunity to separate Gus from Brian. And not even because she loves Gus all that much. I honestly think that Gus has only ever been important to her as a way of getting to Brian; especially since JR was born.

What I don’t understand, really do not understand, is why she hates Brian that much.

Is it just because he once fucked Lindsay?

Well, Lindsay once fucked Brian and I don’t hate her for that.

I totally don’t get it.

Because no matter what she might think, no matter what spin she might put on things, the truth is that Melanie owes Brian a whole lot of gratitude for a whole lot of things.

But all he gets from her is bitterness and spite.

And I really have never been able to work out why.

But meanwhile, I guess we just have to work out how we’re going to handle her latest shit.

*****

Brian

I know Justin can never work out why Mel and I hate each other the way we do. I guess he puts it down to some weird-assed jealousy thing over Lindsay. And I suppose that’s partly true.

But it’s more than that.

Lindsay has always said that Melanie and I are too much alike. That’s more true than she knows, or even wants to think about.
The truth is that Mel hates me because I’m who she’s always wanted to be. She wants to be just like me - the Alpha male, successful in business, and able to fuck whoever takes my fancy. Okay, so she literally doesn’t have the balls to pull off the Alpha male thing. But she still envies and resents my business success; and she resents the shit out of me for not caving to the pressure to live life by other people’s rules - resents that I live my life the way I want, instead of patching together some bullshit compromise that’s neat and tidy and socially acceptable. Because, deep down, if she was fucking honest, she’d admit that that’s what she’s really always wanted to do as well.

She’s no more cut out to live a life of faux-hetero domesticity than I am. She’s a predator just like me. She gets off on the hunt and the chase and the fucking power of winning, just like me - whether at work or at play.

The difference is, I’m smart enough to know that about myself, and honest enough not to pretend to be something I’m not. Even with Justin, even to keep Justin, to make him happy, I won’t do that. I’ve never fucking done that. Because I know it’s a bullshit way to build a life; that any life built on that basis won’t, can’t, stand up to any sort of pressure because its foundations are rotten.

Christ! What a fucking lame metaphor.

But it’s still true.

Melanie is so much like me it curls her guts to see me refusing to indulge in the fucked up lies and compromises that she has. She either has to hate me for having the balls to live my life with some sort of integrity, or despise herself for her own lack of it.

I don’t doubt that she loves Lindsay - or, at least, that she did.

But that was never going to be enough for her; living some cozy little faux-hetero existence was always going to make her feel trapped and less than she should be, let alone taking on being the primary care-giver to a rug rat. It’s why she kicked over the traces to “get her needs met” when Gus was first born; it’s what was behind all the shit with Leda; and it’s why she did a total freak out over Lindsay’s little adventure with Sam. It wasn’t just that she was hurt (although she probably was, just like I was if I’m honest, over Justin and the fiddle-fuck), but she resented the Hell out of the fact that Lindsay was free to do it, while she was tied to the house by the brat in her belly.

In fact, the resentment against Lindsay started building months before that, from the time Linds landed the job at the gallery. Suddenly she had her own career; she was the one with the high-powered job and the status and shit that went with it. And Mel fucking hated it. Almost as much as she resented and hated me.

And of course, deciding to have a kid, actually birth a kid, just to prove that she could, made things fucking worse. She hated having to cut back on her hours at work, she hated the idea that she was tied down not just by the bullshit promises and compromises she’d made along the way, but by her own body. And the more she hated and resented all that shit, the more she hated and resented me for having dodged that whole fucking bullet.

I’m who she could have been.

Who she should have been.

But she let herself get tangled up in all this domestic shit and she can’t even have the honesty to admit that it burns her up inside that she lives like that.
While I never have.

Not even with Justin.

Not even for Justin.

I don’t mean that I’m not prepared to fight hard to make things work with him this time. But I’m not going to pretend to be someone else to do it.

Thank Christ he doesn’t want that from me any more.

He’s not all that fucking domesticated himself. Sure he cooks occasionally, but he’s no little housefrau. He’s a different kind of predator, is all.

And if Melanie really pisses him off, she just might find that out that hard way.

*****

Justin

We finally manage to get all the details out of dear little Mikey. Seems like Mel is planning to petition the courts claiming that Brian is an unfit person to have parental rights to a young child, and she wants Michael to stand up in court and support that. Oh, and spill all the juicy details of Brian’s “debauched” ways, of course.

But at least Michael has come here - and though it’s hurt Brian to hear what Mel has planned - and of course it’s likely to send him of on some idiotic Kinney-curve where he thinks Mel might be right - at least it’s not as bad as if he’d been ambushed in court by Michael doing what Mel asked.

So we sit Michael down and make him promise that first thing in the morning he’ll call the attorney he used during the first round of tug of war over JR.

And then we debate over whether or not to call Ms. Hershell. ...

I think calling Sunday night might not be productive, and might just piss her off. Brian, predictably figures that for the money he's paying her she should answer the phone anytime he wants. In the end we compromise and send an email.

So then, before we’ve even finished eating the food that finally arrived, she calls us.

I hear Brian going over with her all the details that Mikey has told us, and when he finally hangs up he looks at least a little less stressed. He tells me that she wants us to come in and discuss it first thing tomorrow, and that she said he shouldn’t do anything stupid or reactionary in the meantime.

I guess she’s coming to know him pretty well. I suppose that to be a good lawyer, you have to be able to read people, and she is supposed to be one of the best.

So now all I have to do is to help prevent him from doing something dumb, and I need everybody else to be gone to do it.

Well, everybody except Gus, who is now curled up and sleeping in our bed.

We finally manage to get both Lindsay and Michael to leave. In fact, she decides to go home with him so they can discuss what some of their options might be about JR.

Before they go, of course, I hear Brian tell both of them that they shouldn’t worry about money -
that if they need anything for lawyer’s fees, or air fare to Toronto, or anything else, that it’s covered.

And when they’re actually on the way out the door, there’s this big farewell scene with Michael, where he hugs Brian real hard - all teary-eyed and clingy-grateful, and it makes me want to puke.

He might actually have done the right thing for once in his stupid life, but that doesn’t, for me, anyway, just wipe out all the stupid hurtful, just plain spiteful things he’s done to both Brian and I in the past. But I bite my tongue. God knows, Brian needs his friends right now - all of them - even that sorry-assed excuse for a friend.

But more even than he needs his friends, he needs me.

He needs what only I can give him.

I slip up the stairs and close the panels round the bed platform, checking on Gus who’s sleeping soundly. I collect what we need, then I come back down and move towards the couch - the one Brian got to replace the chaise longue. On the way I start slowly stripping off my clothes.

I hear Brian give a little huff of something that might be exasperation, but I also hear him following me, and the soft swish and ruffle as his own clothes join mine, strewn across the floor. By the time he reaches me, I’m spread out on my back, one leg up over the back of the couch, the other foot resting on the edge of the seat, my knees spread wide.

He stands over me for a moment, watching almost mesmerized as my lubed fingers stretch my hole, making it ready for him, then with a kind of groan he almost drops on top of me. There’s a few seconds struggle while we both fight to roll the condom over his cock, then he’s pressing into me, hot and urgent.

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I guess most people wouldn’t call this love-making. This is pure passion and need and there’s nothing tender or sweet about it. But it’s us and it’s real and it’s what we both need right now. I need to know that he’s here with me, that he’s not holding back, not hiding his fears and hurts behind a barrier of apparent gentleness. So I’ll take this any day. Because he’s letting me see all of it - his fear and anger and confusion and hurt; and he’s trusting me with all those things, and trusting me not to make things worse, not to let him down or use his vulnerability against him.

So when he finally shudders on top of me, freezing in place for a moment, then lowering himself to rest against me, I hold him and whisper what he needs to hear. Not that I love him - he knows that, it’s why we’re here, still joined together as his cock gradually softens inside me; not that everything will be alright - meaningless platitudes are the last thing he wants to hear; instead I say, soft but fierce, “We are not going to let that bitch fuck things up - not for us, and not for Gus.”

That’s what he needs to hear.

A reminder of who the bad guy really is. And of whose rights we are really fighting for.

Once he remembers that, I know there is no way that he will let Melanie’s spiteful little plans throw him off track.

I hope her and her new girlfriend have lots of butter and jam on hand, because I can smell the bread burning.

Mel’s toast already; she just doesn’t know it yet.

*****
Brian

We’ve been asked to bring Gus to the custody hearing with us. Apparently he’s of an age now, where they are prepared to ask him for his input on some things at least. So we’re getting ready to take him with us to meet with Ms. Hershell when we get a phone call from the lady herself telling us that Mel’s motion has been placed before a judge as a matter of urgency, and we need to get our asses straight down there.

I suppose I should let Justin drive, but I have to be doing something or I will go fucking crazy. Somehow we make it to the court house in one piece, and I even manage to park the car.

Once inside, I spot her straight away. She comes to me and tells me that the judge wants to see both her and Mel’s attorney in her chambers, and she’s asked that I be allowed to be present.

“Don’t say anything,” she orders. “Unless you’re specifically asked a question, keep your mouth shut. If there is something you need to tell me, write it on this,” and she shoves a note pad into my hands.

“If you are asked a question, keep the answer as short as you can. And aside from that, I don’t want to hear one word out of you. Is that clear?”

I nod. Looks like she doesn’t have to worry about me saying anything, because I couldn’t if I fucking wanted to.

So we leave Gus with Justin and head off to see the judge.

Why do I feel like I’m about to be lynched?
Justin

I don’t know who’s more upset when Brian walks away - him, me or Gus.

I can’t do anything about Brian right now, except send my love and support to him in one concentrated wave of energy; but Gus I can manage.

“I bet there’s somewhere round here that we can get some juice,” I tell him, and, making sure my cell is switched on, I take his hand and lead him downstairs and out to the little diner just across the road.

I feel sick.

I can’t tell if this is a good thing or a bad thing - that it’s in the judge’s chambers, I mean, not in the court. There’s a difference, isn’t there? I mean, if she was going to rule on Mel’s application it would have to be in court, wouldn’t it?

And how the fuck would I know?

I concentrate on keeping Gus happy, and try not to let all those thoughts drive me crazy.

But Gus has only just finished his juice when my phone rings.

It’s Brian.

His voice is hoarse as he sort of croaks out, “Where the fuck are you, Sunshine?”

I pull out some bills and drop them on the table, tell Gus his Daddy wants to see us, and take off back across the road.

Brian

It seems a fucking mile to the judge’s rooms, but we get there all too fucking fast.

There’s a huge butch dyke sitting in there already, and by the way the ice queen greets her, I know that she’s Mel’s attorney.

The judge enters and then we all sit down and it’s all I can do not to start screaming. Instead, I clutch the notepad, and make sure my pen is ready in case there’s something I have to “say” to my fucking lawyer in a hurry.

The judge glances through one of the folders she had in her hands when she entered and then looks up.

“I understand that Ms. Marcus will not be here this morning, is that correct?”

Mel’s lawyer spouts some bullshit about it being because she can’t afford the trip down, and I’m opening my mouth to point out what crap that is when I’d already paid for her ticket when I catch Ms Hershell’s eye and find my vocal chords are frozen. Wish I knew how she did that; think how handy it would be with Mikey. And Deb.

The judge glances again at the papers in her hand, and says, “I wanted to see you in chambers
rather than waste the court’s time, because I am finding it hard to understand the basis for Ms. Marcus’ petition. Indeed, I’m finding it hard to understand why Ms. Marcus believes herself to have any status before the court in this matter.”

The dyke pulls out a sheet of paper and just by glancing at it I know it’s that idiotic thing I signed. God, what a fuckwit!

I feel cold all over, but before Ms. Hershell can say anything, the judge just looks down her nose and says, “Please tell me that you have something more substantial to present than the agreement Mr. Kinney signed…” she pauses to check something on the paper in her hand … “four years ago.”

The dyke lawyer starts to say something about there being no argument about it being my signature, but to my fucking amazement the judge cuts in before she’s even got the words out and says, “Perhaps not. But as none of the signatures are witnessed, let alone notarized, and as the document was never registered with the courts, I can’t believe that an attorney of Ms. Marcus’ standing could possibly believe that the document has any validity.”

Mel’s attorney mumbles something about “the intent”, and the judge cuts her off.

“The court is very rarely interested in intent, but in actions and legal facts. I’m sure that you are aware that Pennsylvania law not only requires that any document relating to the relinquishment of parental privileges must be signed and witnessed in front of a notary, but that, after a suitable ‘cooling off’ period, it must then be registered with the courts in a formal hearing. Since none of these actions were taken, I repeat, the document has no legal status.

“And as Ms. Marcus’ sole claim to rights in the minor child …” again a quick check of the papers …, “Gus, appears to rest solely on that piece of paper, I am waiting see if you have any further evidence to present which might make me revise my opinion that Ms. Marcus has no status in this case.”

Then the lawyer starts in on how Melanie is concerned over Gus’ welfare because I’m such a sorry excuse for a human being.

That’s when Ms. Hershell finally starts earning the fucking huge amounts I pay her.

“In fact,” she cuts in, “Mr. Kinney is a respected businessman. He is sole owner of one of the most successful advertising agencies in the State; he makes substantial contributions to a number of charities; and he has provided consistent financial support for Gus ever since his son’s birth.”

The judge starts looking through another sheaf of documents. Some I recognize as the financial records I’d been asked to provide to prove that I’d always looked after Linds and Gus.

She comes across one that makes her stop and read carefully, and whatever it is, it’s making her face, never exactly friendly, look even more un-amused. But there’s something else stapled behind it, and whatever that is, it takes the scowl off her face at least. In fact, she looks up at me and raises an eyebrow in what is almost a recognizable expression.

For one truly scary moment it’s like looking into some kind of warped mirror.

Before I can work out what the look means, the bitch dyke is saying something about a “sex offences” claim. I feel my fucking heart stop beating, and for a moment I can’t breathe.

Fuck!
Ms. Hershell leans forward, looking furious, but before she can even open her mouth, the judge is waving her input aside.

“Please Ms. Hershell, don’t bother,” she says. Then to my fucking astonishment, she glares at Mel’s attorney and says in a very nasty voice, “We may not be in court right now, but I have no intention of allowing you to present mis-information about Mr. Kinney in the interest of furthering your extremely dubious case.”

She gives me that look again, and amazingly, seeing it makes heart seem to settle into something like a normal rhythm.

“Mr. Kinney was the victim of a malicious accusation by his nephew,” the Daniel-come-to-judgement goes on. “I’ve read the papers relating to the case, and read the signed affidavit of the officer who investigated the case. He is of the opinion that Mr. Kinney exhibited great generosity in not suing his nephew for damages.”

Suddenly she stands up.

“Unless you have something of more substance to present, then I can save the court’s valuable time by ruling now to dismiss Ms. Marcus’ petition, and allow Mr. Kinney to continue with his custody hearing.”

She waits for a moment, then when Mel’s voice box smartly keeps silent, walks out.

Ms. Hershell signals me, so I stand up and shakily follow. In the background, I hear the two lawyers talking about what a cow this judge can be, but personally, I’d vote for her for fucking President.

On the way down the corridor, I hit the speed dial on my cell.
The custody issues continue.

Justin

Brian looks so shell-shocked when I find him that for one split second I’m terrified, but then, as Gus throws himself at his father, one of those slow, sweet, almost shy smiles spills across Brian’s face and I know everything is okay.

He holds Gus in one arm and reaches the other hand to clasp my neck. We don’t kiss, but for a moment, his forehead brushes mine, and then that tongue in cheek smirk wanders across his face and settles in the corner of his mouth, and my world stabilizes around it. However rattled he might have been earlier, Brian is back, and very much on his game.

Before he can say anything, Ms. Hershell walks up to us, and just for a moment there is something in the way she carries herself that reminds me of Brian when he’s in “I’m the fucking best there is” successful businessman mode. She looks for one split second like she might actually smile, but then says almost smugly, “Now that we’ve disposed of Ms. Marcus’ petition, it’s time to sort out the remaining custody issues."

I feel my heart give a funny little skip. I mean, I knew the meeting must have gone well, but … that sounded kind of like they’d wiped the floor with Mel. I glance at Brian and he gives me a brief grin - that shark-grin that should warn everyone who sees it to run a fucking mile, because it means that he’s in a take no prisoner mood. Then he nods at her and, after whispering for a moment in Gus’ ear, hands him back to me.

“The court officer may wish to hear from Gus, Mr. Taylor, so could you be sure to stay within a few minutes’ walk of the building.”
I nod at her, and smile at Brian, trying to send him all my love and support.

I feel his hand grip my neck again in one quick squeeze - a caress that means more to me than any host of fucking ‘darlings’ and ‘I love you’s’ from anyone else ever could - and then they walk off down the corridor. At the junction, I see Lindsay with someone that I guess is her lawyer. She looks towards us and Gus gives her a little wave, but then her lawyer hustles her off down the adjoining hallway and Gus and I are left to our own devices again.

*****

Brian

I can hardly fucking believe it when, as we’re walking down the corridor, Ms. Fucking Hershell drops the little bombshell that I should expect that Mel’s lawyer will be present at these talks. Seems like because they’re less formal than a court proceeding, Mel can still argue that she should have some rights to see Gus. And apparently Lindsay has already agreed for Mel’s lawyer to argue her case. Why am I not fucking surprised?

Then we walk into the room and find Mel’s dyke lawyer there talking to some fucking guy.

Turns out the guy is the court officer who is going to “mediate” our session. For some reason, I’d expected a woman, and the fact that it’s a guy (straight, mid thirties, chunky, rumpled, not even remotely fuckable) isn’t a welcome surprise. At some level, I’d have to fucking admit that … I know I’m going to have to talk about my fucking “feelings” for Gus. Like that’s the important thing … how I fucking feel. Yeah, right. My fucking mother protested that she loved me every fucking day, but it didn’t stop her standing and watching while my father beat the shit out of me. The only “feeling” she really showed over the whole sorry-assed period of my childhood was that she was shit-scared the neighbors would talk about how come I “fell down the fucking stairs” so
many times.

So … for me it’s not about how I “feel” about Gus. It’s about how Gus gets treated; how the way he’s treated, the way he’s looked after, makes Gus feel. That’s all that’s fucking important here as far as I’m concerned. If they convinced me my Sonnyboy didn’t want to be with me, didn’t want to see me, that I made him feel bad, then I’d walk away this fucking minute.

But they won’t; they can’t convince me of that … not any more. Because I’ve seen how happy Gus is to be with me, and to be with his fucking “Dus”. He needs to know that we want to be with him, too. He needs to know we want him in our lives, that he can always count on us to be there for him. That’s what my Sonnyboy needs.

And that’s what he’s going to fucking get.

And if that means I have to talk about my “feelings” for him … well, then that’s what I’ll have to do. Whatever it takes.

But talking all that shit in front of a woman … that’s one thing. Doing it in front of another guy … even one that’s as boring and sexless as this one … that’s … that’s harder. It’s much fucking harder for some reason.

But I guess it’s just going to have to be done.

But before we get to that, I need to know what the fuck Mel’s lawyer is going to get up to. I thought the judge had just ruled that she had no fucking standing in this business, so I’m pissed off that I’m going to have to listen to more of her bullshit. And I’m willing to bet that there’ll be enough of that spread around to grow roses for the whole fucking east coast; with no prizes for guessing who most of that shit will be about.

But I feel Ms. Hershell shift in her seat next to me, and I know that if I look at her, she’ll give me one of her ‘speak out of turn and die’ glares, so I resign myself to keeping my mouth shut till I’m allowed to talk and in the meantime I give my own version of the death glare to Mel’s lawyer.

The guy, Sam somebody, introduces himself and says that he’s there to make sure that we come up with a custody arrangement that represents Gus’ best interests. He makes some yada yada comment about how he hopes we’ll all be happy with the final agreement; but then he also makes it clear that it will be a formal agreement, registered with the court, and happy or not, we’d better fucking abide by it or the court will step in to make sure we do - or to “revisit the agreement”.

In other words, whatever we agree to, we have to stick with it or we might lose whatever we’ve won.

Fair enough.

As long as he really does look out for Gus’ best interests, I don’t have a problem with any of that.

Then he goes round each of us, making sure he knows who we are and who each of the lawyers is representing.

He comes to Mel’s dyke friend last, and says something like, “I understand that you’re here to represent Ms. Marcus who is unable to be present due to the financial burden presented by travel from Toronto to Pittsburgh with a young child.”

Mel’s lawyer agrees, and starts some sob story about how difficult the she-wolf found it to make that decision but how she simply couldn’t come up with the money, etc., etc. She even implied that
Lindsay had cleaned out their bank account to come home, leaving her stranded with nothing.

I’m ready to ignore the dangers of Ms. Hershell’s glare of death, and the only thing that stops me telling this guy what a load of bullshit he’s being told, is that I feel Ms. H. getting ready to intervene herself, but before either of us can say anything, Lindsay’s lawyer jumps in.

“Actually,” she says quietly, “None of those statements are quite accurate. My client’s fare to Pittsburgh, as well as Gus’, and all their accommodation was paid for by Mr. Kinney.”

For a moment, Mel’s lawyer looks like the cat that’s swallowed the cream.

“Exactly,” she snaps. “Mr. Kinney suborned Ms. Peterson into abandoning her daughter, and bringing her son back to the US without his other mother’s consent.”

Both Ms. H. and Lindsay’s attorney start to say something at this, but before they can get anything out, good old Sam intervenes.

“I think you should know,” he says, “that I’ve been briefed on this case by Judge Corelli’s clerk. He has informed me of the judge’s decision this morning, and her ruling that Ms. Marcus has no legal status as Gus’ parent. That being the case, any accusations of parental interference with regard to Ms. Peterson’s bringing Gus back to this country are without any basis in law.”

He pauses for a moment and looks at some other documents in his hand, then goes on, “In any case, given the Canadian government’s repeated requests for both Ms. Peterson and Ms. Marcus to leave Canada, I don’t see how any court could fault Ms. Peterson for complying with their request.”

He looks sternly at Mel’s lawyer and says, “Now can we move on in a more constructive fashion, please?”

I’m ready to let it go at that, but Lindsay’s lawyer clearly doesn’t feel the same way. “In fact,” she says, “Mr. Kinney also paid for an open ticket for Ms. Marcus to visit Pittsburgh, and has given undertakings that he will happily pay for accommodation for her, and for her daughter, for a week’s visit.”

Sam blinks at that, and gives me a look that I can’t read.

Then he turns to Mel’s attorney.

“Is that the case, Ms. Levinson?”

She blusters something about Mel not wanting to undermine her position by accepting anything from me, and Ms. Hershell jumps in with a quiet little remark about how it’s funny that she’d never shown any such scruples before, which makes Sam give her a look. Ms. H. meets it blandly and everyone is quiet for a moment while Sam once more looks through his papers.

“I would not like to appear judgmental in this matter, but I have to admit that if I were asked for my considered opinion, it would be that given how much financial assistance Gus’s mothers have accepted from Mr. Kinney over the years, I believe that Ms. Marcus failure to appear at this hearing is influenced more by the difficulty she might have in re-entering Canada than it is by any scruples concerning the source of the funds which would have allowed her to be here.”

As Mel’s lawyer goes to protest, he holds up a hand.

“In any case, any arrangement for Ms. Marcus to have any sort of visitation rights with Gus will be
solely at the discretion of Ms. Peterson and Mr. Kinney.”

That’s Mel’s lawyer’s cue to jump in with a whole batch of stuff about how I was only ever supposed to be a sperm donor, with no ongoing role in Gus’s life, and of course, what a sorry excuse for a human being I am and how anyone with Gus’s best interests at heart would never let me near my kid.

I try to sit unaffected by all this shit, but it’s fucking hard. Some traitorous part of me wishes Justin was here to … what? Protect me? What am I? Some pussy faggot who needs his hand held when the mean lady says nasty things about him?

Fuck that.

Of course, another, even more traitorous part is tempted to agree and just get up and walk away. But I’ve realized over the last few days that that isn’t an option. It’s not about me. Or Mel either. It’s about Gus. So for his sake I have to hang in there.

But while I’m dealing with my own fucking internal dramas, it dawns on me that good old Sam is looking a little bewildered by all this. He flicks through some of the papers in his file and says, “Ms. Levinson, I can understand that there may have been a verbal agreement prior to Gus’ birth that Mr. Kinney would have no further role in Gus’ life. But the fact is that, as Judge Corelli ruled earlier this morning, any agreement for Mr. Kinney to relinquish his parental rights was never formalized. And in the meantime, it would appear that Mr. Kinney has, in fact, been making very generous support payments ever since Gus was born.”

He looks at her over the top of the papers and says, “If there was never an intent for Mr. Kinney to have any rights or responsibilities towards Gus, then I find it difficult to understand why that would be the case.”

Mel’s lawyer barely bats an eye.

“Those weren’t support payments,” she says. “They were gifts. It was a Mr. Kinney’s sole discretion and there was never any requirement or indeed expectation that these would continue.”

I sit dumbfounded. Because she’s right in a way. I mean, I never signed anything saying I’d pay so much a month or anything. But …

Shit!

But Ms. Hershell tilts her head a little, and says, in that quiet-but-deadly way of hers, “Well, that claim is false. And we can prove that it’s false.”

Everyone looks at her, and she smiles and pulls from her briefcase a paper that I don’t immediately recognize.

“Immediately after Gus’s birth,” she says, “And at Ms. Marcus’s direct instigation, Gus’s mothers requested that Mr. Kinney take out a million dollar insurance policy naming Gus as the beneficiary.”

There’s a pause … I guess while everyone tries to work out the significance of this.

“I fail to see that there could be any need to insure Mr. Kinney’s life for such a sum if there was no expectation that he would be making, during his lifetime, a substantial financial contribution to Gus’s support.”
Sam looks at the paper, and nods, and then asks Lindsay directly if it was true that they had asked me to take out that fucking policy.

She looks cornered for a moment, but then nods. “Yes,” she says. “Yes it was. And I always intended that Gus would know his father, that Brian would have some sort of a role in Gus’s life. Even if he wasn’t … officially … Gus’s parent.”

Sam nods again, and then turns to the dyke lawyer and says, “I would have to agree, Ms. Levinson, that the fact that Ms. Marcus apparently felt it necessary for Mr. Kinney to make such a provision for Gus argues that there was definitely an expectation that during his lifetime Mr. Kinney would be expected to contribute financially to his son's support.”

He pauses for a moment, and then says, “Which, of course, also indicates an expectation that Mr. Kinney definitely would have an ongoing role in his son’s life.”

There’s another slight pause, and then he says, with an edge of pure fucking nastiness in his voice that I can actually admire, “Unless, of course, it was envisioned that Mr. Kinney’s sole role was to provide financial assistance with no further rights or privileges where his son is concerned. And if that was the intention, then I can assure you that as an officer of this court I would have to take a very dim view of such an exploitative approach.”

Ms. Fucking Levinson starts up again about what an asshole I am and how just being around me would totally fuck Gus up, but this time Ms. Hershell cuts her off with another of her deadly verbal missiles.

“The fact is that similar claims were made in front of Judge Corelli. However, we’ve supplied character statements from two of Mr. Kinney’s colleagues, a tribute from one of his clients lauding not only his work ethic, but also his selfless charitable works, a further tribute from one of the charities for whom Mr. Kinney has done fund-raising, and another character statement from an experienced member of the Pittsburgh Police department. Further, we’ve supplied copies of all the documents relating to Mr. Kinney’s partnership with Mr. Justin Taylor. Mr. Kinney and Mr. Taylor have been in a stable relationship for over three years now.”

Lindsay shifts in her seat at that, but Sam is peering at the papers, and Ms. Hershell goes on, “They have joint property agreements, living wills, survivorship documents and both have made out wills in each other’s favor with Gus being named as the legatee to both wills should they both decease at the same time.”

Sam has a quick glance through the papers my highly paid, but just maybe possibly worth it attorney points out to him, and nods.

Then he looks up at Mel’s dyke friend again, and says, “Mr. Kinney’s so-called promiscuity is of no concern to this court unless it adversely impacts on his son, and no evidence has been provided that it is permitted to do so. In fact, despite this so-called promiscuity, it seems Mr. Kinney is in a stable, long-term relationship. And far from being the drug-addled incompetent whom your client claims him to be, he appears, in fact, to be a highly respected businessman who runs a very successful company in a highly competitive field. Not to mention his generous support of various charitable causes. In fact, Mr. Kinney would appear to be a model citizen without so much as an outstanding parking ticket. So unless you have any means of substantiating such claims, when all the evidence points to the contrary, I must advise you that to persist will bring you under the censure of the court.”

Ms. Fucking Levinson starts gobbling at that and for one intense instant I wish Justin was here so that we could fucking celebrate this moment together, but I take a deep breath and concentrate on
the here and now. There’ll be time for celebration later. I hope.

Mel’s bitch lawyer starts saying something about how Gus will be scarred for life if he doesn’t get to see his Moma, and how we’re all out to get her, with no regard to Gus’s feelings; but Sam isn’t having any.

He’s fast losing patience with her bullshit, and says in that snide voice all these fucking law-types seem to use when they want to be particularly nasty without getting hauled over the coals for insulting someone outright, “Ms. Levinson, I don’t think you fully understand how shaky your client’s position is. Not only is she in breach of a Canadian government request for her to leave the country, she is likely to be sanctioned by the Pennsylvanian Bar Council for her actions in this matter. She has misrepresented to Mr. Kinney the status of the agreement she drew up and asked him to sign; she has attempted to mislead the court as to the status of the same document; since she was Mr. Kinney’s attorney of record at the time she could also be accused of gross conflict of interest both in drawing up the document herself and also in not advising him to seek other legal advice on the matter; she has at best failed to disclose fully her reasons for not attending this custody facilitation; and, in attempting to present to the court material relating to the child molestation charges brought against Mr. Kinney by his nephew which she knew to be false, and making further unsubstantiated allegations regarding Mr. Kinney’s character and conduct she has not only been attempting to mislead the court, but could actually face libel action if Mr. Kinney is so inclined.”

Fuck!

“Now,” says Sam, “Rather than waste any more time with Ms. Marcus’s claims, I suggest that we move on to discuss what arrangements Ms. Peterson and Mr. Kinney are prepared to agree to.”

So after all the fucking angst in the end it’s easy.

Linds and I had already discussed this. I don’t want to supplant her as Gus’s primary care giver. I just want to make sure that my Sonnyboy gets to see his Dad whenever he wants to.

So we agree that I can see him three times a week, on a schedule to be agreed, and he can spend two weekends a month with Justin and I once we’ve moved into the house. Plus Lindsay won’t attempt to take him out of the country - or even out of the State, without my written approval - signed and witnessed this time in front of a notary.

We also agree that if Melanie comes back to Pittsburgh, any time she spends with Gus will be supervised by someone from the child welfare agency until the Court is convinced that she is not a flight risk. Unless Mel and Linds get back together of course - and never say never on that front either. They’re both fucked up enough to keep doing this to each other.

But if they do get back together, then there will be ground rules on where they can live, and how Gus gets treated by Melanie. Or else I have the right to step in and ask that we review the custody arrangements - maybe even sue for full custody.

So at least my Sonnyboy has some kind of safety net.

The last thing on the agenda is the only one that Lindsay kicks up over, but I’m adamant, and once Sam sees all the fucking paperwork that Justin and I signed all those months ago, he suggests that Justin bring Gus in so we can all discuss it together.

*****
Justin

Gus and I are sitting in the coffee shop drawing together when my cell rings. It’s some woman from the court asking me to bring Gus back because there are still one or two things to settle.

I can’t tell by her tone of voice what’s going on, so we hurry back.

I’m trying to stay really calm so that I don’t upset Gus, but just as we’re about to walk through the door, he says, “Dus, don’t let them make me go away again. Please.”

I bend down hug him and tell him that neither his Daddy nor I will let that happen. Then I cross my fingers and hope it’s a promise we can keep.

He’s clinging to my hand when we walk in, and seeing all the strange faces, everyone so serious, he turns and hides his face against my hip. I don’t want to make everyone think he’s a baby who doesn’t know what he wants, so I don’t pick him up, I just stroke his hair, and say quietly, “It’s okay, Gus. Daddy is here. And Mommy.”

He looks round then, and, ignoring Lindsay who’s holding out her hand, he runs to his father. Brian picks him up and sits him on his knee and Gus hugs him tightly.

“Hey, Sonnyboy,” Brian says. “This man is helping us work out where you’re going to live and he wants to ask you a couple of questions. Is that okay?”

“I want to live in Pi’ssburgh,” Gus announces firmly (and if Brian thinks I miss his little smirk at the mispronunciation he’s totally delusional). “I don’t want to go back to T’ronto.”

The guy who seems to be the court representative or whatever, smiles at him.

“Do you like being able to see your Daddy more often, Gus?” he asks.

Gus nods firmly. “And my Dus,” he says.

The guy raises an eyebrow.

“That’s his name for Justin,” Brian says.

“He can’t pronounce his “j’s” very well yet,” Lindsay chips in. And something in the way she says it makes me look at her very closely. Her voice sounded … I don’t know … spiteful … color me surprised. What the fuck is going on with her now?

“I can too,” Gus pipes up, getting upset again the way he did the other day in the diner.

Brian intervenes again, like he did then. “He can say Justin’s name just fine,” he explains. “But he doesn’t call him ‘Justin’ just like he doesn’t call me ‘Brian’. As far as Gus is concerned, he has a Daddy … that’s me … and he has a Dus … that’s Justin.”

Sam nods, then smiles again at Gus. “Is that right, Gus? You have a Daddy and a Dus?”

Gus smiles back at him, relieved that he’s been understood. “And a Mommy and a Moma,” he says. Then he frowns. “But Moma’s been mean to us and she isn’t with us anymore.”

He brightens. “So now it’s just Mommy and Daddy and Dus … and I get to see my Daddy and my Dus a lot. So I like it better,” he finishes.

Sam nods.
“Well, that seems to make Gus’ views very clear.”

“Now, Mr. Taylor, I understand that you and Mr. Kinney are in a committed relationship, is that correct?”

I swallow deeply and nod. This is the first fucking time that we’ve really made that commitment public - well, aside from the house-dinner thing that wound up being more about me moving to New York than it was about Brian and me announcing that we were together. Or it seemed like that to everyone else at least.

“Yes,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “Yes, we are.”

“Justin, really …” Lindsay interrupts. “You’ve only been back a couple of weeks. How long will it be before you leave him again?”

I glare at her.

“Lindsay, I’ve only ever left Brian once … and that was a long time ago now. I had to go to Los Angeles for a few months for my work, and I had to go to New York for a few months for the same reason. But that didn’t mean we weren’t together. It just meant we had to live in different cities for a while.”

I turn to Sam. “I’m an artist. Sometimes I have to go where the work or the opportunity is. But both times that’s happened we’ve both known that it was only a temporary separation. It didn’t in any way mean that we’d broken up or anything.”

Sam nods. “My partner’s in the armed forces,” he says. “She’s posted overseas at the moment. It’s tough.”

I nod.

“But I agree, the fact that we are living in different places is purely circumstantial. It has no significance at all in terms of how we feel about each other.”

“Exactly,” I say.

“So, Mr. Taylor. If something should happen to Mr. Kinney, you would be prepared to continue your relationship with Gus.”

So that’s what this is about. I should have fucking known. Brian and I discussed it. If you can call it that.

We were in the shower, and I was trying to blow him quickly before Gus came looking for us, and Brian said, “So, I’m assuming you know he’ll expect you to go on being Dus even if I die young and beautiful.”

I nearly choked, but the movement of my throat made him come - with a vengeance, and by the time I’d swallowed, and gotten my breath back, he was already reaching for a towel. I scrambled up, my head spinning … maybe the cancer … but he shook his head at me so that all the water drops sprayed round the bathroom and said, “Don’t turn it into a prime time drama … I’m just saying … whatever happens … you’re his Dus now.”

So then I heard what he was saying … that if anything did happen to him he needed to know that I’ll always be there for Gus.
“I’ll always be his Dus, Brian,” I told him.

He nodded, and that’s all that was said.

But I guess that while we’re getting all this stuff sorted, he wants to make that formal as well. So that if something does happen to him, the girls can’t fuck with it.

The guy nods.

“Ms. Peterson, I understand that you’re reluctant to accept this stipulation that Mr. Kinney wants to make … that if anything should happen to him, Mr. Taylor should retain the same visitation rights with Gus.”

Lindsay purses her lips together, but her lawyer starts whispering to her, and I hear something about “more than generous”, so I’m guessing that they’re talking about all the money Brian is prepared to commit to handing over to her. Typically, whatever it is the lawyer says, Lindsay winds up shrugging, and her lawyer says, “As long as it’s clearly understood that, in the event of Mr. Kinney’s death, if Mr. Taylor wishes to maintain his visitation rights, it will be expected that Ms. Peterson will continue to receive the same support payments as have been agreed this morning, then we’re happy to proceed on that basis.”

Shit!

It looks like I'm a father. Or a "Dus" at least.

Holy fuck!

My Mom's a grandma - she's going to have a cow.
In the wake of the custody hearings, Justin gets a call that gives the boys another reason to celebrate.

Brian

I guess I could have given him a bit more warning, but as usual he handled himself like the natural fucking salesman that he is.

The truth is that when he puts his mind to it Justin is a master manipulator. And I should know. I play on people’s feelings, manipulate the way they think, for a living. But I had to fucking learn how to do it, through four years of college and a hard apprenticeship, starting at the bottom of the game and working my way up as I learned what worked and what didn’t. But Justin - he does it naturally. Look at the things he’s “persuaded” me into over the years - one way or another.

But it’s not just me; I’ve watched him work Emmett and Ted, Mikey and Vic, his agent, the press … he can be the most persuasive fucker on the planet and cajole people into jumping through hoops for him, while all the time looking like butter wouldn’t so much as heat up in his mouth.

He’s even been known to game Deb, and that takes more skill than I ever fucking learned.

This talent at playing people is one of the things that are going to make him a damned successful artist. It’s not only part of what makes his work so fucking impactful, but he sells himself like a thousand dollar whore when he needs to; and in his game that ability is almost without price.

Right now, he’s just succeeded in selling himself - and in the process, me - to good old Sam. So, although I can hardly fucking believe it, instead of being sent packing and told to forget we ever had a kid (which seemed likely if the wicked witch of the north got her way) we walk away with
the whole fucking shebang. We have rights to Gus, rights that no one can just snatch away - not without jumping through some pretty high damned hoops anyway. And those rights belong to both of us; not just me, but Justin too. And, what’s more fucking important, Gus has rights to be with us; with me, and with his beloved Dus. And that cunt Melanie can go fuck herself because there’s nothing she can do about it.

In fact, if I wasn’t reasonably sure that her and Lindsay will be playing some damned movie of the week make up scene before the ink is dry on all the fucking paperwork we’ve just signed, I’d say that we’ve finally got the bitch out of our lives for good. But at least … at least she can’t elbow me, elbow us, out of Gus’s life. She had the fucking chance to do that, and let it slip away. I guess she was scared way back when that if it took a court hearing and visits to notaries to get all the paperwork formally signed and sealed to deliver Gus over to her, I might change my mind again. So she took the chance that I’d never find out that the whole “signed away my rights” thing was a fucking sham.

Well, she should have gone ahead with it. Back then, I might even have been stupid and gullible enough to jump through all the hoops to make it official because like an idiot, I thought that maybe that might give Gus the chance at a happy family that I never had. Too fucking late now, bitch. Because it turns out that the best chance Gus has at that isn’t with the merry fucked up munchers, it’s with us - Justin and I. And who could have fucking believed that?

Well, I wouldn’t have. Not back then.

But now … now I fucking do believe it.

And the State of good old Pennsylvania agrees with me. Or at least, they believe that Gus won’t be any worse off having Justin and me in his life, and they’ve just signed off on all the papers to prove it.

Now I want to celebrate in all the ways I do best.

I want to get out of here, and hit Babylon, or the baths, or at least Woody’s; but I can’t see that happening any time soon. Not only do we have to spend some time making nice with Linds and doing a handover of Gus (which I’m not looking forward to), but for some fucked up reason, I promised that this evening we’d collect the old fossil and get him to his hotel. And knowing Sunshine. he isn’t going to want to just dump him there. Fuck! It’s going to be fucking midnight before I can get the little twat naked and show him just how much I appreciate his salesmanship … and some of this other talents.

*****

Justin

I know Brian has something else in mind than lunch with Lindsay, but while we might have got the legal stuff all signed and sealed, Lindsay is still the one who has to deliver. And she needs to know that bailing on the agreements that we signed today isn’t going to be an option. So we all head out to a semi-decent, but still “child friendly” restaurant, which of course is filled with breeders - a few couples with, presumably, their kids; a couple of groups that look like Mom and Grandma out for the day with the kids, and a whole bunch of Moms with toddlers in tow. I keep my fingers crossed that Gus being here will encourage Brian to behave in a way that’s not going to set off fireworks right, left and center, but I’m not totally convinced it will be enough. The place is making my skin crawl a little, let alone Brian’s.

I start working out what kind of “G” rated distraction I might be able to pull if either of us starts
getting too antsy. Maybe if I ...

I’m given something else to think about though when, just after we’ve sat down, Lindsay starts her little games, saying something about knowing that she’s agreed “in principle” to Brian having more of a role in Gus’ life, but that he needs to respect the fact that she’s Gus’ mother, so she gets the major say in how he’s brought up. Fuck that!

It’s time somebody told her a few home truths and I’m just about to do it, when Brian says quietly, “This isn’t the fu … the time or place for this.”

And he glances sideways to where Gus is looking round the place with an expression so like Brian’s when he’s about to utter one of his infamous critiques that I have to stifle a laugh.

“There’s lots of babies here,” Gus says in a voice that makes it totally clear that he doesn’t think they improve the place.

Brian also looks around, and for a moment the identical expressions of disdain on their faces make me totally want to laugh.

Or to grab a pencil and try to capture them on paper.

But then my attention is caught by the look on Lindsay’s face - that mask of carefully moderated disapproval that I’ve known all my life; my mother and her friends used it constantly and totally eroded its affect on me through sheer over-use. Like they say, ‘Familiarity breeds contempt’. No shit.

But the look unsettles Brian. Probably no one else would really notice that; but I do, and so does Lindsay. That look is one of the subtle ways Lindsay uses to control him.

I’ve thought about it a lot - especially during those long lonely months in New York - the relationship between Brian and this blonde woman I used to think of as a close friend. This lesbian who has always had not-so-secret yearnings for my fucking partner.

I mean, that fact that I was in New York at all had a lot to do with Lindsay. If she hadn’t got in Brian’s ear about my “great opportunity”, I might have had some hope of convincing him it was really not the right thing for me. But once she’d done her sales job on him it was just a matter of time before he pushed me off one of his fucking Kinney cliffs to go seek my fortune in the so-called Big Fucking Apple.

Dick!

I guess it turned out okay. Because I did get noticed - enough to get a good agent; and I have sold some stuff; and now I have the show coming up. And all that meant that I could come home and make it clear that I am home without Brian freaking out. Because all that was enough to convince him that I can have it all - a successful career and a life with him, and that that’s what being the best fucking homosexual I can be is all about.

But Lindsay didn’t know that it would play out that way. In fact, all the evidence says she thought that once I got on that plane, I’d be gone for good. But she still did her best to push me on board - or at least to fuck with Brian’s head so he’d do the pushing.

But one thing she totally didn’t count on - being away gave me a chance to really think about the fucked up dynamics of our little family. And especially about Lindsay, and her thing with Brian. See … some lesbians really hate men. Completely. Just despise them; think the world would be a
better place if the whole male population got wiped out. But Linds isn’t like that. One of the things that I came to realize about Lindsay is that while she pretty much wants to fuck women, she still wants men to notice her; wants their admiration and attention. Maybe she didn’t get enough from her father. Who the fuck knows? But she craves male attention.

And in college she met Brian; who was, like he is now, beautiful, brilliant, but from a working-class background and, no matter how much he might deny it, he was painfully aware of that, aware of the limitations it placed on him in some really subtle ways.

In some fucked up way, it probably even helped that he was gay. It meant she didn’t have to compete with other women for his attention. He could help her come out - at least help her deal with her own gay-ness, and she could help him fit in. She could teach him a whole lot of stuff that you can’t learn from books, no matter how brilliant you are, and you sure as hell don’t learn in the kind of schools Brian went to; she could pass on the kind of stuff Lindsay and I learned growing up the way we did.

I don’t mean to sound like a snob, and I don’t mean things like which fork to use, and that sort of shit. Brian was way smart enough to pick that stuff up without any help from anyone. I mean things like how to play the subtle power games that go on when a people of a certain type get together; how to smell those out and finesse your way through them, and, most importantly, how to make sure that all the right people know that you’re part of the game.

From Linds he would have learned all the little signals that tell anyone who’s in the know when moves are being made and who’s winning and how to make sure you’re not on the losing side; or even worse, that you’re not left clueless among the oblivious masses. The sexual power games at places like Babylon I think Brian was born knowing. But with this other stuff, with all the little things that send the right signals that get you accepted as part of the power group where money and prestige, not sex, are the measures of status, with those things I think he might have needed some help. And there was Lindsay, ready, willing, and with her background, more than able to help him acquire the skills and … veneer … he needed to pass as one of that privileged.

But being the one who got to teach him that stuff has encouraged Lindsay to always feel a little superior to Brian, and somewhere in his psyche there’s a tiny sliver of himself that agrees with her.

Mostly Brian doesn’t have any time for all that bullshit. But in business, dealing with some of the people he deals with, the things he learned from Lindsay have been really valuable to him. He might spend most of his time just bull-dozing his way through all the nuances and subtleties with his usual combination of arrogance, brilliance and sexual magnetism, but he can do that with confidence because he doesn’t do it blindly; when he crosses a boundary, stomps it to pieces under his Prada boots, he does it knowing to an inch where the boundary is, and knowing exactly what buttons he’s pushing by ignoring it.

It’s like in art.

You can’t afford to ignore perspective and draftsmanship until you’ve got a really good handle on them. There’s a difference between someone who can’t get perspective right, and someone who can, but chooses not to; and the difference is obvious to anyone who knows anything about art as soon as they see the piece of work.

It’s the same with what Brian does. Ignoring convention is completely different from being ignorant of what the convention is; and the difference is obvious to all the people playing the game; the people that, in business, Brian needs to impress. Being ignorant makes you look foolish and incompetent - like a bad artist; but ignoring convention can, if you do it right, make you look both brilliant and powerful. Brian, with his intelligence and skills, he tends to come out looking
like a genius.

So in some ways he feels indebted to Lindsay, kind of the same way he does with Mikey and Deb. Because in some hidden corner of the heart they all seem to forget he has, he still feels like the Mick kid with the black eyes and bruises whose drunken father and bitch mother made it clear that they considered him a fuck up; thought that the best that could be expected of him was to join them in the ranks of Pittsburgh’s working poor - and he’d probably even fuck that up and wind up a totally screwed up loser in some doss house somewhere. He saw himself then (and I guess in some way still does) as someone very different from Michael with his loving family, and certainly different from Lindsay with her country club background. Part of him, no matter how much he might fight this, really believes that because Lindsay’s family had money, and Michael’s family had love, that they are, they must be, better than him, who grew up with neither; part of him still believes that somehow the difference must be his fault, must be because of something in him that didn’t deserve those things.

And that means, in the fucked up world of Brian Kinney’s deep secret soul, that Lindsay and Michael who, in different ways, shared with him at least a little bit of those things, are in some ways better than him, because not only were their lives better than his, but, even more so, because they were willing to allow a loser like him into those lives.

So when Lindsay pulls that fucking disapproving WASP shit on him, that affects Brian. Whether he shows it or not. And Lindsay fucking knows it does.

But so do I. And I am getting seriously tired of her shit. I’d like to really let her have it, but Brian’s right, Gus is here and that means it’s not the right time for that.

Instead, I fall back on my own WASP upbringing; she’s not the only one who learned how to smile while you slip the dagger in between your opponent’s ribs.

“Brian,” I say, all innocent enthusiasm, “We should contact Mom and get her to start looking for a place for Lindsay and Gus.”

He gives me a look, and his tongue slides into his cheek for a moment, but he nods agreement without saying anything.

Lindsay looks rattled though.

What did she think? That Brian was going to pay for her to stay at the Marriott forever?

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea to rush into anything,” she says. “Perhaps Gus and I could stay with you for a while.”

Both Brian and I stare at her.

“I don’t think the loft’s really cut out for family living, Linds,” Brian says dryly.

It’s her turn to stare at us.

“But I thought …” she stammers, “You’re moving into your house.”

That’s when the penny drops. She listened to us tell the guy at the courthouse about the house … about Gus having his own room, and fencing off the swimming pool and stuff, and she thinks we’re moving into the mansion.

Fuck!
She probably thinks that once she and Gus move in there with us that she’ll be able to persuade Brian to let them stay ... a nice cozy little family. She’d be getting all that support money and not having to lay out a red cent of it for accommodation - or even food and stuff, probably. Plus she’d get to play Lady of the Manor. And maybe even find a way to get Brian to push me off another cliff or two, so she could totally live out her little fantasy.

Oh, I so don’t fucking think so.

*****

Brian

What the fuck?

She thinks we’re moving into the manor and she can just move in with us?

I’m sure Sunshine would just fucking love that.

But anyway ... not happening.

“Sorry, Linds,” I tell her before he can open his mouth and deliver the slap down that’s trembling on his wicked little tongue. “We sold that place.”

“But ...”

“We’ve bought somewhere else,” Justin cuts in, and there’s no fucking mistaking the smugness in his voice. “It’s great. Much smaller and more suitable for us.”

“Well, I’m sure ...”

She’s still trying to find a way to make this fucking disaster happen. Have to head that one off fast.

“Lindsay, we’ve just signed the contracts,” I say. “It’ll be weeks, maybe even a month or two, before it’s ready for us to move in.”

She doesn’t look happy but says, “Well, I don’t want to disrupt Gus too much, so ...”

I glance at Justin and see he’s thinking exactly what I am. She didn’t fucking hesitate to “disrupt” Gus when she hauled him off to Toronto, and then let his security be sacrificed to the fucked up games that she and Melanie have been playing. Fuck! She wouldn’t even let me come and see him, let him know that at least he had one person in his life for whom his welfare came first.

But I bite my tongue for once. Gus is sitting right here next to me, and I suddenly realize that he’s wriggling around on his chair in a way that makes me think ...

“Gus, do you want to go to the restroom?” Lindsay asks before I can say anything. She starts to stand up, but he slides down off his chair and grabs hold of my arm.

“I want to go with Daddy,” he says.

“Gus, don’t be silly,” Lindsay starts.

But before she can go any further, I say, “How about if you take Dus with you? I think he wants to go too.”

“Dus” gives me a look that should be registered as a lethal weapon, but he softens when Gus says
“You stay here and wait for us?”

“Of course,” I tell him. “Mommy and I will sit right here till you get back.”

He looks into my face for a moment, and I ruffle his hair. “I promise,” I tell him. “I’ll be sitting right here when you bring Dus back.”

He smiles then and takes Dus’ hand, and as they walk off, I hear him telling his new Dus-daddy that he’s a big kid now and doesn’t need to go with Mommy like a baby.

As my two guys walk off together, I enjoy the view for a moment or two and then take advantage of the few minutes that Gus’ absence gives me to make sure Lindsay understands that I’m not prepared to stand by while she plays the games she has in the past.

“You should have thought about fucking disrupting Gus’ life before you carted him away to a place where he had no family, no friends and you had no fucking jobs, permanent place to live or support system.

“That isn’t going to fucking happen again, Linds.”

She tears up then, of course, and starts saying about how she felt that she had to make the effort to make things work with Melanie and all that bullshit, but I cut her off.

“Whatever,” I tell her. “But right now we have to make sure that Gus gets out of that damned hotel and into some kind of decent home environment as soon as we can. And then you can take your time to find the right place to live permanently.”

She starts going on about how she can’t afford this and that fucking thing, but I cut her off. “That’s bullshit. With the money we agreed on today, you can afford to pay rent on some kind of decent place, even if you can’t afford to buy. And once you get a fucking job, you can start saving for a deposit if that’s what you want to do. So don’t give me any shit about money, Linds.”

I take a breath and say, “Any extra money will be going straight into an account for Gus, or into a college fund. You’re not going to get money just to play around with. If you want more than you can afford on what I’ll be giving you, you’re just going to have to get your ass into gear and find a job.”

She looks at me like she can’t believe what I’m saying, and I reach across the table and cover her hand.

“Lindsay, you’ll be fine. You know that I’m not going to let you and Gus starve in the gutter. But you have to start taking responsibility for yourself, and not expecting me, or Mel or anyone else to support you.”

“That’s not true,” she says. “I had a good job before Gus was born and a better one before …”

“Before you fucking threw it all away because the bitch-queen wanted to get out of Dodge and away from the evil Kinney monster,” I say.

“Brian,” she tries to soothe me, “It wasn’t about you. It was about us not feeling safe after the bombing.”

It’s her turn now to take my hand. “I know the timing was bad for you, with Justin going at the same time, and the way things were with Michael, but you shouldn’t personalize it.”
“Shouldn’t I, Linds? Shouldn’t I “personalize” the fact that you persuaded me that I had to let Justin go to New York, that you practically packed his bags for him, and then as soon as he was on the plane, you announced that you were leaving as well, and taking my son with you. Because I’d had my chances, but it was too late to make up for the time I missed with him after I gave him up to Mel to help stop you from making the biggest fucking mistake of your life with that Gui sleaze?”

I stop then. I’ve said way more than I ever meant to, revealed much more than I intended about how fucking much she hurt me when she told me that.

She’s about to say something else, when the cavalry arrives and I get to spend a few moments helping Gus settle in his seat.

Fuck!

I hadn’t meant to go off on that tangent. I’d meant to discuss with her the anxiety Gus is showing about being separated from me, and from Dus. That he needs her to make sure he knows that she’s not going to be hauling him off away from Daddy again any time soon. That Daddy is going to be a permanent part of his life from now on.

But it’s too late now because he’s back.

So instead I tell Justin that we’ve been talking about finding some kind of short term lease accommodation for Lindsay and Gus. An apartment at least, even if we can’t find a house.

He nods. “I’m sure Mom could find something,” he says. “Somewhere you could move in right away while she looks for something more permanent.”

Lindsay, of course, has got her nose right out of joint by now, so predictably she bristles at this. “I just don’t know if your mother is the right person,” she starts.

So before little Sunshine can burn her to ashes, I cut in, “Don’t be stupid, Linds. Jenn will get you a better deal than you’ll get from some stranger who’s just in it for the commission.”

“Sure,” Justin nods. “After all, she’s finding a home for her grandson.”

I give him a look at that, and he smiles back at me blandly.

Brat!

I suppose he’s right though.

Fuck!

What have I done?

Oh, well, too fucking late to worry about all that now. Right now I have to stop Lindsay having conniptions and deal with separating for a while from my son without him having a meltdown.

Of course, it’s right then that Justin’s cell rings. He glances at it and says, “Sorry, I have to take this.”

He mouths “Charis” at me before he walks away, holding the phone to his ear.

Charis is his snotty agent. She’s so New York blue-blood that it’s probably even her real name. The question is, what the fuck does she want?
His show’s not till October. He’s just got home. Why the fuck is she calling him now?

*****

Justin

Walking back to the table I’m shaking with excitement.

I know my cheeks are flushed; hell I can feel even the tips of my ears burning.

I wish to fuck Brian and I were alone at home, or somewhere I could throw myself into his arms and squeal like a little fucking fan-girl.

But I can’t.

I can’t even tell him what Charis said, because I want to share it with him … just with him, I mean. Not with anyone else listening in. Not even Lindsay. Well, in some ways, especially not Lindsay.

This is a major thing for me, and it is for him too, because he’s so fucking determined to give me every opportunity to find success in my profession, and he’s been so damned supportive and although this isn’t, you know, an exhibition at MOMA or anything, it’s still, to me, pretty fucking big.

I want it to be just us, when I tell him so I can see his eyes light up, and see him realize that things are going to be just great with me coming home to Pittsburgh.

But first we have to get through the rest of our lunch, and then we have to collect Gus’ stuff from our place, and drive them both to the hotel, and Gus starts crying and holding on to Brian like he’s terrified to let go. But we get him calmed down eventually. We promise that he can come and see us soon. We promise to take him to the house again on the weekend so he can pick out the colors he wants his room painted. We try every fucking thing, but what really seems to work is when I take him aside and remind him that it’s Daddy’s birthday in two days - two more sleeps away. And that he has to help me buy a cake, and candles and get everything else we need for his “birthday party”.

Brian’s going to fucking kill me, but it works, which is the main thing. Gus gets really excited and I promise I’ll come and get him first thing on Wednesday morning so that we can get it all organized.

So when we come back to Brian and Lindsay, Gus is all giggly and keeps whispering to me about the things we need to do to surprise Daddy and he waves us off without any more tears or apparent fears.

Poor kid.

He really has been through a lot of shit lately, and in some ways I really wish they could stay with us, just so Gus will feel better.

But at least he seems reassured that he’s going to see us again soon, and that’s the main thing.

So having pacified him, I can turn my attention to pacifying the other Kinney. The tall one, who’s been biting his lip, in fact practically crawling out of his fucking skin, not to demand what the fuck Charis wanted, and has probably got me mentally packed and on the road back to New York by now.
I wait until we’re in the car, then just before he turns the key in the ignition, I say, “They’re having a special exhibition at the Warhol Museum. It’s in July. One of the artists they were negotiating with has pulled out, and they’ve offered me a slot. Just one painting, but …

“Oh, my God, Brian. It’s the fucking Warhol Museum. Most of the other artists are already fairly well known. I can’t believe that they’ve offered me a spot. But the theme is sort of art in response to violence. Something like that. And Charis said when they were looking for someone to fill the spot, someone mentioned me, and that I’m local, and you know, all the survivor bullshit, but …

“Fuck! It’s the Warhol.

“I don’t care if they’ve offered it to me because they think I’ve got three heads.

“It’s the fucking Warhol Museum.”

I know I’m babbling, but shit, I’ve been keeping this news bottled up for hours.

He’s sitting there really still, staring straight ahead through the windscreen, but I can see the corner of his mouth turn up, and when he finally turns to me, although he’s allowing only the tiniest glimmer of his sweet Brian-smile to show, he eyes are shining with love and pride. And relief, too, I suspect.

He doesn’t say anything, just reaches out to squeeze the back of my neck, but I laugh, and use my own hands to pull him close enough to kiss.

“My own fucking little genius,” he breathes into my ear, before his tongue finds other things to do than talk.

Later I’ll tell him the rest. That Charis says that the gallery who’s doing my show in October is “completely thrilled” and is already planning the publicity around my inclusion in an event at the Warhol, and that she expects calls from a few other galleries once word gets out.

But the best thing, the absolute best thing, for me, is that this first really big event in my professional life … the first one that’s about me being presented as someone who’s starting to become at least a little bit known in the art world - is right here in Pittsburgh.

If anything was needed to make sure Brian knows that I don’t have to sacrifice one atom of success to be with him, this is it.

That’s what I want to celebrate with him. Right now, in fact. We’ve still got an hour or two before we need to pick Dan up and take him to his hotel.

And I know just how I want to spend it.
Forging Family Ties

Chapter Summary

The boys share the news with one of the family and then they go home for their own particular brand of celebration.

Brian

The fucking Warhol Museum!

As I start the car, I find it hard to keep the smile off my face.

I remember saying to him, years ago, something about him being the next Andy Warhol. Even then, I knew I wasn’t saying it entirely to be a smart ass. I knew he had fucking bucket loads of talent and potential; and I was coming to know something about just how much passion and conviction he had to drive that talent. But what I didn’t really know then was how amazingly fucking strong he is; so strong that he’s been able to take everything that’s happened to him since, pour it all into his art, and use it to make something … incredible. He’s incredible.

Hopefully this thing at the Warhol will give everyone who thinks they know “little Sunshine” the chance to see who he really is. And help them see what a huge fucking success he can become without having to give up one fucking part of what he wants to do it.

One thing is for fucking sure, I’m not going to let anyone rail road us again into thinking that he’d be better off in New York - or London or Paris or Rome for that matter. He was fucking miserable in New York. I couldn’t recognize it at the time, was to busy fighting off my own misery to be able to see his clearly. But the night he came home …

When he stood there practically begging me to understand how unhappy he’d been … I fucking saw then alright. Saw exactly what we’d done to him between us; between Lindsay and Melanie
telling me I couldn’t stand in his way, and me being so fucking terrified of holding him back that I damned near shoved him onto the plane …

I saw how close to the brink of fucking despair we’d pushed him.

Well, no more.

I promised him I won’t do that to him again and I meant it. If he decides he needs to go away for a while to do this, that, or the fucking other … I’ll be here when he gets back. But I won’t be forcing him away again; I won’t be standing aside while anyone else tries; and I’m sure as Hell not going to let any other asshole play on my pathetic fucking insecurities to convince me that he’ll be better off somewhere else, doing something else, with maybe someone else.

He’s a big boy. He can make his own decisions.

I’m about to try to find a way to tell him that when my cell rings. I let him drag it out of my jacket pocket and motion for him to answer it.

“Oh, hi, Mom!” He sounds surprised. But I’m not. Not really. Jenn knew that we had the meetings about Gus today. It figures that she’d call to get the results. And she’s classy enough to call me directly, rather than talking to Justin about it behind my back.

I don’t want to think too much about how that makes me feel, because it seems to say that she cares about how the whole thing with Gus affects me. That she’s not just concerned about how her little boy is going to be impacted, but about how I’m feeling. And that …

Well, no matter. It shouldn’t matter.

It just shows she’s got class … and balls.

Obviously that’s where he gets it from; sure as fuck isn’t from his asshole father.

Anyway, he’s telling her all about how Ms. Hershell wiped the floor with Mel’s lawyer, and about how we’ve been given permanent access rights, and the visitation schedule and shit.

But suddenly I realize that I want to see her face when we tell her the punch line, and he tells her his own news, so I pull over and take the phone from him.

“You free to join us for a celebratory cup of coffee?” I ask her.

“Now?” she asks, all amazed, like I’m asking her to head off into the Amazon to pick the damned beans.

“Sure,” I say.

He pulls a face. Too bad, Sunshine. I want to fuck too, but some things are more important.

Fuck! Did I even think that?

She gobbles a little - why the fuck women can’t come up with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ without verbalizing all the damned details is beyond me - but agrees that we can meet her at a mall near here in around fifteen minutes.

He’s pouting at me, of course, but when we get to the mall I haul him into the bathroom and show him what the term “quickie” means. It’s surprisingly satisfying, and when we stroll up to the coffee shop where Jenn is waiting, we’re both grinning like fools.
I bend over to kiss her cheek and murmur, “Hi, Mom,” in a greeting that’s only halfway mocking. She blushes and gives me a strange look, like she actually likes that title, or something.

Justin gives her a quick kiss, and is talking a mile a minute before he’s even sat down at the table, laughing at how cool the guy from the court was, and demanding that I tell her how awesome the judge was and how she dealt with Mel’s lawyer - like I could get a word in edgeways to say anything.

Jenn waits till he stops to draw breath, and then says, God help me, sincerely, “I’m glad it went well, Brian. Glad for you, and even more glad for Gus.”

I find myself tongue-tied, or something perilously like it, at that, but Justin is beaming; a genuine fucking Sunshine smile. He nods enthusiastically and starts off again, “It’s great. Gus is going to be so much better off, and …”

He takes a breath, and says, quieter and more serious, “And if something ever happened to Brian … well, I’ll still have rights to see Gus, and stuff, so he’ll never be left without a father.”

His voice drops a little on those last few words, and Jenn and I both react - she reaches out to pat his hand, and I find myself rubbing my knee against his under the table.

Fucking Craig!

He shakes it off and says, “No, I just mean … I guess it’s kind of official that I’m Gus’ Dad, too. Or at least his ‘Dus’.”

Then he turns to her, his face all innocent, but his eyes full of fucking devilry, and says, “So I guess you’ve just become a grandma.”

It was absolutely worth this little excursion to see the look on her face. At first she looks like she’s about to have a cow; I guess she’s not ready to think of herself among the blue hair and pearls brigade yet, and I can’t fucking blame her for that. But then suddenly she smiles (and again I see how strongly Justin takes after her), and says, “I would be very honored to be Gus’s grandma.”

It hits me then that this morning’s exercise has given Gus more than just the chance to see his Dad and Dus occasionally and get to know us; it’s given him something he would never otherwise have had - a loving grandmother that I’d actually trust to do the right thing by the kid. God knows neither Linds nor I have mothers that I’d ever willingly let near Gus; Debbie’s okay, but she blows hot and cold, and anyway, for her now, it’s all about JR; but Jenn ...

If Jenn takes on being Grandma to Gus, then he’s going to get a damned good deal. She won’t blow hot and cold on him - she learned that lesson with her own son and won’t make that mistake again. I feel like I can trust her not to punish Gus for my fuck ups; which is more than most of the other adults in his life can manage. And she won’t try to poison his mind against his parents’ “lifestyle” - she’s a hell of a lot more open and accepting in all kinds of ways than any other candidate for the role.

“Gus will be lucky to have you,” I somehow hear myself saying. “But he’s a demanding little shit, so don’t let him take you for a ride.”

She laughs then, and looks at Justin.

“Sounds just like his ‘Dus’”, she says.

Justin pouts, but he can’t stay pouty for too long, he’s too excited.
“We’ve got some other news,” he says.

She looks at him inquiringly.

He’s glowing with pride, fucking radiant with it, although he’s struggling not to show it when he says, “The Warhol Museum have asked for one of my pieces for an exhibition in July.”

She gasps, and then jumps up to hug him. By the time she sits down they’re both looking a little teary-eyed, but she’s glowing nearly as brightly as he is.

“Oh, Justin!” she says, “Oh, that’s so wonderful. I’m so proud of you. No wonder you both look so happy.”

Her voice seems to choke then, and she reaches out both hands; her left one grabs Justin’s and her right clasps mine and she just sits there squeezing them.

I should be feeling like a total dyke, because I engineered this scene. But I don’t.

I feel …

I feel proud.

And somehow fucking vindicated.

Mainly though, I just feel fucking happy.

*****

Justin

I’m not sure why he wanted to meet up with my Mom, but I’m totally glad we did. It was awesome that I got to see Mom’s reaction over the Warhol Museum thing. She’s so thrilled and excited - and not just for me, for Brian too. Because she gets it that this is the perfect way to show everyone that I’m not giving up anything by coming back here to Pittsburgh to be with him; an opportunity to show the whole fucking world that I can be a successful artist and have a successful and happy relationship with Brian as well.

Also, she loves the idea of being “Grandma”. After the first shock, anyway. I mean, I thought for a moment she was going to have heart attack or something, but then she lit up, her whole face shiny and happy, the way she used to look when I was a kid and I gave her something I’d made, or a drawing I’d done for her; it was like we’d just given her this amazing present. Which made me feel really happy, because it feels like we’re becoming a real family - me and Brian, and Gus, and my Mom - and Molly, I guess. I think Molly’ll think it’s kind of cool to be an auntie. I bet she tries to boss Gus around. That might actually be funny, because when he turns those mini-Brian eyes of his on her, and does the whole quivery lip thing, she won’t know what hit her. She’ll totally cave. I’m kind of looking forward to introducing them.

Anyway, telling Mom about this stuff face to face was so much better than over the phone. It was great seeing her reaction. And it was even better that Brian got to see it too.

Maybe that’s why he …

He doesn’t usually want to be around to share the happy times with people; even the ones he brought about, like the munchers’ wedding. I used to think it was because he … not that he envied other people their happiness, Brian’s not like that; but that he somehow felt that him being a part of
it might make it go away, or at least lessen it in some way. Brian would say that’s bullshit, but that’s what I used to think.

But this time, he’s let himself be part of the moment, and that … that makes me feel amazing - like he really is starting to believe that he can have a share of the happiness, that we can be happy together.

Which makes me think of the house, because, while I really wish Dan wasn’t going away tomorrow, I can hardly wait to get started on the house; I’ve got some ideas on what we might do with it, and I know Brian does too. I can so picture us living in that house; and thinking of the house reminds me of Lindsay.

I’m not sure if I should bring this up, or wait for Brian, because I don’t want him to feel like I’m … I don’t know … intruding or something. But then I realize that I can’t walk on eggshells around him. I tried that after the bashing, and it didn’t make either of us happy. I just have to go ahead and do what I’m going to do, and if he reacts badly, we’ll deal with it; just like we’ll have to deal if he does something that pisses me off.

So I turn to Mom who’s saying something about maybe having us and Gus over on the weekend, so that he can get to know her and Molly, and say, “Actually, Mom, there’s something that we hope you’ll be able to do for us.”

They both look at me and Brian raises one eyebrow, but I go on regardless, “It’s about Lindsay. She and Gus need somewhere to live.”

Mom says, “Oh?” and waits, while Brian does that pulled in lips thing.

Then he says, “They’re staying in a hotel at the moment, and we’d like to get them out of there before Gus wrecks the place.”

I hope Mom knows that’s Kinney-speak for ‘it’s not a good environment for my son’, and it seems like she does because she says, “Oh, yes. Hotels aren’t a great idea for children - not for more than a few days, anyway. I’m just not sure how fast …”

She breaks off, looking a little bit worried, like she thinks we expect to find them a house this afternoon.

Brian nibbles on one thumb nail for a moment, and then says, “We thought you could look around for something long term, and in the meantime you might have some short term lease places on the books. Even a serviced apartment would be better than where they are now.”

Her faces lightens up and she says, “Oh, yes. I’m sure we can find something like that. And that would give us time to find just the right place for them.”

She says she’ll go right back to the office and start looking, so we all stand up, and I help her into her coat, and she hugs me, and then Brian - without him even flinching, he just stands there looking kind of … well, kind of like he almost might conceivably have liked it.

We see her to her car, which is actually parked just near ours, then she heads off and we still have two hours before we’d arranged to collect Dan from the house to take him to his hotel. So …

“Your cock is mine,” I tell him as I get in the car.
Brian

He apparently decides he can’t wait to make good on his “threat”, because by the time we’re halfway home, I’m trying to drive with a hot, wet and very skillful mouth wrapped around my cock.

Fuck!

Mercifully, we get home safely. He’s all over me as we stumble into the lift, and by the time I manage to get the door of the loft open, he’s toed off his shoes, has both his jeans and his briefs down round his ankles and is hopping around trying to free his feet. I’m too impatient to wait till he manages that so I scoop him up over my shoulder, giving his bare ass a slap when he grunts a protest, slide the loft door closed, then carry him over and drop him, ass up, on the chaise.

“Jesus, Brian,” he protests, but I ignore that, pushing him forward so that his knees are on the seat and he’s half-draped over the back. Then for a moment I just stand admiring the view. God I love his ass. Especially when it’s presented to me like that, all ripe and ready, with a nice red hand print on one cheek.

While I’m fumbling in my pocket for a condom with my right hand, I use my left to slap his other cheek, just to even them up. He swears at me, but it doesn’t discourage him from jutting his ass further back towards me, and making some wiseass comment about whether I’ve gone soft in my old age because I’m not usually so slow to get the message. I don’t think either of us wants to waste time looking round for some lube, so I stick one finger into my mouth till it’s good and wet, and then push it firmly into him. He hisses and arches his back. I pull it out, then suck two fingers into my mouth, catching a slight taste of him when I do. I slather them with saliva and then slide them into him, first one, then both together.

He moans and I finger-fuck him for few moments, mesmerized by the sight of them disappearing into his ass, and his hole clenching around them.

“Will you get the fuck on with it!” he bitches, so I pull them out, roll the condom onto my cock, and push into him.

The condom’s pre-lubed, thank Christ, because he’s not really ready enough, but I know
Sometimes he likes it like this; likes to feel the burn and the stretch. I hear him gasp, and feel his struggles to adjust, while at the same time he’s bitching me out for not going harder, so I slap his ass again. He bucks, and I pull out a little, taking a moment to even him up again, with another smack to the other cheek.

He grunts and pushes back, and I can feel him start to open up, ready to take me deep, so I thrust fully in and rest a moment. He’s still bitching, so when I pull out, I spank him again and we keep going like that for a while, deep thrusts, followed by hard smacks on alternating cheeks every time I pull back.

He’s really into it now, clenching his muscles around my cock each time I withdraw, and arching into my hand as it lands on his ass. He’s getting close so he moves his own hand from the back of the chaise, heading for his cock, but I grab it. “Not until I tell you,” I order.

He huffs something that sounds like a laugh, so I slap him harder, and thrust deeper.

By now I’m having trouble keeping that rhythm, though, so instead, I lean forward, wrapping my arm around his waist and pulling him up and back. He comes right up and leans back against me, so I wrap my other hand round his cock, stroking it in time with my thrusts and, then after a few deep hard jabs, my whole body seems to explode with white light and when he spills over my hand I’m not sure if it’s really his come, or if mine has just poured right out through him.

I can feel myself sagging against him, so I don’t resist when he turns in my arms and wraps his around me, falling back onto the chaise and taking me with him. His face is flushed and his eyes are glowing like some feral animal, but his lips are soft on my face and neck, and, when he breathes my name, his voice is hushed and full of something that sounds like awe or love or some shit.

I try to ignore the fact that mine sounds pretty much the same as I murmur his name back to him.

Instead I just lie there for a while, letting my senses swim in the touch and the taste and the smell of him.

Who needs a house? This is home. This. Right here.

*****

Justin

I love it that he totally gets it when I need it fast and hard and kind of animalistic.

Ethan never did get that, and it made sex with him not just unsatisfying on some levels, but actually kind of boring sometimes.

The thing about Brian that most people wouldn’t believe is that he’s an incredibly generous lover. At least, he is with me. I mean, he’s always manages to match his sexual acts to what I need at the time. I guess I try to meet him halfway about that. Like, if he’s all wound up sometimes, and I really don’t mind how we have sex, I’ll let him know that hard and fast is okay; or if he needs to mellow out, I’ll slow things down and take the time to get him feeling so good he just about melts all over me when he comes. But when I have an urge to get off just a certain way, he certainly knows how to help me scratch the itch.

The other thing is that he actually kind of does like to cuddle after sex. I mean, not all the time. But sometimes, he just drapes himself all over me; or, even if he doesn’t go that far, he at least sort of lets it be known that he wouldn’t absolutely hate it if I rested my head on his shoulder; and when I
do, his arm just sort of falls down to fold around me.

Right now, he’s doing the draping all over thing. We’re sprawled on the chaise longue and he’s just about lying on top of me.

I’m not surprised, because that fuck was fantastic, so it's no wonder that he’s more or less collapsed after it; I feel pretty much boneless myself. Another one to store in the memory banks to jerk off to sometime when I’m alone and horny.

But, even if he’s still pretty skinny, right now it feels like he weighs a ton. I don’t dare tell him that, though. He’d have a major queen out.

So instead I resort to other tactics, and start wondering out loud whether we should take Dan out to dinner, and if so, where, and what I should wear; and just like I expect, Brian gives a huge put upon sigh and says, “If you can shut up for five minutes you can join me in the shower.”

Then he peels himself off me and heads for the bathroom.

I take a moment to wipe the smug grin off my face before I follow him. I so know how to work him.

But I’ll totally make it up to him later. I never did get to finish that blow job in the car.

Meanwhile, we can share a shower, and I know he’ll shampoo my hair the way I like and let me wash his back and sneak in a bit of a shoulder massage, and I realize again that it wasn’t just the hot sex I missed when I was in New York. That the sex wasn’t even the thing I missed most. What I missed most was just him, being with him.

It’s the way it feels so fucking good just being with him that makes me know that I was right to come home. It’s what home is, really.
More news about the wicked witch of the North, but on a happier note, the boys spend some time with Dan.

Brian

We climb out the shower and while he checks the loft phone, I check my cell.

There are five calls altogether from a number outside the US - wonder who they’re from? Well, the she-bitch can just stew. Fucked if I’m talking to her. But I bet Lindsay has. Fuck!

Oh, well, I guess I knew that Mel wasn’t just going to go away. It was always going take more than a fucking bucket of water to get rid of this wicked witch. Hell, a bucket of acid probably wouldn’t do it.

There’s a call from Mikey on my cell too.

He hasn’t spoken to Mel (although she’s been trying to call him). But he’s actually listening to his lawyer’s advice for once, and hasn’t called her back. But his lawyer has talked to her lawyer or some shit, and seems like the bitch is back. Or about to get her ass back here, anyway. Mikey’s ecstatic, of course, because it means that his little buttercup or whatthefuckever will be back in town as well. Assuming Melanie brings her along. But I guess she’ll have to, since, with her track record with Canadian immigration, once she's left they probably won’t want to let her back in.

Personally, I wish she’d stayed in the frozen north till she turned into a fucking popsicle, but I can understand why Mikey’s relieved. I give him a quick call, and although he gets in a whole rant about how relieved he is, and how his lawyer is advising him to insist on some kind of agreement about not taking JR out of state without his okay, I manage to cut off his ramblings by promising to
catch up with him tomorrow.

He says that he’s glad things went well with Gus. Seems like he’s spoken to Lindsay and she gave him the run down on how the court thing played out today. That stops me in my tracks a bit, because once upon a time Mikey would have been the first person that I shared something major like that with, and today … aside from Justin, the person I chose to fucking tell about it was Jenn.

Well, and Ted, because he called about some Kinnetik crisis while we were on our way to meet Jenn. And I think Justin told Emmett, because he took a call just before we joined his Mommy.

I guess the Brian and Michael show really has come to the end of its run. I mean, he’s still Mikey. Part of me will always love him. But … we’re not really … necessary … to each other any more. Not the way we were, and that’s probably a fucking good thing.

It’ll be interesting to see how things go tomorrow. Maybe we can be better friends to each other than we have been in the past, just because we have other people in our lives. Or maybe it’ll be like family that you only see once in a while, and they’re almost strangers. Who the fuck knows?

It doesn’t matter, anyway.

Tonight, we have to pick up Dan and take him to dinner, and make sure he gets to his hotel okay and all that shit.

Tomorrow, I have to work, while Justin gets the fucking “bonding time” he seems to be craving with dear old Dan while they go through the house one last time. It’s about time Justin put in some serious hours on his own work, but that’s his call.

The next day, Heaven help me, is my fucking birthday and I’ll be seeing my Sonnyboy.

I don’t have to ask permission. I don’t have to brave Muncher Mansion and the bitch dyke from Hell and hope that she isn’t on the rag, or I haven’t committed some fucking crime against humanity this week, or at least that the umpteen bucks I’ve poured into her sticky fingers means that she’ll at least let me see my son for half an hour or so provided I’m suitably humble and grateful. I won’t ever have to deal with that shit again; now I have a fucking visitation schedule that says he comes to us for at least a four hour visit twice a week, plus one overnighter a week that will become two weekends a month (Friday night to Monday morning) once we get into the house; and this week we have a visit scheduled for Wednesday - all day.

Next week I guess we need to think about getting him back into school. Hopefully by then Jenn will have found at least some temporary accommodation that will suit them.

Meanwhile, if we’re going to be on time to get the old buzzard, I’d better fucking motor, or the little blond twat will have my guts for garters, as the Brits say.

*****

Justin

We call Dan before we leave … just to give him some time to get his “game face” on. I mean, this has to be a really horrible time for him - walking away from a place he’d been so happy, experienced so much love. Knowing it’s all gone now, but still kind of just … wanting, I guess. Wanting it to come back; wanting it so much that you can’t breathe, and all the time knowing, absolutely knowing, that it can never happen, that you can never have those feelings again. So you have to leave, because staying is just too hard. But leaving means leaving all those memories.
I mean, I know you take the memories with you, in your heart, always, but still…

That’s how I’d feel if I were him, anyway. I know I would. I know how I felt when I thought I’d completely blown it with Brian. And I know how I felt when we were back together, and it was so fucking good between us, but it looked like he was going to sell the loft. It was just an awful feeling, even when I knew Brian and I were okay and we’d be together somewhere; it still meant losing … something. Something fundamental to us, as a couple, and as individuals. The place where we’d been through so much … good things, and bad things. The place where I learned what it was to be a gay man; the place where I learned to live again after the bashing, and to hope again after Hollywood; the place where Brian battled loneliness and my betrayal and his cancer; and the place where we helped each other through all those things. The place where we learned to love each other, really love each other, not just romance or lust or any of those things, but real, honest to God, Princess Bride true love. (Brian would kill me if I said that to him, but it’s still true.) To lose it, to walk away from it … especially alone …

So I know Dan must be feeling all of that but like a thousand times worse. That’s why I’m glad he’s going to have us with him. I mean, I’m sure that he’d like to get through all that on his own … like Brian would. But, just like Brian, he’ll be glad we’re there when it gets to the time. Even if, like Brian, he’ll probably never admit it.

*****

Brian

The old buzzard’s all ready to go when we get there, and he’s out the door almost as soon as we pull up. Justin jumps out the car and runs up the steps to help him with his bags. Not that he’s got much. Most of his luggage has already been couriered to New York and will be waiting for him on board the ship. I tell little Sunshine to just get Dan into the car and take his stuff and put it in the trunk myself. Justin manages to get the old fossil settled into the front seat, and then climbs into the back, chatting away, asking him where he’d like to go to dinner.

The fuck! Dan looks like he’s going to puke just at the thought of food, and Sunshine is looking kind of non-plussed at his lack of response.

I start the car and announce my decision. “We’ll go to the diner,” I say. “Give our guest a look at how the other half live……”

Dan perks up a little at that. I’ll bet in all his years in Pittsburgh, he’s never experienced anything like the Liberty Diner. And something new is probably just what he needs. No more fucking memories. Not tonight, anyway.

The shock value alone should help get us all through the next couple of hours.

At the very least, we can watch the show - all the usual soap-drama that goes on there - fucking couples arguing, breaking up, making up and queening out all over the place, and there’s always Kiki and her friends to add to the entertainment.

I guess in a way it’s a pity Deb’s not working tonight; although I have to admit that factored into me suggesting this place. If I hadn’t been sure that we weren’t going to have her all over us about the custody shit and other things that are none of her fucking business, I would probably have gone anywhere but the diner. But according to Mikey Deb’s at home cooking up a storm because she’s convinced that Mel and her grandkid have been on the verge of fucking starvation. As if! Mel’s been shackled up with a lawyer, for fuck’s sake. But come to think of it, I’m not sure that Mikey knows that little tidbit.
Anyway, for now, Dan is spared the experience of Deb in full flight, out-performing all the other drama queens at the news that her grandkid’s on the way home; but with the place full of the usual crowd, it’s still pretty much like a fucking circus. Justin and I shepherd Dan to a seat, and he slides in looking around like he’s never seen anything like this place before. He probably hasn’t. He might despise the “A-gays”, but you can bet your sweet life that he hasn’t been anywhere as blue collar as this since before I was born. So I doubt he’s ever seen out and proud working class Pittsburgh in action; back when he might have gone to places like this it would have all been on the downlow, nods and winks and meeting up out back somewhere. Not anymore. Now there are couples, trios, a few hustlers having a meal before they hit the streets, a couple of drag queens on their way home from some tea dance, and, of fucking course, Ted and Emmett.

They walk in right after us, and before either of us even gets to sit down, Emmett slides himself in next to Dan and is in full flirt mode before his ass has even warmed up the seat.

What the fuck is it with him and old geezers?

*****

Justin

It’s pretty obvious as soon as we walk in that Deb’s not working. For one thing, orders are backed up the wazoo, and for another, the people creating the most noise are the customers.

I feel a sense of relief about that. If she’d been here, she would have been full of JR coming home, and discussing everything about the whole situation with Linds and Mel and the kids at the top of her voice, making sure that the whole of Pittsburgh knows how she feels about it. Which would be okay, but some of that stuff, like the situation with Brian and Gus … and me … I’m part of it now, legally, even. So all of that stuff which is our private business … and really intense personal stuff at that, she would have been laying out for the whole of Pittsburgh to know about.

Ted and Emmett arrive just behind us, and we all wind up sitting together. I guess that’s okay. Although I was kind of looking forward to having the chance to talk to Dan, get to know him better, hear about what life was like for him, how he met Billy, everything.

But before I can even sit down next to him to shield him a bit from … well, everything … ‘cos I don’t think he’s used to it all this … Emmett has already slid in alongside him and is introducing himself. In fact, he’s seriously all but fluttering his eyelashes at Dan. What the fuck?

But Dan gets this look … it’s not exactly a smile, it’s just that his face kind of relaxes the way Brian’s does when someone is amusing him in a good way. So I figure it’s like Fate or something, and just introduce Dan to them, and let things go from there.

Ted gives Brian a glance when he hears Dan’s name; I guess he recognizes it from the legal stuff on the house. But he doesn’t say anything. Just sits next to Emmett, who has squeezed up next to Dan, supposedly to make room for him. But Dan doesn’t seem to mind, and the good thing about having Emmett here is that there are no awkward silences or anything and Dan doesn’t get any chance to brood.

In fact, we all wind up having a kind of a good time. Brian sits back the way he always used to when “the guys” got together, not saying much, just making the occasional snarky comment; but his body feels relaxed against mine, so I know he’s okay with just hanging for a while. He’s kind of sprawled out, with his arm spread along the back of the seat, but his fingers are continually brushing my arm, or my shoulder, or playing with my hair, and the remarks he makes are pungent, but kind of lazy, and not hurtful.
Emmett is full of stories about parties he’s planning or has just done; some of them sound okay, but some sound totally ridiculous. But the stories make Dan smile, and his comments are so much like Brian’s that it makes me smile too. In fact, once they come out with just about the same thing at the same time, and that makes me laugh. Brian’s fingers pull my hair sharply in punishment, but I can feel rather than hear his own laugh, and across the table, Dan chuckles.

Then Dan starts telling us about a party he and Billy went to which was supposed to be a “men in uniform” theme, which they weren’t keen on - he gets this quiet look for a moment and says they’d had more than enough of living the real thing and even in fun didn’t want to step back into that history. He says they decided it would be more fun to put their own spin on it so they dressed up as Edwardian gents, and added a couple of round hats with stiff little brims and tacked tea towels on the back and said they were running off to join the French Foreign Legion. He pulls out his wallet, and shows us an old black and white photo of the two of them.

Dan’s younger in the photo, although still a lot older than we are. But they look … I don’t know. They’re not all over each other, they’re not even smiling, but there’s a feeling about the photo that tells you they are totally there for each other; that they are so much a part of each other’s lives that it would be unthinkable for either of them to have to doubt that. There’s something about that image, something about the promise that it represents that it tells you they are totally there for each other; that they are so much a part of each other’s lives that it would be unthinkable for either of them to have to doubt that. There’s something about that image, something about the promise that it represents that Brian and I can have that, can have what they had - a whole life together, that gets me a bit choked up.

But Emmett is already talking about how the Foreign Legion thing has given him an idea for a theme for a party that he wants to throw at the Rainbow Room as a kind of “thank you” to his staff and all the people who’ve helped make his business such a success. He’s all fired up about making it a “Desert” theme - with Arabs and Legionaries, and having the servers all dressed as Harem girls.

“You could go as Lawrence of Arabia”, Dan tells him. “You’re tall and slender like him.”

Of course, that gets Emmett all flirty again, but Dan seems to be enjoying that in a weird kind of way, and somehow talking about the party leads on to some old movie or something called The Desert Song, and that winds up with Ted and Dan talking about opera for a while.

Brian’s still quiet and relaxed, Dan seems happy, and my fingers are itching for a pencil.

*****

Brian

It’s probably only around nine when I finally call a halt to all this fucking chat, although it feels
later. The old buzzard is becoming more corpse-like by the minute, and I’m afraid if we don’t get him out of here, he’ll croak, and we’ll have a corpse on our hands for real.

So I yawn and stretch and Ted, who’s become much better at getting a clue since he’s been spending so much time working with me every day, immediately starts making noises about needing to be somewhere to meet Blake, and it’s only fucking fifteen minutes instead of an hour before I manage to get us out of there. Of course before that we have to endure Emmett’s fucking epics ‘goodbye, it’s all so sad that you have to go, let’s keep in touch’ fucking scene; but finally he kisses Dan on both cheeks, eyes me like he’s actually thinking of giving me the same treatment and, when he gets the death-glare, hugs Justin instead. Then just when I think I’m safe, he manages to somehow get his fucking arms around me, and I have to grab him before he pulls us both off balance. I feel his lips brush my cheek, and he breathes some bullshit into my ear about what a swell guy I am or some shit.

Fuck!

I seriously need to work on rebuilding my image.

Anyway, we get Dan to his hotel and although Justin insists on going upstairs with him to make sure that he’s fucking settled (like he’s some kind of retard who’s never stayed in a hotel in his life and might not know where the bathroom is), it’s not all that long before we’re heading home.

On the way home I’m thinking all sorts of nasty thoughts about what I’ll be doing to him once we get there, but when it comes to it, we both just fall asleep.

I make up for it the next morning by waking him up with a rimming that has him begging for it. So, as it’s clearly my duty to keep my partner satisfied, I give it to him - twice. And then I blow him in the shower for good measure. I tell Justin to take the Jeep to pick Dan up, and head off to work in a remarkably good mood.

That, of course, lasts about as long as it takes to assess what the latest fuck up is, but that’s alright. Work shit I can deal with. Everything else, for once, looks as if it’s going okay.

Of course, as soon as I think that, the fucking idiot I pay to shield me from this shit during the day, puts through a call from Lindsay. Seems Mel is at the hotel going ballistic, and demanding to see Gus. Hotel security has taken her down to the manager’s office, but they have also indicated to Lindsay that they expect her to get things sorted.

I tell her to stop moaning to me and call her fucking lawyer, which of course sets her off crying and wailing about how she can’t do that, Mel will never forgive her. In other words, she wants me to be the bad guy.

I tell her I’ll get there as soon as I can, and hang up.

Then I call Ms. Hershell and fill her in on the latest.

She somehow manages to convey over the phone the prissy pursed lip thing that I know she’s doing, and says that she’ll try to rush through a court order that will prevent Melanie coming anywhere near Gus except for the supervised visits we’ve agreed. She tells me not to confront Melanie myself, to leave it to her; that she’s prepared to go herself to the hotel and read Mel the riot act. Something in her voice makes me think that she’s looking forward to that, and it’s one piece of girl on girl action I’m fucking if I’m going to miss, so I tell her I think I should make sure Gus is okay and she agrees to meet me there. Meanwhile, she says she will call the hotel manager
and fill him in on the legal situation.

I tell the staff I have something I need to deal with, letting my idiot PA know that I’m pissed that she put the call through, forcing me to deal with all this shit. That’s not entirely true, in fact as it turns out it’s just as well she did, but she doesn’t need to know that. On my way down to the car, I call Jenn, hoping like Hell she’s found somewhere they can move to - preferably today.

Guess little Sunshine gets his brains and his talent from her, because she’s already found a place that someone is trying to offload for a short term rental. They’ve got a temporary transfer out West somewhere, which would leave them paying the mortgage on their place here plus rental in their new city, so they’re looking to lease their house for a few months to cover the mortgage. It’s fully furnished, and actually not that far from our new place. There’s a school right across the road, so we can try to get Gus enrolled there as soon as we get all his records and shit from Canada.

Before I can get to the hotel, however, I get a call from my attorney telling me that when she’d called the hotel, they’d let her speak to Melanie and she’d done the lawyer thing on her and told her that if she didn’t back off, we’d petition to remove any access to Gus at all on the grounds that she couldn’t be trusted to keep the agreements that had been made. Apparently she wasn’t fucking happy, but she at least had enough sense to head off to see her own lawyer and get advice on how she can legally cut off my balls, I guess. Ms. Hershell informed me that she was still going ahead with the restraining order, because “Ms. Markus seems dangerously overwrought, and a court order will mean that if she becomes violent or abusive, Ms. Peterson or yourself will at least be able to call on the police to enforce it.”

In other words, if Mel shows up spitting and swearing and threatening to hack out my blackened heart with a toothpick, I can call on Pittsburgh’s finest to clear the rubbish from my doorstep. Sounds reasonable to me.

I tell Ms. H. that I’ve found somewhere for Linds and Gus to live, and she advises me very strongly not to tell anyone else the address. I hear the sub-text of that - she means Mikey.

I’d hate to think that he’d give it to Mel, but … he might. If it looked like it would make things between them go more smoothly over Jenny, he almost certainly would. Which … it hurts. It fucking hurts that he’d stab me in the back like that and see nothing wrong with it, but it’s the way things are. So if I do manage to catch up with Mikey today … I guess I won’t be telling him fucking everything that’s going on. It’s not like I usually tell him more than I want him to know, anyway. But before I always could have … if I’d wanted to. Now … now is different.

Of course, there’s nothing I can do to stop Linds telling everybody and his fucking dog - or bitch. But that’s Lindsay’s call.

All I can do is get her and Gus packed up and out of there and try to persuade her that, right now at least, it’s not a good idea for her to let Mel know where they’ve moved to.

I suppose that means that the cunt will turn up at the loft once she realizes they’ve bailed from the hotel.

Fuck!

One more thing for Justin and me to be dealing with when we’re supposed to be fucking.

As I’m pulling into the hotel car park, I’m already on the phone to him to let him know what’s going on, and warn him about what’s coming.
Practical lad that he is, he says we should just grab some stuff and come stay at the house for a few days. We won’t be able to move in permanently till the place has had some work done - we want to open the guest bathroom up from Gus’ room for a start to make it easier for him if he needs to go in the night, and we’ll need to be in the loft on Wednesday for my fucking birthday party, but we can definitely camp out there tonight at least.

I love it that the boy’s a fucking genius.
Fond Farewells

Chapter Summary

The boys say goodbye to Dan.

Justin

Dan and I had just arrived at the house when Brian called. Dan doesn’t ask me what it’s about, because he’s got that whole British-reserve thing happening, but I know he heard me say that we should stay at the house tonight, and I don’t want him to feel … like we’re pushing him out or something … so I tell him a little about the situation with Gus, and with Melanie.

He frowns and his face gets this vinegary sort of look that actually reminds me of Brian when he’s in a bad mood, and says a little waspishly, “She sounds most unpleasant. I trust that you and Brian have a good lawyer.”

I grin at him and nod. “I’ve only met her a couple of times, but I think she’s a real shark. She even scares Brian.”

Dan gives a little twist of his lips that in any one else might even be a grin, and says, “I suspect that there aren’t too many who can claim that … and that most of them are women.”

I stare at him for a moment, and then I laugh. “You’re right,” I tell him. “They are.”

He nods.

He doesn’t say anything for a moment, and then in a soft, kind of sad voice, he says, “Billy’s mother scared me silly. She was so angry with me when she found out … well, about us … and when we decided to leave Britain and come here … she came to see me. Told me that if ever Billy had cause to regret trusting me she’d track me down and … she threatened to do things that I didn’t
believe that a respectable woman would even think about back then. Even years later, when she and Billy’s sister came out to visit us … I spent weeks beforehand trying to work out if there was an urgent business trip that I could take at just that time.”

He smiled, then. A real smile, full of happy memories. “Billy thought it was terribly funny.”

I grin at him. “Brian’s kind of afraid of my Mom, too,” I tell him. “Or he used to be. Now they get along much better. Too well, sometimes,” I find myself murmuring, half to myself. It’s true, though. Sometimes it almost feels like they’re ganging up on me.

He smiles again, a different smile this time, a little bit smug, really, and says, “Yes, by the end of that visit, Billy’s mother and I had … er … bonded, I suppose you would say.”

His voice changes, then, and he looks away, out of the kitchen window into the infinity of sky, “She wrote to me not long before she died and told me she felt that God had given her another son.”

I don’t know what to say to that, but I don’t have to because he says, almost to himself, “I felt as if He’d given me another mother, but I never had a chance to tell her that. She died before my reply arrived.”

“I’m sorry,” I hear myself say.

He turns back to me, shaking his head. “No, no. I’m sorry. I just … we have so few opportunities, really, to tell people what they mean in our lives. And we waste most of them.” He huffs a little laugh and then goes on, “I don’t mean that we should spray our feelings over everyone all day every day as if we’re on some endless damned … what do they call them? … talk show. I mean real opportunities … times when it would be appropriate, and when the person concerned is ready to hear us. But we rarely recognize the moments when they come along. That, I think, is one of the few things that I regret in this world … the loss of some of those opportunities.”

I nod slowly. I know what he means, I think. I mean, it would be really kind of weird for me to go up to Emmett and Ted and just blurt out how grateful I am for the friendship they’ve shown to both me and Brian. I guess with Emmett I could. Maybe. But with Ted it would just be weird and really really awkward. It would make him so uncomfortable. Well, both of us, really. But if ever a chance did come along, I’d probably "um" and "er" and let the moment slip because I just wasn’t sure if it was okay.

*****

Brian

I can tell from the looks I get from the flunkeys on reception as I stride past them to the lift that I shouldn’t expect an invitation to join their golden guest list or whatever the fuck the Marriott chain calls their flatter-you-so-you’ll-spend-more-money-with-them scam. All the hotel chains have them and they royally piss me off. I expect to get the best deals, and the best service because that’s what I pay them for, not because I’m so impressed with the fact that they remember my name and so eternally grateful for the basket of fucking bananas in my room that I’m prepared to stay with them no matter what - like accepting any pathetic little room they try to palm me off with, and ignoring the usual lame-assed TV package, poor service and all that shit.

Lindsay looks a total fucking mess, but at least she’s packed all their stuff. Gus runs over to hug me and he’s holding on to my legs like he doesn’t plan on ever fucking letting go.
“Mama was here,” he tells me. “And she was mean. She kept yelling at us through the door.”

I pick him up and raise an eyebrow at Linds.

“You ready to get out of here?” I ask.

She nods. She looks like she’s really shaken. What the fuck was Melanie thinking, coming here and putting on that kind of performance? Well, I guess she wasn’t. For someone who has complained over and over again that I spend too much time thinking with my dick, she’s not exactly a shining example of rational behavior. At least when I was thinking with something other than my brain, I got laid. All that she’s likely to get is her ass kicked by my lawyer. And it doesn’t look as if it’s won her any points with Linds either.

I call the front desk and ask them to send up a bellhop to deal with the mounds of shit she’s brought with her. I know that she’d say most of it is for Gus, but fuck!

I don’t even have the jeep, because I told Justin to take it for the day. I didn’t want the old fossil to break his neck trying to get in or out of the ‘vette and fucking sue us. Or worse, move in with us, because Justin wouldn’t let him travel in that state, or try to cope on his own either.

So when we get downstairs, I tell the valet guys to park my car and we pile into a cab with all the damned luggage, and head off to meet Jenn.

By the time we’re half-way to that meeting, though, I’m ready to jump out the fucking cab right into traffic. Linds, despite every attempt to shut her up, is spewing forth all sorts of shit about her and the she-wolf, and Gus is getting more and more upset. Eventually, I flat out tell her to shut the fuck up, and she blinks at me like she can’t believe I could be so cruel, and then the water works start.

I just pass her a tissue from the box the driver has in the front and concentrate on my son. I reach back and make a grab for his knee. To my relief I hear him giggle and say, “Don’t, Daddy!”

His mother mops up once we reach the address Jenn gave me, and we start looking through the place. It’s okay - one of a set of four two storey apartments that share a common court-yard area out the back. It’s kind of small, but it’s got two bedrooms, each en suite, so it’s okay for a temporary home.

Linds is inclined to turn her nose up, but I remind her that it’s only till she finds somewhere permanent and she finally agrees to take it. Jenn tells her she can move in as soon as she signs the lease. There’s a bit of palaver about that - I have to co-sign because Linds doesn’t have a job - or even a functioning US bank account. But what the fuck do I care? It’s still cheaper than paying for the fucking hotel suite.

Then mercifully Jenn offers to drop me back at the hotel so I can collect the car and get back to work, so I have an excuse to leave with her.

Who would have thought the day would arrive when I would regard an offer like that from Jenn as equivalent to the arrival of the cavalry instead of as an almost certain ambush?

Gus gets a little weepy, but I remind him that he's spending the day with Justin and me tomorrow and he brightens up then so I can escape with a clear conscience for once.

*****

Justin
Dan doesn’t seem to mind me being there while he says goodbye to the house. In fact, as we sit drinking a last cup of tea in the kitchen, he starts telling me stories about some of the times he and Billy had together here. Like when Billy insisted on using one of the small front rooms as a studio, and made this beautiful life-size sculpture of a water nymph on a plinth in all different shades of blue and green glass to go in the middle of some rich guy’s fountain. Only thing was it turned out the plinth was too big for it to fit out through the door and Billy didn’t even think of that till the whole thing was finished.

Dan says every time he’d tried to point out that there might be a problem Billy had nearly snapped his head off, and told him that he should worry about his own business and leave Billy to get on with his, so in the end he’d just left him to it. He says he got home one night to hear Billy ranting and raving and throwing things around and only just managed to stop him pulverizing the whole thing.

Dan gets this look on his face that reminds me of how Brian looks sometimes - how he looked when he gave me the computer for my art, for instance - and says he would have smashed a hole through the outside wall if that’s what it took to get it out rather than let Billy destroy something so beautiful, that he’d put so much of himself into. But in the end, they worked out that Billy could cut down the plinth to a size that would fit through the door and eventually he set the smaller plinth into a big marble base and no one ever knew any different.

But he stopped using the room as a studio after that; he hired a sort of warehouse place where he had plenty of space and no issues about door sizes, no matter what he was working on.

Dan says that was a good thing; it meant that they could leave their business lives behind at the office, or the studio, and that when they were at home it was just them. He says that he really needed that, because otherwise the temptation to work on things at home rather than spending time with Billy was too strong, and there were times when that caused problems between them. But that he believes that it was important for Billy also, so that he had a space away from his work. He gives me one of his piercing looks and says that no matter how creative a career in art is, it’s still a job; that an artist can be as much a workaholic, more so, than any business man. And that it’s just as important to take a break from that process as it is to take a break from designing an engine - or an ad campaign. That too much of a focus on work isn’t good for anyone; and definitely not good for relationships.

I totally understand what he’s telling me. I know that when I was in New York, the temptation to work all hours of the day and night if the mood struck was really over-whelming. And that was fine when I was there on my own. But I would hate it if Brian was always working on some campaign or another and never spending time with me, so I have to be really careful that I don’t do that to him either. I don’t mean that I plan to punch in a time clock or anything, but if I have a separate studio, then there’s not the same temptation to think “I’ll just do a little bit more tonight before I go to bed”, or to slip out of bed and start painting sometime after mid-night.

I know inspiration isn’t governed by a clock, but it’s bullshit to say that if you don’t do it right then that you will lose some magical “vision”. Real art is hard work and it takes a long time to do anything worth doing. Most times, if you are at risk of losing your “vision” for a piece because you can’t work on it straight away, it’s a sign that you’re really in trouble, or that there's something wrong with the piece, because you’re never going to get it finished before you need to take a break, unless you plan on working for days without food or sleep. So you might as well work reasonable hours per day.

Of course there are times when you really do want to get the outline of an idea down right away. Just like there are for Brian when he gets an inspiration for a new campaign. But most of the time
that isn't how it works. Most of the time it’s just following through and executing on those initial ideas and, honestly, you should be able to take a break from that and come back refreshed and pick up where you left off. Just like a writer does, or a film director, or an architect or an engineer … or an ad man.

So anyway, what Dan says reconfirms my feeling that it's really good that I'm planning to have a studio away from here. Of course, it's at the loft, which means that Brian and I will probably crash there sometimes kind of out of habit, but at least it means that this place is really a home … not an extension of either of our work spaces.

We go through all the stuff about where the controls are for the heating and for the pool heating and all of that one more time, and then I tell Dan that I'll wait for him in the car and go off to leave him a few private moments to say his farewells to the life he lived here with his Billy.

He doesn’t take long to join me, and when he does he's … brittle. Kind of like Brian would be in the same situation. So I do what I'd do with Brian, I just talk about anything I can think of; I hear myself prattling on about how Gus will love his little room, and that we're looking forward to taking the boat out on the river, and how we must remember to get a child-size life jacket for Gus and how it's Brian's birthday tomorrow and how he normally hates them, but this year might be okay because Gus is spending it with us and Gus wants to make his Daddy a cake and all sorts of shit.

Well, okay, mainly about Brian and Gus, because I'm so relieved and so happy about how all that is working out. For so long Brian has had to live, not just with the pain of not having Gus around, but with the fear that one day they might just take off and he might never hear from them again, and there wouldn't be anything he could do about it.

Having Gus back here, and actually having some say in how and where his son is living, that's huge. It's the best present Brian could ever ask for … well, except for the gift that Gus gives him every time he smiles at Brian, and makes it clear that he loves spending time with his Dad.

I feel kind of bad about going on and on about our happy family life when Dan is so alone, but he actually seems to enjoy it. By the time we take the turn off to the airport, he's obviously more relaxed and he even manages to huff one of his dry laughs when I talk about how Brian is going to hate eating the cake but that I bet he will because it's from Gus, but that he'll make me pay for it later. And that I'll love it.

We get Dan's luggage checked in and then go to get something to eat … not that there's really anything decent to eat of course - there never is at airports, but we got here really early so it's ages till Dan's flight will board and at least it fills in the time and gives us both something to do with our hands and stuff. I can feel myself getting really choked up already, and I don't want to embarrass him by having some kind of melt down in the airport.

He tells me that there's no need for me to stay, but of course I brush that aside. I'm not just going off and leaving him all alone here.

We’re just finishing our food when my cell rings. It's Brian.

"Where the fuck are you?" he asks.

"At the airport," I say, kind of bewildered. He knows I was bringing Dan here, and he sure as Hell knows the flight time because his PA organized it all.

"I fucking know that," he snipes. "I just want to know … Never mind."
Then the phone goes dead. I blink at it even more confused, and then I hear, "I might have fucking known you'd be feeding your face."

And Brian is pulling up a chair next to me.

*****

Brian

He gives me this look when I sit down and I realize just how smart I was to push everything else aside and take a cab out here. He's going to be all fucking weepy and emotional when the old buzzard finally walks through the gates, and God knows what he'd do to the Jeep driving home in that state.

The old buzzard himself gives me one of those fucking superior smirks like he knows exactly why I'm here, and I'm about to say something snarky that would probably guarantee that I don't get laid for at least … well, probably not tonight anyway … but right then there's one of those little ping-pang noises through the public address system and everyone in the damned airport is informed that there's a flight ready for boarding; because that's a fucking surprise - it's a damned airport for Chrissake! If you understand Swahili you could probably even tell which flight it is, but by the way Justin is starting to fucking hyperventilate, he at least figures it's good old Dan's.

So we all head down to the gate and go through the fucking painful process of saying goodbye to someone that we hardly know but who … well, who's turned into one of few people that either of us really fucking cares about. I know people think Justin is a sentimental little sweetheart, but that's bullshit. Underneath that sweet little blond thing he's got going on, he's as hard-nosed as they come. There aren't a lot of people that he really feels deeply for, but Dan has become one of them.

Fortunately, Dan and I see eye to eye about some things, and prolonged goodbyes seem to be one of them. He shakes my hand and thanks me for all the help that my PA gave him in organizing his bookings and shit, then he gives a little smile at Justin and holds out his hand to him, but he doesn't know my Sunshine half as well as he might think he does, because Justin ignores the hand and throws his arms round him.

Dan freezes for a moment, and then he lets his arms fold round Justin and gives him an awkward kind of hug - like it's something he doesn't do often, or hasn't done for a while anyway.

Justin hangs on to him for a moment, and then finally steps back and says, "Remember, you promised to write. I mean, it's not like you don't know the address."

It's a lame attempt at humor, but Dan and I both smile dutifully and he nods. "I promise I will send you a postcard as soon as I find my feet in London," he says.

He's going to be staying in London for a week or so catching up with one of his sister's kids, before he goes up north, which is where Billy's family came from, to see Billy's sister and her brood.

After that, who knows? I don't think he's planned very far ahead. I have the feeling he doesn't think he needs to.

But that's not something that any of us want to think about right now.

"And you promised to send me the catalogue from your show," he reminds Justin. "And any other news. If you email me care of my nephew, he will see that I get it."

Justin nods and for a moment I think he's going to do a Deb and overwhelm poor old Dan with
another hug, but he steps back against me and I can actually fucking feel him doing his best to smile.

"Take care of yourself," he says. "I'm … Dan I am so glad we met you."

Dan smiles then for real and nods.

"I am very glad to have met you both. I hope you live a long and happy life together and that the house shelters you well."

He gives another nod, and then turns and walks away.

I hear little Sunshine give a sort of soggy sigh, but for a minute I'm busy dealing with my own allergies. Fucking shitty aircon system, probably the air has been recycled so many times that it's almost pure allergens by now.

I take a deep breath, turn and start steering us towards the parking lot.

We have to get to the loft and get some stuff so we can hightail it to the fucking house before dear Melanie comes calling.

I've put up with all the emotional shit that I can take today.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

A short one. But maybe you'll find it interesting. The boys get some very surprising news.

Seems like we're doomed - or else this emotional shit is like the Borg and you just can't escape it, because we've just left the airport when my cell phone rings. It's Cynthia to tell me that Mel had turned up there demanding to see me. Well, apparently her exact words were something like "where is that fucking asshole sonofabitch" - about which my only complaint is that I'm current not fucking; the sonofabitch thing I can't argue with at all, and "asshole" is practically my middle name. Anyway, seems she got more and more abusive and hysterical until she drove even Theodore to the point of threatening to call the police if she didn't either calm down or leave.

She left.

I tell my driver what's going on - although he guessed most of it from the side of the conversation he could hear - and we're just debating whether I should call Ms Hershell to fill her in on this latest, when my cell rings again. This time it's the building super at the loft who says there's "some crazy bitch" shrieking obscenities outside our door. He says the other tenants are complaining. No shit.

I tell him to call the cops.

Then I tell the driver to pull over. It's become obvious that once again my attorney's coffers are going to be swelling due to the fucking munchers' dysfunctional relationship, and I don't want to call her only to have the fucking phone cut out because we've gone into the tunnel. Besides, I know he's going to want to hear what's going on, and I don't want him to crash the damned car because he's too busy eavesdropping to pay proper attention to what he's doing.
As I dial I wonder if Michael is baby-sitting his little fucking dumpling while Mel is rampaging all over town. Shit!

I get through to Ms Hershell eventually, and as soon as I fill her in on the latest chapter I can tell she isn't much either surprised or sorry to hear what Mel's been up to. She tells me that she's already prepared the papers to apply for a restraining order, and that she'll file to have it treated as an urgent matter by the courts. She warns me I should be prepared to attend a hearing this afternoon, although, she says, I probably won't be asked to say anything. She'll get a statement from the building super and that, together with the statements from the hotel staff about this morning's shenanigans, should be enough to prove to the courts that Mel can't be trusted to keep the line. I ask her about getting one from Cynthia or Ted, but she says she'd prefer to just rely on those from neutral sources.

She also tells me that she recommends re-applying to the Family Courts to have even Mel's rights to supervised visits removed unless she's willing to enter into an agreement not to approach any one of us - me, Justin, Gus or Lindsay - except at mutually agreed times and in the presence of our lawyers. Of course she fucking does.

Ka-ching! Ka-ching!

But it's not the money that makes me hesitate on that one. It's …

Lindsay will go fucking ballistic; so will Mikey for that matter if Mel starts giving him a hard time about JR as her twisted form of payback.

I tell Ms H that I'll have to think about it. And discuss it with Lindsay.

When she speaks again, I swear I can hear the wolf-grin in her voice; whatever's going on, she's scenting blood.

"As far as Ms Petersen is concerned, you may wish to pass on the information Ms Marcus's attorney revealed to me this morning. It appears that one of the reasons that Ms Marcus wishes to present as grounds for appeal against the supervised visits only ruling is because she believes she is about to be granted Canadian citizenship, and therefore it would place an intolerable burden on her to be able to see Gus only under the supervision of the Pittsburgh Courts."

"How the f… Hell is she swinging that?" I ask dumfounded.

Again, I can hear the wolf-tone in her voice as she answers. "Ms Marcus was married to a Canadian resident two days ago."

Holy fuck!
Chapter Summary

Justin

I can hardly believe it when Brian tells me what Mel has done. She had a wedding ceremony with Lindsay for fuck's sake. Okay, maybe it wasn't legal, but that's not the point. The point is it was still supposed to mean something; still supposed to mark some kind of commitment; not something just to be brushed aside for whatever fucked up reason.

Shit!

Brian sighs and rubs his hands over his face.

"I am not going to be the one who breaks this fucking news to her," he says. "Let her lawyer do it."

I nod. I guess if I were a better person I'd want to "be there" to support Lindsay, and all that stuff. But like Brian told me once 'they made their own pain'.

Anyone with half a brain would have realized how fucking stupid it was to think that just because some bad shit had happened that threatened their cozy little view of the world and they got scared, they could solve all the problems in their relationship by running away to another country. A place where they had no jobs, no support network, no friends even; and a relationship that had foundations about as stable as the San Andreas Fault.

Because the truth is that although there still might have been some kind of physical thing there (and I so don't want to think about that), I don't believe that Mel and Linds even liked each other very much any more; let alone loved and respected each other enough to make a relationship work.
I know the appeal of the idea of a whole 'fresh start' thing, away from all the day to day shit and the
people who, intentionally or not, well-intentioned or not, keep shoving their fucking noses into
your relationship. I know how good it felt when Brian and I had that trip to Chicago after the
bombing and just left everything - all the everyday stuff and all the major hassles - behind for a few
days. But that was exactly it - it was a break, for a few days. We didn't think we could leave all that
shit behind permanently. I mean, even when he visited me in New York, those weekends weren'tspent in some kind of fantasy-land. We had to fit all that intensity, all the emotions, all the hopes
and fears, and the hot reunion sex into our real lives - my work, his client meetings, plane
schedules and bus strikes and all kinds of everyday shit.

So if the girls thought that the whole 'escape to Canada' thing was going to solve all their problems
they were seriously delusional and the whole thing was kind of doomed from the start. I mean, if
they were relying on that to salvage their relationship, then that's just crazy.

But …

I can still hardly believe that Mel has just gotten married to someone else. Or why, if she has, she's
down here creating drama over Gus. Because, even without the whole thing with Brian's rights,
even if they had gone ahead with the legal adoption, she can't imagine that she and Lindsay could
have shared custody of Gus when they're in different countries. How would that work? Ship him
back and forwards every six months?

Maybe she thought that she had Linds so whipped that Linds would stay in Toronto and give Mel
all the access she wanted even though Mel was with someone else. And now, because Linds defied
her, and brought Gus back home, she's just reacting because she didn't get her own way, like she
usually does.

I mean, everyone used to tell me that Mel lived to make Lindsay smile and all that shit. But you
know what? The only major thing that Lindsay got her own way about, despite what Mel wanted,
was having Brian father Gus. Mel wanted Gus to be circumcised, and it would have happened
except for Brian, regardless of the fact that Linds isn't Jewish and Gus is her biological son and
maybe that's not what she wanted for him. Mel wanted Leda to stay around, and move in with them
and get involved in their lives - Leda moved in, despite how much it played on Lindsay's
insecurities having Mel's ex living with them. Mel wanted Michael (well, pretty much anyone but
Brian) to father her child, Michael got to be Daddy, despite Linds wanting the children to be blood
related and real siblings. Mel wanted to keep their problems from all their friends when they split
up around the time JR was born, Linds kept her mouth shut and didn't even tell Michael, despite the
fact that he was JR's father and had a right to know and despite the fact that it meant lying to their
friends for months. Mel wanted to move to Canada, they moved to Canada, despite the fact that it
meant taking both Gus and JR away from the other halves of their families, and despite the fact that
Lindsay had to give up a job that she really loved and that she was pretty good at. And Mel has the
fucking gall to tell the whole fucking world that Brian is selfish and narcissistic. Fuck!

People seem to think that the reason that Mel and Brian clash so much is because they are so much
alike. And I used to kind of agree. Superficially, in a way, they're right. But in most ways, all the
ways that really matter, they are so very wrong.

Because there's no way that Brian would have pulled all that kind of shit - not on me, not on
Michael, not on anyone he cared about. Brian has always pushed us - me, Michael, even Ted and
Emmett, to be independent and strong and to be, like he says, the best homosexuals we can be.
And while Brian is controlling, it's always been in a 'why the fuck are you worried about me, get
the fuck out there and do what you need to do for you' kind of way. His type of controlling is to
push the people he cares about off cliffs if he thinks that's the impetus they need to let them fly, no
matter what it costs him, or how much he might suffer as a result. While with Mel, the controlling thing is always about Mel, about what Mel wants.

The truth is I will never really forgive either her or Lindsay for taking Gus up to Canada, right after they'd helped push me onto a plane. I take responsibility for my own decision to go along with the whole 'making it in New York' thing. It was painful, but at the time it was the right decision for me, and for Brian and most especially for us. Because Brian would never have forgiven himself if he thought that me staying in Pittsburgh to be with him had damaged my chances for success.

But Linds wasn't thinking about that … she was just thinking about getting me away from Brian. And all Mel was thinking about was doing her best to spite Brian - despite all that he's done for her over the years.

I'm not the starry-eyed little twink I was when they met me, grateful for any support I got in this frightening new world I was so determined to enter. Back then, I never looked behind their kindness to me to see into their motives.

I'm an adult now, and I see their actions with much more cynical eyes.

Besides, it's not just Brian, or even me, whose lives they're fucking with now. There are kids involved here. And it's just not right that Gus and JR are being used in their spiteful little …

Fuck! JR.

I hesitate for a moment, but the days when I was afraid to raise difficult subjects with Brian are long gone; they have to be.

"Do you think we should tell Michael?" I ask.

Brian goes kind of quiet beside me for a moment. Then he rubs his fingers over his lips the way he does when he's really stressed.

"Fuck!" he sighs.

"The thing is," I go on before he can answer my question. "I'm pretty certain Mel will try to manipulate him into helping her with whatever fucked up plan she's come up with. And if he doesn't know that she's married, and has no intention of coming back to Pittsburgh …"

"Fuck!" he says again.

I don't have to finish the thought; he knows only too well how Mel will dangle access to JR like a great big shiny gold star, just out of Michael's reach … unless of course he goes along with her fucking master plan for total domination of all things Kinney.

"Fuck!" he says one more time, and takes out his phone.

*****

Brian

I can tell as soon as Mikey answers the phone that there's something wrong. And no prizes for guessing what that might be. Of course, the fact that he immediately starts babbling that he'd like to increase some imaginary fucking order, but can't discuss it right now because he has someone there is another big fucking clue.
Mind you, I have to admit that it surprises me that he could come up with even that lame attempt to cover up the fact that it's me on the phone.

"So Mel's there," I say.

"Yes, that's right," he answers, all would-be fucking professional store owner.

"Well, ask her how her new little wifey is doing," I tell him.

I hear a kind of gulp, and then he says, his voice all squeaky with shock and not nearly so professional, "What? What?"

"She fucking got married two days ago to the dyke lawyer she's been shacking up with for the last few months. So if she's making a whole lot of promises about you spending more time with your daughter, as if she'll be living right round the fucking corner, it's all bullshit. She's got no intention of leaving the frozen north any time soon."

I hear him breathing, all gulpy and noisy, the way he does when he's really upset and for a moment I'm almost sorry I didn't break the news to him more gently. But fuck that. There's no time. I say quietly, "Mikey, listen to me. Are you listening?"

"Yes," he says.

"Tell the bitch you can't talk with her without your lawyer being there."

I hear him gulp again, and then he says, "Yes. Yes, I'll do that. Thank you for calling."

And hangs up.

Well, the jury's out on how that one's going to go.

Justin's sitting looking at me like he's trying to work out how the fuck JT can swoop in and save the day and suddenly I'm just sick of all this shit.

"Do you still want to go to the house?" I ask him.

He bites his lip and then says, "Not really."

I raise an eyebrow, and he shrugs.

"I just don't want ..." he breaks off and sighs, but I know what he wants to say.

He doesn't want our first night in our new home to be tainted with all this fucking drama. And he's right.

"Let's go home," I say. "To the loft."

Why not? She's done her rampaging there, and if she turns up again the cops can drag her off kicking and screaming. I'm done.

We need a fucking break.

Literally.

At least I do.
He sits for a moment, and then nods, starting the car.

"We've got plenty of food," he says. "We can just disconnect the phones, and lock the door, and let them all wait until we're ready to deal with them."

He knows as well as I do that we can't really do that.

We have to be ready to go to court this afternoon, and potentially set up another visit to Family Court to let Mel have another run at us there. Besides, we have to be available to Gus.

But for the next hour or so, anyway, we can just get off the fucking treadmill for a while. Or rather, get off the treadmill and start fucking.

So that's what we do.

The super is lying in wait for us when we arrive and rides up in the lift with us, giving us a blow by blow description of all the action we missed on the way - like the police arriving and insisting that Mel vacate the premises, but we manage to send him off happy once we get to our floor - with a hundred bucks tucked into his wallet that wasn't there before. And then we get to close and lock the door with every other fucking asshole on the other side of it. In here, for now, anyway, it's just us.

He turns to me and looks me up and down, then he grins.

"You almost look ruffled by all this drama," he says.

I stick my tongue in my cheek and just look back, letting my eyes travel up and down his body. As if my Rageian powers of mind control really are working, he moves towards me and presses me back against the door.

Then he slides down my body and just breathes on my flies.

It's fucking ridiculous, but that alone is enough to start the blood flowing to all the best places, and I feel my cock sitting up and taking notice.

He gives one of his delicious little giggles at my reaction, and carefully undoes the zip on my almost new Prada pants. For once I'm wearing jocks and he mouths them, wet and warm and fucking wonderful, till the material is sticking to my cock.

He's still mouthing at me, when his arms slide round my hips and his hands push down into the back of my pants to cup my buttocks. He squeezes them not too gently, then forces down my pants, and the jocks and then brings one hand round to free my cock, while the other slips down between my cheeks and his fingers play up and down my crack.

Then his fingers are gone and he's pulling away. I look down and see him sitting back on his heels looking up at me. The fingers that had been so close to my hole are now approaching his mouth, and as I watch he slides one deep inside, sucking on it wetly. My dick twitches and I run my tongue over my lips as he slides another finger in beside the first, and then a third. I hear the wet slurp of saliva being slathered all over them and then he's leaning forward again.

His tongue plays over a vein on my cock and then his fingers are pressing at my hole. I brace myself a little and he pushes one in while his tongue teases the little bundle of nerves under the head of my cock. The second gets pushed in while he tongue-fucks my slit and the third when he finally takes me deep into his mouth. I lean my shoulders back against the door and arch into him, letting him set the rhythm any way he wants.
For a while, nothing exists except the feelings he's evoking - and not just the physical ones. Having someone treat me like this, understand me like this, love me like this … it's overwhelming for me. But he does. I know that he does. And then my cock hits the back of his throat and he swallows around it at the same time as he crooks one finger to rub across my prostate and for a while I don't know anything. Not even my own name.

By the time I come back to myself, he's standing up and looking at me, a sort of question in his eyes.

I know what he wants. Hell, I know what I want.

I pull up my almost new Prada pants and head for the bed. Once I get there, I pull them off, and throw them on the floor. Then I lie face down on the bed and push my ass up at him. "If you want it you'd better hurry up and fucking take it," I tell him. "Fuck knows how long we'll have before the phones start ringing off the wall."

He laughs, but it's all breathy and excited, and then he's reaching under me to play with my balls; both of them, he always pays as much attention to the fake one, sometimes I think he almost forgets it is fucking fake, and those times I almost do too. I feel his teeth nip my ass, and then his tongue is pushing at my hole and I'm getting hard again already. But it doesn't matter. This isn't about me getting off. It's not even about him getting off. It's about him reminding me that it's okay to be vulnerable with him this way, that it's okay to let him take control, that I can trust him. And even as I hear the condom packet tear and then feel the burn as he pushes inside me I know that I really can.

That I do.

It's a fucking amazing feeling. Something I never for a moment thought that I could ever have. So it was something I could never let think about, never let myself want.

Other people seem to go right through their lives wanting "that special someone" that they can totally trust to love them forever.

I wasn't kidding when I told Justin that night that I didn't believe in all that shit.

I still don't. I'm still not sure what other people think love is.

But I know what it is for me. For us even.

I know that he will never deliberately hurt me or use my feelings for him against me. I know that no matter what happens in the future, we will always be part of each other's lives. That we will always put each other pretty much first - except maybe for Gus. I know that I can trust him in ways that I never believed I would ever be ready to trust anybody. I know that I would literally be ready to die to protect him, and I suspect it's the same for him. I know that any shitty thing that happens becomes less shitty as soon as he's around. I know that he makes me feel like … in fact, I hope we make each other feel like we're okay. We're not fucking perfect, but we're not complete write offs either and that people who treat us that way are just plain fucking wrong - whether that's his father or my mother or any other fucker who doesn't believe that we deserve at least to be treated with respect.

Most of all, he makes me feel … content. Happy, even. Like I don't have to keep jumping through hoops and upholding the image, like I can just fucking stop and be myself; and that's enough for him.
And that, boys and girls, is a lot fucking more than I ever expected I would have in my life.

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Justin

It's weird. I don't top often with Brian. I mean it happens. It's not like we never do it that way. But compared to how often he tops me it's like negligible, hardly ever.

But whenever it does happen, it kind of means something.

Sometimes I don't know what that is until much later.

But this time, I feel like …

I feel like it's because he's really trying to show me that for once, when under stress, under direct threat even, he's not reacting to that by setting everyone, including me, at a distance while he refortifies the Kinney-castle and raises the drawbridge. He might still raise the drawbridge; I'm kind of afraid he might need to with Mel on the rampage and intent on doing as much damage as possible. But this time I'm on the inside. Literally inside him.

That's what he was telling me as I fucked his ass so hard he'll be bitching at me for a week.

I thought (as much as I can think at times like that) about being all gentle and tender and all that stuff. But it wasn't what either of us really needed. What we both needed was hard and edgy and real. Because what I had to tell him while I fucked him was that he's mine; and I am not going to stand aside and let that fucking cow take a run at him without going through me first.

She thinks Brian is the one she has to worry about. She hasn't got a fucking clue. If she goes into some court room and starts to rag on Brian about his "lifestyle" and all that shit, he'll barely defend himself. He certainly won't do it by attacking her, or Lindsay.

But I won't even hesitate. If she tries to paint herself as some pure as the driven snow wounded wifey, then the fucking gloves are going to come off big time. She opens her mouth about stuff that she thinks paints Brian as some kind of slut who shouldn't be allowed near any kid, then I'll spill the lot about the affair she had just after Gus was born and about the little menage-a-trois that she kind of forced on Lindsay with Leda. As well as about Lindsay's fling with Sam and how totally fucked Melanie's reaction to that was. And we'll see then whether the courts still think of her, or Lindsay either as up-standing citizens who should be listened to when they denigrate Brian. Then I'll tell them how Mel used to try to turn me against Brian. I'll list out every single spiteful thing she's ever said about him - especially the things she's said in front of Gus.

Plus I'll tell them about all the times she's coming running to Brian for help - like over that Gui guy, and over the wedding, and whenever they needed more fucking money for whatever.

By the time I'm finished with her they'll see her as the totally neurotic, jealous cow she is, and will be glad to kick her ass back to Canada.

****

Brian

He's still pounding my ass when the phones start ringing, but we just let them fucking ring. I'm kind of vaguely aware of words pouring out of the answering machine, but I'm way too far gone to take any fucking notice of them.
But just as we leave the shower, my cell rings and when I pick it up it's Ms Hershell's office, so I answer it right away.

She starts right off by asking if Melanie has made any further attempts to contact us, and when I tell her not so far as I know, but we haven't had a chance to check our machine yet for any messages, she kind of snorts.

"I think you can expect her to," she says. "At least if her recent behavior is any guide."

I sense she has more to say so I keep my mouth shut about what I think about Melanie. Fuck, I'm sure she knows by now.

"She applied to the Family Courts this morning for a hearing to have the custody arrangements reviewed."

Shit!

But I take a deep breath and try not to freak out. Justin is hovering at my elbow so I flip the phone onto 'speaker' mode so he can hear for himself. If this is fucking bad, I'm not sure I'll have the words to tell him.

But then she starts speaking again and I can hear that predator note in her voice. The one that makes me so fucking glad she's on my side.

"Don't be concerned, Mr. Kinney, the judge refused to even hear the application. She said that she'd already ruled that Ms. Marcus has no legal standing in this case, and that being so there were no grounds for any further appeals on her part."

I feel the breath leave my body in a whoosh of air and I have the feeling that except for the arm wrapped firmly around my waist that I might have wound up on my ass on the floor.

But she's still not finished.

"Ms Marcus apparently did not take that decision very well, and became somewhat … excited. As a result of her reaction, the judge further stated that due to Ms Marcus's demonstrated disregard for the court's rulings she was issuing an injunction suspending any access to Gus until such time as Ms Marcus is prepared to sign a declaration stating that she accepts the court's rulings, and the custody agreements that have been reached, and will make no attempt to disrupt them."

I must be getting the fucking 'flu' or something, because suddenly the room is swimming in front of me.

"Mr. Kinney, I am advising you in my capacity as an Officer of the Courts, that should Ms. Marcus attempt to contact you, or Mr. Taylor or Ms Petersen, and most especially Gus, in any way, she will be in breach of the injunction and the judge has issued instructions that in that case she will be cited for contempt of court. She will be arrested and held until such time as she indicates that she is prepared to accept the Court's rulings."

I can't speak. I can't fucking get my voice to work.

Fortunately, I don't have to.

"It's Justin Taylor here, Ms Hershell," I hear. "Thank you so much for calling us. And thank you for all your work on this case."
"It's my job, Mr. Taylor," she answers. And then surprises me by saying, "But I do have to admit that I very rarely find doing my job as satisfying as I have in this case."

She seems to hesitate for a moment and then continues.

"The other thing that you should be aware of is that both I and the judge in this case have filed complaints against Ms. Marcus with the Pennsylvania Bar Association. Her conduct throughout, from the time she first drew up the papers regarding Mr. Kinney's relinquishment of his parental rights, has been atrocious. I would be failing in my responsibilities not to report her actions to the courts."

"Yes, I … we understand," he says so calmly that it somehow soothes my vocal chords, and I manage to croak out a few words.

"So, I guess this means we don't have to file for the restraining order?" I ask.

I can practically hear that little pursed lip thing she does when she wants to let me know that she's the fucking expert and I should just shut up.

"I would advise that we should proceed with that. In the event that Ms Marcus apologizes to the courts the more stringent conditions of the injunction may be lifted. She will still not be allowed access to Gus, but she may be free to contact you. I would prefer that that was not the case. However, in light of the Family Court injunction, having the restraining order granted should be a formality and I see no reason why you would be required to appear."

There's something niggling at my mind, but I'm too fucking boneless with relief and a kind of stunned disbelief that for once the fucking universe seems to be on my side, to be able to get my head around it. But again, I don't have to. The blond pit-bull at my side pipes up with the question I hadn't been able to formulate.

"What if Lindsay … Ms Petersen … lets Melanie see Gus?" he asks.

"Then by the terms of the judge's ruling, she also would be in contempt of court and would be subject to the same penalties. In most instances, the courts would most likely be reluctant to enforce them in her case. However, my reading of the situation is that the judge is becoming very weary of Ms Marcus's refusal to recognize her authority, and she would not take kindly to Ms Petersen enabling her to flout it yet again. In that circumstance, she may very well feel that a period of sober reflection would be good for both parties. And Ms Petersen will be advised of this by her counsel. In fact, I should imagine that she has already received that advice."

"Mr. Kinney, Mr. Taylor, I have every hope that Ms Marcus will see the futility of pursuing this matter and will recognize that the most sensible thing she can do is to return to Canada and her new spouse."

Yeah and pigs might nest on the roof of the Steel Tower. She won't want to go anywhere until she's had a piece of my ass.

But … at least we don't have to face her in court and it seems like she's got no fucking hope at all of getting any access to Gus unless Linds does something monumentally stupid.

So things are a hell of a lot better than they could have been.

I mumble some kind of thanks to the magician who has somehow made this happen. I'm paying her a not so small fucking fortune, but what the fuck does that matter? I resolved going in that she could have it all, as long as I got to keep contact with my kid. And I have done way better than I
could ever have fucking imagined.

There are a couple more minutes of formalities about what we should do if Mel shows up, and about payment and all that shit.

Then I click off the phone and for a long moment we just stare at each other.

I can feel myself start to grin, and he hugs me and it seems like all should be okay with the world. But it's not. There's something wrong. Despite the fact that he's smiling at me, somewhere behind his eyes he looks seriously pissed. I'm trying to work out what the Hell is wrong with him when the loft phone rings; it almost immediately cuts to voicemail and Debbie's voice echoes round the loft.
The boys regroup after Justin has a bit of a melt down - or maybe a blow up - that has unexpected results. Brian deals with it in his own inimitable fashion.

Justin

I know it's crazy that I'm pissed because the whole legal thing is going so smoothly in Brian's favor... our favor. I know that.

But the thing is that for the last few days it's been one fucking crisis after another, and every time I've had to sit back and be the supportive partner, and that's fine. That's who I want to be.

But with every new drama my adrenaline levels have been bouncing about all over the place and I guess it's like the whole "flight or fight" response thing has been coming down harder and harder on the side of "fight" every time a crisis comes up; but then the crises have sort of petered out and there's been no fucking chance for me to do the fighting. So I'm kind of exhausted and wired and mad as hell, all at the same time.

Which I guess kind of explains what happens when Deb's voice bellows out of the answering machine demanding "pick up the phone, you asshole".

Before Brian can react at all, I've snatched up the hand unit.

"Have you finished?" I ask, interrupting her mid-rant.

"Sunshine?" she gasps, like she's totally amazed that I answer the phone in my own fucking home.

"It's Justin, yes," I say tightly.
"Is that asshole there?" she asks.

"If you mean that bitch Melanie, no she's not. Nor is your dick-headed son. So at the moment, the loft is asshole free."

"I meant Brian!" she snaps. "That fucking asshole has …"

"Deb!" I shout down the phone at her, so loudly that it cuts her off mid-flow and Brian, who's just reached my side, actually jumps.

"If you can't fucking stop yourself from calling Brian names, and blaming him for everything that goes wrong in your idiot son's life, then I suggest that you don't fucking call here at all," I yell. And then I hit the off button hard, thinking that it's not nearly as satisfying as when you could actually slam the phone down onto its base.

Brian takes a step back and holds up his hands like a cowboy surrendering in a western. He's looking at me like I've grown another head, and not the one that he might like a duplicate of either.

"If you're planning to scream at everyone who calls me an asshole, you might want to invest in some throat lozenges," he advises, turning away to switch on the coffee maker.

I take a deep breath, trying to stop myself from shaking, and wait till he turns back to face me again before I say, "I just won't put up with that shit in our own fucking home."

He shrugs.

He doesn't say that he's used to it; he doesn't have to. But that's going to change.

"You did refer her son as a 'dickhead'", he offers.

I snort.

"He is a fucking dickhead!" I spit. "He's been told by his lawyer a kazillion times not to talk to Melanie, that the best way he can protect his daughter is to leave it to the lawyers. But he still met with her this morning.

"God knows what sort of a spin she's put on things, or what promises she's scattered around; and he'll believe them, and go along with whatever shit she's shoveling, not caring who gets covered in it. And then when it all goes wrong, he'll come whining and wailing about how worried he is about his little pumpkin or buttercup or whatever he's calling the poor kid this week and expect you to fix it."

Brian turns again to stare at the coffee maker as if it's about to reveal the secret of life, the universe and everything.

"I'd be worried too," he says eventually, his voice so quiet I hear him more by instinct than through my ears.

I sigh.

He's right, of course. Michael's daughter is at the mercy of a woman who quite honestly isn't behaving at the moment as if she's completely sane. Mel didn't even bring JR to Pittsburgh with her; she left her in Toronto with her new wife. It's not surprising that Michael's worried. But the problem is that when he gets scared he does really fucking stupid things.
And when they go wrong, Brian feels called upon to find a way to fix it.

It's what he does.

It wasn't just his looks that made us use him as the model for Rage. It's that inner fire he has to make things right. He'd hate to be considered any kind of crusader, but, honestly, he's more of one than anyone else I know. People like Mel, or even Ben, who are supposedly all "politically aware" and active in the community and all that shit, are just poseurs compared to Brian. Because whether it's dealing with Stockwell, all facing up to my Dad or throwing Ted a lifeline when he looked like going under or pursuing what's right for Gus … Brian doesn't just sit around theorizing - he acts. He fucking stands up to be counted and puts himself on the line.

Every. Fucking. Time.

*****

Brian

When the phone rings again I look at him and he looks at me and while we're silently daring each other to answer it, it goes to voicemail.

When he hears Deb's voice, he grabs the phone and stabs his finger on the "talk" button twice in quick succession which of course cuts her off.

I keep looking at him and he sighs. Then he straightens up, looks right into my eyes and says, "Why didn't you answer it that time?"

For one moment I'm confused, thinking it's an accusation. Then it hits me. He knows damned well that one reason I didn't answer the damned thing was that I didn't want to hear Deb mouthing off about his behavior in daring to call her on her shit. He raises one eyebrow at me, the little twat, in the look he fucking learned from me.

I shrug.

But I don't fool him for an instant. He knows that I've got the message.

I give a fleeting thought to how much time he must have spent over the years listening to one or other of them mouthing off about me. But fuck that!

He's not that little twink anymore, and he's obviously set on making it clear to me as well as to everyone else that he's not going to suffer that shit in silence any more.

Fair enough.

He's just putting the coffee cups on the counter and I'm just reaching to switch off the machine when the phone rings and then quickly goes to voice mail.

No surprise that it's Deb again.

But apparently she hasn't called back to ream him out, or to heap more curses on my head (although no doubt at some point she'll be blaming me for turning her "sweet little Sunshine" into an asshole just like me).

No, it's worse than that.

"Don't you hang up on me, you little shit!"
Her voice booms out at us from the machine, and she's speaking even faster than usual.

"I just want to know what the a... that partner of yours is doing for his birthday tomorrow."

Fuck!

*****

Justin

Brian grimaces and, leaving him to pour the coffee, I pick up the handset, feeling pretty kind of stupid.

"Hi, Deb," I say cheerily, as if the earlier phone calls never happened. It's the only thing I can think of to cover the fact that it seems like I behaved like the Drama Princess he used to call me over a totally innocent phone call - well, innocent for Deb. She doesn't intend any harm; "asshole" for her is like an endearment when it comes to Brian. Most of the time. She just never stops to think about how it might affect him to be called that all the time. Or how it affects me either. But anyway, it looks like I picked the wrong time to kick up about it, so I just try to do the whole innocent blue-eyed blond thing and hope for the best.

She snorts, but doesn't call me on it.

"I know it's a fucking forbidden topic," she starts, "but that … Brian can just learn to share his birthday like normal folk. God knows this family needs something to celebrate right now."

I figure that our part of the family has a hell of a lot to celebrate, but I remember that I'm talking to JR's grandmother and cut her some slack.

After a bit of umming and ahhing, we agree that she and Carl and Michael and Hunter, will put in an appearance at the loft at around five o'clock tomorrow to share the birthday cake that Gus and I are going to make in the morning. She wants to help with that, but I put her off. That's time that I'm looking forward to sharing with … my son. Besides, Gus wants to do it himself, not watch Debbie.

I keep an eye on Brian while I'm talking because I know that this will probably piss him off big time. Sure enough, when he hears me confirm the time, he abandons the coffee and does his best to get the phone off me so he can cancel the arrangements or something equally lame, but I'm fucked if I'm going to allow Mel's bullshit to either ruin Brian's birthday or to do any more damage to our already fractured fucking family. There are enough real issues between Brian and Michael and between me and both Michael and Deb without having to deal with any phantasms that Melanie has conjured up.

Gus wants to make a birthday cake for his Dad tomorrow and I know he'll fucking love it if we have everyone over to watch Brian blow out the candles and to share Gus's cake.

So whether Mr. Kinney likes it or not, we are going to fucking celebrate his birthday with a family gathering.

Anyway, what better way is there to demonstrate that Melanie has no fucking power over us anymore - at least over Brian and I - than to have this get together as if nothing she has been doing has affected us at all? She's the outsider now; she's the one who has chosen to separate herself from this dysfunctional little group and make a whole new life for herself up in Canada. And all her ranting and raving and cursing Brian is just like the big bad wolf huffing and puffing uselessly. The family Brian and I are building with Gus isn't a damned house of straw; it's solid; it's got deep foundations and strong walls and she can huff and puff all she fucking wants, she can't blow it
down.

So Brian can do some huffing and puffing of his own over it, but he's going to have to suck it up and smile sweetly tomorrow for Gus's sake and let his family make a bit of a fuss over him. I dodge around the counter and ask Deb if she can do me a favor and invite everyone else and then I let him snatch the phone and when he tells her to forget all that shit I hear her laughter echo from the handset and something about 'see you tomorrow, you little asshole'.

I grin at him and when he scowls I do my best to look contrite.

I'm ready to confess to being a bad, bad boy. If he wants to punish me for that, so much the better.

*****

Brian

The little twat thinks he's won of course. And the worst part of that is that he probably fucking has. At least this round.

The truth is that although I resent the Hell out of having to "celebrate" something as fucking hideous as getting another year older, this year there are definitely other things that do deserve celebration.

Things to do with Gus and with the little twat who's giving me that self-satisfied little smirk that I've been seeing ever since his first fucking night in my bed. It was on his face when we were driving to the fucking hospital that night, because he knew he'd won the battle not to just get thrown out on that perfect ass of his. That alone should have told me how much trouble I was in. I'd never had any trouble getting rid of a trick before, no matter what they thought about it. But with him …

It's on his face now and although there's still a part of me that's tempted to do something deliberately cruel just to watch that look vanish in an instant, I've at least come far enough to recognize how fucking stupid and self-destructive that reaction is. In fact, I probably always knew that, but now I've somehow become smart enough not to let the self-destruct button trigger at every available opportunity. I swear there are times when I watch Gus and secretly acknowledge that sometimes he behaves with more maturity than I used to do when my buttons were pressed.

So instead of behaving like a pouting five year old, I just walk around the counter, open one of the drawers and take out the big wooden spoon.

His eyes widen as it dawns on him what I have in mind to do with it, and then his faces gets all flushed and I let myself grin as we both realize just how hot and bothered the idea of being put over my knee and having that nice hard wood applied to his wicked little butt has got him.

I'm not sure if he'll look on it as punishment or reward, but it will definitely give us both something else to think about for a while. And after the day we've had, that can't be a bad thing.

*****

Justin

Asshole!

Using that spoon was a bit more than I'd bargained for, and my ass is still stinging.
It was fucking hot though.

And now we're both lying here relaxed and sated but I know we should get up and have a shower, because we're going to regret it later if we don't. Besides, I'm hungry.

So I get out of bed and he follows me into the bathroom and gives me a nice rub down in the shower and we're kind of all over each other, touching and laughing and just … together.

It's nice.

Surprisingly, we haven't heard anything from Melanie all afternoon, so maybe she's finally got the judge's message.

Or maybe she's concentrating her efforts on Lindsay or Michael.

Who the fuck knows?

I'm not surprised though that while I'm calling our favorite Japanese take out, Brian gives Lindsay a call.

He sounds exasperated by the time he gets off the phone, but apparently my Mom is there with her. So Brian hands the phone to me, and I talk with Mom for a while. Seems like Linds pretty much moved in on the spot this morning, since they had all their stuff with them and there was no where else to go. Mom thought she should do the right thing and help get them settled as soon as possible, so she called and volunteered to do some grocery shopping for Lindsay, and now the two of them are having a "nice cup of tea" while I can hear cartoons playing in the background, so I guess Gus is watching TV.

I make sure Mom knows she's invited over for coffee and birthday cake tomorrow with the rest of the family, and then Gus demands to speak to me and he's all excited about how we're going to make his Daddy a birthday cake and wants to go into all the details of what flavor it should be (no prizes for guessing chocolate) and what decorations should be on it, and everything else you could think of about a cake, but I remind him that it's a surprise for everyone, and we should talk about it tomorrow while his Daddy is at work and we have the place to ourselves. He giggles at that, and then wants to talk to his Dad, so I hand the phone back to Brian.

He's been peering at his own cell phone, but it's not until he assures Gus that he'll be home in plenty of time tomorrow to have his cake, and then says a few more words to Linds about 'just don't take her calls', and stuff, that he's able to tell me that there was a text from Ms Hershell to tell him that she's already spoken to a judge who'd been happy to issue the restraining order against Melanie.

By the terms of the restrictions placed by the Family Court judge, Mel is not supposed to contact either of us or Lindsay or Gus. But now she'll be in breach of the order if she comes within 200 yards of our dwellings (both the loft and our new place), Brian's places of business - Kinnetik and Babylon, and my studio. Which pretty much means that she can't come to the diner or Michael's store either because they're both less than 200 yards from Babylon.

I asked about Lindsay's new place, but the problem is that they can't add that to the list without disclosing the address. Gus doesn't have a new school yet, but the same thing would kind of apply, because Ms H doesn't think it's a good idea to let Mel know what neighborhood they're living in; and Brian agrees. But of course they can't issue an order to stay away from some undisclosed location, so we just have to rely on the Family Court injunctions to prevent her contacting Lindsay or Gus.
At least that's another thing crossed off the list.

Or put on the list of things to celebrate, depending on how you look at it.

*****

Brian

God bless Mother Taylor.

At least with her there, I know that Linds isn't going to be able to do anything fucking stupid - like letting that psycho cow know where she's living.

She says she has no intention of doing that; and you'd think she'd be so pissed with Mel over the whole marriage thing that it wouldn't even be in question - but it wouldn't be the first time she's done something completely fucking mindlessly stupid where Melanie is concerned.

I guess there was a time when I would have been pissed as Hell about Jenn interfering. Hell, when I wouldn't have wanted her to even know that I had a kid, let alone be having afternoon tea with his mother.

But the truth is that Jenn and I have come to know and understand each other over the last few years and now she's one of the people that I trust to at least try to do the right thing. And to have enough fucking brains to be able to have some kind of hope of working out what the right thing is. Which is more than I'd be prepared to say about most people in my life.

Meanwhile, it's been a Hell of a day, and getting some food delivered and having an early night has never looked more appealing to me.

I have to put in some time at the office tomorrow - I can do that while the little twat turns the loft into a pigsty making cake with my … our … son.

I'll try to get home around lunch time so we can have some serious boys' time together before the fucking hoards descend.

It will be good to have some play time with my two boys.

By the end of the week, I need Gus enrolled back in school, I need to get blondie's ass back into his studio to do some serious work, I need to contact the contractors who worked on the loft and talk to them about work on the new place, I need to find an architect who works with buildings of that period so we can start getting some plans drawn up, I need to find a way to persuade Mikey to just take the fucking money he needs to keep his fucking house, I need to make sure Linds has some kind of car, and try to figure out if there's any way I can help Mikey over the JR situation. Oh, and see if I can think of anyone who could just happen to need a fucking Professor to add to their payroll so that Ben won't be out of work and moping when he gets out, which should be soon.

And I suppose fucking Emmett is going to want a hand moving into his new place any day now.

It's not all fun and games being a fucking super-fag, boys and girls.

But right now …

Right now, there's just me and him and as he comes to me and puts his hands up behind my head to draw me down into his mouth, I pull back for a moment and look into his eyes. They're so fucking deep and blue a merman could drown in them. But his hands are holding me up and suddenly I
wrap both my arms tight around his waist and snatch him up off the floor, holding him close against me.

He giggles, and then breathes my name, and I suck his tongue into my mouth and as he moans a little against my lips, I let all my senses savor him … sight, sound, touch, taste, smell. It's all so fucking right and satisfying and real and …

Here.

Here. With me.

Sometimes the simple fact of him is simply overwhelming to me.

I never thought I'd want this. Sure as fuck never thought I could ever have it. But here it is. In my arms, in my mouth and nostrils and eyes and ears.

God, I'm fucking glad he's home.
Out of the Mouths of Babe

Chapter Summary

Justin and Gus talk while they're making Brian's birthday cake.

Brian

My birthday starts too fucking early and the prospect of the day ahead makes me want to puke. Well, except for the bit with Gus. Who the fuck thought of the idea of celebrating birthdays anyway? It's fucking perverse to "celebrate" getting a year closer to wrinkles, impotence and senility.

The only things that make the whole prospect bearable are the stellar blow job I get in the shower, the coffee that's waiting for me by the time I'm dressed and the kisses that come with it. If I have to get … fuck it! … old, at least I'll have some fucking consolations along the way. Hell, a lifetime of mornings (and afternoons and nights) with him might almost make it worth it.

At least this fucking birthday I do have things to actually celebrate. More than I ever fucking thought I would, or could, or even should, have if I'm being totally honest with myself. I've never had any time for that "count your blessings" bullshit, but for once I can almost see the point.

What's truly ironic (from where I stand, almost surreal), is that most of the 'blessings' I'd be counting (if I actually succumbed to doing anything so fucking lame and maudlin) are things that I went through most of my life thinking were complete bullshit and pretty much literally a fate worse than death. There have been times in my life when I would quite seriously have considered suicide as a viable alternative to finding myself in a situation where I own a house pretty much in suburbia, have a kid that I'm actually committed to spending time with and have someone who's so fucking close to a damned "spouse" that it gives some relic of my "sex God of gay PA" self-image the heebie-fucking-jeebies even now. If I'd known what lay in my future I'd have fought harder to
escape these "blessings" than any damned Steve McQueen hero.

But like the cliché-ridden fucking lyrics of some damned song - that's life.

And my life right now - ongoing dramas and a whole fucking year added to the calendar notwithstanding - is pretty damned good.

*****

Justin

Last night was surprisingly normal and pretty much trauma free. We lounged around eating our Wagyu gyu-sashi and arguing over our favorite bits of sashimi and the gyoza which he will never order for himself because, of course, he "never eats carbs after seven", so he usually just steals them right off my plate. This time I did the ordering so I got enough for him to have his own, thank you very much, but that didn't stop him bitching about how much fat and salt were in them and still stuffing his face with more than his share. We tossed around some ideas for the house - what we could do to open up the front part a little more - and he said we should try to find an architect who's used to working with older buildings. We talked about what we might be able to do to help Michael and Ben. He knows how I feel about Michael, but that's not the point; Michael is part of our "family" and families should look out for each other.

And right now Michael has a lot on his plate - Ben's still in prison, he desperately needs enough money so he doesn't lose their house, and his daughter is up in Canada being looked after by someone he's never even met who is now her mother's legal spouse, so goodness knows when, or even if, Michael will see her again. I'm not surprised that trying to find a way to help is pretty high on Brian's list of priorities. And I'd have to be a complete asshole to stand in his way.

We laughed about the idea of Emmett moving into a place that sounds a bit like one of those theatrical boarding houses they used to have back in the day. He'll have those old queens and the headmistressy-dyke eating out of his hand - literally. They'll love him, and he'll love having someone to cook for and to look after a little. It won't be like at Deb's where, her being Deb, everything has to be done her way, and of course she has to have her say about everything he does - from what time he gets home to how many guys he's fucked or should have fucked this week. He'll have someone around to visit with and share gossip and recipes and stuff but he'll still have independence, and be able to tomcat about as much as he likes without the endless commentary; he'll be in homo heaven - or his version of it, anyway.

Along the way we agreed that we'd take the opportunity while everyone is together to make a couple of announcements. Like making it clear that I'm back for good for a start - no matter what anyone else might think about that; and about the new house. And, we can tell them about the invitation to show a painting at the Warhol museum. I'm not ready to say anything about the New York show yet, but Brian's keen to tell them at least about that exhibition, and I'm happy to go along with that.

I just wasn't sure we should include that announcement today. I mean, it's supposed to be Brian's birthday that we're celebrating. But I kind of know he'd prefer an excuse to slide out of the limelight, so I guess it's okay. Besides it will put a great fucking sock in the 'oh, Justin, but are you sure you won't regret leaving New York?' fucking bullshit, that my 'home to stay' announcement might stir up. If anyone starts to give Brian any of that 'you're such a selfish asshole letting him give up his dreams for you' crap, I'll be able to shove this brilliant fucking right-here-in-Pittsburgh opportunity right up their ass.

Do they have the faintest idea how fucking patronizing that shit is? Like I'm some poor besotted
teenager and big bad Brian is taking advantage of me. I don't think that was ever true. I mean, I know a lot of people might think that he took advantage of me for sex - but who the fuck are they kidding? a) he's never exactly had a difficult time getting laid so why would he need to?, and b) they make it sound like it was some incredible torment getting fucked by Brian on a regular basis. Seriously - I was the luckiest kid in Pittsburgh as far as sex went - fucking regularly with the hottest, and most skilled, stud in town. Puh-leeze! It's a teenage gai-boy fantasy. The fact that I wanted - maybe even needed - more from him emotionally than he was ready to give me back then was not Brian's fault; I wasn't ready to give him what he needed emotionally either. It certainly didn't turn the whole thing into him 'taking advantage of me'. It's just typical of the way that they make Brian into the bad guy over everything.

But what really bugs the shit out of me is that no one ever seems to think that it's incredibly disrespectful to me to believe that I'd let him do that to me. Especially now, after how fucking much I've been through over the last few years.

Seriously, they'd better not try to give either of us - and Brian especially - any shit tonight or I will rip their fucking balls off.

I've had enough of it. No more Mr. Sweet-Little-Justin. If they given him any grief today I'm going to make Rage look like a total fucking pussy.

The same goes for Lindsay if she starts up this morning because I've come alone to collect Gus.

I thought Brian might want to come with me. I mean, it's the first of his official, sanctioned-by-the-State-of-Pennsylvania daddy overnighters. But when I asked him, he just shrugged.

"Gus is expecting you," he said. "I'll see him later."

There was a whole unspoken conversation in there somewhere. Partly about my plans with Gus and Brian's secret, absolutely-never-to-be-even-vaguely-referred-to happiness that his Sonnyboys (as I suspect that he secretly still thinks of us) are getting together to make his "surprise" birthday cake. But also about Lindsay, and the fact that she will almost certainly be expecting Brian, and looking forward to a little Mommy and Daddy bonding moment; and will not be impressed with me turning up instead.

But too fucking bad.

She'll just have to get used to me being part of the picture on a full time basis.

Somewhere at the back of my mind I'm wondering if part of what made her decide to come home was that she thought I'd still be based in New York and she had some fucked up vision of her and Brian playing out some weird-assed Mommy and Daddy thing. Maybe she even thought she could persuade him to move them all into Britin and they could live out her little fantasy of being a nice, wealthy suburban couple.

Well, she's going to have to get back in touch with reality in a pretty big hurry.

But right now I've got more important things to worry about, like getting to the supermarket to buy all the stuff we're going to need to make Brian's cake, which goes way beyond just the ingredients.

I mean, it's not like his kitchen is all that well-equipped. Sure, it's got top of the line appliances and stuff, but there's nothing even vaguely like a cake pan to bake his damned cake. Or a rack to cool it on. I couldn't even find a spatula to spread the frosting. So I have to buy all those things as well as the ingredients. Not that I'm so stupid that I'm going to try to make it from scratch. Aside from
everything else, that would mean buying measuring jugs and probably a set of kitchen scales as well. Plus, getting a packet kind of minimizes the risk that it doesn't turn out properly. I mean, Brian wouldn't care if it came out only an inch high, and tasted of sawdust, but Gus would be devastated. So I buy some death-by-chocolate mix (because Gus seems to be determined to make it chocolate cake), and three packets of different colored ready made frosting, plus a whole variety of candles, and stars and stuff to decorate it.

That way, Gus can feel like he's making the creative choices, but I don't have to deal with him trying to decide between all the bright packets and pretty colors standing in the supermarket aisle surrounded by lecherous old women and psychos wielding trolleys like assault weapons. It's bad enough that I have to put up with that shit.

Seriously, while I'm doing the shopping at least three middle-aged harpies approach me to ask if I "need any help" - and from the way they're simpering and fluttering their eyelashes I don't think they really meant with choosing the frosting - and my ankles are bruised from all the fucking trolleys that get pushed into them without so much as a single apology.

If I'd had any sense I would have got my Mom to buy all this shit days ago.

*****

Brian

He's probably right and Lindsay is going to give him grief over the fact that I'm not with him to collect Gus, but she'll just have to get used to it. She's prepared to pocket the extra money I'm coughing up to ensure that Justin doesn't get cut out of Gus' life, so she's going to have to live with the reality of what that means.

Besides, I have to do some fucking work this week. There are two major client presentations due next week, and I need to make sure those are well on track. Plus Leo Brown is expecting a call, and I'm having lunch tomorrow with someone from "The Church". They're a small, boutique brewery who have reasonable sales throughout PA and are looking to expand into Ohio and maybe West Virginia. We took them on as a client about three months ago. It's not so much an advertising campaign we've put together for them, as a marketing strategy, aimed at the type of bar-restaurants that cater to suburban Moms and Dads who are basically meat and potatoes, but want to be seen as having a little bit more taste and sophistication than that. Before that lunch meeting, I need to review their current sales figures and projections, and be ready to suggest any necessary tweaks that might need to be made.

If I can get some of this shit out of the way this morning, then I can enjoy the rest of the day with my sonnyboys.

Although there's one stop off I do have to make on the way. I need to talk to Mikey.

We haven't really talked since Justin got back. Not just the two of us. In fact, we haven't really talked for months. But fuck it! He has to get a clue about just what's at stake while he's sulking about his widdle feelings being hurt. If Mel fucks off back to Canada, he could wind up losing all contact with JR. The uber-bitch could apply in a Canadian court to have his parental rights terminated. She's legally married there, which gives her new wifey status that neither he nor Lindsay has. And I know that he hasn't been making much of a financial contribution because Linds let it slip. Plus he hasn't been going up there to visit, because either he's working or he's been visiting Ben. So the she-wolf would be able to present a reasonable case that he's a delinquent Dad, who doesn't regularly contribute to his child's support, doesn't bother to visit and who's in a relationship with a HIV+ guy who's currently doing time for a violent assault. Not to mention that
he shares his home with another guy, also positive, who happens to be an ex-hustler.

No fucking prizes for guessing which way most courts would rule. Especially if Mikey can't afford to get to the fucking hearing, let alone hire a top lawyer to represent him.

I suspect that what he needs to do is to present his case in the family court here - where, if the right wizard waves the right fucking magic wand, he becomes the victim of a hate crime, whose partner was unbearably provoked by a verbal assault from the same kind of asshole who set off the bomb that nearly killed him, and who reluctantly gave his consent for the mother of his child to take his daughter off to safety in Canada. Played right, he could wind up looking like some kind of fucking saint who is kind to stray dogs and kittens, takes in street kids to try to give them a decent life, struggles to hold the family home together and desperately misses his daughter.

But he's going to need help to pull that shit off.

And then there's Ben.

All the fucking stress of worrying about the house and worrying about JR all while he's trying to get over his fucking prison sentence is the last thing he needs. Stress is literally a fucking killer if you're positive.

Mikey needs to think about doing anything he can to minimize that stress.

Even if it means accepting help from me.

*****

Justin

As I kind of expected, Lindsay is totally not pleased that Brian isn't with me. While Gus is upstairs collecting his things, she starts getting really snippy about how "if this is how he's going to be about his days with Gus …" but there's no way I'm going to put up with that shit.

I remind her how much time he's taken away from Kinnetik in the last week - not just for the court stuff, but to help her deal with Mel, and find a place to live.

"He has a business to run," I tell her. "He needs to make up some of that time. Besides, we promised Gus that he and I would make his Dad's birthday cake."

"You could do that here," she protests. But Gus comes downstairs just then and immediately makes his presence felt.

"No!" he says. "Me and Dus are going to do it."

"I could help," Lindsay's still clearly clinging on to trying to become part of the day's dynamic.

"No!" Gus says again. "It's got to be just me and Dus. You can't come."

And clasping his leather bear in one hand and dragging his backpack (which, by the way stuff is spilling out of it I'm guessing he packed himself) with the other, he heads to the door.

I know I should probably reprimand him, make him apologize for speaking that way to his mother, but fuck it! These arrangements were agreed days ago. Gus has got every right to be upset that she's trying to change them now, so all I do is to take the backpack off him and open the door.

Lindsay follows us to the sidewalk, her mouth full of 'be goods' and her eyes full of resentment. But
we make our getaway without any more interference.

Gus is totally hyper on the drive back to the loft and I start to get worried that he's going to misbehave enough for me to have to give him a timeout or something; but it never gets to that point. A couple of times while we're mixing the cake he starts pouting over not being allowed to do something his way, or by himself, but both times a simple "Gus" uttered in a warning tone of voice is enough to make him settle down and even apologize.

When I put the cake in to bake, he suddenly says to me, sounding kind of nervous, "I've been a good help, haven't I, Dus?"

"You sure have," I tell him warmly.

"And I'll be real good while we do the frosting," he says, still sounding anxious.

"I'm sure you will," I tell him, wondering why he sounds so tense.

Then I start to get the feeling that I know where that anxiety is coming from. I'm not sure how to handle this, but I don't want Gus feeling all day like he's only around on approval or something. No kid should ever feel like that. And it will spoil the entire day for both of us if I don't do something about it now.

I take a little time to think while I get down a couple of glasses and go to the fridge. "I think we've both been good this morning," I tell him. "We deserve a drink."

I turn to him with a carton of milk in one hand and juice in the other.

"Do you want fruit juice or cow juice?" I ask him.

He giggles. "It's not cow juice, Dus. It's milk."

"Oh," I say, deadpan, and peer at what's written on the carton. "So it is."

He giggles some more and then says, all wanna-be casual (which for a moment reminds me so much of Brian that my heart squeezes a little), "What're you gonna have?"

"I'm having cow ju … I mean milk," I say.

"Me too," he says happily.

I pour milk into the glasses and while I'm putting both cartons back into the fridge, he climbs onto a stool in front of his glass. I take the seat beside him and we both take a long drink of milk.

"I was thirsty," he says.

I smile at him. "You should have asked me for a drink before," I tell him.

He looks away and shrugs, silent for a moment. Then he says very quietly, "I don't want to be no trouble."

My heart squeezes again, more strongly this time, and not so pleasantly.

"Gus," I tell him. "You're no trouble. Not ever. Not to me. And not to your Dad."

He sits and plays with his glass for a minute, looking so much like Brian when he's trying to find words for the emotions that run so deep and are so hard for him to express that I know there is
nothing I would not do for this little boy, nothing I would not risk or sacrifice to make his
childhood a shitload happier than Brian's was.

I put my hand gently on his shoulder and he turns to look at me, his eyes full of anguish.

"Dus, Mommy says that I have to be a good boy and not make any trouble or she'll take me back to
Toron'o."

And right then I seriously want to damage Lindsay. To slap her senseless and make her pay and
pay and pay for even allowing that idea to enter her son's head - let alone putting it there.

But right now it's Gus I have to think about. I lean closer and pull him into a hug.

"That won't happen, Gus," I tell him. "Your Daddy and I will never let that happen."

And in my head I'm already thinking about calling Ms Hershell and finding out what legal strings
we can pull to prevent Lindsay even trying it. Can we get Gus put on some kind of register so if
she tries to take him on a plane or a bus, or across the border …?

But I put the brakes on all that and focus on this scared little boy.

"You remember when we went to talk to the man in the courthouse?"

Gus nods.

"Well, he said that you can stay right here in Pittsburgh for as long as you want."

He looks a little happier, but something is still bothering him.

"And you and Daddy won't get sick of me?" he asks.

I smile at him. "We could never get sick of you. Especially your Dad. He's the happiest Daddy in
the world that you are back here."

He takes a deep quivering breath and then says all in a rush, "Moma tol' me that if I was around all
the time Daddy would soon get sick of me and wouldn't want me no more. And that I shouldn't
think she'd ever want me back either if all I could think about was my Daddy."

His lip trembles. "I missed him, Dus. I just wanted to see my Daddy. But Moma used to get so mad
at me if I said even anyfing about Daddy."

And if I'd thought I'd been angry with Mel before, it's just nothing to how I feel now. For a moment
it's like I literally see red. My whole vision is filled with red and black lit with flashes of white hot
anger and clouded with something very like hate.

I hug Gus closer while I blink to clear it.

"Your Moma can be very silly sometimes," I tell him. "But you don't have to worry about what she
said any more. I promise you, Gus, I promise," I repeat. "… your Dad and I will never let her take
you so far away from him again, and you will be seeing us all the time. You'll get sick of us," I
finish, trying to sound upbeat and like I'm laughing.

I'm rewarded with a slightly watery giggle.

"No, I won't," he says, wrapping his arms around my neck. "You're my Dus and my Daddy and I
love you lots and lots and lots."
I smile at him for real then.

"Me too," I tell him, and he laughs out loud. Then he wriggles free and takes another enthusiastic drink of his milk, the clouds banished for now at least.

But fuck! How fucked up are those two women that they play their fucking little mind games with a child's head?

Brian is going to be seriously pissed.

And I have to tell him. There's no choice here. It's his son's well-being and peace of mind that's at stake.

Fuck!

All I wanted was for him to have a nice relaxed birthday.

Well, maybe it can wait till tomorrow. Gus is with us right now, and he's staying tonight, so he's safe till then at least. Tomorrow we might need to talk to Brian's lawyer and even maybe think about getting Gus some counseling. He can't be left to brood about all the fucking negativity those two have stabbed him with over the years.

And tomorrow, I'm going to have a little chat with Lindsay.

Mel is probably lucky that the lawyers won't let me talk to her as well.
Some Days You Eat the Bear

Chapter Summary

An unexpected arrival seeking entrance to Brian's birthday party.

Brian

It's nearly one o'clock before I get things sorted enough to make it home. By that time I've spoken to Gus three times and Justin twice. Sonnyboy sounds full of beans, Sunshine not so much. I'm guessing he had some kind of run in with Linds, but if it's important he'll tell me later.

In the meantime I've had blow by blow accounts from one of them on how the whole fucking bakeoff thing is going: "I helped Dus mix the cake and now it's baking, Daddy"; "We're waiting for the cake to get cool enough to put on the frosting, if you put it on when it's hot it will all melt and go gooey"; "We've finished the frosting and I did the pur … um, the best bit all by myself". And from the other one I've had repeated assurances that they haven't totally fucking trashed the place.

But at least they're there together with no sign of either Lindsay or the she-wolf, so now the only thing I have to worry about is what the fuck Gus was going to say when he cut himself off after the "pur" bit. 'Perfect'? 'Purr' like in purring pussy fucking cat? Or … I can hardly bring myself to think this … was he going to say fucking 'purple'? If he's picked purple frosting to decorate this fucking cake then my Sonnyboy must be queer as a fucking three dollar bill. Or maybe it's just the effect of being raised by fucking munchers.

Guess it doesn't fucking matter.

He's here and he's safe and he's happy and they're the only things that fucking count with me.

It's a shitload more than poor Mikey has right now. A stop off to see him on the way home was
one of my tasks of the day. He wasn't all that glad to see me walk in the door of his little empire, but he's at least wised up enough to know that I'm not the fucking one he needs to worry about. Seems when Mel went to see him yesterday she didn't mention the fact that she's tied the not with her Toronto tottie, and it wasn't until after I called and he confronted her about it that she came clean. But she still kept saying that 'of course he's JR's father, and nothing's changed' and all that shit. But when he said he thought it was time that either JR came down for a visit or he went up there to see her, she went ballistic, threatening that if he tried to force her to agree to either of those things then she'd make sure that the Canadian courts cut off all his access to his daughter. Fucking cunt!

So we commiserated about the wicked witch of the north and he told me what the lawyer has said about it (basically they're pushing for a hearing here in Pittsburgh while Mel is in town); and also what Ben's lawyer has said about the possibility of Ben getting out of the slammer soon - seems like it might even be in the next week or so. So between his happiness and relief that he's going to get Ben back soon, and his fear that he might never see his fucking daughter again, Mikey was so fucking all over the place that he actually agreed to let me pick up the tab for the civil suit at least.

He's still going to have some financial problems, because he's been trying to pay off the mortgage on just his salary, as well as picking up the legal bills. But I managed to convince him that as I was prepared to help Linds fund her fight for the right to be recognized as JR's parent, I should do the same for him. He got all emotional then, but fuck it! Mikey and Deb were the only real family I had for fucking years. I can't just stand aside and let the bigots and bitches of this world flush his whole life down the toilet.

Anyway, at least he's listening to his lawyer, and he's actually letting me help, so I that was my aim for the day achieved and as soon as I could I escaped from all his Italian/drag queen sentimentality and headed home.

I'm expecting the loft to look like a fucking bomb site, but it's not too bad. If I look closely I can see traces of activity around the place, including (to my despair over what those women have done to my son's taste buds) a smear of bright purple frosting on the side of the refrigerator door, plus a few traces of flour or some shit on the floor near the counter and a DVD cover over by the entertainment unit. And, of course, about a dozen artworks for me to look at and admire.

Gus pounces on me as soon as I slide open the door, but then he stops and seems to hesitate. Not sure what that's about but I don't like it. It's almost like, just for that second, he's fucking afraid of me all of a sudden. I drop my briefcase by the door and sweep him up in my arms, tossing him in the air a little. I won't be able to do that for much longer that's for fucking sure. But I can right now and he squeals like a drag queen on heat but then he's laughing and after giving him a great big wet kiss on the cheek, which makes him giggle even more; I tuck him under my arm and walk over to kiss the other half of the Ace of Cakes duo.

Gus is still laughing and squirming so I set him down and when I look up Justin's eyes are shining at me like I'm the eighth fucking wonder of the world.

Maybe I am. Or at least, the fact that I seem to be fucking getting some things right with these two at least qualifies for that title.

But then Sonnyboy is back, clutching his artwork; so while the blond pastry chef pours me a cup of coffee, I lift the smaller one onto one of the kitchen stools and take a seat beside him so he can show me his masterpieces.

*****
Justin

Whatever fears those bitches might have planted in Gus's mind vanish once he's actually with his father. Brian mightn't be everyone's idea of Father of the Year, and he might not be good at verbally expressing his emotions, but no one seeing him with Gus could doubt how deeply he loves his son.

And I'm sure that when Brian's actually there, Gus feels that love. He's a perceptive kid, and you only have to look at the two of them together to know that they have a real bond between them. I guess it's just when Brian isn't around that the doubts creep in. I can relate to that; but my doubts …

I was going to say that they were different, that they were honestly come by, but you know what? They weren't. They were planted, pretty much from day one, by the same people who've planted the same poisonous seeds in Gus's brain. Well, in my case, those two women were aided and abetted by good ol' Mikey, but Linds and Mel definitely had a prime role.

All the 'don't expect too much' shit and 'he's an asshole and he's never going to change' and 'he only thinks about himself' - all that shit that I heard from them about Brian practically from the beginning. I mean, I used to think they were just looking out for me because I was so young and inexperienced; but now I wonder.

I mean, when you think about it, that whole thing at my "birthday" concert … what was that about?

Anyone who was really Brian's friend wouldn't have been harping on about what he hadn't done for my birthday, they would have been reminding me of all he had done for me - like piecing my whole fucking life back together for a start.

And anyone who was really my friend wouldn't have been encouraging me to flirt with Ethan, they would have been asking me if I really wanted to risk losing everything I had fought for with Brian over some stupid yearning for fucking "romance".

I mean, it's not like they even knew Ethan. They didn't know if he was a good guy or a shallow self-absorbed asshole who would cheat on me the first chance he got. The thing is, they didn't care. They just shoved me towards him anyway, practically pushing me into his arms, just like they had a hand in pushing me on that damned plane to New York.

Because it was never about me, about looking out for me.

It was all about Brian. About them deliberately setting out to undermine him - his happiness, the security he was starting to find with me. They did it for different reasons, but they did it. And they did it deliberately.

Twice.

And I let them.

Twice.

Fuck!

I have no fucking idea how I'm going to be in the same room as Lindsay this afternoon and not rip her smug, manipulative little WASP face off.

I guess I'll just have to try to remember that it's not about me, and it's not even about her, it's about Gus … and about Brian. And try my damndest not to let anything spoil this day for them.
Brian

I can tell he's stewing about something, but it's clearly not anything I've done, and it probably involves one or other of the fucking women in our lives, so with Gus here all I can do is to not make whatever it is any fucking worse by pushing him about it. Sweet little Sunshine can be as fucking passive aggressive as the worst hormonal pregnant woman, so instead of buying trouble I concentrate on trying to guess what all of Gus's drawings are and eat the salad he's made for my lunch while he and my son chow down on toasted sandwiches made from some disgusting processed shit that masquerades as cheese.

We finally persuade Gus to have some "quiet time" by putting on one of his DVDs and sitting with him while he watches the beginning. He must be pretty worn out by all the dramas in his life over the last few days because he's out like a light within fifteen minutes. We move him to the bed without him stirring an eyelid, make sure he's not going to roll himself out if he gets restless and then head out to the living area where Sunshine finally gets the chance to unload all the shit that's got him so worked up.

I'm not even surprised when he tells me the stuff that Mel has apparently said to Gus. For someone who claims to love my son, she's never hesitated in bad-mouthing me in front of him with no regard to the fucking damage she might be doing to him. I don't give a shit what she says about me; given my opinion of her, what she thinks of me could hardly fucking matter less to me. But that she regularly put my son in that position - that's fucked.

I try to be surprised at what Gus has apparently reported about Lindsay, but it's fucking typical of her weak-assed manipulations that she would come out with that shit. She probably didn't even mean it seriously. It's the sort of thing she'd say if he was being fucking "difficult" just to get him to settle down. She just never thinks about the effect that the things she says might have on the people around her.

Her and Mikey, they're two of a fucking kind in many ways.

Well, I've at least temporarily sorted things with Mikey, but I just don't have it in me to deal with Lindsay. Especially today.

Sunshine can have at her with my blessing.

But before Gus wakes up, I take time to call Ms. Fucking Hershell and fill her in on the latest. As usual, I can hear her pursed lips expression even over the damned phone. But she doesn't say much, just that she'll take a note and keep it on record. And she reminds me again that Mel is completely fucking banned from having any contact with any of us, especially Gus and that we should be vigilant in enforcing that. For Gus's sake, if nothing else.

Who the fuck knows what she'd say to him, what poison she'd try to plant in his head?

What a fucked up bitch-whore she is!

*****

Justin

Brian's amazing all afternoon. He doesn't tell me to calm down, or to take it easy or any of that shit. He just sort of gives me that 'a man's gotta do' look of his and calls his lawyer. Then we get on with preparing for the gang to arrive.. Of course, we're in the middle of doing that when Gus wakes up.
He's a bit grizzly. I think he's kind of confused about where he is at first. Then he's thirsty and I'm pouring him some milk. But he's too impatient to wait and he grabs at it and knocks the whole fucking huge bottle that I only bought this morning all over the kitchen floor. Before I can say anything, Brian steps in. He sends me and Gus up to the bedroom to change because we're both soaked with milk - Cleopatra would be proud - while he cleans up the kitchen.

Once that's done, I head off down to the local store to get some more.

I'm on my way back, just about to the doorway of the building when a taxi pulls up and Lindsay gets out. I'm congratulating myself on timing things so perfectly that I'm going to get a chance to talk to her away from Gus and Brian when I realize she isn't alone.

Fuck me if Mel doesn't climb out right after her.

"Mel just wants to say goodbye to Gus," Lindsay says before I can start the yelling.
Chapter Summary

The girls think they're dealing with sweet little Justin, little do they know he's really Tiger Twink.

Justin

These women are unbelievable. Like I'm going to let their bullshit anywhere near Gus - or Brian.

Especially Brian. It's his birthday, for fuck's sake. He shouldn't have to put up with this shit.

But I'm not my mother's son for nothing. I just stand in the doorway and smile at them, while I run my fingers over the buttons on the cell phone in my pocket.

"I'm so sorry," I say, the lie dripping from my lips like sweetest molasses. "That just isn't possible. If either Brian or I agreed to that we'd be violating a court order. I'm sure you understand that we can't do that. We have to consider the possible consequences for our status with the court in terms of Gus. We can't risk anything damaging that."

I give a polite little shrug, as if the whole thing is simply out of my control. "Sorry, Melanie," I smile - wide and fake.

Both the women stare at me; then, without even paying me the respect of a response, they try to move around me. I reach back and make sure the door is firmly locked behind me, then move to stand right in front of the buzzer. They can't reach it without pushing me out the way and they really don't want to try that. I still remember enough from my pink posse days to cause them serious pain if they so much as look as if they're going to get physical with me.

They stop in their tracks, and try another tactic.
"Justin," Lindsay says in her sweetest most refined tone. She smiles winningly and lets her hair fall forward around her face. It's a tactic I recognize. She's using her hair to soften the lines of her face, making her seem more vulnerable than she actually is. My mother does it too. When she wants to look independent and strong, the hair gets pulled back off her face, when she wants to look softer and appeal to the 'big strong man' - boss, husband, lover, stranger from whom she's seeking help, it doesn't matter - then her hair is allowed to fall loose.

"Please be reasonable," Lindsay goes on, using her best WASP charms; which are simply wasted on me, but I guess she hasn't figured that out yet. "Mel has to go back to Toronto. She doesn't want to do that without seeing Gus."

Beside her, Melanie is clearly stewing, dying to push Linds out of the way and demand that I move aside and let her storm into my home.

I shrug, all apologetic, and repeat, "I'm sorry. That's just not an option here."

"Look, Justin," Melanie is clearly ready to let her inner bitch loose.

But I have my own inner bitch, and I'm a fag; we can outbitch a dyke anyday. "No, Mel," I say, still mildly but letting a bite of anger enter my voice. "I can only suggest that you go through the lawyers to set up a supervised visit like the courts instructed."

She glares at me. A real 'if looks could kill' thing. But I don't let it get to me. I just stay cocooned in my own little WASP space. I'd never really understood before how just putting yourself into that headspace tends to sort of distance you from any emotions flying around. It's almost a variation on the 'walls' that Brian uses. Except it's kind of 'read' differently; it still seems arrogant, but because it's more like a class thing, it's sort of acceptable. Whatever, it's certainly useful. It definitely gets Mel riled up, anyhow.

"Fuck! The asshole's really rubbing off on you, isn't he? You won't even let my son see me."

It's her emphasis on the "my son" bit that really seals the deal for me and buries any hope she might have had of persuading me.

Cow!

For years she's pretended that she had all the rights to Gus and Brian had none; tortured him with his lack of standing in Gus's life, when that was a fucking lie. Now she has the fucking gall to come here to Brian's home, against the court's order, spouting about "her" son.

Well, fuck that!

I draw on some of the things I learnt from my mother: I stand up straight, look her right in the eye and say softly, but with absolute certainty in my voice, "If you want to see Gus, apply through the courts. You're in breach of a court order coming here, and you're certainly not getting through the door tonight.

"In fact, if you don't leave now, without any more fuss, I will call the police. It's up to you."

She snorts, almost speechless with fury, then manages to say, "Don't think you can fucking threaten me. You're no one. You have no right ..."

I cut her off, not raising my voice, but letting some of the anger I'm feeling sound in the pure nastiness of my tone, "I'm the man the court says has the right to see Gus three times a week," I challenge. "And you're the one who's going to jail on contempt of court charges if you don't get out
of here right now."

Lindsay tries to intervene again now, doing her 'peacemaker' bit. "Justin, Melanie is going back to Toronto tonight. I'm sure Gus would like to be able to say 'goodbye' to her."

What the fuck is her deal here? I mean, Mel has married some other dyke. Why the hell is Linds buying into this bullshit? But I can't let myself get distracted wondering about that. There is only one issue here and that's protecting Gus and Brian. I shake my head and respond, "Oh, I don't think so. She's not getting any more chances to fuck with his head."

I lift my wrist and, looking pointedly at my watch, pull out my cell phone.

"You have thirty seconds to shift your asses out of here," I tell them. "Both of you. I'll give Brian your apologies, Lindsay."

That actually seems to surprise her. "Now look here," she snaps.

But I cut her off. "It's our day with Gus," I remind her. "You don't have any 'right' to be here. You were invited as a courtesy but as you've seen fit to abuse that invitation, I'm withdrawing it."

That last is said in my best hoighty toighty WASP manner and it totally infuriates Lindsay. She is really angry now, and the fact that I'm using her usual weapons against her probably makes her even madder.

"We'll see what Brian has to say about that," she snaps.

Oh, puh-leeze. I can't believe she's trying the 'wait till I tell Daddy' routine.

Like I'll be so scared of what Brian will say that I'll be begging her to stay or something.

Fuck that! If I ever find myself dominated by fear of Brian's reactions to what I do, then it's fucking over. I'm never going to turn into some little housewife who quakes in her boots at the thought that something she does might upset her lord and master.

I find myself grinning at some of the more pleasurable implications of that 'lord and master' thing, which not only calms me, but totally rattles Lindsay. I follow it up with a killer punch.

"Linds," I tell her, "you really need to get your head around the fact that Brian is my partner."

I let a slight emphasis fall on the possessive pronoun. I don't need to say anything else, just let her hear my absolute certainty that Brian will support my actions.

Suck that up, Linds. By the way her mouth twists, it tastes really bitter.

Well, too bad.

Then I let the WASP mask slip. "Now get the fuck out of here, both of you."

They both gobble at me for a moment, but when I lift my cell and start to dial, they finally climb back in the cab which has been waiting all this time because they haven't yet paid. I'm guessing the driver just kept the meter running and enjoyed the show.

Good! I hope they ran up a fucking fortune.

Stupid cunts!
I wait till the cab has turned the corner, then dial Ms. Herschell's number. Brian made me program it into my phone in case of any problems and it's a good thing he did.

I get put through to her and after I tell her what happened, she says I did the right thing to call her. She asks if there were any witnesses to the altercation, and I tell her 'no', but that I'd recorded the whole thing on my cell phone.

When she speaks next, I know what Brian means when he says you can hear her shark smile down the phone.

"Excellent!" she says, and I can almost imagine her sitting rubbing her hands together like some villain in an old movie. Except she's not the villain; she may just be the fucking cavalry. Because I can't stand here all night to make sure neither of those stupid bitches come back, but maybe she can do something.

She asks me to email her the voice file and tells me that she'll advise the judge that Melanie has ignored the injunction; she says she believes that at the very least Mel will be told to get her ass immediately on a plane or she'll wind up in a jail cell. And that Linds will be told not to push her luck as well. Well, not exactly those words but that was the message.

Of course, we're going to have to deal with the fallout with Lindsay later, but at least Brian can have his birthday uninterrupted.

I'm just putting my cell back into my pocket when another cab draws up. This one's occupant is far more welcome.

"Hey, Em," I say, and open the door for him.

He falls out clutching all sorts of bags and boxes which turn out to be full of food.

Looks like the party's about to begin.

*****

Brian

I can tell as soon as he comes in that some other fucking drama has come up. He's looking at me like he's weighing up just what to tell me about it. I raise an eyebrow at him to let him know I'm onto him and while Gus is distracted by 'helping' the fucking birthday fairy with the mounds of food he seems to think is necessary to feed half a dozen people, we head for the privacy of the bathroom.

He doesn't seem to know what he should say, so I prompt a little.

"You were a while fetching the milk."

He nods, takes a breath, then blurts out, "I ran into Lindsay downstairs."

I feel a headache coming on. I've finally got past being the subject of a fucking turf war between Justin and Mikey. Now it seems Lindsay's decided to start her own. I'm trying to work out how I can make it absolutely fucking clear to her that it's not a war she can ever win, when his next words derail that thought train more effectively than a fucking avalanche hitting the track.

"She had Melanie with her."
I stare at him, completely blind-sided for a moment. Then the wheels start turning again in a whole new direction.

"She said that Mel is leaving tonight and wanted to say 'goodbye' to Gus."

He pauses for a single breath, then says with a hint of defiance, "I told them to fuck off."

I just look at him, stare at him really; at this man they all still seem to see as a sweet little blond twink. Then unexpectedly I find myself snorting with laughter.

Fuck! but I would have loved to have seen their faces when that sweet little twink they were probably trying to patronize to death turned out to be a fighting tiger in disguise.

"Then I rang your lawyer," he finishes.

I realize that I'm still staring at him. I know there was a time when I would have been totally pissed off by his interference. But not now.

No, not now.

I grin at him and am reaching to pull him against me to start showing him how fucking glad I am he's here when Gus's voice breaks in on us.

"Daddy! Dus! There's peoples here."

Justin gives a little huff and leans up to kiss my cheek on the way past to open the door to Gus. I stop him, holding the door shut long enough to say, "J.R. They'll have made some kind of bargain about Gus and JR."

His eyes open very wide.

Then they go so dark they're almost black.

"Fuck!" He swears, softly and fervently. "Fuckin cunt bitches!"

I shrug and kiss him quickly as Gus's voice once more demands our presence.

"They didn't get away with it," I tell him. "You stopped them."

I kiss him again, hard and fast and then, opening the door, I scoop Sonnyboy up into my arms.

"What peoples are here?" I ask him, determined not to let those bitches spoil Gus's fun.

He giggles as I hold him up and shake him a little.


Any other time I might work on correcting his pronunciation, but not right now.

Fuck! Mikey.

I wonder if he knows Mel's planning to get on a plane tonight. Weren't they supposed to have some sort of hearing about JR tomorrow?

*****

Justin
I just didn't see it.

I was wracking my brains trying to work out why the Hell Linds would buy into Mel's bullshit, but I just couldn't make the connection.

Brian, of course, got it right away. Linds was trading access to Gus to get some kind of deal about JR.

Never mind how badly Mel has fucked with the poor kid's head or how scared he was when Mel turned up at the hotel ranting and raving; how terrified he is that Mel will drag him back to Canada; or that we're just starting to get him to believe that he's safe here. Never mind how much of Gus's peace of mind is at risk here.

No. None of that means anything as long as Lindsay gets what she wants.

And she just thought Brian would go along with it. (She didn't even factor me into the equation at all, of course.)

Fucking bitch! She assumed Brian would roll, like he pretty much always has over things to do with Gus, because she's always been able to hold the whole 'you have no rights' thing over his head.

Well, those days are over. She hasn't got the upper hand any more. She can't play the 'be nice to me or I won't let you see Gus' card any more. Brian has court guaranteed rights to Gus now. And, for that matter, so do I.

I see Brian go over to say something to Michael. Guess he needs to know that Mel is leaving.

Weren't they supposed to have some hearing about JR while Mel was in Pittsburgh? Guess that's not going to happen. In fact, it's probably why she's leaving in such a hurry.

Shit! Could she fuck up any more lives along the way?

Well, at least she's not here to fuck things up right now. And everyone else is. Even Deb and Michael. And while I couldn't care less if they hadn't showed, it means something to Brian that they're here. And that's what counts.

Gus has been getting more and more excited as people have been arriving - Ted and Blake, Cynthia, my Mom, and even Molly.

Brian actually takes the time to "introduce" Gus to Mom and Molly. I go to find my camera to get a decent photo of Mom with her grandson, and I don't notice at first that Brian has disappeared. Gus keeps coming up to me, pulling on my hand till I lean down to him so he can whisper in my ear, "Is it time for cake yet, Dus?"

The first couple of times I shake my head. But everyone's here now so when he does it again, I say, "You know, Gus, I think it just might be."

He looks thoughtful for a moment. "Is Mommy coming?"

"No, I don't think she can make it," I tell him, feeling my first twinge of conscience over sending Linds packing. But Gus doesn't seem to mind.

He just squeezes my hand and says, "I think it should be cake time now."

I laugh and lead him to the kitchen island. We clear Emmett out of the space and make a big
production over getting out plates and napkins and forks for everyone.

Then we get out the cake and I carry it out to the table in the dining area with Gus going before me, clearing everyone out the way. Once the cake has been placed safely in pride of place, Gus looks around for Brian.

He's coming down the steps from the bedroom with a strange look on his face. He smiles though when Gus runs over to him.

"Daddy! Daddy! 's cake time!" Gus squeals.

"Cake time?" Brian asks. "What's cake time?"

Gus laughs, tugging on his father's hand.

"Birthday cake time, Daddy," he giggles, pulling Brian towards the table.

My eyes meet Brian's briefly and he mouths 'later' as he allows himself to be pulled in front of the cake which is glowing now with the candles that Em has taken great pleasure in helping me light.

Brian's lips twitch as he looks down at the masterpiece his son has created for him.

The cake is frosted in a deep vivid purple - because, according to Gus, 'that's a special color and it's how my Daddy makes me feel'. All around the edge are a series of brightly colored - green and yellow and blue and pink - little frosting models of all sorts of items (maybe a little inexpertly sculpted, but it's still kind of clear what they are) - everything from sunglasses to underpants, shoes to planes to tiny cars. These are things that, to Gus, represent his Daddy's work.

I'd been surprised and touched to find out how many of Brian's accounts Gus knew about. Apparently whenever he saw an ad, he always asked his Mommies if it was one his Daddy had made. Bet Mel loved that.

In the center of the cake is a great big heart shape in red. Drawn onto it are the frosting outlines of three figures - one really tall, one with bright yellow frosting hair, and the other, much smaller, with a smile so wide it takes up pretty much the whole of the figure's face.

No prizes for guessing who they are.

'Happy birthday Daddy' is crammed round the edges of the heart and there are candles scattered into every free space. It's actually pretty garish, but the love that went into the decorating kind of explodes from every single tasteless inch of it.

Brian sucks his lips in for a moment, and then crouches down next to Gus.

"Is this my birthday cake?" he asks in an almost little boy voice.

Gus nods vigorously.

Brian smiles at him. "I've never had such an ... amazing cake before. Who do you think made it?"

Gus practically bursts with pride. "We did," he asserts. "Me and Dus. And I decided on the decorations all by myself."

He pauses, then confesses, "Well, Dus helped make some. But I tol' him what we had to put on where and we did. Just like I wanted."
Brian ruffles his hair. "You know, I think it might be the best Daddy birthday cake in the whole world."

Gus beams at him, and throws his arms around Brian's neck.

From the sounds of all the throats being cleared I'm not the only one who's moved just about to tears by all this.

I am so fucking proud of Brian.

The cake, judged by just about any aesthetic standard is kind of awful. I know he's had to censor a million snarky comments. Especially because Gus chose the purple frosting that I'd bought thinking we'd maybe use it for some tasteful accents, not to cover the whole damned cake. Then there's the multitude of candles. Plus, I know from his expression when he first emerged from the bedroom that all the latest dramas are weighing on his mind.

But none of this comes across in his dealings with Gus; only his clear delight that his son has made this cake for him.

He hugs his son tightly, and I can tell he's pretty close to the edge, so I say loudly, "You'd better get up and blow out all these candles before they melt all over the cake."

Recalled to his cake monitor duties, Gus urges his father up and, face kind of red, Brian does his best to blow out the candles quickly before too many of the spectators can make comments on either how many candles there are, or on his blowing skills.

Deb does get in one crack about how he must be in practice since I got home, but it goes pretty much unnoticed, by Gus at least, in the applause and bustle over cutting and handing out the cake.

*****

Brian

It seems like a fucking long time before everyone leaves.

Deb and Michael both make attempts to haul me aside to discuss the JR situation, but Gus is all over me and that means they don't really get the chance. Smart little fucker. Already protecting his old man.

I mean, I've told them I'll pay for the lawyers or trips to Toronto or whatever else they need. But there isn't really anything else I can do. Except, of course, let everyone use Gus as some sort of bait to make the she-bitch behave more reasonably. And there is no fucking way that I'm going to let that happen.

They've got themselves into this situation between the three of them, and I'm not letting them use Gus to try to sort it out. Not when he's made it clear that just the thought of seeing 'Moma' practically sends him into panic mode. She scared him at the hotel and he's fucking terrified that she'll drag him back to Toronto. I'm not taking the chance that she won't say or do something to make him even more scared. If he asks to see her, I'll pay for her to come down here, or fly with him up to Toronto myself. But until then, he feels safe here and safer without her around, and that's how it's staying.

Meanwhile, everyone else is having a great time.

First they're all stuffing their faces on all the damned food that Emmett brought.
Then, after I give him a bit of a prompt, Justin makes his big announcement about the fact that he's fucking moving back here. It shouldn't come as any fucking surprise, but the women - and that includes Emmett - all fuss around him so it's only when I take my life into my hands and step into the middle of the throng and haul him out that we get the chance to tell them about the new house. That starts another round, and he looks like using all the fucking fuss to weazel out of making the other big announcement we'd agreed on, so I give a whistle to get everyone to shut up again and push him front and center. He's blushing and umming and ahing, so I step up beside him and say, "Our little genius here has been asked to submit a painting for an exhibition at the Warhol in July."

Then I step back and let them at him.

He's blushing and smiling and they're all fucking delighted for him.

I keep hearing things like 'right here in Pittsburgh', so hopefully they're getting the fucking message that it's actually okay for him to be back here; that he's made a good decision and isn't giving up a single fucking thing.

For one moment I regret that Lindsay isn't here to see this. Then, suddenly, I'm not. Because something tells me she isn't going to be totally delighted by this news. That it isn't going to suit her agenda at all for Justin to be able to show how successful he can be right here in Pittsburgh.

But she's not here, and there's nothing to cloud his joy in sharing this news with his friends.

Gus is a little puzzled by it all, but I pick him up and explain that Justin has been asked to put one of his pictures into a really big gallery where lots of people are going to be able to see it, and then he wants to give Justin a hug so I hand him over and then I can just stand back and watch my Sonnyboys lapping up all the attention.

But eventually things settle down and finally, finally! everyone leaves, and it's not long after that before we get Sonnyboy showered and tucked up in his bed on the futon.

We pull the screens round the bedroom closed to give us some privacy and Sunshine finally gets the chance to ask the questions that have been in his eyes all night.

But I cut him off.

"The lawyer called," I tell him. "She says I should file for an emergency custody order. She thinks that in view of Lindsay's fucked up behavior in turning up here with Mel, it's clear that she's ignoring the court's decisions and that means she could take off back to Toronto with Gus. Ms. H has already applied for an order to seize his passport and put him on some registry that will prevent Linds from getting a new one without checking it with me first. But she thinks that Linds could still take him off someplace away from us, where she and Mel can do deals over him and JR."

He looks at me, serious and stern, his eyes dark and dangerous. There's no trace of the sweet little twink here. Of all of them Justin is the one who would make the worst enemy, the toughest opponent, and I am so fucking grateful that he's on my side. Just the knowledge that he's got my back makes me so much fucking stronger - if only so that I don't let him down.

*****

Justin

Fuck!

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!
Ms. Herschell's right, of course.

But if we do this, Linds is going to go ballistic.

I take a deep breath and try to think clearly; pushing aside all the resentment I feel towards these women, all the desire to lash out at them and do as much damage as I can, and just focus on Brian and on Gus.

Especially Gus.

Because then it's really clear what the right decision is.

Gus doesn't want to see Mel.

He sure as fuck doesn't need to be used as a pawn in the fucked up games Mel is playing with Lindsay's head over JR.

Gus wants to be with his father, and with me, because we make him feel safe.

So that's what should happen.

Fuck the changes to the house. They can wait. There's no really reason why we can't move in there tomorrow.

The changes will mainly be to the downstairs rooms anyway, and we can live through those if we have to. If we move in there right away, and Gus moves into his own room it will help him feel more safe and secure. Like he has a definite place in the world.

So that's what we should do.

Plus it will go down much better with the courts that Gus will have a proper home, and his own room in a nice house in a good neighborhood and all that shit.

We'll need to organize some furniture in a hurry, but that's okay. The kitchen and the bathrooms will do for now. The most urgent change is to put a door through to the small upstairs bathroom from Gus's room, but maybe we could ....

I break off my train of thought when I realize that Brian is still waiting for my response.

I smile at him, small and tight.

"Brian, there really isn't a choice here, is there?"

He sighs. Something's bothering him and it's not just the thought of how Lindsay's going to react.

I put my hands on his shoulders and he rests his forehead against mine for a moment. Then he pushes me back on the bed and in a well practiced movement he falls on top of me, my knees spreading to welcome him and his elbows landing either side of me to take most of his weight.

We rest like that for a moment, then he says, so quietly I can hardly hear him, "You didn't sign on for this."

I almost laugh. I didn't sign on for cancer either, just like he didn't sign on for a moody bitch with a damaged hand. What the fuck has that got to do with anything? That's just details. I signed on for him, good bits, bad bits and everything in between.
"We'll work it out," I tell him.

"You've got a show to prepare for," he reminds me.

"So ...we'll drop Gus at school and I can paint until it's time to pick him up. Or some days if you're not busy you can pick him up. We'll figure it out, Brian. But Gus needs us right now. He needs us to step up and be there for him. So that's what we'll do."

For a moment he sort of goes limp against me, as if he's just put down some incredible burden. But then the usual Pavlov's dog reaction to our being in this position takes over and for a while "limp" is the last word to describe either of us.

Later, lying quietly together, we make plans. And later still he rings Ms. Herschell.

Lindsay isn't going to like it, but we're applying as soon as possible for an emergency custody order so that we can keep Gus with us. At least until we're satisfied that she isn't going to do anything stupid like handing him over to Mel to buy her some time with JR.

Looks like we're going back to court.
Chapter Summary

Brian

Another day, another bucket load of dollars into the pocket of my fucking lawyer. We're back here in the court and the judge isn't even trying to hide the fact that she's less than happy to see us here. In fact, she's making it pretty clear that she's pissed.

She's agreed to hold an informal meeting in her chambers due to the ‘urgency of the case'. So there's the judge, Sam – the guy who handled the custody facilitation meeting, Linds and her lawyer, Ms. Hershell, Justin, Gus and I.

Ms. H. has got her shark look firmly in place, Lindsay's lawyer looks like she's got a bad smell under her nose (she's probably regretting ever getting involved – I know to my cost that some clients just aren't worth the grief), Justin is all sweet little blond WASP on the surface, and seething with frustration underneath and my poor Sonnyboy is sitting on his Dus's knee, hanging on like his life depends on it.

Meanwhile, Linds is alternating between sniveling into a tissue and giving what she thinks are surreptitious glares at the three of us – especially Justin. Bet she blames him for us being here. Well, in some ways she may be right, because without him I mightn't have had the balls to do what I know was the right thing – blocking any chance Mel might have had of getting access to Gus and fucking with his head any more than she has already.

I don't want permanent custody of Gus. I honestly believe that he needs to be with Linds. She's been
the one constant in his life since he's been born, and I think he needs that consistency to continue; the last thing I want is my Sonnyboy to grow up questioning why, if she loved him, his mother would have suddenly given him away. But right now I don't trust Lindsay; and what's worse, I don't think Gus trusts her either. More than anything the poor fucking kid needs to feel safe and secure right now, and judging by the way he's burrowing his face into his Dus's neck like he's planning never to be pried loose, we're the ones who make him feel that way.

I don't really want him here because I think this is going to get ugly, but the judge ignores all Lindsay's ploys for attention and focuses on Gus right off.

*****

Justin

Lindsay is pissing me off like you wouldn't believe, and I really want to tear into her, but I can't do that with Gus here. So I bite my tongue like a good little WASP boy and concentrate on trying to keep calm and positive so that Gus won't get any more anxious than he is already. He's holding on to me really tightly, and at the same time, he's kind of stretched his foot over so that it's resting on Brian's thigh, like he needs to have some kind of physical contact with Brian as well. Brian has his hand over it and every now and again he gives the foot a little squeeze. I'm not sure he even knows that he's doing it, but the judge notices because I see her smiling at him.

Sam, the facilitator guy, leans forward and says something to her. She nods and, switching the smile to Gus, says in a soft warm kind of voice that is really different from what I'd expected, "So, Gus. Did you have a good time with your Daddy yesterday?"

He turns his head a little and kind of peeks at her over his shoulder while he nods shyly.

"I understand it was your Daddy's birthday. Did you have cake?"

This time the nod is more vigorous and he turns around to face her properly.

Brian gives another squeeze to his foot and reaches out to ruffle his hair.

"Gus made the cake," he announces and he's seriously kidding himself if he thinks that everyone in the room doesn't pick up on the whole "proud Dad" thing.

The judge smiles and says, "Well. That was very clever."

"Dus helped," Gus ventures.

"Did he? Well, I'm sure you two had fun making the cake."

Gus nods enthusiastically this time, and starts to tell her how he designed the decorations, and why he chose the things he did to put on the cake.

It's all kind of hard to follow but the judge nods in the right places and then, when he finally runs down a little, says, "Would you like to stay with your Daddy for a little longer? For a few more days, perhaps?"

Gus looks a little anxious. "And Dus?" he asks.

I can't help but give him a little hug.

"Yes," the judge smiles at us both. "And your Dus."
Gus looks thoughtful. "And not Moma?" he asks.

"He means Ms. Marcus," Lindsay's lawyer leaps in to clarify.

"No, not Moma," the judge confirms. "Not even your Mommy. Just Daddy and Dus. Would you like that Gus?"

Gus smiles; the sweet Kinney smile that hardly anyone but Gus and I ever get to see on the older Kinney and looking up at her through his ridiculously long thick lashes, whispers, "Yes."

The he quickly adds, "Please."

Not six years old yet, and already he knows how to use his looks to charm and beguile. Fuck knows what he's going to be like when he's older.

The judge turns her smile on me.

"Mr. Taylor, I don't wish in any way to exclude you from these discussions, but since Gus has made his views quite clear, perhaps he'd be happier waiting elsewhere while we work out the details."

She sees my hesitation and goes on, "I could have an officer of the court watch him if you'd prefer."

I share a look with Brian. He looks torn and I feel the same. On the one hand, I really do want to get Gus out of here before Linds starts venting any of her spite. As it is, she's started to butt in a couple of times, and only her lawyer's reminders have kept her quiet. But on the other hand, I feel like I kind of need to stay and protect Brian. I know that's dumb, but it's how I feel.

But it all works out okay.

The judge presses a buzzer on her desk and a young woman comes in. Gay as I am, even I have to admit she's a real stunner – tall, with long, long legs and shiny dark hair that's cut beautifully to fall naturally around an amazing face, all cheekbones and dark eyes above a generous mouth that looks as if it's made for laughter.

She smiles at Gus as if he's the only one in the room, and he smiles right back at her. I can hardly blame him. It's almost like a reverse Brian Kinney effect. Brian can make straight guys think about bending a little, and this woman makes even gays and little boys take notice.

"Hi, Gus," she says. "I'm Jenny. Would you like to come sit with me for a little while?"

After checking with his Dad to make sure it's okay, and extracting a promise that neither Brian nor I will leave without him, Gus goes off with her happily enough.

As they leave the room I hear him tell her, "I made my Daddy's birthday cake."

So that leaves Brian and me to deal with the judge. And with Lindsay who doesn't look all that thrilled that I'm still here.

"Now," the judge says, getting down to business. "We're here because Mr. Kinney has notified the court that he wishes to file an Emergency Custody Order for Gus. Mr. Kinney, perhaps you'd like to explain why you felt that was necessary."

Beside me, I feel Brian's tension. It's almost matched by the sheer malevolence that's radiating from Lindsay. Brian looks at me for a moment and then gives me a sharp little nod, as if he's
reassured by that look that he's doing the right thing.

*****

Brian

I take a deep breath and take the plunge. This isn't going to be pretty, boys and girls.

"I'm concerned that Lindsay is in a situation where, to get agreement over the other child she has with Ms. Marcus, she'll trade off access to Gus. I don't think Gus wants, or needs to see Melanie … Ms. Marcus … at the moment. I think it will only upset him just when he's starting to feel some security again."

I take another steadying breath and try to think of this as a pitch. I can do this.

"We have ownership on the new house now and can move in there immediately. Gus has seen the house and he's already picked out his room, so he will have his own space and it's not that far from the school he’s supposed to start at next week.

"We …we're not expecting that this will be a permanent arrangement, but until things are a little more settled Justin and I both feel that we can offer him the best chance of stability at the moment."

Okay. That wasn't too fucking "aggressive". Ms. H. warned me about that; read me the fucking riot act in fact. Threatened to take my remaining ball if I didn't keep calm and not come across as being vindictive or a bully. Which means that I can't just come out and say that I'm not going to fucking stand aside anymore and let Linds use Gus as a pawn in the fucked up games she plays with Melanie.

The judge nods, and then turns to Lindsay who is concentrating her glare on me now.

But the judge is giving Lindsay an equally dirty look – she's looking at her like Linds just farted noisily in church. And her tone of voice matches the look. She might have been sweet as sugar syrup with Gus, but now she's pure vinegar.

"In what way, Ms. Petersen, was my ruling that Ms. Marcus was to have no contact with Gus except with the approval of, and under the supervision of, this court in any way unclear?"

Lindsay's lawyer goes to say something, but the judge cuts her off. "This is an informal meeting. I would appreciate a response from Ms. Petersen herself."

"You don't understand," Lindsay snivels.

By the look on his face, this little play for sympathy just makes Justin wants to slap her, and a glance at the judge makes me think she maybe feels the same way.

"She will only let me see Jenny if I let her see Gus," Lindsay wails.

The judge simply shrugs. "The situation with your daughter is an unfortunate one that needs to be sorted out through your lawyers – possibly in the Canadian courts since Ms. Marcus is likely to be granted citizenship following her marriage.

"What you need to recognize and accept, however, is that decisions about when and where or even if, Ms. Marcus sees Gus are no longer solely yours to make."

"But Gus is mine," Lindsay wails louder.

"And Mr. Kinney's," the judge says dryly. "And to some extent Mr. Taylor's also.

"Even more crucially," she says in a voice that makes me think of glaciers and ice floes, "Gus is currently subject to a number of rulings by the courts, which include my own ruling that Ms. Marcus be given only court-supervised access to Gus, and an injunction issued by Judge Davies in the form of a temporary restraining order prohibiting Ms. Marcus from in any way approaching, or attempting to contact, either Gus, Mr. Kinney or Mr. Taylor.

"Are you asserting that you were unaware of either of these rulings?"

Lindsay glances at her lawyer and then shakes her head. The judge nods, as if she's glad Lindsay at least had enough sense not to try to deny that she knew about all this shit.

Then she asks, even more icily, "Do you have any explanation why you were prepared to assist Ms. Marcus in flouting both the temporary restraining order, and my ruling?"

At that Lindsay pauses in her sniveling to glare at Justin.

"If Justin had just let us …" she starts.

But again the judge cuts her off. "Mr. Taylor seems to have acted entirely appropriately, in accordance with these various rulings. And I believe he also acted in Gus's best interests."

She sits back for a moment and looks at Lindsay who's still sniffling into a tissue, and then delivers the body blow. "I'm not in any way convinced, Ms. Petersen that you had even considered whether seeing Ms. Marcus was in Gus's best interests. Everything that you've said so far indicates that you have only been concerned with your own interests – even if those were being pursued at Gus's expense."

Lindsay really does start crying then, all the while protesting that we just don't understand, and wailing about how Melanie will never let her see JR, and all that shit. But she's also getting angry, because all her wailing and whining isn't cutting any ice with anyone in this room except maybe her lawyer, who is doing her best to persuade her to try to control herself.

What's interesting, though, is that for once, I'm not feeling my usual "how can I make it better?" reaction to Lindsay's performance.

Maybe that's because this time she's just gone too fucking far. Or maybe it's because in some weird-assed way I do actually feel more responsible for Gus since I found out that legally I still have my paternal rights. Ever since I signed that damned bit of paper I've kind of felt powerless, so it was easier just to let Mel and Lindsay do whatever. I mean, they were going to anyway, so why fight it? I tried over the whole Canada thing and Linds just threw all my attempts to stay out of their way while they were the parents back in my face; she effectively told me that I'd pretty much neglected Gus. Like I had any fucking choice. I wouldn't have had to worry about getting testicular cancer, that's for sure. Mel would have had both my balls years ago if I'd been there every fucking weekend, demanding to spend time with my Sonnyboy and all that shit.

But things are different now. They just are; and all I know is that this time I have to really be the kind of father that I think Gus deserves. Or at least try to be. And that means that Lindsay's needs and wants are going to have to take a backseat to what Gus needs, and what Gus wants.
She's not going to like that. She'll probably never fucking forgive me. But that's just too fucking bad, because my Sonnyboy has to come first.

*****

Justin

Lindsay doesn't seem to realize it, but everything she's doing or saying is just hammering more nails into her own coffin at the moment.

The judge is obviously pissed, Sam doesn't look too sympathetic, her lawyer looks like she wishes she were somewhere else, Ms. Hershell looks like she wants to give Linds an award for just handing us everything we need on a platter, Brian, for once, seems immune, and I'm just taking notes on how harsh and unattractive her face looks when all of the "sweet little blonde girl" bullshit is swept aside.

Finally, though, the judge seems to figure she's heard enough. After a look at Sam, who's another one who doesn't seem at all impressed by Lindsay's performance, she says, "Well, it's quite clear to me that at the moment Gus is going to be better off with his father."

Lindsay gets up and starts to say something, but while her lawyer is trying to get her to sit down again and shut up, the judge simply says, "Ms. Petersen, I've asked you for an explanation of your decision to flout my previous rulings, and the only justification you can come up with is that you believed it was acceptable to trade access to Gus for access to your other child. This being the case, it seems quite clear that, since you're so willing to ignore rulings by the Pennsylvania Courts, you certainly can't be trusted to keep the custody agreements that have been reached. So I am awarding a temporary custody order to Mr. Kinney and Mr. Taylor. They are both to have legal status as Gus's guardians for the next month. At that time we will review.

"You will be permitted ..." another glance at Sam, and he talks quietly into her ear for a moment, before she goes on, "two one hour visits per week, which will be supervised either by Mr. Kinney, Mr. Taylor, or by an officer of this court should you prefer. At no time will you have unsupervised access to Gus, since I believe that you are a possible flight risk."

Lindsay's really angry now, she's leaning over the judge's desk, trying to say something about, "You can't do this", but she's so angry she can hardly get the words out.

Her lawyer's nearly having conniptions.

The judge stands up and says very quietly, but with that kind of absolute authority that just cuts through every other sound, "Ms. Petersen, I suggest that you calm down and listen to your lawyer. Any further instance of you questioning my authority and, informal hearing or not, I will have you cited on contempt of court charges.

"Is that clear?"

Lindsay's lawyer makes all the right noises and Linds finally sits down. She can't seem to believe what's happened.

What the fuck did she think?

We'd spend all this money going to court and then just stand aside and let her ignore everything that had been agreed so she could get a deal with Melanie over JR?

I so don't think so.
The judge leaves then, and Sam kind of takes over.

He tells us that there will be paperwork we need to sign, and that it will be ready in half an hour. Then he gives a quick glance at Lindsay and says, "I think that it would be best if you took Gus for a walk while the paperwork is being prepared, and Ms. Petersen can have a little time to collect her thoughts.

"If she's calm enough, perhaps we can then allow her a few minutes to say 'goodbye' to Gus for now."

He doesn't raise his voice or anything, but there's no mistaking the threat in that "if she's calm enough".

Clearly, if he doesn't believe that Lindsay is calm enough to behave herself he's not planning on letting her anywhere near Gus.

Meanwhile, Lindsay's lawyer is jabbering in her ear, and Ms. Hershell is standing up, and saying something about staying around long enough to look over the paperwork before we sign.

Fuck!

How did this happen?

In about half an hour we're going to have full time custody of Gus for at least a month.

I can't believe it.

Part of me is terrified and part of me is so excited I kind of want to start dancing around.

And Brian …

Brian just looks kind of shell-shocked.

I reach out and touch his hand, and he stares at me for a moment and then gives one of his tongue in cheek smirks and says, "Well, Dus, I guess we'd better get things moving. We've got a shitload of work to get through today if we're going to get the house ready to live in sometime in the next couple of days."

I bump against his arm with my shoulder, and grin at him.

Then we go to find Gus.

On the way out I catch Lindsay glaring at us both, but when she catches my eye her eyes become really cold and hard.

Fuck!

Like Brian said to me one time, we seem to have made a real enemy here today.

But I can't see that we really had any other choice. Linds is just totally out of control and not thinking clearly, and it's Gus's emotional well-being that's at stake here.

Maybe she needs some counseling or something so she can see that.

Meanwhile, all we can do is try to do our best for Gus. Because he's the one who really counts.
Of course, Brian is on a learning curve, here. Sometimes he's going to make some really dumb mistakes.

Justin

We're both really conscious that all this must have been kind of scary for Gus so when we leave the court, before we do anything else, we take him to the park for a while and let him just run around. He has a great time "hiding" behind the swings and the slide and stuff and having his Dad chase him. I guess it helps both the Kinney guys work off some of the nervous energy that's been building up ever since we knew we had to go back to court today.

They're both a lot less wired when we head back to the loft.

Once Gus is settled down at the counter with some lunch in front of him, Brian starts making phone calls –to Cynthia to give her a heads up about what happened this morning so that if Lindsay or Mel call the office, everyone knows that the only contact is to be through the lawyers; to a builder to see if he can do an emergency revamp of the small upstairs bathroom, starting yesterday; to a fencing contractor to get something put up across the end of the property so that Gus can't get down to the river; to a furniture store to set up an appointment (!) to select some stuff; and to Ted, because he's going to need him to project manage this stuff for him. I cannot believe that he's planning to buy our furniture from a store where you need to make a fucking appointment. Well, I can, but only because it's Brian.

We're going to move into the house as soon as Gus has a door from his bedroom into the bathroom. Brian doesn't want him to have to go onto the landing if he wakes up in the night and needs to use the toilet. We debated about just moving in and letting Gus sleep with us till the work was done, but
then we realized that knocking a doorway through, not to mention moving all the fixtures, is going to mean major mess and dust and shit, and it's not really very practical.

There are major changes that we want to make downstairs too; or at least one major change. We want to knock out the wall between the kitchen and the little front room on that side of the house, and make it into a single space, a combined cooking and dining area with maybe a counter across to give it some definition and give us an informal place to eat if we don't want to sit at a table. Of course, knocking through that wall might not be structurally possible, so we need to get architects and maybe engineers involved; which gives me an idea.

I open the filing drawer in the desk and dig out the file that holds all the papers for the house. It's quite thick, but it doesn't take me long to find what I'd hoped was there – the original plans for the major work they'd had done - taking out all the back rooms and opening up that space - with all the engineering specifications attached.

Brian gives me a smacking kiss and I think I hear him mutter something about 'my own little genius' as he bends over them. We peer at them together, but honestly, not a lot of it makes sense to the uninitiated, except the concept drawings which are beautiful – works of art in themselves. My guess would be that Dan's Billy did those.

Brian calls the architect who designed the loft for him and it's a really weird conversation – at least from my end, given that I can only hear half of it, and not all of that because I'm trying to get Gus to sit down and watch a video. I'm hoping it will put him out, because I suspect that he's pretty worn out by everything and that if he doesn't get a nap he'll be Kinney-cranky by the end of the day.

*****

Brian

By the time I get off the phone Gus is curled up on the futon supposedly watching the Wiggles or Waggles or whatever the fuck they're called, but actually I think he's pretty much asleep.

Stephane seemed almost fucking delirious with excitement when I told him that I needed him to work on some plans for me. I'd no sooner started to describe the house when he squealed, "You don't mean the Arkwright-Dickinson house?" and sounded as if he was fucking hyper-ventilating all over the phone.

Turns out he'd wangled an invitation to some party there a few years ago and had just been blown away by the place. The thought that he was going to get a chance to do some work there seemed to be all the incentive he needed to agree to drop anything else he's got going and start work on the project immediately. He's going to meet with us there tomorrow.

So everything else is pretty much under control, now I just have to work out how the fuck we're going to manage to look after Gus full time without Justin losing anymore fucking time out from his painting. He's got to have the piece ready for the Warhol, and prepare for his own show. He can't afford to be running around after Gus every day.

*****

Justin

I just can't believe the fucker.

Gus finally fell asleep, and Brian carried him up to the bedroom and then told me I should leave,
go to my studio and get on with some work.

He hasn't even told me what went on with all the phone calls yet, and we haven't had a chance to discuss how we're going to manage looking after Gus and all he wants to do is fucking shove me out the door.

I try to reassure him that things will be okay with Gus at least; I mean, the good thing about not having a nine to five job is that I can set my own working hours and make sure I can pick Gus up every day from school.

He just looks down his nose at me like he's fucking King Kinney or something and I'm just an idiot menial, and more or less tells me not to bother my pretty little head about it, just to go and paint some pretty pictures.

He actually has the nerve to tell me that Gus is his problem, and he'll fix it.

Then he sits down at the computer and logs on and makes like I'm not even there.

Well, fuck him!

He gets me so mad sometimes when he just refuses to listen to me. He gets in this space where he totally believes he's the only one who knows what should be done, how things should be, and he completely ignores me.

So I do leave.

First I think about going to see Daphne, then I remember she has classes all day Thursday, so I think about going to see Mom, but in the end I head for the studio and start a new painting.

I think I'll call it "Asshole".

*****

Brian

I guess I should have handled that better, but fuck it. The fucked up mess that I've created with Lindsay shouldn't be allowed to affect Justin's future. These two shows that are coming up could really open doors for him and he needs to be free to work, not worrying about my bullshit.

I know he thinks that being partners means that he gets to have a share in all the fucking problems as well as the good stuff, but …

Shit!

Of course that's what he thinks, and I've just fucking told him that I don't think of us that way, that I don't really see him as my partner, as someone whose wants and needs and opinions carry equal weight in this … relationship, fuck it.

I've just told him that if he has a role it's as a very junior fucking partner who can't be counted on to pull his weight.

Like he doesn't carry more than his fair share; fuck it – he's the one doing most of the fucking work.

I am such a dickhead.
One of these days I'm going to get this stuff.

But it doesn't look like it's going to be today.

I try calling his cell, but he doesn't answer.

Big surprise.

I'm debating what else I can do when Jenn calls. She wants to know how things went this morning. I tell her, and she sounds like she's over the moon.

I mumble something about needing to find someone to take care of Gus. He starts school on Monday, but someone will need to pick him up and …

"I don't want it to be Justin," I find myself telling her. Then I realize how that sounds. "Not that he isn't great with Gus, but … he has to get on with …"

Then I remember that we haven't told her, haven't told anyone, about his New York show in October, so I can't use that to explain.

"He needs to finish the piece he wants to submit for the Warhol show," I say. "In fact, he should probably have a couple of pieces ready in case they're not happy with the first. He needs to be getting on with that."

"He needs to know that he's supporting his partner," Jenn tells me firmly.

I sigh.

"That's what he said. He wants to pick Gus up every day after school, but …"

I don't get a chance to finish, because she cuts in.

"What you both seem to be forgetting is that Gus has a grandmother. And grandmothers get to have a role in childcare."

I sigh more deeply. What is it with these fucking Taylors? Jenn has a full time job; she can't …

"Mondays and Tuesdays I spend the day mainly doing paperwork," she goes on before I get a chance to respond. "You know the sort of thing – arranging ads to hit the papers on Thursday and Friday in time for weekend viewings, catching up on the results of sales and auctions from last weekend. I can do that stuff at home. I'll just leave work early, pick Gus up and bring him to my place and I can get the paperwork done while he's napping, or even after he goes home. It will be worth it if I can spend some time with him and get to know him."

For some reason I'm having trouble getting my voice to work.

The thing is, I can tell that she means it. She really does want to spend time with Gus. I'm surprised at how much that means to me.

"And on Fridays," she says happily, "I get a half day off because I work Saturdays. So that means that you only have to worry about picking Gus up on Wednesday and Thursday and I'm sure that if you split that between you it won't interfere with either of your work responsibilities too much."

"Mother Taylor," I start, intending to protest, I guess … but what can I fucking say?

This is something Jenn obviously wants to do, and it's the perfect solution. Even the courts couldn't
argue with Gus spending time with Justin's perfect-lady WASP mother, especially since she is technically Gus's grandmother.

"Jenn," I try again. "Are you sure?"

It sounds so fucking wimpy.

She laughs. "Of course I'm sure, Brian. I'm delighted. Why don't you bring Gus over for lunch on Saturday so that we can spend a little time together before I pick him up on Monday. And don't forget that you'll have to advise the school."

"Yeah," I say. "I'll do that."

Then some last shred of fucking self-preservation kicks in and I hear myself saying, "I'll need to discuss it with Justin, but …"

She gives a little giggle then, and says, still fucking laughing, "I bet you never thought you'd hear yourself saying anything like that."

She's fucking right, of course, but …

Somehow it's not as horrible as I once might have thought.

Now if I can just figure out how to get the little twat to actually take my calls.

Well, I'd better figure something out fast, because if I know Gus as soon as he wakes up he's going to be demanding his fucking "Dus" and I don't want to have to face the consequences if Dus isn't here. Or at least, on his way back here.

But before I can work out what to do, he calls me.

"I'm going to be heading home soon. Do you need me to pick up anything at the corner store on the way?"

I can tell by his voice that he's pissed at me still, but at least he's on his way home. I should probably wait till he gets here and do this face to face.

"No, I think we're okay till the weekend."

I swallow and get a grip on my remaining ball. "I guess we need to talk … work out how we're going to handle things."

"I thought that was your fucking problem," he snipes.

Little shit!

"Well, yeah, kind of … but …"

"Well, there's nothing to talk about then is there?"

"Justin, don't … you know …"

"I don't know fuck, Brian. I'm just some idiot kid who has a great ass and gives great head."

"Sunshine, you left out the fact that you're a bigger fucking drama queen than Emmett," I can't resist retorting.
I hear his gasp of outrage and realize that wasn't the smartest thing to say if I want him to come home so I can make up to him for being such a shit earlier. Fuck! Now I suppose I'm going to have more payback to face for that crack. I hurry on before I can dig myself even deeper into the shit pit, "But you're also the only fucking person I trust to always put Gus's needs first, so you're the only one who can help me decide what's the best thing to do for the next few weeks, or however long he's with us."

There's silence for a moment, and then he says quietly, "You made me feel like shit, Brian. I fucking hate it when you pull that 'I don't need you to help me with anything' bullshit."

I sigh. I've been doing a lot of that this afternoon. This is one of the reasons I avoided fucking relationships for so long. I'm no fucking good at them. I'm okay with the big stuff, pretty much. But the small day to day stuff … I get caught up in my own shit and kind of lose the fucking plot.

"I know," I tell him. "I … it was a stupid thing to say. I just …"

The truth is that I'm not used to having someone to help share the load. Not used to having someone to rely on that way.

I mean, yeah, sure, Justin, when he's been around. But between being bashed in the head, and the fiddler, and LA and New York, there's been a lot of time when he hasn't been around. Either he's been kind of … damaged, or not there, or else he's about to leave, or he's just gotten back … There hasn't been a lot of time that we've felt really solid. I mean, there have been times … the Stockwell time, and in Chicago, and these last few weeks. But not time enough for me to get into the habit of relying on him. Not time enough to break the fucking habit of a lifetime of thinking I could only rely on myself.

He sighs.

It must be catching.

"You drive me totally nuts, Mr. Kinney," he tells me. "It's a damned good thing you've got a nine inch cock and can suck like a Hoover."

I find myself laughing, with relief, probably. Sounds like his hissy fit is over. Sounds like I might not have to grovel too fucking much when he gets home.

"I love you," I offer.

That makes him laugh too, the little twat.

I know exactly how he looks at the moment. He's shaking his head with that 'for someone so smart, you can be so fucking dumb' look on his face.

But his voice is soft and … fuck me, tender, when he says the words right back to me.
Justin

I walk in the door, and he gives me this really sheepish look.

So he fucking should.

But there's no point in staying mad at him. He's admitted he was wrong, well, as far as he's ever going to, and he's even kind of apologized.

I have to remember that I'm dealing with someone who has totally no idea how to behave like a normal human being when it comes to relationships. He's never been given the chance to learn. So it's almost like training a puppy. You let him know when he's done the wrong thing, and when he does the right thing, you give him a reward.

So I walk over to him and give him a really straight in the eye 'you fucked up' look. But when his eyes go all guarded and his mouth tightens I realize that now I'm the one on the verge of fucking up, so, letting myself gently touch his face, I smile at him and repeat the words I said on the phone.

"I love you," I whisper as I brush his lips with my own. "You're the most aggravating man on the whole fucking planet, but I totally love you."

He huffs, and then lets his tongue slide into my mouth and we're about to get lost in each other the way we do when we hear Gus's voice from the top of the stairs.

"Daddy!"
He sounds upset, so we let go of each other and Brian strides over to Gus and lifts him up.

"What's the matter, Sonnyboy?" he asks, but even as he does we both catch the whiff of urine and realize that he's wet the bed.

Brian kind of freezes, and even knowing how much he wants to be the total opposite of his father, I wonder how he'll react to this. His bed is sacrosanct to Brian. I remember him totally freaking out that first night when I came all over his precious damned duvet. And heaven help anyone who wants to eat – or even drink coffee – in its hallowed precincts.

I'm all braced to step in, but I needn't have worried. Brian, as he does more often than anyone, even me, gives him credit for, handles the situation perfectly.

"What happened, Sonnyboy?" he asks gently. "Did you have a bit of an accident?"

Gus nods dolefully. He's obviously upset, and maybe even a little scared.

"Never mind," Brian says. "We'll clean it up. But we need to get you fixed up first. Justin … can you look after Gus while I change the bed? Then I think we might all have some pizza for dinner. What do you think, Sonnyboy?"

Gus hugs him, clinging to his father for just a minute, and then lets me take him.

We go into the bathroom and I get him under the shower. When I go out to fetch clean clothes for him, Brian is standing still next to the bed. He'd started to pull the sheets off, but now he's just standing there.

I go up to him and kiss his shoulder. "You did good, Dad," I tell him. He really does need that kind of positive reinforcement. He's so unsure about his ability to be a decent father.

He gives a stiff little nod, then jerks into movement and finishes stripping the bedding off.

But not before I catch a glimpse of his face. He was fighting back tears.

Fuck!

I bet I know what that's about.

I can just imagine his fucking father's reaction if ever Brian had wet the bed. And all kids do, I guess, one time or another.

But I can't say or do anything to acknowledge any of that without triggering Brian's self-defense mechanisms, so I just fetch Gus's clothes and go into the bathroom.

By the time he's dressed, Brian has a whole new set of fresh bedding ready to go on. Fortunately, Gus's accident seems to have been more of a trickle than a flood, and it hasn't penetrated the mattress protector, so between us we get the bed remade in record time. Brian gives Gus the new pillowcases to put on and it really does help him feel better about the whole thing because he's soon chattering away about how quickly we're getting things fixed and how good he is at helping and it's not long before we're ready for pizza.

To my surprise, Brian elects to go to the Italian place down the street rather than have the pizza delivered.

Gus doesn't seem to mind. I think he kind of likes being out and about with us. I'm not sure that he
got a lot of that with Mel and Linds. I mean, with the baby and everything, I suppose even going out for a meal would have been a bit of a drama – organizing all the baby's stuff and everything, but anyway Gus obviously enjoys going with us. He skips along beside us, and wants us to take his hands so that he can swing between them. I guess he's getting a bit big for that now, and Brian is so much taller than me that it makes us a bit lopsided, but we're all laughing, so who cares?

We have a nice meal; when they bring Gus a napkin to wrap around himself he looks a bit put out, so I ask if we can all have them. That means that I can have pasta and not worry about dripping sauce all down myself. Brian gives me one of those tongue in cheek looks of his, but he goes along with it.

We have a glass or two of wine (Gus has cranberry and apple juice which is nearly the same color so he's happy) and Brian breaks his damned no carbs rule to share some of Gus's pizza as well as having his inevitable salad. I wind up having a slice or two myself, because Gus can't eat it all. We finish off with tiramisu - well, I do, anyway. Gus tastes it and doesn't like it, so he has some strawberry gelato instead. Brian has lemon gelato – and Gus gets most of that as well.

It's all just so relaxed and comfortable and it's like we've been doing this kind of thing for years because there's no dramas and when Gus starts to get a bit noisy it only takes one look from Brian for him to settle down; not because he's scared of his Dad, but just because he knows he has to behave like a big boy because we're in a big boy's restaurant.

Gus is starting to slow down, though, by the time we leave, so Brian hoists him up on his shoulders and gives him a piggy-back back to the loft. Then he asks me if I can stay with Gus while he goes to the drug store.

Gus and I watch TV for a while, and when he comes back, Brian goes right up to the bedroom. He rustles about in there for a while, but it isn't long before he's back down with us.

I find out later that he'd bought a plastic sheet to put on the bed, but he hadn't wanted to make a big thing out of it, so he'd just slipped it on when Gus wouldn't notice – under the sheets, and even the mattress protector so that Gus wouldn't even feel it, but it would still protect the mattress.

Apparently the woman in the drug store told him that kids Gus's age can have this problem and it's no big deal – especially if their routine has been upset. But that if it carries on he might want to get it checked out with Gus's pediatrician.

Poor little guy. If this sort of incident can be triggered by upset and stress, then it's no wonder that it happened. He's been through so much of both in the past few days. Well, I guess the past months, really.

*****

Brian

We haven't really talked about it, but really, it makes sense for Gus to have the bed, and us to bed down on the futon.

It's only for a few days – at least I hope it is; provided the fucking builders get the work done as fast as they've promised.

And at least this way we can use the computer or watch TV or whatever without disturbing Gus. We've pulled the privacy panels closed, so now he has his own little room. Justin must know what I'm thinking, because while I get Gus ready for bed he pulls out the extra bedding we'll need to
make up the futon.

Gus doesn't want to get into the bed, but I remind him about how he needs to sleep because we have to go to the store tomorrow and pick out furniture for his new room; and that I'm relying on him to help us when we get to the house. I tell him that someone is meeting us to discuss what changes we're going to make, and we need his advice.

Finally, he gets to the real reason he's reluctant to get between the sheets.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," he whispers. "I couldn't help it."

I know what he's talking about, and I sit down and pull him onto my knee. He'll be too big for this soon, he won't want to cuddle up with his old man, but right now he snuggles into me and I feel something tighten around my chest; I'm overwhelmed with the need to protect him from the whole fucking world if I have to. I realize finally that I must be completely different from my own fucking father who was usually the first in line when the hurting started, because I would seriously be ready to kill anyone who tried to hurt Gus.

I stroke his hair, and say as gently as I know how, "It's okay, Sonnyboy. Sometimes these things happen."

"Moma gets real mad at me. Even Mommy does. But I can't help it. Moma hit me once. But Mommy yelled at her and she stopped. But she yelled at me too. She yelled at me a lot."

I feel myself go cold.

Fuck!

I let them take him. I fucking let them take him all that way away from me, and I wasn't there every other week insisting that they let me see him and making sure he was okay and all the while this sort of fucking shit was going on.

I try to master my voice, so he won't hear the anger, won't think it's directed at him.

"Well, Moma was wrong to hit you. I …" I swallow hard. "I would never do that, Gus. You don't have to be afraid that I would ever hit you. You understand?"

He nods and I feel him relaxing against me.

"I know, Daddy. That's why I like it better here with you and Dus."

He yawns.

"I think I'll go to sleep now," he announces; and just like that he's out like a light.

I tuck him into bed and go down to where Justin is sitting on the couch. By the look in his eyes he's heard at least the gist of that.

"Fucking cunts," he murmurs, coming into my arms and wrapping his around me so tight it feels like he's been taking lessons from Deb.

*****

Justin

Brian needs to go into Kinnetik for a meeting first thing – just some admin stuff, but he really
needs to be there. So Gus and I take ourselves off to the diner for breakfast.

We're going to meet Brian later at the house to talk to the architect he wants to work on the downstairs stuff and take some measurements. Then we're going looking for furniture.

The builder he arranged to do the bathroom refit called first thing. They're already on site and think they can have it done by tomorrow night. I can hardly believe that, but given that Brian is willing to pay them a few grand in bonuses if they manage it, I guess they'll work all night if that's what it takes.

Apparently they've worked out that they can put in a door without moving the toilet itself (which was going to be the big job, because it would have meant major re-plumbing). They're just going to swap the positions of the vanity and the shower which means re-tiling and stuff (so Gus will need to use our shower for a few days), but won't require major plumbing work, just a bit of finessing about changing the pipe fittings. And they've recommended putting in a sliding door because it will take up less space.

It's all just so amazing. I mean, I was thinking that by the time we got all the work done on the place, we would be lucky to be able to move in before summer was over, but now we're going to be in there by next week. That means that we'll have to live with the mess while they do the downstairs renovations, but as Brian says, we can just close off that part of the house and live in the rest. We can get the entertainment room set up anyway; and Brian's office come study in the front room; and we'll have the main space at the back, of course. But no kitchen – so I guess we'll be living on take out. Well, that's okay. Thanks to Brian's food fetishes, we've got the menu for every healthy take out place in town. No one will need to complain that we feed Gus rubbish. In fact, if we can get a small bar fridge set up in the entertainment room like we were planning, I can even keep stuff in there to make his school lunches every day.

That's another thing on the list for today.

He's been enrolled in a school not far from the apartment Mom found for Lindsay, but we need to meet with the school principal and Gus's home room teacher to make sure they know about the legal stuff, and that only the two of us, and my Mom, are authorized to pick Gus up from school. They have to know that they shouldn't allow him to go with anyone else.

Especially not Lindsay.

Or, Heaven help us, Melanie.

But first things first, and as I push open the door to the diner, I hear Debbie's voice and brace myself.

*****

Brian

He's almost incoherent when he calls me. I'm just leaving the office and getting into the car, but by the time I can understand what he's saying, I realize that he's not angry, he's trying to stifle what sounds like almost hysterical laughter.

He keeps saying, "It's not funny", but he's still laughing when I pull up at the diner a few minutes later.

Gus is happily munching his way through what looks like a shit-load of pancakes, all of them not so much smothered as soaked in syrup. He'll have such a fucking sugar high. I could willingly
brain Debbie who fed them to him, countermanding Justin's order for oatmeal and toast.

She's fucking lucky that the story she regaled Sunshine with as soon as he appeared (taking him into the back, first, thank God and leaving Emmett to watch Gus) has put her in my good books for at least a day or so.

Apparently Lindsay turned up at Deb's place last night, all woebegone and looking for sympathy. She sniffled her way through her tale of woe, convinced that Debbie, as another single mom would naturally be on her side and ready to come out punching on her behalf.

What had struck Justin as totally hilarious was that Lindsay, knowing that he is Deb's blue-eyed boy and she won't hear a word against him, focused all of her vitriol on me.

Fuck! Did she get her timing wrong! Because I'd among the million other phone calls I made yesterday, I called Mikey and persuaded him to let me fund a trip to Toronto so that he could sit down with Mel and discuss JR without Lindsay there to stir her own brand of poison into the mix. He left this morning, armed with the agreements about JR that everyone had signed before the girls headed north, and with an appointment already organized with a solicitor in Toronto who does pro bono work for these sort of cases (courtesy of his own attorney who handled the matter down here). His attorney even spoke to Mel's hubby/ wife/ whatever and all the indications are that he'll be able to set up some regular visitation schedule with JR without too many dramas.

Apparently someone has managed to convince Mel that if she wanted to keep her daughter at least, she needs to start acting like a fucking rational human being. She seems to have finally grasped the fact that if she keeps acting like a psycho, the courts, even in Canada, might well decide that she can't be trusted to look after her own kid and either take JR into care, or give her to Mikey – given that he's never given up his rights, and he has court papers to prove it.

Anyway – things look like sorting themselves out for Mikey and although all I did was to cough up some spare change, for once I'm the fucking hero and so all of Lindsay's wailing about what an asshole I am fell pretty much on deaf ears.

Apparently, according to Deb anyway, she got sent off with a lecture about how she'd made a whole batch of bad decisions and had deliberately misled all of us over what was going on between her and Mel and it wasn't surprising that now no one was willing to trust her – least of all with Gus.

But that wasn't the end of it. Seems she went to Mikey next, going on about how she had only been trying to make sure JR was alright and all that shit and all she got out of that (again according to Deb who got it from Mikey) was to be told that if she'd really been worried about JR she would have told Michael what was going on with her and Mel months ago, instead of pretending that everything in Canada was just rosy.

When she started in on how it wasn't really my fault, it was all Justin's doing, Mikey apparently told her that if that was the case he was fucking glad Justin was back because it meant that, instead of Linds being allowed to manipulate me into doing whatever she wanted, someone was actually standing up to her and making sure that the first priority was Gus, and seeing to it that he got the care and support he needed.

Then he told her that she needed to leave because he had to pack and didn't have time to deal with her shit, and he went upstairs to do that and left Hunter to show her out who pretty much told her to go fuck herself when she tried to get him to persuade Michael to help her.

So then, (by the time he gets to this point in the story Justin is getting the giggles again – I think it's some kind of hysterical reaction to all the fucking stress) she apparently called Ted (who reported it
to Emmett, who told Justin while Deb was distracting Gus by getting him to help her carry his milk to the table). Ted apparently told her that he'd had time over the last couple of years to assess his priorities and work out who his real friends were. Seems neither she nor Mel were high on that list, given that they've pretty much shrugged him off since his flirtation with crystal. They don't like Blake, for one thing, and made it pretty clear that they didn't feel comfortable having a couple of ex-addicts round the kids. Which I guess is fucking understandable, but didn't make Theodore in any way inclined to put up with Lindsay's shit now.

Besides, Theodore and I … I guess … anyway …

After all of that, she headed for Emmett's and that's when she really got fucking dumped on because Emmett, for all his campy queening is pretty fucking shrewd where people are concerned, and while he doesn't necessarily run off at the mouth over everything he observes, when he does he pretty much tells it like it fucking is. So Lindsay, instead of getting the warm and fuzzies from him, got told that she needs to get a grip and stop thinking about herself.

What Emmett tells me when we take our coffees to a table in the back away from where Gus is finishing off breakfast with some fruit, is that he told Linds that she needs to think about who is the most important person in all of this.

"Sugar," he says, "I told her that my Aunt Lulu always said that you know who and what is really important to a person by what they're prepared to do to protect it.

"For you – that's Gus and Justin, and you would do just about anything to save either one of them from even getting their feathers ruffled.

"For me, it's my clothes and my recipes and, I'd like to think, my friends.

"I told Lindsay that as far as I could tell, all she was interested in protecting was herself. That she didn't even seem to consider Gus at any point, because if she had, she'd have been on the plane back to Pittsburgh as soon as things went bad up in Toronto. In fact, she'd never have left.

"The whole 'we're afraid of losing our kids' stuff was total bullshit. No judge would have taken her kid away from her, they'd have had no reason to; that only happens where there's a straight daddy demanding his rights; and sometimes the courts agree with them. Not saying that's right, but it's not how things were for Mel and Linds.

"They really left because the older Gus got, the more he got like you and the more he wanted to spend time with you, and Mel couldn't handle it, and Linds couldn't handle the risk of losing Mel. If you'd been prepared to take her in and support her full time she would never have gone back to Melanie. But as things were, she needed Melanie so that she had someone to look after her. That's what Lindsay has always wanted. She's never wanted to have to stand on her own two feet.

"So that's what I told her. And I told her that as far as I was concerned she was a selfish cunt for even thinking of herself when what she should be doing was worrying about how Gus was, and what she could do to make things easier for him, not throwing more drama his way."

He blinks at me and gives me a little grin, his gap-teeth gleaming for a moment. "She didn't like it much," he finishes.

*****

Justin

So basically, Lindsay has been running all over town to everyone we know trying to get them to
support her and persuade big bad Brian to "do the right thing and give Gus back to her".

What I find absolutely hilarious in all of this is that the problem for Lindsay is that she just hasn't caught up with all the changed dynamics in our little group.

She's operating as if it's five or six years ago, when I was the know-nothing twink who just went along with whatever Brian wanted and everyone regarded Brian as the world's biggest asshole.

But it hasn't been like that for a long time now, and Lindsay just doesn't seem to realize it.

Ted and Brian are really tight, for one thing (although Brian would probably deny that with his dying breath).

And Emmett has seen Brian really differently since the whole crystal-queen thing. Both because of how he looked out for Emmett while Ted was going through that, and because of how he helped Ted afterwards.

Things have blown hot and cold with Michael, but at the moment Brian is definitely on the 'good guys' list with both Michael and Debbie because he's really helped Michael out financially. He's even put out feelers to try to find Ben a job when he gets home, which will be pretty soon, probably.

So running round to all of these people who have really good reason to know that Brian is not a selfish asshole, that he's one of the most generous people you could ever meet – at least with his friends (even if he'd die rather than admit that either) didn't do anything except get everyone all riled up to protect Brian.

And Gus.

Because, really, everyone gets it that it's not about deciding whether to be on Brian's side, or Lindsay's. It's about being on Gus's side, about deciding how to do the right thing for him.

And Lindsay's antics have totally made it clear that the right thing for Gus is not to risk him having to go back to a mother whose only concern is that she isn't getting her own way. Well, that and the fact that she won't be getting any support payments for the next month while Gus is with us.

Apparently she was wailing to Debbie about that as well, and about how she wasn't going to be able to afford the next month's rent on the apartment. Of course, that kind of came unstuck when she had to admit that Brian had paid the first month's rent and the security deposit.

Debbie apparently told her that if she needed the money so bad, she'd just have to get a job like everyone else does.

But the clincher, the thing that just made me totally lose it, was that when Linds whined about how hard that was going to be Deb told her that they were a waitress short and she could have a job here.

Just imagining the look on Lindsay's face when Deb suggested she should be waiting tables in the diner is enough to make me burst out laughing every time I think of it.

Fuck! I bet she's even more pissed with Debbie than she is with Brian right now.
Of course, sometimes Brian gets it absolutely right, including in his unexpected choice of design consultant.

Brian

We finally get away from the diner and get out to the house just as Stephane's fucking Porsche is pulling up.

I introduce him to Justin and to Gus, and we go in.

I'm a little shocked by how weird the place feels now that it's empty; which is fucking ridiculous. I mean, I knew the old fossil had packed all his shit and either shipped it, or had it taken to an auction house. So of course it's fucking empty, but …

It's still kind of unsettling. I move so I'm a little closer to Justin. If I'm feeling a little spooked, he's probably feeling worse.

Anyway, Stephane has already been all over the plans I emailed to him and he's confident that we can create an opening between the kitchen and the front room on that side of the house. He advises us to leave a little of the upper and side walls – like an extended arch - but says that the wall isn't a load-bearing one and in any case the whole structure has been reinforced with steel girders so opening it up isn't going to cause any structural problems.

He also says that – for the right fucking price, of course - he can find a paint crew and electricians to come in today and tomorrow and do whatever painting and rewiring we want done. Dan had the whole place re-wired just a couple of years ago, so it's all up to code, but we need extra power points in some rooms and a change to the lighting in what used to be the dining room, and is now
going to be our fucking media or entertainment room or whatever; the place where we can relax and watch a fucking movie if we feel like it.

Justin and I have discussed all this and he's drawn up a plan of what colors he wants where and where he wants the new power points to go, so we don't have to waste time on that shit.

Justin insists that, as well as the media room and our bedrooms, we get the other front room painted now. The one he wants me to use for my office. I don't really need a fucking office, but I guess it will give me a bolt hole when domesticity gets too fucking much for me.

The resident artiste insists that because of the way the light comes through those green glass bricks the main color in this front part of the ground floor just has to be green. I guess he should fucking know. Color's his thing, after all.

For the study, I wanted to keep it just monochrome – there's no green glass affecting the light in there, but he wants one wall to be a deep kind of mossy green. He says it will help concentration and will go well with the kind of sleek furniture I like. I bow to his judgment.

Anyway the important thing is that thanks to Stephane's contacts we can get all of the painting and shit done by tomorrow night. So we can pretty much move in on Sunday.

Halle-fucking-luljah.

It's going to cost a shitload – getting tradesmen to work long hours and on the weekend is expensive - but who gives a fuck about that?

We leave Stephane to work up a quote for the major renovation work – although it's pretty much a done fucking deal anyway – and get out of there.

We have to get to Gus's fucking school and play nice with the Principal, and then head over to Marty's place.

Justin's going to have a shit-fit when he finds out who will be helping us get the place furnished in two days.

*****

Justin

I'm so excited, and so is Gus.

The architect Brian has arranged to meet us ("Stephane" which I thought was really pretentious until he started talking and I realized he's French – or French Canadian - with the greatest accent) is going to make up a quote for us, but really, we all know that he's going to be doing the work. He's just about as excited about it as I am. Seems like this house is almost kind of famous – at least among people who've actually been here - because of Billy's window. I guess we're lucky it hasn't been listed or something so we can still do what we want to it.

Anyway, Stephane and I stood out in the back room under the windows and talked about them for a few minutes before Brian got totally antsy so we had to get back to concentrating on the huge amount of work that needs to be done.

Brian and I talked the other night about what we wanted done, and I drew up kind of a layout of how I thought things should work – where the power points have to go and stuff - that the control freak of the family actually seemed happy with; so it's easy to explain to Stephane exactly what we
want.

We talked about colors too.

Dan and Billy had kept all the downstairs walls just kind of off white; which Brian would probably like, but I think is kind of boring. But when I started to think about it I realized that the light seeping into the front part of house through all those green glass bricks means that you have to be really careful what colors you use, because they're going to be changed by that greeny tinge – reds would probably go brown, that kind of thing. But I figured if we went with the green thing it would be good for the living areas anyway – brightish greens for the kitchen, and even to some extent the dining room because they're energizing, soft calm greens for the TV room; and I picked a lovely dark smoky green for a feature wall in Brian's office. That shade will be calming as well, and should help concentration. Besides it will really show off his chrome desk and stuff.

Upstairs – well, Gus's room will start off being a kind of muted buttercup yellow. It's a good color for a child; but I want to paint a mural or something for him, so we'll keep the color to half-strength. And I thought maybe bright blue curtains and duvet; and a softer shade of blue for the sheets, so they'll be kind of calming as well.

The real shock was our room. I was sure that Brian would want it to be all monochrome like the loft, but when we were going through the color charts, he found this deep burgundy color that he really liked, so the end wall, the one opposite the clear glass wall, is going to be that color. Everything else will probably be neutrals, but when we get some time I'll look for some cushions or something – bright blue, maybe, or even silver, just to give some accents. It will be great, because when you look through our glass wall out to the stained glass window, we'll kind of have some of those colors coming right into our room. The deep glowing burgundy of the wall will kind of balance the deep colors of the window and then the highlights will pick up some of the lighter colors as well. It will almost make our room like an extension of the window.

The doors and the skirting boards things these old houses have are natural wood – a beautiful dark wood glowing with just a hint of red. It would almost be criminal to paint them, so despite Brian's moaning about it a little we're leaving those as they are. We can always have them done later if he really hates it. Fortunately, there's no carpet in the place, just these beautiful old polished boards, so we don't have to go through stripping out dusty old carpet and then trying to get the boards polished and all that stuff.

Anyway, Stephane has taken notes from the color charts I gave him, and he's going to organize some painters to come in today. He says they can do the prep and one coat today, then a second coat tomorrow and it will be dry by Sunday morning.

So now I guess we just have to find a bed for us, and for Gus and a couple of other things and we can move in. We can get all the rest of the stuff later, after the renovations to the kitchen and new dining room have been done. We'll be living on take out till that's finished, and probably with some dust and paint fumes as well, but at least we'll be in the house, and we'll have Gus with us … and it will be totally not like anything I ever dreamed of doing with Brian, so fuck knows how we're going to make it work. But we'll find a way; we have to, for Gus's sake.

But first we have to get Gus formally enrolled at his school, and make sure that they know who his legal guardians are and that no one else should be picking him up, or even trying to contact him. And that we need to know if anyone tries.

*****

Brian
We manage to get through the meeting with Gus's Principal without me wanting to puke or throw her through the window, so I guess it wasn't too fucking bad.

While Gus was taken off to meet his new teacher and see his classroom, we went though at least the basics of our fucked up situation with Ms. Principal and she hardly blinked. Guess these days custody wars are pretty much the norm; and with the number of hetero-wannabe gay "couples" around, she's probably dealt with a few lavender colored ones as well. She certainly didn't seem fucking fazed by any of it. She asked for copies of the court rulings so they could put them on file in case Lindsay (or even worse the fucking she wolf) turns up and tries to bullshit her way into seeing Gus. Ms Herschell had warned me that the school was likely to ask for them, so Justin printed them off this morning and we had them ready.

That seemed to win us Brownie points for a start.

We sign all the forms and shit and agree that we'll try to make time to do some parent-involvement stuff – fuck knows how, but I guess I can always send Theodore. And of course we can hand over the check for the fees and for all the little extras that the fees don't cover; so she's got all the money upfront right away. That makes her happy as well.

Then she focuses on Justin and it turns out she's an art fan and had actually seen Justin's stuff at the show at the Bloom Gallery, and read the Art Forum article so she was all over him about what he was doing next and all that shit. He didn't mention New York, but he did tell her about the Warhol thing and she said she'll look forward to it. Yada yada.

We hear Gus's voice as he's coming back down the corridor telling his teacher about how he has a Daddy and a Dus and that he lives with them now and he sounds so fucking happy about it that …

Fuck!

I get de-railed from any pointless introspective bullshit wondering about how the fuck I've managed to get to this point where I'm sitting here with my partner playing nice with a primary school principal while waiting for my son, by the sound of my partner's voice.

"Brian and I need to be sure that Gus won't face any … difficulties … because of his parents' sexual orientation."

Trust Sunshine to lay it on the line with no bullshit.

To her credit Ms Principal doesn't bat an eyelash. In fact, she sits up in her chair and for one scary moment she actually reminds me of my dragon of a lawyer.

"We have very strict policies about bullying of any kind, Mr. Taylor," she says firmly. "We expect all our students to exhibit respect and tolerance towards each other. And we expect the same of their parents. When you and Mr. Kinney have a chance to read the material I've given you, you'll see that our board of governors has laid down stringent guidelines about what is considered unacceptable behavior, and that any breach of these – by students or parents – could result in the child in question being suspended or even expelled.

"We had a situation just last year with a young Muslim girl. One of the children had a parent who lost someone on 9/11, and who seemed to want to take out their grief and anger on every available target. They took to harassing the child and her mother at the school gates, telling her that she wasn't welcome at this school with "decent folk". We made it quite clear that not only was their behavior not acceptable, neither was their attitude, and that since their children couldn't help but be affected by that attitude, we believed they'd be happier finding a different school."
"Believe me when I tell you most sincerely that I would have no hesitation at all in taking the same stance with anyone who causes any difficulties at all for young Gus over his parents' sexuality."

And fuck me if I don't believe her.

*****

Justin

I think Brian might actually have liked Gus's school principal. He didn't make one single snarky comment; not even when she was assuring us of how strong their stance is against bullying. Of course, I know that just saying all the right words doesn't mean that the school will actually go out of its way to protect Gus from any bullshit about his parents, but she seemed sincere, so we'll just have to wait and see.

Anyway, that's done now so after lunch we can get on to the furniture place Brian has … honestly can you believe it? … made an appointment with.

For once we don't go to the diner, we get something to eat in a nice little place on 5th Avenue. I'm wondering how Gus is going to hold up … I know what Brian's like when he's shopping … when I my cell rings. It's Dan. He's on the ship; it sails tonight at 6. He just wants to say goodbye and to ask me to pass on his thanks to Brian for all his help with getting everything organized. I take the phone outside so I can fill him in on everything that's been happening. Well, not everything. But I do tell him that there's been dramas with the munchers and that Gus will be staying with us for a while, so we're going to be moving in to the house right away.

He seems really pleased to hear that.

I was going to tell him about the work we're having done, but then I think that maybe that will upset him. So I just say that we're having Gus's room painted.

He gives a funny little huff, almost like Brian when he's kind of onto me … hearing the things I'm not saying. And then he says, "Well, you'll be wanting to make some changes, of course. If you're thinking of having any major renovations done, remember that I left all the plans and technical specs for the house with the other papers."

He hesitates a moment and then goes on, "Justin, I truly want you and Brian to feel at home in your new house. I have been ready to let it go and move on for a long time now."

His voice sounds a little husky for a moment, and I have to strain to hear the next bit. "I have just been waiting for you to come and claim it."

But then it gets stronger and he says, "It's important now that you do claim it; that you make it your own."

I realize then that telling him about the changes won't upset him, it will kind of reassure him. So I say, "Well, we are looking at doing a few things. We thought we'd open out the front room from the kitchen – make that into a combined kitchen and dining area. And we're putting a door through from the little bedroom at the front into the bathroom for Gus."

There's a kind of whispery sound that I recognize as his laugh and he says, "Billy was always on at me to have the kitchen opened up. He hated having to disappear across the hall when we were having a dinner party; said he felt like he was missing half the fun. But when we did the major work on the house he was still thinking of using that front room as a work room, and later we just never seemed to get around to it."
I can exactly imagine the little smile and the soft, remembering look on his face when he goes on, "He would be delighted to know it's finally going to happen."

We talk a little bit more, and then he says that he has to go.

I thank him for calling and promise that I will call him as soon as we've moved in, and that I'll email him some photos of all the rooms as we paint and renovate them.

I feel kind of sad when I hit 'end call'. But really happy too. I'm so glad that he called. I'd kind of thought that once he left that we'd never hear from him again and it's really great to know that he's still kind of around. I feel like even though we hardly got to spend any time with him, he's still somehow become part of our family.

*****

Brian

He's almost bouncing when he comes back into the restaurant.

"That was Dan", he says. "He just wanted to say goodbye and to than …"

"Yeah, yeah," I say. Fuck the whole 'thanks' thing. I didn't do anything except pass on a couple of instructions. Ted and the dragon PA from Hell that they found from somewhere to take on the apparently terrifying task of answering my phone and organizing a few fucking meetings did the rest. I admit that I pay her salary, but I'd be paying that anyway, she might as well fucking earn it.

He inhales the rest of his lunch and then we head out to meet up with Marty. He's got an "office" just off Liberty Avenue. It's more like some set director's idea of a French queen's boudoir, all spindly gilt tables and ormolu clocks, with a totally incongruous projection system set up that's connected to his laptop.

It's so god-damned fucking kitsch it makes my teeth ache.

But I've used Marty a few times when we've needed to create 'rooms' or looks for shoots and he's a fucking genius at understanding what you want and knowing just where to get it. Like everything else, his services come at a price, but if he can cut through the bullshit of spending weeks looking for the key items of furniture we need to make the place at least livable, it will be worth every pink cent we're pouring into his pocket.

I might think he's a complete twat when it comes to all the other bullshit he spouts, but when it comes to sourcing furniture and furnishings he fucking knows his shit, so who cares?

I see my own little twat giving him some really funny looks when we sit down and then all of a sudden the penny doesn't so much drop as goes hurtling over the cliff.

"You're Mysterious Marilyn!" he squawks – swear to God, fucking squawks - sounds like one of those fake duck calls hunters use.

Marty smirks and fucking preens a little.

"Well, yes, sugar, sometimes I am. But right now I'm the one who's going to find just what you need to help you get settled into this fabulous new house of yours."

He flips open a laptop and projects some of the photos of the house that we took the other day up onto the wall.
Then he starts bringing up other images – beds first. See what I mean? The man understands priorities.

"Now, I thought you'd probably like something very sleek, very stream-lined for the master bedroom. What do you think of these?"

*****

Justin

I can't believe that Brian is using Mysterious Marilyn as his whatever the fuck furniture consultant. But he, she, whatever, definitely seems to know what he's doing. He seems to understand exactly what Brian would like, but at the same time he manages to find stuff that appeals to me as well.

Like with the bed. He starts bringing up these images, and at first I think he's just going for the same kind of look that Brian had at the loft – really simple platform beds. But these are a little different. They all seem to have … I don't know … more personality, or at least more warmth, than the loft furniture. I have to admit that I like them too.

We start looking at individual pieces in more detail and amazingly, we hit the jackpot after just a couple of shots. The bed itself is really simple, but it has a nice padded leather head piece and side tables in a dark reddish wood that's really like the doors and stuff in the house. Marty takes some notes, and refers to some other file and then says, "Yes, I know where I can find that in stock, and, for a fee of course, they should be able to deliver and install the bed on Sunday. I'll confirm that with them before you leave. Of course, it's one item of furniture that you will probably want to try out first, but the wholesalers I use have a storefront just on the northside. It'll only take you a few minutes to get there once we're done here."

And so it goes on.

In not much over an hour, he's found the furniture for our room, and for Gus's room; two small sofas and a wet bar and mini fridge for the entertainment room; and an amazing pair of recliners with a matching sofa for the main room; plus a pair of end tables to go out there.

We'll need to get more stuff eventually; something to house the entertainment unit for a start - although we'll probably have that custom made. And we'll be putting in some kick-ass speakers and stuff. But we can use what we've got for now and this afternoon's effort means we'll have everything we need to be comfortable when we move in on Sunday.

He even shows us some beautiful bedding that will be perfect for our room. It's just like I pictured it – dark sheets and duvet with pillows and cushions in shades that are lighter, but incredibly vivid – just like Billy's window. And a blue set for Gus's room. It's almost like Marty or Marilyn or whatever knew exactly what I'd been thinking.

Even as that thought crosses my mind I happen to look up and he's giving me a funny knowing little smile.

It's kind of weird and a bit creepy.

But who gives a fuck?

Brian's happy with the look of the bedding and since they're top of the range kazillion thread count Egyptian cotton, his label queen requirements are satisfied so he tells Marty to order them as well and now we're out of here and off to try out what will hopefully be our new bed.
I can't believe it. I thought we'd be here all afternoon and still arguing about stuff by breakfast tomorrow.

Maybe Mysterious Marilyn really is some kind of psychic miracle worker.

*****

Brian

We try out the bed – which seems comfortable and more importantly seems like it's strong enough to hold up under the considerable demands we will be placing upon it (I'm already picturing little Sunshine spread out on those dark sheets – all golden-pale and glowing). Then we test Gus's bed which is also okay, and which he seems to love. But by the time we finish Sonnyboy is getting fairly cranky.

I know how he fucking feels.

But I also know that if he has a nap now, we'll have trouble getting him to sleep tonight.

So instead, I take out my cell and make a call, confirming the tentative arrangements I'd made for this afternoon.

Justin looks at me like I've lost my mind when I pull up outside this fucking boating supply place. But then he gets it and the full wattage Sunshine smile breaks out. We go in and get kitted out with the best fucking safety vests they've got and I make arrangements for one of the guys to meet us back at the house.

He's going to come out with us in the boat and give me some instructions on the basics. He's also recommended that both Justin and I do some fucking basic boating certificate. Technically, we probably don't have to, I think the motor's just under the horsepower that would make it a legal requirement. If it were just me I'd shrug off all that shit. But it's not. I have Gus to think about – and Sunshine too. I'm not going to lose either of them to some dumb fucking boating accident that happens because I had my head too far up my fucking ass to learn the basics about how to keep them safe on the water. But the certificate can wait. For now, we've got someone who does know what they're doing taking us for our first spin in our boat.

Of course we have to fucking stop on the way to the house to stock up on food in case the little twat and his apprentice starve in the hour or so that we'll be on the river.

But once we maneuver through the house, dodging the fucking army of highly paid worker ants that are swarming all over the damned place, and then dodge the other army that are working on the fence at the bottom of the garden and finally get down to the water, both my sonnyboys are almost giddy with excitement.

I have to come the heavy father with Gus to get him to take me seriously when I tell him he has to sit still and quiet in the boat or we will come right back to shore. But he gets it; and he behaves. Justin sits next to him with one arm wrapped round him tightly and Gus sits there with one hand on the edge of the boat and the other on Justin's knee and while I get my lesson in steering and controlling the boat I can see them both just alight with joy. They're sitting towards the prow of the boat, and the wind is catching their hair a little and both their faces are absorbed and glowing and it's like they're fucking flying.

If I live to a fucking hundred and eighty (God forbid, unless they find a way to keep me looking hot and something better than fucking Viagra to make sure I can still get it up) I will never forget
this moment.

And it makes me want to scream 'fuck you' to all the fuckers who think I'm a dead loss as a human being.

Because I gave my sonnyboys this.

I did.
Galloping Grandmothers

Chapter Summary

Gus gets a surprise, and so does Brian.

Justin

After the boat ride (which is fantastic – I can't wait till Brian and I get our certificates and we can come out any time we want to) we head over to my Mom's. She wants to spend some time with Gus before Monday so he'll be okay with staying with her after school.

He met her at Brian's birthday party, but that was just kind of in passing. Today, when she opens the door, Gus goes a little shy and kind of hides behind Brian's legs. Brian squats down so he's level with him, takes Gus's hand and says, "Gus, this is your Grandma Jenn."

Then he snakes a look up at Mom which is pure fucking Kinney, and I know that intro was meant to be payback for some of the shit she's said about him.

Gus doesn't pick up on any of that stuff, of course. He just zeroes in on the 'grandma'.

"My Grandma?" he asks, like he can hardly believe it.

"Sure, Sonnyboy," Brian responds, standing up. "Justin is your Dus, and Jenn is Justin's Mom, so she's your grandma."

Gus beams up at her and then holds up his arms for a hug.

She picks him up and kisses him and he gives her one of his best through-the-eyelashes looks and says, "Are you really my grandma?"
"Yes, sweetheart," she says, looking all gooey-eyed, like she used to look when I brought her home some lame thing I'd made for her at school.

"Just mine?" Gus wants to know.

Mom looks puzzled, but says, "Yes, honey, just yours."

"Not JR's?" he keeps on.

She smiles at him and hugs him again. "No, Gus. Not JR's. Just yours."


Well, I guess JR's got Deb for a grandma, and I suppose that seems like lots. In fact, I'm pretty damned sure that Deb has been lobbying for super-gran of the century, lavishing attention and cuddles and treats on JR. Maybe not so much on Gus. No wonder Gus wants his own Grandma all to himself.

Just then he wriggles, so Mom puts him down and we head for the kitchen where there are fresh-baked cookies and milk for Gus and coffee for us.

Brian kind of zones out while I fill Mom in on what's been happening – at least the stuff I can talk about in front of Gus. But that's a lot really, with the move into the house and everything.

Then Mom says, "Would you like to see your room, Gus?"

To everyone's surprise Gus kind of freaks. He gets really red in the face and starts climbing onto Brian's knee. Once he's there he kind of burrows into him and says, "I have a room. My room's at my Daddy's house. With Daddy and with my Dus."

He sounds like he's about to cry.

But Mom's really smart and she says quickly, "Well, yes, of course it is. But I thought you might like to have a playroom here for when you come visit me after school."

Gus looks dubious, but Brian says, "It's okay, Sonnyboy. You're going to be living with me and Dus for a while. But Grandma Jenn is going to have you visit some days after school while Dus and your old man are at work."

"Not to stay?" he says, his little face all tight and anxious.

Brian ruffles his hair, and Gus leans into him, so Brian kind of wraps him right up in his arms and rocks him a little.

"No, Sonnyboy, not to stay."

"Just to play," Gus says, and then suddenly he giggles. "I made a rhyme, Daddy."

"So you did," Mom says. "You must be very smart to do that. Do you want to see your playroom now?"

So we go upstairs and into the room I'd stayed in when I first got out of hospital.

My memory of that room is of it being full of heavy red-black clouds of anger and resentment and frustration and fear; they had stifled and choked me so that I could hardly breathe.
But all those memories have been stripped out of the room.

The small bed is still there, but it's been pushed back against the wall and covered with a deep blue blanket and some vividly colored cushions.

The carpet has been covered with a bright rug and there are yellow drapes with blue dragons on the windows.

There's a storage unit with shelves on one side and two drawers on the other which has been painted bright green, and a small table and two chairs in red and blue. There's also a yellow plastic A-frame that's got a blackboard on one side and an easel on the other, with sheets of paper already in place.

Sitting on top of the storage unit, held upright by cheeky cat and dog bookends, are some kids' books; there are some board games and toy cars on the shelves, and when Gus runs over and opens the drawers he finds some blocks and a toy tool set and some paints and crayons and pencils.

I can hardly believe she's done this, just for Gus.

And Gus fucking loves it.

I sneak a look at Brian, almost afraid that he'll see all this as Mom kind of stealing his thunder, and I get a real shock.

He's looking almost like he wants to cry. He doesn't say anything at first, just rolls his tongue into his cheek and kind of struggles to hide his emotions, like usual. But then he reaches out one hand and grips Mom's shoulder hard. She looks up at him and then she smiles; one of Mom's best smiles, and nods at him. He gives a kind of jerky nod in response, and then says, "Well, Sonnyboy, I think there's something you need to say to your Grandma."

Gus is really quick and he runs over to Mom and wraps his arms around her as well as he can and says, "Thank you, Grandma Jenn."

She smiles down at him and tells him that he's very welcome.

We're all a little bit unsure about what to do next. Well, except for Gus.

He knows exactly what he wants to do. He starts pulling the cars out of the shelves, and gets a little bit antsy when Brian stops him and tells him to put them back.

Gus looks a bit mulish; there's the definite threat of a Kinney queen out in his scowl and jutting bottom lip, and I know Mom is itching to intervene, but she doesn't, she lets Brian handle it; and he does. Pretty well, too.

"Sorry, Sonnyboy," he tells Gus. "All this will be waiting for you on Monday after school. But right now we need to get home."

Gus is still pouting, but Brian goes on, "We've still got lots to do to get the house ready tomorrow, and I'm relying on you to help."

Gus stands up as tall as he can stretch then and says, "I'm ready Daddy. I'm a real good helper."

"Yes, you are," I tell him. "We couldn't do it without you."

So without any more fuss, Brian and Gus say their goodbyes and head for the car. I stay behind
long enough to give Mom a big hug. "Thanks, Mom," I tell her. "It means a lot – to all of us."

She just smiles again, and kisses my cheek. "You and Brian have made me a Grandma," she says. "That's a gift I never thought I'd have. I have every intention of making the most of it."

I hug her again and then head out to join my men.

Today has been really full on, and the next couple of days are probably going to be even worse, but really … it's all been amazing.

I think I'm happier than I've ever been in my life; and I suspect that Brian feels the same way.

This is a great foundation for us to build on.

*****

Brian

The whole day has been total fucking chaos and the weekend's likely to be even fucking worse; and to add injury to insult we've only managed a couple of quick fucks in the shower.

At least we've got a plan for the weekend and for Monday. That's going to be the big one. I'll drop Gus at school and Jenn will pick him up. We spent some time with her tonight and Gus seemed to get along okay with her. He likes having a grandma of his own, and he fucking loves the room she's set up for him. I still can't fucking believe she did that. It's …

It made me feel like he really has got a grandma who gives a shit about him. Funny, the best thing I've ever done for my son was fuck the brains out of a little blond twink the night he was born.

With Gus all taken care of, Justin, thank God, is finally going to be able to put in some serious time in his studio.

I'll pick Gus up from Jenn's at around six, which will give me time to get him home and fed and into bed by 7.30. So Sunshine doesn't have to sweat it if the inspiration is flowing and he wants to work all fucking night. I can do some work from home once Gus is in bed, at least to catch up on all the shit that's been going on at Kinnetik while I've been turning into Mary Fucking Poppins.

Thinking about Justin working in that idiotic breeder apartment that he's using as a studio reminds me that I need to talk to Stephane about starting work on the loft as soon as he finishes at the house. There won't be a lot of structural changes here, but we need a kick ass lighting design if we're going to use it to showcase Justin's work properly. Plus the color scheme will probably need to be revamped – some of it will need to be dark to show off the paintings and shit, and the area around the windows that he'll be using as his work space will need something that will bring in and reflect all the available light. The little twat will have his own ideas about that, but Stephane knows his shit and between them they can work out what each space needs.

I guess it will be fucking weird leaving the loft. It's been my haven and my sanctuary for so long; more than that, it's been the tangible symbol of my success, of the fact that I fucking got out, got away, left all the bullshit domestic drama crap behind, along with the abuse and neglect and all the fucking pain of my fucked up childhood.

But you know what?
The new place is going to be a symbol of an even bigger success; not just career success – any asshole with half a brain and enough ambition to put in the hard yards can achieve career success; no, this new place is going to be about my success as a man.

All the assholes who fucking thought they knew me, knew what I want, who thought they knew my limitations and fucking dared to pity me because I was never going to be capable of having any sort of life aside from sucking and fucking my way through every back room on the east coast, all of the critics who were looking forward to feeling so smugly superior as I degenerated into a pathetic over-the-hill party boy, our new home is going to make a statement to all of them, it's going to scream at them how fucking wrong they were. Because thanks to my Sonnyboy and the little blond twat they all love to patronize (as if he's not more of a fucking man, more mature and adult and talented and capable than they are ever going to be), I'm going to fucking have it all. That's what this new house is going to fucking shout from every single steel beam, solar panel and glass fucking brick in the place.

*****

Justin

We grab some food on the way home and as soon as we finish it, Gus pretty much crashes. We get him into bed and then Brian lures me into the shower for some big boy time.

I'm kind of reluctant to fuck with Gus in the loft. I really don't want him waking up and wondering what all the moaning and groaning is about, never mind anything else, but Brian persuades me that it should be okay in the shower. With the door shut and the water running, hopefully Gus won't hear anything, but still I try to keep pretty quiet. This is another good reason, of course, for rushing the move into the house.

After the shower we just collapse onto the futon. It's Friday night, and I guess it's still early, but it's been a really, really long day and the weekend is going to be chaotic as hell as well. I fall asleep pretty much straight away, and given that every time I drift into semi-consciousness during the night Brian is draped around or over me, I'm guessing he pretty much does the same.

We wake up fairly early in the morning, but Gus is already awake. He wants to shower with us, so there's no opportunity to do anything but wash this morning.

Then we get breakfast. Gus has cereal and I make some toast. Brian consents to have one slice of whole wheat toast with avocado, no other spread. Then he piles his usual five spoons of sugar into his coffee. I will never get how he comes up with his diet rules. Never.

We're working out our plan for the day – Brian is going to make a quick trip to the house to make sure Stephane knows where all our stuff is to go once it's delivered (and put the fear of God into the workmen, I suspect). I'm going to take Gus to the park for a little while so he can run off some of his energy. Then we're all going to meet up and do some "basics" shopping – toothpaste and soap, and cleaning stuff and a bucket and broom – that kind of shit.

We'll have some lunch and then do some shopping for Gus. Brian wants to get him his own little lap top – mainly so he won't be tempted to use ours and stumble across stuff that might scar him for life. I suggest getting him an iPad, but Brian wants something where he actually has to read things on the screen, not just look at the icons. He says it's about encouraging him to improve his reading skills, not dumb things down so much he doesn't have to read anything to be able to operate it.

He also wants to encourage him to learn to use a proper keyboard. Who knows what he'll need by
the time he's in high school, they'll probably be using all voice activated shit by then … but right now speed on a keyboard is a really useful skill to have for doing essays and stuff, so I can understand where Brian's coming from. Gus will never learn to use a keyboard properly if all he's used to is the dinky little touch pads on the iPad.

He's going to need new clothes too. I swear he's grown even in the couple of weeks he's been back in Pittsburgh. And Brian wants to make sure that he's got everything he needs for school on Monday. I can see we're going to have arguments about whether he really needs designer trainers and that sort of shit, but it'll be just like the arguments we have over my clothes and I always win those.

We're just about ready to head out when someone knocks at the door.

Brian drags it open with an exasperated growl, and then there's a sort of pause. Finally, I hear him say in a really weird voice, "What the fuck do you want?"

I move towards him and peer round his shoulder to see the last person either of us expects, or wants, to see.

No. It isn't Melanie.

It's Joan Kinney.
Chapter Summary

Why is Joan Kinney knocking on Brian's door?

Brian

Even while I'm pulling the door closed behind me, and thinking about how I can protect Gus and make sure that he never gets to meet the evil grandmother from Hell, and wondering if I should just shove her down the lift shaft and be done with it, part of me is just pissed off about how fucking unfair it is.

Two days. Two fucking days. If she'd come here two days later we would have been gone.

But then she's giving me the evil eye, and I wait for the patented "I'm your mother, don't speak to me that way" speech.

But she surprises me. And at first I honestly don't understand what she's saying, because it's so different from what I expect to hear.

Then finally I hear Lindsay's name and I realize why Joanie has turned up on the doorstep right now.

Surprisingly, she's not bitching at me about 'how could you let me find out this way that I had a grandson' and all that shit. She looks fucking furious; that cold fury that used to totally paralyze me, far worse than Jack's rages. But as I should have fucking guessed, it's not me she's furious with, it's Lindsay.

I calm down enough to actually listen to her and find out that Linds, having gone the rounds of all the rest of the 'family' in an attempt to find someone who'd support her efforts to get her son back
so she can use him as a bargaining tool in her battles with the She-wolf of the North, decided to go visit the She-wolf of Pittsburgh to see if she'd be prepared to help. Hell! Knowing our history better than most, Linds probably figured Joanie would be the first to throw up her hands in horror at the thought of her pervert son actually having an innocent child in his clutches.

But maybe Linds never has been all that good at reading people, because she's got Joanie completely wrong. If she'd gone there and wept on Joanie's shoulder about how she knew I was a good Dad, but she just missed Gus, Joanie might have bought into it. But Lindsay, apparently, didn't do that; she thought she could get Joanie's well-known prejudices to work for her, and went in there sounding off like some missionary Christian about how it couldn't be good for Gus to be brought up by someone like me.

Now, if Joanie's given the chance to be the first to throw stones at me, that's one thing. But family is family, and to have some outsider come and tell her that her son isn't fit to raise a child ... Hell, no! Linds might have been able to manipulate Joanie into raising Hell with Child Services or some shit, if she'd been clever, but to come in all high and mighty and threatening to get outsiders involved in Joanie's family business ... that approach was never going to work.

So while I listen carefully, I'm way ahead of the story. I know exactly how my dear old Mom would have reacted to some WASP outsider swanning in and telling her that her son wasn't a fit father. She'd have done exactly what her and her kind have always done, resorted to the Creed. Not the Creed you learn in Church, but the creed followed by all the wives of drunken working class men like Jack: "No matter bad things get, you keep it behind closed doors, keep it in the family; and you never let anyone get away with thinking they've got a right to criticize a family member, no matter what shit they're pulling".

It's the creed that made a Hell of my childhood, but I guess this time it's fucking worked in my favor.

Lindsay, in her WASP arrogance, couldn't have got it more wrong. I'm betting she was shown the door with an icy politeness that didn't do a lot to mask implacable hostility, quite probably spiced with a touch of 'how dare you?' thrown in that coming from anyone else would have sounded suspiciously like Joanie defending her pervert son. That doesn't surprise me nearly as much as it would have fucking surprised Lindsay.

The only thing that does maybe surprise me is that Joanie's here telling me about it.

She's finishing up now, drawing herself up and saying in that pinched mouth way of hers, "I just thought you should know what the mother of your apparent son is saying about you."

Then she turns away.

I'm even more surprised that she'd not storming the loft, demanding to see this grandson she didn't know existed, demanding to know how he's being cared for, all that shit. But having said her piece, she just starts walking down the stairs.

I'm about to go back in and pull the door closed, making sure it's locked when I glance up and see her looking back.

If it were anyone but Joanie, I'd say that for one fucking moment she actually looked regretful; I know that all of a sudden she looks fucking old, and ... I don't know ... maybe defeated, or some shit like that. Then catching me looking, she turns away and straightening her back heads on down the stairs.
Justin

He looks kind of … disconnected … when he comes back in, like something's happened that he can't process properly. For just one moment, I really wish Gus wasn't here so that I could go to Brian and try to get him to talk about whatever it is that's just happened, whatever that bitch of a mother of his has said about him. Or about Gus. Or about us. Or … well, what the fuck ever it is that she has sounded off about.

He stands there, lips pulled in, just looking at the floor, while I scrabble around under the couch to help Gus find his missing trainer and then help tie his laces. Then he looks up and our eyes meet.

"Lindsay", he mouths.

Fuck!

I can not believe that even Lindsay would do that; would go to Brian's fucking mother and get her involved in this. Lindsay knows, better than anyone except Michael and maybe Deb, how much Brian's parents fucked him up. She knows that's why Brian has never let his Mom find out about Gus. And now, just to get her own way, she goes to Mrs. Kinney to help her get Gus back?

That is so fucked!

But Mrs. Kinney came here. Does that mean that she refused to help Lindsay?

I tell Gus to go visit the toilet before we leave and he heads up to the bathroom.

While he's up there, Brian gives me a bullet point summary of what brought his mother here, and I find myself saying, without any agenda, just kind of thinking out loud, the first thing that had come into my mind.

"She came here," I say.

He frowns.

I shrug.

"I'm just saying. She could have gone to her priest, or Child Welfare, or even the police. But instead she came here."

Gus comes barreling out of the bathroom, slowing his impetuous steps to descend the steps carefully under Brian's watchful eyes, and then running to me.

"Are we going now, Dus?"

"As soon as we get our coats on," I tell him. It might be May, but the weather is definitely not all that warm yet, we'll need our coats in the park.

Brian seems kind of lost in thought, but he grabs his own coat and joins us in the elevator. He gives us each a quick kiss goodbye when we get to the street and heads for his car. We've arranged that he'll call once he's done at the house, and then come pick us up and we'll do the supermarket shopping to get all the basics we need for the house. After lunch we'll do the fun shopping.

Gus and I get to the park and he heads straight for the swings. I offer to push him, but he's so independent he insists he can manage by himself, so I sit on a bench nearby and pull out the small
sketch book I keep in my coat pocket.

I'm working on capturing the absorbed determination on his face – so like his father's when he's working on a project – and vaguely thinking of painting something that conveys that resemblance, maybe even for one of the panels in Gus's room, so it's not till I hear Gus's delighted "Daddy!" that I realize Brian has joined us a little earlier than I expected.

And he's not alone.

*****

I have no fucking idea why I am introducing Joanie to her grandson. I thought I was driving to the house; but I guess my subconscious had other ideas, because I took a different turn and found myself trailing my fucking mother to the bus stop.

She barely glanced up when I pulled the car up in front of her, guess she wasn't expecting me to be there either.

Of course I had to get out the car and open the fucking door for her. Heaven forbid that she just got in the fucking car.

"If you want to spend a few minutes with him in the park, that's fine," I told her. "But I'm not telling him you're his grandmother. You're just some woman his father knows."

I think I'd expected her to get right out the car again, but after a moment she just nodded, her head still in the fucking air, of course.

"Very well," she said. "You can introduce me as Mrs. K."

So that's how I do introduce her when Gus slips off the swing and comes running over to us.

Of course, my sonnyboy is as smart as they come, so right away he says, "K is for 'Kinney'."

I fucking freeze for a moment, but of all people my fucking mother comes to my rescue.

"So it is," she nods. "… also for 'kettle'. Now, what else starts with 'K'?"

That derails him from the whole 'kinney' thing and he starts going through the things that he can think of that start with 'K'. He's like his fucking father, I guess. All too fond of showing off how smart he is, so that sometimes he outsmarts himself and misses the obvious.

"Kite!" he pipes up. "And 'kestrel'. That's a kind of bird. There's a pitcher in my book."

"Picture," I say automatically. Didn't the fucking munchers teach him anything about pronouncing words properly? My son is not going to sound like some ignorant moron.

"I know something else," he pipes up, just as my fucking partner finally joins us, probably wondering if I've totally lost my mind.

"Krispy Kreme!" the little manipulator finishes triumphantly, then turns his fucking eyes to his beloved Dus and does his best to look like he's a starving orphan and Dus is his only hope in the world of getting any food again ever.

"Mo…" I start, almost shooting myself in the foot. "Mrs. K.," I correct myself, "I don't know if you remember my partner, Justin?"
I'm amazed at how easily those words come out; and right away I see their effect on both of them. The little twat, who had been looking all anxious and confused, suddenly seems a fucking foot taller and comes to stand right next to me. He smiles at her, and says, "Well, we've never actually been introduced, but we've run into each other a couple of times."

A couple of times? When the fuck has he ever 'ran into' Joanie aside from the viagra afternoon? That's something I'll have to follow up later.

Meanwhile, my Mom is staring at him like she can hardly believe her eyes, but for once she keeps her tongue between her teeth and simply responds, "Yes, how do you do, Justin?"

Like this is a perfectly normal social situation for us all.

Fuck!

"Krispy Kreme, Dus," Gus says, anxious that the grown ups don't lose track of what's important here.

"Gus," I intervene, "you know it's not a good thing to eat too much sugar. So you can choose. You can have one Krispy Kreme now, or you can have an ice cream this afternoon. Which is it to be?"

He looks as if he's about to pout, but then he stops and thinks about it.

"If I wait till this arvenoon, then can I say what I want?"

A negotiator, just like his old man; that's fine with me.

"Sure," I tell him. "If you want to wait till this af-ter-noon" (pronouncing the work very clearly)" … you can choose then what kind of treat you want."

"Okay," he says.

Mom is staring at me like I've unexpectedly grown another fucking head, or something, while the little twat is smiling at me like I've just done something amazing instead of having to think on my feet to keep up with a five year old.

*****

Justin

I have no idea why Brian has shown up with his mother. Or why … well, no I guess I can understand why he's not introducing her to Gus as his grandmother. But I can tell by the look on her face that she's amazed at what a natural he is as a father.

So she should be. He's never had any decent role model of what a parent should be like; even Debbie, good-hearted as she might have been to offer him some kind of refuge, isn't my idea of an ideal parental-figure; she was too busy excusing everything Michael ever did wrong and blaming it all on Brian.

But Brian – he just gets it. I had kind of decent parents - well, at least until good old Craig decided he no longer had a son - but even so I'm learning a Hell of a lot just from watching and listening to Brian. Because he never talks down to Gus. He always treats him with respect. Like just now. He could have just said 'no' to the doughnut, and then bought him an ice cream this afternoon – which would have sent all kinds of mixed messages. But he didn't do that, he just reminded Gus that he's not allowed to have too much sugar, and then let him make the choice on what kind of treat he'd
So Gus isn't left feeling like he's being treated like a baby and denied a treat into the bargain; he's left feeling like he's being treated like a big boy who is allowed to make some choices for himself and encouraged to make good ones.

I kind of half expect Mrs. Kinney to say something about it, but she doesn't, she just stands and watches while Gus runs back to the swings, shouting over his shoulder.

"I can push myself on the swing, Daddy. See how high I can go."

In fact, he doesn't go all that high. He's too light and his legs are still too short to give him much power, but he does get the swing moving, and he's clearly proud of himself.

Mrs. Kinney just stands watching with this really strange expression – like pride and regret and longing and bitterness and something that might be love are kind of fighting for control of her face. Brian goes over to sit on the swing next to Gus, and shows him how to lean back and pull hard on the chains to use his weight more effectively to swing himself higher, and while she's watching them together, her expression changes. The pride and bitterness have melted away, and her face is filled with regret, her eyes are desperate and hungry and sad, and she looks so alone.

After a minute, I look away. I just can't look at her any more. Because suddenly I see how much she looks like Brian. That's exactly the look he had on his face when I walked away with Ethan at the Rage party; and I don't want to think about what it means that it's the look on his mother's face right now.

I just want to feel free to hate and mistrust her like I have ever since she shattered whatever hope was left in Brian's heart that one day she might really become his mother over the whole incident with his nephew's allegations of molestation. But I can't hate her, not while she looks like that. It totally undermines everything I want to feel about her.

I begin to understand, though, why Brian has brought her here. If he'd seen anything like that look in her eyes while they were talking at the loft, he wouldn't have ever been able to forget it. It would have haunted him, and if he'd let her walk away without meeting Gus he always would always have wondered 'what if'.

So I guess I'm glad she's here. At least, I'm glad Brian doesn't have to wonder what might have happened. For once, he's taking a chance. Even with Gus involved, he's giving her some kind of chance. And that ... that says to me that he's feeling secure enough to do that. That he's feeling sure enough about how things are with us, to be able to take that kind of chance with her; which is so fucking amazing that I find myself smiling at her. She doesn't see it of course, she's got her eyes totally glued to them, to Brian and his son. Her grandson.

Gus kind of gets the hang of what Brian has been showing him, and Brian sees her watching and gets up and comes back to us. "I'll drive you home," he says.

She nods, her head held high and says, quietly and without any tone except polite farewell, "Yes, thank you. Goodbye, Justin. Please say 'goodbye' to Gus for me."

And then she turns and walks away.

Brian gives me a look and I move to him and pull him down for a quick kiss.

"I'll be a bit later than we planned," he says. "Can you ..."
"Why don't I just take Gus home in a while," I suggest. "I can go online and order the supermarket stuff and get them to deliver it tomorrow to the house. It's not like we need to choose patterns for a bucket or anything. We could meet you for lunch at the diner."

He nods, grateful for an easy solution to that problem at least, and then takes a deep breath before following his mother to the car.
Packing and Preparations

Chapter Summary

Midst all the drama, the boys are trying to get organized to move into the house.

Justin

I let him go and while I keep one eye on Gus, I get out my phone and send a text message to his lawyer. It can't be right that Lindsay is pulling this shit. His attorney at least needs to know about it.

Gus is supposed to have his first supervised visit with Lindsay on Tuesday, and the way she's been behaving, God knows what she'll say to him. She might spill the beans that 'Mrs. K.' is his grandmother. She might even make it sound like Mrs. Kinney agrees with her that Gus shouldn't be living with his father.

It's not like I think that Brian and I are going to be perfect parents or anything. And I know that Brian thinks that eventually Gus should go back to Lindsay.

But right now she's just not behaving rationally, and I don't think she should be allowed anywhere near him.

I have no idea what she thought she was doing, going to Brian's Mom. I mean, did she think Brian would listen to anything his mother said? Or did she hope that she'd persuade Mrs. Kinney to speak to the judge and tell the Court that her son is a pervert who's going to rot in Hell because he likes cock?

And did Lindsay seriously think that any of that would make any difference?

It seems to me like she's totally delusional and she seriously needs to get help.
But meanwhile, it's up to me … well, to Brian and me, to see that all her shit-stirring doesn't hurt Gus.

So the first step is to make sure that Ms. Hershell knows exactly what dear Lindsay has been up to. Then she can advise us on what we can do about it.

Once that's done, Gus and I walk back to the loft. We're doing the not stepping on cracks thing and when he does step on one, I play at being the big growly bear who's going to eat him all up. He's laughing and laughing and, looking at him, I can't help but think about the man he so much resembles. I wonder if Brian ever had any moments in his childhood when he looked like this – so free and relaxed, his eyes sparkling and his face flushed from laughing so much.

I hate to think it, but I know he probably didn't.

Which of course makes me think of Mrs. Kinney.

I guess I'm kind of surprised that I didn't just explode at Brian's mother – if she can call herself that. But Brian obviously had some reason for bringing her to meet Gus. I know it's not something that he would do lightly. And fuck knows I am only too well aware how hard it is to get past wanting approval/acceptance/whatever the fuck, from a parent who has turned their back on you. I would never be able to slam that door completely shut in my father's face, so I understand why Brian's not ready to do that to his mother.

Plus … she came to Brian. Whatever Lindsay wanted her to do, his Mom came to Brian instead.

That has to mean something.

I'm betting it sure as fuck means something to Brian.

Gus and I get home and I give him some juice and an apple and settle him down with some toys while I go online to order the stuff we need from the supermarket. By the time that's done, it's time to leave for the diner to meet Brian for lunch. On the way, I get a text from Ms. Hershell saying that she'll advise the court officer who'll be supervising Lindsay's visit with Gus on Tuesday what has happened.

Brian's already there when we get there and kind of wired, which isn't surprising, but he says that things are going well at the house. Well, what he actually says is that the builders seem less fucking incompetent than most, but from Brian that's practically a glowing endorsement.

He has about two bites from his sandwich and two cups of coffee – which doesn't exactly relax him. I'm wondering if I can get Kiki to keep an eye on Gus while I drag Kinney senior to the restroom for a quick blowjob when my cell rings.

It's my mother, with an offer that's too good to refuse. Now all I have to do is to convince Brian. I tell Mom it will probably be okay and I will let her know for sure later today.

*****

Brian

With Gus around we haven't really had a chance to talk and I'm betting my fucking partner is practically choking on everything he must want to say about why the fuck I lost my fucking mind and introduced Gus to my mother.

The thing is that I don't really have an answer. Well, except for the fact that once Lindsay let
Joanie know about Gus it was only a matter of time before she forced a meeting with him. At least this way I could control how that meeting went. Including not letting Gus know that he was talking to another grandmother. And making sure that dear old Mom knows that I'm not prepared to acknowledge her that way.

She needn't think she's got any right to get involved in my son's life. I'm not going to give her the opportunity to fuck him up the way she did Clare and me. And I'm sure as shit not going to give her the chance to spout all her bigoted bullshit at him. He'll run into enough of that in his life. But not when I can prevent it.

So any time Joanie spends with Gus, either Justin or I will be there and the first sign of that shit and she's out the door and won't be coming back.

As it turns out, the shit with Joanie isn't the only thing he's stewing about. We take advantage of the fact that Emmett and Ted wander in to the diner and can keep an eye on Gus for a few minutes and have a much needed fuck in the restroom.

While we're doing that, he lets me in on what else is buzzing around in his brain.

He tells me about sending the text to my lawyer. Should have thought of that myself; but he's got my back, so that's okay.

Then he tells me about his Mom's offer. Seems she's volunteered to come over tonight and do some baby sitting. She says she can get there around 9.30, by which time Gus should be in bed and asleep, and hold the fort while her son and I head out for a little of the sort of R&R we can't easily get with Gus around.

Contemplating hitting the floor at Babylon and even having a drink or two, and I can't say I'm not tempted. But I know we've got a long fucking day tomorrow that's going to be filled with frustrations and part of me is thinking that for once I should do the sensible thing and just stay home. I can tell the little twat is keen on the idea, though, and in the end I figure we could head out, have a drink and maybe even a game of pool at Woody's, then a nice leisurely fuck in the VIP lounge at Babylon and still be home by midnight.

It's the last one that finally makes me realize how much we both need this. The way we've had to rush through every fuck this week would make any self-respecting fag despair.

*****

Justin

I'm expecting a bigger battle, but as it turns out it's amazingly easy to persuade Brian that we both need a bit of a break. Guess he finally realizes that although having Gus with us is a huge responsibility, it still doesn't mean that every moment of our lives from now on has to be only about Gus. I mean, we have to consider him in everything we do, but as long as we make sure he's okay, we can still have time to ourselves without that harming Gus in any way.

I know Brian wants to be a good Dad. In fact, being the control freak he is, he won't settle for less than being the world's most perfect Dad; he'll beat himself up every time he thinks he's failed to reach some ridiculous standard of perfection. And the problem is that everyone else – well, Debbie, Michael and Lindsay, anyway, who are the three people he's always allowed to influence him the most – are going to hold him to the same kind of impossible standards.

But that's fucked.
Brian of all people is never going to be some character out of a lame old sitcom with no life outside work and the family living room – unless it's mowing the lawn or fixing the car. If Brian tries to be that character, he's dooming himself to failure.

But the thing is, he doesn't have to be.

He can be Brian fucking Kinney and still be a great Dad to Gus. It's just about finding the balance. And this week has all been about Gus, and making things as good and as comfortable as they can be for his son when both of his son's mothers seem to have lost their minds.

Now he needs some time just to be Brian, even if it's just for a few hours.

And for that matter, I need a few hours just to be Justin Taylor and not feel like I'm tied to the house and the kid 24/7.

I know that sounds selfish, but I read something somewhere that said, "You can't nourish others, if you don't nourish yourself."

And I think that's true. We have to keep things balanced, and make sure our needs are met as well as Gus's or the whole thing will just get too much for all of us.

So, as long as Mom is happy to baby-sit, then we should feel free to go out for a few hours and have a bit of fun. I want to shake my booty in front of all the hot and horny men at Babylon and then have Brian fuck me senseless, before we come home and get some sleep so that tomorrow I can help Brian go on being the world's hottest, as well as most perfect, Dad.

It's my job to make sure that we do find the balance, and that Brian doesn't beat himself up about it. I'm not going to let him do that to himself. Just like he's stepped in loads of times when I've been about to make a big mistake – like when I was seriously thinking of going to Dartmouth. He never told me what to do, but he's always made sure that I knew I had choices.

So I need to make sure that he knows that too. Gus will be fine at the loft with my Mom. He probably won't even wake up. But really, if he got sick or something, my Mom would be way better at knowing what to do than either Brian or me; and there's no way Mom would let any harm come to him. She told me when she called that she loves him already. She says that once I came out she stopped hoping that I'd ever give her a grandchild, and so Gus is like a little miracle, and she will always think of him that way.

I am so fucking lucky to have her. I wish I could find a way to tell her how much it means to me that she sees Gus as my son; that she sees Brian's son as my son. I mean, I'd known for ages that she'd gotten over the whole "that Brian" thing. But this … this tells me that she really accepts us as a couple; that she believes in us; believes in our future together. And that makes me feel so … relieved, I guess.

No one we know has that. I mean, Mel and Lindsay certainly didn't. Lindsay's parents are cunts and Mel's aren't much better. Blake's family kind of gave up on him years ago he told me once; and also that Ted's Mom tries, but she doesn't really get it, even now; and if they go to see her, or she comes over, it's always really awkward. Or course, Emmett isn't with anyone right now, but from what he's told me, his folks would be more likely to join the mob baying for the faggots' blood than to actually welcome their son's partner into the family.

Deb supports Ben and Michael of course, but "future" is kind of a limited concept when your
partner is positive. I try not to think about that, but it must be tough – for Deb as well as for Michael. Don't know about Ben's family; we never hear anything about them; I don't even know if he has a family.

So aside from Ben and Michael and Deb, where there are all these other uncertainties, what Brian and I have with my mother, the support that we get from her as we are building a future together, that's pretty much unique in our little group. It makes me feel so proud of my Mom. It wasn't easy for her – she had to turn her back on the nice comfortable life that she used to have and really step out into a world that's shown her its ugly side more than once.

But she's come out of it so damned strong and …

Well, I guess it's true that a gay boy's best friend is his mother. Well, one of his best friends. I need to let the other one know what the Hell is going on. If she comes over one night and finds we've moved and I didn't tell her she'll kill me.

Daph's only small, but she's scary when she gets going.

Ask Brian.

He said he had the bruises for days where she punched his arm when she was telling him about me running away to New York.

Anyway, while we're driving to the computer store where Brian wants to get Gus his kiddy laptop or whatever, I take the chance to give Daphne a call. I've texted her a couple of times to keep her up on what's been happening, but it's all been happening so fast, it's hard to for me to keep up, let alone fill her in on all the latest moves.

Anyway, she's totally stoked and she offers to come over to help us move. I give a sideways look at Brian. I know he doesn't want any of the gang to see the house until it's all finished, but Daph isn't one of "the gang"; she's my gang. Besides we might need back up keeping Gus out from under everyone's feet, so I tell her I'll call her in the morning (that way I can make sure she's awake – sometimes on Sunday she doesn't surface till half way through the afternoon). Then I put my cell away and wait for Brian's reaction.

*****

Brian

The little twat gives me that chin tilted into the air look that means he thinks I'm going to give him shit about inviting his little friend over.

But, fuck it! It's his house. If he wants everyone to come over and help us move, I could live with that; let alone young Daphne.

Besides, I haven't seen her in a while; she couldn't make it to my birthday because it clashed with a study group that she couldn't bail on because they had a project or some shit to hand in next day. And I like Daphne. She's a good friend to Justin, which is what counts most to me. And I guess, she's really been pretty much a good friend to me as well.

But right now we have a shit load of stuff to buy for Gus. Aside from the kiddy computer, he needs new trainers and some other clothes for school, plus exercise books and all that shit. We got a list when we were there on Friday. And I'm betting the little blond twat is going to want to get a whole heap of other stuff.
Then we need to get back to the loft and pack up everything we want to take with us.

That's mainly going to be clothes, at this stage. Well, and the computers.

And the entertainment system and all the DVDs and shit that we got for Gus.

We're not going to have a kitchen for a while, but I guess we'll still need glasses and plates and cutlery to eat with. Gus will anyway.

Maybe we should get Daphne to come over this afternoon. We can always promise her pizza and beer in exchange for her help. She's a college student, she's bound to go for it. I make the suggestion and am rewarded with one of the smiles that light up the whole fucking world. My world, anyway. On that thought I feel like I should check that I still have a cock; but then his free hand comes to rest on my thigh and squeezes and I feel my dick twitch so I guess I haven't turned into a lesbian yet.

He snaps shut the phone for the second time and says that his girlfriend is going to get some boxes for us. Seems like she stored all the ones she used when she moved into her place.

So now it's time for serious shopping.

Of course, my son who seems to have inherited his other father's appetite, remembers half way through the afternoon that we'd promised him ice cream, so before we go home we have to make a stop to get some. They both buy cones and Justin also insists on buying a tub to have after the pizza.

Fuck! I have to find some time to get to the gym.

*****

Justin

I guess I was kind of surprised that Brian suggested inviting Daphne over to help, but I'm glad he did. She doesn't help much with all the packing – well, I knew she wouldn't be any help with that. Daph's idea of packing and Brian's so don't go together. But she keeps Gus occupied and amused.

We'd made a quick stop at the house to drop off all the things we bought this afternoon. I hardly recognized the place. It still reeks of paint, of course, it probably will for days, and I made a mental note to stock up on anti-histamines. But it looks so different. Just having a little color on the walls – even if they are mainly green-tinged, makes a huge difference to the front rooms downstairs; it gives the place more energy and makes it seem less stilted and formal. Brian's study looks awesome with the dark green feature wall. I can't wait to see his stuff in here, it's going to look totally Brian – very sleek and sophisticated and he can have it as minimalist as he likes.

The entertainment room - which used to be the dining room - looks so much bigger without that huge dark table in the middle. It looks brighter too, even though there are no external windows to this room because the table used to kind of absorb all the light. There are new light fixtures in here too and that helps. Nothing fancy, just a couple of down-lights that are on dimmer switches so we can control the light levels.

And the back room looks amazing. We didn't put any color on the walls here, because the windows supply all the color you could ever need and I wanted to keep the effect of the light coming through the colored glass and projecting those colors onto the walls when the sun is in the right place, but we had the painters refresh them with a nice soft ivory shade and the room looks ... well, to quote Emmett (who is totally going to die when he sees it), it looks faaabulous. I can
hardly wait until we get the furniture in here, and the rug that Brian bought for the other house.

We didn't go upstairs. I kind of wanted to, but they're still working up there and it's no place for Gus, so we just dumped the stuff we'd bought and got out of there.

We stopped and got ice cream on the way home and then, of course, I had to listen to Brian bitch and moan about us eating it in the car, but he's going to have to learn to live with that stuff. And it's not like we're in the Corvette. We got anti-histamines too. I even got some child-strength ones, because I don't want Gus's first days at his new school messed up by any kind of allergy problems.

My cell rang just as we were getting out of the car. It was Daph, who was already upstairs. We introduced her to Gus and they seemed to click right away so we left them watching the Wiggles while we did what we needed to do.

*****

Brian

I'm a genius.

Inviting Daphne over here proves it.

I wouldn't trust her to pack a lunch, let alone my Armani, but she keeps Gus from out of our hair while we get on with it.

Justin is all for starting in the kitchen – big surprise. But when I point out to him that we can do that stuff once Gus is in bed and asleep, as long as we're quiet, he sees sense and we get all the clothes we need for the next few days packed, and then have an early dinner.

After pizza and fucking ice cream – just a spoonful for Gus who does not need a sugar injection just before bed, Justin packs up what he wants from the kitchen – I tell him to leave the coffee machine till tomorrow - while I get Gus into the shower and ready for bed. Then the three of us sit down with him and take turns reading him stories. He gets one from each of us and is falling asleep on my shoulder by the time Justin finishes his, and we tuck him into bed.

By that time, Daphne needs to head out – she has a hot date tonight, but she's promised to be here by no later than eleven tomorrow. That will give us time to get all the electronic shit packed, and get everything over to the house and set up and still have Gus in bed at a decent time.

We head for the shower and then put on something hot enough to be seen in at Babylon, and I'm just dealing with what looks like a milk splash on my favorite Prada boots when the buzzer sounds. Jennifer's right on time.
The boys have some play time at Babylon; and Daphne gives Justin a different perspective on a few things.

Justin

I guess I should have expected it, but I just didn't. Sue me.

My Mom turns up with Tucker in tow.

I so don't think it's appropriate to leave them here together to look after Gus, but when I try to pull Brian aside to tell him that, he stares at me like I've gone out of my mind and then nearly pisses himself laughing.

Asshole!

Okay.

I suppose it is kind of funny to think that way – like my Mom is some fifteen year old girl who's going to be here alone with her boyfriend.

And I have promised myself that I'll be more supportive of her thing with Tucker.

That would be so much easier if he had a real fucking name. Tucker! Honestly. It's just like fucking "Hunter".

What is it with these young guys and their lame names? Are they just trying to be cool, or what?
Still, I suppose at least Tucker's being so damned young is one of the reasons Mom's stopped giving me grief over the age difference between Brian and me. And anyway, it's not like there's anything I could do about them being together, even if I was a big enough prick to try.

So I finally decide to ignore Brian's snorts of laughter as we say goodbye and just concentrate on having a good time.

*****

Brian

For some reason, he still gets his panties in a pandemonium over Jenn and her toy boy. Personally, I say good luck to her. Tucker's almost hot enough for me to fuck. In fact, on a slow night at Babylon I'd definitely do him. So why shouldn't Ma Taylor enjoy herself? I bet her prick of an ex didn't waste any time in finding a little bimbo to help him get over his mid-life crisis. Or his trauma over having a fag for a son, or whatever it is that the asshole tells himself has ruined his life other than his own bigoted stupidity.

I think for a moment little Sunshine is going to give Daddy a run for his money in the making an ass of himself over something that's none of his business department, but he finally gets his head around the futility of throwing a hissy fit over whatever he thinks his Mom and her boyfriend are going to be doing other than watching the pile of DVDs they brought with them and gets his ass out of the loft and on the road to Woody's.

It's Saturday night, so of course the place is busy (though I note it's not as busy as it used to be before the new street-side bar in the Babylon complex opened up), but kind of surprisingly Ted and his blond are there, and we find chairs and pull them up to their table. I prepare myself for some boring prattle about opera or the state of the country's finances or whatever, but actually they're comparing the relative hotness of a couple of TV vampires, so it could be worse. I don't watch either of the shows, but my own blond does, so I've at least seen the guys they're talking about. They're both kind of hot, I guess, but with one notable exception, I don't usually go for blonds, so it's the dark haired one I'd vote for. If I had any intention of dignifying their conversation by getting involved in it, anyway.

As it happens, a pool table opens up just as Emmett arrives. He's got the drag queen chef in tow, who sits down alongside Ted's little counselor and they get into some heart to heart over who knows what deep and meaningful shit, while the rest of us have a game.

For a little while, it's almost like very old times. Except of course that Mikey's not here. He's up in Toronto trying to sort out his own custody issues.

And Justin is. He's playing a good game too, which since for some fucked up reason he's playing with Ted against Emmett and me, means that I'm going to have to take him down or I'll never fucking hear the end of it.

In the end it's Emmett who sinks the winning fucking ball. Don't ask me how that happened, but at least it means that my team won so I'm spared the little twat's gloating.

We have one more beer and then it's time to head for the magical kingdom of Babylon.

*****

Justin

I get this incredible rush as soon as we walk through the door. It's the smell of horny men and cum
and booze and various illicit substances all filtered and enhanced by the lights and the incredible energy of the music and I feel like flying. We ditch our coats and grab a quick drink, then I head for the dance floor and leave Brian propping up the bar with Ted and Emmett and the others.

I'm not sure what he's got in mind for tonight, but I wouldn't say no to a threesome if the right candidate comes along.

I can feel Brian watching me, so I step it up a notch, moving my hips in the way I know will get him all hot and bothered. A few guys try to move in on me, but I just sway out of their reach.

Then I see the one I want to play with. He's not all that tall, maybe an inch or so taller than me, but he's got really great muscle tone, the way Brian likes them, and he's just a little on the chunky side, the way I do; no body fat, but kind of stocky and solid.

It really is funny about the attraction between Brian and I because we are both the opposites of the physical types we normally go for, if that makes sense. I'm not usually attracted to the tall skinny types, and Brian certainly isn't into twinks, or even slim-built men. He goes for the gym bunnies, and I go for the more stocky body type and yet …

Well, guess that's love for you. Although I'd never let Brian hear me think that, let alone say it.

Anyway, I let this guy dance closer than any of the others and, just when he's reaching out to put his hands on my hips, I feel Brian slide up behind me. He doesn't hold me, just rubs his crotch across my ass. I think I'd recognize the feel of his cock anywhere, and anyway, his aftershave is teasing my nose and the hairs on my arms are kind of standing on end a little, the way they do when Brian's around; especially when he's in predator mode.

I sense him eyeing up the guy over my shoulder and then he purrs into my ear, "Want a little toy to play with tonight, do we, Sunshine?"

I don't answer, just press my ass back against him, still moving my hips that way he likes, and lean my head back against his shoulder. I sneak a glance up at him. He's looking at my catch with that tongue in cheek smirk that lets me know he's in the mood to play as well.

The poor guy looks a little rattled, but I feel Brian nudge me forward and I reach out and stroke the trick's right nipple through the sheer fabric of his shirt. He hisses and I pinch a little.

That's it for the foreplay, I think, and I let my hand drop down and grab his belt and we head for the backroom with Brian right behind us.

As soon as we get past the entrance, I let go of the belt and move my hand a little lower, firmly gripping the guy's cock through his jeans. It seems like it's a nice size, and I suddenly know exactly how I want this to play out.

We find a free bit of wall and I put my back against it and slide down, opening my own pants on the way so that if he looks down he'll have a nice view.

As I'm getting out his cock, his pants are jerked further down and his hands come out to brace themselves on the wall above my head. I look at his cock – it is kind of a nice one, not all that long, but lovely and thick, good for sucking - and as I go to it I hear the rip of the condom pack and then a moment later the cock head I'm suckling jerks in my mouth as Brian enters him.

Deny us what you will, Brian and I are good at this anyway, and our trick doesn't last long. That's okay, we didn't really want him to. Brian doesn't even come, he just pulls out as I stand up. Our playmate is looking kind of dazed, like it was all over way too soon for him to even register what's
happened, but he doesn't get much chance to think about it, because before he quite knows what's going on, I've sheathed my own dick and taken Brian's place. A moment later, Brian, after fumbling his way into a fresh condom, is pushing into my ass and this time we both plan on making the ride last a little longer.

At first the poor guy starts to protest. He's just come and he's probably a bit sensitive and not really ready to go again. Or so he thinks. But I haven't been fucked morning, noon and night by the fuck master general for years without learning a thing or two, and as Brian is prepared at this stage anyway to let me set the pace, I use some of the stuff I've been taught and it's not long before the guy is all 'yes, oh fuck yes'.

It's around then that Brian kind of takes over and insists on setting the pace for the rest of the fuck.

And what a memorable fuck it is. Maybe not on our top ten list, but definitely in the top 100.

It's only after I've come and our trick has come for the second time that I feel Brian shudder against my back.

He pulls out and my asshole clenches spasmodically, protesting at his absence. But I have the feeling it won't be for long.

We sort ourselves out and tell the barman on duty at the bar near the backroom to make sure that our trick gets his drinks free for the rest of the night and then we head up to the VIP area.

There's a kind of murmur – not of applause exactly, more like appreciation – as we make our way there and I realize that we'd attracted quite an audience.

Well, hopefully we gave them something to jerk off to for a while. I know the memory is going to be company for me some night when Brian's away on business and all I have to keep me company is my right hand – or my left. There are advantages to being ambidextrous.

*****

Brian

For some reason that fuck in the back room puts everything else that's going on in perspective for me. Sometimes I wonder if I know who I am anymore. I mean, suddenly I've acquired, not just a live in partner, but this guy who actually does fucking share my life; and a son. Not just a kid that grew from my sperm, but a son who is dependent on me at the moment for stability and happiness and … heaven help him, for love; he's depending on me to make sure that he knows he's loved.

On top of all that, I'm about to move into some house in the suburbs. Well, okay, it's not really the suburbs in the sense that it's not like where Justin grew up. But it's not a big house right away from everyone else either. It's a place with fucking neighbors and all that shit. The house isn't even all that big. I'd always thought if I moved at all it would be somewhere so huge that … I don't know, I guess I could get lost in the place or something if we had guests or whatever.

But this place won't be like that. In that way, it won't be that much different from the loft.

I'm not saying I don't want to move. The little twat loves the fucking house, and I can live with it. At least with that fucking big-assed space at the back it has style; it will make a statement. Even the front is going to be so much fucking better now that Justin is waving his magic wand over it. Well, aided and abetted by Stephane and fucking Marty and shit-loads of my … our … money of course.
But all of that is …

It's so completely fucking different from how I thought my life would play out; from whom I thought I was that sometimes it …

I guess it kind of freaks me out maybe a little.

But right now …

Now I know that I can have all that, all that shit I thought I'd never have, never want, never be able to achieve, let alone sustain … I can have everything that other people have and still be Brian Kinney. It doesn't mean that I think I'm going to be attracting an audience to watch the fuck-meister (and his hot as hell apprentice) at work forever. But it does mean that I don't have to dwindle into some meek little suburbanite domesticated house fag either.

So when we get upstairs, I don’t feel any need to keep broadcasting that discovery; instead I steer us into the cubicle that's reserved for the owners – myself included. Once in there, I roll the wooden blinds down and lock them in place, hang a figurative 'do not disturb' sign; well, I make sure there's a chain draped across the outside – same message.

Then I let him push me down onto the couch and lie back while he starts moving those lethal fucking hips of his in a slow teasing rhythm. Before too long, though, he's speeding up a little and now each little bump and grind is accompanied by the revelation of a new patch of flesh.

By the time he's naked, I'm hard and as horny as hell. The fuck downstairs seems like it was in another fucking lifetime.

He moves a little closer and I grab him and pull him down on top of me. He gives that irritating, idiotic, inane little giggle that drives me totally nuts and I roll him under me and it's a good thing there's another condom in my pocket because I'm not sure I could have …

Well, it doesn't matter, because he's rolling it on me and then yes, thank you Jesus, I am finally, finally, sliding into him and able to claim the long, leisurely fuck that has been denied to us all week.

Neither of us are in any hurry, and we take our time; changing positions a couple of times along the way before he settles on top of me, my cock sheathed in his beautiful tight ass and I can watch the way he rides me, using my dick to pleasure himself. And me.

It is so … fucking … beautiful.

I wish I had even a fraction of his talent at putting images on paper or canvas or screen so I could somehow fucking capture how he looks right now. And how he looks at me. Like somehow just by lying here and letting him give me this incredible pleasure I'm making his world better, satisfying more that just his body, that somehow I'm making him happy.

*****

Justin

I need this. Oh, God, I need this. I just have to … yes, that's it … just … oh fuck!

I need to come, but I don't want this to end.

I try to slow down, to just hold still for a moment, to let the feelings ebb a little, but …
Oh, God, he looks so fucking hot.

His face is flushed, and the veins in his neck are standing out a little and his lips are parted just enough so I can see the tip of his tongue. It's almost the same color as the head of his cock when I suck him; so I lean forward and press my mouth to his and suck his tongue into my mouth and it is so lovely and slick and velvety and it tastes like beer and Beam and Brian.

Then I pull back so I can watch him some more.

But I seriously need to come.

I can feel that sweet hot tingle in my balls and at the base of my spine and then I feel that amazing rush right through my body and my cock is spurting and I feel Brian judder under me and his cock throb in my ass and …

The next thing I know, his hands are on my hips, gently trying to lift me up, but I feel boneless.

I struggle to get off him and it's actually fucking painful pulling off his cock because he's still semi-hard.

He kind of deflates once I pull away though and I help him get rid of the condom. He sits up and gestures towards a cabinet I hadn't even really noticed. It has two doors – one side holds wet wipes and towels and the other hides a small mini fridge. I pull that open and find some miniatures – I know he'll want the Beam so I have the vodka. There are glasses and ice and even a freshly sliced lime in an airtight container. I add that to my vodka and strain out the stray juices into my glass as well. Then I toss him the wet wipes and towel and stumble back to him.

Once we've cleaned up we just kind of curl together on the couch with our drinks. It isn't cuddling if the hot sex makes you cuddle.

Or something.

*****

Brian

It's not that late when we get back to the loft – just after midnight. Jenn and her boy-toy are drinking coffee and watching some movie. Jenn says they can finish it later, so they get ready to leave.

I go up to check on Sonnyboy. Ma Taylor says he didn't stir while we were out, so I just want to make sure that he hasn't had any accidents, but everywhere I feel in the bed is dry. He was okay last night, too, so maybe he's feeling more secure and there won't be any more issues. I made sure we got some protective sheets and stuff for his bed at the house, but hopefully we won't need them.

He looks so small, lying there. But he looks happy too. I don't remember ever feeling free enough to sleep like that – sprawled out the way he is on his back. I was always hunched in on myself, trying to protect myself even in my sleep. I touch his hair, so fucking relieved that he seems to feel safe with me. I know he should. I know that it's natural, how it should be. Hell, it shouldn't even be in question that he feels safe with his old man.

But I sure as fuck never did; and I've always kind of felt that … that I was doomed to be just like good old Jack. But I guess I was wrong.

Because I'd chew off my own fucking fingers before I'd ever lift a hand to hurt my son.
Justin

I have the best friend in the whole fucking world.

She arrives just when I am getting ready to kill either Gus or Brian – Gus because he's so hyper and running around everywhere and asking 'are we going yet, Dus, are we?' like every second minute, and Brian because he is being so ridiculously anal about using those stupid garbage bag tie things made from plastic covered wire to tie up and tag every single fucking cord for every piece of shit electronic equipment in the loft. As if it matters which cord you use as long as the connections fit.

If it had been up to me we would have just shoved all of the cords into a box and sorted them out when we got to the house and I bet it wouldn't take half as long as it's taken Brian to do it his way. And we still have to go through them when we get to the house to work out what goes with which bit of equipment.

And if he tells me one more fucking time that he's used colored post its to wrap around the ties so he knows what each cord belongs to I seriously will use one of them to strangle him.

But once Daph arrives things kind of calm down. She suggests that I take Gus to the park while she and Brian load up the cars with the boxes. I think she should go, since I don't feel right bailing on them and in the end Brian shoves both of us out the door and tells us that if he really needs help he can call Emmett.

So Daph and I take Gus out so he can run off some of his energy. It's kind of funny because we get accosted by an old lady who says that our little boy looks just like us. Um … not really, lady. I mean I'm fair-skinned, blond and blue eyed, and Daph is well, mocha with dark hair and eyes and Gus has his father's coloring – all olive and hazel and chestnut. But I guess people see what they want to see.

Anyway, while Gus is playing on the swings and the slide, Daphne and I just sit and talk for a while. I tell her about one of the pieces that I’ve been planning out. I don't think it's what I want for the Warhol show, but I do want it finished for the New York show in October.

I first started working on the idea when I was in New York; I knew that I was angry, and I thought it was with Brian. I'd been kind of stewing over the fact that I was all alone in New York, and feeling horrible and like he didn't want me enough to fight to keep me with him, and that made me think of the time with Ethan and how easily he let me go then. And even LA.

Although, with LA I had been the one who decided. I couldn't really blame Brian for that one because he didn't even know anything about it, before I'd told Brett I would do it. So it was when I was thinking about LA that I realized that I wasn't just angry at Brian, mainly I was angry with myself, for some of the choices I've made. And LA was really the big one.

I know that to everyone else it seemed like a no-brainer that I should go; that I had to take the opportunity when it was thrown into my lap. But …

I'm telling Daph about all this shit that has been going on in my head, and trying to explain … well, to work out for myself really … why I keep feeling like going to LA to work on the movie was something that did major damage to my relationship with Brian; like it really undermined his trust in us having a future together, and it seems like it's maybe only now that he's really starting to believe in it the way I do – like it's something so inevitable that the stars would have to fall out of the sky to prevent it happening. But I know that he never ever blamed me for heading off to
Hollywood, so I'm not really sure why thinking about it makes me feel so bad.

Daph gives me one of her 'duh!' looks, and when I go all 'what? why?', she asks me what I would think if it happened to someone I knew.

I kind of don't get what she means and finally she says, the words seeming to tumble out of her mouth like she's been saving them up for a long time, "Look, if I'd had this on again off again thing with a guy that I was crazy about, and we'd just gotten back together when I found out I had cancer, and I freaked out and told him to go away, so he did for a while. And then he came back, and I had the treatment and was still feeling totally shitty and I had to wait for my next check up before I even knew if they thought the treatments had maybe worked and while I was trying to cope with that he got this incredible job offer that was going to take him out of state for who knows how long and he just accepted it without even talking to me about it, and he didn't even tell me for days. He kind of let me think that everything was fine and he was going to be right there with me if the results didn't go well, and then he sprung it on me that he was heading off to the bright lights and leaving me behind. If all that had happened to me, what would you be thinking about the guy?"

She speaks really quickly the words just rushing out all in a jumble, so that it's only my long experience with Daphne that helps me to understand them, but I do and they kind of make me feel a little bit sick. Because put like that it sounds so fucking cold. But really, that's exactly what I did to Brian.

Fuck! How the fuck did he have the courage to let me come back to him?

And I didn't even come straight home. I kind of hung around in LA for a while; partly because I just didn't want to face everyone, but partly because I was still hoping, I guess.

Shit!

Now I know why thinking about the LA thing makes me feel the way I do.

And the ironic thing is that if they'd made the fucking movie, it would all probably have been worse. I probably would have been offered other stuff and …

Who knows when I would have pulled my head out of my ass and got home? And whether Brian would have still been ready to take a chance that I might stay.

I start to laugh.

All this time I've kind of thought that having the movie cancelled was one of the toughest things in my life. And I still hate the reason that those gutless pricks pulled the plug on it. But really, not having it go ahead was probably one of the luckiest things that's ever happened to me. Because, quite apart from Brian, I didn't really want to be doing that shit anyway. I know I once thought I wanted to work in animation. But I was a kid then. I had no idea. Once I hit PIFA and started trying all these different styles and techniques and exploring how to express my thoughts and feelings and put them out there for other people to share … there was no going back to the mechanics of anything like animation – let alone set design.

I laugh even harder at the thought of what a narrow escape I had in so many fucking ways.

Daph is looking at me like I've gone slightly crazy and Gus comes running over to see what I'm laughing about. I pick him up and swing him round and tell him it's time to go.

On the way back to the loft, as Gus is doing his hopping over cracks thing again, I give Daphne a hug.
"Thanks, Daph," I tell her. "You really helped me put things in perspective. Not just about Brian … but about me … my life. You're the best."

She kind of shrugs, but I can tell she's really happy because she gives this little skip like she used to when we walked from the school bus stop together.

I am so lucky to have her for my BFF.
Home at Last

Chapter Summary

The boys (all three of them) finally get to move into their new home.

Chapter Notes

This is the final chapter of Homecoming. There's still a lot of stuff going on in their lives, but it seemed the right time to draw a line under it now that they are finally safe in the new house.

The saga will continue in Homework.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Brian

Right now I’m wondering what the fuck I was thinking when I signed up for all this shit.

For a fucking house that it’s going to be weeks if not months before we can live in comfortably; for a fucking partner who’s spent all day arguing with me about where to put every single fucking stick of furniture we own; and for a live-in kid who has spent the whole day right under my feet determined to “help” and behaving like a complete fucking drama queen if he didn’t think his help was being appreciated enough.

At least I know I’m not going to turn into fucking Jack any time soon, because if I were they would both be sporting bruises or worse by now.
Surprisingly, that thought makes me laugh.

Yeah, right. Like I’d get away with that shit on Sunshine’s watch. Raise my hand to either of them and he’d cut off my balls so fast I probably wouldn’t even notice till I saw Deb wearing them for earrings.

I choke off another laugh and he looks at me like I’m losing it. But the thing is … I find immense comfort in the very fact that I’m not signed up with another Joanie – someone who’d take all the shit as long as it kept a roof over her head, sherry in the cupboard and let her hold her head up in Church.

I might refer to him as a little twat, but my partner’s got balls the size of Texas and knowing that he’ll put up with a lot of my shit because he loves me, but he sure as fuck won’t let any of it affect Gus if he can help it is like operating with one of those safety harnesses; I might stumble along the way, but I’m not going to be allowed to crash and burn. It makes the whole “Daddy” thing a lot less scary.

All of which means that even though it’s been a fucking bitch of a day, I can still relax, knowing that even with all the shit we’ve had to deal with, I’m not going to be allowed to let it push me into fucking up big time.

Gus has been hyper and cranky and generally a pain in the ass all day and so-called Sunshine hasn’t been much better.

If it hadn’t been for his little girlfriend none of us might have survived. But she was a fucking champion, keeping Gus out from underfoot as much as possible and helping with everything from keeping the two bottomless pits fed all day to dealing with the delivery guys. (Turns out being little and cute is just about as effective in getting those guys to move furniture around all afternoon till it’s actually in the right place as being unbelievably hot and sexy is.)

Now it’s Sunday night and we’ve at least managed to get ourselves moved in to the house. We’ve left most of our shit at the loft, but we’ve got all of Gus’s stuff and enough of ours to at least be comfortable for a few nights. We can get the rest as we need it.

The place reeks of paint and sawdust; we’re going to be driven out of our minds by the work they’re going to be doing on opening up the kitchen into the front room, and after that I want the side wall of the pool area replaced with more of those glass bricks – probably clear ones down there and I’ve been thinking that maybe we could replace the wooden decking with the bricks as well, and replace the fold back wall with sliding glass panels – insulated and double glazed I guess - so that we get as much natural light into the pool area as we can, make it seem like it’s almost outside, but with all of the benefits of it being inside so we can use it all year round. Of course, all that means that it’s going to be weeks before the fucking builders get done with the place.

But I guess none of that really fucking matters, because we’re here.

Because he’s here. And Gus. And as long as they’re here and safe and happy, I can deal with all the rest of the shit.

And now that we are here, now that Gus has put his toys in the big-assed storage bins that slide out from under his bed, now that Sunshine has stocked the bar fridge in the media room with milk and juice and stuff for Gus’s lunch, and they’re both upstairs getting Gus ready for bed, things feel like they’re just about under control again. Gus is happy as a pig in shit; he loves the house, he loves his room and tomorrow he gets to go be spoiled rotten by Grandma Jenn, so he’s happy. And despite all the dramas of the day, Sunshine seems fucking happy; especially since he’s got me
playing house husband of the year, crawling around like I’m doing right fucking now trying to link up all the fucking cables from the DVD player to the speakers and the TV and the CD player/ iPod dock. But whatever.

As far as I’m concerned, things could be one hell of a lot worse. Less than a month ago, he was in NY, Gus was in Toronto and I … well, I was … lost.

But now by some fucking miracle, they’re here. We’re here together; and while I hope that sometime soon Linds will pull her head out of her ass and start concentrating on Gus so that he can go back to live with her, he will still have his room here, and he’ll be using it every week.

As for Justin … the little twat looks like he’s planning on staying around for the long haul this time.

So I’m pretty fucking happy myself, I guess.

*****

Justin

Fuck! I’m tired. We managed to get Gus to bed on time – mainly because he loves his little room so he was really excited to sleep there for the first time. The room’s okay. It’s been painted a nice sort of soft buttercup yellow. The drapes are blue with yellow moons and stars and suns and the bedding’s blue to match. Fucking Marty/ Marilyn really did work miracles.

When things are settled down a little I want to paint something for the room. I wanted to do a mural, right on the walls, but Brian thinks that’s kind of dumb because whatever I paint, he’ll grow out of it so quickly and it will have to be painted over. I don’t think that’s any big deal, but he says I should just do a painting, or paint something on panels that can be moved or replaced.

I guess that kind of makes sense; it’s actually given me a few ideas. If I use panels, I could make it like a continuing story that sort of grows up with Gus. I’ll think about it some more when I get the Warhol piece finished.

There’s another piece that I can’t wait to get started on as well. The one about Brian.

I’ve been thinking a lot about what Daphne said yesterday about the whole LA thing and how I handled it.

The thing is, if it had been the other way around, if Brian had done that to me, everyone we know would have been hounding him and calling him a totally selfish narcissistic asshole and all that crap.

But because I did it to him, everyone seemed to think that was okay. Like ignoring Brian’s feelings and Brian’s needs when I’m supposed to be his partner is alright.

And that’s what I’ve been thinking about. It’s not whether I was right or wrong to go to LA or even to handle the whole film offer the way I did. It’s about that difference between the expectations on me and the expectations on Brian. And the kicker is that Brian buys into all that shit. Even if he spouts his whole ‘you can’t count on anyone but yourself’ bullshit, he really means that he doesn’t feel like he can count on anyone else. Because the truth is that people can count on him; people do. And he always comes through in the crunch.

So I’ve been thinking all this, and I want to find a way to paint something that shows – not just how I see Brian as being the one who provides support to all of us, but to show myself, his partner,
as being ready to support Brian, as being someone he can count on.

And do all that without straying into ‘Wind Beneath My Wings’ sentimentality.

Anyway, for now I can help support him. I can help him make sure that things are okay for Gus, because really that’s the most important thing for either of us right now.

We’ve got the week ahead organized anyway. Tomorrow, Mom will pick Gus up from school and Brian is going to collect him from Mom’s in time to get him home and fed and into bed. He’s also going to make time on Tuesday to take him to the first supervised visit with Lindsay. I’ll pick him up after school on Wednesday, and probably Thursday as well. Then Mom will on Friday and maybe we’ll both collect him from Mom’s on Friday night. Or maybe she could bring him over here and baby-sit for a few hours so we can have another night out. I guess she could even bring Tucker. Maybe if I’m around him enough I’ll kind of get used to him.

So although the week is going to be busy with me working in the studio and him trying to catch up at Kinnetik and all the time making sure Gus is okay, at least we have a plan.

But I can’t help wonder how Brian is really feeling about all this. I know he loves Gus. That’s really obvious, but even so … suddenly finding himself in a full time relationship, moving out of his loft, which is so linked to his self-image and the face he likes to present to the world, and having Gus full-time … this is so not what he thought things were going to be like.

It’s funny, we were out saying goodbye to Daphne – the three of us – and Daph took a photo. She sent it straight to my cell and …

I don’t know … it was almost like looking at people I don’t even know.

Brian was smiling, for a start. I mean … a real smile, not the smirk he usually adopts for photos.

And, despite the fact that we’d been through so much chaos, despite the fact that we were all dirty and tired and kind of grumpy, we look happy.

Brian and I both look happy.

And kind of relaxed.

It’s fucking weird.

It’s like … like we really have come home. Like we already feel at home here, with all that means.
So tonight … tonight we are in our new house, and Gus is safely tucked up in bed. We have a baby
monitor set up just in case he wakes up and doesn’t know where he is, but he went out like a light
so hopefully he’ll sleep soundly.

Meanwhile, we have our privacy back and an awful lot of new rooms to ‘christen’.

I’m standing under those amazing windows trying to work out just where to start, when Brian
comes looking for me. And somehow that’s when I know that we should start right here. It’s right
that the first time we make love in this house should be in this incredible space that Dan and Billy
created.

I reach for Brian and he comes into my arms like he’s been waiting all his life for this moment.

I guess he has.

I guess we both have.

*****

Brian

So first we fuck on the rug in front of the fire. That’s okay. In fact, it’s hot – and not just from the
flames.

Then while he gets something to eat (because it’s at least two hours since he last ate with Gus), I
get the Jacuzzi going.

We take some cheese and wine and other shit in there with us and spend some time just unwinding
and letting the jets of hot water ease away a hell of a lot of the stresses and strains of the day.

I could definitely get used to this.

Then he gets kind of frisky and insists that we start experimenting with ways to enjoy the tub even
more. He’s very inventive and comes up with a few that are more than satisfying and I figure I
could absolutely get used to this.

We clean up and head upstairs, and although he thinks he’s ready to fall straight to sleep I manage to get inventive on my own account and demonstrate a few reasons why he might want to stay awake just a little longer.

And Gus sleeps through it all.

All in all, our first night in the new place could have been a shit-load worse.

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Chapter End Notes

Well, there they are. Settled in the new house.

And so ... on to *Homework*.

But I wanted to say a quick word about that. It is still a WIP. And I am not the most regular of up-daters. Or at least the most frequent.

But I am still working on it, and I will finish it (well, God will, anyway).

So I hope you'll please stay along for the ride.

...and at least the most frequent.

But I am still working on it, and I will finish it (well, God will, anyway).

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