Intersect

by Azile (LadyBlacklodge)

Summary

As Justin makes his way through the crowd in Herald Square, he sees a man who is almost a stranger to him now.

Notes

WARNING: No beta at the moment. Present day, post 5x13, somewhat of a kid!fic but won't completely focus on her. Brian and Justin are no longer together in this universe at the moment. I actually started this as a one-shot that was supposed to end bittersweet, open-ended, and with Justin and Brian just becoming friends again. As I wrote it, it occurred to me that it is not going to be ending up that way. While Brian and Justin will have romantic and sexual tension in the first story, they will end up together in the sequel. This story will center around the rebuilding of a friendship between Brian and Justin and their ability to find love with other people.

A/N: This is my first fanfic in a long time and my first fanfic in the Queer as Folk fandom. I thought that my first story in this fandom would be about Brian and Justin's grand romance. It isn't starting out that way, but they will find their way back to each other.
Justin sees him for the first time in seven years on December 21, 2014.

To be more accurate, it has been seven years and one month to the day. He can’t remember the hours and minutes offhand. He isn’t a lovesick teenager anymore. But if he is being completely honest with himself, he could probably figure it out if he thought really hard about it. Then again, if he was going to go ahead and be completely honest with himself anyway, he also knows he didn’t want to think that hard about November 21, 2007 and the dates in between when it came to Brian Kinney.

He had thought, hoped, he would see him again one day. After the angry words filled with hidden accusations and pain thrown between them during a snowfall that had come too early became less painful to think about, he wanted to call. However, while the gang always thought Brian was the stubborn one in their dynamic, little did they know that Justin could easily match him on that front. It wasn’t until May of the next year that he even thought that maybe he should be the first one to make contact with Brian again, or any of his extended family back in Pittsburgh for that matter.

The only people from back home he had kept in contact with within those six months were Daphne, Molly, and his mother. And of course they didn’t tell him anything about Brian because he avoided asking about him. Not that they knew that much, since they only saw Brian occasionally. He decided to reach out to Emmett first. Emmett, of course, started berating him for not calling or answering his calls and then cried with happiness due to finally hearing from him again. Then he started acting nervous and overly talkative, even for Emmett. When Justin mentioned he was going to take the first step and call Brian and apologize for what happened, he knew it was too late.

“Sweetie, don’t get me wrong, I think it is a good thing that you are willing to patch things up now that you have gotten your head out of your ass. But Justin…he’s been seeing someone.”

“So, he’s seeing the same trick more than once then? It isn’t like I am with him anymore. I’m not going to have a problem with that, especially with what happened.”

“It’s more than that. He told us he has been with him for three months. He brought him to dinner. Which is honestly a complete surprise for multiple reasons because we hadn’t seen much of him since you were last here and voila! He comes in last week with his new beau and tells us all about how they met. And Teddy was the only one out of all of us who knew about it, which hurts because he knows I wouldn’t tell anyone ever-”
And, on that fateful day in May of 2008, he learned about Eric Davisson. The new eligible gay bachelor of Pittsburgh who, at 32 years old and approximately 5’11”, was lean yet muscular and had olive skin, black curly hair, beautiful green eyes, and a kind and gorgeous smile. He was a genius and innovative architect who was designing the building for a gay and lesbian youth center that Brian was funding and was surprisingly very passionate about. According to Emmett, they met and hit it off. And then they kept hitting it off on a regular basis.

It hadn’t been his intention to even start things back up with Brian. At least not immediately. But he couldn’t help but feel betrayed and heartbroken by Brian moving on, and so soon after they had broken up. He knew he should have done more. He knew he should have taken Brian seriously when he brought up expanding Kinnetik to New York and the two of them getting a bigger apartment together. In all honesty, New York had become a new and exciting place for him to explore, become independent in, and a place to meet new people. He hadn't been pining for Brian like he was when he first moved up and was homesick. He should have taken Brian seriously when he told Justin he didn’t want to trick anymore because it didn’t make him feel happy, it just reminded him how lonely he was.

And what did Justin do? He pulled a fucking Michael and dismissed it by telling Brian he was just going through something and he would get back to normal. And he kept doing that because it was easier to leave Brian in Pittsburgh with their “no lock on our doors” rule and convince himself that Brian was okay with that since he is the one that enforced the rule in the first place. That made the fact that the man he loved had stayed a changed man and was unhappy easier to ignore. And Brian eventually got to the point where he stopped hiding it. It was just little things first. He started calling less for a while, then he started calling more "just to hear Justin's voice." He would get a bit more openly upset when Justin postponed a visit or told Brian that it wasn't a good weekend for him to come up to New York. One sign that should have raised an alarm was when they fought over the phone and two days later he received two dozen fake roses in the mail because Brian knew that Justin developed an allergy to real ones.

So it shouldn't have been a surprise when Brian lost it the day before Thanksgiving. It had been building up, he gets that now. It is only when years have already passed that he gets that Brian was changing because he wanted and needed to change for himself, not only because he felt the whiplash from the pressure put on him by his friends to grow up one second and stay the one constant in their lives the next. He also gets that Brian felt hurt when he called off the wedding due to the quick changes in Brian’s personality. But he also thought that Brian felt relief to stay a free man. And he can also admit to himself that, in his early 20s, he wasn't really ready to settle down right then. He just wanted it to be guaranteed that it would eventually happen one day with the love of his life and he thought that was Brian.

But seven years ago, he thought he was doing Brian a favor by giving him the space and freedom he used to thrive on and trying to redirect any returning thoughts Brian may have when it came to monogamy. Some of the gang felt the same, at least Michael, Lindsay, and Debbie did. Emmett had hinted to him that Brian wasn’t tricking nearly as much as he used to and even Ted had called to let him know that Brian seemed a bit depressed and asked when he was coming for his next visit. Soon, they both knew they were wanting different things yet again but the situation was
completely switched around.

Brian was the one to kick him out though. That was one recurring event that stayed pretty constant. They had sucked and fucked to the days leading up to it, as per usual. But that night Brian sat him down and said he wanted to get Justin out of the sublet room he was currently residing in and get them a bigger place in New York. He wanted expand Kinnetik and have an office in Manhattan. He went as far as getting the rings he kept out and Justin was stupid enough to say he didn’t want Brian to go against who he really was and that monogamy and marriage weren’t important. He expected Brian to feel relieved at that. He wasn’t.

“Brian, I’ve been trying to tell you not to worry about changing for me. You know I love you how you are. Please sit-”

“I haven’t changed for you, Justin. I want this. I thought you wanted this. Why won’t anyone believe me when I say I want this?”

“Brian, I’m sorry. Look, we can talk about it. I just don’t get what changed.”

“I changed, Justin. I didn’t plan for it to happen, but it did. Jesus, I changed because of you, not for you. I want to be with you. I miss you when you aren’t here and no one takes me seriously and then they just dismiss what I am saying when I bring up any fucking feelings I have over this and I am sick of it. No one in fucking Pittsburgh can see that I don’t even want to be the stud of Liberty Avenue anymore and that I haven’t been since before you left. And when I finally wanted to commit to you, you back out and I understand that because you are doing so well in New York and you deserve to get noticed and you need to establish yourself but I am willing to move there to be with you and even though this is the most I have ever probably said at once in my entire life, you don’t get it! No one fucking gets it!”

And Justin tried to reason with him. He did. But Brian eventually pulled out the truth that he, Justin Taylor, was not ready for any sort of commitment after all and that while he would love for Brian to come up to New York, he still wanted to explore his options and fuck around. He even would prefer to stay with his roommate for a little while longer. And he thought that if Brian knew that he still did love him and wanted him there, even if Justin himself wasn't ready to take that step yet, Brian would cool down and realize that the long distance thing got to him and eventually he would realize that he didn't want to take that step either. That wasn't the correct assumption. Just like that, the argument stopped. Brian stared at him with a flushed face and Justin could swear with tears in his eyes, and then ended things with a, “It doesn’t matter if I become everything you ask for. We are not on the same page. No matter what we want, we never were and never will be. Get out.” and threw Justin’s duffle bag out into the hallway.

And that fucking hurt. It hurt a lot. And he missed Brian and he wanted him to call but he never
did. And only when he worked up the courage to even think about calling Brian himself, he found out that it was in fact possible for Brian Kinney to willingly and enthusiastically move on and commit to someone.

He never ran into him in Pittsburgh. He barely ever went back to visit anyway. Soon, there became no reason to. His sister went to college at WVU and just accepted a job in Morgantown. Daphne met a guy her junior year of college and moved with him to Philadelphia after graduating. His mother and Tucker moved up to Connecticut to be closer to Justin’s grandparents. Michael and Ben eventually moved to Toronto to be closer to the girls and JR. Not so surprisingly, Debbie didn’t last more than a year in Pittsburgh without her son, so she and Carl put the house up for sale and bought a place up there as well. Emmett eventually got back with Drew and Drew signed with the New York Giants and finished up his football career with them. They got a nice town house in Hoboken, so he saw Emmett pretty regularly and he had even catered a couple of gallery showings Justin had attended. Justin and Ted were never that close and Ted had become close friends with Brian anyway, but he was still with Blake and still working at Kinnetik. According to Emmett, Brian had made Ted and Cynthia partners a few years after Justin had moved to New York. The last big piece of news he had really heard about Brian was that he had expanded Kinnetik to Chicago over three years ago and moved up there with Eric and their newborn daughter. The little news he had received about Brian over the years had shocked him less and less as time had passed. Eventually, instead of feeling shocked and heartbroken, he felt surprised and even happy for him even though those emotions were conflicting with the bit of longing and sadness he still held in his heart. Despite that, he was glad Brian seemed to find some sort of happiness with someone who couldn’t automatically judge him due to who he was before. And he can’t feel bitter about that, because Justin had mostly moved on as well. He had a string of fuck buddies and boyfriends throughout the years but he eventually met Nathan who has been with for almost two years. He formed a small group of friends up here and started to keep in touch with Emmett, Debbie, and even Michael and Ben again. His work is selling well in various galleries not only in New York, but in other parts of the country as well. He is happy with his life.

“Justin?”

Justin jerks himself out of his thoughts. He looks up to see a tall man with a bundled up little girl on his shoulders and he realizes Brian had spotted him and made his way over to him.

“...Hey, Brian.”

There is a long pause and they just look at each other. He looks different. A bit older. He had a short beard that appears to have a couple of grey hairs in it and a little bit of crinkling around his eyes. He is still beautiful.
“Aren’t New Yorkers supposed to avoid Macy’s at all cost?”

“I like the displays they have for Christmas and haven’t gotten around to seeing it yet. That doesn’t explain you. Why aren’t you on 5th Avenue shopping instead?”

“Macy’s is much more fascinating to a three year old than the stores on 5th Avenue.”

The little girl on Brian’s shoulders starts to pull at his hair and chants,

“Daddy, Santa!”

“We’ll see, baby.”

Brian leans in and quietly says to Justin, “There is no way I am waiting in that line. She saw Santa in Chicago. She will forget about it once she looks at the window displays, I’m hoping.”

Justin nods, not sure what to say to this Brian. Brian smiles at him and introduces him to his daughter, Lily. She looks down at Justin excitedly, gives an exaggerated hand wave, and yells, “Hello, Justin!” and goes back to looking at what she can see from her father’s shoulders.

“Want to walk with us to the other side of the building?”

The few minutes it takes to get to the displays are a little awkward. He asks about Gus, who Brian says is in his first year of high school (and doesn’t that just make him feel old) and has his first girlfriend, whom he is crazy over. Lindsay is managing a gallery in Toronto, which he knew about, and Melanie was finally able to start her own practice last month, which is great considering the rocky start she had while gaining the right to practice law in Canada. He is working up the courage to inquire about Eric, when they hit the crowd of the people who are looking at the windows of Macy’s, mesmerized.

One window displays a wonderland of flawless crystallized ice that shines with hues of blue, white, silver, and gold. Other windows display small moving sets that depict complex and dreamlike images that appeal to people of all ages. When he finally stops himself from looking at the displays, he looks over at Brian.

“Look at that one over there, Lily! Do you see them dancing?”
“Look at that one, Daddy! It looks like Frozen! Where’s Olaf?”

“I don’t know what either of those things are.”

“Daddy! You do know! You know all the words to-”

“Lily, look! Rudolph!”

Brian stops and sneaks a glance at Justin. Justin glances right back at him and smirks. Brian mirrors his expression before reaching into his pocket to look at his phone.

“Lily, we’re gonna go meet Papa down the street and go eat.”

“But, I’m looking-”

“We can come back later, I promise.”

Lily seems to consider it, agrees, then she looks at Brian and says, “You inviting Justin to meet Papa too?”

Brian is put on the spot for several seconds and looks at Justin as though he is asking him a silent question. Justin is about to put him out of his misery and tell him he has to get going but then Brian asks,

“Are you hungry?”

Justin wasn’t expecting that. He is about to say no, that he had already eaten a shitty hot dog off the street, but thanks. But he is curious. He is curious about the man Brian is raising a child with and has built this life with. He also is genuinely hungry because his body never is able to say no to the prospect of food, even after he got over puberty.
“I’m never not. That is something that hasn’t changed.”

Brian grins and says, “You always did eat everything in my fridge.”

“Like that was hard. All you usually had was leftover Thai and guava juice.”

“I like grape Juicy Juice the best.” Lily exclaims proudly.

“That is a wonderful choice, Lily,” Justin tells her.

“So, you’re coming with us?”

“...Yes.”

Brian’s expression is blank. But then he nods and reaches into his pocket to grab his phone and send a quick text. He waits for a minute longer and his phone lights up. He reads the message silently and glances at Justin once more.

"Let's get going then."
Chapter Summary

While Brian and Justin connect in Herald Square, Eric finishes looking at apartments for the day and gets to thinking about how he and Brian have gotten this far.

Chapter Notes

This is a shorter chapter than the last one. It is also going to be the last mostly narrative chapter for a while (since the style was started when this was just a one shot in my head.) Now that this will become a full-fledged story with a sequel, I want to ease back into my dialogue-driven comfort zone starting in the next chapter.

“Apartment hunting in New York is not as interesting as I thought it was going to be.” Eric thought to himself, as he stepped out of the brick building on Houston St.

He thought it would be easier since they had a larger budget than many couples, but they were looking to buy and both he and Brian were going to be pickier about it. It had been Brian who had covered a couple of places in the Upper East and West Sides yesterday and Eric had taken Lily to see the Lion King. They were going to a place in the West Village that was just advertised a few hours ago tomorrow morning. In all honesty, they should have seen them together to begin with, but there were so many things going on for young children due to the holidays and they wanted to Lily to get acquainted with all the city had to offer, since she was uncomfortable about leaving Chicago. It also made it so they didn’t have to carry her around and wear her out by putting her through adult things just a few days after moving their stuff into the sublet apartment they were living in. So it was his turn to see the apartments today. This one in Soho, one in Tribeca, and two in the Financial District, one in Tribeca. They were all fine and very Brian with their sleek modern look and open floor plans (except the bedrooms because they both learned quickly that a small child can be a real cock blocker) but he didn’t feel right about any of them and neither did Brian, despite being pretty adamant about wanting to stay in Manhattan.

When he gets the contract and designs a building or a house for a client, he is known for modern floor plans, bold colors, angled ceilings, and the works. They are similar to the downtown apartments he viewed. But he wanted something a tiny bit more traditional for Lily. They didn’t need a suburban home or anything, but a foyer would be nice. More separation in between the rooms and having an apartment they could actually move around in and have their own space in would be a plus too. Brian of all people knew that Lily was, endearingly, a hyper little shit. In Chicago, he found her on top of the island in the kitchen hanging off the pots and pans above the stovetop. Brian tried to hide it, but he was livid. “What if she managed to turn one of the burners on and she just let herself hang over the fire and burn slowly?” he had said, “It would have been a nightmare.” And there hadn’t been a stool or chair in sight. Eric himself doesn’t know how that is even possible. She still won’t tell them how she did it. But while Eric thinks having a bigger room, more space to play in, and moving into anything other than a large studio may be good for Lily, Brian thinks she will manage to sneak out of sight and jump out a 12th story window.
He wasn’t under any illusions that a bigger place would keep her out of trouble and keep her from breaking stuff. She was a three year old, or three and a half, as she insists on everyone knowing. But he wanted a place they could build a real home in. Both of them were doing quite well. Brian was spending more than he had in a while, due to buying out a floor on Madison Ave for Kinnetik to expand in, but they had met when both of them were quite established within their careers already and finances had never been a problem for the two of them in the last six and a half years they had known each other. Things on pretty much all fronts had been good. Brian, as frustrating as he can be sometimes, was a wonderful partner to him and a doting father to Lily and Gus.

Eric knew right from the beginning that he had been lucky when he came to Pittsburgh to design and oversee the construction of The Gay and Lesbian Youth Center of Pittsburgh. He was contacted by Brian by email with praise on his previous work and a passionate explanation on what he wanted to do. He wanted a place for teenagers who identified as LGBT or even just questioning to have a place to go where they could feel safe and not judged. He wanted counseling services for the kids so that they could become more confident and for parents who were struggling to grip with their child’s identity, regular healthy and substantial meals for visitors to have, rooms for teens who had been kicked out to stay in until they work things out for them, tutoring services in case they had missed school due to bullying or being on the streets, extracurricular classes to encourage the kids in their talents and interests, an entertainment room and a small library so they could socialize and get books out to read. Eric had struggled with his sexuality throughout his childhood and even into his twenties and he wishes there had been a place like this for him seek refuge in.

When he finally did get a boyfriend at 25 and let his parents know, it can be said that they were not happy about it and his relationship with most of his family has been cordial and distant at best ever since. He had experimented a few times with men after he moved to D.C. for school but only committed to the occasional woman, until Joshua. They didn’t have too much in common, but he had dated Joshua for over a year. Then he found out he was cheating on him with a married woman. That had just confused him because Joshua’s flame burned pretty bright. But when his sister let that slip to his parents, they pleaded with him to get over this phase because Joshua obviously had and if someone like Joshua could, then why couldn’t he? So the idea of a place that actively helped teenagers meet other people their age like themselves and tried to work with their families into being more accepting really made him want to work on this with Brian. He moved down for what was supposed to be for four months. Things with Brian started up in the first six weeks within meeting and he stayed for three years before they expanded Kinnetik.

Eric thinks he has given Brian and Lily enough time and he is honestly starting to feel his stomach rumbling at this point. He gets out his phone and texts Brian:

Hey! Went to see the apts.
All looked nice but idk about buying.
Still think we should look in
Brooklyn Heights and Cobble Hill.
Neither of us are too far from Chelsea
Want meet in the middle and go to that sandwich place for lunch?

Eric waited for a minute and received a text back.

Yeah, that sounds good.
Be there soon. I love you.
It wasn’t as though Brian had never said the words before. He had several times, but it was rare enough that it always put a stupid grin on Eric’s face and gave him a fluttering feeling in his stomach. He was about to text back an, “I love you too <3” but his phone vibrated again with another text from Brian.

Ran into Justin. Lily invited my ex-fiancé to lunch so he could meet my current one. You.

And then his phone buzzed again.

You can top tonight if you want.

At least he gave him that nice sentiment.

Eric knew Brian had only one other actual boyfriend before him. He knew that Brian had fallen hard for the young man, even though it went against his no repeats rule he had in his 20s. He also knew that had gotten his heart broken just a couple months before he met him and Brian had given him whiplash when it came to wanting to go out and spend time together one minute and pushing him away the next in the early stages of their relationship. He knew that his first love was an artist doing quite well for himself and he knew that Brian had bought one of his paintings anonymously after they moved to Chicago. He didn’t complain about it. He understood that Brian needed something to remember him by and he could even admit the painting was fantastic. He felt some light jealousy but kept it to himself. And when he agreed with Brian that Kinnetik needed to expand to Manhattan, he was too worried about uprooting Lily and his own career (it is daunting to build in a city that is already taken up its space with buildings) to really focus on that he even knew Justin Taylor lived in New York as well. He just hadn’t expected to be meeting him so soon.

So as Eric looked down at his phone and tried to sort out what he felt when he thought about who Justin Taylor was to his fiancé, he typed out a message and flagged down a cab.

Can’t wait.
18th and 6th

Chapter Summary

Brian felt like he had entered some sort of weird dimension where his ex and his partner laughing together was completely acceptable. He looked down at Lily to see if she had noticed that the two of them had fallen into some strange universe and that it was her and her daddy against the world. But Lily didn’t pay any mind to possibly being lost within some sort of warped black hole. She only paid attention to tearing up her grilled cheese into a bunch of little pieces.

“Eat your food.” he told her.

“I will. I’m just fixing it first.” she insisted, as though tearing it up would make it taste so much better. Usually there wasn’t much of a point to argue her logic.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took me a day longer than I thought it was going to! To defend myself, I did write almost 7000 words on the bus. I wrote a long background chapter on Brian after he broke up with Justin but I decided it would fit better if I put it in chapter 5 instead and give you what I promised with this chapter.

As Brian got Lily off of his shoulders and onto his hip, he put his hand up to hail one of the many cabs passing by. It wasn’t too terribly far and he could walk if he wanted to but his kid had been out in the cold for a while and he wanted to get her warm sooner rather than later. He told Justin just that. Justin. Brian doesn’t know exactly what was going through his head when he just asked him to lunch instead of attempting to give him an out. He knows that Justin hadn’t completely left his head and his heart in the first place, so seeing him there and seeing how beautiful he still was made all of his rationality go out the window for a minute.

“You are still rational enough to not give into any urges you may have.” Brian thought to himself firmly.

A cab pulled over to the curb. He got Lily settled in, then slid in and got her on his lap. He scooted over so Justin could get in next to them.

“Where to?” the driver asked the men as he got back into the lane.

“Not far. Just to The Telegraphe Cafe on 6th Ave and 18th Street.” Brian replied.

As they drove along the streets of New York, Lily was going on and on about what she wanted to get to eat.

“Daddy, I want spaghetti.”

“Lily, they don’t have spaghetti.”
“I bet Papa wants spaghetti.”

“I bet he doesn’t.”

“I bet he does.”

“How about a grilled cheese sandwich instead? You can share some soup with me too.”

Lily thought it over and came to the decision that this was acceptable. Then, she looked over at Justin.

“Sorry, Jus’n. No spaghetti. You like grilled cheese?”

“I love grilled cheese. I don’t know if I will get it today but they are always yummy.”

Lily quiets down after that and starts playing with her dad’s hand. Brian tickles her a little and then glances over at Justin and decides to break the silence.

“She is a bit tired today. She has had a couple of busy days going to plays and museums and going shopping for new clothes. She is really smart for her age and has a big vocabulary. Usually she talks so fast that you can’t keep up with her and is running around once her feet touch the ground. She keeps us on our toes.”

“She seems like a great kid, Brian. How long are you all visiting New York for?”

“Actually...we are moving here. Kinnetik has been doing so well in Pittsburgh and Chicago and we have collected a lot of high-profile New York clients despite not having a location in the city. So, it was time to physically have an office here. Eric was actually looking at some apartments this morning. We are subletting a place until we find a place we love enough to buy. We are going to start looking together tomorrow but wanted Lily to have fun these first couple of days. She is still uneasy about moving so we wanted her to enjoy her time in the city when she got here.”

Before Justin can respond, the cab pulls over by their destination. Brian pays the driver, telling Justin, “Please, it is like $11 bucks. Put your wallet back in your pocket.” Justin tried to tip but Brian gave the driver a twenty dollar bill and told him to keep the change. Brian walked with Lily and Justin to the entrance of the cafe. The place was small and casual. Only a few people were there. Eric stood up, walked over, and kneeled down as Brian put their daughter down on the floor. Lily squealed and yelled, “Papa!!” Her voice vibrated with the heavy steps she took as she ran to Eric with so much excitement that would make an onlooker believe that she hadn’t seen him in weeks, rather than just seeing him last night before she went to bed. Eric took her into his arms, hugged her, then picked her up.

“What did you do with Daddy today, Silly Lily?” Eric asked her set her on his hip and carried her back to the table as Brian and Justin followed while Lily talked.

“We went to bunches of places, Papa! We went to a Disney Store spent lots of time in there! Daddy got me a BEAUTIFUL dress that looks just like Rapunzel’s! He said it looked tacky but I say it is the best dress ever and he must have thought so too but didn’t wanna say ’cause he bought it for me anyway and I thanked him a lot. Then, we went to Macy’s and looked at windows. That sounds boring but it was really fun.”

“I’m glad you had fun, baby.” Eric grinned over at Brian and Justin and extended his hand towards Justin. “Sorry about not introducing myself as soon as I saw you. Lily tends to talk a lot. You must be Justin. I’m Eric. It’s nice to meet you.”
Justin accepted the handshake and smiled back at him. “I am Justin. It’s nice to meet you too. Thanks for being okay with me coming along.”

“We met him on the street, so Daddy and I invited him.” Lily told him as Eric laughed at her explanation.

“It’s no problem. Lily and Brian are certainly hard to say no to.”

They all sat down at the table, the waitress took their order, and they started making small talk about how things were on the trip over and how they were enjoying the city so far. Lily told Justin about The Lion King and how much she loved it. Justin told her he loved it so much that he had seen it twice. It wasn’t long until they got their food and they started to eat.

“So which neighborhood are you in right now? If you don’t mind me asking.” Justin inquired as he put his spoon down.

Eric wiped his mouth with his napkin and waved his hand to imply he didn’t mind.

“Right now we are in the lower part of the Upper East Side. It’s a temporary place but it is okay for right now. It is definitely small but it is a two bedroom and the living room is big enough to have a Christmas tree up for Lily. But Brian and I are looking for something bigger. I think he is leaning toward the Upper West Side or the West Village but I am leaning towards Brooklyn. Prices are going up but Brooklyn Heights, Dumbo, and Cobble Hill aren’t far from the city plus there are townhouses and larger apartments available in those areas that are lower in price than some of the studios in the village.”

“I’m not against another borough, I just would like to be close to the office.”

“But think of the space and even the potential view we could have! If we do Brooklyn Heights or Cobble Hill, there are a couple of places not far from Court St and that has the 4 and 5 train, the 2 and 3, the N, Q, R and the A and C aren’t far either. Plus there are more built in garages so you could have a place to put your car without worrying about street cleaning and tickets.”

Brian let out an exaggerated put upon sigh.

“Fine. We can look in Brooklyn.”

“Ha ha! I knew I could persuade you.” Eric said as he gave Brian a kiss on his cheek.

Brian looked over at Justin, squinted his eyes, and asked, “Out of those three neighborhoods, which one is the most Stepfordy of the bunch?”

Justin snorted, “I don’t know, Brian. Maybe Brooklyn Heights. Brooklyn has become more desirable to live in than Manhattan in the last couple of years. Larger living space for lower prices and more apartment availability. Dumbo is slightly more industrial but, while convenient enough, not as convenient as Brooklyn Heights. Cobble Hill might be a little less ritzy and expensive than the Heights but not by much. If you want more space and are willing to spend more, I would go with Brooklyn Heights or Cobble Hill. Yeah, there are a lot of families there, but it is really pretty, I’ve heard they have good schools, and most people in the city in general mostly keep to themselves so you don’t have to worry TOO much about regularly getting invited to community get togethers.

“Brian would hate for that to happen. He once took personal offense to the couple who lived in the apartment below ours in Chicago because they gave us a casserole to welcome us to the neighborhood.”
“They also brought Lily the most hideous onesie I have ever seen. If that woman’s taste in clothing was that bad, then her cooking probably wasn’t much better.” Brian huffed in defiance.

“Babe, that doesn’t even make sense.”

“That honestly doesn’t surprise me. He once scared off a Christian fundraising group that kept coming to the loft hoping for a donation for a new playground by answering the door wearing absolutely nothing.” Justin revealed.

Then Eric and Justin started laughing at Brian’s expense and Brian felt like he had entered some sort of weird dimension where his ex and his fiancé laughing together was completely acceptable. He looked down at Lily to see if she had noticed that the two of them had fallen into some strange universe and that it was her and her daddy against the world. But Lily didn’t pay any mind to possibly being lost within some sort of warped black hole. She only paid attention to tearing up her grilled cheese into a bunch of little pieces.

“Eat your food.” he told her.

“I will. I’m just fixing it first.” she insisted, as though tearing it up would make it taste so much better. Usually there wasn’t much of a point to argue her logic.

“So Justin, what part of the city are you living in?” Eric asked him after their laughter died down.

“I’m in SoHo right now, but moving to Williamsburg in February once my lease is up.” Justin told them.

“I just looked in SoHo today. It is a great area. The apartment was mostly an open floor plan though.”

“Yeah, that is how mine is. There are some bigger ones if you want to pay a completely outrageous price but the majority of living spaces in SoHo are lofts. I love it but I own a gallery in Williamsburg plus Nathan is living over there so we are looking for a one bedroom.” Justin explained.

Of course the first thing Brian wanted to do was start asking questions about Nathan, like what Nathan did. Was he an artist? Was he in another field? Was he better than he was? But Brian held his tongue and instead asked Justin, “So you own a gallery now? That’s great!”

“Yeah, I bought a three story building that used to be an auto-repair shop. It had two apartments over it so I just made some renovations, put in some stairs and a service elevator in between floors and it has been doing pretty well. I get a lot of local street artists to show their stuff there as well as some students at several of the colleges.” Justin informed them.

“That sounds really great! One of my favorite parts of the city is that the artists will paint or draw in public for the whole world to see. It is great to hear that someone is taking interest in their work. Brian and I will have to stop by sometime, won’t we Brian?” Eric said to him. Brian found the whole situation to be so bizarre that it took him a second to nod and say, “Sure.”

He felt a nudge and looked down at his kid sneaking his bowl away to finish the broth at the bottom of his soup.

“Hey,” he said quietly.

Lily slurped and took the bowl away from her face. “Yes?”
“Does anything feel off to you?”

Lily giggled, leaned into her father, “You are so funny, daddy.”

He had to teach his kid to be more observant.

But he couldn’t blame her. She obviously had gotten it from Eric who was completely oblivious that his partner was sitting here confused to all hell while he spoke and laughed with Justin. And Justin didn’t seem to notice how awkward the situation was either. He must have a type. Justin and Eric looked nothing alike, but neither of them had any clue at all whatsoever.

Finally, the check came and Justin insisted that he pay for all of them. Justin left the waitress a good tip and they all headed outside of the restaurant to part ways.

“Eric, it was so nice meeting you. Let me know if either of you need any help with anything when you find a place. Here is my card. Feel free to stop at the gallery any time.”

“Will do, Justin. It was nice meeting you. I’m sure we will see each other again soon enough.”

Lily had a hold of Brian’s hand as she looked up at Justin and exclaimed, “Bye Justin!”

“Bye, Lily! It was nice meeting you!”

Justin looked back up at Brian and quietly said, “Goodbye, Brian.”

Brian just nodded said, “Bye, Justin.” then watched Justin wrap his scarf around his neck and walk away. Then he looked at Eric, forced a smile, and said,

“Lily needs a nap. Let’s head home.”
Justin goes to the gallery to distract himself and gets Nathan to come help him get ready for the New Year's Eve Showing.

Justin usually didn’t go and actively work in his gallery on the weekends, but he needed to get his mind off of the surprise of that afternoon. He was actually pretty lucky they had stopped at that place for lunch, since the L train was only four blocks away and that meant he didn’t have to transfer trains like he would have from Herald Square or his apartment. So he walked down to 14th street and caught the L. He got off after a few stops and walked the two blocks to the Bedford Art Gallery. He walked inside and saw his intern, Lola (who seems to have changed her hair from a royal purple to a shade of lavender,) doing inventory and Max getting a few new pieces in for the show on New Year’s Eve.

“Hey Justin,” Lola called out, without looking away from the laptop.

“Hey, Lola. Your hair looks good. What are you doing here so early? You usually don’t come in until 3 on Sundays.”

“Nothing else better to do. What about you? Couldn’t get Nathan away from his muse?”

“Calling Arm & Hammer Baking Soda anyone’s muse seems to be a bit odd, don’t you think?” Justin asked her in amusement.

“Well, you have to be pretty passionate to write a song about them. Or be getting paid a pretty decent sum of money.”

“Pretty sure it is the second one.” Justin laughed, “I talked to him last night and he was working on it. I will probably stop over later to see how he is doing.”

“Hey, at least his band has that gig next Saturday at The Dram Shop, right?”

“Yeah, I think he will feel better that he is getting work in what he actually wants to do.”

“Well, I’ll be there.”

Justin thanked her for it and went back to his office. He closed the door and threw himself in the office chair. Brian. After all this time, he ran into Brian. What were the fucking odds of that? That he would run into Brian, just three days after they moved to the city? He didn’t know how he felt.
about it. And he didn’t know how Brian had felt about it either. It had been weird, to say the least. Brian barely contributed to the conversation once they met up with Eric. In fact, Justin had spent most of the time talking to Eric.

He hadn’t been expecting to actually like Eric. He never knew much about him other than what some of the gang had told him in passing throughout the years when they talked on the phone. He did look him up on Facebook a few weeks after Lily would have been born out of curiosity. He even remembers what his profile picture looked like. It was a close up of Eric and his little family. Brian had Lily in his arms, eyes filled with love, and Eric was leaning over, smiling, and stroking his baby’s face. Justin remembers how heavy his heart had felt. He knew Brian had entered a serious relationship but it was then when it had hit him how much he had probably hurt Brian by going back on what he had previously said he had wanted. He could look at that picture and see how happy he was, how happy both of them were, and how much he must have wanted this. Justin remembered feeling happy for Brian because he could see how happy the man was but he also felt as though his heart had been ripped out just a little because, even though over three years had passed since they had broken up at that point, there was a small part of him thinking, “That could have been me.” Justin saw how they moved so well with each other and how much Lily loved both of her dads.

“Just take your mind off of it. Think of Nathan.” Justin said to himself as he rubbed his temples.

Justin loved Nathan, believe it or not. Not like he had loved Brian, but he still loved him. He had some negative qualities, like getting too emotional about rejection and taking things very personally in a multitude of ways, whether getting upset about someone not caring for a song he wrote or seeing that goddamn Sarah Mclachlan commercial. But he was filled with life. He was a good listener and did manage to enthusiastically encourage Justin’s already established career when he hit an artist’s block even though his music career was still just developing.

Nathan, about eight years his junior, was not like Brian on the surface. Some people did a double take when they found out he and Justin were together. He didn’t know why, exactly. Well, they dressed a little differently and, despite both being in a creative field, their interests differed when it came to several things. And Nathan tended not to be the most grounded person when it came to his emotions. He had no problem showing them, since he did have occasional queen outs over the fate of his career and being afraid that he would write commercial jingles for the rest of his life when he wanted his band to succeed. Justin felt for him because the band was actually very good. Nathan didn't need the constant praise the Ethan “the genius” had though.

He had seen Nathan’s band perform a few times at small music festivals and bars, that’s how he met Nathan in the first place. But, if you put them in a genre, it would probably be punk rock in style with more of a glam rock sound. But the record labels now were focused on EDM and indie folk music. So Nathan had been especially moody about that the last few months. Justin tried to remind him that he was lucky to get so many offers on the jingle thing, because it did pay pretty well but Nathan was adamant that it was rotting away any talent he might have. Justin sighed. He should probably call him. He was upset last night and didn’t go over only at Nathan’s insistence. Justin pulled out his cell and dialed Nathan’s number.

“Hello?” Nathan answered.

“Hey, it’s me. I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“Fine. Arm & Hammer will be pleased that I sacrificed any artistic integrity I have left for their consumerism.”

Well, at least he isn’t crying like last night.
“I am sure it sounds great and you will give them a completely new image.”

“Why the fuck do they need a jingle? Everyone already knows Arm & Hammer. Most people buy their fucking baking soda anyway! Why can’t they just stop shoving it down our throats?”

“Hey, Nathan? Nathan. How about you come over to the gallery and give me a hand with things? Get your mind off it. Just remember that you finished it and you are getting paid.”

“Yeah, yeah. Why are you over there? It’s Sunday.”

“I had nothing else better to do. Come on, I wanna see you.”

“Alright, I will be there in about a half hour. I have to shower first.”

“That’s fine. See you soon.”

Justin hung up and went out to help Max with some of the paintings that they were bringing in. He recognized one of the paintings as Aisha’s. They had come across a twelve year old girl who lived in Brownsville. She would have put his younger self to shame. She came from a low income area and she and her three siblings were being raised by her grandmother. For the past year and a half, she would take the train after school or in the morning on the summers and weekends to Central Park and paint there. She offered to do portraits, painted the scenery, painted something from her imagination. She was just trying to bring in a little money back to her family to help out. He ended up finding her one day about six months ago and she had told him she did this because she was too young to get hired anywhere and didn’t want to do the things her older brother had done because he was dead now. That statement had startled him to say the least, so he had given her his contact information and had spoken with her grandmother. He sent her art supplies, canvases, some money for the work that she would do outside of school and checked on her progress every week. She had managed to make fourteen paintings. She was going to get one of the main rooms of the ground floor to herself and get to share a show with three other people. If he had doubted his decision before, he no longer did when she had thrown herself at him and thanked him profusely with tears streaming down her face.

“So Justin, how has your weekend been going?” Max asked him as they each carried a painting out of the van.

“It’s been...going. How has yours been?”

“Alright. I don’t know if Lola told you, but she made a couple of big sales an hour or so before you came in.” Max said with his voice filled with pride.

“That’s awesome. I will give her the commission money from it.”

“Yeah, I just thought you should know that she is doing a good job.”

Max had been working for him since May, after he graduated college in Art History. He was a sweet guy with a round face and thick glasses. He was sort of awkward and nervous and would babble when he got overwhelmed but he was very meticulous about the paintings and Justin genuinely liked the guy. Lola started her year long internship in September. It would take someone who was deaf and blind to not be able to realize that Max was head over heels when it came to Lola. He thought about asking Max why he hadn't asked her out yet, but he figured it wasn’t his place as their supervisor.

About half an hour passed and Nathan came in. He seemed to be in an okay mood as he came over to Justin and kissed the living daylights out of him, then started kissing his jaw.
“Missed you.” Nathan purred into his ear.

“You saw me two days ago.”

“Still missed you. Let’s go into your office.”

“Nathan, I want to help them with the paintings first.”

“Fine. After though, I want you to fuck me ov-”

“Nathan. Employee and intern in the next room.”

“Whatever. What do you need help with?”

“Just help me sort some paintings and decide on where to put what. We aren’t actually moving anything today but I want the paintings and sculptures we have to get designated places before Christmas.”

So he and Nathan got to work and decided where to put what. And Nathan put up with Justin’s over-analyzing of what should go where for the best lighting and exposure like he usually did and after a few hours they had gotten the majority of work completed. Nathan had suggested Justin go with him grocery shopping so they could make dinner together. While that went okay, making dinner had happened much later since Nathan literally had his clothes off as soon as he went through the door and Justin was fucking him against the kitchen table. Eventually, dinner did get made and they did sit down to eat. Justin was quiet until Nathan spoke up.

“Why are you so weird today?”

Justin didn’t register the question.

“Justin.”

Justin looked away from his plate and at Nathan.

“Huh?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh. Nothing.”

“Liar. You have been quiet all day. You were more or less going through the motions while you were fucking me. What is wrong?”

“Don’t worry about it, Nathan. I’m just feeling weird. Probably coming down with a cold or something.”

“Is it something I did?”

“No.”

“I know that I have been sort of moepy and I whine about the commercial stuff, but that is just me venting. Tell me if I ever bother you with it.”

“You aren’t bothering me. It is nothing, I assure you.”

Justin got up to wash his plate in the sink. He felt arms come around him and settle on his stomach,
and lips on his shoulder.

“Love you, Justin,” Nathan mumbled into his shoulder, "More than I have ever loved anyone."

Justin touched one of his hands, brought it up to his mouth, and kissed it. If he didn’t speak, then he didn’t have to lie.
Brian and Eric come home, discuss Justin, and get some alone time.

Lily fell asleep on the cab ride home, so there was a reason not to bring anything up quite just yet. She had her head on Eric’s chest as she puffed out soft breaths onto his neck. So he could pretend that this was why Brian was barely saying a word as on the 40-odd block drive to their apartment.

He had been surprised to say the least that he had actually gotten along with Justin. It wasn’t like he was expecting a downright brawl over Brian with them scratching each other’s eyes out. But he hadn’t expected to talk about living in New York or each other’s careers and especially not about their respective experiences with their mutual acquaintance, Brian Kinney. But they had. He had found that he had respected Justin. He would go as far as to say he sort of liked him so far. But Brian more or less had sat there and occasionally chatted with Lily. It was times like those where he wanted to remind his fiancé to keep his people skills in check a little better. But he understood that it was probably awkward for Brian, to say the least.

The cab approached their building and they paid the driver. They rushed into the entrance to get inside away from the cold and took the elevator up to their floor. Brian got his keys out of his pocket and opened the door for Eric and Lily. Eric walked past him to put Lily down in her bed. He took off her coat, shoes, hat, and scarf, then tucked her in. After she was settled, he quietly shut the door to her bedroom and turned to Brian.

“So…” Eric started.

“What was that about?” Brian blurted out.

“What was what about?”

“You know what I am talking about. With Justin and the whole, ‘Oh, Justin! I am sure we will see each other very soon! We can even stop by the gallery tomorrow!’” Brian mocked as he kicked off his shoes and collapsed onto the couch.

“I think we remember things differently.”
“Whatever, I was paraphrasing.”

“I was trying to be nice to him. He was respectful to me and I owed him the same courtesy,” Eric explained, “He seems very nice and I don’t know many people in this city yet outside of a few potential clients, so I wanted to make conversation.”

“…What, you want to be friends with him?”

“I am not aiming for that necessarily, but I am not completely against it. I was also trying to make up for your lack of conversational skills. You are the one who brought him to lunch and then you didn’t really say much and left the conversation up to us. It would have been awkward if we had just sat there.”

“Yeah…about that. I was just…”

“Weirded out? Uncomfortable?”

“Pretty much. Sorry.”

“I get it, Brian. I know it had to have been weird for you. I do know you. I know what you felt for him and that he will always hold a big place in your heart…I just hope that if we see him again or start seeing him on a regular basis that I don’t have to worry about my place in it too much?”

Brian sat up to look at Eric who, for the first time in years, looked a little insecure when it came to Brian’s feelings for him. Brian hated seeing that look on his face. Brian got up and crossed the room to Eric. He pulled him in for a deep kiss and put his arms around him. Even though he had opened up more in the last several years due having both Justin and Eric in his life, he still hated saying the stuff he was about to say. But the truth needed to be put out there and he wouldn’t begrudge Eric of it.

“Of course you don’t have to worry. I live with you. I share a daughter with you. I love you. Justin may have been the first person I have ever fallen for but not the only person. You, Lily, and Gus are the three most important people in my life. Okay?”
“I know. You too.”

Brian started to kiss him again and gently directed him to their bedroom. Eric unbuttoned Brian’s shirt and kissed his chest and collar bone as he slid it off. After the rest of their clothes were discarded, they fell back onto the bed. Eric managed to get Brian onto his back and plant kisses down his torso to his pelvis. He took Brian’s cock in his mouth and did every trick he knew worked on his lover to make him moan and pant with need. When he brought Brian close to release he stopped and traveled back up his body to kiss him again.

“Hmmph, wha?” Brian started to say through the kiss.

“You said something when you texted me today that intrigued me.”

Brian looked confused for a moment and thought back to earlier. He rolled his eyes and huffed out a laugh, then looked at Eric.

“Well... get to it then.”

“Are you giving into more of your primal urges in your advanced years, old man?”

“Please. You are NOT that far behind me and you are still my good little bottom 75% percent of the time.”

“I think it is more like 70%”

“Says you. Are you wanting me to change my mind?”

Eric laughed and planted kisses all over his partner's face, then looked into Brian's eyes, and said, “I want to see you when I am inside of you.”

Brian looked nervous for a moment, then looked back into his eyes and nodded. He spread his legs so Eric could settle himself in between them and felt Eric’s lubed fingers at his entrance. Brian gasped when Eric touched his prostate and moaned when his lover finally entered him. As Eric increased his speed, Brian wrapped his legs tighter around Eric, pushed back towards his thrusts,
and rolled his hips for the maximum amount of pleasure. As Eric came inside of him and brought Brian to completion as well, he did something he hadn’t had to do in a while and tried to get Justin’s face out of his head.
Liberty and Church

Chapter Summary

Brian thinks his past with Eric in Pittsburgh.

Chapter Notes

This is the long chapter I had written before 4 and 5. It felt right to put it here. I am preparing myself for some hate. Just remember, Britin shippers, I am one of you! Even though this story makes me comes off as though I am not.

Contrary to the former popular belief, Brian Kinney was able to find love. Yes, he found it with Justin. But he had also found it with Eric. He remembered Mikey and Ted seeming to wait for him to crash after he broke up with Justin for good. They had expected him to return to his wicked ways and make flyers for Orgy Loft Night featuring your favorite ingestible letters of the alphabet. But that (surprisingly, he might give them that) hadn’t happened. The first month he did use fucking as a coping mechanism, yes, but they were mostly call boys that looked like Justin and probably pitied him when they let him hold them. He knew how fucking pathetic he had been. It hadn’t been like that last time because, as much as he still wanted Justin, he actually wanted to move on as well.

It hurt that most of his friends couldn’t see that he had changed, but it was a stab to the heart that Justin couldn’t see what he wanted until he drove the point home and basically got an, “I’m not interested right now” in return. But his previous methods weren’t working this time around. He briefly wondered if he should see a therapist but he had too much pride for that, so no thanks. Plus, people broke up all the time. The only difference with this time around with Justin is that he knew deep down it was for good. So that was when he, Brian Kinney, would do what the average heartbroken person did as a lonely single thirty-something who wanted more out of life than a quick fuck. Rebound. He asked a few guys from Babylon out, but they kept asking him when they were going back to the loft to fuck and that they appreciated being taken out to a four star Italian restaurant but carbs wouldn’t do a thing for their figure. Brian knew he would have to try something else.

He doesn’t know how his friends did not find out about him going to a gay singles mixer. God that had been so fucking embarrassing. He felt like he morphed into Ted Schmidt as soon as he walked into the room. Then he pushed himself and cruised the ones who were good looking yet approachable. He knew he had fucked the majority of them already. He saw them look into his direction and whisper to each other. He just had to avoid the ones who did that then and that was good because it made him focus on more viable options. He tried making small talk with a few people but eventually someone would bring up something along the lines of, “So is this your first
time cruising for a fuck in a place like this?” There had been one man. He even remembered his
name Evan…something. He remembered his first name. But they had a good conversation. He
found him to be passionate and interesting. Evan was a doctor who worked at Allegheny General.
He took his job several months earlier after he finished his time with Doctors without Borders.
Brian remembered being engrossed In Evan’s history and his passion for his career. He also was a
good looking man. So Brian did something he hadn’t done in, well…ever: Asked someone out on a
date. Without knowing how good they were in bed first. He worked up the courage and asked if
Evan would like to have dinner with him that coming Friday. Evan looked uneasy and Brian had
gotten this response:

“Brian, you are an interesting guy and seem very nice. You actually seem pretty perfect. I
appreciate you asking. However, the stories I’ve heard about you since I have moved here, while
impressive, aren’t what I am looking for in a partner. I am sorry. Oh, what do you know? My
friend is right over there! It was nice talking to you.”

So after that embarrassing night, Brian Kinney became convinced that he wouldn’t find anyone.
Ever. For the first time in his life he wished that he had been more discreet about his stud status.
Queening out ever so slightly by figuring there was no point in trying anymore, Brian threw
himself into his work like he had never before and started being a regular at Babylon again. He
hadn’t gone back on drugs though and only kept weed and alcohol in the mix. He doesn’t know
why he didn’t start taking them again after he kicked Justin out of his life but for some reason he
didn’t want to keep them around anymore. He sent Justin to work on being the biggest success he
could be and he wanted to do the same.

He signed more accounts within two months than he had in the past six months (and the number
within those six months was admirable.) The money Kinnetik was making was absolutely
incredible. He gave all of his junior ad executives and Ted a nice raise and gave Cynthia a
promotion to become an ad executive as well. He knows he should have done it before, but she was
his favorite (and most well-paid) assistant he ever had and he knew no one would live up to her. He
himself also had a lot of money on his hands, especially with the money he saved up for an
apartment and a New York branch not being spent. Ted, who didn’t even know he kept every cent
of his New York savings, suggested he treat himself to a vacation since he had been working non-
stop but he didn’t want time on his hands to think about a certain someone right now. Ted got the
hint and suggested another car or club. He didn’t need another car or a fucking dance club right
now. When had Ted become the shallow one? So, he created a $30,000 scholarship for college
students in need who were not receiving any financial assistance from their parents. He also made a
few traveling grants that let a deserving art student in Pennsylvania and each of its bordering states
go to Europe for a summer to study their craft. But considering the money Brian had, he wanted to
do something more substantial. It wasn’t until he heard about Corey Price, who lived in a small
town in West Virginia about 45 minutes outside of Pittsburgh.

He usually didn’t feel much but a slight twinge of sadness for a gay kid who got the short end of
the stick (with the exception of one certain teenager. He still feels enraged over what happened to
him.) But for some reason Corey Price’s death had struck home. Not being the most conspicuous
of gay teens, Corey put shame on his mother and enraged his new step-father, who was the coach
of the football team. Corey must have been a brave and stupid little shit, coming out at the age of 15 to everyone. He stood up for a couple of the gay and lesbian seniors at his high school and demanded respect. Everyone in their town knew. The kid got harassed non-stop. One day he came home after studying at a friend’s house and there was Coach Burless and six of his finest players there in the garage waiting for him. He tried to run but was caught quickly. His step-father wanted to “teach him a lesson.” That lesson included over fifty kicks to his stomach and head. He died on the concrete floor due to blunt force trauma and internal bleeding.

The students were all under eighteen and more or less just got a slap on the wrist with small juvie and community service sentences. His step-father only got eight years in prison, eligible for parole in three, since he never actually kicked his step-son, only let it happen. Brian remembers reading about it and feeling absolutely disgusted by the story. He wished that Corey could have gotten away from his family and that life. He knew what it was like having hateful parents and they hadn’t even known he was gay until he was an adult. All of the sudden, he wanted these teens to have a place to go in case things got too rough. He wanted them to have every chance at life and to be encouraged by someone who cared about whether they lived or died. He wanted this center to be huge and give opportunities that Pittsburgh may not have much of yet. He started contacting the people he needed to contact, got permissions and grants from the city, the Department of Child Welfare, the Department of Education, PIFA, Pittsburgh Institute of Technology. He contacted various college professors, retired teachers, nurses, counselors, cooks, artists and musicians interested in giving lessons, basically anyone that might be interested in committing some time once this place was up and running.

Of course it needed to be built. He wanted it to be beautiful and welcoming. He wanted a desirable place for people to turn their heads at. Brian knew he needed to find the best person for the job who could see the full potential of what this center could become. So he did his research and came across Eric Davisson. From what he could tell, Eric was five years younger than he was yet he had already taken home the Pritzker Prize as well as collecting a number of other awards. He was incredibly attractive, in a sweet and cute sort of way. From a few of the interviews he could find, the guy seemed open-minded and approachable, but there was no denying his talent and genius. Adding all of that up, plus the fact that he made Brian’s gaydar ping a little, he knew he had to have him for this project. So he wrote him an email with his plan and who had committed to it. They talked on the phone and negotiated, then Eric said he would come in that coming Monday to meet him at Kinnetik. Brian arranged for a car to pick him up, paid for a ticket, and paid for his sublet.

The first time he met Eric was memorable. And not for the old reason of “little did he know, he would be meeting the father of his child.” Sure, he supposes that was part of it, looking back. But it was when Cynthia let herself in, confused and strangely amused, then exclaimed, “Brian! My first boyfriend is here to see you. You finally get to meet the man I gave a hand job underneath the gym bleachers.” After getting a little surprised over the possibility that she might be talking about the architect he was meeting today, Brian made some quip along the lines of, “If he is your ex, then you must not have been very good. Cynthia, I’m shocked.” He followed her out into the lobby and
From then on they worked side by side at a constant rate. He found his confidence and knowledge in what he was doing inspiring and he just liked being around Eric in general. Within a few days, he did subtly get out of him the affirmative statement, “Yes, Brian, I am gay. Cynthia was the beginning of my relatively long string of denial.” And Brian felt relief at that. He wondered why at first, but assumed that it was due to him just having more gay friends by a large margin. He hadn’t had a real conversation or relationship with a straight man outside of business and Carl in years. Over the next couple of weeks, he started to tell Eric more and more about his friends and family, his past, even what he wanted to be when he was six years old. He even told him a little bit about breaking up with Justin for the last time when they had a little bit too much to drink one night several hours after everyone went home. In turn, he heard about Eric’s life, his asshole parents, that he would like a family one day, and that his first boyfriend cheated on him with a married woman. Brian tried not to laugh at that but it was a hard feat. He is sure it was upsetting at the time.

It took another week to realize that he wasn’t over Justin, but he was also feeling something significant for Eric. He found the best part of his day to be when they were working and talking together. He felt butterflies when they went out to eat after hours of planning and getting together a construction team. He knew it was two colleagues, maybe friends, that were just taking a break together, but he found himself wanting it to be more than that since Eric was starting to sneak into the last thoughts he had before he fell asleep each night when usually he only thought of Justin. He felt like he needed to know more because all he knew was that Eric didn’t have a partner in his life at the moment.

They had been working late again. They actually had a slight argument earlier that night about how utterly controlling and picky Brian was and that he was a total perfectionist. It might have been Brian’s imagination, but Eric looked almost fond when he spoke of those qualities. He ended up apologizing for putting stress on Eric’s design and Eric looked pensive, then looked at him.

“Brian, what you were doing wasn’t a bad thing. I got defensive and I was tired. I know why you are wanting to spend extra time on the design.”

“Because I am controlling, picky, and a total perfectionist?”

“Yeah, sort of. But it is more than that. You want this to work, and not for yourself. You want to give these kids a chance to prosper, to meet other kids and adults like themselves, and to know that people care about them, in a way that our parents didn’t care for us. You want them to open up their eyes in wonder every time they walk in and hope they will know that they can be someone beautiful. That they can be big fucking successes AND be gay, yet there will still be people who love them for it unconditionally. So yeah, you are going to be controlling, picky, and a total
Brian remembered feeling a little overwhelmed because he felt like someone had finally listened to him and hadn’t immediately assumed the worst. Someone who wasn’t using the word “asshole” or “prick” or “heartless bastard” to describe him. Before he knew it, he found himself doing something that he hadn’t done with anyone besides Justin in years. He was kissing Eric, with every bit of tenderness and passion he was feeling and Eric was kissing him right back with just as much fervor. Before he knew it, they were taking off each other’s clothes. Brian ended up having what was the closest he had come to making love since he had been with Justin. He found himself smiling at Eric as they lay there on the floor afterwards. Then, he gathered the courage to ask the one thing he thought about asking for about a week now.

“So…you want to go out to dinner and a movie on Friday? I am a proper gentleman and I want to take this slow.”

He remembers Eric laughing and looking at him, his eyes bright with amusement.

“Only if you fuck me into the floor again. And pay.”

They didn’t move all that slowly. They were having sleepovers a few times a week and spending at least five evenings a week together working and taking very productive breaks after most of the employees of Kinnetik went home for the night. Sometimes Eric would come by during office hours as well. So after a few weeks, he knew he probably should tell at least a couple of people who regularly saw him and Eric together that they were seeing each other. He let Cynthia know first. He didn’t want her to walk into his office with her high school boyfriend bent over his desk without any kind of warning. So he sat her down.

“Cynthia, I have something to tell you.”

“Yeah, Brian?”

“I-…I don’t exactly know how to say this.”
“Are you fucking Eric?”

“…Yes, but—”

“But it is more than that. It isn’t that shocking. You have been spending most of your time together and ignoring your friends’ calls most of the time as well. I’ve seen how you have been looking at him. It reminds me of—never mind. I am happy for both of you. And surprised you waited almost a month before doing anything with him. That is like eight months in gay time. Gay male time that is. I’m not close with any lesbians, so I wouldn’t know about them. I should broaden my horizons.”

She gave him a kiss on the cheek and walked back to her desk, with the sassy clack of her heels sounding against the floor.

Besides Cynthia, Ted was the only other person he told that day. Ted didn’t have psychic premonitions over his love life like Cynthia revealed she had, so he was forced to talk about his feelings.

“Brian? You wanted to see me?”

“Sit down, Theodore.”

…

“I’m sitting, Brian.”

“Right.”

“Brian, is everything alright?”

“Yes. Things are fine.”
“Okay. I am just concerned. Ever since-never mind-you have worked yourself so hard and I know Michael is your best friend but I feel like we have become very close since working together. You are one of my dearest friends and I just want you to be happy.”

“Theodore, I am the one who brought you in to talk.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“…You are one of my closest friends too.”

“Well, I appreciate that a lot, even though it looks like you are going to burst a vessel.”

“Ted! Are you listening?”

“I’m listening.”

“Good. Because you are the only one I am telling about this, besides Cynthia. And I am only saying it once. If you tell anyone at all before I am ready for it to be known, I will rip out your intestines and shove you off a balcony.”

“Oooh, this must be juicy.”

“Theodore, please give me your word. I am only telling you because it might slip in the office since he will be here a lot anyway.”

“He? Brian-“

“Eric and I have been seeing each other. I…feel something for him.”

…
“Why do you look so shocked?”

“What about Justin?”

“What do you mean, what about Justin?”

“I thought you might, I don’t know, patch things up.”

“We weren’t eye to eye on a lot of things.”

“I haven’t really talked to him at all since he left. I know he wanted monogamy and marriage before and you were never-“

“You’re wrong. It turned out he was the one that didn’t want to take that step, Ted.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“But he said yes to marrying you before and if he knew you still-“

“Ted! I don’t want to talk about him.”

“I’m sorry, Brian.”

“Whatever.”

....
“Eric is a great guy. I can tell you both really like each other.”

“Yeah. I like him a lot.”

“Hey, that’s good! I’m happy for you. I promise I won’t say anything, Brian. And if any of the gang gives you any shit, I’ll side with you, so don’t worry about that.”

“…Thanks, Theodore.”

It took him a total of three months of being with Eric to introduce him to his makeshift family. Eric had signed a year lease on an apartment about six weeks before. He was extending his stay in Pittsburgh to see the completion of the center and, Brian would like to think, because they had started something. The gang, surprisingly, didn’t find out about his relationship until he told them at dinner while Mel and Lindsay were in to visit with the kids. He introduced him professionally as “the great architect he enlisted to help him with The Gay and Lesbian Youth Center” during dinner and didn’t introduce Eric as his boyfriend until Gus went into the other room to play with JR. Gus was still missing Justin and he didn’t want to upset him by being with someone else. He remembers the silence at the table and all their faces filled with blank shock when he had exaggeratedly cleared his throat and announced,

“If I can have everyone’s attention, please. While it is true that Eric and I have been working together on the center and overseeing the construction of it together, we have also been seeing each other for about three months now. Before you all get outraged that I kept my personal business personal, I wanted to wait until I felt a little more secure about it. So…I would like everyone to meet Eric….my boyfriend.”

When no one said a word and Brian saw Ted mouthing and gesturing some shit that was probably supposed to be comforting, Emmett started to clap and squeal then grabbed Eric’s hand.

“Oh, Eric! It is so nice to meet you! Your hands feel so nice, what kind of lotion do you use? Sweetie, you just know that any lover of Brian’s is a-Brian stop looking at me like that, I am just trying to be friendly!”

Then the exclamations and remarks came.

“Why would you try to keep him hidden away, you little asshole? Look at him! He’s gorgeous!”
“Brian, why wouldn’t you tell me? I’m your best friend! Ted, why don’t you look surprised by this news? What do you mean you have known about it for almost two months?”

“Michael, calm down. I am absolutely sure Brian had very logical reasons for keeping this to mostly to himself for a while. Eric, sometime we should discuss how architecture has changed over the course of the centuries and how modern buildings reflect the visions of our ancestors from long ago. What do you think about the architectural designs in Tibet?”

“Good luck with Kinney, Eric. He is definitely a piece of work to say the least.”

“Why, Brian! This is quite a piece of news to throw on all of us! And so soon after Justin.”

This went on and on until Brian finally cleared his throat and glared at all of them. They all reverted back into their silence.

“Would you all please just shut up?”

He turned his head to Eric, gave a small smile, and held his hand. He turned back at his family.

“I know you are all surprised. I get that you don’t see me as the type of man who is meant to be tied down to someone or even the type of man who someone would even think about being with long-term.”

“Brian, we never meant-“

“Come on, Brian, you know-“

“We are just surprised, Bri-“

Brian holds up his hand to silence them again.

“You all know I wasn’t at my happiest for a while. I know you were concerned, and I appreciate that. So you should also know that Eric here has made my life a lot easier since then. He makes me
happy too.

Everyone at the table was staring at him in shock, yet again. Finally, they gave him their approval.

“Oh honey, you know I would never disapprove of your new cute beau!”

“Brian, I am so glad you are happy, you little shit.”

“I was just surprised about it, Brian. I have just been worried about you for a while. I want you to be happy. You are my best friend.”

“We would love to have you both over, Brian.”

“Good for you, Kinney.”

“Brian, don’t get me wrong, I am happy if you are, but you are sort of a bit,” Lindsay let out a huff of laughter, “wild, don’t you think? You have always been the type to refuse to be saddled and ridden.”

Eric looked at Lindsey and tilted his head.

“Who says I’m saddling him? We aren’t into pony play.”

Brian looked at him with a big grin on his face and made the decision to knock all of their socks off.

“And he does not only ride me. We take turns.”

He stood Eric up and kissed him (he added some extra tongue for effect) and then turned to his friends, who all were failing to pick their jaws up off the floor.
“Well everyone, we must be off. Got to get JR a birthday present for Sunday and Lindsey, I want to take Gus out tomorrow. Explain things and make sure he is okay with Eric. Later.”

Despite his feelings for Eric only getting stronger as time passed, it was hard for the first year or so. By the time their one year anniversary came along, the center was completed and Brian got all weird and distant when he thought Eric might want to leave. But then Eric sat him down and said that he wanted to move his office here. He fell in love with Pittsburgh and fell in love with Brian. The commitment and consideration put into the move relieved, flattered, and scared Brian. It was new for him that someone was willing pack up their lives to be with him, of all people. He felt conflicted about it all. Also, being with someone other than Justin sometimes got to him when the blonde popped up in his head during his dreams or when he saw a painting that looked similar to his style. He sometimes would backtrack and get weird about being just with one man.

Despite wanting to try monogamy, he found it a bit hard in that first year as well. Once in a while, they got with another couple or brought a trick home together, but he knew Eric, who enjoyed it enough, wasn’t as into it as he was. Whenever he got into one of his dark moods or something bad happened, he always felt tempted. He remembered how much that had fucking scared him because he never wanted to make a promise he didn’t end up keeping. When he and Eric had been together for about a year, he did actually slip up. His mother ended up in the hospital due to a heart attack, they didn’t know if she was going to make it at the time, and his family felt comfortable asking him for money but also felt comfortable with fighting him for a house he didn’t want nor was up for grabs yet and insulted him due to who he was at the same time. It wasn’t anything they hadn’t said before. But he had kept himself separated from his family ever since his bout with cancer and he forgot how much they could fuck with head.

So one night, he got extremely drunk and brought some nameless trick back home from Babylon. He was so out of it that he passed out and the guy stayed over. He would have confessed to Eric anyway, but he had walked up to the loft and found the guy pulling his pants on. It would have been better if Eric would have screamed at him or even took a swing at him. He remembers how he felt when he found out about the fiddler and he knows that if Eric feels anything close to what he felt for Justin then he probably feels gutted. Instead, he stands there looking at the ground as the trick leaves. Neither of them had said a word. Finally, Brian had finally broke the silence.

“Eric, I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Why did you do it, Brian? I-I thought things were good. Did I…did I do something?” Eric’s voice broke while a tear fell down his face that he quickly wiped away to hide the evidence. He cleared his throat, “I just don’t get what happened.”

“I don’t know what happened. I fucked up.”
“No, you fucked another guy, Brian!”

“I know that and I said I’m sorry.”

Eric took deep breaths to gain control, then spoke.

“Brian, I have been cheated on before. Usually I would just leave them or we would just decide to be fuck buddies instead. But I never cared for any man the way I care about you. Yet again, that makes this hurt ten times more than any of their slip ups. But I want to try to work this out with you.”

“You can’t. I’m so fucked up.”

Eric came over and put his hand on his arm.

“Come here. Sit down with me. What’s going on?”

“Why the fuck are you being so understanding?”

“Because I love you. So much. You seem upset and I think you may have done this because something happened?”

Brian took a deep breath in and then out. “I don’t talk about this shit.”

“Just try.”

Eric pulled him in and Brian put his head on his shoulder as they sat there together.

“My mother had a heart attack. She needs bypass surgery but they think her heart is too weak.”

“I’m so sorry.”
“I haven’t seen her since I had cancer. That was when she told me that God gave me cancer because I’m a fag.”

“What a bitch.”

Brian snorted, “Yeah that’s my mom. They just said some things that implied that I was the scum of the earth. They wanted money for the surgery. I wrote her a check but then Claire started getting on me about Mom not wanting a fag living in her house if she dies and that I better not fight her on it. As if I would want to live there. My mom saw that I was there and I tried to be nice to her, so I just told her hello and she said to me, ‘Unless you have stopped turning your back on God, I want you out of my sight. I don’t need the added grief.’ So I left the hospital, went to Babylon, drank and took some E, then took that guy home. There was no talking or kissing or even exchanging names. Just fucking. And I’m sorry. I am so sorry if I hurt you. I hurt people that I love, that’s what I do.”

Brian was so distressed at this point that he didn’t realize what he had said in his last sentence.

“I thought you were all about no apologies, no regrets.”

“Well, I am changing my mind due to my previous actions.”

“That’s something.”

They sat there in silence for another minute before Eric spoke again.

“Is that what you want? An open relationship? Are you wanting to hook up with other couples more or bring tricks home or have more threesomes? I just need to know, Brian. I can try to do that if that is something you feel that you want instead.”

“I don’t know. I want something more than tricks. Eventually I want…”

“What Justin wasn’t able to give you yet?”
Brian shrugged.

“You know I want something like that as well, Brian. That’s why I moved here, to try to be with you.”

“I know. But I don’t want you to-“

“Brian, shut up. I’m not regretting anything. I had only been in Boston finishing up a job when you contacted me. Yeah, a lot of tech companies are wanting their headquarters built in Palo Alto so I was technically living out there, but my colleagues I worked with are still out there and I put my name on enough places for people to reach out if they really wanted to. You did and I had never even built anything in Pennsylvania.”

Brian didn’t know what else to say to that so he sat there in Eric’s arms and waited for him to speak again.

“I just want to know if you are willing to work this out too. Don’t you know how much I care for you?”

Brian nodded, let out a shuddery sigh, and said, “I just need to work on some things. On me.”

“Okay, what do you want to do?”

‘Want to do’ wasn’t exactly the right phrase. He didn’t want to do it at all.

“I think I should, I don’t know…see someone. Like a therapist.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I saw a therapist a year or so after I graduated college. I told you it took me a while to admit I was gay. It actually really helped me open up more. Don’t feel embarrassed about it, Brian.”
It was at that point that Brian swallowed his pride and worked out his issues. Not only his issues with entering a monogamous relationship so quickly but also his issues he had after Justin. He went to see his therapist once and sometimes even twice a week for about eight months. Eric was very supportive throughout the whole thing and went to almost half the sessions so he could understand where Brian was coming from. Surprisingly, it had helped a lot. He came up with better coping mechanisms when he was distressed. He learned to be more open and assertive with what he was feeling to Eric and his friends. He learned to be more adamant when it came to dealing with Lindsey and Melanie. He wanted to see his son more and he wanted his son to know his partner better.

He also learned that he would always love Justin. That what they had shared was special and intense. But he didn’t have to let the fact that the relationship fell apart keep him from not moving forward and forming just as a meaningful relationship with someone else. He thought about contacting Justin a few times, to see how he was doing or at least get some closure. But he didn’t want to tempt himself with anything if Justin wanted to meet again. He didn’t want to get upset if he found out that Justin had found someone else because that would be downright hypocritical of him. He realizes that he may have acted too harshly when it came to how he treated Justin when he kicked him out. He feels badly about it now. He knows that Justin is young and wanted to experience life a little more. Maybe if he ran into him by chance in Pittsburgh he could get some closure. He just couldn’t initiate it.

Time passed and Brian realized that he and Eric had been together for two years. Things were going really well. Brian had signed a lot of companies in Chicago so they were thinking about expanding there in about a year or so. Eric got work everywhere but made sure to come home on the weekends when he did get work farther away, work from home when possible, and made sure not to get quite as involved as he did with the preparations of the center. His friends had come to accept that Brian had changed and, while he would never be a stepford husband, he was only sleeping with one man now. Justin was never completely out of his mind. Deep down he knew his love for that kid would never come close to fading, but he learned to love two people with the same amount of intensity. It might have been harder if Justin was around, but he hadn’t seen or spoken with him for almost three years. He didn’t like to focus on that time gap. It got him depressed. So he focused on Eric, his son, his friends, and on Kinnetik and the center (which was doing quite well and getting a lot of kids on the right track.)

Brian was the one who actually brought up having kids. He had become neutral to the idea of raising a child. Brian had Gus, and he was enough. But Eric didn’t have any biological children. He didn’t want Eric holding back any kind of urge to want to care for a child. So he asked Eric what he thought about it over dinner.

“Eric?”

“Yes, Brian?”
“I just wanted you to know that if there is something you want, all you have to do is tell me.”

“What else would I want? I am actually very happy right now.”

“I know, but if you felt something was, I don’t know, missing from what you have.”

“Just say it, Brian.”

“Fine. Are you wanting kids?”

There was silence. Then Eric cleared his throat.

“Would that be something you would be interested in?”

“It isn’t something I wouldn’t be interested in.”

“If I had children, I would want to raise them. Their mother could be an active part of their lives, sure, but I would want custody with my partner, not the birth mother. I would want my partner to be the child’s father as well. Is that something that you wouldn’t interested in?”

Brian hesitated but then looked back at all the conflicting feelings he had over his situation with Gus’s mothers. Despite butting heads with Melanie pretty regularly, he actually had a lot of respect for the woman. He knew she loved her son with her whole heart and he knew Gus was happy. But a part of him wishes he would have fought harder to at least have him on a more regular basis when he was younger because he had yearned to be more of an influence in his life.

“I am still interested.”

Eric gave him a big smile and they started talking about their options. Soon, he became excited at the prospect. Eric suggested they ask Cynthia to mother the child. Brian was dubious. Not because he didn’t want her to mother a child he raised, why wouldn’t he? She was pretty, driven, smart, and successful. But she never seemed like the type to procreate. It didn’t hurt to ask though so they
worked out how to present their idea to her. It must have worked because, while she didn’t agree to
carry the kid (“I will bloat like a whale and be put on bed rest, Brian!” but Brian also thought she
refused to carry it to keep from getting too attached) she agreed to let them use one of her eggs. She
insisted to be called Aunt Cynthia and that, as long as she saw that baby on holidays and got to visit
them whenever she called in advance, she would be happy to be a part of this. They went through
an agency to find a surrogate. It was there they found Holly. She was a 27 year old divorced mother
of two kids and was taking classes online to make something more of herself. She had told the
agency that she would prefer a gay couple since she knew there was still prejudice about the gay
community and kids.

The months started to go by. All of their friends had been shocked by Brian Kinney, yet again, but
they were incredibly happy for the couple. When Brian and Eric had gotten a bigger place
together, the gang helped out with the nursery and brought them clothes, toys, and other supplies.
Both Eric and Brian were active when it came to going to Holly’s appointments. Even Cynthia
went to a few. They visited her on a regular basis to bring her food, offer to watch her kids, and just
to see how she was doing. Around the fifth month of Holly’s pregnancy, they found out they were
having a girl. Brian remembers how nervous he was. He didn’t know how to deal with girls. He
had already been nervous about raising a child that wasn’t biologically his. He remembered the
instant connection he had felt with Gus when he was born and Brian was afraid he wouldn’t feel
the same with their daughter. Eric seemed to sense his fears and told him that he knew what a big
heart Brian had, despite him not showing it all of the time. Even on the chance he didn’t feel an
instant connection, his love for her would grow as he spent more time with her. That helped a little,
but Brian was still nervous.

The day came when he got the call from Holly saying she was going into labor. Brian called
Debbie and asked her to head over to Holly’s to watch her kids as he and Eric drove over to pick
her up. Brian and Eric both led Holly to their car and got to the hospital in record time. Eleven
hours later, Lily Piper Davisson-Kinney was born. Brian had told Eric that Lily didn’t need his last
name because Davisson-Kinney was a total mouthful. But Eric had insisted because she was his
daughter too. He watched Eric hold Lily, looking down at her with so much love and devotion in
his eyes. He looked up at Brian, his eyes twinkling with pride and pure happiness, and asked,

“Brian, do you want to hold your daughter now?”

Brian felt hesitant but held his arms out to take the newborn. He prepared himself to not feel as
much as Eric did. That he would look down and just see a baby whom he had no real connection to.
He didn’t prepare to look down and fall in love with this little and beautiful baby girl with a hint of
Eric’s black curls in his arms. He didn’t expect to not be able to stop smiling. He didn’t expect to
cry tears of joy and to feel like someone so precious had been placed in his life. When he looked at
Eric and gave him a watery grin and a warm and loving kiss, he also hadn’t expected that he would
wonder a little what it would be like if it were Justin in Eric’s place instead.
Driggs and Grand

Chapter Summary

Justin sleeps over at Nathan's and finds out some surprising news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You gonna stay here tonight?”

Justin gratefully took his eyes off the movie. They were watching a disturbing French film about a woman who starts eating her own flesh because she gets a cut on her leg at a party. He didn’t know why a relatively minor flesh wound would cause you to practice autosarcophagy, but to each their own. It wasn’t really his kind of movie and by looking at Nathan’s nauseated and freaked out expression, he didn’t think it was his either. Sometimes random Netflix picks didn’t work in their favor. Justin sighed and looked at the clock. It was about a quarter after ten. He hadn’t really planned on staying over. He had a painting he needed to work on plus he felt like he needed to be alone. He thought going into the gallery and going to Nathan’s might help him get his mind off today but it hadn’t. Every time he let his mind wander, Brian was there. Nathan had known something was up. Usually he didn’t push Justin too much to keep him company, but he kept being overly affectionate and let him know they could do whatever Justin wanted that night. He asked Justin if he wanted to go out for drinks or something, but Justin hadn’t been in the mood to go out. That was why Nathan had said, “Let’s watch a movie. Come on, it can be something we have never seen before. We will pick the first thing Netflix Roulette gives us. It’ll be fun!”

So Netflix Roulette, in its infinite wisdom, had given them a movie that made Justin’s mind want go elsewhere and made Nathan squirm and go, “OH MY GOD, WHY?! WHY ARE YOU DOING THAT TO YOURSELF?! STOP IT! STOP IT!!” If Justin didn’t have his mind filled with other things, he would actually find it kind of funny. It was sort of ironic that Nathan could act all bad boy in his leather jacket and have a devil may care façade on stage but would let out high pitched whimpers when he watched someone cut their own skin off and eat it. Justin is sure that some rock stars have done worse.

“Justin? Are you staying here or not?” Nathan asked, who was now sitting up straight and wringing his hands.

“If you are really that freaked out, then fine.”

Nathan let out a breath in relief and let his body fall back into the couch.
“Oh good. I’m glad you are staying.” He sighed, then put his face into Justin’s shoulder and whined as the main character got some skin stuck in her teeth.

“Nathan, why don’t you just turn it off?”

“What do you mean? It’s movie night. Why would we not finish the movie on movie night?”

“Because you are freaked to all hell. Come on, turn it off.”

Nathan sighed, got the Roku remote off the coffee table, and pressed stop.

“I just want to spend time with you.”

“You can have that without forcing yourself to watch a woman eat herself alive.”

“Really?” Nathan looked at him with exaggeratedly wide and innocent eyes and Justin had to snort a little at that.

“Just this once.”

“Well, I should take this one opportunity to do something really special then…watch Going Down in La-La Land.”

“We have watched it four times already. It isn’t even all that good.”

“He’s so cute, Justin. You know how cute he is. He is almost as cute as you.”

“He’s okay, I guess.”
Nathan found the movie and put it on. When they were about fifteen minutes into it, Justin felt lips kissing the side of his neck and a hand traveling down to his denim-covered crotch. Justin sighed. His cock was starting to react, but he didn’t really want to fuck right now.

“Nathan…”

“I know you have something on your mind and you won’t tell me. I suppose I accept that. Just let me make you feel good, baby. Let me make you cum. Just close your eyes and relax.” Justin was growing harder so he closed his eyes and nodded. Nathan began to kiss his jaw and neck again and unzipped Justin’s pants. He pulled his pants and underwear down below his waist and started to stoke Justin’s cock.

Justin tried to let his mind go blank as the pleasure started to build up. His attempts were hopeless. Brian’s face was still in his mind, looming over him as Nathan whispered words Justin couldn’t quite focus on and started to jerk Justin in quicker motions.

“Now relax. I want you to always remember this, so that no matter who you’re ever with, I’ll always be there.”

Justin gasped and came all over Nathan’s hand. As Justin caught his breath, he slowly opened his eyes. He felt a little guilty and looked over to Nathan to see if he sensed anything was off or if he might have, god forbid, moaned out someone else’s name. But Nathan looked at him with a grin on his face and brought Justin in for a kiss.

“You feel better?” Nathan asked him as he got a tissue to wipe off his hand.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Justin started to feel tired and drifted off for a little bit. Before he knew it, Nathan helped him up with a, “Come on. Let’s get you to bed” and walked him to the bathroom so he could brush his teeth. Justin sat down on the bed, then took off his jeans and shirt and got under the covers. He felt the bed dip beside him and felt an arm wrap around him.

“Goodnight, Justin.”
“Night, Nathan.”

“Stop! Leave me alone! Get off of me!”

Justin woke up with a start and saw the red numbers on the alarm clock telling him it was 5:22 AM. He felt Nathan struggling against the blankets and heard him crying out in his sleep.

“Nathan. Nathan! Wake up. Come on, baby, it’s just a dream.”

Nathan struggled against Justin and wailed. Justin stroked his back and got the top half of Nathan’s body onto his lap so he could stroke his hair. Nathan’s shouts turned into cries which eventually turned into whimpers. Then he heard him groan, “Justin…”

“It’s okay. You’re okay. You are past that now. No one is going to hurt you again, I promise, alright?”

Justin sat on the bed with his back against the headboard. He felt Nathan’s tears drip onto his leg as he ran his fingers through his hair. Eventually, he felt Nathan fall back to sleep.

Around 9 am, Justin woke up with a stiff neck and Nathan was still sound asleep. Slowly, he shifted Nathan off of him and put his clothes back on. He needed to get back to the apartment but he wasn’t going to go until Nathan woke up. Justin sighed. Nathan’s nightmares had become less and less frequent, at least on nights they slept together. Usually just once every couple of months. He had met Nathan years after what caused them had occurred. It broke his heart when he had to witness them but it broke his heart even more when Nathan withdrew and became guarded for as long as a couple of weeks when a nightmare or flashback happened on a night he wasn’t there. He knew Nathan didn’t blame him for not being there when things like this happened or anything. Nathan would just go into a bout of depression and not deal with it the right way.

He decided to make him breakfast in bed. Justin was feeling bad about having other things on his
mind yesterday. Nathan hadn’t deserved for Justin to only be half there. Luckily, Justin had insisted Nathan buy actual food to work with so he made the two of them omelets with bacon, peppers, mushrooms, and cheese with some toast and orange juice on the side. He got a tray from underneath the sink and carried it to the bedroom. He put it down on top of the dresser and walked over to the bed. He crawled across it and stroked Nathan’s face to gently wake him up.

“Hmmm?” Nathan grumbled as he frowned and stretched.

“It’s 9:30.”

Nathan shrugged and turned back over, then mumbled, “Early enough to sleep another hour.”

“Come on, Nathan. I made you breakfast. Besides, I need to go back to the apartment soon to work on my painting. Eat with me.”

Nathan let out a long breath.

“Sorry, I just feel like I didn’t sleep very well last night.”

“I know. But maybe eating something might make you feel better. You can take a nap in a bit if you are still tired.”

Nathan slowly sat up and rubbed his eyes. He looked at him with a small and tired smile as Justin brought over the large tray. He let Nathan hold it as he went back around the bed to sit on top of the covers.

While he and Nathan ate, they just talked about any random things that passed through their heads. He didn’t think that Nathan remembered waking up last night so he didn’t say anything about it. Nathan usually avoided the topic anyway.

“So what day are you going up to Connecticut to see your mom for Christmas?”

For the past few years, Molly would get a ride from Morgantown to the Pittsburgh Airport and would stay in New York for a couple of days. They usually took a train up to Connecticut two days
before Christmas to see his mother and Tucker for the holidays. She usually had gotten a month off while she was in college and she still got a nice sized break since she was teaching Science at an elementary school (which made Tucker swell his chest up with pride since she had been inspired to teach by him.) Last year, he had invited Nathan to come up with them, but he had refused. Nathan’s parents had been dead for years and his memories of the holidays were not happy ones. He had gotten Justin a nice set of oil paints and a couple of canvases plus had written him and recorded a song. But he was not about actually celebrating Christmas at all.

“Actually, Molly, my mom, and Tucker are coming here this year. Molly is staying with me and Mom and Tucker are staying at Hotel Pennsylvania by Penn Station. We are going out to Hoboken later in the afternoon on Christmas day to eat dinner at Emmett’s and Drew’s.

“Oh. That’ll be fun.”

“Why don’t you come, Nathan? Come on, it isn’t that far out of the way. Emmett is a fantastic cook. He likes you and wants you there too.”

“But New Jersey is really far.”

“You KNOW it is a five minute train ride from Christopher St. I swear, you natives are so weird about Jersey.”

“Yeah, but I’m in Williamsburg, so I have to make two transfers just to get to Christopher St.”

Justin just stared at Nathan with an eyebrow raised. Nathan stared back at him, looked away, then started tapping the breakfast tray. Finally, he let out a sigh.

“Can you give me a day or so to think about it? I know I’m weird when it comes to things like this but I just don’t know how to-“

“Nathan, I understand. You don’t have to explain yourself to me. Give yourself a day. But I think you should know that you will probably have a good time.”

Nathan nodded. “I will probably go. If you think Emmett has enough space.”
“Nathan, it is a 3 million dollar townhouse. It has six bedrooms, a big kitchen, and a giant dining room with a table that can extend to fit probably almost 20 people. It’s almost disgusting how well off they both are. I think he has enough space to have you over for dinner. He told me to invite you.”

“Alright. I will let you know by tonight.”

“Yeah, just call me. I need to get back to my apartment,” Justin told him then hesitated, “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll be fine. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay. Call me if you need to talk to someone.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Justin kissed him on the forehead and said he would see him later. He put the dishes in the sink before he left, walked out the door into the hallway, went down the stairs, and was in the cold air again. He began to walk back to Bedford so he could take the L and transfer to the N at 14th Street to take him back to his apartment.

The train ride went relatively quickly and he walked to Mercer Street and went up to his loft. As he let himself in, his phone started ringing. Thinking it might be Nathan possibly remembering more of his nightmare, he got his phone out quickly. He looked at the Caller ID and saw it was Emmett.

“Hey, Em.”

“Hey, sweetie! How are you doing?”

“I’m doing okay. Just getting inside now, stayed the night at Nathan’s. How is everything with you?”

“Oh, so-so. Drewsie is all upset over the playoffs and I keep telling him that it isn’t his problem anymore but he gets all offended and says it will never not be his problem blah blah brotherhood
blah! But you know, the injury got to him and since this is his first year not playing he is a little touchy about the whole thing. Luckily, the last several months we have been busy with a certain project that is starting to come to fruition, so he is excited about that.”

“You still won’t tell me what you and Drew have been planning.”

“Well, we wanted to be sure and make sure things are on the right track. Now that they are, we are going to announce it at Christmas Dinner. So you don’t have to wait too terribly long.”

“I am excited to find out.”

“So you are coming right? You and your family for sure?”

“Yeah, Em. Wouldn’t miss it. Actually, I really think Nathan is going to come this year too. I told you how he gets during the holidays but I told him you had invited him and convinced him that it would be good for him.”

“Oh, that’s…great!”

“You hesitated.”

“Oh honey, you know I want him to come. I want him to have a good time and I want him to get to know me and Drew better. I like him fine. It’s just-“

“Does this have something to do with Brian and Eric moving to New York?”

“Oh! You…you know about that?”

“Why the hell wouldn’t you tell me?”

“Now, before you get too pissy, I was under the impression that they weren’t going to come until after the 31st at the absolute earliest but I guess they got a sublet at the beginning of December and moved in a few days ago. I thought I had some time to break the news and you haven’t seen each
other for so long, I didn’t see why I would need to tell you immediately.”

“Emmett, I saw him yesterday. I had lunch with him. And Eric and Lily.”

“You what?!”

“I ran into him on the street. Lily asked if I was coming to meet Eric for lunch too and Brian asked if I was hungry and I was curious so I went. That is how I found out.”

“What are the odds? Well, now that you know, I should probably tell you that I invited them for dinner. They usually go up to Toronto but they just moved here so Mel, Lindsay, and the kids are coming to them and staying in a hotel and since JR is coming, Michael and Ben are coming, Hunter is flying in from Los Angeles to be here too, and then Cynthia is coming in too, and-

“Cynthia?” Justin questioned.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t she? She’s technically Lily’s mother.” Emmett said offhandedly.

“Oh. That’s news to me, but go on.”

“Well anyway, it felt rude to not invite all of them when we have the space and we have all been friends for years. The more the merrier! So I suggested to them all that they come here for Christmas a couple of weeks ago. So it will be you, Nathan, Drew’s grandparents, Drewsie himself, me, your mother, your sister, and Tucker, like originally planned. We are just throwing in eleven other people, including your ex! It really isn’t that big of a deal! And since you already had lunch with Brian and won’t be so shocked that he lives in the area now and Nathan knows by now as well, you can both be better prepared to see him. Right? Justin? Are you still there?”

“Yeah. I may not have mentioned running into Brian to Nathan yesterday.” Justin confessed.

“Oh, honey…honey, that’s not good. You need to let him know.”

“I know that now! It just didn’t seem to be a big deal at the time, at least not a big deal to tell him right away, and it didn’t even occur to me that I would see them again so soon until you called!”
Maybe I can tell him that they will be there but not mention anything about lunch yesterday."

“And nicely ask Brian, Eric, and Lily to go along with it? Brian and Eric would maybe keep their mouths shut but you can NOT ask a three year old to pretend like she doesn’t know you.”

“Shit. You’re right.”

“And don’t you THINK about backing out, Taylor! I have already bought enough food to feed twenty people and then some. Do not take a quarter of my attending guests away now.”

“I will call him in a bit. It’ll be fine. I will just grovel a lot.”

“You better. Now, the real reason that I called is that I needed to ask you about how many guests are approximately going to be in attendance at your party so I know how many hors d'oeuvres to make.”

“Probably anywhere from sixty-seventy people. I will pay you extra to cover for more than that though, to stay on the safe side.

“Oh sweetie, please. You are a close friend. Don’t worry about it. It’ll be exciting to have an artsy New Year’s Eve party. Giving all those struggling artists some extra cash to ring in the New Year. I think it's wonderful.”

“We are all excited about it. Sorry to cut you short, but I better get off the phone. I need to work on this painting and do a few errands as well.”

“And call Nathan. Today, Justin.”

“I know. I will.”

“Alright, all I can really say is good luck!”

“Thanks, Em. Talk to you later.”
Justin hung up the phone and looked at his screen. He should probably call him now. But maybe it would be better to wait. He had a rough night so he might have fallen back asleep. But then again, it is better that he know before he calls to tell Justin if he is definitely coming or not. If he doesn’t then it might be fine, but if he does and Justin only brings it up then…

“Just fucking call him now, you coward.” Justin mumbled to himself as he pressed Nathan’s name and put the phone up to his ear.

The phone rang three times. Nathan picked up and sounded alert.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Hey. You miss me already? I bet you just barely got home.”

“Yep, that’s it.”

“Well, I miss you too.”

“Also I just wanted to call and see if you had thought more about Christmas dinner.”

“I don’t know, Justin. I might feel weird. I’ve only met your mom twice and I’m a lot younger than Emmett and Drew. I guess I could talk to your sister and stuff but I don’t really know any of them.”

“Yeah. I understand. I don’t want to pressure you into anything.”

“That’s good. But why are you all cool with me not coming now when you were really wanting me to this morning?” Nathan asked, sounding a little suspicious.

“I do want you to come!” Okay, Justin knew he sounded too defensive there.
“Seriously, what is up with you?”

*Just fucking tell him.*

Justin took a deep breath and began to speak.

“’There are going to be a few more people there than I originally thought.’

“Like whom?”

“Well, Drew’s grandparents, I guess.”

“Makes sense if they’re his grandparents.”

“Right. And some friends from Pittsburgh. Lindsay and Melanie. You met Lindsay once when she came in for my show, remember? Michael and Ben. Michael is the one I drew Rage with. All of the kids. Gus, JR, well Hunter really isn’t a kid anymore.”

“Gus, Gus…That is Lindsay’s son, right? The one she had with Brian?”

“Yeah. And speaking of Brian…”

There is a pause where neither of them speak. Nathan breaks the silence and says,

“So Brian’s coming?”

“Yes. With his partner and daughter.”

“Hmmm. All these people are flying out from Chicago and Toronto to have dinner in Hoboken?”
“Not from Chicago.”

“That’s where you told me Brian lived.”

“Kinnetik has been doing really well lately and apparently he bought a floor in a building on Madison Ave and he moved here just a few days ago.”

“Uh huh. And you just found this out?”

“Yes. Well, sort of. I found out yesterday afternoon.”

“You saw me yesterday. And today. Why wouldn’t you bring it up?”

Justin sighed and just came out and said it.

“Because I ran into him and his daughter yesterday and had lunch with them. And Brian’s partner. It wasn’t planned or anything, they just invited me to tag along. I didn’t know how to bring it up.”

“You could have brought it up by saying, ‘Hey, I ran into my ex and had lunch with him.’ It isn’t that hard.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“You were acting so weird and quiet yesterday. I knew something had to have happened.”

“It was nothing, Nathan. It was just a shock to see him after all these years. Most of the time I was with him he was practically a functioning alcoholic, drug user, and fucked everything that moved. It was weird seeing him settled down with a small family. I am sorry I didn’t tell you. It just put a lot on my mind.”

“And you felt like you couldn’t unload and share that with me at all?”
“I’m telling you now.”

Nathan let out a sigh. He was about to point out that the only reason Justin was telling him was because he might potentially meet Brian now. Nathan didn’t know that much about Brian, to be honest. He always thought he may never completely live up to Justin’s first lover though. Acting all jealous wouldn’t help now. Don’t get him wrong, he felt jealousy. He also felt betrayal because Justin hadn’t told him yesterday, even when Nathan had asked what was wrong. But that wasn’t the way to go about this. He had to be rational.

“So fine. He’s coming to Christmas dinner with his family. If that is the only thing you need to warn me about, then that’s nothing. I’m coming.”

“You-you’re coming to dinner?”

“Yeah, I’m still invited, aren’t I?”

“Well, yeah. I just don’t want you to feel weird. Because you were afraid you would feel uncomfortable before but now-“

“It’s no big deal. According to you, a lot of people will be there. I am sure I can find someone to chat with. If no one my age, then there is always Drew’s grandma. Just tell Emmett I’m coming.”

“Alright, if you’re sure…”

“I’m sure, Justin. You said you went back to your loft to paint, right? I should let you get to that then.”

“Yeah. Are you sure we’re okay?”

Nathan sighed, then answered, “Yes, Justin. It just surprised me a bit and okay, I’ll admit, that I am a little annoyed that you didn’t say anything yesterday, but I am sure that I will enjoy myself at dinner. We’re good. Now go be the genius that I know that you are. Love you.”
“…You too.”

Justin heard Nathan hang up and he took the phone down away from his ear.

He didn’t know how he felt about this.

Chapter End Notes

It literally took me 7 chapters to get through 24 hours in these characters lives. Well, six chapters. Since chapter 6 was catching you up in Brian's life with Eric. But still.

I feel like this story may be longer than I anticipated.
Chapter Summary

Brian thinks of the only two places he really called home as he, Eric, and Lily look at a townhouse in Brooklyn.

Chapter Notes

A/N: First, I would like to thank my new beta who found my story on Ao3, abenjami! Thanks again for making this hobby a little easier!

Two chapters are going up this time, since they are both short. But Chapter 10 WILL be the Christmas dinner chapter. I can promise you it will be long and a bit emotional. We will start to dip our toes in some real drama.

Please review! It makes me so happy to see that people are reading and feel moved enough to comment. Even if your comment totally puts down my story, I enjoy reading what people are thinking and have to say about it.

“Brian, I really love it. I love it so much.”

Brian looked around the townhouse. He had to give his partner props for finding it because it really was beautiful. Modern and sleek enough to appease him, but had a lot of creative individual touches that drew Eric in. As soon as Brian put Lily down onto the polished hardwood floor, she took off running and pointed out everything she liked. Granted, she had done that with every place that day (if Brian and Eric were lacking in anything, it was not good taste.) However, this place seemed to renew her sense of energy, which had been winding down with the last two places they had seen in Dumbo. Brian actually really liked the last place they looked at. It was almost right on the water and had rooftop access. It was a townhouse, but its style reminded him a lot of his loft in Pittsburgh.

However, Eric hadn’t been completely convinced and said, “Brian, I really like this place and it reminds me of Pittsburgh too, but you still have that loft. It is a great loft and we stay there frequently when we go back for business. I love it and I know that it means a lot to you sentimentally, don’t get me wrong. But don’t you want something just a tiny bit different this time? Can we please look at the next place, just to see? I know it is a bit more expensive but we are both doing really well and can afford it plus I really loved the pictures we looked at. If you still like this place a lot better we can make the call as soon as we step back out onto the street and we’ll make an offer and.”
Brian had just laughed and kissed Eric on his temple. “Eric, I don’t mind seeing the next place, you don’t have to work so hard to try to convince me. I’m not going to live in a place unless you absolutely love it. Let’s go back to the car before I get another parking ticket and we’ll head over there.” And that’s what they did. It turns out that it was worth looking at the next house on the list, just to see how happy and in awe the potential new home made his partner look.

Brian always handled change in odd ways. Sometimes he welcomed it and sometimes he detested it. When he found something he loved, it was hard for him to let it go. He had lived in several different places in his life. His parents had moved him and his sister around to about five different cheap apartments in the Pittsburgh area that he could remember before his mother’s father had passed away when Brian was thirteen and left his house to her. None of those places, not even the house, felt like a home. The closest before the loft was Debbie’s but he always made sure that he remembered he was just a guest. When he moved into his loft in Pittsburgh, it represented so many things to him, most of those things brought on by change. It represented the new starts in his life. He was only 24 when he made the purchase. It had been the first confirmation of his success. It was confirmation that he had made it without his parents’ financial or emotional support. It was confirmation that he didn’t have to go back to live in a blue collar neighborhood like the one he grew up in and work a manual labor job like his father did. He didn’t have to reside in a small studio shit hole barely surviving off of ramen like he did in the summers while he was in college and he had an unpaid internship by day and waited tables by night. When he bought the loft, it was proof that he had survived and that he had gotten farther than either of his parents had ever thought he would. It gave him the status of being a true stud, not just an exclusive young top in the back rooms.

But what started making the loft really special to him were the many memories that he had with Justin. It was where he had first taken Justin when he met him under the streetlight. It was the first and only place he had lived in with Justin. It was where Justin had recovered from the bashing. It was the first place where he had ever made love and not just fucked. It is where Justin told him how proud he was of him for giving up everything to stop Stockwell. It was where Justin had taken care of him when he had cancer. It was the first place he had slept with Justin and the last place as well. It was the place where he had welcomed him into his life and the place where he had ultimately kicked him out of it. The only thing it hadn’t been was the place where Justin had said yes to his proposal. And, as great a memory as that was, it was a proposal that had led to nowhere and what use did one man have for a country manor? As hard as it was, he was able to let that place go because it never represented a home to him, only what could have been but shouldn’t be dwelled on. The loft had ended up representing the five wonderful and tumultuous years he had spent with the first person he had ever loved and deep down would always love. He could never let go of it.

The loft had memories of Eric as well, although not as many since they had only actively lived there together for about a year before moving to a bigger place only a few blocks away. And then they had only lived in that bigger place for a few months before deciding it would be best to rent it out until they sold it so Brian could work out of the Chicago branch instead. But it had been the loft where Eric had been compassionate and understanding when Brian had slipped up and where Brian had taken a turn for the better. It had been where they had agreed to have a child together. It
was there where Eric inexplicably had Billie Holiday playing while he worked on a design for a client and Brian had even more inexplicably made him stand up and slow dance with him to “I’ll Be Seeing You.” It had been almost as ridiculously romantic as another dance he had initiated years before.

However, most of his favorite memories with Eric and Lily were up in Chicago, a city which held another home that he would never let go of. He had so many memories with his lover in that windy city. It was where they had watched their daughter grow into the precocious, outgoing, and happy little girl she is today. It was where he had held Eric for about half an hour while he cried after his parents had come up from North Carolina to finally meet their granddaughter only to completely dismiss Brian’s place in her life and express their extreme disappointment in their son. He remembers wanting to stake his claim on Eric and Lily right then and there and throw his partner’s parents out of his apartment. He remembers finally getting them to leave and slamming the door in their faces, then rushing over to Eric when he saw his face crumple. He remembers Eric sobbing out reassuring words, in order to make sure Brian knew that he was, “the most wonderful father any little girl could ask for” even though Eric was the one who had been crying. It was also in Chicago where he and Eric had danced around like idiots and sang along to Disney songs with Lily to make her giggle and the term “Stepford” had only passed through Brian’s head four times tops. It was there where he had shared a great amount of happiness with Eric and Lily and built a home with them. This place that already held so many memories was also the place Eric had proposed to him surrounded by boxes packed up for New York and Brian hadn’t thought of saying anything other than yes. He had been glad Eric had asked since Brian himself didn’t think he could ever bring himself to ask that question to anyone else ever again, even if he really wanted to.

Brian had mostly hidden it, but it had been so hard to leave that loft on Tremont Street and almost just as hard to leave their Chicago apartment on Clark Street. But at least this time he didn’t feel like he was leaving anything behind when he left Chicago since Eric and Lily were still with him. He knew that no matter where they lived, no matter how much or how little it cost, they would make new memories together. He knew that their home in New York would mean just as much as the two that meant so much before it.

“Brian? What do you think?”

Brian looked at Eric and his mouth turned upwards into a small smile.

“It’s perfect.”

Eric grinned, then took Brian’s face in his hands and kissed him square on the mouth. They followed Lily around the rooms while she showed them which room HAD to be hers. After leading her away from the master bedroom, she picked another room with a bay window with a cushioned seat built against the wall and a built-in bookshelf. She was so excited and he could tell that Eric was just as excited about this place as well. Brian couldn’t say no. He went downstairs to put a bid
in with the realtor. He had easily been approved for a loan to cover more than the five million dollar asking price (Christ, buying a nice sized place in the city was expensive.) After he had bargained with her and she had called the owners, they finally agreed that 4.5 million would be acceptable. They thanked the realtor and told her to have a good holiday. Brian took Lily’s hand and the three of them walked out of the house that was now approved to become their home by the first of February. As they walked down the street to become acquainted with their soon-to-be neighborhood, Eric reached out and grabbed his free hand. Brian was happy.
East End and Laguardia Rd.

Chapter Summary

Justin picks up his sister at the airport and they fill each other in on what has been going on in their lives.

Chapter Notes

A/N: Again, thank you to abenjami for volunteering her time to beta for me. I am excited to write the dinner for chapter ten. It will be long and some stuff will go down, so I need to plan it out a bit. Hope to have it up in the next two to three days.

Please let me know what you think! It keeps me excited when it comes to writing this long story I have planned out!

Justin got off the shuttle bus that went to LaGuardia and waited near his sister’s gate. She knew her way around the city enough by now to get to his loft on her own. But he was feeling a bit anxious to see her. She had just turned 23 at the end of August and is the same age as Nathan, but their age gap had kept them from having a close relationship as kids. They didn’t start to get to really know each other until the summer after her second year of college. She had gotten an internship at the New York Hall of Science Museum and all of them, even his father from what he had heard, had been proud. She had responded to a Craig’s List ad and had gotten a sublet in Harlem in order to have an easy commute and save money. Craig had offered to rent a studio that she could have to herself, but she had distanced herself from their father since their parents had divorced. Yes, she hadn’t been close to Justin when all that shit went down, but she had been old enough to stay disgusted with her father for disowning his own son. She probably should have taken him up on the offer though because, unfortunately, the woman she had moved in with was absolutely psychotic. She had paid for May when she moved in at the beginning of that month and gave the woman her money for June with her month’s notice. She became so wary of her that she packed her bags in the middle of the night only after two weeks of living there, had taken the subway down to his apartment at the time in Park Slope, then knocked on his door at 2 am and asked Justin if she could stay with him for the remainder of her almost four month stay. He had let her in and she tossed everything in the corner and proclaimed that she would never use a website named after her father again.

Justin remembers that summer being a rather celibate one. Yet he also remembers it as the summer when he had finally gotten to know his younger sister. He learned how fucking brilliant she was, for one thing. They were a bit more on the same level now that they were both adults too, so they had more to talk about now. Justin had always felt pretty confident in his looks and he knew that he
easily attracted both men and women, but Molly was drop dead gorgeous. He had developed late case of overprotective older brother syndrome during her stay since she had attracted catcallers from left and right and he had neighbors asking him if his sister was single. He remembers being so worried that he signed her up for self-defense classes and she had just laughed at him and told him not to waste his money. Although, he had put his muscle memory to use from when he was in the Pink Posse and he made sure she knew how to throw a punch and knock someone’s feet out from under them if the need may arise. He may have also given her pepper spray. Despite being a bit too nervous, Molly had taken it all in stride and, when Justin was free from work and wasn’t staying over with someone and Molly wasn’t at her internship, researching, or going out with people her own age, they would see plays, go to museums, go out to eat, cook, watch movies, and just talk. If someone had told his younger self that Molly would become one of his closest friends, he probably wouldn’t believe them, but that is what had happened. He talked to her at least once a week and had just seen her at Thanksgiving, but he was missing her.

A flight attendant announced that Molly’s flight was arriving and soon after the passengers started to come through the door, down the ramp, and to the baggage carousel. He saw the loose strawberry blonde curls in the crowd. He called out her name and she turned around with a big smile on her face. She ran over and gave him a big hug. When he tried to let go, she whispered,”

“Justin! Don’t let go yet! I had to sit by that guy over there the whole trip up here and he is a creep! Those forty-five minutes felt like a lifetime. Maybe he will think you are my boyfriend and feel bad.”

“Don’t be disgusting.” he had said to her as he slowly pulled himself away.

Justin looked over to who she was talking about and...yeah, he was pretty gross. Justin winced in sympathy and grabbed her bag so they could leave.

“Thanks for paying for my ticket. Flights two days before Christmas are a bit too much for a teacher’s salary, even when said tickets are paid for two months in advance. I will pay you back soon.”

“Don’t worry about it, because you know I won’t take it. I am glad to do it.”

“I know, and thanks. Even though I will just hide money under your pillow next time I’m here.”

Justin snorted and raised his hand up to get one of the passing cabs.
“The bus would be cheaper, Jester.”

“I rarely take cabs and, like we established, money isn’t a problem anyway, Mollusk. Besides, it will be faster. We have to meet Mom and Tucker at Penn Station in a few hours anyway. I want you to get settled first.”

Usually it was easy to get a cab at the airport but with so many flights coming in for Christmas, he was having a harder time.

“Should I flash some leg?”

“Molly, you’re wearing jeans.”

“I just have to roll one of my pants’ legs up. It would work, trust me.”

Luckily it hadn’t come to that because one pulled over for them soon after. He got her bag into the trunk and they piled in.

Molly had talked about how her month had been and what she had been up to. She seemed to have something on her mind though and Justin planned to question her about it as soon as they got back. The ride took longer than normal since they got stuck in traffic on the Queensboro Bridge, but they got home with about two hours to spare before they needed to get on the train to meet their mother.

Molly got the air mattress out of the closet and turned on the automatic pump to blow it up so the noise wouldn’t bother the neighbors later. After, she sat on the couch, turned on the TV, and got quiet.

“You seem off.”

Molly stared at him, then blinked. “Why do you stay that?”

“I can’t pinpoint it, you just do.”
Molly sighed, then blurted out,

“I think I am going through a quarter-life crisis.”

Justin raised an eyebrow her and motioned for her to go on.

“I am aware that I got really lucky when it came to getting my job. If Janice Barker hadn’t dropped dead from an aneurysm while grading pop quizzes the second week of school, I probably would have been a substitute for at least another year or two before finding a full-time job. What were the odds that she would teach my subject? Her demise was my gain, and for that, I am grateful.”

“How have I never realized how demented you are?”

“I will come off as more sympathetic in a minute, I promise.”

Justin waited for her to continue.

“I like kids. I do. I like every single one of my students and I enjoy doing what I do enough. I recognize that it is an important job and that in one way or another, I have the ability to shape the lives of these kids. But I don’t think I can explain why mixing baking soda and vinegar together does what it does one more time. It is so simple and boring. I was afraid this would happen. The thought almost made me go into teaching middle school and high school students instead. But Justin, teenagers are such fucking shitheads. I should know. My brother moved in with his older lover when he was 17 and I dyed my hair turquoise and let my friend pierce my belly button with a hot sewing needle at an even younger age than that. They drive people crazy.”

Justin remembered when his mother called him in such a state when that had happened. From what he could make out of his mother’s stressful call, his 16 year old sister had walked through the front door in a cutoff shirt, blue hair, and smelled like marijuana. He had felt a strange combination horrified and amused. He also felt guilty about being so distant from her. He is sure a rebellious punk rock Molly would have been interesting to witness.

“I don’t think I want to be a teacher. I don’t think I ever did really. I want to help find the cures to diseases. I got my bachelor’s degree to start doing that but then went into something I turned out not to be passionate about. Why did I do that?”
“Molly, I’m sorry you feel that way. But you don’t have to freak out about it. You are 24. You are still really young and you can still go get your doctorate. You are my sister and obviously that makes you really fucking smart. I wouldn’t be surprised if you found a vaccine for Ebola or a cure for some type of cancer.”

“Tucker will be upset. He thinks that I wanted to follow in his footsteps.”

“Tucker’s not so bad. He won’t be offended. And if he is, remind him that he is not the one who has to live your life.”

“Dad will be upset. He worried that I might try to aim too high and fail if I went to grad school to study medicine. He would have never said that about you if were in my place.”

“If I were a straight son in your place. Dad’s a prick, I don’t know what else I can say.”

Molly was silent then looked at Justin.

“He’s been asking about you lately, you know. When I bother to pick up the phone.”

That reveal had perked Justin’s interest.

“What has he been asking? If I still like co-”

“No, I think he has given up on you ever not liking that. He called last week to check up on me. Then he asked me if I knew how you were doing and if you were happy. He sounded sad. And drunk.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That you were a big success and if he wanted to know any more then he would have to get in contact with you himself. I don’t talk to him much, but he’s been weird. He’s living alone since Madison left him last year. He asked me to come spend Christmas with him. If he hadn’t pulled what he did with you, I would have felt sorry for him.”
“Molly, you don’t have to keep him out of your life because he kicked me out of his. I’ve told you that. I do know that he always loved you.”

“I don’t want any man in my life who would do what he did to his son. The only way that I would even consider making up with him is if he at least attempted to make up with you.”

There was no point in arguing with her. It was something Molly had always felt, even when back when they had barely seen or spoken to each other.

“So, big brother, how have you been? Any exciting news?”

“Well, we are having the New Year’s Eve Showing at the gallery.”

“Yeah, no shit. I will still be in until January 2nd, as if you didn’t remember. Go on.”

“Nathan wrote a jingle for Arm & Hammer. He’s getting a good paycheck for it.”

“I’m sure it’s lovely. Anything else?”

“Brian Kinney is going to be at Emmett’s for Christmas dinner.”

....

He really wishes Molly would pick her jaw up off the floor.

“Hot Brian?”

“What?”

“I always referred to him as Hot Brian to mom. I think it made her uncomfortable.”
“Then yes, ‘Hot Brian’ is coming to dinner. And yes, before you fucking ask, he is still hot.”

“Good thing Nathan isn’t into Christmas.”

“He’s coming too.”

Molly put a hand on his shoulder and put on her most sympathetic face. When Justin looked at her, she couldn’t hold it anymore and broke into a fit of laughter.

“It is going to be so awkward for you! ...I’m sorry, it isn’t funny. Nathan knows, right?”

“Yeah, I told him. He took it better than I expected.”

“Well, that’s good. Don’t get me wrong, I like him. But he is the type to go into drama queen mode over little things, let alone something like this. He is just so different from you, Justin.”

Justin sighed. His sister and his mother both liked Nathan as a person. Hell, when Molly came, she and Nathan would go bar hopping without him if Justin didn’t feel like going or had something else planned. But she and his mom always threw out hints implying that they didn’t see how Nathan and Justin had ended up together in the first place, let alone understand how it could be that they were approaching being together for two years this coming February.

“So you’ve said. But Brian is coming with his partner and his daughter so it will be less awkward.”

“For Nathan, maybe.”

“Eric and Lily are both very nice.”

“Obviously I am missing some of the story. And you are going to tell me it tonight. But what time do we need to meet mom?”
Justin looked at the clock. “We should probably leave now.”

After he and Molly got their coats on, they headed out the door.

“Look at you two! You have both grown, I’m sure of it!”

“Mom, we have both been grown for a while.”

“Oh, my babies…”

Ever since Jennifer and Tucker had moved up to Connecticut about two and a half years ago to be closer to her parents, she had felt conflicted about it. She didn’t regret it, by any means. Her father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and, while her mother was still very active and capable at the age of 76, she didn’t want her facing the challenge of her husband’s slow mental deterioration. But she missed her kids. She was actually physically closer to Justin now, but she was still a couple of hours away and only saw him once every other month or so. Molly had only been a little over an hour away when Jennifer was in Pittsburgh, since Molly just lived in Morgantown. But now her youngest was so far away and she only got to see her for holidays. She missed them so much.

“Hey, mom? Why don’t we get your bags to your room and go get dinner? Come on, the hotel is only a block away.”

Justin took her suitcase and shook hands with Tucker. They got to the hotel and checked in then came back downstairs to join her kids again.

Tucker turned to Justin and asked, “What did you have in mind for dinner?”

“There’s an Indian place about seven blocks down that is really good. If you want, we can go there.”

They decided to walk and he was glad that his mother directed her attention to Molly for the most part on the way there. He knew he needed tell his mother that Brian would be at Emmett’s. She
started out despising Brian and surprisingly ended up loving the man. She had been almost as heartbroken as he was when they had broken up for good. He knew it couldn’t be a surprise to her though. It wouldn’t upset him if his mother reacted positively upon seeing Brian again, but he didn’t want any surprises getting her too excited about it in front of Nathan. That would just be an extra blow to his current boyfriend and he wanted to make Christmas as easy as he could for him. He wanted it to be easy for both of them.
Chapter Summary

Brian wakes up Lily for Christmas morning. Some of the gang come to visit to exchange presents.

Chapter Notes

So I am going to get to the dinner. I am. It was supposed to be in this chapter but this one started to get long. I have almost 6000 words written in the next chapter so it felt best to split them up and I figured I would post this one now. Next chapter should be finished soon and I will send it out to my beta to read. As always, a big thank you to abenjami for proofreading.

“Lily. Lily, wake up!”

Lily felt a hand on her shoulder nudging her awake. She slowly opened her eyes and rubbed her face only to see her daddy sitting on her bed holding a camera. He was so strange sometimes.

“Daddy, what?”

“I think someone broke into the apartment.”

“Huh?”

“When I went to bed last night, everything looked normal. The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, the tree was lit, the presents Papa and I got you, your brother, and JR were under it too. But NOW there are presents everywhere and I just don’t know who left them. We should call the police so they can investigate and take the presents to the station.”

“No no no no no! Daddy, no! Santa came, it was Santa! Santa came here and left the presents for us! And we DON’T have a chimney, silly!”
Wide awake now at her daddy’s horrible detective skills, she got up and jumped on the bed a few times to get out some of her excitement, then jumped down to the floor and ran for the living room with her dad on her heels. She saw her papa coming out of the kitchen with two cups of coffee, but she couldn’t waste time saying more than a quick “Hi, Papa!” to him right now. She had to get to the living room. When she finally did get there, she squealed and danced around when she saw everything.

“Now, Lily! Make sure you read the names on the tags. Some of those are probably for JR and Gus. Remember when I taught you how to spell and write your name?” her papa asked her as she ran over to the Anna and Elsa dolls.

“Yes, yes L-I-L-Y Lily.” She recited, then looked over at daddy. “Daddy, can you open Elsa?”

Daddy sighed as he turned off the camera and said, “I’ll try. Those twist ties are a real bi-… pain though.”

“Okay, daddy. You try your best and ask Papa if you need help, okay?”

“Yes, dear, be sure to help poor little me with this god awful packaging.”

Her papa laughed at that and went over to sit next to Daddy on the couch. He put Daddy’s mug of coffee on the coffee table, then turned to her.

“Lily, why don’t we see what’s in your stocking?”

“Ohkay!”

Eric turned to Brian and smirked then shook his head.

“You really had to get her up at 6:45 in the morning?”
“Someone broke into the house, Eric. She had to know. Besides, I was bored.”

“Just admit it. You are a little bit into the Christmas spirit this year and you know it.”

Brian leaned closer and said in a low sensual voice, “Bah…humbug” then pulled mistletoe out of the couch and held it over their heads.

“Did you seriously stash mistletoe in the couch like you used to with condoms? Brian, you are so weird.” Eric gasped out as he laughed but was shut up by Brian’s lips against his.

“Daddy, Papa, stop.” Lily told them as she colored in her new coloring book. She had been pouting a little since they told her she had to wait until the rest of her family came before they opened the wrapped presents. If Brian had let her sleep as long as possible, this wouldn’t be happening.

“Who all is coming this morning?”

Brian started adding them up in his head.

“Gus, JR, Lindsay, Mel, Michael, Ben, Hunter, and Cynthia.”

“Jesus, will they all fit in here?”

“We shall see. It will be like a game.”

Eric smiled at that. “Well, you are in a playful mood this morning.”

Brian shrugged and went over to Lily. “Hey Lily, how about I make you hot chocolate and then the three of us will play one of your new board games?”

“Can we play Candyland?”
“Absolutely.”

“Okay!” Lily exclaimed as she ran over to the tree to get the game.

Eric came up behind Brian and held him around the waist.

“I love you like this, Brian. You are so good to our kid,” he whispered in Brian’s ear.

Brian looked down and gave a humble smile. He secretly enjoyed being like this too.

After Lily kicked their asses at Candyland three times in a row and they put on Elf for her to watch, they heard a knock at the door. Lily, who had been immersed in Buddy the Elf’s antics, turned around really quickly and said,

“Gus, JR, and Aunt Cynthia?”

“It just might be. I’ll go check.”

Eric got up to look through the peephole then opened the door. Michael was in front of the crowd and exclaimed, “Merry Christmas!”

Lily ran over to greet them all. Daddy and Papa took Lily to Toronto for holidays and usually for at least a weekend every other month, sometimes more, and they would go to Pittsburgh to see Aunt Cynthia almost just as much. They came to see her too, especially Aunt Cynthia and Gus, but she missed them so much in between visits. She loved them all, but she REALLY loved Gus, JR, and Aunt Cynthia.

Gus, because he was her brother. He was always nice to her and would sometimes even play with her. But he hadn’t been playing with her as much the last few times she saw him. He never liked playing dolls or dress up, but he had been ignoring her more. Daddy said it was because he was a teenager now and had a girlfriend. If she ever got friend like that, she wouldn’t ignore people, but that was just her.
JR was almost 11 years old and not a teenager so she would play with her more, even though she wasn’t her sister. She didn’t understand that, because she was Gus’s sister, so wouldn’t that make JR her sister too? She felt like JR was her big sister though and she loved it when she got to come with Gus and stay with them. She liked Disney movies okay, but she liked sports a lot more than dolls, dress up, and playing pretend. That was okay though because JR had taught her how to throw a ball sort of right this past fall and it was sort of fun.

But she missed Aunt Cynthia the most. She loved Aunt Cynthia so much and wished that she lived a lot closer. She came to visit a lot though. She would take Lily out for ice cream and to the park. They would have what Aunt Cynthia would call girl’s day out and they would go do things like go to kids’ museums and go out to dinner. She would play with her and read her bedtime stories when she was in. She had even heard people say that she had Aunt Cynthia’s eyes and she loved that people thought that because Aunt Cynthia was really pretty. She was so nice to her and told Lily that she was the most important person in her life.

“Hi, Uncle Michael!” Lily called out as she ran over to give him and Uncle Ben a hug.

“Hey, baby girl!” Uncle Ben told her.

“Uncle Ben! I’m not a baby girl anymore!”

“That’s right, I’m sorry. I keep forgetting you are a big girl now.”

“Yep! Where’s Aunt Cynthia?”

“Hi, sweetie.”

Lily turned and found her. She was carrying a suitcase and had a happy smile on her face. She kneeled down and Lily ran into her arms and held on as tight as she could. Aunt Cynthia picked her up and held on tight. Lily didn’t want to be let down, so Aunt Cynthia just talked to her while holding her.

“I see that Santa came to visit.”

“Uh huh. He must have known Gus and JR would be coming ‘cause he left them stuff too. Daddy came in and woke me up telling me someone broke into the house and left a bunch of stuff here.
He was going to call the police and have them come get it! It’s like he forgot it was Christmas!”

“Brian!” everyone said as they looked over towards the kitchen where Brian was making pancakes and more coffee.

“What? Everything I said was completely true.”

Aunt Cynthia rolled her eyes and looked back at Lily.

“Well, I brought you some presents too. I even brought a present for Gus and JR.”

“Did you fill up that suitcase up with presents?” Lily asked, eyes wide.

“You bet, you spoiled girl.”

“I’m not spoiled! It’s not my fault you bought me presents,” Lily giggled.

“I suppose you’re right. I just have to learn to ignore your cuteness.”

Cynthia put Lily down and opened the suitcase so she could put the presents she brought under the tree. She put the suitcase in the corner of the room then turned around to watch Lily interact with JR while Gus went in to hug his dad and talk to him. She knows that she spent too much on Lily. She knows she spoils that little girl, but she can’t help it. She really missed Lily after their visits ended. Even though she had told Brian and Eric that they didn’t need to tell Lily her biological role in Lily’s life until she was older, Lily was her daughter. No, she hadn’t carried her for nine months, but she felt such a strong bond with her that she hadn’t expected. She wanted her to have the things she never could have even hoped to have when she was a child. She knew Brian and Eric were more than capable when it came to loving her and making sure she wanted for nothing, but she wanted to contribute in any way she could.

Cynthia had grown up poor. Her father had left the family while her mother was pregnant with her so it had just been Cynthia, her mother, and her sister, who had been five years older. Her mother
had worked her ass off to provide for them. She had worked as a maid at a motel in the mornings and worked as a bartender at night. Her sister often had to watch her and put her to bed once their mother went to work if they didn’t get a babysitter. But they had made it work. Cynthia didn’t remember feeling like she was lacking anything until she was six years old and her sister had been diagnosed with leukemia. Despite getting financial assistance for treatments and her sister going through chemotherapy, they had lost her a year after the diagnosis. Losing her oldest daughter had driven her mother into a downward spiral. She never got over it. She drank almost non-stop and had emotionally distanced herself from Cynthia. She was never abusive. She never hit her or was mean to her. She had just ignored her. Sometimes she would tell Cynthia how sorry she was and that she loved her as she tried to pick herself up off the floor.

Cynthia thinks her mother understood her behavior enough to encourage Cynthia to go out of state and away from her for college. She had even signed a loan form for a parent plus loan but Cynthia knew she could never afford it so she sent the payments in herself. She would send the money to her mother, but she was afraid of what her mother might spend it on. When she started working for Brian full-time and was doing well for herself, she got her mother into a better place and made sure her bills were paid for, but never sent her more than grocery money. Her mother couldn’t go to more than a couple of AA meetings without falling off the wagon and still had problems dealing with her daughter’s death, even after thirty years. Cynthia obviously handled it better, but she still missed her sister and wondered what it would have been like to grow up with her. Right before Lily was born and Brian and Eric asked her what her first name should be, she immediately said the first name of the sister she had lost as a child.

Cynthia never regretted her decision to not carry Lily and give her parental rights to Brian. She had always respected Brian. He was only six years older than her, but he had been a mentor and a heroic figure in her life ever since she had met him. He had taken her on part-time at Ryder when she was a junior at La Roche College, even though he had been told to look for a full-time assistant. Cynthia remembers asking him if he was sure if that was okay and he had said that he didn’t need a full-time assistant after all and it was for the best to keep himself working more. He had said he wanted to start her at $12 an hour since he remembered how a low-paying part time job really fucked his finances when he was in school. He didn’t want her to have to work her ass off at two jobs when she had classes to focus on. She remembers almost bursting into tears at his surprising kindness and making him incredibly uncomfortable as she tried to keep her eyes from leaking. He had taken her on full-time the day after she graduated. She has been so grateful for what he had done for her and has even loved Brian for all the time she has known him. The fact that he was with Eric who had strangely and coincidentally been her first boyfriend made her even more keen to say yes to being the mother of their child. Even though it turned out that Eric came out as gay years later, he had been incredibly kind to her and non-judgmental when it came to her financial class and mother, despite coming from an upper-middle class, two parent home. But she probably would have agreed to do it if Brian had been with Justin still and he wanted him to have a biological child with her.

She had never planned to be a mother. After watching her mother suffer the way she did and seeing how it had devastated her to lose a child, she told herself she would never have kids. She had never been around young children for long periods of time, so she didn’t feel much for them anyway. She wanted to be a career woman. She would go to school, make decent money, and maybe get a cat. All that had happened. She graduated with honors, she now ran the Pittsburgh branch of Kinnetik
with Ted and was making more money than she ever dreamed of, and she came home to her Maine Coon, Jasper. She hadn’t expected Lily to come into her life but, like she never regretted giving Brian her rights, she never regretted forming a bond with her. She loved her so much and she was so glad she was being raised by two people who loved her dearly as well. The only thing she kind of regretted was that she had been the one to insist that Lily call her aunt instead of mom.

“Come on, Aunt Cynthia. I wanna show you what I got so far.” Lily commanded as she pulled on Cynthia’s hand. Cynthia followed her daughter. She pulled her skirt down and sat on her knees to look at what Lily had to show her. Brian and Eric had done pretty well when it came to indulging Lily’s girly girl tastes. From what she could see, Santa had brought Lily some new dolls, a few costume dresses, and a little purse. They had also gotten gender neutral gifts, like a small bike with training wheels, a couple of board games, and several coloring books. She is pretty sure Brian had secretly wanted her to be at least a little bit of a tomboy. He had tried to get her to broaden her horizons a little. However, the most he could get her to do was to get her to wear a helmet when she rode her tricycle instead of a tiara. But the helmet Lily had picked was purple and had glittery stars on it, so Cynthia didn’t think that was a huge win on the tomboy front.

“Look at what I colored for you, Aunt Cynthia! I colored it just for you!” Lily proclaimed proudly as she handed her a sheet out of her coloring book. She was getting coordinated enough to color somewhat in the lines now.

“Lily, it’s beautiful. I will put it on my refrigerator. How does that sound?”

“Good. Then when you go into the kitchen and get something to eat, you can think of me and how much I love you.”

Lily got up and ran into the kitchen to see Gus. Cynthia took Lily’s artwork and carefully put it into the pocket of the suitcase she brought with her.

Brian sat down with everyone and they did their gift exchange. They had each gotten the other adults in the room something and had all gotten probably way too much on the kids. They had fun watching the kids get excited over their gifts. Gus and JR didn’t believe in Santa anymore, but they still got presents from him since they were both kids and to keep the illusion up for Lily as well. They also got the kids presents that were from them too. They had gotten JR a new softball mitt, a camera, some money, and some new clothes. Brian sort of went all out on Gus. He and Eric had gotten him a new gaming system, the new iPhone, some books, a leather jacket, a few movies he had been wanting, and a gift card for the mall up in Toronto so he could buy some things for himself.
He had also bought Gus condoms, although he wasn’t that much of a jerk to put those under the tree. Lindsay had called him up a few days ago asking him to have “the talk” with Gus. They thought it would be better that he get it from his father, rather than either of his mothers. Both Mel and Linds had been a little worried that he might be an early bloomer like his father. The thing was, despite Gus being a dead ringer for him and having a bit of his sarcastic aloofness going on, he wasn’t all that much like him. For one, he was pretty sure the kid was as straight as an arrow. Sure they say no one is completely one way or another, but Gus had always had crushes on girls and practically had hearts in his eyes when he talked about Penelope, his girlfriend. He was also a lot more innocent than Brian ever was. He didn’t jump right into things like sex, but even if he did, he would much rather hear that Gus had slept with Penelope than hear he got taken advantage of by his gym teacher in the locker room. Brian had tried to make that story into something hot, but he would be devastated and enraged if that happened to either one of his kids. So he said he would talk with him before they left after the New Year. If Gus did end up having sex, he wanted him to be safe and not be afraid to talk about it with him if something happened.

The kids had opened all their presents, at least until they got to Emmett and Drew’s house in Hoboken. In the past, Emmett tended to splurge on Lily when it came to birthdays and Christmas. Even if Emmett didn’t make it to Toronto where they usually gathered for a special occasion, Lily always had a package waiting for her when they got back to Chicago. Brian and Emmett always had a strange friendship. They never had much in common and pushed each other’s buttons in the past, but he did appreciate Emmett accepting Eric into the group immediately with open arms and without questions or skepticism. He appreciated Emmett’s neutral feelings when it came to him ending his relationship with Justin and not taking one side or the other. When Brian learned to open up a little more, he even told Emmett how much he had appreciated his actions back then, which of course led Emmett to become a touchy and teary mess. After Lily was born and she became old enough to make it known what her tastes were when it came to toys and clothes, Brian had sort of been lost when it came to buying stuff for her. Emmett was probably too ecstatic to help him out when it came to mentoring Brian when it came to buying clothes and gifts for her and showing him what stores and activities they could do that would indulge that side of her as well. So he knew that they would be lugging home at least a few things for Lily and probably sending some stuff up from Emmett back to Toronto for Gus and JR too.

Everyone was pretty tired after the Christmas morning high. Lily had passed out on top of the torn up wrapping paper, Gus was lounging next to her texting on his new phone, JR was sitting next to Hunter with her head on his shoulder, and the adults were sitting there quietly. Since there were eleven of them and the apartment was a temporary place that Brian and Eric had only really prepared for three people, not all of them got chairs. But they made it work and enjoyed each other’s company. However, they all avoided the topic of Justin. Everyone, including Brian and Eric, knew he and Nathan were going to Emmett’s today and no one really knew how to bring up the subject. It had been so long since they had witnessed Brian and Justin in the same room and, even though they heard Justin went to lunch with Brian, Eric, and Lily and it went well, they couldn’t really anticipate how this was going to go. In all honesty, Brian couldn't either. He didn't think the problem would be spending an evening with Justin, he just didn't know how he would feel spending an evening with Justin with Nathan along. Brian would like to think he grew up and could deal with seeing his ex with someone else. Justin seemed to do fine when he met Eric and Lily. However, Brian knows Justin has always been a bit more emotionally mature than him. Brian knows he can be a petty asshole when he gets upset by something. As much as he tried to work on
that in the past several years, it still happened. But he was going to try his best not to be.

“It’s a little after 11 now. We are probably going to head back to the hotel to get the gifts back to the room and maybe see some of the city. What time should we meet you to catch the train?” Michael asked as he started picking up some wrapping paper around the tree.

Eric got on his phone to look at the holiday schedule.

“When does Emmett want us there? Around 4, right? The PATH for Hoboken leaves every 20-30 minutes from 33rd Street. There is a train that is supposed to leave at 3:15. Let’s meet above ground at the entrance by 3 so we can go together. If we get there early, we can just walk around the park in front of Emmett’s place for a little bit so you guys can enjoy the view.

“That sounds good to us,” Ben said as he stood up.

“Hey JR, do you want to come with us or stay with your moms and we’ll just see you there?”

JR shrugged and said she supposed she would go with them then put on her coat and boots. Michael and Ben asked Gus if he wanted to tag along too but he wanted to stay with his dad for the day. Mel and Lindsay decided to head back to the hotel and rest a little before going to Emmett’s. Cynthia headed out the door soon after, but not before she carried Lily to her bed. Soon, it was just Eric, Brian, and Gus in the room. Gus put on one of his movies and they all sat down and watched it together.

___________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

“As you sure we don’t need to bring anything? Like a casserole or something?”

As Justin straightened Nathan’s tie, he shook his head.

“We are bringing an expensive bottle of wine and that should be enough. Believe me, Emmett has it covered. He bought all this food that he is dying to make and bringing over any more would just be downright gluttonous. We will all go in and help him, of course. Dinner won’t be ready until at least 6. It’ll be a good time to visit with everyone else too.”
“Like Brian?”

Justin grimaced. “And everyone else. I’m looking forward to seeing Gus. I got to keep in touch with him even after Brian and I ended things because I stayed in touch with Lindsay and Mel. But I haven’t seen him since August when Lindsay took him to Philadelphia for my show. I have only gotten a couple of emails from him since then.

Nathan sighed. “I’m glad you kept in touch with him. I know you told me you knew him since the night he was born. I would never hold that against you. I’m happy he is still in your life. Don’t mind me, I’m just a little jealous I guess. And curious. How did you keep in contact with Gus and your friends but not run into Brian until now?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. I spent the holidays with my mother and sister, so I didn’t really run into him then. I’m pretty sure he straight up avoided me when he was still in Pittsburgh and I would go back to visit everyone. I guess we never were in Toronto at the same time. Or maybe Debbie gave him a heads up. Running into each other strangely never happened until we were both in the most crowded and anonymous city in the world.”

“Well you called pretty much everyone coming, besides Drew’s grandparents, to invite them since they will be in town. Someone might bring up how they are all looking forward to it. It might be awkward if you leave just Brian and Eric off the guest list.”

Justin is absolutely flabbergasted at what comes out of Nathan’s mouth sometimes. For the last three days, he would act completely okay with meeting Brian one minute and interrogate Justin on Kinney 101 the next. Nathan seemed to be both threatened and drawn to Brian. He did give Brian props on going to prom to sweep Justin off his feet and the whole Stockwell saga. He also admired Brian for paying for Justin’s education and encouraging his art career. But at the same time it
seemed as though Nathan felt that he couldn’t compete with someone like that, even though Brian wasn’t in the competition when it came to Justin anymore. So Justin did find it surprising that Nathan would suggest inviting him to the show.

“I—I don’t know, Nathan. It is probably the polite thing to do. I could maybe do that?”

Luckily, Molly walked out of the bathroom at that point and raised her eyebrow at the tension.

“So, what are we talking about?”

“Nothing, Mol—”

“Justin and I were just talking about how it would be polite to invite Brian and his partner to his art show.”

“Oh. Well, that would be an interesting idea.”

“I thought so too.”

“Nathan, what the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Nothing is wrong, Justin. I just made a suggestion.”

“You are acting ridiculous!”

“Because I suggested you invite someone to your gallery? You are being so defensive and delusional.”

“I’m going to take a walk around the block.” Molly muttered as she put her coat on and walked out the door.
After the door closed behind her, Nathan and Justin just stared at each other.

“I was seriously just making a suggestion, Justin. I am trying to be supportive. I am not trying to fuck with you by giving you some test to pass.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I really am. I will admit that this is weird for me. I know I am being too defensive about it.”

Nathan walked over to Justin and gently grabbed him by the tie.

“You may be the first person I ever loved in my life, but I understand the situation enough. Brian was your first. He had a huge part of your life, things ended badly and abruptly, and suddenly he is back in your life after several years. Part of you will always love him. I get it. I have interrogated you enough the last few days to try to understand the guy. I have been a bit petulant with the way I have been acting, and I’m sorry for that. I really do want to be supportive and I was trying to show that by suggesting you invite him to your show.”

Nathan bent down a little to kiss him on the mouth, then turned around to look in the full-length mirror.

“So Taylor, how do I look? Dashing? Ridiculous?”

Justin turned him back around and looked at Nathan from head to toe.

“Beautiful.”

“Really?”

The exchange started to give Justin severe déjà vu so he kissed Nathan with all the passion he could muster. Things started to heat up and Justin was just about to undo Nathan’s tie again but Nathan stopped him by giving him a gentle push on the shoulder.

“Molly left because we were arguing. I don’t want her walking in on our hot makeup sex. Besides, your mom will be here in about twenty minutes.” Nathan looked down at their crotches and saw
they were already both a little hard. “Damn. Help me think of something disgusting.”

“A woman getting pieces of skin out of her teeth?”

“Please, that is so four days ago.”

“An elderly woman mastur-"

“Stop. I don’t want you to finish that sentence.”

They hear a knock on the door and both turn their heads towards the sound. Molly raises her voice with a, “I’m coming in now because it is fucking cold outside and you both better be dressed!” and used her key to get in.

She looked at both of them to inspect how much she had cock blocked. Not being able to truly tell but having an instinctual feeling that she did in fact cock block her older brother, she felt satisfied and went to lounge on the couch.

“I wish mom and Tucker would get here already. You both are making things so awkward.”

Justin just looked at her. Molly was never one to bite her tongue.

“So, brother of mine, have they texted saying they were on their way yet?”

“Yeah. They texted while you were in the bathroom.”

“Good. Because I am starving. All I had was cereal.”

“We are still exchanging gifts here with mom. Dinner probably won’t be ready until 6 at least. You might want to snack on something else.”
As Molly became quite content with the package of cinnamon Pop-Tarts she was holding, they heard the buzzer ring. Justin saw from the camera that it was his mother and Tucker so he let them up. Nathan instantly became straight laced and stiff as his mother walked through the door and Justin rolled his eyes. Nathan wasn’t the type to become easily nervous around just one person, but Jennifer Taylor was an exception to that rule. He wanted her to like him. The thing was, his mother did like Nathan. She felt protective of him since he lost his parents so young and didn’t have any family to speak of. Justin hadn’t told her all of the details, but she had witnessed him have a minor flashback one of the few times she had met him and her heart had ached for him. She just had made it known to Justin that she thought they were an odd match for each other. He never would tell Nathan that though. He didn’t want to put that on him.

“Hi, sweetie! Merry Christmas.” His mother told him as she walked through the door and gave him a kiss on the cheek. She walked over to Molly and Nathan to do the same.

They sat down to exchange gifts. Along with painting them artwork and having it sent back to their respective homes, he had also written Molly a check as well as his mother and Tucker an even larger one. They didn’t want to accept it but he refused to take it back. He had also gotten Molly a New York Pass with tickets for museums and free meals at restaurants that were good for a year. He got his mother a membership at a spa up in Connecticut and Tucker sweater that he had bought on Madison Ave because in all honesty he didn’t know what else to get Tucker. Nathan had bought Molly a book by Stephen Hawking and his mother a nice bracelet. Nathan had asked Justin what Tucker would even want and Justin had been almost as clueless as he was but told Nathan he didn’t have to worry about it. Nathan decided to get him a gift card from Amazon, so Tucker could just get himself something he wanted.

His mother and Tucker had gotten him a gift card to his favorite art supplies store plus some clothes his mother thought he would like. They gave Nathan Just Kids by Patti Smith and a new jacket. Molly had given Nathan original records she found at an independent music store and Justin two tickets to one of the shows Off-Broadway he kept saying he wanted to see but hadn’t yet. And of course, his mother showered her youngest with necklaces, new dresses, and a new petticoat. They killed time with conversation and before they knew it, it was 3 pm. Justin started to feel nervous as he got ready to go. He kept telling himself it would be alright, but he felt as though he were in for a long and eventful night.
11th and Maxwell Lane

Chapter Summary

Justin takes Nathan and his family to Emmett's for Christmas dinner. Emmett and Drew make an announcement. Brian decides not to aim for BFF status with Nathan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Justin leads the way out of the PATH Station in Hoboken. He thought he was okay with this. In a way he is. Lunch went fine just a few days before and that was a more intimate setting where Justin didn’t even have any allies. Brian may not even talk to him tonight. There will be plenty of people in his life there that are much more important to Brian than Justin is now. There are people who Justin is excited to see and even though those people are also friends with Brian, it will be fine. Even though Nathan is coming along and that means he and Brian will be in the same room, it will still be fine.

“Justin!”

“What?”

“Sweetheart, I have been trying to get your attention.”

“Sorry. Just thinking.”

Molly scoffs at that and Nathan stays silent. Justin doesn’t think Tucker knows the potential awkwardness of the situation.

“I was just asking you how many people are going to be there.”

“I don’t know, Mom. Twenty?”

“That’s a nice turnout. I really am looking forward to seeing Brian.” His mother gives a quick glance over at Nathan. “Because it has been so long and I grew fond of him. I saw him every so often while he was in Pittsburgh. I even asked him to lunch once.”
“You what?”

“It was a friendly gesture, Justin. Just to catch up. It was nice. I haven’t seen or heard from him since he moved though.”

Justin looks at Molly to see if she knows anything about this but she is looking away from him and twirling her hair and Nathan has an expression on his face that Justin won’t even try to begin to read.

“It wasn’t a big deal. I don’t know why I am bringing it up. I wish Debbie was coming in. We only get to see each other when she gets to come in and stay at Emmett’s to see one of your shows in the city. I talk to her usually at least once a month, but I hadn’t asked what her plans were. Is she feeling alright? Michael and his family are coming in.”

“She’s fine, Mom. She and Carl are spending Christmas with his daughter and her family this year. They live in Utah.”

“That should be nice. I am disappointed that I won’t see her though. I miss her. She has been a good friend.”

“I’m sure you will find someone to talk to.”

Justin stops his guests and shows them where Emmett’s townhouse is. They cross the street at the park and walk up the stoop steps. Justin takes a deep breath and rings the doorbell. Milliseconds later, he hears deep barks and nails against polished wooden floors.

“Stella! Hey Stella! Get back, sweetheart! Be a good girl!”

Emmett opens the door with an extremely welcoming grin, one that only Emmett can pull off without coming off as too enthusiastic.

“Merry Christmas, everyone! I am so glad you could make it to my little feast. Come in, come in! Stella, sweetheart, sit! This is Stella. Justin has had the pleasure of meeting her, of course, but she loves meeting new people. She is quite friendly. Let me take your coats and you can go into the
parlor and get yourselves comfortable."

“Emmett, are you going to let us get a word in edgewise?”

Emmett realizes that he is babbling and stops to look at Justin. Justin smiles at him and gives him a hug.

“Merry Christmas, Emmett.”

“Oh, yes! It is a wonderful Christmas. It would be perfect if Teddy and Debbie could’ve made it but so many of the people who I truly love are here…” Emmett starts to trail off and get misty eyed, “Oh, don’t mind me! The holidays bring out the true queen in me.”

With that, Emmett walks down the hall and leaves them in the foyer.

“Is he always like that? He seemed a bit more…calm when I met him.” Nathan whispers to him, slightly nervous.

“He does seem a bit more Emmetty than usual, I will give you that,” Justin mutters back.

His mother looks at Stella oddly, then turns to Justin.

“When you mentioned Emmett had a dog, I didn’t imagine he would have…”

“A Bull Mastiff? I don’t think Emmett imagined it either. I am pretty sure he compromised with Drew and let him pick the breed while Emmett got to pick a name from A Streetcar Named Desire.”

“Well, that would explain it.”

“She is a sweetheart though,” Justin tells them as he scratches Stella behind the ears, “Aren’t you, Stella?”
Just as Justin finishes petting Stella, Emmett reappears with a, “I thought you all were behind me! Justin, you know your way around. Everyone is in the parlor.”

“Fuck,” Justin thinks to himself. He told himself he was going to be fine. He will be fine. That is such bullshit, this is so weird. He had to be around Eric and Brian as a couple for an hour and a half tops. Emmett expects them to stay here for several hours. He is going to have to mingle with them. Nathan is here and he will be expected to introduce him to Brian. He is so fucked.

“Look who’s here, everyone!”

As Justin turned the corner, he was greeted faces he hadn’t seen in the same room in years. Those faces held the most mixed emotions Justin had probably ever witnessed, as they greeted him all too enthusiastically while sneaking not so subtle glances in Brian’s direction. And then from all the way across the room, there was Brian himself, who completely poker-faced. Eric gave Justin a kind smile and a nod, then looked back over to his partner with a sympathetic glance and a pat on the leg. Brian broke eye contact with Justin and gave Eric a reassuring look to let him know that he was alright. Just as Justin was about to greet the group, a fourteen year old boy about his height was suddenly in front of him.

“Hey, Justin.”

Jesus, Gus was growing. He already had an inch on him and Justin was sure he would get as tall as his dad. He was looking so much like him, it was insane.

“Hey, Gus.”

Suddenly, Gus is hugging him and Justin hugs him back without hesitation. Over Gus’s shoulder, he can see Brian looking down at his feet and Eric pointedly ignoring the exchange as well. Everyone else in the room including Lily, who looks curious over the exchange, stays silent until Justin breaks the embrace.

“You’ve grown since the last time I saw you. At least four inches since August.”

“Just about. I’ve missed you.”

“You too, buddy.”
Gus walks across the room to stand next to his dad. He gives Brian a questioning look and Brian just pats him on the shoulder, letting him know that it’s all good. Just as Michael and Ben go over to Justin to greet him and Justin is about to introduce Nathan to the people he hasn’t met, he sees Brian walk over to his mother.

They are a little too far for Justin to make out what they are saying to each other, but his mother looks happy and emotional and reaches up to hug Brian around his neck. Lily, who has a hold of Brian’s leg, gets lifted up by him and introduced to Jennifer. While he can’t really hear what Brian and his mom are saying, he can hear Lily’s animated voice talking about what she got for Christmas.

“Hi, I’m Nathan. It’s really nice to meet you.”

Justin turns his head and sees that Nathan has taken it upon himself to introduce himself to Ben and Michael since Justin seems to have forgotten to do it. He really wishes he had horse blinders right now because he can’t even focus on one common task for more than five seconds before wondering what his mother and Brian are talking about, now joined by Molly. Brian does a double take when he sees her and he is pretty sure he hasn’t seen Molly since their rehearsal dinner.

“Justin?”

_God damn it._

“Hey, sorry. You never got to meet Nathan, did you?”

Michael smiles at him, sort of confused. “We just did.”

“Yeah, of course.”

There is a bout of uncomfortable silence, then Ben speaks to Nathan.

“So Nathan, I heard that you were a musician.”
“Um, yeah. I’m in a band. We do okay, but we aren’t well known or anything.”

“Nathan also writes music for television.”

“That’s really cool! What shows have you written for?”

“Mostly shows filmed locally. I get some pilots here and there. Some shows get picked up and get longer run times than others. I mainly get commercial work.”

Michael’s eyes light up at that. “Oh, Brian is in advertising. Are you contracted by a certain agency that we may have heard of?”

“No. I mean, I have a talent agent, but I get hired as a freelance musician by different companies he sends my resume and work samples to. Usually they are short-term or open contracts.”

“I don’t know much about it, to be honest. I think Brian-”

Justin decides to cut in to change the subject. “Hey, Michael? Did I ever tell you that Nathan did the music for Squirrel Girl last year?”

Nathan goes red at that. Justin sort of feels bad, but Nathan doesn’t know how many points that will score with Michael.

“You did the music for Squirrel Girl? You wrote the theme song too?” Michael says, with admiration in his voice.

“Uh, yeah. But it got canceled after ten episodes, so it isn’t that big of a deal.”

Michael puts a hand on Nathan’s shoulder. “Don’t ever say that! I really think that Squirrel Girl never got the chance it deserved. Despite being a really obscure character in the Marvel Universe and only making a limited number of appearances, she was always really kick-ass. I was over the moon when they announced they were making animated series that revolved around her. It was a really great addition to the Saturday morning cartoon line-up. JR loved it and I have a few of the issues that feature her at my shop in Toronto. And, just for the record, the score was awesome. The
theme song, how did it go?” And then, probably to Nathan’s horror, Michael began to sing.

”Who’s that nut with a tail on her butt?
It’s Squirrel Girl, Squirrel Girl!
Watch out for her sidekick or you’ll get cut-“

Alright, Justin feels more than sort of bad now. He knows how many times Nathan had to rewrite that song to make it appeal to the targeted eight year old audience. He also knows how much he hated the version that the show runners loved the most.

“Hey, Michael? I’m going to introduce Nathan to everyone else.”

“Okay, Justin. But come talk to me later. I have to speak to you about something important.”

Justin raises a questioning eyebrow but says nothing else as he leads Nathan away from Michael and Ben. Nathan looks around to see if anyone heard Michael’s rendition of Squirrel Girl, but they all seem to be engaged in conversations of their own. Justin will introduce Nathan to Brian. He will. But there are other people who haven’t met Nathan yet. Hunter hasn’t. Mel-no Mel met him briefly at one of Justin’s shows last year. The kids met him with Lindsay. So only Hunter, Brian, Eric, and Lily. And Drew’s grandparents and Cynthia. But Justin hasn’t even met Drew’s grandparents so why would they care? They are just sitting on the loveseat nodding along and pretending like they can hear what is being said to them anyway. It would probably be weird to introduce Nathan to Cynthia before introducing him to Brian. Seriously, where are Emmett and Drew? Do they expect Stella to be the hostess? It doesn’t matter. He can do this. Brian didn’t have a problem introducing him to Eric, so why should this be any different? He will just make his way across the room to introduce Nathan and Hunter is closer, so it just makes sense.

Justin approaches Hunter, who is standing a few feet away from him and talking to Mel and Lindsay. He can work his courage up this way. Hunter sees him and greets him with an eloquent, “Sup, man?”

“Hey, Hunter. How have you been?”

“Good, good. L.A. has been awesome.”

“Yeah, I enjoyed my time there a lot. You are a production assistant on Teen Wolf, right?”
“Yeah, man. I really like it. I dig the show too, surprisingly. Sort of has the style of a modern Buffy, but with a little bit of Japanese influences going on. Actually, I am getting promoted to a camera operator position for next season.”

“That’s great, Hunter!”

“Yes, we were all telling Hunter how proud we were of him,” Lindsay says.

“He worked so hard to get where he wanted to be,” Melanie adds.

“I still have some steps before I become a cinematographer though. Don’t blow too much smoke up my ass.”

“Hunter, I don’t think you have met my boyfriend, Nathan. He works in television sometimes too.”

“Hey, I’m Hunter. I heard you were a musician. That’s cool. I don’t have much of an ear myself. The guys that do the music on the show that I work for really enjoy their jobs though.”

“Yeah, it can be fun if you get work on a decent show.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. One of my first PA jobs was for Shit My Dad Says.”

“I don’t think I ever watched it.”

“You weren’t missing out, believe me.”

Hunter and Nathan kept talking and were actually hitting it off. He hoped that Hunter could be someone Nathan could have a conversation with in case the night did end up taking a strange turn. He didn’t want to break up their conversation, so he decided to back off and do his own thing for a few minutes.

He was going to go find Emmett and see if he needed any help, but he ended up running right into Eric.
“Oh I’m sorry, Justin! I didn’t pay attention to where I was going.”

Justin noticed that Eric spilled his drink on himself. He felt bad and tried to apologize, but Eric insisted that it was just water and that it was no big deal.

“How has your day been, Eric?”

“Pretty exhausting, actually. Christmas is fun and rewarding with a kid, but when your daughter is on the go all the time, it can be demanding. On top of all that, Brian woke her up earlier than usual because he was “bored.” I actually have his camera on me because I wanted to show Emmett when I went to help him in the kitchen just now. Want to see?”

“Oh, I uh-”

Before Justin could say much else, the proud dad pulled out a camera, found the video in question, and pressed play. As Justin watched the video, he felt like he had no idea who this man was anymore. He understood that people changed. He understood that it took some people longer to grow up than others. But this wasn’t the Brian he knew. Brian wouldn’t film his kid waking up at Christmas just to capture the look of pure joy and excitement that occurred. He probably wouldn’t be caught nearly buying out an entire Disney store either, going by the presents in the video.

Then again, that wasn’t completely true. Even with this pod person, he could still find the Brian who he had private moments with that were calm and playful. Brian did always try to work at making his friends happy and helping them out with the problems in their lives, even if he covered up why he did it later. He always showed a different side to himself around his son, even though he tried to emotionally distance himself for a while after he signed over his rights. This Brian may not hide his genuine happiness like he used to, but even before this Brian came into fruition Justin remembers seeing the open and unguarded expressions in the early mornings after they settled down from a night out and laid in bed together. He remembers genuine excitement about the wedding, before he began to think he was holding Justin back. This Brian was probably always there, lurking beneath the surface due to being stifled by his upbringing, his anger, his dominant masculinity, and his overall reluctance to expose that side of him because any negativity thrown his way would hurt so much worse. Justin saw the changes. They were changes he had wanted almost the whole time he was with him until they actually started to occur. He remembers being scared that it was Brian putting on a front just to make him happy. He loved Brian both ways, but he couldn’t be a man who was okay with his partner changing almost everything he originally stood for just to make him happy. He had good reason to think that because it was such a change from the Brian everyone else knew. But fronts don’t last for over seven years, do they?
“Are you becoming one of those annoying parents who force everyone they see to look at pictures of your child?” a familiar and annoyed voice calls out as the video on the camera finishes.

“You are the one who filmed the oh so magical moment.” Eric teases back as he shuts the camera off.

As Justin looks up, he sees that Brian is no longer talking to his mother. He had taken it upon himself to introduce himself to Nathan in the corner of the room by the wet bar. Brian walks away from Nathan, leaving him with a pale look of uneasiness on his face, and over to Eric to get his camera back. Eric half-heartedly tries to play keep away with it, but Brian gets it back and stashes it in his pocket. He finally looks in Justin’s direction and acknowledges him.

“Justin, pleasure seeing you here.” Brian then grabs Eric by the hand and pulls him away. Justin hears him asking Michael to keep an eye on Lily, and then Brian and Eric are out of the room and up the stairs.

Well, that was a change from a few days ago.

Justin needs a drink. Because even though Brian hasn’t been a part of his life for several years now, he is still versed just enough in Kinney to read his odd moods. That wasn’t only lust for his partner. That was an attempt to make Justin jealous, maybe even hurt him. In some small way, it is almost a relief to see him indulge his petty side. In a slightly bigger way, Brian’s method sort of worked when it came to the desired effect. But it is more familiar to the Brian he first met. It is almost reassuring to know that Brian is still technically Brian.

Justin makes his way over to the bar to mix himself a drink and Nathan is still there staring at Justin with lingering betrayal in his eyes.

“You shouldn’t have left me alone, Justin.” Nathan tells him, his voice low enough so only Justin would hear.

Justin sighs and replies, “I left you with Hunter. You were having a good conversation. Honestly, I was just going to go see if Emmett needed help in the kitchen but I ran into Eric and he showed me a video of Lily.”

“Well, while you were watching home videos, your ex-fiance took me to the side so he could interrogate me.”
“What? No, he didn’t.”

“He did. I thought it was going to be fine. He seemed a little high and mighty when he introduced
himself, but okay enough. But then he kept asking questions about us and then just about me. I’m
pretty sure he was judging everything that came out of my mouth. He did seem a little pissed that
you’re dating a guy who got hired by one of his competitors to write the Arm & Hammer jingle
though. So that was nice.”

“Was he a total asshole to you?”

“Well...no. He was just...I don’t know, invasive and a little rude.”

“Look, just count your blessings. Because he can be a real asshole when he feels like it. He is
charismatic and really intimidating. He can be brash and really frank when it comes down to it. He
can also be the most generous person in the world. But then he will just shut you out before you
can blink…” Justin trails off at Nathan’s suspicious expression. “Look, if he starts being an asshole
to you I’ll talk to him, alright?”

“You have barely said a word to him in years. How much of an effect can you have on the guy?”

Justin tries to answer that but he honestly can’t. “Just ignore him then, okay? He hates that.”

“I don’t...think...that Emmett...and Drew...would like us fucking in their guest...oh, fuck…” Eric
moans out as Brian pounds into him from behind.

“Needed to...fuck your tight...little...ass!” Brian enunciates through his hard rhythmic thrusts.

“Oh god, Brian harder! Fuck me harder!”

Brian obliges and works up a quicker and more punishing rhythm. He is feeling close, so he
reaches around Eric’s waist and starts to jerk his cock in time with his thrusts. As he feels Eric’s cum coat his fingers, he lets go of his orgasm as well. He collapses on Eric’s back due to the high and when he comes down from it, he gently pulls out of his partner and lays on the bed next to him.

Eric, still panting, says, “Don’t get me wrong, I love spontaneous sex almost as much as you do, but where did that come from?”

Brian shrugs with the reply, “I was horny.”

“It didn’t have to do with wanting to get away from certain guests downstairs?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, because you weren’t dismissive with Justin or anything.”

“I thought I was quite friendly.”

“Of course you did.”

Brian is silent and stares at the ceiling while Eric is on his side and staring at Brian.

“Brian, everything seemed fine this morning. You were actually in a really good mood, if I remember correctly. Hell, things even weren’t so bad when we had lunch with Justin. But today, you left that Nathan kid looking as intimidated as one of your new interns and practically acted as though Justin wasn’t there.”

“Whatever.”

As soon as Brian thinks the conversation might be over, Eric goes on to say, “Are you jealous or something?”

Brian can only sneer with a reply of “You know I don’t do jealous.”
“I know that’s what you usually say. Apparently you also used to say that you didn’t do love or relationships. You did that with Justin. And you did that with me.”

When Brian says nothing, Eric continues.

“You have become more and more open with me these past few years. I know you have your days where you pull away, take a few steps back, and act like a fucking dick, but days those have been farther apart lately. So talk to me.”

“It’s nothing. I promise you, it’s nothing. It was just me fucking with the new guy.”

“And Justin?”

“I said it was nice to see him. Listen, can we just drop the subject?”

“But you seemed fine this morning. You were happy.”

“I am happy.”

“Well, you are being really sassy.”

“Sassy, Eric? Really?”

“Brian, in all honesty, you are probably the sassiest stud I have ever met.” Eric huffed as he got up and put his clothes back on, “Help me straighten up the bed.”

“Flattening out the wrinkles in the comforter won’t get your cum stain out of it.”

“Damn it, we should have fucked in the bathroom.”

“Too late now. Maybe after dinner.”
After Brian gets his clothes back on, he walks around the bed and puts his arms around Eric’s waist. He nibbles his ear and kisses down his neck and shoulder, only to try to sneak a hand down Eric’s pants. Eric reluctantly swats his hand away.

“Stop. We are going downstairs. We have been up here for twenty minutes already.”

“Dinner won’t be ready for another hour.”

“We are supposed to be spending time with our friends.”

“They can wait.”

“It’s Christmas, Brian. Your kids are downstairs.”

That gets Brian to give up for now. He turns Eric around to face him, puts his hands on Eric’s cheeks, and kisses him. He ends the kiss but keeps Eric’s face in his hands.

“I want to tell everyone tonight.”

“Tell everyone?” Eric stops to think of what Brian is saying and his eyes light up in recognition. “You mean-”

“I want to announce that we’re engaged.”

“Brian, are you sure? I mean, Debbie isn’t here and she is like a mother to you. Ted and Blake aren’t here either and don’t try to say that it doesn’t matter, Kinney, I know you better than that.”

Brian lets out an aggravated sigh.

“We have all lived in different cities for years, Eric. As disappointing as it may be, it might be a long time before we get this many people under the same roof with us again. It is a good of a time
“This doesn’t have anything to do with Justin being here, does it?”

“No. This has to do with telling the people who I consider my family that an important thing that has happened to me. I want them to know.”

“Alright.” Eric says right before he gives him another kiss. “If you’re sure.”

“I have never been more sure about anything.”

As they head out into the hallway, the door opens from across the hall. Drew comes out and stands in the doorway. Behind him, the room is newly decorated with sky colored walls, a galaxy rug, a spaceship bed, and toy trucks and dinosaurs on top of the bookshelves. Drew clears his throat and looks to see if there are any more people close by.

“…Emmett wants to keep this quiet until dinner. I won’t say anything if you won’t.”

After that, Drew heads back downstairs. Brian didn’t believe him, but he didn’t care. It wasn’t like they were subtle when they snuck away. Eric nudges Brian and is grinning with excitement. Brian just shrugs and follows Drew.

“Hello, Emmy Lou. Do you require my assistance?”

Emmett turns his head to see Brian leaning on the counter next to him. He is pretty sure Brian is not serious about helping. But maybe he’s wrong because Hunter, who literally just walked into the kitchen, is told to “kindly fuck off for ten minutes, will you?”

“I know you don’t really want to help me with dinner, Brian.”

“Good guess. I already had to cook breakfast. Helping you would be overdoing it.”
Despite what Brian just said, he picks up a knife and starts cutting up an apple for the fruit salad.

“I also know you fucked Eric in one of the upstairs guest rooms.”

“What a surprisingly accurate claim! Did you keep in touch with Mysterious Marilyn once you moved out of the Pitts?”

“Mysterious Marilyn, Drew Boyd. Where does one stop and the other begin?”

“It is a philosophical question that we all must think of at one point in our lives.”

“And I know you know about the room across from the guest bedroom.”

“I did catch a glimpse of it.”

Silence.

Of course that is all Brian Kinney will give him.

“So, are you curious as to what is going on?”

“It is pretty self-explanatory, isn’t it? You are having a kid. Adopting, specifically. A boy, age ranges from 2 to 5.”

“Did you keep in touch with Mysterious Marilyn?”

Brian just raises an eyebrow and smirks but keeps on cutting.

“I’m so scared, Brian.”
“I know.”

Emmett looks around and makes sure nobody is coming in. He goes over and closes the door to the kitchen for precaution and then goes over to check the casseroles and the ham in the oven.

“We were going to adopt a baby, you know. Get approved by an agency and an expecting mother. We waited for months and months and got close last year. I didn’t want to tell any of you until it was an absolutely sure thing. Weird, right? Me, not getting overwhelmed with excitement and telling everyone as soon as we found out? I was just so scared that it would fall through. Turns out I was right. We got approved while the mother was already eight months along. I had one month to get excited and plan, but when she got here, the mother changed her mind. She fell hard for her daughter.”

Brian just nods for him to continue and for some reason Emmett can’t shut up.

“It is harder to get approved as a gay couple. A lot of expecting parents want a mother and a father to raise a baby. But Drew and I are really stable. We have a wonderful home. He has celebrity status. I know that eventually we could probably have a newborn if that is what we really want.”

“But it isn’t.”

Emmett shook his head. “At the end of July, Drew started volunteering at an organization in the city where children in foster homes go to meet and play with other foster children in their age groups on the weekends. They have indoor and outdoor activities. They’ll go to a park, sometimes to museums. It is a really good program. And you know that Drew is still a popular player and, of course, the kids went nuts for him. After two weekends of having so much fun, he easily convinced me that I should volunteer with him on the days I didn’t have an early event to plan for a client. I mainly just got meals together and read to the younger kids, but I loved doing it too. It was there we met Duncan.”

Emmett takes a deep breath.

“Duncan is only three but you may never meet another little boy who is more filled with life. He is so adorable. He has this perfect little round face, soulful brown eyes, the biggest smile, and the cutest dimples to top it off. He has been handed the shit end of the stick so many times in his short life, but he doesn’t let that get to him. He is playful and likes to tumble around. He loves trucks, trains, rocket ships, and he likes to pretend he is a dinosaur. He loves football and Drew became his hero the first time he laid eyes on him. He is definitely one butch little boy.”
“I had seen Duncan essentially acting as Drew’s shadow and had read to him during story time. When Drew came to me two months ago and asked if I would consider adopting a three year old instead of a newborn, I knew he was talking about Duncan. But I didn’t know Duncan like Drew did. So I made a point of trying to get to know him.”

Emmett laughs a little at this point, because it is so strange that he is unloading this on Brian Kinney of all people.

“The agency that handles Duncan’s case set it up so that Drew and I could go visit him in his foster home. They like to introduce a child to potential parents and have visits for at least a month or so to make sure everyone gets used to each other. His foster mother and father already had four other foster kids under their roof, two of them being younger than Duncan. It wasn’t possible for them to adopt Duncan, especially since they were adopting the oldest child and her baby sister already. So they were happy someone was interested in adopting him.”

“Tended right away Duncan and I will probably never have anything in common. But he is so sweet that I didn’t really care. He laughed when I couldn’t catch the football that Drewsie threw at me but it was a laugh that was in such good spirits that I was laughing along right with him. I started visiting him as much as I was allowed because I missed him so much on the days I didn’t see him. We even went to spend Christmas Eve with him and gave him and the rest of the kids he’s living with some presents. And, even though I don’t know anything about cars or trains or dinosaurs, he still wants to sit in my lap and fall asleep in my arms as I read a story to him and cries when I leave. He doesn’t even move in until the first week of January and he has already become the most important person in my life.”

Surprisingly, Brian is still there listening to all this and he clears his throat. “That tends to be how it works. It’s scary. I get it. But things sound promising. What’s the problem?”

Emmett sighs. He might as well say it if he has said this much already.

“It’s just that…he’s three. He is essentially just a baby who has been passed around to different foster homes for over a year. He is going to like anyone who shows him a little bit of love and attention, even if that person is completely different from him. What if-” Emmett breaks off and wipes his eyes, “What if this rough and tumble little boy grows into a young man who loves sports and cars and probably women and becomes so ashamed to have a dad like me?”

Emmett knows it is probably a hard fear for other people to grasp. He has always taken pride in who he is, so this vulnerability he has usually comes as a surprise. But he grew up with a father who was ashamed of him and brothers who absolutely hated him. They had known how different
he was and were probably elated when Emmett ran away from Mississippi and never came back. He never felt masculine enough to father any child properly, let alone a son like Duncan. He hadn’t even considered it until somewhat recently because of those feelings.

“Well, for what it’s worth...”

Emmett prepares himself for one of Brian’s insults that end up being encouraging. Or one of Brian’s encouragements that end up being insulting.

“I think you’ll be a great father.”

He knew he would say someth-

Wait, what did he say?

“As long as you are good to him and try your best, he’s going to love you. Yeah, kids are hard but at the same time they aren’t. You don’t have to change every interest you have just to appease them. As long as you are spending time with them and you are encouraging them, they will appreciate you. Besides, no father creates a child’s dream room with everything his son likes for his own benefit. So don’t worry about not being a good father just because you like to put on a feather boa once in a while.”

Before Emmett can say anything, Brian continues.

“And hey, maybe you will rub off on each other. I mean, I knew shit about Disney Princesses and now look at me. I know all the words to every fucking song on that goddamn Frozen Soundtrack. I even have a playlist on my phone to have on hand in the car for Lily. By the way, I think your casserole is burning.”

Ending on that note, Brian pats him on the shoulder and walks out of his kitchen.

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Brian goes back to join the rest of the guests and freezes when he sees Justin and Nathan with Eric and Lily. Justin is squatting down so he is eye level with Lily as he hands her a wrapped package from his messenger bag. Brian can already tell it is a framed picture before Lily gets the wrapping paper off. Brian walks over to get a look at it. Of course Justin painted a princess in a castle to give to his kid. And to top it all off, he threw in a unicorn. He can tell that it was something Justin did
within the last couple of days. As if seeing The Lion King on Broadway twice and having that sunshiney smile didn’t already make her like him.

Upon seeing the painting he made for her, Lily, in her always subtle demeanor, takes in a giant breath of surprise and hugs her new present while she squeals and jumps up and down. Over and over.

“Thank you thank you thank you! This is one of the best presents in the whole world! I will keep it forever and ever and hang it on my wall and look at her and tell her goodnight before I go to sleep and say good morning to her when I wake up and name the unicorn Chico—”

Eric puts his hands on Lily’s shoulders to keep her in place. “Lily, honey, I think he gets it.”

“Chico?” Brian asks, amused.

“After JR’s dead hamster, Daddy.” his daughter informs him as she bows her head slightly, probably recalling the tragic loss.

“Justin, it’s so nice of you to take the time to do this. She really does love stuff like this. You didn’t have to.” Eric tells Justin sincerely as Justin stands back up.

“I went out to buy Gus and JR presents when I found out they were coming and I didn’t want her to feel left out. I figured you and Brian had gotten her plenty of toys so I just painted her something. I wish I would have had more time to make it look a bit nicer.”

“If this is your work rushed, then I am sure the rest of your paintings are absolutely incredible.”

Thank god Eric hadn’t mentioned the painting of Justin’s they did have. Brian doesn’t think he could live that down.

“You know, a few of his paintings are going to be up for auction at the New Year’s Eve exhibit at his gallery.”

Justin turned his head to look at Nathan with a subtle expression that Brian intimately knew as,
“Please shut the fuck up.”

“I’m sure they will get high bids.” Eric says.

“Justin, did you get around to asking Eric and Brian if they wanted to come?”

Brian didn’t know Nathan nearly as well, so he couldn’t read what exactly was going on with him. But he knew people in general enough to know that this inquiry probably stemmed from an earlier argument and he was just being petulant.

“Nathan, it’s short notice. I’m sure they have plans.”

“Everyone else here switched their plans around so they could come. I don’t see what the big deal is in asking.”

“Well, Brian’s assistant offered to watch Lily since she has a daughter just a couple of years older and we had plans to go out—”

“But we can always go clubbing another time.”

Eric looks at Brian in surprise. And then Brian, for only the second time that day, looks Justin directly in the eyes.

“We would love to come to your little party. If we are invited, of course. Nathan wants us to come. Do you not want us to come, Justin?”

Justin seems to be struggling for words, which Brian is sort of pleased about. However, he keeps eye contact with Brian and says,

“Of course you can come. 164 Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg. Take the L from Union Square.”

“I’m sure it won’t be too hard to find.” Brian says as he wraps an arm around Eric’s waist.
“Great, then I will see you there.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

Brian considers saying “fine” again, so it is probably for the best that Michael steps in to try to break the tension.

“Oh wow! That’s a really pretty painting, Lily!”

“Thank you, Justin painted it for me. It’s so beautiful.”

“It sure is. Speaking of art, can I talk to you for a second, Justin?”

As Justin gets led away from Brian, Eric, Nathan, and Lily by Michael, he looks back one more time to find Brian staring back in his direction. Brian has one of those expressions on his face that makes him look like he is five seconds away from sticking his tongue out at him. Honestly, going by today, he wouldn’t be surprised if he actually did. He doesn’t know what he did today to deserve to be a target for Brian’s mood swings, but it isn’t like this is the first time.

He doesn’t know where Michael is pulling him until he ends up in the bathroom. Justin looks around at his surroundings.

“So what did you need to talk to me about that required the presence of a toilet?”

“You know, you are all so fucking confusing.”

“I’m sorry?”
“First, you and Brian break it off and don’t speak for seven years. And then you both run into each other on the street and decide to have lunch together, which is whatever, that’s your business. When I talked to Eric, he says that you all got along and that Brian, while he was a bit nervous, seemed to get through the meal okay too. We all thought that maybe we could all move past this and not have to censor what we say about one of you to the other. Especially mentioning what were up to in New York to Brian. We thought that we could start inviting you up to Toronto for the holidays instead of inviting you at odd times of the year. At the very least, we assumed everything would be fine for tonight but then Lindsay overheard Brian initiating a proverbial pissing contest with Nathan. But then Nathan goes ahead and invites Eric and Brian to your exhibit. I don’t know Nathan, but he came off a little as the jealous type so I was a bit surprised by that. And then there’s Eric, who has a patience that has to rival Ben’s, but even he was getting a little aggravated with your exchange with Brian just now.”

“Michael, what’s your point? Brian going off and having proverbial pissing contests and Brian being an ass are nothing new.”

“My point is that you both need to get over this shit and move on with your lives. Just put what you had behind you. You both have been avoiding each other but then you can’t concentrate on anything once Brian moves into your line of vision and you’re right, Brian has been acting like an asshole. And the thing is, he hasn’t acted like one in a long time. At least not around Eric. He can still throw out the underhanded insults, but he has calmed down with it a lot over the years. Eric makes him so happy, Justin. I was under the impression that Nathan made you happy too but what happened out there, as minor as it may have been, did not make Nathan or Eric very happy at all.

“Is that all you wanted to talk to me about, Michael?”

“Come on, Justin, don’t be upset.”

Justin takes a deep breath and takes his palm away from his eyes.

“Michael, I’m not upset, I’m just frustrated that I am the one being lectured here. I am trying. I painted his daughter a picture. I have had a few conversations with Eric. And fuck, I don’t want Eric to feel uncomfortable. Brian did a good job when it came to choosing him. He seems like a really great guy. And with Nathan, I know I made him feel uncomfortable by only giving him half my attention tonight. I feel bad about it. No doubt he will point it out once we leave. I would like to be friends with Brian again. I’ve missed him. But he has barely looked at me all night and probably just accepted Nathan’s invitation to make him, or to make me, feel uncomfortable. Smug bastard.”

Michael really looks at him at this point.
“Deep down, Brian will still be Brian, won’t he? If he can’t fuck the elephant in the room, then he will just avoid it. I didn’t mean to upset you, Justin. But you and Brian haven’t been exactly subtle today. I know he has been worse than you since he apparently grilled Nathan on everything from whether he was a bottom or a top, to if you paid for everything, and even on his birth year. I probably should have saved the lecture for him or not given one at all.”

“No. No, I know that conversation back there took a weird turn that Nathan probably wasn’t expecting. I’ll apologize to him. Fuck, I was kind of looking forward to seeing Brian tonight because I thought I might get to know him again and have him in my life, even though I was nervous about introducing him to Nathan. Stupid of me, right?”

“No, Justin. It’s not stupid.”

“We better go back out.”

“I actually do have something I need to talk to you about.”

Justin gapes, “You mean that lighthearted conversation we just had didn’t take care of that?”

“Nope. I got contacted by Red Giant Comics. They want to reprint the existing comics of Rage and reboot the series. With gay marriage legal in two-thirds of the U.S. and more allies than ever, they think that it could be a huge hit. They aren’t wanting to buy the creative rights or anything. We would make a good percentage of what they make off of Rage in any media platform. They just want the rights to publish and produce what we come up with or give the okay on. They want the two original creators on board. We could work mostly from home on the comics and meet them occasionally for meetings on where to go next. I told them I had to talk to you.”

“It sounds great, Michael. But I haven’t done anything like that in years. And Rage…”

“I know. But will you just think about it? Please? I understand if you don’t want to, but Ben and I could really use the money.”

“Okay. I’ll think on it.”
“That’s all I ask.”

Justin and Michael head out of the bathroom and bump straight into Emmett.

“What were you both doing in there? Did you both make a pact to go to the bathroom together always and forever?”

Michael and Justin both just shook their heads no.

“Alright...Well, I was just going to get assistance from our other guests. I need help carrying everything out to the dining room.”

Michael and Justin head to the kitchen and are floored by the amount of food Emmett has covering the counters. Emmett walks back in and they stare at him. “What?”

“There aren’t THAT many of us, Emmett. You didn’t have to overdo yourself like this.”

“Well, Michael, maybe you wouldn’t be surprised by how much food I was making if you had come in to help me once in a while like most of the others did.”

“You lived with me! You know how useless I am in the kitchen!”

“Hmmm...That’s true. I suppose I should thank you. You go ahead and grab the cranberries and Justin, you get the mac & cheese casserole.”

The three of them carried dishes into the dining room and put them down where Emmett told them to. The table was already set, so they went back to get more food, but everyone else had already grabbed something so they just turned around and followed them. When all the food was down on the table, Justin went to stand next to Nathan and reached over to grab his hand. Nathan just pulled it away which sort of hurt. But then, to Justin’s surprise, Nathan reached back over to take Justin’s hand and pulled him over to two of the chairs set around the very large table. His mother sat next to him on his right and Tucker was next to her. Molly went to sit by Nathan and across from Hunter and soon everyone had figured out where to sit. Brian, Eric, and Cynthia were sitting on the other side of the table and to Justin’s right and for some reason Emmett had a booster seat that Lily could sit in. To Justin’s relief, they weren’t close enough to really have an easy conversation with. When Emmett saw that everyone was sitting down before he cleared his throat to speak.
“I just would like to say a few things, being Miss Hostess of the evening and all. Oh, look at this. We never get to use this table. Drew, look how nice everyone looks sitting here! Now, I know it’s not Thanksgiving, but I just wanted to say how grateful I am to see you all here. It means the world to me that you came out to spend Christmas in our home. Brian, Eric, Lily, I am so glad you have moved so close by. Don’t let anyone tell you Jersey is too far away, because it’s not and you can come out to visit any time.”

“As all of you may have noticed, there are sealed envelopes on your plates. I haven’t designed a dinner theater game, although that would be so much fun so let’s keep that in mind for next year! It is just a small gift you to put on your fridge or in your albums. Go on, open them!”

Justin, like everyone else at the table, opens his envelope to find a picture of a small African-American boy with Emmett and Drew squatting beside him. The boy has his arms around their necks with a huge smile on his face and Emmett and Drew look just as happy. Everyone looks up, except for Brian, who keeps looking at the picture with a small smile. Lindsay ends up breaking the silence first.

“Emmett? Drew? ...Are you?”

“I gave you that because I want you all to have a picture of our son.”

Everyone around the table gets so excited and emotional. Justin thinks he even sees a tear in Drew’s eye. He glances over at Brian and sees that, while he looks happy enough, he doesn’t look at all shocked. And of course, Emmett is almost bawling at this point. It doesn’t take much to get him to cry, but Justin understands how emotional he must feel this time around.

“Okay guys, enough with the pats on the back and the tears. I am sorry to say you might not get to meet Duncan while you are all in because introductory period isn’t up until January 3rd, so he won’t move in until then. But the paperwork is through and everything is official. As soon as he gets settled in and used to the place, we will try to come up to Toronto to come visit.”

“Debbie is going to go nuts when she finds out.” Ben says to Emmett.

“I know, I am so excited to tell her. I already called Teddy and let him know this morning. But now that I have told you, let’s not have the food get cold. Let’s eat!”
All of the food that Emmett made is, as always, absolutely delectable. He really has outdone himself. Justin doesn’t talk much to Brian and Eric. They mainly keep any conversation between them dealing with passing the food. Most of what they all talk about is Duncan, who Emmett and Drew are all too eager to talk about. Since Gus is sitting on the right side of Brian, Justin can have a conversation with him a little better. They talk a bit about how Gus is liking high school and of course Penelope, who Gus talks about as though she is the most wonderful person on the planet. He is glad that he was able to keep in touch with Gus, despite not being a part of Brian’s life anymore. He loves that boy so much. He looks almost exactly like his dad. He is a teenager so of course he is going to have a bit of a mouth once in a while, but he is so innocent, curious, a bit more shy and sensitive than Brian, and doesn’t hide his kindness by dismissing it as though it is for his own gain. He wonders how Brian feels about Gus’s differences from him, but Justin can tell that every time that Brian speaks to Gus, he is very proud of his son.

After dessert, they are all helping Emmett clean up. They all gather in the kitchen to talk as they take turns washing the mountain of dishes that Emmett dirtied when he prepared the meal. Justin goes back to the table to get the table cloth so they can get it washed. He feels Brian’s hand pulling him into the foyer before he knows that it’s him.

“Wha-Brian, what are you doing?”

Justin ends up finding himself pushed against the door with Brian’s body practically flush against his and dilated eyes staring down at him. Brian is silent for a few seconds, releases Justin’s arms, and slowly backs away. Justin rubs his arm nervously as Brian keeps his eyes on him.

“Brian, did you need something?”

It takes Brian a few more seconds to speak, but when he does, his voice is barely above a whisper.

“I wanted to warn you, or give you some notice so you wouldn’t be too surprised, about something.”

“Brian, you have barely spoken to me all night or even looked in my direction. You acted like a dick to Nathan. What is so important to the point where you have to pull me away from everyone else and talk to me in a dark hallway?”

Brian’s expression becomes indignant and guarded.
“Bullshit, like you acted so fucking perfect tonight. Avoiding introducing your boytoy to me until I just went over to talk to him myself. Bet that made him feel really special. I didn’t hesitate inviting you to lunch to meet Eric.”

“What- Brian, what the hell? You acted like this because I didn’t introduce you to Nathan when we got here? Why does it matter so fucking much anyway?”

Brian shakes his head as if he’s trying to clear it. “It doesn’t. It doesn’t matter at all. But I’m about to make an announcement and, since things between us are obviously still strained after all this time, I am giving you an out so you don’t have to be in the room when I say it.”

“What-

“When I go back into that room and rejoin all of our friends, Eric and I are going to announce that we are getting married. I thought you should know in case you didn’t want to see that.”

With that, Brian leaves Justin in the hall and goes back to the kitchen.

Justin is not going to get upset about this. He has no right. Brian has been with Eric for over six years. As long as Brian took to come around to the idea of marriage, it eventually happened. He knows he has no right to get upset over him moving on to pursue that with someone else.

He can’t move his feet though.

As much as he tries, he can’t. He wants Brian to be happy, but seeing him after all these years have dug up long buried emotions. He knows that if he witnesses it, then any small dash of hope that persisted over the years will be extinguished.

He knows that it could be obvious that he isn’t in the kitchen with everyone else. He knows, as he hears the muffled offers of heartfelt congratulations start to reach the hall, that Brian Kinney probably feels like he has won since Justin has shown how bothered he really is by staying out here. He has to go back in. He has to show some level of support in some way. He can pretend that he was in the bathroom or something and get the news from Nathan or Emmett. He has to ignore the heaviness in his heart and the fact that his eyes feel a little wet. As Justin takes that step, he feels his cell start vibrating in his pocket. He pulls out his phone and looks at the screen, but he doesn’t recognize the number. He’ll answer it anyway. It gives him another reason to put off reuniting with everyone else.
“Hello?”

“…Jus’n? That you?”

The words are slurred and the drunken voice takes a second to place, but as soon as he places it, he knows it so well. It was a voice that he knew every day of his life up to the point where it became hateful and disowning.

“Dad?”

“Heyyy, son.”

Justin is silent. Brian Kinney pulling him into a hallway to tell him he was engaged is routine compared to what is happening right now. There is no way Justin could have anticipated this happening tonight. Or any night for that matter.

“You there? Justin?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s…it’s good to hear your voice. Deeper than what it used to be.”

“How did you get my number? Did Molly give it to you?”

“No…no, she didn’t give it to me.”

“Then how the fuck are you calling me?”

“She visited me back ‘n Oc…October. Left her phone on the counter when she went in the other room. I found it on her phone an’ wrote it down.”
“What an honest thing to do.”

“I jus’…I wanted to call you and hear how you were doin’.”

“Like you care.”

“I do. I care now.”

“I don’t give a shit. It’s too late. Merry Christmas and don’t call me again.”

Just as Justin is about to take the phone away from his ear, he hears a whimpering sob on the end of the line.

“Justin…Justin, please….”

“What? What do you want?”

“I’m so sorry…I’m so fucking sorry.”

Justin leans against the wall with the phone pressed to his ear, his heart beating quickly in his chest. He stays silent as he listens to his dad cry, something he doesn’t think he has ever heard in his entire life. And even though he still hates the bastard, it still fucking hurts to hear him this way. He wishes it didn’t. He wishes he could hear this and feel nothing.

“What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

It takes his dad a minute to control his breathing and compose himself enough for the quiet sobs to die down. He lets out a few shaky breaths, then finally speaks.

“I-I just wanted to hear you. I missed hearing you. I missed so much. I’ll leave you alone now.”
“Dad…Dad, you aren’t going to do anything stupid, are you?”

“No. No, I’m just going to head to bed early. I’m sorry, Justin.”

Justin is about to suggest he drink some water and eat something before he goes to bed, but he hears a click on the line. And if Justin couldn’t move before, he definitely can’t move now.

At some point, he hears a door swing open and the light comes on above him. He can see Nathan with an annoyed look on his face in his peripheral vision.

“Justin, seriously, what the hell? You’ve been gone for almost half an hour! What…hey, what’s wrong?”

Suddenly, Justin finds himself sobbing with deep gasping breaths and feels tears spilling from his eyes. Nathan doesn’t even know what happened, but even if he does think it is about what Brian announced on the other side of the house, he can’t ignore Justin like this.

Justin sees Nathan step in front of him and feels his arms pull Justin against him. Justin all but collapses face first into Nathan’s chest as his sobs hit him full force. He clutches onto Nathan and just fucking bawls like a baby.

“Hey, hey shhh…it’s alright. I’ve got you. It’s okay, Justin. Tell me what’s wrong? You are scaring me so much right now. Shhh, it’s gonna be okay. Whatever is going on, it’s going to be alright.”

Chapter End Notes

I thought about titling this chapter "Justin's fucked up Christmas" but I have the cross street title theme going on here. As always, thank you to abenjami for proofreading. And thank you to all of you who are reading. A double thank you to all of you who are leaving feedback. I hope your Christmas or other seasonal holiday you may celebrate went better than Justin's. Please let me know what you think!
Chapter Summary

Nathan thinks about why he hates Christmas so much as he gets ready to take Justin home.

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter describes physical and emotional abuse, as well as insinuates sexual abuse. Also describes a past suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Call him a fucking Scrooge if you will, but Nathan hated the holidays. Especially Christmas. Growing up, he had never really gotten to celebrate them. His mother did what she could for the first several years of his life. When he was five, she had gotten a tiny artificial tree from a neighbor who was about to throw it out since he got a bigger one. He remembers his father grabbing her arm, bruising it with his fingerprints, as she told him she hadn’t spent a cent on it and to please believe her. Despite his mother making her own money as a waitress, she had no right to her funds. All of the money she earned went to her husband. He hadn’t even fucking needed it. He had been the head of the Language Department at Hunter College. It wasn’t like he was the richest man in the world but he could manage to earn his own spending money and not steal his wife’s. He didn’t have to ban her from spending any money of her own on even a few tree ornaments or for a present for their son. And Victor Hall knew he didn’t have to. As Nathan grew a little older, he knew that his father was genuinely a psychotic and sadistic fuck and got off on shit like that.

She had made it work though. She enlisted Nathan’s help and they made their own ornaments out of printing and construction paper. He remembers her quietly singing songs in Arabic and making him learn them so he could not only be bilingual, but also connected to her Syrian heritage, a heritage that she ultimately ran away from when she fled to America at the age of nineteen. It was odd, because many of the songs they sang were not Christmas themed yet they sang them anyway as they sat there, cutting out snowflakes to tape together so they could wrap them around the tree. When he pointed that out, she told him, “Translate some then, Ibn*, if you want to sing something else. You can practice Arabic that way.” Nathan remembers her teaching him the variety of subjects she knew about. He remembers her encouraging his love of music, even though she couldn’t buy anything for him besides necessities to keep up appearances. He remembers her trying to protect him from his father, the man she had married to keep herself from being deported or homeless. The man who promised to get her into the university he taught at and pay for her education if she married him, only to entrap her and abuse her in every way possible, even though she was the mother of his child.
His mother loved Christmas. She never told him why she loved it, except for saying that it was a “pretty holiday in America.” He didn’t think it was for a religious reason because she refused to talk about any religion. Now that Nathan knows what kind of country Syria is when it comes to religious beliefs, he feels as though she must have assigned any faith she might have had to one at some point in her life. But when Nathan brought it up once, all she said was that she believed that there was something better than life on Earth. She also refused to talk about any part of her past, even any family she may have left behind. Despite never knowing anything about them, even as a young boy Nathan sensed that his mother’s family members were not good people. He sensed that she ran for a reason. Just like she had ended her life for a reason.

He had only been eight years old. His mother had only been thirty. For at least a year, she had been taking little by little out of her tips before she gave the rest to his father. Not much. Just a few dollars at most each day. She had saved up enough to have a more proper Christmas that year. Nathan knew she had always wanted what their neighbors had. Strings of lights decorating the apartment, a big Christmas tree with ornaments from fucking Bloomingdale’s or wherever. And for some reason that year, she no longer cared about her husband’s reaction to her defiance. Six days before Christmas, she had a large pine tree delivered to their apartment and put it right by the window. She had bought lights to wrap around it and beautiful decorations to put on the tree, including an angel to put on top. Nathan remembers his mother coming to pick him up from school and coming home to see how much life she had given their prison and seeing presents wrapped under the tree. He had been too excited to see the dullness and resignation in her eyes. A few hours later, she made him go to his bedroom right before his father came home and beat her with his belt until she had bled. He knocked over the tree and took the presents outside to throw them in the trash. Nathan remembered how much it hurt when he saw his mother’s completely lifeless expression as he cleaned her wounds by the bathroom sink. She had only wanted to celebrate a fucking holiday like everyone else and give her kid a decent Christmas morning. But instead of waking up to find presents under the tree and hot chocolate for breakfast, Nathan had woken up to find his mother hanging by the very belt she had been beaten with. Apparently the lingering wounds on her back weren’t worth an in-depth investigation by the police. It wasn’t until a couple of days after she died that he found the guitar she had bought for him hiding in the back corner of his closet. That guitar had been a small comfort to him as he embarked on eight more years of one long torturous nightmare.

See, Justin knew. He has known about that and what happened for years after. But Justin was always the type to bounce back on his feet. He was hopeful and, for some reason, thought that Nathan was one strong fucker to live through all that. And he looks up to Justin. He wants to make him happy and to be a man who is able to overcome all of that. In a way he has. He has been doing better than he was just a couple of years ago. Yet Nathan wants to be perfect for him. He wants to be worthy of having a partner like Justin Taylor. He wants to be normal, even though Justin never asked him to be. But when Justin had told Nathan that he would probably have fun at the Christmas dinner, like most people would, he hadn’t really believed him. For the obvious reasons, of course. But for other reasons, to a lesser extent. He wasn’t really all that close with Emmett or Drew for one thing. He supposed, outside of Molly and Jennifer, he knew them the best out of all of Justin’s friends from back home. He liked them fine. It was cool that Justin was friends with a football star and Emmett was always very welcoming. But it was hard for Nathan to connect with them because of the age difference. He felt like a child around them and in some ways he was. The twenty year age gap was sometimes very apparent when interests and life experiences made it into the conversations that he had with them.
Hell, the eight and a half year age gap between him and Justin could be noticeable sometimes when it came to maturity levels and partying. He wasn’t an alcoholic or a drug addict by any means, but he was young and liked to let loose sometimes, especially on days where he wasn’t feeling his best. That was why Nathan always enjoyed Molly’s visits. She had become a real friend to him, even though she really didn’t know anything about his family besides the fact that his parents were dead from circumstances that were undisclosed to her. She was someone he could go out with on a more regular basis than Justin was up to anymore. She felt like more of an equal. But even though he and Justin are at different points in their lives professionally and in some other ways too, he loves him so much. Justin is a mentor to him. He is a protector. He is the one person besides a few people in law enforcement that knows pretty much everything about his past. And, for some reason, Justin still loves him. Nathan didn’t scare him off with his life story. He wasn’t disgusted by it or horrified by him. He was sympathetic and heartbroken for him. He took care of him and tried to talk to him. Nathan knows it might be naïve to say it, but he honestly thinks that Justin is the love of his life because of that.

So when he found out that the man who used to be the love of Justin’s life was coming to dinner as well, he definitely knew he wouldn’t have a good time. Yes, the threat of Brian Kinney gave Nathan all the more reason to go and stake his claim, but he just instinctively knew that the night would probably end up being uncomfortable at best. He didn’t expect that Justin would partly ignore him for half the night, despite knowing what this day meant for Nathan. He didn’t expect for Brian to interrogate him on his sex life and for him to peg Nathan as the bottom. He didn’t expect them to have some sort of strange staring match when Nathan suggested that Justin invite Brian and Eric to the gallery for New Year’s Eve, but he couldn’t complain about that. He had been a bit petulant about it by bringing it up at a strange time and brought it upon himself. But out of all those things, nothing was compared to finding Justin sobbing uncontrollably in the front hallway. Fuck, it hurts to see him like this. And he wants to know why it is happening and at the same time he doesn’t because he heard Kinney’s announcement in the kitchen. As much as seeing Justin this way makes him feel like there is a knife sticking in his heart, he also knows that if he finds out that the reason has to do with his past lover truly moving on, it would be as though that knife were twisted to make his heart bleed even more. But what comes to no surprise to Nathan is that this is all happening on fucking Christmas.

“Hey, hey shhh…it’s alright. I’ve got you. It’s okay, Justin. Tell me what’s wrong? You are scaring me so much right now. Shhh, it’s gonna be okay. Whatever is going on, it’s going to be alright.”

He quietly pleads with him as he presses his cheek against his hair and wonders what fucking caused this. What caused Justin to break like this? Even though it is usually Justin providing the emotional support for him, it isn’t as though he hasn’t seen Justin cry before. He had seen him sniffle during a sad movie or two. He had cried with him a couple of times when Nathan came back to reality after a particularly bad flashback. He had taken it hard when his first roommate he had in New York, Kyle, had overdosed on heroin and subsequently died ten months ago. But even then he hadn’t cried like this. Those cries had been soft and heartbreaking but hadn’t come from a place of shock and absolute devastation since Kyle had cut Justin and most of his other friends out of his life when his addiction got bad. Nathan didn’t know where this was coming from. Kinney
couldn’t cause this, could he? These primal sounds of pure confusion, as though even Justin himself doesn’t even know where this is coming from, and gut wrenching pain only muffled by Nathan’s dress shirt. Something else had to be going on. And, even if it hurt Nathan to hear it, he needed to know so he could at least try to help him.

“I-I don’t,” Justin tries to get out, but his voice breaks on him and the cries start again.

“Come on, Justin. Please tell me what to do here.”

He is afraid that Justin might start hyperventilating since he can’t seem to get a hold of himself. But then, surprisingly, he hears Justin say, “Need to leave. Want to go home.”

“Okay, okay. Let’s go then. Come on.”

Immediately, Nathan walks Justin over to the coat rack by the door and finds his coat and scarf and gets Justin bundled up. Justin walks out the door only to sit on the front steps. It’s only then that Nathan remembers that Molly, Jennifer, and Tucker are there too. He steps outside and squats next to Justin.

“You wanna stay here while I go get Molly, your mom, and Tucker?”

Justin has settled down since he got his coat on and went outside. A stray tear falls here and there, but he is no longer having a meltdown.

“I don’t want to make them leave. They are having a good time. They should stay longer. It’s not even 9 o’clock yet.”

“I am sure they wouldn’t give a shit about staying longer if they knew that you were so upset.”

“I don’t…I don’t want to be around them. I don’t want to be around anyone right now.”

“You want me to go back inside too?”

“Like you would do that, even if I said yes. You already know that I’m upset.”
“Yeah and you haven’t told me why you are upset.”

Justin just shrugs and sniffles a little.

“I am going to go inside to tell them that you aren’t feeling well. That you have a headache or something and want to head back to the city. That alright?”

“I can’t think of anything else better to say. Just…try to get them to stick around a little longer. They can ride the PATH back with the others. Hotel Pennsylvania is close to the 33rd street stop so it isn’t like they are riding back alone.”

“I guess I can try to get them to stay. I’m pretty sure that some of them will come out to at least say goodbye to you though. Just…stay here until I get back? I don’t want you being alone right now.”

Justin just sighs and says nothing else.

Nathan goes back inside. He looks down at his shirt and sees the wetness left there from Justin’s tears. He knows Justin wants to keep his breakdown quiet so Nathan takes his coat off the rack and puts it on, then heads back to the kitchen, where the rest of the party are scattered around and helping Emmett or in conversations of their own. Brian and Eric are missing. Nathan guesses that they have taken up Drew’s offer to let Lily sleep upstairs until they decide to leave. He walks over to Molly, who is chatting with Hunter, and pulls her aside to the walk in pantry. He knows he should be more subtle than that, but his mind reeling right now.

“Hey. Justin and I are going to go. He’s not feeling well. Said has a headache. I think he had too much wine or something.”

Molly starts studying him like she is suspicious and says, “Okay, well I guess we can go too. I’ll go get Mom and Tucker so we can get our coats and say goodbye to everyone.”

“Molly, he really isn’t feeling well. I don’t think he wants you guys to see him like this. He is kind of out of it.”

“When I came up this summer and we all went out for the 4th of July, we practically had to carry
him home while he belted out The Star Spangled Banner and then threw up on my shoes. There’s not much left that I haven’t seen.”

Yeah, that had been an eventful night.

“What’s going on with him?”

“He’s just…not feeling well.”

He knows Molly is thinking what he is thinking and she hadn’t even witnessed what happened in the foyer. He knows that Brian’s announcement is the most logical thing they can currently jump to if he doesn’t want to see anyone, even if the reaction seems a bit out of proportion to the situation since Brian and Eric have a kid together.

“Nathan, what’s going on with my brother? Does he need me? Or mom?”

“I think he just wants to wind down. I will probably take him back to my apartment to keep an eye on him, if he’ll let me. You have a key to his place, right? Do you feel comfortable staying there by yourself?”

“Yeah, but I may just crash on the pullout couch in the hotel room if we do stay for much longer. Trains after midnight can be a bitch when it isn’t a holiday. I’m going out to talk to him.”

“Molly-“

“I’m not going to play third wheel to you guys. I’m just going to tell him goodbye and that I’ll see him tomorrow. You let me do this and I will wait to tell Mom and Tucker that he went home until he’s already left.”

“Alright. Fine.”

Molly and Nathan leave the pantry and, fuck, he wasn’t subtle. Melanie and Gus are giving him concerned looks while occasionally glancing over by the doorway, probably to see if Justin is around. Luckily, most of the others, including Jennifer and Tucker, are too engaged talking about
what they plan on doing for the next few days. Emmett and Drew seem to only have eyes for each other and are acting more lovey-dovey than he’s ever seen them, probably from the excitement of announcing the upcoming arrival of their new son. So Molly and Nathan are able to sneak out of the kitchen and back to the front of the house easily enough.

Molly ignores the coat that Nathan is holding out for her and immediately goes outside and Nathan is relieved to see that Justin had actually listened to him and stuck around. Molly goes down to sit next to her brother and puts her arm around him. He sniffles but holds it together, which Nathan is grateful for. He stands behind them and watches the exchange.

“Hey, big brother. Nathan said you weren’t feeling well. What’s going on, huh?” Molly asks him as she rubs his back.

Justin puts a hand over his eyes and shakes his head, but doesn’t say a word.

“Come on, Justin. I’m worried about you.”

“I don’t want to talk about it with you right now, alright?” Justin snaps at her, causing her to jerk her hand back. Justin takes a deep breath and Nathan can tell that he immediately feels guilty.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Molly. I need time to process. I’ll tell you tomorrow, okay? I don’t want you getting upset over this.”

Before Molly could respond, Justin puts an arm around her neck and kisses her head. He gets up and Nathan hands him his bag. Both of them walk down the steps, but Justin turns around.

“Could you-“

“I’ll just tell them what Nathan told me, except hopefully make it more convincing. And make it so they won’t get mad at you for just taking off. Call me when you get up tomorrow, alright?”

“Okay. I’ll call you.”

As Nathan walks with Justin the several blocks to the PATH Station, they don’t talk. Nathan wants
to put his arm around him, hold his hand, do something to let just know that he is worried and that he wants to help. But Justin is bundled up with his hands deep into his pockets, guarded and his mind elsewhere. They get their Metrocards out and go through the turnstile, only to see that no one else is there and that they have another twenty-five minutes before a train to New York comes.

So they sit. Nothing is said for the first ten minutes. They just sit in silence. Nathan wishes that some street performer could come in and sing Christmas carols or something. The silence is getting unnerving. He doesn’t know why Justin can’t just talk-

“My dad called me tonight.”

Nathan mind goes blank as Justin’s words hit him. He hadn’t expected that. And going by what happened tonight, he is sure that Justin hadn’t expected it either.

Nathan doesn’t want to say anything. If he asks why, he might come off as pushy. If he jumps to any conclusions, it might get Justin worked up. So he stays quiet and puts his hand between the crook in his arm to slide it down and lace his fingers with the hand in Justin’s pocket. Justin pulls his hand out but, to Nathan’s relief, keeps his fingers laced with his.

“You know, I haven’t spoken to him since he had me arrested. I refused to say one word to him and he didn’t bother reaching out to me. Until tonight. Why? Why would he call me?”

“I don’t know, Justin.”

Justin suddenly releases his hand, gets up, and starts pacing back and forth. He looks at the floor and growls out a rant as though Nathan isn’t even there.

“And fuck. I am so pissed. How can he fucking call and want to fucking chat? The bastard. Goddamn sorry excuse for a father. I hate him. I HATE HIM!”

As Nathan hears Justin’s shouts echo through the tunnel, he realizes that it is good that there are no street performers on this very slow night. Witnessing his calm, rational, and sensitive boyfriend flip his shit is sort of terrifying.

“Justin.”
“Like today hasn’t been shitty enough, then he calls me and makes me worried out of my mind over him and I haven’t seen him in almost a decade. Fuck him. Fuck today.”

“What else happened today, Justin? Are you talking about Brian and Eric getting engaged? You knew that they announced that, right?”

Justin stops pacing to turn his head and look at Nathan. It’s the first time Justin has really looked at him with any concern since they got to Hoboken. But then his eyes get misty and he looks away. He shakes his head and clears his throat.

“No, that’s not it. I have no right to be upset about that.”

Nathan isn’t oblivious to the fact that having no right doesn’t mean you won’t feel it anyway.

“Justin it’s-“

“Jesus, just like I have no right to rant about my father calling me to say hello when your-” Justin starts but he breaks off and gets a guilty look on his face.

Nathan closes his eyes and breathes out.

“When my dad was a sociopathic and abusive rapist who is now dead?”

“I’m sorry, Nathan. I am really sorry. I didn’t mean to even bring anything up about it. Please don’t-”

“Justin, it’s okay. I am not going to freak out. Yeah, I think we can agree that my dad was worse than yours. But there are many degrees of shittiness and your dad kind of sucks too. There’s no denying that. Rant all you want.”

“I don’t feel like it anymore.”
Justin sits back down and reaches over to take Nathan’s hand again. He is quiet for a minute and looks like he is sorting out his words in his head now, before blurting them out. Nathan figures his next words would be calmer and more rational. He was hoping for Justin to elaborate on what had occurred in the phone call to make him so worried about his estranged father. No such luck.

“Nathan…I’m so sorry about tonight. I really am.”

And before he can stop himself, Nathan says to him in a hurt and betrayed voice, “You know what this day means to me. You know.”

Justin looks incredibly guilty and Nathan feels guilty too. He didn’t mean to say that. He wants to brush it off and say that it is okay but it really isn’t. He didn’t want to sound needy and codependent, but Justin did know. He fucking knows what happened exactly fifteen years ago. He knew that it was a big step for Nathan to go to a dinner celebrating this day and even if Brian Kinney’s presence gave his possessive side more drive to be there, he did it for Justin. He wanted to be normal and be there with his boyfriend. And Justin had basically ignored him for most of the night any time Brian walked into the room. He thought he was going to leave the party pissed off at Justin. And going by the way he just blurted out what he felt just now, he is a little pissed off at him. But fuck, seeing him break down tonight had really taken a lot of that away. Seeing him like that made him realize that it was a hard night for him as well and to just let it go, at least for tonight.

“But the party is over. Nothing else we can do about it now.”

“Are you okay? Fuck, I shouldn’t have pretended that today was going to be fine for you. I feel terrible for not being more attentive to you tonight.”

“What do you want me to do, Justin? I’m not going to cry about you not keeping me as your center of attention all night. It won’t do any good. I think I did well today, considering the other Christmases I have had in the last fifteen years.”

“It should have been better for you. I should have made it better for you. I’m so sorry, Nathan.”

“Well, there’s always next year.”

“Do you need to talk? Do you need to...“
“Justin, I promise you I will let you know if I need to talk about her. Or him. But I am not going to do it now. The train is going to be here in four minutes.”

Nathan stands up and turns his head to see Justin nodding, his face sad and resigned. Nathan sighs because this is not how he wants tonight to go. He didn’t want to end the night with an argument or with Justin feeling this bad about everything.

“Will you stay over at my place? Just for tonight? In case I do start thinking about her too much?”

Before he knows it, Justin is standing in front of him and holding both of his hands.

“Yes. God, it is the least I can do. I want to be here for you. Especially today.”

Half the time he has to plead with his workaholic boyfriend to stay over so when times like this occur and Justin seems enthusiastic about staying, it feels good to know that Justin still wants him. He is hoping that it is just because he has a studio set up in his loft and not at Nathan’s apartment. When they start searching for a place together, he is going to make sure that Justin has space for an even nicer studio and space for Nathan to have space of his own too. That way Justin won’t get sick of him because they will be able to get away from each other when they need to. He wants this to work. He wants this to work so much. For over a year, it has been good. Nathan has never been happier in his entire life. After being with Justin for several months, he finally had started to believe that Justin genuinely cared for him and loved him even and those were emotions he had never felt directed towards him since his mother was alive. He really hopes those feelings aren’t changing now that Brian was living in the same city. If he lost Justin, Nathan doesn’t know how he would deal.

Nathan stares at his boyfriend and then gently wraps his arms around him. Just as gently, Justin hugs him back and they stand there in the empty train station just holding each other.

“Merry Christmas, Justin.”

Nathan can hear Justin stifle a whimper and he feels his boyfriend’s arms wrap tighter around him. He tightens his hold as well and they stay like that until the train comes.

Chapter End Notes
*Ibn is the phonetic sound of son in Arabic, if my research is correct.
33rd and 8th

Chapter Summary

Eric really loves Brian, but that doesn't keep him from being really pissed off at him right now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Eric loves Brian. He honestly and truly does. He would not have spent over six years with him and decided to raise a child with him if that wasn’t the case. Life has been good for them. There are times when his eyes wander over to Brian and he can’t stop staring. It happens when he watches Brian working. It happens when they are making love. It happens when Eric wakes up before him and instead of getting his day started, he stays in bed a little longer just to watch his partner sleep. Sometimes when he thinks of how lucky he is to have Brian as the great love of his life, he gets overwhelmed by how intense his feelings for Brian still are after all this time. And when they announced their engagement tonight, he felt so fucking happy. Brian kept kissing him as though they were in the honeymoon stage of their relationship still and Eric couldn’t stop smiling until they put Lily down for a little bit upstairs. Despite how all over the place Brian was tonight, that announcement really had made both of them happy.

But that doesn’t stop Eric from still being pissed at him for being a dick tonight.

He is holding his tongue on it on their way back to the train station. Not only is it midnight already, but Cynthia, Lindsay, Melanie, Gus, JR, Michael, Ben, and Hunter are with them as they walk away from Emmett and Drew’s house. But what is really making him hold his tongue is the fact that Jennifer, Molly, and Tucker are with them too. Yet Justin and Nathan are very noticeably absent. He is actually concerned about that, believe it or not. He isn’t blind. He saw Justin looking at his partner and not paying enough attention to his own. It hadn’t made Eric happy by any means, but Justin had been nice to him. He had given a beautiful painting to his daughter and he was pleasant and engaging during the few conversations they did have. It had been Brian who had been the instigator of any drama that had occurred tonight. Brian’s acceptance to Justin’s forced invitation did not come from kindness or any wanted attempt to become friends with him. He did it to make him uncomfortable, just like he had when he had dragged Eric up to the bedroom. And Eric hoped that Brian didn’t try to scare Justin away when they announced their engagement, but how else could you explain Justin’s absence for the rest of the night? He knew that Brian genuinely wanted their friends to know. They talked about how they were going to tell everyone after Brian had surprisingly said yes without any hesitation. Brian had wanted to announce it the next time there were a big group of them up in Toronto. But then they were invited to Emmett’s and he had apparently decided to do it there instead.

He still doesn’t know what he said to Nathan, but he knows Brian way too well to know that it
wasn’t anything friendly and casual. He knows that his fiancé is an expert on how to put people on
the spot and make them feel inferior without even trying. That was fine for business. That persona
got things done for Kinnetik when need be and Brian compensated by giving his employees
bonuses, great benefits and medical insurance, and rollover vacation days. But it wasn’t okay to do
at his friend’s Christmas party to someone who was technically young enough to be his son. It just
wasn’t. He didn’t care that Nathan was the new guy or that he was Justin’s boyfriend. He didn’t
care if Nathan had acted a little jealous over Brian’s presence. He didn’t deserve it. And if anyone
knew the daunting task of becoming the new love interest to a man who already had experienced
an epic romance, it was Eric.

Eric was very secure in his relationship now but that first year had its rough patches, especially
looking back on it years later. Not only when it came to dealing with Brian’s more severe mood
swings, bouts of depression, and lingering feelings for Justin, but also from Liberty Avenue. The
whispers behind his back and the well-meaning warnings to his face about Brian’s heartbreaker
stud status were one thing. He knew that Brian honestly wanted to change and he had to believe
him on that. And Brian did change, both before he met the man and after they had gotten together.
Eric knows that his place in his life had helped Brian grow exponentially, but Justin had helped
him come a long way before Eric was even in the picture. He doesn’t know if Brian knows this,
but he and Justin had formed a small but semi-rabid fanbase when it came to their relationship.
Swooning men who had wanted to be in Brian or Justin’s place when they had been together had
come up to him in awe because he had won over Brian’s heart after it had belonged to Justin for so
long. One man had even said to him, “How is that even possible when Brian and Justin are
supposed to end up together in every possible universe? They even end up together in a fictional
comic book one!”

He had just directed him to Michael on that one. Eric really didn’t know much about alternate
universes and comic books.

He knew how intense Brian’s relationship with Justin had been. He even truthfully told Brian that
he was fine if they became friends with him. So the fact that Brian had acted like this tonight after
being with him for six and a half years really did piss him off a little. And, like he knew Brian,
Brian also knew him well enough to know that not all was well with Eric.

“Hey. Eric.”

Eric glances over at Brian and sees that he looks a little worried. Eric hadn’t realized it until that
point, but they were both trailing behind everyone else. They were all tired and quietly chatting.
Cynthia was pushing a knocked out Lily in the stroller that they had brought with them. They were
just far enough behind to have a quiet conversation to themselves. Honestly, Eric wanted to put it
off until they got back. His annoyance with how Brian had behaved tonight came back as soon as
they were out the door and he had time to process the whole night, not just their announcement.
“You mad at me or something?”

“Let’s just save it until we get home, Brian.”

He could tell that what he just said was not what Brian wanted to hear. Brian’s pursed lips and narrowed eyes gave that away. But he managed to keep his mouth shut, even though Eric could tell he was dying to say something. That was surprising for him. Eric wondered how Brian would react to this. Eric had mental lists of possible Brian reactions. When he had to think about what might happen, he usually thought of the scenarios from most likely to least likely with examples that displayed those possibilities. Brian, despite his devil may care attitude at times, absolutely hated it when people he loved were upset or angry with him. Most people did, but Eric thinks Brian’s abusive upbringing made it so he secretly needed affirmation of love and approval. There seemed to be three possible ways he might react to it:

1. He mopes, but pretends not to be affected by it at all by putting his guards up even though it is completely obvious that he really is upset.

Example: When Brian and Michael got into a huge fight over Brian buying too many expensive presents for JR on her birthdays when Michael couldn’t afford to do that for herself. Eric had mainly taken Brian’s side on that one. Partly because, as Brian’s partner, he was supposed to. But also because he knew that Brian did it because he really loved JR and that he didn’t want just Gus to get nicer presents and his sister not get the same treatment when it came to that. Eric had understood Michael’s problem with it though. He understood that it made him feel bad and question his abilities as a father when he shouldn’t be questioning that just because he makes less money. He had explained to Brian that this was what Michael was probably feeling and Brian worked on making it up to Michael and setting up a compromise.

2. He lashes out and hits below the belt.

Example: When Lindsay still refused to take Brian in a monogamous relationship seriously. Eric had caught vibes from her when they first met and a couple of times after. But it had been when Brian had brought him up to Toronto for the first time that she had really been awful by saying, “Brian, you had no right to bring Eric up here when you are supposed to spend the weekend with Gus! I understand you are going through something, but I don’t approve of you bringing some experiment here when you are supposed to be spending this time with our son. Oh. No offense, Eric.” She had said this when he and Brian had been together for eight months already. Eric had been shocked by the shit that had come out of her mouth. He knew that Lindsay was one of Brian’s best friends. He had heard that she had been supportive of Brian when he and Justin broke up for the first time. He didn’t know what to say to her. Brian had been pissed. He told her, “How the fuck do you know he is an experiment, Lindsay? You hauled away our son and you all aren’t even around me anymore! You know shit about Eric and you know shit about me! If this is how you feel, then expect to have a place in my life as my child’s mother, but don’t expect to have a place in
it as my friend.” And the very small sadistic side of Eric was cheering when Lindsay had burst into tears and ran out of the room. It had been cold, but he thought that Brian had every right to stand up for himself. Brian spent that whole weekend livid whenever Lindsay was in the same room as him and eventually Lindsay was begging for his forgiveness and trying to spend time with Eric on her visits to Pittsburgh. It took a while but they worked everything out. He had seen Brian choose this method on people who didn’t deserve it nearly as much. But this had been the time where it had been really effective and most likely deserved.

3. He goes against his nature by getting openly upset with himself and doing anything, including putting their wants and needs first, to try to make everything okay. And he sometimes begs for forgiveness if need be.

Example: This didn’t happen that often. This was rare. It had happened to an extent when Brian had cheated on him earlier on in their relationship. But that had been caused by a deeper turmoil so Eric had forgiven him pretty easily. Usually this was reserved for his kids. One instance was when Brian had gotten really busy with the new Chicago branch of Kinnetik. On top of that, they had just moved to Chicago not even two months before and they had a five month old daughter who had been going on and off her sleeping schedule due to the move so Brian was getting no sleep and had no extra time to do anything. Gus, who had just started the 6th grade, was really missing his dad. He was calling sometimes multiple times a day because of it. He really wanted his dad to come up to visit him, since he couldn’t visit his dad in Chicago due to just starting school for the year a month before and he had no holiday breaks coming up. It was never officially confirmed, but Eric also thinks that Gus was feeling a bit left out by his dad since he was raising a new baby yet never seemed to want to raise him, which broke Eric’s heart because it was more complicated than that but Gus had been a kid so he hadn’t understood that. Brian should have been paying more attention to Gus’s change in behavior and newfound neediness. It would have been a strong hint that something bad was going on with his son. But Brian had been tired and agitated from working too much and having a newborn. He had a lot on his mind at the time and hadn’t caught onto it. After this went on for a couple of weeks and Brian had tried to gently let Gus down time after time, he let his agitation, lack of sleep, and guilt got to him which caused him to blow up at his son, something he had never done until that point. He said something along the lines of, “How many fucking times do I have to tell you that I can’t come visit you right now? I am very busy here, Gus! So you need to stop calling just to ask all of the time! I told you I would try to get there sometime soon and you need to learn to accept that as an answer!”

Gus had taken that hard. He started sobbing on the phone, hung up on his father, and refused to take Brian’s calls for days. Brian had immediately felt awful and was worried sick every time he called to ask to talk to Gus and Lindsay or Melanie told him Gus was refusing to talk to him. They asked Brian what had happened between the two of them but Brian had felt so disgusted with himself that it was hard for him to say more than it was his fault and that he had been an asshole. Eric remembers feeling so angry in regards to how Brian had reacted but when he started to ask, “How could you say that to him when he misses you so much?” Brian had been so sad and self-loathing. So there had been no reason to yell at him because he already knew that he had screwed up. Regardless, Melanie had taken care of that anyway when Gus had finally told her what all had been bothering him. She had called to give Brian an earful. Brian had taken it. He didn’t attempt to defend himself and looked like a kicked puppy during that phone call. Turns out, Gus had been getting severely bullied at school by a few older boys since the first day of middle school not only
because he not only had gay mothers, but a gay father too. Gus had always been so sweet and sensitive and never even liked to play fight, let alone hit or throw insults back when he was getting punched in the ribs or mercilessly taunted by kids who were a few years older than he was and had hit their growth spurts and puberty already. To sum up the problem, Gus really wanted his dad to be there for him and to comfort him but Brian had been too busy. So much for Canada being the land of peace and acceptance. Backwards thinking assholes apparently existed everywhere.

Immediately after he had gotten off the phone, Brian booked tickets for the three of them to fly up to Toronto for the weekend. They had left the very next day and when Gus came home from school, Brian had been so upset with himself and told Gus how sorry he was. He told Gus that he had been selfish and horrible and that Gus hadn’t deserved that at all. He also let him know how concerned he was over him and that he had missed him so much. It took Gus’s anger at his dad out of his sails and he just lost it. Brian ended up holding and trying to soothe a hysterical and hyperventilating Gus on the couch, who was crying over missing his father terribly and going through hell at school. That reaction had scared Brian and it got everyone in the room pretty emotionally worked up out of fear and concern for Gus’s emotional state. Brian had been so worried about how his son was feeling that he ended up not going back with Eric and Lily after the weekend was up and extended his stay for ten more days. Eric completely understood that he needed to spend extra time with his son and go to the school with his mothers to try to get down to the bottom of what had been happening. Brian had flown Cynthia up to Chicago so she could take care of things at Kinnetik while he was gone. Luckily, Eric had decided to work mostly from home the first year of Lily’s life so it hadn’t been that much of a burden. However, not having Brian around caused him to notice how much he really helped with the baby.

It took Eric probably a couple of months to convince Brian that he wasn’t a bad dad to Gus just because he had reacted that way and that he had just lost his temper and snapped at him. It happened to every parent once in a while. Brian had beat himself up over it really badly though. He saw the effect that bullying had on some of the kids at the center in Pittsburgh. He kept having these horrible thoughts of what could have happened if Gus had decided to do something irreversible due to being shut down by his dad when he was going through something like that. Eric kept having to remind him that they were all going to make sure that Gus was treated better at school, make sure he felt completely included and loved by all of his parental figures, and watch out for any signs that might indicate that Gus might be having problems like that again. Brian had seen Gus pretty frequently before with the exception of the dry spell when Lily and the new branch came into play but he had made sure to go up to Toronto or fly Gus down to Chicago as much as possible after that.

On a little bit of a lighter note, another example happened a couple of months ago when Brian had one day where he was too tired of watching Frozen over and over again. Her obsession still stands and it has since Emmett had gotten it for her on her birthday in April. Brian ended up yelling, “No, Lily! You just have to let it go!” at Lily when she kept begging him to watch it for the 57th time. And, since Lily is three and didn’t catch the pun and Brian can be scary when he raises his voice, she started crying and pouting then wouldn’t talk to Brian for a few hours. She was still giving him the silent treatment when Eric got home from a meeting. Not being able to stand it anymore, he ended up asking her to play tea party with him that night (something that had Eric rolling on the floor with laughter then and still makes him chuckle to this day.) He also read her a shit ton of bedtime stories and watched Frozen with her twice the next day. He did that all because of a three
year old’s ability to freeze him out made him feel so horrible about himself. Brian can be such a pussy sometimes.

“So, I’m really glad we told everyone tonight. It feels more official.”

Shit, is this a fourth method that Eric doesn’t know about? Playing off of what makes Eric so fucking happy to try to make him forget that he was pissed at him or something? It totally was. He could tell by the way Brian put his hands in his pockets and looked a little bit upwards with his tongue pressing a little bit inside his cheek, as though he could just have wrecked his brain for a surefire way to get Eric back to his normal Brian-loving self. It is sort of working. But he isn’t going to play into it quite so easily.

“I guess.”

In his peripheral vision, Eric can see Brian look down sharply at him as though he was expecting that to work. Eric does feel bad, because he thinks that part of Brian is genuinely saying that because it really is true for him. And it is a low blow to say that, when Eric feels that way as well. But Eric isn’t perfect. It takes a lot, but he can get angry sometimes too. He can’t just forget how Brian acted tonight without at least talking it out first. But not here. Not in front of their friends and family and Justin’s family. He needs to take his mind off of it for now.

So, instead of letting Brian say anything more to him, he decides to catch up with Ben and start up a conversation with him about how his new position is going at Ryerson University. Ben had recently went from adjunct professor to one of the founders of the Queer Studies major at the school. The courses he created for the school were in high demand so they had taken him on full time this past semester. He was very enthusiastic about the school and did a lot for the LGBTQ college community up in Toronto, not only at Ryerson, but at other universities as well. Eric liked listening to him talk about what he had been doing because he would have loved to have had a professor like Ben while he was in school. Who knows? There could have been a teacher there like Ben when it came to being open and accepting of different sexualities but Eric hadn’t tried to look into any courses that focused on gay and lesbian people back then. He had only started to become interested in helping the gay community when he was in his late 20s and became really passionate about it when he and Brian built the center together.

They end up reaching the train station and luckily there is only a ten minute wait. They all sit next to each other when they reach the platform and Brian nudges Hunter out of the way so he can sit next to Eric. He can feel Brian’s stare on him and it doesn’t add to his anger, but it does make Eric wonder when his fiancé was going to try to start practicing his people skills outside of the workplace. However, he doesn’t want Brian this tense. So, without looking over, he reaches over and puts his palm on top of Brian’s hand and strokes it with his thumb. He feels a little tension release out of Brian and he feels Brian’s fingers move upwards to make Eric lace his fingers with his. He does it. He can’t deny Brian when he needs just a little bit of physical reassurance.
He and Brian stay quiet. Cynthia is on his left and they both have one hand on the stroller. Lily is still out cold. Ben is beside Cynthia and Michael is beside him. Since he and Brian are holding off having a conversation and Cynthia looks so exhausted, he listens to the conversations between the rest of their party. Jennifer and Michael are the easiest to hear so Eric just ends up putting his head against the wall, closing his eyes, and tunes in.

“Michael, it has been so great seeing you. You said your mother and Carl are coming here in a couple of days for New Year’s Eve, right?”

“Yeah, they are leaving Salt Lake City on the 28th and staying at the hotel in a room down the hall from us.”

“That’s great. I would love to spend some time with her while we are both here. You know, it is so odd that we didn’t know that we were staying in the same hotel. You think we would have ran into each other on the way here.”

“We just got in last night and did presents at Brian’s this morning. We had just gone back really quickly to take some stuff to the room so we haven’t been there all that much. It really is a coincidence though. But it is the best priced hotel in Manhattan.”

“It really is. Around Christmas, the prices are outrageous.”

Eric hears silence and then hears Michael speak again.

“Is everything okay, Jennifer?”

“What? Oh, it’s fine. It’s just… Justin and Nathan left without saying anything. Justin told Molly that he was feeling sick but I tried calling him before we left Emmett’s and he wouldn’t pick up. I know I was being overbearing by doing this, but I called Nathan too and he had sounded strange when he told me Justin had went to bed early because he wasn’t feeling well. Justin’s always been a night owl, so I just hope he isn’t feeling too terrible.”

Eric can hear the hesitation in Michael’s voice when he says, “I’m sure he’s going to be alright. It’s cold and he’s been under some stress with the gallery thing on New Year’s, plus it’s Christmas. Maybe that all caught up with him and he was just really tired.”
I hope that’s it.”

Eric hears the train start to come with its loud horns and the screeches it makes against the iron tracks. It wakes Lily up as soon as it starts to pull in and she begins to cry, partly because of the sound and probably because she feels very confused about where she is. She starts calling out for Brian and immediately he feels Brian let go of his hand. Brian gets Lily out of the stroller so he can pick her up and hold her to calm her down. He holds her as they all walk to the train together and sits down with her in his lap. She snuggles against him and closes her eyes before the train takes off again.

Even though Eric knows they still definitely need to have a talk about what happened tonight, seeing Brian cuddle and comfort their daughter like that with absolutely no hesitation makes his heart melt every time. Brian was always hesitant to show his softer and more open side when he was around strangers and even around his closest friends. But when it came to Gus and Lily, that rule went out the window. He would show any strength and any vulnerability to comfort his children and make sure they knew he was there for them. He comforts Lily when she has a nightmare and will let her sleep in their bed when she gets really scared. He will talk to Gus for sometimes hours on the phone and drop anything he was doing at a moment’s notice to go up to Toronto to see him, especially after what happened over three years ago. He makes silly faces to make Lily giggle and reads to her in different voices to enhance her imagination. He is the cool dad for Gus but, when Gus least expects it, cracks a dad joke to make him cringe. It didn’t matter if anyone else was in the room or not. If his kids needed him to show a certain side of himself, he would do it. He remembers when Holly had been pregnant with Lily and Brian had been so scared that he wouldn’t love her at first sight because she wasn’t his flesh and blood. He had been the one to bring up Eric having a child and had given the okay to raising that child with him. But once it became a reality, Brian had been scared shitless. Oh sure, he tried to hide it but he even had moments where he gave in and expressed his fears over being a full-time dad. Eric had known that he had been the stud of Liberty Avenue. He was still considered a legend and would get looks of longing when they went back to Pittsburgh on business. And fuck, he was still a stud and a legend in the bedroom. Eric was just the lucky one who got to experience that every day. And he knows Brian is happy. He knew it in the small moments they had and the small gestures they have made towards each other over the years. And he knows it from the big moments. He saw his unguarded overload of happiness and joy when he first held Lily. He saw the love and tenderness in Brian’s eyes even as he scoffed when Eric decided to pull a cliché and get down on one knee in the middle of their packed up living room. He doesn’t think that Brian wouldn’t trade in what he has now for anything. He hopes he wouldn’t.

“So now you are willing to look at me?”

And yeah, Eric is doing that thing where he can’t stop staring at Brian. It happens at least once a week. He is still so far gone for this man that even when Brian acted like a total asshole at some points of the night he can’t stop mooning over him.
Brian starts staring back at him and it feels as though that they are both in a trance. Eric tries to read his fiancé to try to figure out what he is feeling right now but there are so many things going through Brian’s eyes right now. There’s pure love. He usually can see that and that is why he doesn’t doubt Brian’s feelings for him. But then there is pain and confusion and hope and annoyance and happiness and anything in between. Eric knows that some of those feelings are for him. He just doesn’t know which ones also apply to the fact that he saw Justin tonight. So he really can’t respond to Brian’s question right now because he has to sort through every flicker of feeling that goes through his partner’s eyes and Brian lets him. Brian just sits there silently and seems to be doing the same thing to him and they probably look absolutely ridiculous but neither of them take the initiative to glance away.

It must go on longer than Eric thought because suddenly he hears a voice from someone standing above where they are sitting.

“Oh, dudes! Neither of you are that pretty, you know. Didn’t you hear the nice automated voice saying, ‘This is 33rd Street?’ Well, she wasn’t lying.”

Hunter walks off the train and Brian and Eric quickly do the same, even though they don’t really have to rush since there is always a delay on the first and last stops on the line. They catch up to the rest of the gang and they all wish each other one last Merry Christmas and Brian and Gus make plans to spend the day together after Brian talks to a client tomorrow morning. Cynthia, Lindsay, Melanie, and the kids are staying at the Marriott at 49th and Lexington since Brian got rooms for them there. Brian offers to drive the kids to the hotel so the three women can take the cab that has just pulled over. After they see them off, they part ways with Michael, Ben, Hunter, Jennifer, Tucker, and Molly. Lily is in and out of consciousness and clutching onto Brian. Brian doesn’t want to put her in the stroller since it is getting colder and he wants to keep her as warm as possible. So Eric pushes the empty stroller as the five of them make their way down the street to the parking garage where Brian left his car. He is honestly glad that Brian brought a car to New York in times like these because he knows that the holiday train schedules suck and they are all tired and cold.

They pull up to the hotel and Gus gives his father a hug from behind his seat and Lily a kiss on the cheek. Eric volunteers to see them to the lobby where the women are waiting. JR hugs him goodnight and surprisingly, he gets a hug from Gus too. It isn’t as though Gus has never hugged him before. He gets a couple of hugs from Gus every time they visit each other. But Gus had spent the day paying a lot of attention to Justin. It had taken Gus several months to really warm up to him when they first met because he had missed Justin being his father’s partner and it had taken time for him to come around to his dad having a new man in his life. He has been close with Gus for years though and he’s glad seeing Justin didn’t seem to reignite any resentment within Gus towards Eric because he really does love the kid. In all honesty, seeing him with Justin had probably made him as nervous as seeing how Brian had behaved around Justin.

Eric walks back to the car and they drive home in silence. Brian gets Lily out of her car seat and they go up the elevator. The apartment is dark and they are both so tired that they don’t bother turning on any light except the one in the small hallway from the living room to their front door.
Eric follows Brian to Lily’s room and they both tuck her in and kiss her good night. Eric heads back to sit down on the couch while Brian goes to the bathroom. Eric ends up waiting several minutes before Brian comes back out and they look at each other in the semi-darkness. Eric already gets the impression that Brian isn’t going to speak first. He is waiting to judge how Eric is feeling, even though Eric is wanting to judge how Brian is feeling. Some battles must be lost though, so Eric lets out a sigh and speaks first.

“I think you already know that I’m not all that happy right now.”

Brian stays quiet and looks away from him and down at his feet.

“I need you to say something about what was going through your head today, Brian.”

“I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know? I don’t believe that you act without thinking that much.”

“I was just…I don’t-“

Brian breaks off and pulls at his hair. He looks so confused, as though he is actually finally thinking about how he behaved tonight. Maybe Brian does act without thinking that much.

“Brian, I understand that seeing him involved with someone else was a big deal for you-“

“No, it wasn’t. I’m with you, so why would it be a big deal?”

“Be that as it may, it still was. You can’t fool me. But you did manage to hurt me a little tonight.”

“Well, it wasn’t intentional.”

“Goddamnit, Brian! What kind of answer is that? Not only did you act like an ass to Justin, but you managed to isolate Nathan, who is fucking twenty years younger than you by the way, so I hope you feel real tough. But by doing all of that, you managed to make me feel bad about myself. I
should have put the announcement on hold, even though I feel so proud to call you my fiancé and I felt so in love with you when we told everyone. I will remember that feeling of pride and euphoria for the rest of my life. But today is also tainted because I will also remember how you used my presence in your life to make your ex-fiancé fucking jealous and that fucking hurt, Brian!”

Well, shit. Eric thought he had calmed down on the train. He didn’t know how upset he was until he started talking about it. And Brian, oh Brian. Going by the look of shock and guilt on his face, it seems as though he didn’t know how much of an ass he really was until Eric blurted out all of that.

“Eric…”

“What, Brian? Just say something.”

Suddenly, Brian is straddling him and sneaking his tongue in his mouth. He can feel Brian rubbing his ass against his crotch and, on instinct, Eric grabs the back of Brian’s hair and forces him closer, but then pulls his head away from his own because this is something Brian does when faced with a multiple types of problems: ignores the problem with sex.

This time it was obvious. Sometimes, he was more subtle. Like just a few days ago when he offered to bottom via text. Even though Eric wasn’t upset over him inviting Justin to lunch nor had the meeting gone badly, Brian had discreetly put the idea into Eric’s head beforehand just in case. Brian knew that Eric wasn’t clueless on his strange ways of appeasing him. He knew that Eric knew the reason. Not that Brian never bottomed without ulterior motives. It is something that Brian has actually started enjoying more in the last couple of years, but he still doesn’t do it very much. The times it does occur, whether the occasion stems from Brian being weird or Brian just really wanting a dick up his ass, the act is usually very sensual and loving. Brian is always so tight and he still isn’t completely at ease when he bottoms. Eric likes to show him how much he loves and appreciates him. Regardless, the fact does remain that Brian does use bottoming to his advantage once in a while. He knows how much Eric loves to get to top him and both of them will use that offer to their advantage from time to time. Brian knows how pissed Eric is and he hates it. He might even bend over the couch for him. Hell, he just might get on his back, hold his legs up, and spread his cheeks for him if Eric really tried to convince him. But, as strange as it may sound, that isn’t what Eric wants right now. He never wants to take advantage of Brian that way, just because Brian has a habit of being an emotionally stunted asshole sometimes.

“Stop. Brian, stop.”

Brian registers that he is being spoken to and looks down at Eric.
“I really need you to talk to me. More than I need to fuck you or kiss you.”

Brian seems to be searching for words. He looks at Eric, slightly panicked, as he tries. Eric puts a soothing hand on his back as Brian stays in his position on top of him, to try to coax something out of him. Brian gets off of his lap but sits next to him as he finally comes up with something to say.

“I never want you to feel hurt. I fucking despise anyone who tries to hurt you. It’s why your mother and I aren’t on the best of terms. You know how I feel about you. I feel so much for you. I know I was a total cunt tonight. In all honesty, I don’t know where it came from. Justin brought out a lot of good in me back when we were together but he somehow brings out the worst in me too, even though he didn’t do anything to deserve it. And you especially don’t deserve to feel the way you do now. I really didn’t mean to upset you.”

Eric sighs. Brian looks so confused and honestly, Eric doesn’t know what is going on with him at this very second. It’s as though there are two different Brians at war here. Both of them are Brians that don’t emerge around Eric that often. There is the one who really is a total ass and wants to do things like make Justin jealous, even if it hurts Eric in the process. Then there is the overwhelmed Brian who opens up to Eric when he is fucked up about something.

“What did you think it would do, if not upset me?”

“I…fuck, I don’t know.”

“Did you think about how I would feel at all?”

“I don’t know, Eric! I said I was fucking sorry, alright? I am going to try harder to not pull that shit again and I will try to be nicer to Justin when we see him at his party.”

“And to Nathan.”

“Are you se-”

“Brian, you were a shit to him and you know it.”
“…Fine.”

“Alright. I guess that’s all I am getting out of you. Thanks for letting me into your head a little. I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

As Eric stands up, he feels a hand wrap around his wrist. He turns to see Brian looking up at him and he looks so worried that Eric can’t help but feel bad about all of this.

“What, Brian?”

“Eric, we’re good right? Everything is still the same between us?”

“As long as you want everything to stay the same, then yes.”

“You know I want everything to stay the same, Eric.”

Eric nods and bends down to give Brian a kiss. He gives him one chaste kiss, but that isn’t enough so he gives him a second and a third. After Eric pulls away, Brian just pulls him back in for a deeper and longer kiss. They finally pull away and Eric walks away from the couch. He makes it a few feet, but then hears Brian’s voice.

“The only thing I would change about us is me. I would change how I let my feelings affect me. If I were a better person, I wouldn’t have acted like such a shit because I am so far gone for you.”

And Eric can interpret those “feelings” as feelings for Justin. He isn’t that much of an optimist to just dismiss the possibility. But what Brian said is enough. He knows that he is sorry. He knows that Brian loves him. That’s enough. They can figure out the rest later.

"I wouldn't change you."

Eric walks back over to hold out his hand. Brian takes it and Eric leads them to their bedroom.
Chapter End Notes

Even though this didn't have any Brian/Justin interaction, Please review! Next chapter will be a Molly POV. B/J will get another moment soon.
33rd and 7th

Chapter Summary

Molly can't sleep and she wishes that it was all Tucker's fault.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to abenjami for proofreading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“How can one man snore that loudly?”

It wasn’t fair that her mother could sleep so soundly through this and Molly was stuck listening to Tucker’s snores as she tried to smother her head in a pillow. It probably wasn’t the best idea to attempt to smother herself but it kept her from smothering her pseudo step-father. Of course it hadn’t started until she had finally gotten her mind off of her brother long enough to start to shut her eyes. It was only then when he began taking these wheezing breaths that would probably muffle a jackhammer. She remembers her friends in high school doing triple takes as he walked in and out of the room and then they would gush about how lucky her mother is to be a cougar to a man who was sex on legs. Bull. Shit.

Don’t get her wrong, Tucker is very nice and has always been open minded and accepting when it came to Justin and very supportive of her. She can admit that. He loves her mother ridiculously so and it wasn’t Molly’s business if he was into older women and probably had mommy issues. She can even tell that he would probably be very good looking if he weren’t so Tuckery. But fuck, does the guy snore. Maybe it is a severe flaw that comes with good looking men. Molly remembers when she was fifteen and Justin had come in to visit from New York and brought Brian over for dinner. She knew that Brian was gay and that he was with her brother, but she could not stop staring at him. She remembers that Justin, for some reason, had said at the table that Brian had a deviated septum and snored really loudly sometimes and Brian had gotten all pissy about it. Their bantering was actually really cute at the time, but you never know. Maybe that was the beginning of the end for them. Somehow Molly doubts it.

Whatever caused them to finally call it off for good didn’t really concern Molly that much. It happened years ago and the past is the past. What concerned her was that Justin just left without coming in to say goodbye to his friends. She honestly doesn’t know what would elicit that kind of response. She would totally understand if Justin had been upset about Brian’s announcement, but he hadn’t been in the room. Molly is pretty sure that Brian had to have said something to Justin beforehand in order for him to just not happen to be there when Brian and Eric told everyone they
were getting married in the spring. In all honesty, Molly didn’t think the announcement was that exciting. She knew that Brian and Eric had been together for a long time and they had the cutest little girl together. And she gets that it might be hard to hear the greatest love of your life has definitely moved on but Justin shouldn’t have been that surprised by the admission either. He knew that Brian had gotten to the point where he was willing and even happy about taking that step. She knew he hadn’t drank more than two or three drinks the whole time they were there. His alcohol tolerance was not that low. So why did he look so upset and have puffy and bloodshot eyes when she came out to see what was wrong? What had happened to make him fall apart like that?

This is what has been plaguing her thoughts at 5:00 am. She has slept two hours max and it’s stupid. Because of Tucker, of course, the loud fucker. But also because this is on her mind and it isn’t even happening to her. If she can’t sleep well, she has to wonder how Justin is sleeping.

Even though they aren’t twins, they must have some sort of psychic connection because her phone just vibrated on the end table. She sneaks over to the bedside table on her mom’s side of the bed and unplugs her phone. As soon as it lights up, she sees a message from Justin.

Dad called me last night.
That’s why I left early. Sorry
for ditching you guys :/ 

Well, fuck.

She hadn’t been expecting that at all. Although, she should have been expecting it more than Justin was. She was really the only person that still talked to their father on occasion, but she had cut back as soon as she had moved for college and told him that there was no need for him to help her move into the dorms. She didn’t talk to him on the phone very much. She picked up the phone for his calls maybe eight times a year. She saw him face to face even less, just a few times a year at most. She never told him when she was in Pittsburgh to visit her friends from high school or when she went up with her friends from college to go shopping. The only times she saw him were the times when he had went out of his way to come down to Morgantown and would call her to see if she wanted to “hang with her old man.” She said no most of the the time and only felt a little guilty for letting him down when he had driven over an hour to try to see her. But there had been times where she had given in. Those were the times when she must have been feeling nostalgic over memories of him playing in the yard with her and Justin and taking the two of them out for ice cream. When she did give in, he would take her out to lunch on High Street and act way too eager to please. It ended up being so annoying. She used to give him underhanded comments and he would act as though she had never said them.

However, the three times she had seen him this past year, he had looked tired and lonely. The last time she saw him, she had actually gone to visit him for the first time since she moved to Morgantown at 18. It was almost three months ago. She doesn’t know why she did it. He had
called and asked her to come see him and he sounded fragile and off. He had looked as fragile as he sounded. She barely recognized him as the man she grew up knowing. He had stuttered and trailed off at the end of sentences. He looked shaky and honestly on the verge of some sort of breakdown. And, despite her feelings on what he had done to Justin and her mother in the past, even she had been worried about his behavior. She had asked if he was sick or something but he kept saying, “Oh, I’m fine. Just fine.” But from what she had seen of him this past year, especially her last visit, he had looked so fucking sad and asked about Justin every time he called but she refused to tell him. She may have been worried about him, but Justin and her mother didn’t need to be. Their dad didn’t deserve to know anyway. He didn’t deserve to be privy to information about a family he had tried to tear apart.

She doesn’t know how he got Justin’s number. Justin has changed it a couple of times since he and Brian broke up. The first time he changed it was due to being on the same plan as Brian. So he had called AT&T and had his phone number deactivated, then got a New York area code. The second time was about three years ago to get some weird fan off his back. She could understand if their dad had done some searching and found the number to the gallery but Justin didn’t easily give out his cell phone number. He had a main business card for the gallery that was available for art collectors and visitors that just had the business line on it and he had another one that he gave to artists and personal contacts that had his cell on it as well. But Justin didn’t do that much business in Pittsburgh anymore. So she has to wonder how their father gotten a hold of his son. But she is more curious about what the fucker said to Justin to make him want to get away from everybody.

Well, Justin was up, right? He had texted her. She could step out into the hall and call him and ask what had happened then.

She grabbed her purse so she could step outside into the hall. She went through her recent calls list and found Jester listed there and pressed it to call. It rang four times and she thought he might not pick up but he did on the last possible ring.

“Hey.”

He says it quietly and his voice is a little hoarse. Suddenly she didn’t know what she was going to say to him. Being the youngest, there weren’t that many times where she had to be the protector. She usually protected him behind his back by condemning their father for what he had done and not giving up any information about Justin, even when her father looked completely horrible.

“Hey.” She says back to him.

Justin breathes out and stays quiet for a second.
“I didn’t think you would be up yet.”

“I figured you texted at five in the morning to get telling me what happened out of the way but get out of talking to me about this so quickly. Pussy.”

Justin huffs out a laugh, which is impressive because she is pretty sure her brother does not feel like laughing one bit.

“I just…I told you I would tell you what was going on but I didn’t know how to come out and say it.”

“I understand, Justin. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. I was really mad at his nerve to call me, especially on Christmas, but now…fuck, I’m really worried about him, Molly.”

“You two haven’t spoken in years. I figured if it ever happened it would be a blow up or stiff and cordial at the absolute best. What happened?”

“He called me. Completely drunk off his ass. Tried to act friendly as though as if he was just catching up with his son. I wasn’t having any of it. He knows that I had no intention of speaking to him again. I asked him how he had gotten my number. He said that you had left the room when you went to visit him last and he had looked up my number on your phone.”

“He looked through my phone? My phone?! Without my okay? That asshole, fucking snoop-”

“Molly, just let it slide. I don’t think he did it to invade your privacy.”

“I don’t care about the reason! He still did it!”

“I am pretty sure he hasn’t been thinking straight. He seems like he has been wanting to call me for a while but just worked up the nerve last night. Don’t…don’t chew him out just over him looking at your phone.”
Molly let out a sigh. She knows she just has to let this go for right now. It is a relatively small thing and this is ultimately Justin’s battle to fight.

“Sorry. Start again. What did he say to get you all worked up?”

“He wasn’t himself. He was acting as though it had been a long time since we’ve talked and that he just wanted to catch up with me like we were old pals or some shit. I called him out on it and told him I knew he didn’t give a shit if all was well with me or not. He claimed that he did care. Then I told him it was too late and ordered him to never call me again. I was about to hang up but...fuck…”

“What, Justin?”

“He let out this fucking whimper and it pissed me off for a second because why should he be the one hurt here, you know? I asked him what he wanted and then he started full-fledged crying. I could tell he was trying to put himself together but he couldn’t manage to do it. I just listened to him as he sobbed on the phone and he could only get out ‘I’m so sorry.’ And-

She hears Justin break off and she knows hearing their father like that affected him. Hell, hearing what happened second hand is affecting her.

“I have never heard him like that. I don’t think I have ever seen that man shed a tear, to be honest. After a couple of minutes, I asked him why he was crying. He managed to pull himself together just enough to tell me that he missed hearing my voice and he would leave me alone now. And the way he said it scared the shit out of me. I asked him straight out if he was planning on doing something stupid. I was afraid he might be suicidal, with the way he was acting on the phone. He said he was just going to bed early and told me he was sorry again, then hung up.”

Jesus, now Molly wishes this had just been about the Brian and Eric thing.

“Has he said anything to you? Has he done anything to give you a hint that he was feeling a certain way?”

“I don’t know, Justin. I’ve told you he’s been weird. I don’t see him much but I didn’t want to frighten you or mom. He’s been really lonely. The last time I saw him he looked as though he were some weird combination of uncomfortable and relieved to see me. I think his hands were shaking a
little. He trails off at the end of his sentences sometimes and spaces out.”

“Do you think he’s sick or something?”

“I asked him. He said he was fine. I guess it’s possible he doesn’t know if something is wrong or not.”

“...Maybe drugs?”

“Really, Justin?”

“Well, how am I supposed to know? You haven’t said anything about shit like this happening before now!”

“You never want to talk about him!”

“I would talk about him if I knew he was suffering some sort of nervous breakdown!”

“Well, now you know!”

“Fuck! You should have told me something was going on with him!”

“I am barely around the man, Justin! I don’t know shit about him except that this past year seemed to be hard on him. I don’t know how bad he fucking has it! I try not to care too much because of what he did to you!”

They both take a moment to calm down. Molly called to comfort her brother, not to flip out at him. Even though he started it first.

“I didn’t know he got your number from my phone. I didn’t know that he would break down like that when he called you. He has never done that in front of me. But I have noticed a lot more alcohol in the fridge when I visited last and I’ve noticed how odd he has been acting in the last several months. I should have said something. I know I should have. But I didn’t want you and
mom to worry about him when he was such a shit to the both of you for several years. You are up here and he disowned you. You owe him nothing. He cheated on Mom but I know she would freak out if something was wrong with him. She doesn’t need that when she has been helping Grandma with Grandpa. I didn’t know what to do.”

“I know, Molly. I’m sorry for freaking out. I really am. He just worried me a lot.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. Right now, probably try to get a little more sleep. I will figure out the rest later, I guess. You want to meet for lunch?”

“With or without Mom and Tucker?”

“I guess with. I don’t know if I will tell them what happened last night though. Not yet.”

“You know, I think Mom thinks it is because of what Brian announced last night. I know you had to have heard about that by now.”

“Well, it wasn’t.” her brother snapped, leading her to believe that it was part of it, the liar.

“You don’t have to snap at me.”

“I’ll make it up to you by taking you all to Park Plaza in Brooklyn Heights.”

“Their buffalo chicken sandwich is good…”

“It should be easy for you to get there. Easier than for me to get there, even though I’m in Brooklyn.”

“Oh well, train lines are a bitch! I’ll meet you there around noon and then maybe we can talk about everything tonight in person, without fighting over the phone.”
“Alright. I love you, Molly.”

“You too, Justin.”

She ended the phone call and started to walk back to the room. She stopped because she knew she wasn’t going back to sleep. Not when the secret fears she kept stifled had just come out and confronted her. Now that even Justin was worried about their dad and she couldn’t stay in denial in an attempt not to care. Damn it.

It was about 5:30. The hotel had a shitty continental breakfast she could go down to. She could do that to kill some time and try to get some stuff off her mind. If she got tired, she could always go back to sleep until 10:30 or so and if she didn’t, then she could go somewhere and explore some before she went to meet Justin.

She took the stairs even though it was six flights and found the dining area. No one was there yet. She got herself some coffee to drink and cereal, toast, and a banana to eat, then sat down.

After sitting there by herself for ten minutes, she became so lost in her thoughts that she didn’t notice when Hunter approached her.

“Hello, Madam. I don’t mean to bother you, but there is absolutely nowhere to sit. May I be honored with your presence?”

Molly snaps out of it and looks around the dining room to see that he is fucking with her.

She presents the seat to him and he sits down with his food mountain of eggs, sausage, bacon, and mini pancakes drenched in syrup.

“Out of everyone, I didn’t expect it would be you to be up so early.”

Hunter shrugs as he shovels food into his mouth.
“I get up at like 4 am everyday to be on set and set everything up for the first shoot of the day. I’m used to it now. You’re a teacher, you understand early mornings.”

“Yeah, but I don’t do them when I don’t have to.”

"And yet you are up now."

Molly shrugged and just played with her spoon.

“While it is nice to sleep in, I like some time to myself. Getting up early is the only way I am going to get it. Like right now, I am right across the hall from my parents and as soon as they get up, it’s like, ‘Hunter! Let’s go see what show we should go to today!’ and ‘Hunter! Let’s go to a museum, buddy! The Met sound good to you?’ and ‘Hunter let’s all hold hands as we cross the street because we aren’t in each other’s space enough as it is!’ Don’t get me wrong, I miss them to death while I am in L.A. and it is nice that they miss me too. But come on, I’m 27 and I need some space even when I do visit, you know? Hey, this bacon sucks. Want some of it?”

“No, I’m good.”

“Well, you don’t look that good. NOT that I mean you don’t look good physically. You are gorgeous, as always. But you look distracted.”

Molly doesn’t know if it is the fact that she is really tired or that she is just really bothered by what is going on. She doesn’t know if it is the fact that she always finds Hunter so funny and interesting on the occasions she does get to see him and, out of all the people she sees when she sees Justin’s friends, Hunter is the one she looks forward to seeing the most outside of Nathan. But without her brain’s permission, she tells him absolutely everything.

Chapter End Notes

Please review! It makes my day and gives me the strength to keep writing this story (which I love doing anyway, but encouragement never hurts!) The next chapter will be long and from Brian's POV.

I have also started a new story for Queer as Folk. I needed a little variety when it came to genre and tone. I wanted to do something more dramatic, yet more off-the-wall and
fun. Since my story idea about Melanie having Brian's baby instead of Michael's isn't off-the-wall and campy enough for me to sit down and start writing right now and I didn't feel like writing my cracky oneshot quite just yet, I decided to go with another idea.

"Feed & Extract" is a supernatural angsty horror story with some humor and even a road trip. Brian and Justin are together from the beginning of it and don't have romantic emotional attachments to other men. It is set after season 4 and goes AU from there. So if you are into those sorts of things then the first chapter should be up in a day or so.

However, if you are not into supernatural angsty horror stories with some humor and a road trip, then thanks for reading this story!
48th and Lexington

Chapter Summary

After having a stressful morning, Brian spends the day with Gus and gives him 'the talk.'

Chapter Notes

I know I suck since this story hasn't been updated in so long! But I'm back now and it's here. Also, if you want to read more of my QAF fiction, Feed & Extract is another fic I have up. Hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Brian walked to the Mariott, he tried to get how annoyed he felt under control.

After the eventful night and morning he had, Brian wasn’t in the best mood. Eric had forgiven him for the most part, but Brian could tell that he was still pissed off. After he had taken him back to the bedroom, he hadn’t really wanted to have sex even though Brian offered to bottom. He had given Eric a blow job this morning but he was still a little distant before Brian left for his meeting. Eric was the type to want to work out the problems by talking it out. He had tried last night but he knew it wasn’t quite over yet. He knew that he would have to try to suck it up, at least until later. He knows that he needs to sit down with Eric, not only for his own piece of mind but for his fiancé’s as well, and talk about it. Only this time he would have to be less defensive. He knows he was a dick. He doesn’t know why he thought jumping on him for sex would make Eric get over it. That didn’t usually work. At least not for something more than an argument over who was going to do the dishes or something else mundane.

He needed to make sure that Eric knew that the two of them could back out of going to Justin’s gallery on the 31st. Brian wants things back to normal, even though it hasn’t even been 12 hours since they had their confrontation at the apartment last night. He knows he was a dick to Justin and Nathan. He knew he had acted in a way that wasn’t that common of him anymore. It’s as though he couldn’t stop himself. It hadn’t been just Justin’s presence that had set it off. It had been Nathan’s presence and the fact that he was with Justin that had put him in such a dickish mood. Just seeing Justin, who hadn’t even done anything to him, wouldn’t put make him pull the shit he did last night. Hell, when he saw him on the street for the first time in years it had been Brian who had approached him. When he laid his eyes on him, his heart skipped a beat and he felt some strange sense of anticipation.

But, fuck, he didn’t want to be happy about Justin slowly coming back into his life. He didn’t want
to be angry or sad about it either. But if he kept acting hot and cold on Justin, he was afraid of what might happen to his current relationship. He knew that Eric was probably one of the most patient people he has ever known. He had to be to go to over half of Brian’s therapy appointments for eight months and see him closed up for the longest time and when Brian finally did open up, Eric saw him fail to hold back tears, go into rages, and talk about his childhood and the promiscuity that he used to practice. Eric was practically a saint most of the time and that period in their lives had proved it. When it came to patience at least. Not in the bedroom. In the bedroom, his partner could have the dirtiest mouth.

Eric and Brian didn’t get into many arguments. Not serious ones anyway. They got along really well and since Eric was the type to want to talk things out and Brian, while volatile, hated for the people he cared about to be upset with him, their fights usually didn’t last long. But they had gotten to that point a few times where they would have a nasty argument that simmered for a while. There had been times where Eric had been put in a foul mood, usually by his family or a homophobic client, and it caused him to lash out at Brian and that in turn would cause an argument between them. But it was usually Brian who started something, He was man enough to admit that he was usually the one that did or said something scathing and ended up regretting it later. It had only happened a couple of times, but there had been nights where Eric made Brian sleep on the couch and Brian would lay there stewing in his anger over how fucking stepford that was but also itching and aching to go back and be in bed with his partner. That had happened twice to him in their whole time together, to be exact. One reason had been how he had spoken to Gus a few years back and, even though Eric hadn’t flipped out at him like Mel had, he sure as hell wasn’t happy. Brian had understood why.

The other was when Brian had gotten all upset about how much Eric was leaving town to work and he was barely seeing him. Lily had been about 18 months old and she was going with him on every other trip Eric was taking so “Brian wouldn’t be overwhelmed.” The trips were usually just for a few days tops but Brian had really been missing his daughter and his partner and had just blown up at Eric when Eric had mentioned that he had to leave again since he had to fly to Montreal to meet with a new client. Eric got all defensive and pointed out he had stayed home for over a year to be a stay-at-home dad while Brian got to build up his business and they just went at it. Eric told him to sleep on the couch that night and Brian had laid there and was too upset to sleep. Eric ended up coming out in the middle of the night, got on top of him, and laid his head on his chest. It had been nice and sweet and then Brian rolled him onto the floor, put Eric’s legs on his shoulders, and fucked him until Eric was moaning out a litany of filth. Thank god they hadn’t woken up Lily because he didn’t want honestly didn’t want to scar her at such a young age but, more importantly, he hadn’t wanted one of his top five fucks with Eric to be interrupted.

He is actually surprised that he wasn’t banned from the bedroom last night. He would have understood but he had been grateful that Eric had led him to bed so he could sleep next to him. They didn’t fight that often, but Brian hated it when they did and it got to that point. He usually didn’t get all mushy about it, but he really did love him. He had honestly thought he would never feel like that again about someone after Justin. He had even found him sort of quickly after he became single again. He may have wanted to pair up with someone due to being lonely at first but it had grown into something more, despite the many bumps along the way. It had taken him so long to find Justin and it had taken him a while to accept him into the role of his partner as well. He never had legitimate romantic feelings over anyone before Justin came into his life. Well, that
wasn’t completely true. He sort of had a crush on his roommate his first year of college but he was one of those men who only acted on any gay curiosity when they were drunk and then denied everything the next morning. Phillip had briefly made him question his no repeats rule but no one had made him question his stance on relationships like Justin had. And when he kicked Justin out of his life, yeah he fucking regretted it, but he was still Brian Kinney and didn’t want to cave. He had been embarrassed and didn’t want to give in and apologize and at the time he felt that he didn’t have to because Justin had strung him along making him look like some pining lovesick puppy. He had prepared himself for it to happen when Justin had first left but they had made things work and Justin ended up pulling the rug out from under him two years later. Whatever. It was years ago. He was over him. He had Eric now and he was happy about that.

He had to get his mind off of it. Think about something else. He had plenty on his mind. His meeting for instance. It hadn’t gone as well as he hoped. Jeff Sellers, a theater director and producer, had enlisted Kinnetik into advertising for an off the wall Broadway Rock Musical. He wanted unique advertising and Brian had put the designs in motion. He had people go to different neighborhoods and put up worn looking band flyers. He had planned for the band to perform on top of a fucking double decker bus in Times Square. They had met for coffee to initially discuss the prep work needed and talk figures but that didn’t happen since Jeff had informed him that three out of four of the band members got busted yesterday for dealing large amounts of cocaine. It was going to be on the 6 o’ clock news so thank god Sellers gave him a heads up. Fucking dumbasses. Who fucking deals cocaine on Christmas? So now the show was on hold just as Brian had been ready to have some of his team go in and do superficial renovations to the theater since they were going to make it emulate 80s punk rock. But now new musicians needed to be cast to accompany the star of the show. They needed to be able to learn the music quickly and be decent enough actors to say the few lines that each of them had. He hadn’t listened to Strep Negative’s music before, but after all the grief they put him through in the last hour, he knew that he never would. Not that he would get a chance to. No respective record label would touch them now. This was supposed to be a pretty big break for them and they blew it. Whatever. Their shitty name should have been a hint that they would suck.

Oh well. Another thing to add to his list of shit that was stressing him out. He was hoping that spending the day with Gus would make him feel a little better. Maybe the stress would rub off onto his son when he gave him ‘the talk’ later and he could secretly laugh at any horror he put on Gus’s face. He felt like he probably wouldn’t though, considering he had to alter most of his knowledge to fit a woman partner instead of a man. But he could do it. His number of sexual partners (most of them being one-time hookups) literally went into the thousands. He had lost track of how many men he had slept with and it had become irrelevant since the last time he had fucked someone else besides Eric was a couple months before Lily was born when they had brought a couple of tricks home. However, out of the very high number of people who he had slept with, only three of them had been women. And if wasn’t awful per say. He had gotten off and he had liked two of the three women as friends but obviously hadn’t been attracted to any of them. And even though there was a big enough difference between men and women to make Brian unquestionably gay, there wasn’t that much of a difference in the basics and even logistics of it. There wasn’t a difference when you had sex with someone you gave a shit about, just a difference between what gender those feelings were generally directed towards. He wanted to just lay down the safe, consensual, and comfortable speech and open up the topic for questions and discussion. But still, he wasn’t looking forward to the awkwardness. He had been planning to hold off for a couple of more days but Lindsay had texted him today and asked whether he was going to fit that into today’s schedule. So whatever, he could do it. It would be one more thing to get off his mind and his to do list.
As he arrived at the front of the hotel, he was barely in the lobby before Gus was jumping off of one of the couches and walking towards him.

“Thank God you’re here.” Gus told him while walking past and out the door.

“Good to see you too.” Brian called after and followed.

Brian walked down the steps and stood next to Gus. He could tell his son was annoyed about something as well.

“What’s going on, Sonny boy?”

Gus shot him a glare that screamed ‘I’m not a baby but too old to say I’m not a baby so take a hint and stop.’

He fucking wishes.

“Nothing. Mel and Lindsay are pissing me off, that’s all.”

Ah, the use of names. He must be pissed.

“Not Ma and Mom, huh? That bad?”

Gus just shrugged.

“Well if you want to talk about it just say the words. You hungry? Pick a place and we’ll go.”

They end up catching the train and going down to La Paella in the East Village. He had taken Gus to New York on vacation a couple of times before he moved up. The first time they went, they were both starving and had just chosen La Paella at random. The food had taken a while because they made it fresh but when it finally arrived, it was more or less an orgasm in your mouth. Gus
usually made it a point of trying to get Brian to take him there and it sort of became their thing to do. Despite only going there a couple of times more than Gus, they always remembered them. He always left a large tip, so that might be why. It was a small and intimate restaurant and every time they went no one else was there. Maybe it was more of a dinner destination or they just came at a strange time but that was the way it had been every time and as they sat down Brian could see that this time was no exception.

“Hello, Hello! How are you both today? Ah, Señor Kinney! It’s been a while! Can I get either of you something to drink?”

“I’ll have a glass of the house wine.”

“Good choice, sir! And for the young man? Wine as well? Sangria, if you want something sweeter.”

Gus’s eyes light up at that and Brian’s eyes roll.

“He’s fourteen.”

“Aw, it’s Christmas. Or close to it. Back home, the kids always got a glass of wine on the holidays. America is different though.”

“We won’t say anything.” Gus tells the waiter clinging onto some remnants of hope for a buzz.

“Gus, give it up and order a soda.”

Gus sighs and orders a coke, then goes back to his menu.

The food is delicious as always and Gus does seem to lighten up a little but still seems a little off. The waiters are on the other side of the room so Brian takes the opportunity to take the first step and ask.

“Wanna tell me what’s got you upset with your moms?”
“It’s stupid.” Gus mumbles as he stabs a piece of pork with his fork.

“Come on. You know it’s going to bug the both of us if you don’t spit it out.”

Gus lets out a breath.

“They want me to go down to Pittsburgh for a month in the summer to spend time with their parents. They just brought it up like it was already set. I don’t fucking get it. I barely know them and I don’t want to know them any better. Ma’s parents are okay I guess but Mom’s are such conservative snobs. Mom doesn’t even like them! I don’t know if they are trying to mend bridges by using me and Jenny as pawns but I’m not going.”

Brian ignores the f-bomb, partly because he doesn’t give a shit, but also because he can see how upset his kid is by this and he is sort of pissed for him. The potential upcoming visit isn’t a huge deal in the long run but sometimes Mel and Lindsay didn’t give the kids enough independence when it came to decision making. Gus was 14 and if he really didn’t want to go and spend time with them then he shouldn’t have to. But he seems so vehement about it.

“Are you wanting to spend the summer with your friends? Penelope?”

“Yeah. And if I have to go there I will barely get to see them. Because after I go to Pittsburgh, I’m going to come stay here with you for a few weeks, right?”

“I’d like you to. But if you want to stay in Toronto so you can see your friends, I’ll understand.”

“But then I won’t get to see you.”

“Gus, I would go up to Toronto to visit, you know that.”

“I like it here though. I like getting breaks from them to see you, Eric, and Lily. I love them but they argue a lot and they are so invasive.”
“Okay. You know I want you come here too. I’ll talk to them for you, alright? I’ll try to make sure they know how upsetting this is for you and see if they’ll at least shorten the stay by a couple of weeks.”

“Alright. Thanks, dad. You’re the best even though you wouldn’t let me get alcohol.”

“I’ll give you a beer on your sixteenth birthday. Maybe.”

Gus does lighten up a little at that and they finish their meal in better spirits.

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They spend a few hours walking around the East and West Villages. They catch some Australian horror film at the IFC called *Babadook*. It’s actually pretty frightening and even made Brian feel uneasy while he watched it. They hop on the 2 train after so Brian can show Gus the new house. They won’t get the keys for another couple of weeks but Gus already loves it just by seeing the exterior and they walk along the promenade to look at the view. Around 6, the cab pulls up in front of the apartment. It’s only the two of them there since Eric and Lily went out to dinner with Cynthia and wouldn’t be back until for at least another hour. So Gus and Brian end up playing poker on the coffee table. The apartment’s quiet and Gus seems at ease. Shame he will have to pull him out of it.

“So I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Gus raises an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“How long have you and Penelope been together?”

“About three months, why?”

“Well, she’s your first girlfriend. You’re fourteen. You’re at an age where a lot changes and urges start to occur...”

God damn it, why is this suddenly so hard? He is Brian fucking Kinney, not some elderly sex ed
Gus does get the hint though because his eyes widen and he may be blushing a little.

“Uh, Dad? It’s fine, I understand how that stuff works.”

“Really? How well?”

“Um…”

“Gus…have you and Penelope had-“

“No! Dad, no. I swear we haven’t. I mean we’ve—forget it, we’ve done nothing.”

Brian knows his kid well enough to know he isn’t completely lying. He’s a shitty liar so that’s easy. Thus, Brian can also tell that he isn’t being completely truthful either. He is guessing that Gus had gotten at least a little lucky and made it to second base but is too embarrassed to tell him.

“You know I’m not going to judge you over anything. Not only is it natural, but I would have no right.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

Brian raises an eyebrow at him and Gus winces a little.

“Sorry. I mean, I’ve heard things. Not for a while but Ma has mentioned how you used to be when you were younger and I remember you and Mom arguing about it when you first got with Eric. I just know you’ve hooked up with a lot of men. But it’s different with girls. So you don’t have to-“

“I’ve had sex with women, Gus.”
Gus gapes at him like that is the most preposterous thing he has ever heard and Brian rolls his eyes at his son’s expression.

“You? You’ve slept with women?”

“A few. Three, to be exact.”

“Wha—…Seriously? Who? Tell me about them.”

“I wanted to talk about you, Sonny Boy.”

“But you just dropped that like it’s nothing. You’re gay!”

“I’m aware.”

“I’m just curious.”

Whatever. Once Gus hears that his dad actually did sleep with his mom after all, he might gross out and they can get back on topic.

“Well, the last time it happened was a mistake. I was 24, really drunk and high, and don’t really remember any of it. I had gone to some breeder party, no offense. It hadn’t been my scene but a coworker had invited me so I decided to go for the free booze. Everyone drank too much, including me, and I woke up next to some woman I barely recognized. I don’t think I got her name. She woke up about the same time I did and asked if I was up for round two. The mere thought grossed me out and had me jumping out of bed, throwing my clothes on, and running out the door.”

Gus looks a little embarrassed but snorts at that.

“So what? The girls were just one-time hook ups?”

“No, I slept with your mom a few times in college. We were even sober the last time. That time had made it absolutely clear to me that I was way more into men and that your mom was more into
women. I guess she was my college experimental phase.”

Predictably Gus looks horrified and is probably seconds away from covering his ears and asking for brain bleach.

“Well, who was the other person?”

That takes Brian by surprise. He hadn’t expected Gus to want to know anymore after the Lindsay reveal. He didn’t think of the first girl he had ever slept with very often, but when he did it did hurt just a little bit.

“Her name was Maria. We had Advanced Chemistry together. She wasn’t conventionally pretty. Sort of nerdy but cute in her own way, I guess. She was my lab partner and I knew she had a crush on me. I didn’t feel the same of course but I liked talking to her even though she was really shy. We were juniors in high school and I was positive that I was gay at that point since I had been hooking up with other guys at the school plus I had started going to Liberty Avenue to hook up with guys who knew what they were doing. But a small part of me wanted to try sleeping with a woman, just to see what the fuss was about. Plus if I did end up liking it, I might have an easier time.”

Gus is listening intently as Brian takes a breath and continues.

“I had asked her to hang out after school a few times and we did homework together. I really liked having her as a friend. She had all this knowledge and I liked how that challenged me. Since I knew that she liked me and I was curious, I ended up kissing her and we ended up having sex in my bedroom. It wasn’t bad. I got the job done so I guess I enjoyed it enough. We actually hooked up a couple of times. But I always fantasized about men and sleeping with her didn’t change that in the slightest. I ended up telling her I was gay before she could get too attached. I didn’t want to lead her on more than I already had. Maria was hurt but she still wanted to be friends. We were actually close for a while. She the first person I talked to about being gay, besides Michael, Debbie, and Vic. Her home life was similar to mine and we connected because of that too. She was a friend outside of Mikey. I probably should have invited her to Debbie’s or something but she had a few of her own friends as well and our friendship was a quiet but personal and unique one. We kept in touch for a while after graduating but she got a full ride to UCLA. She had an aunt out there who was willing to help her out as well. So we wrote each other and called once or twice but the long distance charges were a bitch back then so that didn’t happen much. We drifted apart because that’s life and after a while I didn’t think about her much at all. But sometimes people from your past will pop up in your head and one day she did and that made me wonder whether or not she became a doctor like she had wanted to. I googled her online and found her obituary. She had become a surgeon but died a month before I looked her up from cancer. She left a husband and two sons behind.”
Gus was looking at him with such sadness and looked like he was seconds away from hugging him because the kid was way too sensitive. Brian hadn’t planned on sharing that much of the story with him. It just sort of poured out. In all honesty, Brian had been surprised about how much that news had upset him at the time. It had been right after he and Justin had broken up and Brian was already feeling stressed out, depressed, and raw due to that. It hadn’t helped his mindset at all. He would be lying if he said he hadn’t shed a few tears for her. He ended up making a huge contribution in her name to a charity the obituary said she supported.

“That’s so sad. I’m sorry, Dad.”

“We hadn’t spoken since college and it was a long time ago. Now that you know some stuff about me that no one else knows, let’s get back on topic. Gus makes a face but Brian says, “Don’t look at me like that, it’s important. I don’t care if you decide to have sex. Sex is fucking incredible. I personally love it. I know you are young but I started having sex at your age so you need to know the stuff I am about to tell you. One: be safe and wear a condom. I bought you some and if you would need more and you’re too embarrassed to buy them, all you have to do is ask. But I cannot stress enough how important that is. You do not need to knock a girl up or catch an STD, especially in high school. I am not becoming a fucking grandpa any time soon. It’s just not going to happen and if you throw this piece of advice away and make me one I will help you out but have an age crisis and bitch about it the whole time. If you want a kid down the road, make sure you are mature enough and stable enough to support one and it is with someone you like. As for STDs, if you are sleeping with multiple people, get checked frequently.

“Dad, I would NEVER cheat on Penelope. I only want to be with Penelope.” Gus heatedly argues and Brian doesn’t mean to scoff but he sort of does.

“Even if you are with one person monogamously your entire life and you and Penelope live happily ever after, still get checked out every so often, alright?”

Gus nods and Brian continues.

“As long as you wear one, you should be fine. Also, you’re young. It’s okay if at one point you start to experiment with what you like and who you do it with. If you end up sleeping with a guy, it doesn’t mean you’re gay just like how sleeping with women didn’t make me straight or even bi. Don’t deny yourself anything like that in fear of a stigma and don’t force yourself to try something you just don’t feel comfortable doing. And don’t let anyone pressure you into doing anything, I don’t care who they are. I know you wouldn’t pressure anyone to do anything they didn’t want to do. You are an amazing person, so I know you know not to do that. But if anyone tries to pressure you, don’t cave in out of obligation. And if anyone manages to force you to do anything, I don’t care if it is a woman or a man, you fucking tell someone. I don’t want you hiding that or brushing it off like it’s nothing. It will end up fucking with your head so if anything like that happens, tell me and your moms and we’ll help you through it, you hear me? If you decide to hook up with someone
you don’t know later on and you feel like there is something off and you feel uncomfortable, leave. And if you need to talk about something, whether it is sex, not wanting to have sex yet, any kind of confusion, or if anything happens that you just need to get off your chest, you know I’m not going to judge you. Don’t feel ashamed or embarrassed if you need advice or just someone to talk to.”

“Okay, Dad. I get it. I promise I’ll talk to you if I need advice.” Gus tells him, still a bit embarrassed but otherwise okay.

“Good. I love you, Sonny boy. I just want you to be safe.”

“I know, Dad. I love you too.”

Brian stacks the cards and gets up off the floor. He walks over to where his son is still sitting and kisses the top of his head. He feels Gus lean his head against him and even though Brian still has a lot on his mind, having his son here makes it a little easier to deal with.

Chapter End Notes

I was wanting to get an important scene in this chapter but it didn't happen. The chapter would have ended up being probably 20,000 words. But we'll get there really soon and the feelings between Brian and Justin will slowly start to evolve. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

For a man who used to be only about himself, Brian is dead set on mending other people's wounds today.

Chapter Notes

So this is a chapter that is subtly putting things in motion. I hope you like it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The 28th comes along and Brian is trying to get Lily to settle down. Lily is out of her mind with excitement since today is the day that her Grandma Debbie and Grandpa Carl are coming in. She had started calling them that on her own since JR called them that and Lily hero worshipped her every so often. She didn’t really have anyone else who fit into the role of a grandparent. She did call Eric’s father Grandpa James and Eric’s mother Abuela Luisa as a formality. They did genuinely seem to care about her and like her when they had come to visit her a few times but Lily was smart. She knew that they didn’t like Brian and that they were cold to Eric. And for a girl who rarely ever met a stranger, it was almost disconcerting how much she closed up around them and would cling onto Brian’s leg in a form of silent solidarity. She seemed to like her Aunt Amanda and Uncle George okay when she met them but they weren’t close to their brother either so they rarely came around and they themselves had only gone down to North Carolina to visit once for Eric’s grandfather’s funeral. She has never met Cynthia’s mother. Even though Lily doesn’t know that Cynthia is her biological mother yet, they had planned for Cynthia’s mother to meet her at one point but she ended up getting alcohol poisoning and Cynthia decided that she really didn’t want Lily around that. It had been a relief because Brian and Eric honestly didn’t either but didn’t want to hurt Cynthia’s feelings by saying so. She had never met Joan or Claire. They wouldn’t see her as family anyway and Brian didn’t want to put her through that. He felt like she wouldn’t warm up to them either and Brian would rather have her be her talkative and hyperactive self rather than some shy and quiet pod person. Most of the time.

He wishes she would settle down now though. Don’t get him wrong, Brian loves Lily ridiculously so. His friends would still get a little taken aback when it came to how open and loving he was around her. That didn’t mean she didn’t drive him insane. Ever since he reminded her this morning that her Grandma Debbie and Grandpa Carl were coming in, she has been off the walls. It doesn’t take a lot. She got like this whenever she knew someone was coming to visit but about other things too. She got like this when they told her they were seeing The Lion King on Broadway. She got like this when they went to Build-a-Bear. She had even gotten like this a few months ago when Dora and Friends: Into the City premiered on Nickelodeon. Eric made popcorn for her and that led her to believe it was an exciting and groundbreaking occasion. He doesn’t know why they still watch Dora. Eric usually says that he wants her to watch it because she should be connected to her heritage but she’s only a quarter Mexican and while that’s a significant amount, why does she have
to watch it several times a week? And in all honesty, Lily’s Spanish is actually pretty good already since Eric is fluent and has worked with her. But sometimes, plopping her in front of the television got her to settle down.

“And I can show Grandma Debbie my new dresses and we can bake cookies together and we can walk around the park.” Lily continued as she stood next to Brian’s seat as she jumped up and down.

“Go watch Dora. I think they play it around this time.”

“They do?!”

“Even if they don’t you can put a movie in as long as you settle down. Jesus, kid. You’re jumping off the walls.”

Lily has the decency to look bashful for maybe three seconds before running over to the television and finding Nickelodeon.

“Daddy, this is Bubble Guppies. I don’t like Bubble Guppies.”

“Since when?”

“Since now. It’s for babies.”

Brian sighed and got up to look through Lily’s DVDs and picked a few for her.

“Which one do you want to watch? Anastasia, Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, or The Wizard of Oz?”

“Um….”

Brian wants to throw his hands up in the air and say fuck it when Lily starts doing Eenie Meenie Miney Moe. However, he does smile a little when she looks up at him with a grin and says, “My
DADDY! told me to pick the very best one and you shall be it!”

Her little left pointer finger lands on The Wizard of Oz so Brian puts it in and sits down on the couch. Lily is on the floor in front of the television for a little bit but takes Brian by surprise by jumping into his lap when the witch comes out.

Brian and Lily hear the door open and Eric walks in and hangs up his coat. He walks over and kisses Lily on her cheek. He bends down to give Brian a kiss and Brian reaches up to pull him in by the nape of his neck to press his lips against Eric’s. Eric does a double take and smiles.

“You shaved your beard!”

Brian snorts and rubs his jaw.

“I think it took Lily a few seconds to recognize me when she woke up.”

“You had it for a few months. I missed looking at that face.” Eric tells him as he nuzzles and kisses Brian’s cheek.

“Papa, you’re blocking the TV,” Lily says as she exaggeratedly tilts her head to see the screen.

“I’m sorry, baby.”

Eric goes on the other side of Lily and sits down. Brian looks over his daughter’s head to talk to him.

“How did the meeting go?”

“Good. Bensonhurst is so out of the way though. I was on the D train for at least an hour there and and possibly longer back. I’m glad I left here early. I heard it was sketchy but it didn’t look that bad. It’ll be a good place for a synagogue. The lot they have is close to the beach. I have to figure out some extra precautions though in case another Hurricane Sandy hits.”
“And how do you plan on doing that?”

“Strong foundation, thick walls, build up the first floor so it’s pretty far above ground. Shouldn’t be too hard since they want it made out of stone. The city gave the community a grant for it so the extra work won’t be coming out of their pockets too much.”

“That’s good. You have the designs drawn out?”

“Yeah, a few of them actually. They are wanting to go old school and have an intricate Renaissance style building so I’ve drawn out some potential carvings as well.”

“Would you show them to me later? I want to see them.”

“Of course.”

Brian and Eric had talked a little more after Brian had gotten back from the office yesterday. He tried to be more open and make sure Eric knew how sorry he was for being such an asshole on Christmas. Things were still a little tender and shaky but they were getting back to normal. In the long run, that one night would probably end up being just some stupid thing that had happened but Brian still made sure that Eric knew that they could go out for New Year’s like they originally planned rather than go to Justin’s gallery. Eric had shot down backing out though and said, “We already said we would go. The rest of our family will be there as well. Just play nicer this time, alright?” Brian had agreed but he was nervous to face Justin again. He didn’t want to apologize. Justin knew him well enough to know that if he behaved differently it meant that he knew he was a dick so maybe he wouldn’t have to. He’d figure it out.

“We still going out to eat for dinner later?”

“Yeah Debbie and Carl’s flight got in this morning and we’ll meet them plus Michael, Ben, Hunter, and the kids around 5:30 at Carmine’s.”

“Fuck, Brian.” Eric quickly looks at Lily to see if she caught that but she’s too wrapped up in the Cowardly Lion’s song, “That’s close to Port Authority. At rush hour too.”

“We have a reservation. It should be fine.”
'Still not looking forward to walking through that though.'

'You and me both. But Debbie wanted to go for their ‘enormous portions at an affordable price.’ It’s supposed to be good but I told her I would take her somewhere classier and not as crowded. Debbie’s not really about that though.'

'That’s true. I hope Lily doesn’t want to walk around. You’d think she would have had enough of Times Square.'

'No. I like Times Square.’ Lily tells them distractedly as she watches her movie, ‘We going now?’

Eric sighs and ruffles her hair. He gets up to start making lunch for Lily and asks if Brian wants anything. Brian tells him no because he has eaten way too much these last few days and he is going to be eating a shit ton of carbs tonight, so no thank you.

After Lily eats her peanut butter and jelly sandwich and finishes the movie, she starts to get restless. Brian ends up taking her to the small and enclosed park a few blocks down while Eric takes a nap since he got up at 5 am. They walk down and Lily is about to dart off when Brian says, ‘Hey! Get back here!’

Lily reluctantly walks back towards Brian.

‘You know the rules. Stay close to where I can see you. If you can’t see me then you better be finding me in 10 seconds. I am going to be at that bench right next to the swings, alright? Do not go past that flagpole over there.’

‘Okay, Daddy.’

Lily ran off to play with a little boy and girl around her age on the tire swing and Brian fended off a couple of mothers’ advances. Women who would flirt and compliment him on how beautiful his daughter happened pretty frequently.

‘She is an absolute doll. With those dark ringlets and those big brown eyes.’
“Yeah, she takes more after her father.”

“Oh...yes, I suppose I can see a little bit of you in her. You are very handsome and it’s obvious she’ll grow up to be gorgeous.”

“I meant her other father.”

“...So she’s your step-daughter?”

“No, she’s my daughter.”

“Oh....Oh! Okay. Well, it was nice talking to you.” They would usually say as they blushed and walked away.

It may be awful but Brian always enjoyed making those women a little uncomfortable.

Every once in a while Brian would hear Lily say, “Daddy! Watch this!” and she would go down a slide or climb a few feet on the jungle gym. She was having fun and staying pretty close. Of course it is when Brian takes his eyes off of her for a second to answer Michael’s text when he hears her crying.

Brian is off the bench in a heartbeat and running over to Lily. Even with her jeans on, she managed to fall and scrape her knee so bad that she was bleeding through the denim.

“Hey! Shhh, let me see.”

Lily is sobbing so hard that she’s hiccuping her breaths in and out. Brian rolls up her pants leg and tries to be careful of the wound and shit, it looks painful.

“Calm down, it’s okay. What happened?”
Lily, with tears streaming down her face, suddenly fills with rage and points to a red-headed boy around six or so at the top of the slide and yells, “He p-pushed me off the ladder!”

“Did not!” the little shit bastard yells down with a fucking smirk on his face.

“YOU DID TOO!!!!” Lily screams up at him, her face red with anger and her nose dripping with snot.

“Baby, forget about him. He’ll grow up and amount to nothing,” Brian shoots the fucker another glare as he runs past him to go back up the slide, “I’ll carry you back to the apartment, okay? Put your arms around my neck.”

Lily does and swings her legs around Brian’s torso, only to keep crying into the right side of his neck. He starts to walk away from the scene of the crime when the mother of the demon spawn comes up to him.

“Sir, I assure you that Colton would never push her. He’s a good boy. She probably just took a hard fall and wanted someone to blame because she’s upset.”

“Bullshit! He could have made her break something! Now go control your sociopath of a kid!” Brian snaps, causing the woman to recoil. He opens the fence and leaves the park.

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Brian gets Lily into the living room, gently sits her on the couch, and goes to get the first aid kit that Eric keeps in the bathroom.

“I’m going to clean your knee before I bandage it up, okay?”

“‘K-Kay…” Lily whimpers off as Brian gently cleans her knee with a wet soapy washcloth and makes sure there isn’t any gravel stuck in her knee. Her little hands were scraped in the fall as well so he cleaned those too. As he puts antibiotic ointment on her, he tries to distract her by getting her to talk about Disney shit. She gets through it and Brian is ready to bandage up her knee.
“Pick a bandage.”

“Minnie Mouse…” She tell him quietly, still sniffling. Brian ends up having to use gauze and tape, then a couple of Minnie Mouse bandages on top to keep Lily satisfied.

It’s then when Eric comes out of the bedroom and looks over to where Brian is bandaging up her knee.

“What happened, honey?” he says as he rushes over to Lily so he can sit next to her and stroke her hair.

“I was going up the slide because I wanted to go down the slide and I was only a few steps away from the top but a really mean boy grabbed me and said, ‘Get out of the way, brat!’ I’m not a brat! But he shoved me off the ladder and I got a boo-boo on my knee and my hands too! I hate him!”

“The kid just fucking smirked about it too. His mother refused to believe that her precious angel was an asshole.”

“Yeah! He fuck-ing smirked about it!” Lily confirms, slightly stumbling over the new word.

“Lily Piper!” Eric then shot Brian a glare, who just shrugs, kisses her bandaged knee, and gets up off the floor.

“Give her a pass. She’s upset.”

“She can have one but not you. Don’t say that word in front of her.”

“You did earlier.”

“Yeah, well...she was distracted!” Eric says, trying to hold in a laugh.

“Uh huh. Seriously though, he really did smirk. I wanted to knock him off the slide and see how he liked it.”
“How old was he?”

“I don’t know, maybe six?”

“And he pushed a three year old!?”

“3 and a half.” Lily says, “More than that. My birthday is coming up real soon.”

“It’s not for another three months, nine days, and…” Eric pauses and looks at the clock, “five hours.”

“Nuh uh. I will be four next Wednesday.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Maybe she hit her head,” Brian says as he squints his eyes at her.

Eric looks sharply at Lily, takes her face in his hands and checks her pupils.

“Does your head hurt?”

“No, my knee hurts. I told you that. And my hands. See?” Lily says as she shows Eric the scrapes she got when she caught herself.

“Well, if your head starts hurting you tell us. And you aren’t going to be four next Wednesday.”

“Why not?” Lily pouts.

“Because you just aren’t and I want you to stay little forever,” Eric tells her as he lifts her into his
lap and hugs her.

“Papa, I’m not little!” Lily tells Eric as she struggles, but then starts giggling when Eric starts tickling her and blowing raspberries on her neck.

“Sorry to interrupt the father-daughter moment, but we all need to get dressed and out the door soon.”

Lily jumps up and winces at the sting that her knee gives her. She doesn’t let it get to her though because she twirls around on her good leg, leaps, and runs for her bedroom.

“I wanna wear my blue dress you got me! I HAVE to wear that one.” Lily says as she takes Brian’s hand to drag him to her room.

“Lily, you’d have to wear tights with that. You need to wear something more comfortable so it won’t touch your knee so much. Be practical.”

Lily spins around to face him with pursed lips and puts her hands on her hips.

“And what am I gonna wear, Daddy? Huh?”

Such a drama princess.

“Your black pants and your red sweater.”

“Um, no.”

After shooting down a few of Brian’s suggestions, Lily finally agrees to wear sweatpants but only under the ankle length Rapunzel dress that Brian bought her a few days before Christmas. She is the only person he knows who can pull that look off.
“Grandma Debbieeee!!” Lily squeals from Eric’s arms as they enter Carmine’s.

Eric puts Lily down in front of Debbie and Carl where they proceed give her hugs and kisses.

“Grandma, wanna see my dress?”

Lily takes off her coat and gives it to Eric, then spins around so Debbie and Carl can get a 360 degree view.

“Oh sweetheart, you look absolutely gorgeous! Look at you!” Debbie says to her.

“Just like a princess!” Carl adds.

“Thank you. Daddy got it for me because it’s the best dress ever.”

Brian tries to hide a scowl as Debbie laughs and goes over to pat Brian on the cheek.

“How are you doing, kid?” Debbie asks him as she kisses his cheek.

“Okay,” He answers her honestly. He has a feeling that she has been caught up by now on how he acted at Emmett and Drew’s.

“Yeah, we’ll talk about that later,” Debbie says to him quietly before going over to squeeze Eric in her affectionate grip.

“Where is everyone else?” Eric asks as Debbie releases him.

“They should be on their way. They ended up going to some panel that Ben was interested in going to. How they got the kids to agree to go, I’ll never know.”
Michael, Ben, and Hunter bring Gus and JR with them and get there a few minutes after they did. Gus sits on his father’s right side and Eric sits on his left. Lily is on the other side of Eric and next to JR and the other five people in their makeshift family are on the other side of the table and suddenly Brian feels like he and Eric are sitting on the kid’s side of the table.

“So Eric, what’s new?” Debbie asks him as twirls her pasta with her fork.

“Well, I have a new project in Brooklyn designing a renaissance style synagogue.”

“Oh, I bet it will be beautiful. Post pictures when you’re done so we can see it. Maybe Carl and I will take a trip down to see it in person once you finish it! What else?”

“Brian taught Lily a new word today.”

“Jesus, which one?”

Eric covers his mouth on the right side so Lily can’t see and whispers, “Fuck.”

“Oh Brian, why?”

Brian scoffs and gives Debbie a look.

“Don’t look at me like that. It wasn’t intentional and she has the vocabulary of a 1st grader so it was only a matter of time.”

“But still-“

“She even used it properly. Granted, she was just copying what I said but I heard the anger in her voice. My little genius…” Brian says as he reaches around Eric to pet her on the head.

“And what were you so angry about, Kinney?”
“Some Damien wannabe pushed her off the top of the slide. Never was a huge fan of an eye for an eye until that happened.”

“Yeah, Grandma! He pushed me off the ladder and hurt my knee. There was a bunch of blood too. He was really mean.”

“He fu-sounds it! I hope his mother knows what a brat he is!”

“She didn’t care. Basically accused Lily of making it up so I told her off and we left.”

Debbie looks over at Lily with a sympathetic look on her face.

“Are you feeling better now, sweetheart?”

“My knee still hurts some but I feel MUCH better now that I got spaghetti.”

“Spaghetti does tend to make things a lot better, yes,” Debbie tells her seriously as she goes back to her own pasta.

“Brian, speaking of her vocabulary, she is very advanced for her age. She seems like she has gained a lot of words in the last few months even. Have the two of you thought about getting her tested to see what areas she’s gifted in?” Ben asks them.

“We did.” Both Brian and Eric say in unison. They look at each other and Eric is the one to elaborate.

“We actually did a month before we moved here. She’s still young but they think at the rate that she is going, she will be at or near a genius IQ level, if she’s not already there. Her math skills are above average. She understands addition and subtraction already. It’s her vocabulary and memory levels that are off the charts. She knows the state capitals. She knows how to say the alphabet forwards and backwards. She knows the planets. She picks up speech and language at a really advanced rate. She also knows how to spell and write her name and a lot of other words as well. She has figured out how to sound out words and is reading now too. She comprehends children’s books easily. She is almost at the same level with those things when it comes to Spanish too. It made Brian want to become fluent because he felt left out, didn’t it babe?”
Brian rolled his eyes but didn’t deny it because Eric knew he was on the mark since Brian had been practicing with them and had been getting better.

Brian couldn’t deny that he was very proud of how smart she was. But he would be proud of her even if she was like any other almost 4 year old. He was proud of both of his kids and JR too.

Hey Lily, say the alphabet backwards,” Michael says to her. Lily throws down her fork and takes on the challenge.

“ZYXWVUTSRQPONMLKJIHGFEDCBA!”

“Good job!” several of them tell her and Debbie claps.

They part from the rest of the group with Gus and JR in tow and make it back to their apartment for the evening. He hasn’t had all three kids since the summer and he is both looking forward to it and dreading it because he really needs to get laid tonight and he feels like Gus and JR will be easier to wake up if he or Eric get too loud. He’ll wait until the kids are asleep but he needs to get off.

And the kids seem to be working in his favor. They stay up for a while to play a couple of board games. Lily ends up getting really tired so Eric takes her to her bed and JR sleeps next to her while Gus stays up for a while longer. Gus ends up getting tired by 10 pm and passes out on the couch, which is really unlike him when he doesn’t have school. So by 10:05, Brian takes Eric to their bedroom and by 10:10 he has his face buried in Eric’s ass and is flicking his tongue in his hole. He adds a finger, then two fingers, and Eric muffles a moan against his pillow. He pulls his fingers out along with his tongue and tenderly kisses Eric’s cheeks and lower back, slowly leading himself back up to Eric’s shoulders. He takes a hold of his cock and lines it up with Eric’s hole and slowly pushes in. Eric arches his back at the intrusion and Brian lets himself sink in gradually.

Brian really wants to let loose but he knows that it might cause the two of them to get loud so he keeps his thrusts steady, quickens his pace, and doesn’t fuck Eric as hard as he’d like to but it feels so fucking good anyway. Eric’s cock is rock hard and is dripping with pre-cum so Brian lets himself come in Eric’s ass and flips him over so he can suck him off. Eric lasts less than a minute and shoots his load into Brian’s mouth.

“That was…fuck…” Eric manages to gasp out as his eyes close a little.
“Fantastic?”

“Yeah…” Eric confirms as he starts to drift off.

“Tired already? I thought you took a nap today.”

“I only actually slept for a half hour. I’m so tired…” Eric tells him.

Brian takes sympathy and kisses his shoulder.

“I’ll get a washcloth and clean you off.”

“Mmm, that’d be nice…”

Brian goes into the bathroom connected to their bedroom and gets a washcloth from the bathroom closet. He gets it a little damp with warm water so he can clean off his partner. Eric is basically in and out of consciousness as Brian cleans him and when Brian takes the washcloth back to the bathroom and cleans himself up. When he comes back, Eric is asleep. It’s not even 11 yet so Brian decides to read. He’s a few pages into a book when his phone starts to vibrate on the nightstand. He picks it up and sees Debbie’s name on the screen.

“Hello?”

“Wanna come downstairs so I can get you a drink? I would have brought pot but didn’t want to be frisked at the airport,” he hears her voice say as she cackles.

“Debbie, what the hell? Did you come here by yourself?”

“I’ll have you know that I can take care of myself, thank you very much. I have pepper spray on me. Now come on. There’s a bar open across the street.”

“…Fine.”
“See ya in a few!” Debbie chirps before he hears the click on the line.

Brian quietly gets dressed and writes a quick note telling Eric, “Apparently going bar hopping with Debbie Novotny” in case he wakes up before he gets back. He goes out the door and locks it behind him, then takes the elevator down and sees Debbie sitting in the lobby. She sees him approach her and she gives him a big smile.

“Mind telling me why you’re here at 11 o’ clock at night?”

“The night’s just started. The Brian I knew 10 years ago would just be picking up his first trick of the night. Can’t a lady have a little bit of fun too?”

“You’re 63.”

“Don’t age shame me! Now get that cute little butt out the door!”

Brian raises his eyebrow in skepticism but obeys her. She makes small talk with him as they walk and they make their way into the breeder bar across the street from his building. It’s not very crowded so Brian and Debbie get seats at the bar and order drinks.

“So I heard that you finally saw Justin again.”

Brian looks over at her but then goes back to staring straight ahead and doesn’t say anything.

“In all honesty, it took you both long enough. It’s been hard on us, you know? Moving things around because you both were too chicken shit to face each other. We didn’t want either of you to be upset or uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Yes, we did. Because every time Justin’s name was brought up you would flinch and we could tell how much it upset you, even after Eric came into the picture. And the times that Justin came
up to visit and we asked you to come visit too, you refused. There were times when Justin did the same thing. We didn’t want to have you both come without any warning that the other would be there because that wouldn’t be fair to the two of you. I know how fucking hurt you were. I hated seeing you so upset and heartbroken. I wasn’t going to push you into something you weren’t ready for.”

“I get it, Mother. But you can stop worrying now. I’m a big boy and I can handle it,” Brian tells her sarcastically as he sips his beam.

“Then why did you give Justin and Nathan a hard time at Emmett’s?”

“I wasn’t that bad.”

“My son told me differently.”

“Your son is a snitch.”

“Ah, you know me. I was pressing him for some juicy gossip.”

Brian just shakes his head because he figured.

“I wanna know if you are alright.”

“Fine.”

“What about you and Eric?”

“We’re good now.”

“I’m glad. He’s a good man. I really think the two of you are fantastic together. And I know how much you love him-”
“We’re getting married.”

Debbie puts her hand to her mouth and her eyes fill a little with tears.

“Oh, honey. I’m so happy for you. Did you ask him or-”

“He asked me. Got down on one knee in Chicago like I was some maiden in waiting,” Brian snorts as he takes another sip.

“I would have paid to see that.”

“I told Justin before I told anyone else. I took him aside into the hall when no one was watching. I was a fucking asshole about it.”

“I’m not that surprised. You tended to bring out the best in each other but sometimes the worst too.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You’re coming to his gallery on New Year’s, right?”

Brian nods.

“I know it’s rough for you to be around him, even after all this time. I know it probably hurts to see him with another man. But remember that you are with someone else too, Brian. You have a wonderful partner and a beautiful little girl with him. Don’t strain that because you and Justin are in the same city again. And I think you should be a little bit grateful to Justin. If it weren’t for him, you would probably still be turning tricks every night and you might have never been tempted to build the center in the first place. He taught you how to love and in a way helped you achieve what you have now.”

Brian stays silent. He never really thought of it that way but deep down he knows she’s right. He can’t think of how his life would have progressed if Justin or Eric hadn’t entered it. He probably wouldn’t be nearly as close with Gus. He wouldn’t have Lily at all. He would be so empty and
lonely but probably wouldn’t even know it.

“And he’s going through a really rough time right now. Take it easy on him.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I shouldn’t be saying this. I should keep my mouth shut. But I have had a little too much to drink and I’m gonna tell you anyway. I met with Jennifer for a little bit after I got in. We had lunch together, just us girls, and caught up. I guess Craig called Justin while he was at Emmett’s. He was drunk and crying over the phone. I guess he finally saw what an asshole he was to his son and drunk dialed him. Justin was so worried and upset that he left without saying anything to Jennifer. He hadn’t spoken to his dad since Craig had him arrested in Pittsburgh. He’s in a hard place right now because of that.”

As Debbie speaks, Brian feels a deep wave of guilt and worry hit him. Fucking Craig. He always hated the bastard. Brian clears the lump out of his throat.

“Is Justin okay?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t gotten to see him yet. I think Carl, Michael, Ben, and I are going to meet Justin and the rest of his family and do something tomorrow. The girls might come too but it’s not set in stone. But just keep it in mind that he’s going through that, alright?”

Brian nods and gets his wallet out to pay for the drinks but Debbie stops him.

“I’ll get our drinks and the tip. You paid for our tickets and our hotel rooms. It is the very least I can do.”

Debbie puts down some money for the bartender and they leave. Debbie is about to walk back to the train but Brian stops her. She’s had a little too much and, while she’s not drunk, he feels uncomfortable letting her go back so late by herself especially with the transfer she would need to take. Brian is calculating where she can sleep in the apartment, but a couple of cabs pass by and Brian manages to get one to pull over and Debbie gets in. He makes her take some money to cover the fare. He waves her off and goes back up to the silent apartment.

The living room is pretty dark and he doesn’t want to turn the light on and wake up Gus so he just
turns the light on in the kitchen and that’s just enough to see what’s around him in the other room. He feels something heavy inside him and he knows he won’t get to sleep soon but he can’t just sit here and do nothing. He feels even guiltier about what happened now. Craig’s call had to have happened after Brian talked to him. He seemed mostly okay before that. And he knows that Justin wouldn’t have been able to brush a call like that off. If the situation were reversed and Joan called Brian crying over him or whatever, he would be fucked up over it too. It had to be even worse for Justin because at one point in his life, he actually had a good relationship with his father. But it’s not like Brian can do anything about it.

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------- He doesn’t mean to go through Eric’s wallet. He really doesn’t.

But Justin had given his card to them in case they needed anything and now Brian needs to call Justin.

He looks at the card and sees that it has his personal cell as well. He sneaks back out into the hallway and with shaky hands, Brian dials the number.

It rings a few times and Brian is ready to chicken out and hang up but he hears Justin’s voice on the line.

“Hello?”

Brian’s throat dries up and he can’t speak. He tries to get a sound out but suddenly he doesn’t know what to say.

“Dad, is that you?”

“No.”

“Brian?”

“…Yeah. Hey.”
“Hey?”

Brian doesn’t say anything because he didn’t plan this out. He is supposed to be good with words but he can’t figure out what to say. He hears Justin sigh.

“Why are you calling, Brian? It’s almost 1 am.”

“I don’t know. I wanted to check up on you.”

“Well, all is well. You know, you have some nerve. The way you acted at-“

“Debbie and I got drunk and she told me your dad called. I know that you’re not okay.”

He can hear Justin take a few deep breaths.

“Debbie told you? So it’s just going through the grapevine now, is that it?”

“Don’t be mad at her. I don’t think she meant to.”

“Well, it’s none of your business. I can take care of it myself.”

“Fine. Forget I even called. Maybe I’ll say hi to you and your boyfriend on New Year’s.”

Brian is about to hang up but he hears Justin say, “Brian, wait.”

Brian stops and keeps the phone against his ear.

“What?”
“…I don’t know what to do.”

“I figured.”

“What am I supposed to say to him?”

“You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to.”

“I know but he was so fucking upset and hard on himself. Molly told me some stuff and I think he might be depressed or having a breakdown. I wish I could ignore that but I can’t. It has kept me up the last couple of nights and I can’t stand thinking of him like that but he hurt me so fucking m-much and I don’t want to get hurt again,” Justin’s voice cracks as he starts to get overwhelmed. And it makes Brian's heart ache.

“I know, Sunshine. You don’t deserve this. Do what you think is best for you, not for him.”

“I don’t know what is best.”

“…If my mother called me trying to apologize after all these years and was a wreck while doing it, it would piss me off. But fuck, I know it would mess me up too. I tell myself that I made my own family and I don’t need Joan and Claire. But I can be fucking weak. If I thought they were genuinely trying to patch things up and wanted to get to know me, I would be on my guard, but I would probably end up giving them a chance. Because my family actually giving a shit and accepting me was the thing I wanted the most for a really long time.”

Justin lets out a sob and Brian hears him sniffle and quickly get himself under control.

“I wish you could have had that, Brian.”

“I’m happy with what I have.”

“I know you are. I’m glad you are happy.”
“But what I mean is that if you think you want to give him a chance, go ahead and do it. Don’t forgive and forget because fuck that. He has to work for it. But do it for you, not for him.”

“I’m thinking about it. It’s just hard.”

They both don’t say anything for a few seconds. Justin decides to change the subject.

“Did Lily hang up her painting?”

Brian lets out a laugh, “Yeah, even though we’re moving to Brooklyn soon and she’ll have to hang it up again at the house. She named the princess Lily the Second and you already know about Chico. She told JR all about it even though JR could see it for herself.”

“I’m glad she saw the resemblance with the princess.” Justin laughs.

Brian clears his throat.

“I better get back inside. Everyone is already asleep so I should head to bed. I just called to check up on you…and to say I’m sorry. About what happened last time. I was a dick.”

“You were. Although hearing you apologize is sort of shocking.”

“I’ve grown up a bit.”

“Yeah, you really have. I’m glad this is ending on a better note. But can you promise me you’ll be nicer to Nathan too the next time you see him?”

“I’ll try.”

“Please do. Don’t feel too guilty about it, but Christmas is an awful day for him.”
“What, is he Jewish?”

“No,” Justin takes a breath, “His mother killed herself on Christmas when he was a kid. He never tried to celebrate it since.”

“Fuck…”

“You didn’t know, Brian. But he’s had a really hard life and that was just part of it. It would mean a lot if you try to be less intimidating next time. And don’t tell him I told you that. I shouldn't have. Molly doesn't even know. I'm as bad as Debbie, I guess.”

“I’ll be nicer to him.”

“Goodnight, Brian. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

“Yeah, okay. Bye.”

Brian hangs up and waits another minute before he goes back inside. He needs to catch his breath because for some reason he feels like that phone call was monumental.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think in the comments! The feedback keeps me going!
Chapter Summary

Brian rings in 2015 with his friends and family.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: The confirmation of unprotected sex between Brian and Eric and that they have been doing it bare for a while.

Sorry that this chapter took so long. Real life has been busy but it's almost 9000 words so hopefully that makes you all a little happy. Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Brian! Which shirt?”

Brian follows Eric’s voice to the bedroom and sees his partner in just a towel going through his drawer. He comes up behind him and takes the towel off.

“Neither. Get on the bed.”

Eric scrambles for his towel and puts it back on.

“Lily is up and we have to drop her off soon! She is not going to end her year by walking in on her dads fucking. Now which shirt?”

Brian lets out a put-upon sigh, then looks at the two shirts Eric is holding up.

“The black one. It goes well with your hair and brings out your eyes.”

“Aw, pumpkin…” Eric tells him as he plants a sloppy kiss on his cheek.
“Call me pumpkin again and see what happens.”

“Pump-kin.” Eric enunciates before Brian tosses him on the bed.

Brian pins Eric’s arms above his head and starts sucking at his neck. He grinds his hard-on against him and Eric lets out a moan.

“Brian, we can’t. Lily is out in the living room and she-”

“If she hears anything, we’ll just tell her that we were exercising. I’ll be quick, I promise. I just need to be inside of you.”

Eric looks at him and sees something desperate in Brian’s eyes. Things with Brian have been good. Hell, they’ve been good for years. They had fought over how Brian acted at Christmas but they patched that up. However, the last couple of days Brian had been a little needy and he isn’t sure why. He knows that Brian has problems with abandonment so maybe their argument had caused him to become insecure. As far as he knew, things were okay outside of their relationship besides some work stress. So the fight that Eric had already put behind him was the only thing he could really think of. That and the party they were about to go to. Brian might feel nervous about facing Justin and worried that he’ll fuck up again. And, as much as Eric doesn’t want that to be the case, he doesn’t want Brian to feel that way. So Eric finds his legs spreading and Brian lowers his pants and boxer briefs just low enough to let his dick spring free.

“Alright, alright. Just be quiet. And put a condom on, okay? I just took a shower.”

Brian sighs and reaches over to the nightstand and searches around for a condom. It’s honestly shocking how much Brian loves the connection and feeling they get when they have sex without anything between them. Don’t get him wrong, Eric loved it too. And while he thought it was a huge step in a relationship, he knew Brian was a huge advocate for safe sex and never even considered doing it until he was in his mid-thirties. It was smart of him due to his old lifestyle but he used to be so repulsed by the idea. Eric hadn’t needed it by any means. However, it had been something he imagined doing with a committed partner one day. When Eric asked about it, Brian hesitantly told him it was because of something that had happened with his gym teacher when he was 14 years old and stupid. Despite that setting off alarms in his head and going into instant concern for his partner, Eric knew not to push the subject. He knew Brian didn’t want to talk about it but since Brian was seeing a therapist at the time, he did ask him to bring it up with Dr. Tessler and Brian had when Eric wasn’t asked to come along. But Brian had opened up a little about it with Eric eventually and, even though he had been relatively vague about it, it had been an emotional night for both of them.
However, Eric knows that he wasn’t the first man to consensually have sex raw with Brian. He knew that Brian had only consented to that one other time before him and that was with Justin when they were engaged. It was probably another reason Brian had been hesitant to open himself up like that to someone again. But on an eventful night about almost three years ago, they were about to make love and Brian had looked down at him and told him he was ready then asked if they could skip the condom this time. They talked about it after and made sure the other knew they had to be open if one of them ever slipped up. But they had been fucking without them ever since, no matter who was topping who. Unless they wanted a quick clean fuck like tonight, they had just become accustomed to going without.

Brian slips the condom on and enters Eric and Eric stifles his groan at the intrusion. He turns his head a little and takes his eyes off Brian when the pleasure builds but Brian starts stroking his cheek and asks him to look at him. Eric does and they don’t break eye contact until after they come.

“You okay?”

Brian hears Eric’s voice from across the room and turns his head to look at him. Eric is pulling on the black shirt and after he gets it over his head he gives Brian a look of scrutiny and concern.

“Great. Never better.”

“Okay. You would tell me if something was wrong? If you were upset or worried about something?”

“Jesus, Eric. You know I would. I would tell you first if something was wrong. What have I done to make you think something was wrong?”

Eric shrugs and looks away.

“I don’t know. You’ve just seemed a little shaky the last couple days. Like you need reassurance.”
“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. I just want you to know that I love you and that I’m over the fight we had so you don’t have to worry about that if you have been.”

“I know you’re over it. I’m fine, Eric.”

Eric nods and doesn’t say anything else and now Brian has one more thing to feel bad about so he goes over to him.

“I love you too. Everything’s fine. Just stress,” he tells him as he kisses his forehead. Eric nods and brings Brian in for a kiss.

“I’m going to get Lily’s overnight bag packed,” Eric tells him. As soon as he leaves the room, Brian sits down on the bed.

He feels so fucking guilty.

It’s a relatively new emotion for him. One that he really only started experiencing when he started entering relationships. And of course this time around it involved the only two people he had ever been in love with.

Eric was the most understanding and patient man. He really was and Brian loved that he was so innately good. He balanced Brian out and kept him a little more in line when it came to his brash side. But he knew that if Eric found out that Brian had not one, but two late night phone conversations with Justin that he didn’t bother to tell him about, he would be pissed. He wouldn’t leave Brian just for that but it would take longer than a few days for Eric to get over the betrayal of him calling his ex-fiancé late at night without even mentioning it to him.

It wasn’t as though he and Justin had phone sex or even talked about yearning for each other’s presence or some shit like that. The first time they had talked it had been because Brian was concerned over Justin’s situation with his dad. It had been a spur of the moment thing that had been driven by a need to comfort Justin in some small way and take the sourness of their last encounter off of both of their minds. He wouldn’t have felt that bad about one phone call. But two? He didn’t really have an excuse for the second one.
And it wasn’t like they brought up their past in the second one either. Justin had texted him earlier in the day yesterday. Nothing personal, just a link regarding a classic film festival at Anjelica Theatre that he thought Brian would be interested in taking Eric to that was happening in the middle of February. Justin knew his taste in movies well enough to know that Brian would be interested in going to something like that. The two of them had ended on a better note with the first phone call so it hadn’t been weird that Justin texted the link to him.

But it probably had been a bit weird that Brian called him later that night after Eric had fallen asleep. They hadn’t talked about anything that had happened between them or hashed anything out. They talked about movies they’d seen, books they’d read, their current partners, and Lily and Gus. Fuck, Brian even ended up telling him how Eric proposed. Which probably wasn’t the most thoughtful thing to tell your ex and while Justin wasn’t jumping for joy over the engagement, he did sincerely congratulate Brian since Brian hadn’t given him the chance to do that at Christmas. Justin had even laughed a little at the imagery of Brian having his hand held by a kneeling Eric. Brian’s still sure that Eric did that to fuck with him a little bit. He asked him about it once but Eric just batted his eyelashes and said, “I did it that way to show my love for you, Brian, and nothing more.” Yeah, right. Eric was a big romantic at heart but only a few people knew what a sarcastic shit he could be. It was one of the many things about him that turned Brian on, to be honest.

In return, Brian had listened to Justin talk about his current epic sized painting that he was working on and about Nathan, Jennifer, Molly, and some of his other friends in the area. Eventually the conversation led to Brian going into proud dad mode and telling a few stories about Lily and Gus. And that had been pretty much it. The phone call was a little over an hour. Brian went to bed feeling happy. And when he turned over to put an arm around his current lover, he immediately felt guilty.

So Brian swore to himself that there would be no more late night phone calls to Justin. Eric trusted him and was okay with them forming a friendship with Justin. How many partners would be okay with that? He didn’t want Eric to feel threatened by Justin either. He had no reason to and Brian would make sure with everything that he had that it would stay that way.

“Hey, I have Lily’s stuff together. She just needs to get her coat and boots on. You ready?” Eric says to him as he popped his head in.

“Yeah, I’m coming.”

Brian goes out into the living room where Lily is on the floor reading a Dr. Seuss book.

“Alright, Silly Lily! Time to get your coat on,” Eric says.
“No. Not going,” Lily informs them as she turned a page in her book.

Great.

“Lily, don’t you want to play with Tiana? You like Tiana,” Eric says as he bends down to reason with her.

“No. She’s old.”

“She’s seven,” Brian replies as he held back a laugh.

“Yep,” Lily sasses him, as if he just proved her point. Fucking three year olds.

“Lily, you have to go. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.”

“But Gus is going to the party! JR is going! Everybody’s going! I wanna go with you!” she pouts as she gets up to stomp her feet.

“Aunt Cynthia isn’t going. Ted and Blake aren’t going,” Brian points out but Lily calls him on his crap.

“That is BECAUSE they aren’t in New York! Aunt Cynthia went back home! Those other two never came up here in the first place!”

“Hey, be nice. Ted and Blake sent you a lot of presents for Christmas and called you to say hi. They wanted to be here but had to go to see Blake’s family,” Brian tells her sternly and Lily looks like she feels a little bad but is still defiant.

“Baby, you think Tiana’s old? There are going to be so many old people at the party we’re going to,” Eric tells her seriously then leans in to loudly whisper, “They’ll all be Daddy’s age.”

Brian glares at Eric but Eric just looks up at him and smirks. Lily stays silent and looks like she is thinking, then looks at her dads.
“If I go, can I get a pet?”

Brian would be proud of his kid for her bargaining methods if this subject hadn’t been brought up several times before in the last two months.

“No.”

“But I can play with a pet! I can play with a fishy or a turtle or a lizard or hamster or a parrot or a kitty or a doggie or a snake-”

“Lily, we can’t get one right now. We’re about to move. We have to get the house ready and Daddy and I have to work a lot since we are in a new city. But once things settle down, we’ll talk about it again and start out with something easy so you can learn how to take care of it. That okay?”

Lily just looks away and puts her coat on. When Eric tries to help her, she takes a few steps back and quietly says, “I can do it myself.” It takes a lot longer that way, but she manages to zip it up eventually.

“Come on, Lily. You’ll have fun, I promise,” Brian tells her as he holds out his hand. Since she is in a foul mood, she ignores it so Brian reaches down to take it. She glares at the ground as she walks out of the apartment with them.

They decided to just take the subway since they had no idea how parking would be down where Justin’s gallery was. Brian had his assistant set up in a nice apartment in Sunset Park so they would have to turn around and make a transfer after they dropped Lily off but it wasn’t too much of a hassle. Lily likes the trains anyway and she does cheer up a little when they got on and Brian and Eric start talking to her about what Malia has planned for her and Tiana.

“We’re watching movies and Tiana’s mommy is making dinner for me and Tiana?”

“Yep. And if you and Tiana are good, she’ll let the two of you stay up to watch the ball drop.”

“What’s that?”
“It’s a tradition they do in Times Square,” Eric informs her.

“So she’s taking us?!” Lily squeals as both Brian and Eric shush her.

“Absolutely not. People stand out there for days just to get a decent spot. You’d get trampled anyway,” Brian tells her.

“Nuh uh. We watch it from her window then?”

“No sweetie. You wouldn’t be able to see it from there. It’s on TV,” Eric says.

“Oh. Okay,” Lily answers, not that impressed anymore.

“This stop is: 25th Street. This is the train to Bay Ridge, 95th Street. The next stop is: 36th Street. Please be careful as you exit the train.”

“This is our stop,” Brian tells Eric as he picks Lily back up.

They got off the train and walked the two blocks to Malia’s apartment building. They rang the bell to Apartment 4A and Malia’s voice came on the line.

“Who is it?” Malia calls out.

“The one who comes bearing money and a child,” Brian dryly responds as he adjusts Lily on his hip.

“Oh, it’s you. You can come up, I guess.”

The door buzzes and Eric opens it. They walk up the four flights of stairs and knock on the door. Within a couple of seconds, Malia opens it.
“Hey, girl! I haven’t seen you in weeks! Your daddy had to keep me busy by opening a new office and dragging me along with him. Give me a hug.”

Brian lets her down and Lily runs over to hug Malia. Malia has been his assistant for a little over two years now. After having a couple of assistants who didn’t work out, he called Malia in after seeing her resume. She is a Chicago native who isn’t afraid to speak her mind and is as tough as nails. Malia has spunk, to say the least. She is a 32 year old single mother who was widowed a year after Tiana was born. A few days after he hired her, he had been in a bad mood about a design messed up by someone in the art department. So he had been a dick to everyone that day, including her. Brian remembered her coming into his office and more or less laying down the law on how she expected to be treated and the lengths she would go to in order to be the best assistant she could be in return. Like Cynthia, she wasn’t afraid to call out Brian on his bullshit and has become a real friend to him despite both of them having dominant personalities. She is smart, funny, and has good ideas when it came to some of their campaigns. He let her sit in on meetings and give her input. He knew that within a couple of years, he would probably have to offer her a higher position because she had potential. He respected her a lot and on top of that, she offered to watch Lily when Eric and Brian had to be somewhere.

“Here’s her bag. I packed a couple of juice boxes, a couple of books she likes read to her before bed, one of her favorite stuffed animals, her pajamas, and two sets of clothes. I know she’s just staying tonight but you never know what messes that kids will get into. I know you have Brian’s number, but do you have mine too in case—”

“Yeah, Papa. Ladies’ night!” Lily confirms, nodding her head vigorously.

“Can I have a hug and a kiss before we go?”

Eric squats down and holds his arms out.
Lily wraps her arms around Eric’s neck and gives him a kiss on the cheek.

“Happy New Year, baby.”

“Not a baby,” Lily mumbles into his neck.

Eric lets go and stands up then Brian bends down to kiss Lily’s head and holds her little body against his.

“Happy New Year, kid. Be sure to eat all the sugar you can find in the house so you and Tiana can stay up until midnight and drive Malia insane. Banging on pots and pans is a nice tradition.”

“Kay, Daddy.”

“Kinney, get out of my house! And stop corrupting your little angel.”

“But it’s fun,” Brian tells her with a grin as Eric takes his arm and pulls him away.

“Have a nice night, Malia. Bye, Tiana! Happy New Year!” Eric tells them as he and Brian go out the door.

Since they had to go to Sunset Park first, they do not take the L like Justin suggested that they should. Brian and Eric get on the N so that they can go to Fulton and transfer to the G. When they get off at Bedford, the walk is only a couple of blocks farther than it would have been if they had taken the L. It gives Brian and Eric a chance to explore an area of Brooklyn they hadn’t really seen. It was sort of neat and industrial. It was definitely a place that would appeal to artists and musicians but, even more so, hipsters. He hoped Justin didn’t lead a secret life as a hipster.

“That the place up there?” Eric asks him as they hear music and see a small crowd.

Brian shrugs and pulls out his phone to look at a picture of the gallery.
“Looks like it.”

Eric nods and starts walking, but Brian pulls him back.

“You sure you are okay with going? If you want to turn around and go out like we planned before or go back to Malia’s and spend it with the girls then that’s fine. I’ll understand.”

Eric raises an eyebrow.

“Brian, I told you I didn’t want to back out. It’s fine. Our friends are in there. Although Malia was right when she called me a helicopter parent tonight. This is the first time neither of us have had her since we moved. It’s been a while since I went into over worried mother mode.”

“You were pretty clingy.”

“She was just in such a bad mood tonight before we left the apartment. What if she’s lonely? She doesn’t have any playmates here besides Tiana and they get along great but they are in different stages emotionally due to their age gap so there will be times when they don’t want to do the same things. On top of that, she is missing Cynthia already. Gus, JR, and everybody else will be going back soon and I know that it’s not like she had them on a regular basis in Chicago but that’s the only home she remembers so she was comfortable there but now she’s in a new place-”

Brian turns Eric to face him and puts his hands on his shoulders.

“Eric, she’ll be fine. She’s a tough kid. Overly dramatic and way too friendly for her own good but she gets that from you and you turned out fine. Emmett and Drew are getting Duncan soon and he’s the same age as her. The four of us will probably be foisting our kids onto each other so they can play together. It will all be ridiculously domestic. But she should be with us tonight. Let’s just go back to Malia’s, stay there, and-”

“Brian, it’s fine. Gus is here, remember? He’s leaving the day after tomorrow so let’s spend time with him and you can pal around with Michael.”

Brian notices that Eric doesn’t bring up Justin. Eric already made a point in telling him to play nice with him and Nathan and if that hadn’t convinced him enough, talking to Justin on the phone and finding out about how much of a dick he really had been to Nathan on Christmas had.
“Alright. Let’s go inside.”

Brian and Eric cross the street and make their way to the entrance. They go in and there is a nice turnout. The gallery looks nice and Brian is impressed by the size of it. Justin has done well. All he knows about the event is that there are five up and coming artists being featured plus a couple of Justin’s paintings. They have a bar set up, a small stage and mood lights installed, and servers with hors d'oeuvres and champagne.

“Everyone else should be here. Let’s look around,” Eric suggests as he takes Brian’s hand and they walk into the next room.

They initially start to look for their friends and family but get distracted by the paintings in this room. They are vibrant, intense, and emotional. He knows it isn’t Justin’s work but this artist is good and Brian is already walking over to put a silent bid on a piece that he has his eye on.

“She’s good, isn’t she?” Lindsay says as she comes up beside him.

Brian turns his head and sees her standing there. He nods and turns back to the bidder so he can write the name of the piece, the artist’s name, and $20,000 on the bid line. He knows it’s high but the gallery will get ten percent, a charity of the artist’s choice (which was a food and clothing pantry in Brownsville) will get twenty, and whoever this woman is deserves the rest so she can have some money available to her for any future pieces.

“I know she’s new but I’m surprised that I’ve never heard of her,” Brian says as he walks with her.

“This is the first time her work has officially been displayed. Justin told me he found her painting in the park and that she did it to help support her grandmother and her siblings. She’s twelve years old.”

“You’re lying.”

“I was shocked too. She’s incredibly talented, especially for her age. I really think this might help her situation more.”
Brian nods and makes a note to bid on something else of hers if there isn’t anything else that catches his eye.

“Where’s Gus?”

“He’s with Nathan,” she tells him and when he gives her a baffled expression she elaborates, “He volunteered to help him and his band set up for their set.”

Brian huffs, then looks away.

“I just talked to Nathan. He’s really nice, Brian. He is young and a bit aloof, but he has a good heart. He sort of reminds me of you a little.”

Brian ignores that statement and says, “I’m going to go find Eric. I’ll see you in a bit, Linds.”

Brian walks around trying to find Eric. He doesn’t find him but he does find Gus. Gus is on the left side of the platform carrying a microphone stand and talking to Nathan. Knowing Gus, he is probably questioning him on everything from his guitar to what music he likes to his jacket to what his other hobbies are but Nathan doesn’t seem to be annoyed by him or anything. Gus looks over and sees Brian and waves in his direction. Nathan looks over and quickly looks away. Seems like Brian intimidated him more than he thought. He starts to feel good about that until he reminds himself of what Justin had told him and then feels guilty. He had prepared himself to apologize or at least strike up a more appropriate conversation with him but like hell he’s doing that in front of his son. It may set a good example but Brian was still a prideful man.

So he walks around some more and finds his partner on the second floor. Talking to Justin. Damn it.

Maybe it’s a good thing. He doesn’t think Justin would say something like, “Oh by the way, your soon-to-be husband has made a couple of late night phone calls to me. Don’t worry. He waited until you were in bed asleep to make them.” Justin wasn’t vindictive. Brian was more vindictive than Justin and Eric combined and he wouldn’t fuck up someone’s relationship like that.

Eric may apologize for Brian’s behavior but it was more likely that he would just say something along the lines of, “Hey, Justin! This is a great event and I really appreciate you inviting Brian and me. It means a lot. Both Brian and I have already put in bids for paintings. They’re all fantastic!” Brian knew that as much as Eric would want to smooth things over and make sure Justin wasn’t
uncomfortable, he would stand by Brian first.

There was one way to find out.

Brian walked over and flicked Eric’s ear, smiled at Eric’s amused expression, and turned his head to Justin.

“Everything looks great, Justin.”

Justin gave him one of his signature Sunshine Smiles but also looked hesitant to take the compliment.

“You really think so? Emmett has really helped a lot so the compliment should go to him. I’ve thrown several gallery showings but nothing with this many people and never with entertainment and on top of that it’s New Year’s-”

“Justin. You did good. How did you find the artists? Lindsay told me about Aisha Morrison but what about the others?”

“Well, it’s the first show for Edward Jones too. He’s actually in his sixties and has been a street painter for a long time. He is a teacher at a middle school in Queens. His work is really good but it is his technique that sold his work to tourists. He mainly uses spray paints and can do a whole detailed landscape in under ten minutes. It’s fascinating to watch. Liam Phillips is my age. He owns a restaurant on Bedford so my staff and I go there a lot for dinner and drinks. He’s become one of my closest friends. I noticed the work he had hanging around the restaurant and when I asked him who the artist was, he told me that he did the paintings himself. He was tight on money when he first opened so he decorated the place by putting up some of his own work. He mainly works with oil paints and watercolors. He’s had a couple of showings here before and his work sells pretty well. Valentina Amador is originally from Spain but moved here as a teenager. She’s a student at the New York Art Institute and she interned here last summer. Her specialty is sculpting. She works with glass frequently and has some amazing glass sculptures upstairs. She even has some woodwork. Some furniture, some decorative pieces. And Zeek Collins is the fifth artist. He’s in his late twenties and I met him at a small showing in Dumbo about six months back. He does a lot of mixed media work. His art is very textured and he uses anything from paint to fabric to polymer clay to digital designs, anything really, in order to make his work three dimensional. His section is upstairs with Valentina’s.”

That led into Eric diving into a discussion with Justin about his preferences when it came to his own art. Brian must have a thing for art geeks. Justin and Eric both had very different jobs, but
both of them were visionary genius and excelled in their careers early in their lives. They both built beautiful things with their hands and put their heart and soul into every project that they did. To be truthful, the two of them had a lot in common besides Brian and Brian isn’t surprised that they actually get along really well despite the circumstances. They all spoke for a while and Justin was very interested in the synagogue in Bensonhurst and told Eric that if he was interested or open to it, he knew a few younger artists interested in the architectural field who would love to come observe the process. And Eric, with his giving and overcaring heart, said he would love to be of help to any younger people interested in the field. Their discussion went on to the point where Brian started to feel a little left out. It wasn’t that Brian wasn’t artistic. He loved art, was knowledgeable in it, loved men who were artists, and was even a visionary himself. He needed to be one since he had to create a certain kind of art for his own career. But a national ad campaign for a tennis shoe was different than a painting or an intricately designed building so he couldn’t add much of his own experience to the conversation. But eventually, all conversations end. Eric ended up wanting to go upstairs to look at what they didn’t get to see yet and Justin needed to go and make the rounds before Nathan’s band played. So they parted and as Eric turned to go upstairs, Brian and Justin made eye contact and Brian forced himself to look away.

He followed his partner upstairs and immediately, Eric became enamored with Valentina’s work. She had built a beautiful bookshelf that Brian knew Eric was going to go and bid a ridiculous amount on just to make sure he was the one who would get it. Some of the work that Zeek Collins did was great as well. There was a very cool piece that they decided to bid on for Lily. The actual picture, while detailed and beautifully and realistically done, wasn’t unique. It was of a young girl sitting at a table and she was pouring water into a glass. But it was textured, layered, and fascinating to look at. Brian could tell that Collins used thin cuts of wood for the table and shaved glass for the pitcher and cup. The piece must have been battery operated because the clock on the wall in the picture was moving with the correct time and there was water moving from the pitcher into the glass. It was very unique.

After they went back downstairs and made their bids those two pieces, they went into the main room and found the rest of their family.

“Hey, boys!” Emmett called out as he waved.

“Hey, Emmett. You are finally standing still long enough for us to actually talk to you now,” Eric laughed as he gave Emmett a hug.

“Oh, it’s been busy. Justin doesn’t really have a kitchen here so I brought my food truck that I keep in the city in order for all of the hors d’oeuvres to stay at the right temperature. So I’ve been in and out and bossing my servers around. But it’s been a great night. I didn’t even have to get anyone other than the piano player for entertainment. Justin has Nathan’s band playing. It will be a wonderful contrast from what you usually hear at events like this since they are a rock band rather than some girl with an acoustic guitar quietly singing on stage.”
“Do you know if they are any good?” Brian asked him.

“Actually, they are very good. Drew and I went to go see them once at a festival that Justin invited us to last year. I know dubstep and club music is in but I’m surprised they aren’t that well known yet. Nathan has a fantastic voice and he’s a great guitar and piano player.”

Brian expected as much. Even though Nathan was Justin’s boyfriend, he didn’t see Justin giving him the gig just because of that.

Brian found out for himself at 10 pm when Justin came up on stage and introduced The Accidental Natives. Nathan and his band came up and Justin gave Nathan a kiss before Nathan went to stand in front of the center mic. Nathan gave a little introduction for each of the band members and he was surprisingly charismatic and personable. When they started playing their first song, as much as Brian didn’t want to be, he was very impressed. Nathan was fucking good and the rest of the band was as well. His singing voice was clear and strong. The same could be said for the other singer, Petra, on the songs where she sang lead. Nathan also had these great guitar solos. They did have a signature sound but their songs varied. A few of the songs were fast, loud, and catchy but there were also ones that were slower, softer, and hypnotic. They were the kind of songs that make you want to take E in order to really experience it. Brian ended up standing there for the whole set just to listen to them.

As they finished their last song and received a loud applause, Eric turned to Brian and said, “They’re really good, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, they are,” Brian says as he nods.

He keeps his eye on Nathan. He sees Justin come up to Nathan to tell him how great he was and he waits it out as Justin talks to the rest of the band and gives Nathan a ‘see you later’ kiss. Once Justin goes to talk to Michael and Nathan is unoccupied, Brian walks over to speak to him. He taps Nathan on the shoulder to get his attention. As soon as Nathan turns around and sees him, all of that charisma that he held on stage drains away.

“You want something?” Nathan asks a little harshly as he tries to maintain eye contact with Brian.

“Yeah, I do. I wanted to tell you what a great job you did. You’re a fantastic musician and performer. Justin made a good choice by having you play here.”
Nathan blinks like he didn’t expect that. He loses his scowl but his posture is still tense.

“Oh! Thank you. We’ve been playing together for almost four years now but have gotten more serious about it in the last two. I really do appreciate Justin asking us to play tonight but I sort of had a leg up with him.”

Brian ignores the sexual innuendo he could make but still interrupts him.

“Justin didn’t ask you to play because you’re his boyfriend. If you sucked, he would have made an excuse about needing another type of musician to set a different tone for the night. He asked you to play because he knows real talent when he sees it.”

Nathan looks like he is thinking about what Brian just said and it must bring some comfort to him because he posture relaxes and he gives Brian a hesitant smile.

“And I know real talent when I see it too. I’m doing an elaborate ad campaign for a Broadway rock musical and it needs a new band. The director casted some dumbass instrument wielding so-called band called-”

“Is it Strep Negative? I saw on the local news that they had gotten arrested for cocaine distribution and that they were supposed to be in a Broadway show this spring. I’ve met them a few times at different festivals and gigs. They are pretty good, but they’re fucking idiots.”

“They are. They’ve already cost me almost a quarter million. We’ve had to take down all of the flyers that have their names or faces on them. We had to postpone the bus performances which means the permits with the city that were approved for those days, at a pretty high price I might add, are now useless. The show is postponed for another month. If the right band isn’t found soon, the director will have to throw in the towel and I don’t get paid my percentage of the ticket sales.”

“That sucks, but what does it have to do with me?”

Brian raises an eyebrow. Does he seriously have to ask?

Nathan raises an eyebrow back. Apparently he does.
“Would you like to take my card so you and your band can come in next week to meet the director?” Brian enunciates so the fucker gets his point, “I think once he hears you, he will say yes immediately. I let that you all want to play your own music, but the sound of the music in the show is similar and you could catch onto it quickly. The show is going to be a hit. The director has had a lot of high profile shows on and off Broadway. But more importantly, I am advertising for it. Every campaign I take on succeeds and everyone that is a part of it succeeds as well.”

“How humble of you.”

“Being humble doesn’t get you anywhere. You wouldn’t become so charismatic and sure of yourself once you go on stage if that were the case. What I am telling you is the truth. The members of Strep Negative were supposed to form a musical collaboration with the star of the show, develop a cult following, have some of their original music appear on the Featured Artists page on iTunes and Spotify, get bigger and better gigs on the side, perform at the Tony and Grammy awards, and eventually start touring and doing bigger and better things as a band. It was supposed to be the beginning of their rise to fame story. But now it won’t be. And that’s a good thing because Strep Negative has nothing on The Accidental Natives. Now do you want to take my card before I take back my offer?”

Nathan stares at him and reaches out to take Brian’s business card.

“I’ll talk to Petra, Sebastian, and Nadia. I’m sure they’ll want to do it but I’ll figure out what times we can offer to meet. You aren’t fucking with me, right?”

“No, Nathan. I’m not fucking with you. Give me a call and we’ll all meet. Happy New Year.”

“Yeah, you too. And…thank you.”

Brian shrugs, smirks, and walks away. He’s glad now that Nathan’s band is as good as it is. It gave him the chance to extend the nice gesture out as a peace offering without having to apologize and it eases his mind with this particular campaign as well.

Brian walks across the room where Eric is standing with Michael, Ben, JR, and Gus.

“Isn’t it great? Only an hour left until the new year!” Michael exclaims like the dweeb that he is. Going by JR’s expression, she feels the same way Brian does.
“You’re in a cheerful mood,” Eric says to him with a smile.

“Things just seem to be going well for everyone. Hunter’s here with us for the holidays, my best friend is finally living out his dream by opening an office in New York, Emmett and Drew are adopting a little boy, and just a few minutes ago, Justin came up to me and said he would work on Rage with me again. Things are going great and I’m excited for what’s to come.”

“You’re working on Rage again?” Brian blurts out.

“Yeah! I didn’t want to mention it unless Justin said yes. I didn’t want to work on it without him. But we got an offer from Red Giant. They want to republish the existing books and want us to write a reboot for the series. It’s a good deal. We will maintain creative control of the comics but they will spread it to a larger market and manufacture merchandise. We’ll also be able to okay or deny any adaptation offers.”

Brian doesn’t know what to think about this at all. He glances at Eric from the corner of his eye and he seems happy for Michael but also a bit confused so Brian tries to clarify some things.

“So once again, Rage, Zephyr, and JT will be out and about, saving the world many fags at a time?”

“Isn’t it great?” Michael exclaims.

“So you said reboot. Where and when will the series take place?” Eric asks.

“Justin and I haven’t really talked about it. But I was thinking maybe a little into the future since the last issue ended with Rage and JT adopting their son—” that’s when Michael breaks off and sees the possible conflict.

“Or maybe it can take place in an alternate dimension. That actually might be a better idea. It’ll give the comic a new look but retain the characters and their personalities, yet give us the option of adding new heroes and villains.”

There’s an awkward silence for several seconds. Even the kids pick up on it. Gus is staring way too hard at one of Justin’s paintings and JR is looking down at her shoes. Even though Eric is probably happy for Michael to have an offer like this, he looks a bit uncomfortable with the idea
going by his blank expression. Brian doesn’t know what his face is doing but he clears his throat and puts an arm around Michael’s shoulders.

“Let me know if I can help with getting the word out. I’m sure the new issue will be great.”

Michael gives him a relieved smile and gives him a hug. He and JR go off to find Lindsay and Melanie and Gus stays with them. Brian looks at Eric and takes his hand. Eric looks at him with an expression that says, “Don’t worry, I’m cool with it.” And he might be. Brian hopes he is. Michael and Ben could use the extra money, especially since they have been talking about having a kid. They had JR and Hunter but they only had Hunter for a few years before he went off to college and then to LA and JR lived with Linds and Mel during the week. Five years ago, Brian would have been wary of Michael’s wish to be a full-time dad. Yeah, he loved Gus. He loved that kid so fucking much. If something happened to his mothers, he would raise him in a heartbeat. Despite how he used to be, he would have stepped up even when Gus was young if he had needed it. But he didn’t know how rewarding it would be to raise a kid until he had Lily. He wanted to pull his hair out sometimes but he would never regret that step into Stepfordville. He wanted Michael and Ben to be able to experience that as well. But they needed money to be able to do that. They weren’t poor. The comic store was doing surprisingly well for this day and age and Ben got paid okay. But kids were fucking expensive. Not just raising them but actually having one as well. They might not get approved easily for adoption due to Ben’s HIV status. It was unfair and it sucked, but when it came to babies, the birth parents and agencies were picky. Getting a surrogate and a donor were costly. Lindsay and Melanie weren’t exactly at the prime age to do either anymore. He had been happy for Emmett when he and Drew announced they were adopting a kid but he had been a little worried about Michael’s feelings. So fuck, if Rage would help Michael and Ben get a kid then he had to be okay with it, even if Michael decided to keep Rage and JT together.

He and Eric didn’t bring up the subject after Michael left. Emmett and Drew approached them and they started talking about Duncan. Emmett and Drew went to see him earlier in the day and showed them a few pictures on their phones. When Eric brought up having regular play dates for Duncan and Lily, Emmett pulled a Lily by squealing out his excitement. Brian briefly thought he would take his Lily impression even further by twirling out his happiness but Drew had put a hand on his shoulder to subtly calm him down so they didn’t get to see that.

“Only half an hour,” Eric whispers in his ear as Emmett and Drew walk away.

“So sentimental. Just like Michael.”

“Says the man who hid mistletoe in the couch.”

“I did that for some action.”
“Like you need anything to get me to kiss you.”

Eric kisses him and Brian gives him a sweet smile. After a few minutes pass, Brian looks around and sees that someone is missing.

“Where’s Gus?”

Eric looks around as well but doesn’t spot him.

“I don’t know. Maybe he went to go look around.”

“Or went to go look at anything other than his dad sucking face.”

“It could have been that too,” Eric laughs.

“I don’t see him with the others so I’m going to go look for him. I want to ring in the New Year with Gus at our side.”

“Who’s the sentimental one now?”

Brian smirks at his partner and goes up the stairs to see If Gus is on one of the other floors. He doesn’t see him on the second so he checks the third, which is pretty much empty at this point of the night. He goes into the third floor bathroom to check to see if Gus is in there but he finds Justin instead. So Brian damns the skip a urinal rule like he always does and unzips his pants next to Justin.

“Uh…hey, Brian.”

“Hey. So do you always climb two flights of stairs to take a piss when you’re here?”

Justin huffs out a laugh as he zips up his pants and flushes the urinal.
“No. I came up here for some peace and quiet. My head was starting to hurt from all of the people and the stress. I just happened to have a full bladder at the time. Doesn’t explain why you’re up here when everyone else is downstairs.”

Brian zips up as well, flushes, and goes over to the sink to wash his hands.

“I was looking for Gus. He was with Eric and me but wandered off. I was hoping to find him before midnight.”

“I saw him on the second floor on my way up here. You may have missed him after he went back down or something.”

“Hmmm. I probably should head back down and see if I can find him then.”

“Yeah. See you down there.”

Brian turns to leave the restroom but stops when he hears his name.

“Brian?”

Brian turns around and walks back over to Justin.

“Yeah?”

“I just…I wanted to thank you for making that offer to Nathan. He may not have appeared overly excited about it in front of you but that’s because you’re…well, you. But he is excited. He and the rest of his band are so happy about the chance you gave them. I’m pretty sure Petra wants to kiss you because of it. So thank you.”

Brian hides a smile and shrugs.
“He’s fucking good. It’s hard for me to admit it, but the kid is talented. Does he write most of the music?”

“He and Petra switch off. Nadia and Sebastian have written a couple of songs but she and Nathan are sort of the creative geniuses behind the band. They do have a small following but if they get this, it will really be a boost for their careers.”

“It’s not that big of a deal, Justin. The play needs a band so I won’t lose any more money. They happened to catch my eye and it’ll help me out if they get it.”

Justin stares at him for a few seconds, then puts his hands on his arms.

“You think you have everyone fooled. We have avoided each other for a long time, but I still know you better than most people. You’re a good man, Brian Kinney. Whether you want people to know it or not.”

Brian swallows the small lump that forms in his throat and leans in before he can stop himself. Their faces are a few inches apart and Brian can see Justin’s eyes dilate and feels the air from Justin’s breaths. He can’t fucking help it. Even though all this time has passed, being this close to Justin still turns him on. It makes his head get foggy and his heart beat quickly. But he’s not fucking stupid.

So he fights through the fog and he kisses Justin on the cheek instead. He lets his cheek rest against his for a few seconds and Justin must not mind because he doesn’t move an inch. As Brian revels in the feeling of just touching Justin, he feels the gnawing guilt hit his stomach yet again because the man who he loves and made a life with is downstairs waiting for him.

So Brian whispers, “Happy New Year, Justin” into Justin’s ear then backs away from his ex-lover. He sees Justin give him a sad but accepting smile before Brian turns around and heads downstairs.

The clock strikes twelve and 2015 hits. Brian is surrounded by his friends and family and he is really and truly happy. He gives his fiancé a long and loving kiss. He knows this will be a great year for him. He’s getting married to the father of their incredible little girl and he has finally made it in New York. After they break the kiss, Brian presses his forehead against Eric’s then wraps his arms around his lover and they just hold each other. As Brian looks over Eric’s shoulder and sees Justin hugging Nathan, he feels happy for him. And as Justin’s eyes meet his and they stare at each other across the room, he pushes down the longing and tries to give Justin a smile.
Chapter End Notes

This can be seen as the end of Act I. There will be a small time jump after this chapter. The next chapter will be from Justin's point of view.

Thank you for reading! Please read and review so I know what you think! :)

Justin sees his father for the first time in years and even he knows there is something terribly wrong.

I'm sorry for the delay on this chapter and I do apologize that it is significantly shorter.

February 13, 2015 - 9:15 am.

Justin isn’t nervous. Just because he let three Manhattan bound trains pass him before he forced himself to get on one doesn’t mean he is nervous. He’s just putting off something that he doesn’t want to do. Although, he could have just had Molly relay a message along the lines of, “I changed my mind. Go fuck yourself and leave me alone” to his father so it’s possible a small part of him is curious about how he’s doing. He has been worrying about the man so he can’t deny that.

His father had called him a few weeks ago. The call went much more smoothly than the one on Christmas. It might have been due to Justin recognizing the number thus not being caught off guard or it could have been due to the fact that his father was sober this time. Either way, despite the conversation not ending with both of them crying like the last time, it was still a stiff and odd conversation. He had hesitated in picking up his phone when he looked at the Caller ID but Nathan had been out with Petra and he wouldn’t be there to help him pack up his stuff until the next day. Justin wasn’t doing anything too important so he had picked up the phone and braced himself for what had come next.

January 20, 2015 - 7:15 pm.

“Hello?”
“...Hey, Justin.”

Justin doesn’t know exactly what to say. He no longer knew how to talk to this man. He hadn’t known how to start up a conversation with him after he came out but it’s been years since he had even spoken a word to him besides the one drunken phone call. In most ways, this man was a stranger to him now. He hasn’t realized how long he has kept his silence until his father speaks again.

“I’m sorry about calling you on Christmas, son. Especially in the state I was in. I shouldn’t have done that.”

He sure as fuck doesn’t know how to respond to his dad’s apology. It sounded sincere. Justin is pretty sure that his dad is actually being genuine. Maybe that is why he can’t figure out what to say. His father had never been one to apologize. Not for as long as he can remember anyway. He had always been a prideful man and hated to admit when he was in the wrong. The only time he would hear the words “I’m sorry” come out of his dad’s mouth was when he would tell a family friend that he was sorry for their loss at a funeral. He never seemed to regret anything. If Brian had been straight and never had the opportunity to fuck his teenage son, Justin could see Craig Taylor and Brian Kinney getting along pretty well.

“Justin, you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“I just...I needed to tell you that. I hope you’re doing well.”

“I’m fine. How are you?”

His dad seems surprised that he would even ask. He didn’t mean to ask him that. Whether the question had just come out of his mouth out of habit or it’s possible that deep down he really wants to know the answer to it, he isn’t sure.

“Oh! I’m fine, just fine. I just got home from the store.”

“Is Taylor Electronics still all about conservative family values and fag hating?”
He winces as soon as the words come out of his mouth but the wince quickly turns into a scowl. He knows he probably shouldn’t be such an asshole to his father when he worked up the nerve to apologize. But tough shit. He doesn’t want to let the conversation progress any further if his dad still holds the same opinions as he once did, even if he seems to be finally changing his mind on his son.

“No! That was-I was fucking awf-I’m sorr-,” his father tries to spit out as his breathing quickens. Seriously, what the hell? Is this what Molly had been telling him about? How their manly and stern father has become some shaky and panicky pod person?

“Fine, I get it. Calm down.”

His father breathes in and out a few times and seems to settle down.

“I’m fine, Justin. Sorry about that. Sometimes I get...That question just...I don’t hold those views anymore. I stopped giving money to anti-gay campaigns several years ago and started making donations to the Human Rights Campaign a year and a half ago. I am not quite to the point where I am a staunch and vocal activist for the rights of the LGBTQ movement, but I have made my change in opinion known to people of importance in Pittsburgh.”

“...What.”

His father lets out a sigh.

“I know it doesn’t change anything. I just...wanted you to know.”

Neither of them speak for a minute. Justin needs to sort through what his dad is trying to tell him and he’s guessing his father is sorting himself out in some way as well. Fuck if he knows.

“What do you want, Dad?”

“...I want to talk to you again. Try to make up for what I did. I want to see you again and maybe earn a little bit of respect back,” his father says earnestly, pain lacing his words.
Well, fuck.

"Fuck. I can’t deal with this shit. You had me fucking arrested a decade ago and all of the sudden you want to be my father again?"

“I am so sorry that I did that. It was a horrible thing to do and I will regret it until the day I die. I am not going to force anything on you. I’ll let you off the phone, okay? If you change your mind, you can call me. If you don’t, I’ll understand. I really am sorry.”

“Wait.”

He hears his father breathing on the line, anticipating his answer.

“I can’t promise anything. I’ll give you a chance but if you fuck it up, it’s over. Even if you don’t fuck it up but I realize that it is impossible to get over how you treated me then I am free to cut all ties without any more of an explanation than telling you that I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Do you understand?”

He can hear his father hesitate but then gets his answer.

"Yes, Justin. I understand."

"Good. So when are you going to be able to make it up to New York?"

February 13, 2015 - 10:25 am.

It had been a strange phone call, but his father had been thrilled that he made the gesture of inviting him up. He had started thanking Justin profusely and stuttering over his words. That had just worried him more. He told Justin that he could make it up in the middle of February for a few days and had called Justin back a few days later to let him know the dates and where he made
reservations to stay.

He is across the street from Jeffrey’s. His choice on where they were meeting, not his dad’s. Despite his alleged change in views, Justin is pretty sure that his father wouldn’t have chosen a restaurant on the gayest block in the gayest neighborhood. But he thought choosing a restaurant so close to Stonewall was a subtle type of justice.

Nathan had offered to come with him. He almost let him but then he remembered that Nathan had rehearsal today. They only started this past Monday but Nathan and the rest of the band seemed to be really enjoying the process so far. But this rehearsal would be different. This was the first rehearsal that Brian would be coming to watch so he could talk to them about upcoming publicity stunts and interviews. Nathan shouldn’t have to deal with Justin’s father the same day he had to start working alongside his ex. Even though they had seen Brian and Eric since New Year’s and things were better, Nathan and Brian weren’t the best of friends. So he would do this alone. If he could manage to make it across the street, that is.

He keeps staring at the place and can see pretty clearly through the windows. He pauses when he sees his father. For a second, he isn’t sure if it’s him or not. Even from across the street he can see how thin he has gotten. He looks as though he may have more gray in his hair too but he can’t be sure from out here. He can see his father just looking down at the table by himself while other people talk to the people they are dining with around him. He glances out the window every so often but he doesn’t think his father has spotted him yet. Justin starts to feel bad for being 25 minutes late. He should have sucked it up and not wasted time by purposely missing the train. Even though he knows the ball is in his court and his dad should be grateful that he’s willing to take this step, he still should have met him on time.

So he makes himself cross the street and go through the entrance of Jeffrey’s. He walks over to his father’s table where the man is still looking down at his laced fingers.

“Dad,” he says quietly to inform him of his presence.

His father looks up and seems surprised to see him. At least it seems that way at first. But his father keeps staring at him and doesn’t say anything. It’s like he’s caught up in some moment in his head or he’s in shock. It’s weird.

“Sorry I’m late.” Justin says, trying to get him to snap out of it.

His father shakes himself out of his thoughts, gets up from his seat, and says, “It’s really good to see you.”
He looks like he wants to bring him into a hug. It’s just not going to happen. Justin isn’t going to be okay with hugging his father anytime soon so he ignores the slightly open arms and sits down in the chair across from his father’s.

“You order yet?” Justin asks him as he opens his menu.

“No. I was waiting for you,” his father says as he sits back down.

“You didn’t have to.”

“It’s fine, Justin.”

Justin picks out what he wants from the brunch menu and they both order when the waitress comes by. As they wait for their meals, Justin tries to make small talk, he really does. But his father keeps fucking staring at him and it’s a little unnerving. He tries to keep reminding himself that there is something off with the man and that he needs to be just a little patient.

“I saw some of your paintings online. You’re...You’re really talented.”

Justin shrugs in response.

“I really mean it. I bought one. It’s in my living room.”

Justin doesn’t mean to drop his mouth in shock, but it happens anyway.

“You bought one of my paintings? Why?”

He comes off more suspicious than he means to.

“I just wanted one, okay? I asked the gallery owner to keep my information private.”
“So which one was it?”

“What gallery?”

“What painting.”

“Soil to the Sky.”

Huh. That one had sold at a pretty high price too.

“I was wrong by wanting you to major in business. You are doing very well and I’m proud-”

“Stop. Don’t say shit you don’t mean.”

“I-I do m-mean it!” His father stutters in distress.

Justin takes a minute to really look at his father. He watches the man trying to collect himself. The more he studies him, the more he realizes that something is terribly wrong. There are too many frown lines on his face and his eyes look dull but it's his dad's behavior that's off. Even though the conversation hit a little bit of a rough patch, it was relatively minor. Nothing that should arise more than annoyance in him But here he is, breathing unevenly, tapping his silverware against the table, slightly rocking in his seat, and making these occasional humming noises. Justin was willing to overlook the out of character apologies and even the meekness the man was exhibiting, but he can’t overlook whatever is going on here.

“What’s the matter with you?”

Justin’s father looks up and, if anything, his breathing gets even more uneven.

“Nothing. I’m f-fine, just-”
“Bullshit. You’re acting weird. And not just by saying you’re sorry and being okay with gay people now. You’re acting erratic. What is it, drugs?”

“W-What? No, Justin. I’m not on drugs,” his father denies. Justin is inclined to believe him. He may have stumbled over a word but that doesn’t mean he’s lying. He’s been stumbling over them pretty frequently.

“Are you sick? You’re pretty skinny. Is this a side effect from a medication or do you have a neurological disorder? Is it Parkinson’s?”

His father looks pretty insulted by that.

“No, Justin. I don’t have Parkinson’s and I don’t have any other diseases.”

Justin studies his father a little bit more and his father uncomfortably looks away due to the scrutiny.

“Molly told me that you’ve been drinking more. Are you going through withdrawal or something?”

“No. M-my drinking isn’t the problem. It isn’t making me like this at least. I could cut down, I’m not saying I couldn’t. But I don’t drink to get drunk most of the time and I don’t even drink every day. I know I need to quit drinking when I’m u-upset but it usually calms me down. I usually just have one or two beers but once in a while I drink more. Sometimes that makes things worse like on Christmas but that’s not it.”

Justin waits for an explanation but his father doesn’t provide him with an answer. He shouldn’t push him for one. It isn’t his business. But Justin has always hated being left in the dark so he asks anyway.

“Then what the hell is going on with you?”

His father stays silent and looks down at the table. Whatever. It’s his dad’s business. That doesn’t mean that Justin has to witness whatever he’s going through.
“You know what? I’m done. I’m going to go-”

“No, stop! Please don’t leave,” His father cries out.

Justin pauses at the desperation in his father’s voice and sits back down to look at him. He stares at the man who gave him piggyback rides, read him bedtime stories, taught him how to ride a bike, taught him how to drive, beat the shit out of the man he loved, told him to never come back home, had him handcuffed in front of the store he and Daphne used to spend their afternoons at after school while he told them not to get too rowdy. He would sometimes take them out for ice cream before he took them home even though his mom would get pissed that he gave Justin dessert before dinner.

He looks at this man and wants to know what the point of all this is. He feels fury and sadness and longing and-

All of those emotions come to a halt when he sees the first teardrop fall on the table.

His father’s head hangs low and his shoulders shake with suppressed sobs. He looks so small and so fucking sad and Justin has no idea what to do. Crying isn’t something his dad would ever do in front of him in the privacy of their home, let alone in a crowded restaurant. He heard him cry on the phone but that conversation had been short and it is so much more shocking to witness in person.

“Dad?”

It’s possible that his father doesn’t hear him but Justin thinks that he does because his shoulders start shaking even harder as puts a fist to his mouth to stop from crying out.

“Dad, please. What is going on with you?”

But his father starts to quietly keen, rock in his seat again, and say, “I don’t know I don’t know I don’t know.”

Justin looks around to see if anyone is witnessing what he is witnessing. Several people at nearby tables have their eyes on his dad. They look concerned, which is shocking for New York. He doesn’t want their pity and he knows his father wouldn’t want it either so he gives them the
bitchiest look that he can muster to get them to mind their own fucking business. They take the hint.

“Dad, come on. Tell me-” he starts to say but is interrupted by the waitress.

“Sorry your orders took so...should I come back?” she asks as she inches away from their table.

“Just bring it back later! I don’t care if it’s cold!” he snaps at her. He’ll apologize by giving her a big tip before they leave but right now he can’t worry about his tone.

She quickly leaves with their plates and they have a tiny bit more privacy again.

“Talk to me. You are scaring me.”

That doesn’t get his dad to stop crying but it does get him to talk through the tears.

“I’m so lonely, Justin. I don’t go out, even to the movies. I’ll buy groceries once in a while if I feel like I can go outside. I don’t talk to people at work. I force myself to go there most of the time but I lock myself up in my office. I jump at certain sounds. Like when someone rings my doorbell to sell me something. I have panic attacks. I can’t sleep yet some days I don’t even attempt to get out of bed. I was st-staring to get a little like this when Madison was still with me but she got sick of it. I don’t blame her. She was a lot younger and didn’t need to put up with me. But now I’m completely alone. I feel so g-guilty about what I did to you. It started out when the guilt started building up more and more. What I did dr-drove my family away and I know I deserve that. Jennifer can’t look at me. Molly has hated me since she was old enough to understand what I did to you. She only answers a few of my calls a year and lets me come s-see her even less. I only get that much because she feels like she’s obligat-”

His father breaks off as the quiet sobs hit him again. Justin watches him cover his face with one hand and just cry. And, as much as he doesn’t want it to happen, Justin feels hot tears pour down his own face. Justin reaches over to the dispenser to pull a napkin out and lightly rubs him on his arm. He doesn’t react so Justin puts the napkin in his hand himself. The action just makes his dad cry harder, crumple the napkin in his hand, and hold it against his face so that he can muffle himself in an attempt to keep any dignity he has left.

“I don’t want you to see me like this. I don’t want anyone to. I’m so sorry that I’m so f-fucking embarrassing,” his dad sobs out.
“Shhh, you’re not. You’re not embarrassing.” he tries to assure him.

“You shouldn’t comfort me. You have to hate me so much. I hate myself so much.”

“Don’t…don’t talk like that. I don’t hate you. I never hated you even when I wanted to,” Justin tells him honestly.

That doesn’t help resolve his dad’s tears one bit. So Justin does something he didn’t expect himself to be doing at all: He reaches out to hold his dad’s hand.

His dad squeezes his hand so hard that he’s surprised that the circulation in his fingers hasn’t been cut off yet. The action started out making his father even more emotional but Justin strokes the man’s hand with his thumb and he calms down gradually. Justin waits in silence and it gives him a chance to will his own tears away as well.

“I really have been trying, Justin. I’ve been donating to the GLC and to the Gay & Lesbian Youth Center. I made sure that the campaigns I used to support knew that they lost my vote and I wouldn’t be donating to them anymore. I have been tr-trying to educate myself on the subject.”

“Gay & Lesbian Youth Center? You know Brian founded that place, right?”

“Yeah. It got a lot of press back when it was opening so that fact was hard to miss. I donate anonymously on the website. I don’t think I will ever be a fan of Brian but I’ve heard good things about the center.”

Justin doesn’t know how to respond in regards to Brian being brought into the conversation so he just says, “Hmm.” In response.

“So I’m here until Tuesday. I understand if you have plans-”

“I do have plans.”
“Oh.”

“It’s Valentine’s Day tomorrow. Nathan would be bummed if we didn’t go out.”

“I forgot that it was tomorrow. Is Nathan your boyfriend?”

Justin feels like that’s pretty obvious if he’ talking about taking him out on Valentine’s day but he answers regardless.

“Yeah, he’s my boyfriend. He’s very nice.”

“Good. That’s good. I’m sorry for all this, Justin. Don’t…Don’t worry about me. I’m just going through a slump.”

“You had a breakdown in a crowded restaurant. I’m not trying to embarrass you but that indicates something more serious than some slump. You need to start seeing a psychiatrist. I don’t know if this is a severe case of depression, some sort of mental breakdown, or another mental illness but what you told me is really serious. You have to know that.”

He expects his father to fight him on it, but surprisingly he nods. Then he looks out the window, zones out, and Justin has a hard time keeping his attention after that.

“Listen, I’m going to go pay for the food and give her a tip. I know we didn’t eat but she did try to give it to us. I doubt you want to sit here after what happened.”

“I guess I can walk around. It’s been a while since I’ve been in the city. Thank you for meeting with me.”

Justin lets out a sigh. He had been hoping to keep brunch quick and cordial, then be on his way. That plan went out the window twenty minutes ago.

“I’m not going to ditch you. We’ll walk around for a while and grab lunch. Your treat. The West Village is gorgeous and I think you’ll enjoy walking around. Maybe we’ll catch a movie somewhere since you said you haven’t been to one in a while. Sound okay?”
His dad turns his head away to look at him and he nods again.

“Okay, Justin. That sounds good. Thank you.”

Justin nods back then stands up to pay for the meals that he sent away and slips the waitress a twenty. When he comes back, he sees his father slipping his coat back on and getting ready to leave. He didn’t realize an action so simple could relieve him so much. As they head outside and Justin starts pointing out different historically significant places and his favorite stores, he wonders what he has just gotten himself into.

Chapter End Notes

Please read and review! Also, for those who are interested, I have made an album that gives backgrounds and faces to the original characters to this fic + Gus, JR, and Molly. Here's the link if you want to have a look. You know some the information but it has helped me keep people straight in my head.

https://plus.google.com/u/0/photos/112663227400364087424/albums/6117661535243982785
Chapter Summary

Nathan really does think today is a step forward in his career and in his relationship with Justin.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, but I do hope you like this chapter! I really enjoyed writing from Nathan's POV and ended up feeling a lot closer to him while writing this. I hope you do too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“He is so hot.”

Nathan forces himself not to bitch about Petra’s constant gushing. He’s been close friends with her since he returned to New York City when he was eighteen years old. He was barely making ends meet and lived with four other people in some shit hole in the Bronx. He had worked at a hole in the wall restaurant six days a week. It hadn’t been the ideal job but his boss had been a pretty decent guy and would even let him out early on sunny days if he was in a good mood. Whenever he wasn’t working or sleeping, he played the same guitar his mother bought him for Christmas at different parks throughout the boroughs. He couldn’t afford much else and had been saving money up for a higher quality model. He kept his case open for the extra cash and it helped him get by.

That is, until Petra started performing.

At least twice a week, they would end up playing in the same place at the same time and it had totally fucked up his finances for a while because, if she staked out the more populated area, she would be the one getting the tips. One of them ended up getting screwed over depending on where they sat and they ended up wasting time if they decided to leave and find another place to perform. It didn’t help that they had similar sounds. It was such an unlikely scenario since they were in New York so it really pissed Nathan off at the time.

It wasn’t until one strangely deserted Tuesday morning in Battery Park that they actually hit it off.

Nathan remembers strumming along quietly and humming out a tune on the spot. He had needed to
fill his time in some way since no one was passing by but somehow he became so lost in the tune that he didn’t even notice Petra sit down with her own guitar. He only noticed her when she started singing and strumming along. They had sounded so good together that Nathan didn’t even stop playing. The duet routine ended up working. They almost tripled their cash later that day, split the money between them, and played together ever since. They got a few gigs and some studio time, which had been nice. They decided to form a full-fledged band and recruited Sebastian and Nadia over three years ago. Despite how impatient Nathan felt when it came to getting a decent record deal offer and wanting more recognition, they hadn’t done that badly for their ages. They got good gigs regularly and made okay money. However, they had been stagnant in their progress within the last year. It had been frustrating and disheartening. They all still felt passionate about music, but it was hard to keep going when they weren’t gaining more recognition and not moving up.

So Nathan was thrilled that something was finally going their way. He felt honored and proud of the band and he couldn’t wait to see what this opportunity brought them.

He just wished it had been presented to them by someone other than Brian Kinney.

“God, the things that I could do to him!” Petra groans as she tosses her head back. Nathan is so fucking grateful that Brian is out of earshot. Brian getting an ego boost is the last thing he wants right now.

“He’s old,” Nathan points out. And he’s not wrong. Brian is twenty years older than him and eighteen years older than Petra. He’s almost ancient.

“He’s not old,” Petra corrects as thinks of a more suitable label, “He’s…distinguished.”

“I think I can see a gray hair from here,” Nathan exaggerates as he squints.

“You can not,” Petra laughs as she lightly slaps his arm, “And even if you could, I would still fuck him.”

“Petra, I’ve told you this before: Brian’s gay.”

“I can turn on the charm so well though. Maybe that charm is just strong enough to seduce him,” Petra jokes. At least Nathan thinks that she’s joking. Knowing her, she might not be.
“He’s engaged.”

“But not married.”

“He has two kids.”

“Two? God, Nathan. Why did you have to ruin my fantasy?” Petra pouts as she gets up from her seat in the theater.

“It was fleeting and doomed to fail. Someone had to bring you back to Earth.”

Petra sighs, “I suppose you’re right. God, Justin’s lucky. He got to fuck both of you.”

“Seriously Petra, shut up,” Nathan grits out.

Petra rolls her eyes and hops onto stage to tune her bass. He takes a few seconds then follows her up and makes sure everything is in order with the instruments. Everything has to be perfect. If they have to play all of the songs in the show only after a week of rehearsal just so Brian Kinney can nitpick and decide which songs will be the most effective for promotional appearances, then he is going to make sure that the man has barely anything to complain about.

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Fuck, how can one man be so intimidating?

Brian has been scrutinizing all of them throughout the show they were giving him. He supposed Rebecca had the most to be concerned about, considering she was the star of the show, but she was also pretty prevalent on Broadway so she was more confident and sure of herself when it came to scrutiny. Nathan managed to ignore him and get lost in the music while they were playing. But as soon as they finished the last song, his palms started sweating.

Brian wrote a few notes down, slipped the small notepad in his pocket, then approached the stage and lifted himself up onto it with ease. Slowly, he studied each of them.

“You’re all fucking good. You are aware of that. ‘Midnight Revolver’ needs more work, so you probably won’t be ready to play that in two weeks. Pity, since that’s the most powerful song.”
“Two weeks? I thought we didn’t have to worry about press junkets until the first of April!” Rebecca exclaims.

“You won’t be doing any interviews and the big stuff won’t come until then. But you will be performing as the band portrayed in this show much sooner than that. I have you booked at the Bowery Ballroom for a set on February 27, then a set on Saturday at the Mercury Lounge on February 28th. You’ll begin and end with a song from the show. In between will be a mix of The Accidental Natives and a few songs off of your EP, Rebecca. You just need to fill up 45 minutes. ‘Illuminate’ and ‘Radio’ will probably be the best ones to go with right now. As soon as ‘Midnight Revolver’ is up to par, I suggest you play that.”

“Isn’t this a bit much though? The show doesn’t even go into previews until May,” Rebecca points out.

“Oh, you’ll probably do fine without it. But this is about attracting the locals to your show. They seem to have an aversion to Times Square. This is an original way to reach out and connect with them in a place they go to relatively often. Word will spread and soon you’ll have people fighting at the stage door for tickets. I have you doing sets at different venues every Friday and Saturday until the end of March. I have you in hidden gems and I have you in highly regarded venues. You’ll be performing in every borough at least once, but half of your sets will be in Brooklyn. There’s a high percentage of young and artistically inclined snobs who hate anything that could possibly be considered mainstream. But if you come to them and they like you, you bet their asses that they’ll come to you and say, ‘I knew them before they were popular.’ That’s something they love to throw into people’s faces. Now here’s an itinerary.”

Brian hands them each a packet. Nathan takes his and starts glancing through it. Some of these places are venues he could only dream of performing in, due to them being so selective. He has no idea how Brian did it.

“Now as for the performances, both before during the promotional period and for the actual show, you all need to ooze sex. You are all young. You’re all hot. The majority of people will want something to look at, along with the lovely set design. Nadia, wear your hair in loose curls. Die a streak of it Ultramarine. Sebastian, use some hair gel and wear a tighter shirt. Rebecca, show more cleavage and use more eye shadow. Petra, wear a shirt that shows your stomach. And Nathan,” Brian says as he comes over to him, “You’re pretty toned. I can tell. Lose the shirt and wear the leather jacket. Unbuttoned and unzipped. I don’t give a shit how cold it is.”

Their director Jeff speaks up at that point.
“Brian, all those ideas are fine but I need to talk to the costume, hair, and makeup department about—“

“All those ideas are fine but I need to talk to the costume, hair, and makeup department about—“

“All about how they need to be even less modest when it comes to the actors in this production.”

Brian turns to the cast and stares them all down.

“If you were doing a show about jazz or folk or fucking swing music, I would tell you to class it up. But you are supposed to be fucking rock stars. Be sexy. Don’t give a shit about class. You need to be forward and raw and in your face with your audience. I am selling a product and that’s you and your show. So don’t be afraid to show off and use your appearance to your advantage. You are all talented but looks can only help when it comes to entertainment. Go through Midnight Revolver again. That’s the one you have to play when you do the double decker bus performance so it needs to be perfect.”

With that, Brian hops off the stage and sits in the second row. Nathan keeps eye contact with him through the whole song.

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Nathan gets his stuff together, gets his coat on, but then instantly starts worrying about Justin. He had been so busy that the fact that Justin’s dad was in town went into the back of his mind after they started rehearsal. It’s probably for the best that it had. He had been worried when Justin left this morning and, now that he had his phone back on, he could see that Justin didn’t return the text that he sent him right before he got to the theater.

He could wait until he gets back home but he’s worried. He knows how strongly Justin feels about whatever is going on with his relationship with his father so he decides to give in and call him before he gets on the train.

“You’ve reached Justin Taylor. Please leave your name and number and I’ll return your call.”

“Hey, babe. Just wanted to see how things were going. You didn’t return my text and it’s 6 pm now. Hope to see you when I get home. Love you.”

Nathan hangs up and ten minutes later he gets a text back.

**Sorry, just turning my phone back on.**
Saw you called. I was at a movie. 
Going to go out to dinner now. I don’t feel like cooking. I should be back at the apt by 8. Love you too.

Nathan reads the message and is more than curious than ever about what went on today. He expected Justin to be closed off after meeting with his dad, no matter how the meeting ended up going. He had prepared himself to come home to an emotionally distraught Justin or a monotone ‘I’m going to bed early’ Justin. He prepared himself to come home and not find Justin at all and he would have understood if Justin went to his studio to lose himself in one of his paintings. He didn’t expect Justin to go see a movie.

He could offer to go meet Justin but Justin hadn’t mentioned it in the text so Nathan doesn’t want to come off as pushy. He might need time to himself so Nathan would wait until he and Justin were both home and settled in. They really have gotten closer in the last couple of weeks since officially getting an apartment together so he feels that Justin will be more apt to open up.

Nathan walks out into the lobby and sees Eric and Lily waiting for Brian. Despite his stubborn resolve to not become best friends forever with Brian, he actually does like Eric. Eric might possibly be the nicest guy he’s ever met and has been nothing but sweet and welcoming to Nathan the few times he and Justin had gone out with them or when they all met up with Emmett, Drew, and Duncan. He wouldn’t mind becoming friends with him so Nathan walks over to say hi.

“Hey, Eric! You here to meet Brian?”

Eric turns around and spots him, “Hey! Yeah, I just relieved Lily’s after school nanny. So now we’re here to meet him for dinner. How did rehearsal go? Brian didn’t load you guys down with too many appearances, did he?”

“If Nathan wants to get famous, I’m doing him a favor,” Brian interrupts as he comes up close behind Eric.

Eric jumps at the sound of his voice, “Jesus Brian, you scared me.”

“Daddy!” Lily squeals as she rushes towards Brian and hugs his leg.

Brian grins down at the little girl, picks her up, gives Eric a kiss, and says, “I didn’t know you
were coming to meet me.”

“We thought we’d surprise you, it being Friday and all. Lily’s taking us out to eat. Her treat.”

“Papa, I don’t make money,” Lily reminds her father.

“Fine, Lily’s being stingy so it’s my treat.”

“Even though we’re going out tomorrow for that wretched holiday? And here I thought you were insistent on cooking at home more often.”

Nathan sees Eric shrug, “We’ll start next week, I swear. You know it’s your fault for moving us to one of the restaurant capitals of the world.”

“I’m not complaining.”

Eric turns to look at Nathan, “Nathan, are you hungry? You can come with us if you want.”

Nathan glances at Brian and can’t read how he feels on Eric’s offer. It doesn’t really matter anyway. As hungry as he is, he’s had his Brian Kinney fill for the day and, more importantly, he wants to check and see how things went with Justin and his father.

“Thanks for the offer but I told Justin I would be home soon. I think he might be making dinner,” Nathan fibs.

“Alright, well some other time then,” Eric says with a smile.

“Sounds good. See you all later,” Nathan waves.

“Bye Nathan!” Lily says just a little bit too loudly.
Nathan goes out the stage door and heads to the first train he’ll need to take to get home.

After Nathan gets off the L, he makes the short walk to their new apartment.

They didn’t move that far from Nathan’s old place. They did end up getting a two bedroom instead of a one bedroom. They bought a fold away wall for the the spare bedroom that had bookshelves attached and a bed that could be folded out if they had a guest. It was the best decision to get that rather than a regular double bed. Nathan kept his instruments in there and Justin had an easel and some supplies in there in case he didn’t feel like going to the gallery to work in his studio. They were planning to install a small work sink in there for Justin to use. It looked like the situation was really going to work out for them. The place had more space, the extra room served as a decent rec room whenever Nathan needed to practice or Justin wanted to work on his art. The only guest they might have for more than a night would probably be Molly so that’s the only time the room’s other purpose would need to come into effect.

It had only been two weeks, but he loved his new home. He loved living with Justin and coming home to him. He loved being able to make love to him whenever the lust arose and he loved that they could just be together as a couple. They talked things out better, they had become more affectionate. He finally felt comfortable and secure. All he wanted to do was come home to his boyfriend and see how he was doing.

Despite Nathan not knowing about how Justin was doing after meeting with his father yet, he found himself excited to see him. Fuck, he was more lovesick than ever.

Maybe Justin is excited to see him too, since he’s opening the door before Nathan can even stick his key in the lock.

“Hey,” Justin says as he walks right outside their door and closes it behind him.

“Hey,” Nathan answers back, a bit confused, “I thought you were going out to dinner and wouldn’t be back yet.”

“Dinner...it didn’t happen. Something came up so I’ll call for take-out,” Justin says as he waves a hand.

Justin takes his hand and leads him downstairs out their building’s door. They stand out on the stoop in the cold and Justin stays quiet as he seems to be lost in his thoughts.
Nathan can immediately tell something is off. He wants to ask what’s going on and battles with himself on whether or not he should bring up Craig Taylor. Before he can decide, Justin brings him down for a soft kiss. It’s filled with need, pain, and confusion. He stays there and returns the kiss for as long as Justin needs. Justin does end up reluctantly pulling away and brushes his forehead with his.

“What’s going on? You seem sad. Does it have something to do with your dad?” Nathan asks him as cups his cheeks.

Justin nods and lets out a sigh.

“He do something to you? Did he say something that upset you?” Nathan presses, worried about what happened between Justin and Craig.

“He didn’t do anything to me. He didn’t say anything upsetting, at least not when it came to me.”

“Then what happened?” Nathan asks, concerned.

Justin looks so fucking troubled and it’s making him so worried.

“Justin, come on. You can tell me,” Nathan gently coaxes him.

Justin breathes out and then he finally tells Nathan what happened.

“I was purposely late to meet him. I let a few trains pass and eventually forced myself to get on. I was almost a half hour late and he probably thought I ditched him. He was still at the restaurant when I met him though. But I know that the fact I was so late didn’t help his nerves. He didn’t say anything about it despite that and I sat down with him. He was trying really hard but it was hard for me to sit there and listen to him and I made some underhanded remarks. I noticed he was acting funny. He was shaking and rocking a little in his seat. His breathing was erratic and he was making quiet humming noises. Finally I asked him why he was acting like that and he tried to say he was fine. I grilled him about it. Asked if he was sick or if he was on drugs. I knew I was making him more distressed but I had to know what was going on.”
Justin takes a breath to calm himself.

“He just kept trying to change the subject and eventually I got up and told him I was leaving. He grabbed my wrist and begged for me not to go. I turned around and saw that he was crying. Fuck, Nathan, you don’t know him but the man’s not a cryer. I sat down and asked him what was wrong and he just cried and started saying that he didn’t know over and over. He was rocking back and forth and had his arms crossed. Finally he told me how he’s been feeling. All the stuff that he told me just doesn’t match up with the father who raised me. He’s so fucking lonely and depressed. He ended up sobbing and breaking down right there at the table. I could tell he was trying to keep himself from doing it but he couldn’t hold it in anymore. I won’t get into our conversation. It was between us. But he managed to pull himself together enough to tell me his change in opinion on gay people and eventually settled down. There’s something seriously wrong with him. Fuck, I went in there planning on making the brunch as quick as possible. We didn’t even eat there. I sent the waitress away when she came with the food because of the state he was in and paid her after my dad calmed down. But I couldn’t just leave him after that happened, even though he was expecting me to. I ended up walking around with him for the rest of the day. I took him over to a Halal cart and he got us lunch. We sat in the park for a while and then went to IFC to see a movie. They were showing Lambert & Stamp, that rock documentary, so we went to see that. He was way too quiet and subdued to be normal but at least he seemed relaxed enough.”

“After we got out of the movie I suggested we go get some dinner. I should have just taken him to somewhere in the area but I figured it would be nice for him to see more than just the village and I haven’t been to Atrium in a while. It’s close to the water so I thought he would enjoy seeing the skyline from Brooklyn. I took him to the train station so we could catch the A train and things were fine before we went down the stairs. But it was still rush hour, it’s a major station, and it was really crowded. I could tell something changed after he went through the turnstile but I wasn’t thinking. People were rushing past and the place was packed. All of the sudden he wasn’t beside me and I looked around and found him fucking terrified. He was gripping his hair and could barely stand. He ended up having a full-blown panic attack. Logically, I knew what it was but I never associated it with him. I haven’t had one in years and they weren’t even close to being as intense as the one he was having. The ones I’ve seen you have weren’t even as horrifying as the one I saw him have tonight.”

Justin takes a moment to catch his breath and calm himself down before he continues. Nathan rubs his arm in concern and waits for Justin to gather himself.

“There was a cop nearby. He was nice about it and could tell that my dad was having a meltdown and a panic attack. He asked me if he should go up on the street and call an ambulance but my dad was shaking his head and begging him not to so the cop just stood in front of us to keep people from coming too close. The panic attack hadn’t passed but I figured he needed to get out of there so I led him upstairs and eventually got a cab.”

Justin stifles a sob and Nathan puts his arms around his neck.
“Justin…”

“I couldn’t just have the cab drop him off at his hotel. I don’t think I could even leave my worst enemy in a state like that. He could barely walk right, the attack was so debilitating. I had to keep an arm wrapped around him because he was so unsteady. His attack was still going on while we were in the cab. I brought him here and he’s in the living room. It finally passed fifteen minutes after we got back. He’s embarrassed but he’s so fucking exhausted that he hasn’t even been able to try to brush off what happened. I know it’s probably weird for you that’s he’s here but I can’t send him back to his hotel tonight, not in the state he’s in. Maybe he’ll feel better tomorrow but he’s such a fucking wreck that I don’t feel good about leaving him by himself while he’s here. He’s not in his right mind and it’s scaring me-”

“Justin, don’t worry about making me uncomfortable. God, don’t worry about me at all right now. It’s fine. He can sleep in the spare room tonight or until whenever you feel okay with him going back to the hotel.”

“I’m fucking pathetic, huh? Talking about how much I resent him but wanting to take care of him almost as soon as I see him.”

“No, you’re not pathetic. You have a big heart, that’s all. It’s a good thing. He made a lot of big mistakes when you came out. It’s not going to be something you get over automatically, even if he is remorseful. But I know you. You aren’t going to let him suffer like this. I’m not going to be annoyed that he’s here, especially if he’s in the state you say he’s in. It’s okay. I want to help you and that means helping you help him.”

Nathan brushes a stray tear off of Justin’s face and kisses him. Justin lets out a quiet and desperate noise and clings on to him.

“Thank you,” Justin mumbles, “For wanting to be here for me.”

“We’re partners. Where else would I be?”

Neither of them have actually said the word “partner” before. To Nathan, it seemed reserved for couples who were practically married and living together. Justin seems a bit surprised that the term came out of Nathan’s mouth. But Nathan won’t take it back. They’re living with each other now and have been together for two years. They’re partners.
“I’m going to head up to the apartment. You can introduce me to your dad and we’ll all agree on a restaurant to order from.”

“Okay. How did rehearsal go?”

“It was fine. I’m not going to be around for Friday and Saturday nights starting in the next couple of weeks though. Brian has us performing in these really great venues to get the locals talking. Then we’ll really start promoting and I’ll be working even more.”

“Not to mention practically every day once the show starts,” Justin adds, a strange combination of bummed but proud.

“You’ll just have to come see me often then,” Nathan suggests as he kisses Justin’s cheek.

“You know I will.”

Together, they go back up the stairs to their second floor apartment. Nathan unlocks the door and Justin takes the lead by going inside first. Nathan follows him and sees the man who must be Justin’s father sitting on the couch. Justin was right. The man looks absolutely exhausted. His eyes are open, staring at nothing and look haunted and empty. It’s disconcerting to say the least.

“Dad?”

Craig turns his head to look at Justin and tries to give him a small smile but doesn’t quite manage.

“How are you feeling?”

“I-I…” But Craig doesn’t seem to know how to answer Justin’s question.

“Okay. I want to introduce you to someone,” Justing says placatingly.
“Alright.”

Justin clears his throat and turns to Nathan.

“This is Nathan. He’s my boyfriend. He lives here with me.”

To Nathan’s surprise, Craig slowly gets up. He’s shaky but manages to walk over to him.

“It’s...It’s nice to meet you Nathan. Justin says you’re a good guy,” Craig offers as he holds out his hand.

Nathan accepts the handshake and offers the man a welcoming smile.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Mr. Taylor. We were going to order some food. You have any preference on what you want?”

“Please, call me Craig. I’m not feeling so well. You boys go ahead and get what you want.”

“We’ll narrow it down to a few places and we’ll get you something in case you want it later. Eating a good meal might make you feel better.”

“I don’t know.”

Nathan gently takes Craig’s arm and leads him back to the couch.

“Here, let’s sit down.”

Craig looks at him oddly but hesitantly sits down and Nathan does the same. It’s hard to bring up a safe and neutral topic. He doesn’t know much about Craig. Justin tried not to talk about him much. This is also a man who could possibly be mentally ill and very depressed, not to mention racked with guilt over the stale relationship with his son. Even if Nathan brings up a topic seemingly non-confrontational, like Craig’s store, he could easily upset him if it brings back a negative memory.
“Are there any places in the city you want to see in the city that you haven’t yet? I know you just got here this morning but I figure you’ve been here before since Pittsburgh isn’t that far.”

Nathan knows he’s being more friendly than he would usually be, especially since he is talking to a man who hurt Justin so badly in the past. But he’s suffered panic attacks for over half his life. He knows how much the major ones can take out of you. To have one in public can be absolutely humiliating and mortifying. And the way Justin described the attack, it sounded intense and all-consuming.

“I’ve been here several times. I just wanted to see Justin,” Craig mumbles honestly while looking down at his feet.

“I know, but you have to fill up your time with him somehow. This one tends to drag you place to place, all day and all night. He exhausts Molly unless she insists on creating the itinerary. You might want to give him a few places so he is forced to limit his options a little,” Nathan tells him as he looks up and winks at Justin.

“He was always like that. Even as a little boy. Jennifer and I took him to Disney World for the first time when he was five and he had us all over the place. Woke us up at 6 am each morning, demanding that we get up so we could get started on the next park,” Craig chuckles, lost in the memory.

“It sounds like he hasn’t changed one bit.”

“I’m glad. He was always such a good boy.”

Nathan glances over at Justin and, as soon as he does, he wants to jump up and hold him. It’s hard to see Justin so choked up and not do anything about it. But he can also tell that Justin doesn’t want how he’s feeling to catch his father’s attention so Nathan gives him an out.

“Justin, why don’t you go to the bedroom and get on your laptop so you can look up a restaurant on Grubhub? I’m sure Craig isn’t a picky eater. Find him something that will still be good if he heats it up later,” he quietly tells his partner.

Justin sniffs and nods then quickly heads to the bedroom. Nathan turns to Craig and starts up the conversation again.
“You should ask him to take you to a few art museums. He can go to all of them over and over again and never get sick of them. I appreciated art before I met him but the passion he has just sucks you in. He knows so much about all of it and can sit there for hours just looking at one painting if you let him. When he talks about it, you can’t help but listen. He makes it sound so interesting and you find yourself wanting to hear what he knows and what his opinion is on a certain piece. He owns a gallery close by too so you should ask him to show you it. It’s a great place.”

Craig meet his eyes and nods.

“I want to get him to talk to me about things again. It’s been such a long time. Going to places he enjoys will be a good way to meet him halfway. Thank you, Nathan.”

Nathan feels himself becoming a bit bashful under Craig’s sincerity so he looks away and shrugs.

“What is it that you do?” Craig asks him, genuinely interested.

“I’m a musician. I have a band but also do music for television to pay the bills. Our band has a following but we hadn’t made progress for over a year so that had been disappointing. But we recently got cast in a rock musical on Broadway. I just came back from rehearsal.”

“That’s fantastic. It’ll help you get more recognition. I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you. That means a lot,” Nathan says to him, surprised at the praise.

There is a silence between them. Nathan looks down and can see that Craig’s hands are shaking. Despite being alert enough for a conversation, Nathan can tell he didn’t just perk up after he walked in. He’s obviously suffering the aftershocks of his attack and it’s taken a toll on him.

“Do you need anything? Water, ginger ale, crackers? My stomach bothers me sometimes after I have a really bad panic attack.”

Craig stutters, gets wide eyed, and blushes, “I-I’m fine. You shouldn’t have to go to any trouble.”
“It’s okay, Craig. I know how shitty they can be. Your head hurt? I can get you some Aleve.”

Craig hesitates but ends up nodding so Nathan walks to the bathroom and gets the Aleve out of the medicine cabinet then gets a glass to fill with water. He goes back to the living room and puts the glass on the coffee table, then puts the tablets in Craig’s hand.

“Here. It’ll make you feel a little better. It’s PM so it will help you sleep too.”

Craig shakes his head, “I can get some at CVS once I get to my hotel. I don’t want to get drowsy and overstay my welcome.”

Nathan raises an eyebrow.

“You really feel up to taking a trip back to Manhattan after what happened? When I have a panic attack, it sometimes wipes me out for the rest of the day. I had one when I was a teenager that lasted a few hours once. It was so bad that I thought I was going to die. It scared me. It eventually passed but I was exhausted. Justin and I think it’s best that you stay here, at least for tonight. We have a spare room. It has my instruments and some of Justin’s supplies in there but there’s a bed that folds out. You won’t be overcrowding us or anything.”

But Craig keeps shaking his head.

“I don’t think Justin will like it if I stay. He’s put up with me all day and I’m sure I embarrassed him so much with what happened in the station and at the restaurant. I’m sure he told you what all happened if you know about the panic attack. I don’t want to bug him by hanging around when he doesn’t really want me in New York in the first place. I’ll be okay. Maybe I can see Justin in a couple of days.”

“It was his idea that you stay here. He’s worried sick about you. He’ll be a lot more at ease if he can keep an eye on you.”

“I don’t-”

“Just give up and take the pills.”
Craig looks at him to try to find a catch but actually listens to what Nathan says and downs the Aleve with the water.

Nathan sits down next to him again and looks over toward the hallway. Still no sign of Justin. He must be really worked up. Or doing that thing where he browses Grubhub for over an hour before actually ordering something. It bugs the shit out of him when Justin does that. It’s already bad enough when he has to wait almost an hour for his food after putting in the order but then he has to add the time that comes with how indecisive Justin can be before he finally confirms their meals. Like, sometimes Nathan is really hungry and he just waits and waits for Justin to pick a place. It’s hard with 92 restaurants delivering to them but-

“Why do you have panic attacks?” Craig suddenly asks him.

It’s kind of an invasive question from someone he just met. He would tell him to fuck off if it weren’t for the fact that Craig is Justin’s father and had just suffered a major one himself.

“I know that’s probably not an appropriate question but...I don’t know. I’m not like this. I’ve never been like this until a little over a year ago. I feel like I’m going insane and I don’t know what’s happening to me,” Craig confides in him, very distressed.

Nathan lets out a sigh.

“I’m not going to give the details. Only Justin knows the full extent of what happened. But I had a horrible childhood and a horrible father.”

He knows the statement strikes a nerve within Craig since the man grimaces.

“It wasn’t like your situation with Justin. My father probably made you look like father of the century. My father was...sick. Fucked up. Souless. A monster.”

“I-I’m sorry. I apologize for bringing it up. You have a real reason for having them and I’m just a fucking mess.”

“That’s not true. Some people have them for no pinpointed reason at all. Obviously, you having
them on a regular basis is an indicator that something is terribly wrong. You might need to be on medication, get diagnosed with a couple of things, and talk to someone. But my reason isn’t more or less valid than yours. It’s just different.”

Before Craig can respond, they hear the bedroom door open from the hall. Nathan gets up to evaluate Justin and sees that his eyes are bloodshot and a little puffy.

“Where did you order from?” Nathan asks, trying to keep things normal.

“Sweet Chick,” Justin responds, his voice raspy.

“Comfort food. It’ll be good for us,” Nathan remarks as he kisses Justin’s forehead.

“...Can you tell I’ve been crying?” Justin whispers.


“I don’t want to make him feel bad. I’m going to wash my face,” Justin tells him as he gently pulls away.

“Okay.”

Justin doesn’t necessarily come back out of the bathroom looking as good as new, but what went on in the bedroom is a little less obvious. They both go back to the living room and turn on the television. Craig is indifferent to what they watch and Nathan doesn’t think he’s actually watching what’s on the screen. But that’s okay because he and Justin aren’t really either. The television does get their nerves to settle down though so it’s good for something.

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Craig eventually ends up eating part of his meal before getting too tired to even pick up his fork.

“Dad? Nathan has the sheets on the bed. I’ll walk you into the bedroom so you can rest a while.”

“It’s barely 9 o’clock,” Craig mumbles tiredly as Justin helps him up.
“It’s okay. You’ve had a rough day. You can get well rested and feel better tomorrow,” Nathan says to him.

Craig nods and Justin leads him to the spare room. Within a few minutes, Justin is turning off the lights and gently shutting the door behind him so that he can head back to the living room.

Nathan feels Justin take his hand and Nathan looks at him and squeezes in response.

“Thank you,” Justin tells him.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You were here. You got him to open up a little to you. I heard certain parts. You are an incredible person. I don’t tell you that enough.”

Nathan gives Justin a smile and strokes his face. Justin pulls him in for a kiss and within a few minutes, Nathan knows there’s no stopping the moment from going further.

“Bedroom,” Justin gasps out as Nathan kisses along his jaw.

Both of them quickly get up and make their way to their bed. They slowly strip each other out of their clothing and Nathan gently pushes Justin onto his back. Justin nods and brings him down for a kiss so he reaches over to the nightstand to put the condom on. When he breaches Justin and they slowly move together, taking their time in the moment, it feels an awful lot like love.

Nathan is half-asleep when he feels Justin kiss his shoulder and the bed shift.

“Where are you going?” Nathan yawns, starting to sit up to look at his lover.

“For a walk. I just need to get some fresh air and think,” Justin says, not quite meeting his eyes.
“It’s getting late. I can go with you,” Nathan offers.

“I just...I need to be alone for a while. Clear my head. You’re tired and you have rehearsal tomorrow morning. Get some rest. I won’t be gone too long.”

“Okay, if you say so. Love you.”

“I love you too,” Justin tells him, then gives him a quick kiss on the lips.

Nathan plans to wait up for Justin but the comfort of their new bed lures him in before he can stay awake for more than an hour. By the time Justin comes back, he’s out like a light.

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Nathan’s alarm is set for 7:30. They have an early practice today due to it being a holiday. They can have the rest of their day free this way. The cast is lucky that their director is a romantic.

When the alarm goes off, he turns it off quickly and it doesn’t even rouse Justin. Nathan stretches then heads to the shower and stands under the steady hot stream. He brushes his teeth, eats a banana for breakfast, then goes back to the bedroom to change into his clothes for the day.

He’s unplugging his phone from the nightstand when Justin’s chimes twice next to his. It’s hard not to see what the texts say when the screen lights up.

Brian:
I’ll make a call to Dr. Tessler today to make sure she fits him in.
She's good and I really do hope therapy will help him.

Brian:
If you ever need to talk, in person or otherwise again, don’t hesitate. I'll be here.

Figuring out the reason why Justin wanted to walk alone last night hits him harder than he’d like to admit, especially when he was trying so hard to be there for him. He has to suck back the unwanted tears as he walks to the train.
Please review! Next chapter shouldn't take as long!
Chapter Summary

Brian gets the best news of his career and is just a little bit in denial over his daughter having a crush so soon.

Chapter Notes

A lot of this is fluff until the end so if you love fluff, great! If you don't, bear with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You look terrifying.”

He looks up and sees her standing there, eyebrow raised and coat on, ready to relax for the rest of her weekend.

But Malia’s jab won’t be getting to him today. Fuck no. He’s not going to take this terrifying grin off his face and become suave and stoic right now. It’s Sunday so there’s no one in the office except for him, Malia, and two of his new workaholic employees trying to show their worth. He doesn’t need to keep up the intimidating boss routine up. Not when something this big has happened. Once he tells her what’s going on, she’ll look terrifying as well.

“We got them.”

Malia pauses then marches over to his desk.

“We got who? Don’t get my hopes up with your vagueness. Be more specific.”

Brian stands up and walks around his desk to hold onto her arms.

“Coca-Cola said yes to our campaign. They want to change up their image since they’ve been around so long and have the money to do it.”
Malia laughs and says, “What’s the yearly budget? You wouldn’t tell me!”

“3 billion dollars.”

“Three Billion?! Oh my god! I’m getting a raise!”

Brian shakes his head.

“Not just that. You’re getting a new position as an ad exec. One of the ideas they singled out was yours. You are one of the reasons why we’re about to be filthy rich.”

Malia takes a step back and stares up at Brian.

“You’re messing with me.”

“No, Malia. I’m not messing with you. I think you are going to do great things. You’ve put forth great ideas ever since you made me sit down and listen. I’ll miss you as an assistant but I’ll get over it eventually. I’ll even train you. I haven’t personally done that for a while. And you can find someone to replace you. Hopefully we’ll transition you to a senior advertising position within the next six weeks or so.”

“Wait, you mean junior, right?”

“No, senior. You have been doing just as much as the junior advertising executives. You have worked your ass off and unofficially filled two positions. You have come up with just as many great ideas. You made sure I saw you as more than an assistant. You deserve Senior. Hey, are you okay?”

But Malia is too busy tearing up to answer. He hates dealing with crying women.

“Malia, you’re going to have to toughen up if you are going to be a ruthless ad man.”
Malia glares at him and wipes her tears.

“Shut up, Kinney.”

That’s a bit more familiar. He’s about to give her a light pat on the back but is interrupted by her charging forward to hug him.

“Thank you. I mean it,” she says softly then lets go to straighten her posture and become professional once more.

“You done?” Brian asks, straightening his suit.

“Yes,” Malia says, defensive, “Tiana and I are going to head out. I’m sure she’s bored of coloring at my desk. She wants to see a movie.”

“Which one?”

“Spongebob.”

Brian huffs out a laugh, “Saw it.”

“When have you even had time to see a movie?”

Brian shrugs, “Lily was begging to go last Saturday even though it literally came out just the day before. I had Duncan for a few hours while Emmett catered an event. Drew was at some pediatric benefit and Eric was overseeing construction in Bensonhurst so I got stuck with them. Eric and I only have a nanny for Lily a few hours on the weekdays and Emmett and Drew only have an occasional babysitter since Drew has more time on his hands now that he’s retired from football. I don’t know why we don’t have a full time one. Something about how we should spend quality time with our kid. Why did we think that was such a good idea?”

“Ha! Sorry, I’m just imagining you trying to keep a hold of two pre-schoolers in the city. It’s so domestic.”
Brian ignores the comment. He likes talking about Lily so it doesn’t matter.

“I went to the Regal on Court Street so it wasn’t too far. I kept a death grip on each of their hands. There ended up being no issue. I just needed for them to sit down and chill out. It wasn’t too bad. It had time travel and talking dolphins in space, shit like that. Typical acid induced Spongebob. Lily and Duncan loved it. They’ve known each other for less than two months and every time they see each other they act as though they have been separated by war and are reuniting after years apart. Twenty minutes later they are arguing. Then they’re running around and laughing up a storm. Then Lily gets mad that he doesn’t want to play tea party or he’s mad that she doesn’t want to play with his toys. They’re so back and forth but Lily usually cries when he goes home or she has to leave him.”

Malia smirks but doesn’t say anything. He hates when she does that.

“What’s with that look?” Brian asks, a little confused and suspicious.

“Nothing,” Malia insists but gives in at Brian’s raised brow, “Just sounds like your baby may have a bit of a crush.”

“Oh, shut up. You sound like Emmett. They aren’t even four years old,” Brian insists.

“I’m sure it’s adorable.”

“Speaking of Emmett,” Brian says as he pointedly ignores his assistant, “He and Drew are coming over with Duncan today so I’m going to get going as well. I’ll make the announcement about Coke tomorrow morning and we’ll get to work first thing.”

Brian follows Malia out of his office and Malia calls out, “Tiana, let’s go see a movie!”

“Is Brian coming?” Tiana says as she hands her mom a picture.

“No, baby. He already watched it with Lily. This is mother-daughter time.”
“Okay!”

The three of them leave head for the front doors, tell the new workaholics to have a good day, and head out.

“We’re just going to go to the AMC on the next block over so we’re heading this way. See you tomorrow, Brian!”

Brian waves them off and catches a cab back to Brooklyn Heights.

He can’t wait to tell Eric about the new campaign. He’ll be excited for him. Maybe they can celebrate later this week. Although he knows that Eric will probably be extra enthusiastic in bed tonight to let him know how proud he is.

But of course he has to deal with their child first. Who, by the looks of it, is quite a handful right now. Her toys are out and all over the living room floor and she’s dragging her costume trunk down their steps as he walks in.

“Lily, what are you doing? You’re going to fall.”

“Will not!” she grunts out as she drags it down another step.

Eric looks up from where he is trying to straighten up Lily’s things and glares at up at his daughter when he sees what she’s trying to do.

“Lily, you are really toeing a thin line here! I told you not to bring more toys down. I WILL call Emmett and Drew and tell them to leave Duncan at home!”

Brian snorts at the threat and at Lily’s look of pure terror.

“No no! He HAS to come over!”

“Then start taking some of your toys back to your room. Now. And no costume trunk.”
“But I have prince outfits he can wear and we can be the prince and princess.”

“That would be adorable,” he hears Eric mutter.

“Fine. But let Daddy carry it the rest of the way down. And come take some of your dolls and stuffed animals back upstairs.”

“Okay!”

Lily steps to the side and the trunk slides down the stairs and bursts open in the foyer.

And Brian is just laughing at this point. His day has been really on point so anything minor that goes wrong is sort of hilarious to him.

“Sorry, Daddy! I’ll put them back in the trunk.”

He bends over to help Lily put all of her costumes back in and picks up the trunk to carry it to the corner of the room.

Then he turns to his daughter, “Listen to your papa and pick up some of your things. You know you don’t need everything down here. And put them in your room where they belong, don’t just toss them in the middle of the floor.”

Lily walks into the middle of the living room and looks around at all her toys.

“Okay. I’ll take this and this...and this upstairs. But I am leaving this. Duncan will think it is the coolest toy ever and we’ll have so much fun. But I’ll take Nala back upstairs and my Polly Pocket set too.”

Lily loads her little arms up with toys and goes up the stairs to carry them up to her room.
Eric sighs and kisses Brian hello.

“God, Brian. She’s been such a pain today. She’s driving me crazy.”

“And here I thought you were the patient parent,” Brian smirks.

“You don’t know how off the walls she’s been since you left this morning. I tried to get her to watch a movie but she wouldn’t sit still. I took her to the park but that didn’t wear off some of her energy like I thought it would because when I tried to get her to take a nap she just kept getting up. Since Duncan is coming over she’s just been focusing on him. Her crush is adorable but god she’s obsessive.”

Brian frowns.

“I don’t think she has a crush. They’re just best friends.”

Eric laughs at him.

“Brian, please. It’s obviously very innocent but little kids get crushes on their friends and classmates all the time. They don’t know what it means. Just today she wanted to talk about our wedding and what she would have to do as the flower girl. I told her about what’s planned and she said, ‘Well when Duncan and me get married, we’re going to have tigers and elephants at our wedding.’ As though that made her wedding plans so much better than ours.”

Brian grimaces.

“Look at you,” Eric teases, “Going into protective dad mode so soon.”

“I am not. I’m just thinking of how expensive that wedding will be.”

Eric laughs at that and Brian puts his arms around him.

“I have something to tell you.”
"What is it?"

“We got it. Kent called my cell when I went into the office this morning.”

Eric steps back.

“Kent? That’s-”

“The CEO of Coca-Cola. It’s a three billion dollar campaign.”

Eric breaks out into a grin and Brian smiles just as widely back and pulls his fiancé in for a kiss.

“Brian, that’s fantastic! I know how much you wanted it. I am so so proud of you,” Eric says as he caresses his face.

“It’s so big. It’s-”

“Everything you’ve worked towards. I know,” Eric finishes gently.

“I’m making Malia a Senior Advertising Executive. She’s helped a lot with the campaign. She deserves it. Ted and Cynthia are freaking out. They are coming in later in the week to discuss where to go from here.”

“We’ll have to celebrate while they’re in.”

Brian sways with Eric. He feels high right now and Eric is indulging him in his uncharacteristic silliness. They’re making out and fuck, he wants to go further but Lily comes stomping down the stairs, cock-blocker that she is, and he forces himself to pull away.

“There. I did what you asked. Happy now?”
“Ecstatic, darling,” Brian calls out grandly as he sweeps his little girl off her feet and swings her out while he turns around.

“Daddy, what are you doing?” Lily yells.

“Daddy is money-happy, baby. He’ll be like this all day.”

“Money-happy?”

“It’s a very real emotion. Money pays for the tigers and elephants,” Brian teases and raises an eyebrow at Lily in question.

“What? Papa, I told you that in secret!” Lily scolds before she demands to be let down.

“You didn’t tell me it was a secret.”

“Well, it is.”

Eric raises an eyebrow and Lily runs up the steps and goes into her room.

“What a drama queen,” Eric drawls.

“She gets it from somewhere,” Brian reminds him.

“Yeah, from you.”

Brian playfully pushes Eric’s shoulder and heads into the kitchen to get some water then sits down.

“I’m starving. I didn’t eat breakfast or lunch today,” Brian hints as he looks up at Eric with big
“Then why don’t you make yourself something to eat?” Eric mocks.

Brian just tilts his head.

“Fine. You’ve convinced me. What about a torta? That’s what Lily wanted for lunch and I have some meat left over.”

“Random choice for a three year old.”

“It’s her heritage, Brian. At least Mexicans have decent food. I, for one, am glad she chose it.”

“Hey, don’t diss the Irish. We have potatoes.”

“Which originally came from South America.”

“Which the Europeans eventually found and claimed as their own you mean. Why are we even discussing this?”

“I’m not sure. We ran out of potatoes when you made chicken and mashed potatoes last week.”

“It’s fine. I’m craving a torta now anyway.”

“Then why are we talking about potatoes?”

Brian just shrugs and waits for Eric to heat up the meat and put his meal together.

“Hey, did you get a hold of Dr. Tessler for Justin? I didn’t get to bring up the subject yesterday when I got home since we went out for Valentine’s Day.”
“Yeah. She always has a waiting list but she said she would fit Craig in if he or Justin got a hold of her on Monday.”

“Good. Justin was pretty upset when he came over the other night. I was worried about him.”

“Me too.”

“I know you were.”

Eric puts the sandwich in front of him and sits down across from Brian. Brian changes the subject from there. He doesn’t want to think about Justin calling him so fucking worried about the man who kicked him out. They had just put Lily to bed when Brian’s phone rang and Justin had been quiet then finally said, “You’re the only one who knows about how I felt when everything went down with my dad. I’m having trouble with all of this. Shit, I shouldn’t be calling. I don’t know why I called.”

And since Brian promised himself to not take part in any more secret phone calls, he told Justin to hold on for a minute. Then he took a deep breath and told Eric what was going on and asked if it would be okay with him if Justin stopped by to talk about what was going on with his dad.

Eric had surprisingly said it was fine. When Justin hesitantly accepted the invitation, Eric had offered him something to drink, made some small talk, and was scarce on and off. Of course he didn’t leave the house. Brian can’t blame him for that. He probably wouldn’t knowingly leave Eric at home with one of his exes either.

Justin had stayed for a couple of hours. He choked up talking about what went on that day and, while Brian didn’t particularly feel a strong amount of sympathy for Craig, he wanted him better. He could tell how much it tore up Justin that Craig was this depressed and messed up. He didn’t know what he could do to really help Justin or Craig though. He sat there and listened, asked a few questions, wondered why Justin was here of all places.

Eric had caught enough of the story when Justin first came in. It had been when he passed through to get a drink of water he said, “What about Dr. Tessler? Does your dad still live in Pittsburgh, Justin?”

That left him explaining how they knew Dr. Tessler. His poker-faced therapist who sometimes
dabbled in couples’ therapy on Brian and Eric’s behalf in their early years. The woman that helped him come to terms with his break-up with Justin and completely commit himself to a man he loved just as much.

He didn’t say all of that, of course. He had just said, “You know how fucking up I used to be, Justin. Hiring a therapist was long overdue and she’s one of the best on the east coast. I saw her once to twice a week for over eight months and had appointments about once a month after that until we moved to Chicago. I still call her sometimes when I get too stressed and have an occasional appointment with her when I’m in Pittsburgh. She became someone I could confide in. I can call her tomorrow and see if I can get her to bump your dad up on her constant waiting list. You know how persuasive I can be. He has to want help and be open to it though.”

“I think he is,” Justin had answered, “I told him that he needed to start seeing a psychiatrist after what happened at the restaurant and he nodded. I’ll tell him that she’s good.

“It’s probably best you don’t tell him I recommended her to you. I don’t think she would have any biased feelings about it since I don’t think he was ever brought up but he might be biased against her if he knows.”

And it had been decided. Brian eventually called Eric back in to sit next to him and Justin said he needed to get back about 20 minutes after that. They walked him to the door and wished him goodnight. When Brian led Eric to the bedroom, he handed over the tube of lube and turned over on his stomach. He had been itching to get fucked for most of the day and Eric being so gracious had topped off the reasons as to why it had to happen.

“You alright?” Eric presses.

Brian shakes himself out of his thoughts and smiles.

“Just thinking of when you were fucking me the other night and how good it felt.”

He wasn’t lying. His dick was getting hard just thinking about it.

Eric’s eyes widen and he laughs, “And here I thought you were a bossy and exclusive top. There’s still hope for you yet.”
Brian smirks, “I’m only a bossy top 70% of the time, remember?”

“I recall you saying 75%. I’m glad you find my estimation more accurate.”

“What can I say? I’m engaged to a genius.”

Brian stands up and comes around the table. He’s about to bend down to kiss Eric but his partner is quick on his feet and pushes him into the refrigerator. And then...damn, Eric knows how to give a good kiss.

“Lily’s...upstairs,” Brian gets out in between kisses.

“It’s fine, she’s pissed at me and won’t be down for a while,” Eric insists as he kisses Brian’s face.

And Brian’s about to give in. He’s just about to fuck Eric against the counter. Or let Eric fuck him against the refrigerator. He doesn’t give a shit. As long as they both come, it’s fine. Lily may come down any second. She might actually be quiet for once and accidentally walk in on her dads fucking. She’d get over it. He could call Dr. Tessler for her too.

Unfortunately, the doorbell rings and pulls them out of the moment. He has to laugh when Eric glares in the direction of the front door and straightens out his shirt in a huff. He turns away from Brian to go and answer it and that’s when they hear the high pitch squeal from upstairs.

“DUNCAN’S HERE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

They make it to the living room before Lily does, even though she forgoes the steps and climbs onto the banister to slide down instead. He doesn’t get how she can do that since it’s taller than her. Just like the time she hung from the pots and pans over the stove, Jesus Christ.

Brian catches her before she makes it all the way down so she doesn’t get hurt.

“What did I tell you about sliding down the bannister?”
“Nothing yet! That’s the first time I’ve done it at this house,” Lily chirps.

“Well, the same rules apply. Don’t do it.”

“You should try it. Maybe you’d have more fun,” Lily mumbles but then runs to the door.

Eric peaks through and welcomes in Emmett, Drew and Duncan.

That’s when the greetings begin. Lily is immediately squealing and she and Duncan are hugging it out, Emmett is cooing and snapping pictures, and Drew is offering them both butch handshakes.

“Daddy, where’s my rocket ship at? I wanna show Lily,” Duncan asks as he turns to Emmett.

“It’s in the bag I brought, Baby. I’ll get it out for you once Pa and I get in and sit down,” Emmett says as he unzips his son’s jacket. As soon as Duncan gets his jacket off and recovers from yet another epic reunion with Lily, he turns to Brian and Eric then looks up and waves.

“Hi!”

“Hi, Duncan! I’m glad you could come over. Lily has been so excited to see you,” Eric says as he bends down to return the boy’s hug. When Eric releases Duncan, he barrels himself over to Brian and hugs his legs.

Shit, the kid may not be related to Emmett or Drew by blood but he’s built just as solid as Drew is. Once the kid gets taller, he may actually manage to knock Brian down.

“Hi, Brian!” Duncan says as he looks up at him.

“Hi, Duncan,” Brian says back as he ruffles the little bit of hair that he has.

“Duncan, come here! Put these on over your clothes!” Lily insists as she reapproaches them, already wearing one of her costumes.
“Oh my goodness, how cute! Yes, Duncan, go dress up like a prince so I can take pictures!” Emmett says as he snaps away.

Brian doesn’t even try to resist rolling his eyes. Emmett has turned into this over-the-top scrapbook parent who can’t get enough pictures of his son. Drew had taken almost as many pictures at first but probably realized that Emmett was getting every possible moment in. And even though Brian was happy for Emmett since even he could admit that Emmett was one of the nicest people he had ever met and deserved everything he had now, he knew how cute Duncan was already. He didn’t have to see every picture he took of the boy.

The four of them sat down and caught each other up on what was going on since they hadn’t seen each other since last Saturday and watched the kids act like animals around the living room. Kids are fucking weird.

“Meow,” Lily said as she clambers into Brian’s lap and away from Duncan, who is barking at her.

“I don’t like cats. Why is there one in my lap?” Brian said with a glare.

“Meow,” Lily answers as she licks the back of her hand.

“Go play. Don’t claw the furniture or get hair on anything.”

Lily hops down and she and Duncan go and do whatever the fuck on the other side of the room.

“Brian, you should tell them,” Eric says as he nudges his side, “The kids are more or less keeping to themselves now.”

“Ooh, tell us what? Is it exciting?” Emmett says while he claps.

Brian looks at them and gives in, “Alright, fine. Emmett, Ted may have told you but Kinnetik had a very important meeting a few days ago with Coca-Cola for an ad campaign. They are willing to put three billion dollars towards advertising a year so it’s fucking huge. Anyway, the CEO called me today. He must have similar ideas when it comes to working on the weekends but said he made a decision while he had breakfast this morning and decided to go with us.”
“Brian, that’s great!” Drew tells him sincerely.

“I’m so proud, Baby!” Emmett squeals as he runs over to hug Brian.

“Alright, alright. That’s enough, Honeycutt,” Brian says after he returns the hug and starts warding off Emmett when the man doesn’t take the hint.

“Sorry. I just know how hard you worked for everything you have. It’s inspiring to see you achieve this.”

And that’s not a tear he feels in his eye. It isn’t. And since it isn’t he pushes Emmett back towards the couch.

“Go sit next to your husband before he gets jealous.”

“You’re probably right. He does know about that one time at Babylon when I first arrived in Pittsburgh. Remember how you staked out the new guy, Brian?” Emmett winks.

Brian is about to reply but a shouting match interrupts them.

“We’re going to play princess in the castle!”

“No! I don’t want to play that! I want to play Power Rangers!”

“I don’t want to play Power Rangers!”

“I do!”

“I don’t!”
“Hey! Stop arguing! Lily, he’ll be here for a while. You can play both. Duncan’s the guest. Play what he is wants to play first.”

Lily glares at Eric.

“Don’t give me that look. I’ll put you in time-out upstairs if you are going to be like that and Duncan can stay down here.”

“But he was yelling too!” Lily cries.

“You both need to stop yelling. Now either figure out how to combine Power Rangers and princesses, let him go first, or pretend to be something else.”

Lily stews in her anger for a minute, stomping around with her arms crossed. It makes Brian want to root for Duncan in this stupid scenario but unfortunately Duncan decides to make peace.

“You be a princess and I’ll be the red ranger and save you from the big dinosaur at the castle.”

Lily perks up immediately.

“Okay! I’ll go stand over on the seat by the window ‘cause that’s where the castle is. Daddy, will you be the dinosaur?”

“No.”

She looks towards Emmett and Drew so Brian intercepts before she has a chance to ask.

“They’re busy, Lily. We’re talking. Just pretend like there’s one.”
Lily makes an exasperated sound, “Fine. I don’t know why they don’t want to play, Duncan. Daddy pretended to be a bear yesterday when I wanted to play Goldilocks.”

“Aw, Brian! I bet you were a marvelous bear.”

Brian scoffs, “Shut up, Honeycutt.”

The kids finally wear themselves out a little bit and Eric puts in a movie for them to watch in the living room while the adults go and make dinner. Well, while Emmett and Eric make dinner. Drew and Brian try to stay out of it as much as possible and eventually sneak out to the sunroom out back and take a few hits off a joint, something Drew hasn’t done for years since he stayed clean and healthy for his football career. He starts feeling it before Brian does and hands the joint back.

“We shouldn’t be doing this with the kids in the living room. You’re a bad influence, Kinney.”

Brian shrugs, “They were minutes away from passing out. I don’t do it as much anymore since I have a kid in the house but I find time to let myself unwind. I cut out every other drug except for this and alcohol. I don’t even smoke cigarettes anymore. Lily and Gus ganged up on me last summer and asked me to stop. So I don’t feel guilty about it. Especially when Lily has been climbing the walls today. She’s crazy about your kid. It’s annoying.”

Drew snickers, “Yeah, Duncan wouldn’t shut up about her on the whole ride here. Emmett thinks it’s the cutest thing he’s ever seen and probably drives the whole family crazy with the pictures he keeps sending. He keeps talking about a joint birthday party since Duncan is only a week older than Lily.”

“Lily would get excited but then get pissed at Duncan for not wanting a princess themed birthday party.”

“Duncan would probably hold his ground and insist that everyone dress up as astronauts. He is usually a very easygoing kid and has been very appreciative over everything but the boy likes what he likes.”

“I have noticed the last few weeks that he’s a lot more comfortable giving you two shit now.”

Drew laughs, “Yeah, but it makes me happy that he’s becoming more rambunctious. I think it
means he’s more comfortable with us now and is really seeing us as his parents. He even started
calling us Daddy and Pa on the 6th. We told him he could call us whatever he was comfortable
with when the adoption went through and the fact he decided that he would call us that means
something. It made Emmett cry, that’s for sure.”

“I bet you weren’t completely dry eyed either since you remember the date.”

“I’ll never tell.”

Brian passes the joint back to Drew and watches the smoke blow out from the man’s mouth.

“So how much have the topics of your marijuana-fueled conversations changed in the last twenty
years?”

Brian laughs at that as he thinks about how they just rambled on about their kids and silently
compares it to a conversation he had at nineteen when he admitted to Michael that he was
conflicted about whether or not he was turned on by fisting. Michael, fucking baked as can be,
hugged Brian and said it was okay as long as he and his partner were safe.

Huh. He had forgotten about that. He did eventually figure out that fisting a guy didn’t do that
much for him and he would never agree to being on the receiving end because fuck that.

Drew may be reminiscing about a previous high conversation as well since he’s not saying
anything. It’s nice to sit here quietly. With the high paced environment at work and a preschooler
at home, it doesn’t happen that often.

“Hey, where are you gu- Are you kidding me? Drew! Are you smoking weed?” Emmett says
disapprovingly as he side eyes Brian.

Drew sighs, “It’s been years. Brian mentioned his stash and the kids are practically asleep.”

“Don’t mind me. I suppose I’m jealous that you didn’t get high with me for your first time in what?
18 years? You could have invited Eric and me.”
“You were cooking,” Brian insists, “And we were getting baked. See? We all have purpose in life and we just fulfilled it.”

Drew and Brian try to hold back their laughter but don’t quite manage.

“Well, as one of the cooks, I announce that dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes. So put out your joint and come help.”

Brian and Drew get up and follow Emmett back into the main part of the house and into the kitchen. Brian sees Eric stirring a pot on the stove so he comes up behind him to put his arms around him. Eric reaches back to pat Brian’s cheek, turns to accept a kiss, then narrows his eyes.

“You were smoking without me? Fucker.”

“I have enough for tonight.”

“I only do it a once a week after Lily’s fast asleep. I already hit my max this week.”

“I don’t know why you insist that your week starts on Mondays. It’s Sunday so it’s close enough anyway. Indulge with me, Eric.”

Eric rolls his eyes, “Lily has been a handful. I might take you up on it tonight. We’ll see.”

“And then I’ll rim you and suck you and fuck you.”

“Brian, stop trying to turn me on while I make dinner. I’ll end up burning everything. Will you go check on the kids?”

Brian lets out a put upon sigh, “Fine. But you still owe me from earlier this afternoon.”

“Oh I’ll pay you back very graciously later, lover,” Eric sarcastically purrs.
“You do know we can hear everything you are saying, right?” Emmett butts in.

Eric laughs and Brian shrugs before going into the living room to see what the kids are up to.

Brian was right when he said they were tired. They’re sitting up but Lily has her head on Duncan’s shoulder and Duncan’s head is leaning on top of Lily’s hair and they’re both fast asleep. He does end up taking a picture on his phone but only because he knows Eric will want it.

Brian leans down and wakes them both up then ends up carrying their lazy asses into the kitchen. They wake up more once they realize how hungry they are and the six of them sit around the dining room table, passing the bread and butter and indulging the kids by listening to their ridiculous stories. And Brian’s enjoying himself a lot. He even thinks the Brian of fifteen years ago would like this, even if he wouldn’t admit it.

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After Emmett, Drew, and Duncan go home and Lily stops crying over Duncan not being able to sleep over, they read a couple of books with her and play Hungry Hungry Hippos because it’s fast and mindless. Then he and Eric make good on their plans once she’s tucked in.

They suck and fuck and rim several times. In between fucks, Eric does end up taking a few hits from a joint. Eric doesn’t get high often. He’s more responsible than Brian’s ever been. But he loves Eric when he’s high. He’s so sweetly handsy and laughs at almost anything. Frankly, it’s adorable. But he also gets sleepy a lot more quickly so he’s out before Brian is. And, although Brian knows that he needs to get some rest for a big day tomorrow, he can’t sleep. The highs of the day are keeping him up and he wants to talk about them more. Brian Kinney wanting to talk. It’s unfathomable. But he’s proud of himself and he’s proud of his company. So be it.

And maybe it’s the excitement of telling Eric and a couple of his friends about the big news that makes him want to text Justin too. Justin had been there when he created Kinnetik. Hell, he named the place. So fuck it, they’re in a good place. He’ll send him a quick text now.

Hey, thought I’d tell you that Kinnetik got Coca-Cola.

It’s not even thirty seconds later when Justin responds.

:DDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDD
THAT’S GREAT!!!!!!! I’m really happy
for you. How are you celebrating?

Drugging, Tricking. You know me

Haha, yeah right.

Brian smirks at Justin laughing off his last text. It really isn’t him anymore although he had fucked and smoked. But in comparison to ten years ago, it's definitely a change. He's glad Justin knows who he is now. He never even thought about doing more than asking Eric if he wanted to go out later in the week.

Emmett and Drew are came over with Duncan. They stayed for dinner. Kids drove us crazy.

Ah, so was a domestic couples’ night.

Fuck off. Lily has to play with someone.

Very true and she and Duncan are adorable together. Hope you had fun! :)

He really doesn’t want to ask this certain question. It’ll bring the playful banner down but he knows it's a possibility that Justin is having a stressful time right now and might feel like he can't talk about it.

How's your dad?

There's a no response for a few minutes and Brian's afraid he may have put Justin on the spot. But then he gets a response.

Not good. He isn't himself. I told him that I wanted him to stay in the guest room until he
went home. He said he didn't want to get in the way. But he ended up having a minor panic attack while we were out. I'm not sure what triggered that one. You couldn't really tell unless you were looking for it. But I was looking for the signs so I took a cab and had him check out of his hotel early. He went to bed at like 8. I walked past his door around 9 and I could hear him crying. I don't know over what. Today went pretty well. I showed him the gallery and introduced him to my friend, Liam and his girlfriend. I should have went in to comfort him or at least check on him but I didn't know how to handle it. I feel awful.

It probably would have upset him more if you caught him like that. He probably needed to decompress on his own and that's why he went to bed so early. Don't beat yourself up over it.

I just don't understand what's happening to him. Like, okay. I get that he feels guilt over everything that went down with us and he wants to get to know me again. That's fine. But there's something wrong. I don't understand.

It sounds like he let everything build up to the point where he can't handle it anymore. He probably obsessed over it and eventually spiraled and now he can't function like he once did. Maybe it's some specific mental illness that's hereditary and it was bound to happen sooner or later. Let Tessler diagnose him and go from there.

I can't just forget about him and leave him in Pittsburgh. I can't.

I know you can't. I know you well enough to realize that you've already decided to give him a chance. Just be there for him. Show concern. Let him know that he can talk to you and hash out the bad blood once he’s more stable.
Yeah, the last time I said anything was when I met him for brunch. I can’t put him through too much stress when he’s like this. I can figure it out once he’s recovered more. It’s just hard to see him like this.

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What?

Did Brian Kinney just send me an emoticon?

I’m allowed to send emoticons to display my conflicted feelings on your father’s predicament.

Lol, i just remember u getting pissed whn i used 2 send u quick emails looking like this

Internet language still pisses me off. Looking at that text is is painful so never write like that to me again. Emoticons just give me a quick out when it comes to expressing myself.

:)

Smartass.

:Đ
Shit, I have to get to bed soon.
Busy day tomorrow.

Yeah, my dad asked about a few museums.
So I’m taking him to a few low key ones.
Then I’m going to be working non-stop to catch up.

Hmm. You think you’ll be in Manhattan anytime this week?

I’ll actually be at David Zwirner Gallery around 10 am on Thursday to talk about an upcoming show.

That’s not that far from my office. You free for lunch?

He doesn’t know what made him ask that. Fuck, why is he suffering from foot in the mouth syndrome via text? He has been itching to just hang with someone and he’s not close with that many people here. The reason why his relationship with Eric worked so well is because they both firmly believed that it was important to have lives outside of each other. The two of them hung out with Emmett and Drew (and occasionally Justin and Nathan) but they always had the kids. He went to a club with Emmett just one time. He and Drew are getting to the point where he could consider calling him up and asking if he wants to get a beer but they aren’t quite there yet.

But it probably would be more understandable than meeting with Justin. Justin, who hasn’t texted him back yet.

Shit.
He’s about to text back a, “Nevermind, it wasn’t right of me to ask” when his phone vibrated in his hand.

**Okay. I can meet you at Kinnetik a little before noon and we can decide from there. That okay?**

Brian hesitates over the previous message he was typing. Then he takes a breath, erases it, and sends back his answer.

That’s fine. See you Thursday.

Alright. Night, Brian.

Goodnight, Justin

Well, that wasn’t a phone call.

But fuck, he just planned lunch with his ex-boyfriend.

Eric said that he liked Justin though. He said that he didn’t mind if they became friends with him and Nathan. If he works up the nerve, he’ll even be upfront with Eric. He’ll tell him that Justin is going to be by Kinnetik on Thursday and they were going to meet for lunch.

It’ll be fine.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please review!
The day before Brian's lunch with Justin, Lily falls ill.

Brian was impressed with the progress they had made on the Coca-Cola campaign. Two late nights on Monday and Tuesday equaled out to being ahead of schedule and that was always a good thing in his book. Ted and Cynthia had arrived days earlier than he expected and had gotten in first thing Monday morning. They worked from early in the morning to late in the evening planning the budget. Ted made the charts to show how much they could spend on everything. Cynthia made calls to start inquiring about filming permits in various locations. Brian spent hours in the art department, assigning his visions to his best people, and overseeing the storyboards soon after those visions were clear. He contacted different directors, photographers, and cinematographers to figure out scheduling and availability. He threw different big names around with Cynthia and Ted and planned on talking to Kent about them to see what he thought about those faces endorsing the popular soda.

However, he felt guilty about the lack of time he had spent with his daughter the last two days. Their nanny, Jess, had been working more the past couple of days due to Eric working extra hours in Bensonhurst and Brian had been even worse than him. At least Eric had been there to take her to preschool and got home by 8 o’clock at the latest. Brian hadn’t seen his daughter awake since Sunday. He would always get in past her 8:30 bedtime and leave before she woke up. He would go in to kiss her goodnight even though she slept through that. She had called him yesterday afternoon to talk to him and he stayed on the phone with her for a little bit. She missed him and talked and talked like Lily does and it had brightened his day. He was worried about her today though. Eric had called to tell him Lily was sick this morning and stayed home from preschool. Jess had been nice enough to come in at 8 and, even though he knew Eric wanted to stay with Lily when she was feeling bad, he had a few meetings today of his own and had to oversee the construction of the synagogue for a while. Eric assured him it was just a stomach bug and that she had put on a brave face and insisted that she was going to be fine. Lily’s well-being was lurking in his mind though, even with everything that was going on at Kinnetik.

It was a good thing that his main job today was to oversee his employees’ progress and consult different departments on the various projects Kinnetik had taken on. He didn’t have anything to present nor did he need to kiss ass today. But Kinnetik had several big projects lined up and it was
hard for him to pull away. But when his cell rang and he saw Jess’s number, he picked up in a heartbeat. He knew it was probably nothing but Lily being sick always made him nervous.

“Brian? It’s Jess. Sorry to be calling you but Lily was very insistent on talking to her daddy.”

“That’s fine, Jess. You know I’ll talk to her any time.”

“Lily? You still want to talk to your dad?”

He could hear Lily’s voice in the background confirming Jess’s assumption and soon he heard his daughter on the line.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Hi, baby. How are you feeling?”

“I don’t feel good. My tummy hurts.”

“I heard. I’m sorry you are feeling sick. Have you been able to do anything today?”

“Jess and I made some pictures. I made one just for you. I almost threw up on it but Jess got a trashcan.”

Brian winces at his daughter’s bluntness, “I can’t wait to see it. Are you feeling any better than you did before Papa left?”

“Not really. It really hurts. Daddy, I miss you,” Lily starts to whine.

Brian lets out a sigh, “I miss you too. I’m sorry that we haven’t seen much of each other the last couple of days.”
“We haven’t seen any of each other at all,” Lily points out.

Fuck. His kid knew how to guilt him.

“Daddy, I want you to come home. I miss you. I want you at home with me,” Lily whimpered.

“Honey, I want to be there but I’m busy with work.”

“Maybe you could work here. I will be good, I promise. I won’t be loud.”

Brian doesn’t know what to say to make her accept that he needs to stay in the office. All he can come up with is, “I’ll be home before you go to bed. I’ll read you a couple of bedtime stories and tuck you in.”

Lily doesn’t say anything and Brian’s guilt goes up a notch.

“You mad at me?”

Lily makes a sound that tells him she’s trying not to make a big deal out of it.

“So what else did you-”

But Lily interrupts him by retching. He hears Jess’s soothing words and eventually Jess grabs the phone.

“Brian? Sorry, Lily’s throwing up again. She made it to the wastebasket though. I’m going to give her more Kaopectate and hopefully that will make it so she’ll feel better.”

Brian puts a hand over his forehead, “Alright. Try to get her to drink some water so that she doesn’t get dehydrated. Call me if she is still feeling bad in a couple of hours. Keep Eric updated too.”
“I will. Eric called about half an hour ago to tell me he’d be home around 4:30 since he decided to have Lewis oversee the construction today. It’s only 6 hours away but you know kids. She wants her parents here.”

Brian scoffs a little, “Now the nanny is guilting me too.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I just meant that she loves her parents.”

“Okay. Just keep me posted. I’ll try to leave a little early too.”

“I will. I’m going to get off the phone so I can try to get Lily’s stomach to settle.”

Jess hangs up and Brian tries to get his mind off of his sick child at home wanting him to be there with her so that she could be comforted by her daddy.

He lasts for half an hour before he puts his coat on.

He might have lasted longer if it weren't for Cynthia urging him to go be with their baby before informing him that she would come over this evening to spend some time with her. She and Ted assured him that they would keep everyone working and everything ahead of schedule.

So, with their blessing, he leaves the office at 11 and gets on the train. He gets off at his stop around 11:25 and quietly lets himself into his home to be with his daughter.

"Brian! I didn't expect you back this soon," Jess says as she comes down the stairs.

"Things were under control at work and I wanted to come back to spend time with Lily. Where is she?"

Jess nods over to the direction of the living room, "Over on the couch. She's dozing on and off but never stays asleep for more than ten or fifteen minutes."

"What are her symptoms?"
Jess sighs and counts them off, "Fever of 100.8, nausea, vomiting. She had a brief bout of diarrhea just about half an hour ago so I'm worried that will kick into full force as well."

Brian nods, "Thanks for doing so much extra work, Jess. I will pay you for the full day but go ahead and head home. I don't want you getting sick and taking it back to your husband and daughter. If you do, well...sorry."

Jess smirks, "She isn't the first child I have nannied, Brian. My immune system is pretty strong but if it does happen it wouldn't be the first time. Although Ruby doesn't need it with her cello recital coming up. She's a teenager though so she tries to avoid me anyway. Are you sure you don't need an extra hand around here? The stomach virus can get messy."

"I should be alright. I feel bad for not being here yesterday or the day before. This can be a bonding experience. I'll wait on her hand and foot while she whines and throws up."

"It sounds like a great time. I wouldn't worry too much about the whining. She's been a trooper, all things considered. You being here will lift her spirits. Call if you need anything."

"I will. Have a good day, Jess."

Jess gets her things and kisses a sleeping Lily's forehead before she heads out the door. Brian walks over to Lily and sits on the other end of the couch to get a good look at her. Poor baby. She was clammy, pale, and had dark circles under her eyes. Her curls looked wild and were tied up in a ponytail. If she wasn't feeling better by tomorrow he was taking her to the doctor, his workaholic schedule be damned.

Lily stirs and crosses her arms over her stomach. Brian gets up and reaches down to put his hand over her forehead. Lily looks up and smiles at him through her pain.

"Daddy? You came home?"

Brian nods and sits back down on the couch, "I guess I couldn’t say no to your charm."

Lily sits up, crawls over, and curls into his lap. Brian lets his head rest on her hair and rubs her
back as she sits there.

“You feel sick?” he inquires, looking down.

Lily nods, “Uh huh. Daddy, I feel really bad.”

“I know. You need anything?”

“I need to go to the bathroom. My tummy hurts really bad!” Lily tells him, starting to get frantic.

Shit.

Brian tries not to jostle Lily too much as he gets up and carries her to the toilet. His heart goes out to her, it really does. Especially when it is coming out from both ends and he has to put the waste basket in front of her. It definitely took becoming a full time dad in order to not get grossed out by this.

“Daddy, I don’t like feeling like this!” Lily moans to him.

“I know, baby. I know,” He says as he makes sure all her hair is away from her face.

“It hurts!”

Brian sighs and continues to comfort his daughter. When she is finally done with the toilet and the wastebasket, he cleans her up, scrubs out the wastebasket, then takes her downstairs to the kitchen and gets her a ginger ale and some saltines to settle her stomach. She resists and cries at first, saying it will make her feel sick but she finally believes him when he tells her it will hurt more if she has nothing in her stomach at all.

“Sip on it,” he reminds her gently as she drinks some ginger ale.

Lily nods and does what she’s told, “Can I have water too?”
“Of course. But sip on that too.”

Brian goes over to get her a cup of water and puts it in front of her.

“I hate being sick,” Lily pouts after she rehydrates herself.

“I hate when you’re sick too.”

“How come? You aren’t sick. I’m sick.”

“It hurts to see your kids not feeling well. It makes you wish that you could trade places and be sick instead just so they can feel better.”

It’s an honest statement, one that Brian didn’t expect to make. As soon as it comes out of his mouth, he knows it’s corny. Lily doesn’t make a big deal out of it though. In fact she does the opposite.

“You’re crazy then.”

Brian smirks at her, “I’m crazy? You’re crazy.”

Lily shakes her head so enthusiastically that it moves her body from left to right in her seat, “Nuh uh! I’m not crazy. You’re crazy!”

“You’re crazy if you think I’m crazy. I’m perfectly normal. You’re a nut.”

Lily giggles, “No, you’re a nut!”

Brian lets out a dramatic sigh, “I suppose you had to inherit your insanity from somewhere. Let me fill up a couple of sippy cups for your water and ginger ale so that we can go be nuts in the living room. You can pick out a movie we can watch.”
Lily shakes her head, “I don’t want a sippy cup. I’m not a baby.”

“You’re sick and it’s in the living room. Your strength and coordination isn’t up to par right now and I don’t want you spilling drinks all over the couch. You’re the princess for the day but you are using the sippy cups.”

“But I don’t want to,” Lily pouts.

Brian gives her a look and Lily stays defiant. He would be annoyed but he’s hoping this means she is feeling a little better. But he knows better from his own experience with this kind of virus. You feel better for maybe an hour after throwing up before getting nauseated all over again.

“Lily, no one is here to watch you drink from a sippy cup. It’s fine. You can pick any movie you want to watch. Even Frozen.”

“I’m sick of Frozen.”

At those words, Brian feels like he’s in Heaven.

“Can you say that again? Slowly and clearly.”


“Honey, if you weren’t suffering from projectile vomiting I would throw you up in the air right now and take you out for spaghetti and ice cream.”

Lily holds her stomach and whimpers, “I never want food. Ever again.”

“I know. Now come on. Go get on the couch.”

Brian turns on the television and goes to Netflix so that Lily can pick something out. She ends up
choosing Mr. Peabody and Sherman. Brian changes into some sweats and a T-shirt then sits down next to her. She’s watching the movie intently, wrapped up in a huge, warm, soft blanket with a trashcan in front of her and her sippy cups and crackers on the coffee table. Within 20 minutes he’s rushing her to the bathroom to throw up. Fifteen minutes after that, he’s rushing her back for the other reason as to why she’s so sick. He starts getting worried and gives her pedialyte and more medicine to keep her hydrated. She ends up curling up in his lap again. Working so much these past couple of days has caught up with him so he lies down and lets her fall asleep on his chest as the movie plays. After it’s over, he carries Lily and the wastebasket upstairs and takes her to his and Eric’s bedroom. He lies down next to her and they both fall asleep. She doesn’t wake up once.

Brian feels a kiss on his forehead before he opens his eyes to see who the perpetrator is.

He looks up at Eric before he stretches and yawns.

“How’s she feeling?” Eric asks him, worried.

Brian looks over at Lily, “She’s been better. She’s been asleep for a while though. What time is it?”

“About 4:15. When was the last time she threw up?”

“She threw up a little less than three hours ago and had diarrhea about 15 or 20 minutes after that. I think she’s feeling a little better but I wouldn’t be surprised if she woke up feeling sick again either.”

“My poor baby,” Eric frets as he strokes her hair, “Thank you for coming back, Brian. I know how busy you’ve been.”

“Out of the two of us, you were the one with the busiest day today.”

“Yeah, but you have all these new accounts-”

“Eric. She’s my kid too. Of course I’m going to come back when she calls and asks for me to come home.”
Eric nods then takes Brian’s face in his hands and kisses him.

“Still. Thank you.”

Brian smiles then looks at Lily again.

"You think we should keep letting her sleep? She might not sleep well tonight."

"Let's wake her up around 5. If she goes to bed a bit later then so be it. She probably won't be up for school tomorrow since her symptoms just started this morning so she can sleep in and I will stay home with her."

"You sure? You're pretty busy too, especially since you got your office set up."

Eric shrugs, “Lewis is capable of overseeing construction for one more day and the construction workers are a good team. The meetings I had today went well so I will be designing when I’m not taking care of her. I have Roger, Lucy, Tom, and Veronica in the office so they can cover anything that comes up. If there’s an emergency, it’s not that far to Red Hook. The only reason I may need you or Jess would be if something would happen in Bensonhurst.”

“Alright. If you think you can handle it, then by all means. I’m just worried that both of us might get sick.”

“I’ll hold your hair back if you hold mine.”

“You’re fucking weird,” Brian mutters as he gets up and walks past his fiance.

Brian walks downstairs and Eric follows. Brian sits down in the barcelona chair and grabs an unsuspecting Eric then pulls him into his lap.

“Mph, Brian-” Eric says before he’s interrupted by Brian’s kiss.

“Lily will be asleep for a while longer and she’s taking up our bed. It’s too early to start making
dinner. We should fuck to help the time go by more quickly.”

Eric laughs, “Oh, we should? And if Lily walks down?”

“Then we’ll say we were exercising, I’ve told you this. Come on. We haven’t had sex for-”

“17 hours?” Eric mocks.

“Oh, you’ve kept count too.”

Eric shakes his head in amusement but catches Brian off-guard by quickly turning around and straddling Brian.

“You want to see me fuck myself on your cock?” Eric whispers into his ear, grinding his ass into Brian’s hard-on.

“Ugh, fuck yes. Do it.”

Eric doesn’t keep him waiting. He quickly gets up and yanks Brian’s pants and boxer briefs down in one go.

“Stay here.”

“Eric, do not fucking leave me like this.”

“I have to get the lube. We don’t keep any down here.”

“How idiotic of us,” Brian replies as he watches his partner run up the stairs.

Luckily Eric is quick and comes back down in good time. He holds his ass above Brian’s lap and lets him stretch him just enough to make sure the intrusion is somewhat comfortable. As soon as
Eric says, “I’m good, I’m good. I just want your cock in me” Brian pulls his fingers out and watches Eric sink down on his cock.

Eric’s the one that decides on the speed and Brian’s just along for the ride. He starts out slow and sensual, pressing kisses down his face and neck as he slowly lifts himself up and sinks down again. Brian tries to muffle his groans as he quietly begs Eric to go faster. Around the 10 minute mark, Eric gives in and is bouncing on Brian’s lap at just the right speed. He tries to hold on for longer but soon enough Brian is coming in Eric’s tight hole and Eric follows soon after. Eric collapses onto his chest and breathes into the crook of his neck. Brian puts his arms around his back and they sit there for a minute before moving and getting dressed again.

Eric starts making homemade chicken noodle soup so that Lily might be able to keep it down and won’t be bothered by any aromas of other foods she would usually eat. Brian goes ahead and wakes her up then carries her downstairs to the couch. She seems to be doing a little better but she still feels warm.

“You feeling any better since your nap?”

Lily shrugs, “My tummy still hurts some.”

Brian sighs, “I’m sorry. If it makes you feel any better, Papa’s in the kitchen making us all some soup.”

Lily gasps, “Papa’s home?!”

Lily jumps up and Brian reminds her not to run as he walks her towards the kitchen so that she can greet her father.

“Look who’s up,” Brian says to Eric, who has his back to them.

Eric turns around and immediately comes over and crouches down on Lily’s level, “Hey, baby! You feeling any better?”

“A little bit. My tummy is feeling funny,” Lily informs him, “I missed you lots and I wanted you here with me.”
“I missed you too,” Eric tells her sincerely as she picks her up for a hug. “You were on my mind all day.”

“I called Daddy since he hasn’t been home in days and he came home to take care of me.”

Brian frowns and Eric tells her, “He’s been home, honey. He has been working really hard and just stayed at the office late. He would go and kiss you goodnight when he got back even though you were already asleep.”

“My daddy loves me,” Lily beams.

“You bet he does. Your papa loves you too. You are a very lucky girl to have such doting parents.”

“Uh huh! What kind of soup are you making?”

“Chicken noodle soup. That okay with you?”

“I don’t know. I’ll try to eat it.”

“As long as you try. We can’t have your stomach being empty or you’ll just feel worse.”

“That’s what Daddy and Jess said.”

“Then you know it has to be true.”

Eric sets Lily down on a bar stool and lets her watch while he cooks their meal. Brian stays close by to keep an eye on her and makes sure she sips on her ginger ale. She does end up feeling sick again and Brian takes her to the bathroom but Lily claims that it’s a false alarm and she feels better.

And she does seem to be feeling better. She does have some bathroom issues after dinner and throws up once more but by 8 she seems like she’s done for the day. She’s very happy when
Cynthia stops by for about an hour before heading back to her hotel. They let her stay up later than they usually would on a school night only because Eric is staying home with her tomorrow. When they do put her to bed, Brian stays true to his word and reads her a few bedtime stories until she falls asleep.

Brian and Eric end up hanging out downstairs for a while. They fuck two more times before going up to bed and fucking once more. After they are spent and Brian is lying in Eric’s arms, they talk about their days and meetings planned for the next week.

“You’re sure you have time to stay home with Lily tomorrow?” Brian asks.

“Yeah, it’s fine. My schedule wasn’t that heavy anyway. She’ll probably be okay but I don’t want to risk sending her to school sick or her passing it along to another child. If she’s feeling better, I’ll just work with her here.”

“I’ll try to come back earlier than I have been. She’s been upset that I haven’t been around the last couple of days and I know that now. Damn, she had to wonder why I wasn’t at the house since I wasn’t out of town on business or anything.”

“Brian, I explained things the best I could. I think she logically understood that you were really busy at work but missed you immensely regardless.”

“I missed her too. And you. I guess.”

"Be still my beating heart!" Eric proclaims before he smiles and kisses him. Then he sobers up.

“Take whatever time you need tomorrow but try not to work yourself to the ground. And try to be back before Lily goes to bed. She feels better about her day when she sees you.”

“Alright.”

There’s a silence for a minute before Eric breaks it, “Shit, at the rate we’re going it will be impossible to have time to plan the wedding.”
Brian rolls his eyes, “I still don’t see why we can’t do something small and do it sooner.”

Eric glares, “I plan on only getting married once, Brian. Let’s make it count.”

Brian smiles, “Hamptons it is then.”

“You better be saying that since you are the one who put down the deposit at Solé East without asking if I wanted to chip in on that.”

Brian shrugs, “You can pay for the Honeymoon.”

Eric laughs, “Okay, deal. Will we even have time for that?”

“We’ll make time.”

“Where will Lily stay? She could stay at Lindsay and Melanie’s but it’s sort of a hassle to send her up to Toronto and get her from up there.”

“Emmett and Drew are willing to take her for a week or so. Maybe that way she’ll get sick of Duncan.”

“Wait, when was this even brought up?”

Brian looks at him then looks away.

“Brian...have you been planning our wedding without me?”

Brian chooses his words carefully, “I’ve been seeing a lot of Emmett and we did hire him to plan it. I wanted to surprise you with something beautiful.”

Eric stares at him with a twinkle in his eye and flips Brian on his back to press kisses all over his
Eric kisses him a few more times and Brian holds back laughs at the silliness of the situation before Eric stops, “But I’m picking the menu and the music.”

“Oh? And what will they be?”

Eric thinks, “Hmmm. For the menu, there will be a choice between Steak, Chicken, Salmon, or vegetarian whatever-the-fuck they eat with sides of sautéed vegetables, red skin mashed potatoes, and a salad. I also want those cream cheese pastries that Emmett makes. And cake.

“Whatever you want.”

“I want all of them. Maybe I should design the menu when I’m not hungry. That soup didn’t fill me up at all.”

Brian snorts, “Want me to go down and make you something?”

Eric thinks about it and shakes his head, “No. I need to fit into my tux for the big day. No carbs after 7.”

“You have never went by that rule. Ever.”

“It’s never too late to start.”

“Whatever, princess. Who will be doing the music?”

“Well, I’m not taking Lily’s suggestion by hiring Taylor Swift. She’ll be disappointed but so be it.”

“Can you imagine Michael’s face though? He’ll think we went nuts,” Brian laughs.
Eric puts on his best Michael impression and says, "Brian, are you sure you are feeling alright? Do you even want this? Brian!"

"You'll always be young and beautiful but that doesn't mean she has to be here!"

They both laugh and settle down so that Eric can tell Brian his idea of musical entertainment.

"I was actually thinking of hiring Nathan's band to play."

Brian doesn't have anything to say about that.

"So? What do you think about that? You think they are really good too."

"Yeah, but they're busy-"

"Previews don't start until May. The wedding is on April 19th and on a Sunday. They'll have time to plan what they are going to play and it won't interfere with the show."

"You have this all planned out, don't you?"

"No. If you have a problem with it we don't have to hire them. I just figured that since we've been hanging out with Justin and Nathan it would be something nice to do."

"Don't you mean it would be weird to do? You really want my ex's boyfriend performing at our wedding?"

Eric shrugs, "I didn't think of it like that. I just thought it would be courteous to do for a friend."

“Oh, I forgot that you and Nathan are all buddy buddy now.”

“I wouldn’t go that far but I do think he’s a good kid and we’ve had some good conversations."
Same goes with Justin. Maybe you can ask Justin how he feels about it tomorrow when you go have lunch with him.”

“Yeah, about that…are you okay with that? I only offered because he needs someone to talk to about his dad.”

Eric lets out a sigh. “Brian, you know I don’t have a problem with us hanging out with him or with Nathan. I’ll admit that when you told me you were meeting him for lunch alone, I wasn’t thrilled and I may have been secretly pissy over it. But I did see him when he came over here. He was distraught and he needs a friend close by who really knows the situation. And the fact you told me straight out that you asked him to meet for lunch means something. You didn’t try to hide it or put a spin on it.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Brian mutters.

“I know that. You are honest and I appreciate that. Most of the time. The fact that you are so honest makes me a little more comfortable with you meeting up with him. You were comfortable with telling me so that tells me you are comfortable enough not to…you know.”

Brian glares, “No. I don’t know. What do you think I am going to do with him?”

“Are you even listening? I said that I don’t think you are going to do anything and I trust you. Jesus, Brian.”

Brian knows he’s being unfair and he needs to stop being a dick but sometimes the mention of Justin makes him get so fucking defensive.

“Sorry.”

“Hmm.”

“But just so you know…I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t do anything with him. I wouldn’t do that to you. I never want to lose you.”
Eric isn't saying anything. Brian is afraid to look at him but the curiosity gets the best of him and he glances over to his partner. And there Eric is, looking back at him. Brian leans his head forward and his lips connect with Eric's. After the soft kiss ends, Brian lets Eric lay his head on his chest and they fall asleep like that. He feels content having Eric in his arms, just like he always does. The last waking thoughts he has are that he was telling the truth. He never wants to lose this. He also really hopes that he was telling the truth when it came to the other part of his promise as well.
Justin opens up to Brian on their lunch date.

Those who have been waiting for Brian and Justin to have a significant chapter together will probably love and hate me at the same time for this.

Justin steps outside on the busy Manhattan sidewalk. Although he has been what one could call truly successful for the last three and a half years, he still feels a flutter of excitement and happiness when he gets a show at a prestigious and respected gallery. He has his own gallery he can show his work at. Once in a while he will. However, he built that for unrecognized artists. Justin had the money so he had thought, “Why not?” Running it had become almost as much of a passion as painting itself. Almost. Painting got him through a lot of shit on an emotional level. It got him through the bomb. It got him through his breakup with Brian. It got him through his abrupt breakup with Dean, who he had been the first man he had actually fallen more than just a little for post-Brian. Diving into his art got him through in a way only Brian had been able to. It even got him through his worries the day he took his dad to the airport.

God, that had been more emotional than he had been expecting.

Nathan had been so wonderful and supportive throughout all the stuff that had happened with his father. He had been surprised about that. Ever since Nathan’s mother died, he hadn’t had a parental figure since. Justin refused to acknowledge Nathan’s demon of a sperm donor as a father. Justin never met him but he was glad the man was dead. Despite the fact that the circumstances of Victor Hall’s death had been less than ideal and had affected Nathan’s psyche immensely, he couldn’t help but think that the monster deserved much worse.

So it had been surprising when Nathan had actually taken a liking to Craig. It was more surprising that Craig had really liked and approved of Nathan as well. They had exchanged phone numbers. Fucking phone numbers. He knows his father felt a small connection with Nathan when it was revealed they both had panic attacks, something that had been new and confusing for his dad but come on. Nathan knew the shit Craig had done in the past. When Justin brought it up after his dad was on the plane, Nathan shrugged and said, “I didn’t know him before but he seems like he really loves you and wants to know you again. People do change.”
And while he appreciated Nathan’s optimism and knew deep down his boyfriend was probably right, it would be nice to talk to someone who knew how his father was before.

So, since the meeting ended earlier than he was expecting, Justin takes an eastbound train then walks to Kinnetik to meet Brian instead of at the restaurant.

He knows he should just find something to do to pass the time but he is curious about how the new office looks. He had been there for Kinnetik’s conception and the fact that it has grown this much really astounds him. Actually, no it doesn’t. If anyone could pull off major success, it was Brian Kinney.

He walks through the office doors and heads to the front desk to be called up to the correct floor. Security is tighter here than he remembers the office being in Pittsburgh but that’s to be expected, especially with other companies in the building. He gets into the elevator, heads to the 20th floor, and steps off at the executive floor of Kinnetik.

He walks past suited men and well-dressed women and walks through the arch carved into the glass panels.

“Hello,” Justin greets the woman at the desk, “I’m here to meet Brian?”

“Brian? Well, aren’t you on familiar terms.”

“You could say that,” Justin smirks.

“You have an appointment?”

“No, I’m supposed to meet him for lunch but got here a little early. If he’s busy, I can wait.”

The woman laughs, “I’m just messing with you. Justin, right? I’m Malia, Brian’s assistant. It’s nice to meet you. Brian should be out in a couple of minutes. You can sit, if you want.”
“Thank you.”

“Want anything to drink?”

“No, thanks. How long have you been working for Brian?”

Malia thinks on it then replies, “A little over two years. I started with him in Chicago, my hometown. It was hard to live up to Cynthia, but I managed.”

Justin nods, “Brian has always loved Cynthia.”

“She does know how to put up with his bullshit. But luckily I catch onto things quickly.”

“What do you catch onto quickly, Henderson?”

Brian steps out of his office with a raised brow. Justin can already tell he likes Malia when she just raises an eyebrow back.

“Your bullshit.”

Brian shrugs, turns his head to look at Justin and say, “It’s true,” then turns back to Malia.

“How did those interviews go today?”

Malia shakes her head, “One girl was a nervous wreck, another was so chipper that you’d kill her before her first day was done, and the last one spoke too softly.”

Brian nods gravely, “Well, we can’t have that. I need another tough as nails assistant.”

“We can always go to the Bronx in the middle of the night to look.”
Brian actually thinks on it, “How about we save that as a last resort? I should be back by 1:30 to prepare for the meeting at 3. Call me if the building burns down.”

“Will do.”

Brian turns back to look at him and it’s the first time that Justin feels truly nervous by this meeting. Should he be doing this? Meeting with his practically married ex-fiancé/first love/the man who was his everything for a decent chunk of his life without the presence of either of their current significant others? He didn’t even tell Nathan. His boyfriend had been a little distant with him. Justin was pretty sure Nathan was onto him when it came to his conversations with Brian. He hadn’t been that subtle about it. Meeting Brian without him knowing was only sending a surge of guilt through him now. He needed to stop being such a shit.

“You coming?”

He’d stop after he had lunch with Brian.

Justin gets up and Brian leads the way, popping his head into a few offices to request a few things before pressing the button for the elevator. As soon as they’re in, it’s hard to think of what to say.

“So where-”

“How’s-”

They cut each other off and Brian lets out a chuckle then says, “Since you’re here, we can go somewhere closer to here, if you don’t mind. There’s a good Turkish restaurant a couple blocks away we can go to. Malia brought some back for both of us a couple of weeks ago and I’ve been craving it.”

“That’s fine. I can eat whatever.”

Brian smirks and mutters, “Don’t I remember?”
The elevator pings and a couple of business men join them in the elevator. By the time the elevator is on the ground floor, they’re packed in like sardines and he has to remember that he shouldn’t feel a thrill due to being flush against Brian.

“How did your meeting go?” Brian asks him after they go out the revolving doors.

“It was a done deal, but they ended up wanting more paintings than I expected. That’s a good thing but it means I’ll need to be getting to work.”

“It’ll pay off. What date’s the show?”

“June 21. You are more than welcome to come, of course. Eric too. I think I may be able to swing it so Emmett can be the one to arrange and cater it, since I’m the primary artist being featured.”

Brian snorts, “You can barely get Emmett to settle down when he’s working. He’s moving non-stop. I doubt we’ll be able to talk to him much. But I’ll let Eric know and we’ll try to come out for it.”

Justin nods, smiling, “It’ll be great if you can.”

“Here’s the place,” Brian tells him, changing the subject as he gently takes Justin by the elbow to lead him into the restaurant.

The place looks pretty nice but it isn’t crowded at all. They’re promptly led by an older man to a table and they sit down across from each other to look at their menus. For the first few minutes, the only speech that is exchanged regards to what they are thinking about ordering. It’s a few minutes in when Brian asks, “So how are you really doing?”

Justin looks away and answers, “I’ve been okay. And how have-”

“Don’t bullshit me.”

Before Justin can answer, they’re interrupted.
“Hello! I’m Ahmet. Would you gentlemen like something to drink or an appetizer?”

Brian clears his throat, “You want an appetizer? My treat.”

“If you are wanting to get one, I’ll have some of it.”

“We’ll get the Mucver as an appetizer and I’ll have an unsweetened iced tea to drink,” Brian tells the waiter.

“I’ll have a coke,” Justin supplies when the man turns to him.

“I’ll be back with your drinks and to take your orders.”

“Thank you.”

Brian turned back to him and silently waited for an answer.

“I’m...doing better, I guess.”

“You guess,” Brian echos, his voice and expression giving away nothing.

“Yeah, Brian. ‘I guess.’ Nothing has really changed from what I told you before.”

Brian sits back in his chair and looks at him with expectant eyes, “Then why don’t you share with the class how the rest of Craig’s visit went?”

Justin lets out a sigh, “He went to bed and cried himself to sleep Sunday night, like I told you. Nathan ended up peeking in to see if he was alright but Dad was already asleep or pretending to be. I planned on pretending that I hadn’t heard him but, since he went to bed so early, he woke up at like 4 am. I was having trouble sleeping and I heard him walk into the living room. I decided suck it up and go sit out there with him. I didn’t really want to but I was worried. He was-
“An unsweet tea for you and a coke for you,” the waiter interrupts as he puts their drinks down on the table, “Have you both decided what you are having for your entreès?”

Justin clears his throat and answers, “I’ll have the Kuzu Shish.”

Brian doesn’t take his eyes off him as he gives his order, “I’ll have the Adana Kebab.”

“I’ll run that back to our chef and your appetizer should be out shortly,” the waiter assures them as he departs.

“He was?” Brian prompts.

“Huh?” Justin replies dimly.

“You stopped at ‘he was.’ What was your dear ole’ dad doing?”

Justin glares at the sarcasm, “Listen, I understand if you don’t want to hear about this. It’s fine.”

“I asked, didn’t I? That should tell you I want to know what’s going on.”

“Why? Why do you want to know?”

Brian sits there, being fucking stubborn and not answering his fucking question. Why should he tell him all this if-

“Because I care,” Brian admits, “I know this is fucking you up and you don’t feel like you can talk to people about it. I remember how he acted back then and I was a big part of why he ditched you. So if you are needing to unload on someone, then it should be me.”

Justin feels his eyes soften at Brian’s gruff concern and you know what? It must get him comfortable enough to start talking with him.
“He was sitting there in the dark. Just sitting there on the couch, staring off into space. I sat down in a chair and just waited for him to say something but he didn’t. So finally I just said, “How worried do I need to be about you going back to Pittsburgh by yourself?” And he just said he didn’t know. And then I asked him something else. I don’t know how I worked up the nerve to ask but it was dark. I couldn’t really see his face. I think that made it easier and I had to know and if it turned out to be the case he needed someone knowing about it.

Justin takes a hitched breath, “I asked him if he was suicidal. If he was at risk of trying to kill himself. He didn’t answer. It was pretty evident that he was. So I asked him if he had attempted to do that to himself yet. I had to ask him a few times and only when he realized that I wasn’t going to let it go he told me he had tried a few months ago. That had... That had been hard to hear. I told him to tell me everything that happened. At first he was getting all nervous and upset but I told him that he needed to tell someone. I think I needed to know. I had all these images in my head. He said that he had broken his arm in a few places last spring. He fell off a ladder while he was trying to fix the rain gutter on his house. It had been pretty bad so he ended up driving himself to the hospital with one hand. They put his arm in a cast, prescribed him pain pills, the works. I guess he only took the pills when he absolutely needed them so there had been a fair amount left over. They sat in his medicine cabinet for months. I guess he had days where he’s felt okay enough emotionally and days where he felt awful but in the summer he just began feeling worse and worse and by fall he was fighting to get out of bed everyday.”

“Your appetizer,” Ahmet says quietly before he quickly leaves. Justin is pretty sure he heard some of it but Brian keeps looking at him, urging him to go on.

“He attempted to kill himself in October. One night, he downed all the pills he had with a bunch of alcohol and went to bed as though it were just any other night. He said he woke up with vomit all over his pillow and the worst hangover of his life. When I asked him if he was relieved when he woke up, he said no. At the time, he had been wishing that he slit his wrists too-”

Justin breaks off and covers his face. Just for a minute. He doesn’t want Brian to see him break down.

“Justin…” Brian murmurs as Justin feels him reach over the table to rub his shoulder.

He needs to pull himself out of it. He came here to eat with Brian. He won’t put all this on him. So he takes a deep breath, rubs his face, and ties things up.

“He told all of that to me with a straight face, almost robotic. I guess he called Molly the day after he woke up and she drove up to see him, although he didn’t tell her what he had done. I’m so
relieved she went. She usually avoids him at all cost so I’m glad she didn’t that day. Who knows what he could have done to himself? The rest of the visit was fine. He was weird about telling me all that but I tried to go out of my way to make sure had a decent last day. We went to see a show off-Broadway and to the transit museum. We watched the end of Nathan’s rehearsal and the three of us went out to eat. I took him to the airport on Tuesday afternoon and took both of us by surprise by hugging him. It was weird because I still haven’t fully forgiven him plus I haven’t seen him since he had me arrested. But...I don’t know. He looked like he needed it. There was a part of me that was like, “He didn’t give you the shit you needed when you needed it most.” But whatever. So I pulled him in and wrapped my arms around him. He was stiff at first, like he didn’t know what to do but when he hugged me back, he just broke. I tried to be strong and told him Molly was picking him up and to text me to let me know he got home alright and to let me know how his appointment went next Monday. He pulled himself together, nodded, and got on the plane. Molly was pissed that I had her pick him up. I haven’t told her everything but I told her to try to be kind to him and that he was in really bad shape.”

Justin looks at the almost forgotten appetizer and puts one of the zucchini slices on his plate.

“How has your week been?”

Brian blinks and shakes himself out of his silence, “Okay. A lot of it has been spent at work. I went home before lunch yesterday because Lily was sick.”

Justin feels a spike of concern at that, “Is she okay? What was wrong?”

“Stomach virus. She probably caught it from someone at preschool. It was disgusting but I didn’t want Jess, her nanny, to get it. And she wanted me there. Called me up, upset and scared because she was feeling so bad plus she hadn’t seen me in a couple days so she was missing me. I didn’t have much of a choice at that point.”

“Is she feeling better today?”

“Yeah. She’s not 100% by any means but she’s keeping food down. Eric’s staying home with her today.”

Justin nods. He likes Lily a lot. She’s adorable and seems to take to practically everyone she meets. She also makes Justin want kids of his own but he and Nathan haven’t talked about it.
“You’re a good father, Brian.”

Brian raises an eyebrow, “Because I went home to take care of my child?”

“Yes. And for other reasons. Sorry. I just remember how you felt like you weren’t back when Gus was little.”

Brian shrugs, “I still feel like I’m not equipped a lot of the time. I tend to talk to my kids like adults too much and still get annoyed kind of easily. It can be worse with Lily because we don’t have much in common when it comes to interests.”

Justin snorts, “She’s a three year old girly girl, Brian. What do you expect? You still love her.”

“Of course I love her. I’m just saying that I don’t have this down pat.”

Justin smiles affectionately, “I think you are doing a pretty good job.”

A small smile pulls at Brian’s lips, “Well, trying still does mean something.”

They are caught in a stare, just for a minute but it’s intense and Justin feels lost in it. For a very small amount of time, Justin feels like he is over a decade younger. He feels a rush of attraction and love and exhilaration, things he shouldn’t be feeling at all. Brian isn’t looking away either. It pleases him and it terrifies him.

“You meals, gentlemen,” Ahmet greets as he comes to their table with two hot plates.

Brian is the first to look away as he looks to Ahmet and thanks him. Justin manages to stop staring at Brian when Ahmet puts his plate down in front of him.

They eat and they talk about everything and nothing. At times, it feels like they are back in Pittsburgh with their relationship left unbroken. At others, it’s obvious that they have a long way till they get to know each other again. Radio silence for years has made them both grow up and the differences in their ways of living, both from each other and from then and now, is undeniable.
“I wanted to ask you something,” Brian says as he puts his fork down.

Justin swallows his food, “Go ahead.”

“Eric and I have a date set for the wedding. April 19th. It won’t be a huge wedding, basically just friends, family, and a few business associates. We’re having it at Solé East in the Hamptons and I was wondering if you and Nathan wanted to come. We’re sending out invitations this weekend but since you’re here, I figured I could ask you now.

Justin looks down so that his eyes won’t give anything away. He swallowed the lump in his throat and pushed down the unexpected sadness. He knew it was coming. He knew they were getting married. He was happy that Brian was happy, so he didn’t know why he was bothered by it.

“Justin, if it makes you uncomfortable you don’t have to come,” Brian tells him in a low voice.

Justin lifts his eyes to look at Brian and Brian looks like he understands. That whatever he says, Brian will accept and not question. But Justin is trying. He wants to be Brian’s friend. He misses having him in his life. He has since they split up. So he knows what he’s going to say.

“Count me in. I’ll be there,” Justin answers, forcing a smile on his face.

Brian looks for a lie but Justin is telling the truth. He will be there. So Brian nods and continues.

“Eric wanted me to also ask you if Nathan and his band would be interested in performing at the reception. I figure we’ll hire another musician as well to split up the time so that he can enjoy the reception. We’ll pay them well. If you want to pass the offer along and have him call Eric with his answer, I would appreciate it.”

“I’ll tell him about it and have him get back to you.”

Ahmet comes by with the bill, which Brian insists he pays. They both get up and Justin walks him back to Kinnetik. The walk is filled with little conversation until Brian gets to the revolving door.
“If you want to meet for lunch again or come over, just give me a call. Eric and Nathan can come too. Or not. I like talking to you.”

Justin is surprised by the admission and expresses just that, “Even though I was the one who talked most of the time?”

Brian shrugs, “You needed to get it out. I’m glad you did. One day the situation may be reversed and you can return the favor.”

Justin smiles, genuine this time, “I would like to meet again. I want this to work out. The two of us being friends, I mean.”

Brian smiles back, “Me too.”

“Maybe we can meet for lunch again sometime. I was planning on having a small dinner at the apartment on Sunday. You, Eric, and Lily are welcome to come.”

Brian thinks on it and nods, “We should be able to make it. I’ll give you a call. I’ll see you later, Justin.”

Brian goes through the revolving doors. Justin finally feels like he can breathe.

He gets back on the train and heads back to the apartment. He walks in and sees that Nathan is already home.

“Hey!” Justin says as he walks over to kiss him, “What are you doing back early?”

“We just ran through the show once and performed some of the songs a few times. I just got back a half hour ago. I figured I would just hang out until we have that set at 8. How did your meeting go?”

Justin smiles, “Great. He wants at least 15 pieces. I have some in storage that I have been planning to display but I’ll be busy.”
“You can handle it.”

Justin knows he’s going to have to tell Nathan about the lunch, especially now that Brian asked him to ask Nathan about performing at the reception.

“Hey, I need to talk to you about something,” Justin tells him, pulling Nathan over to the couch.

Nathan sits down next to him and glances over to him, “What is it?”

Justin lets out a breath, “Okay, so I met Brian for lunch today.”

Nathan stiffens at that, “Why?”

“Just to talk. As friends. He knows about the stuff that happened with my dad so he understands how confused I am about all of it.

“And I don’t?”

Shit. He shouldn’t have said anything. Or he should have said something before he went.

“You do. God, Nathan. You’ve been fucking incredible. You know how to talk to my dad in a way I can’t yet and were so supportive of me and I couldn’t have gotten through this past week without you. But...Brian was a big part of why my dad disowned me in the first place. I just needed to talk to someone who understood why I felt so conflicted.”

He knows Nathan is angry when he subtly moves his hand away from Justin’s.

“You know I understand shitty fathers. Better than most people.”

“I know that! I know you understand. But you met him and you guys actually hit it off. You spoke to him on the phone yesterday for a while and talked to him about how he was feeling. I figured
that you might not understand now because you like him and are worried about him.”

Nathan glares at that, “I’m always on your side, Justin. Just because I met a man who was different from what you described doesn’t mean I suddenly think he was never like that. I know that he was and I hate how he treated you. I would have listened to you.”

Justin starts to flounder for words, “I know that. I know you would have. I just…”

But Nathan brushes it off, “Forget it. You want to talk to him, that’s fine.”

“Nathan-”

“Look, I get that he was a big part of your life and you want to be friends with him again. Whatever, let’s move on.”

Justin stares at him, trying to find a catch. But Nathan can be a great actor when he wants to be.

“Was that all you needed to talk to me about?” Nathan questions, starting to get up.

“No. Brian and Eric are getting married on April 19th in the Hamptons and Eric came up with the idea of hiring the band to perform for some of the reception. Brian told me to ask you.”

At those words, Nathan seems to relax. Justin had been expecting the opposite, really. He thought that Nathan would blanch at the idea of performing at Brian’s wedding but apparently not.

“I’ll talk to the band to make sure they keep that date clear and call Eric to tell him we’re in.”

Justin pauses at Nathan’s immediate answer as Nathan gets up and goes into the kitchen. Justin sits there for a few seconds but goes to follow him. He finds Nathan unloading the dishwasher and Justin puts a hand out to gently grab his wrist.

“Hey,” Justin says quietly, “You don’t have to say yes if the idea weirds you out.”
Nathan looks over him and a small smile that doesn’t reach his eyes forms on his lips, “It’s fine. I like Eric a lot. He’s really happy with Brian and Brian’s done a lot for the band. What better way to thank them than perform at their wedding reception? Just promise you’ll save me a dance.”

Nathan leans over and lightly kisses Justin on the cheek. Justin tries to not let the idea of Brian and Eric dancing to Nathan’s voice get to him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! If you are still reading and like (or dislike) the story, let me know. Sometimes it’s hard when you get emails from upset readers not liking the story solely due to Brian and Justin being with other men. I love writing this Intersect. I love it so much that there’s going to be a sequel and possibly a third (and final) installment as well if people want it. But once in a while it gets frustrating when people only comment and sometimes bash me over not having B/J together yet in this particular story and it makes me question if people are that into the story itself. But I do want to thank those who feel passionate about Intersect, whichever way you feel.
Author's Note

I don't like to start drama here, but a reader has been harassing me for months about Brian/Eric and the ending to this story. She is now claiming that she works for a Gay & Lesbian Organization in India and that one of the men she helps has committed suicide over Intersect. Considering the 40 some messages this woman has sent me since December, I sincerely doubt this is true. She has proven that she is either very mentally unstable or a troll. However, I would like to apologize in advance if I come off as defensive in response to future comments who complain about Brian and Justin not being together. One person should not have an effect on me like this, but when you lie about things like suicide to get an answer to a story, it can be very distressing to the author. And, SPOILER ALERT: Did people kill themselves when JK Rowling killed off Dumbledore? Did people kill themselves when Diane left Cheers? Did people kill themselves when Sam became addicted to demon's blood in Supernatural? I sincerely doubt it. Just because I am writing a story where things don't go smoothly and completely happily does not give them the right to harass me via email and accuse me of murder because I apparently caused a 21 year old Indian boy to kill himself today due to writing fanfiction (I got the email within an hour of posting Chapter 22.)

Here are a few of the emails sent to me in our conversation.

"I'm not harrasing you I told you before also many people relate to b/j n my own. Brother died after that series ended without b/j I warn you many tyms but you dint listen to me now tell me who is responsible for that kid death your weather you believe it or not you killed an innocent 21,yes boy ur dishgusting"

"Just I said you something your getting angry but what about that guy who died after reading your story n god knows how many will die after reading Brian marriage with other you will b responsible n I want to clear one thing to u lady if any other boy died cos of your story now that I will come to your country in file a case against you & your story I swar to god"

"Will Brian marry Eric or not say I want to say this people hear pls atlest for sake of this guys say pls say me your not planing for Brian"

"U know what your fan fiction & Brian getting married to another guy is important but you know what dear u can do as you please but I promise u 1thng if anything happen to any of my boy now you will pay for it if you don't want to say anything abt Brian marriage its OK with. Me cos u feel shame n guilty if anything happen to them I'm not saying you to Chang e plot of your story I'm just saying u weather he will marry to Eric now your wish cos ur doing a sinful thing I won't say anything. Now its up to u"

My harassment that I am getting from Intersect isn't just "I want Brian and Justin to be together!"
That is understandable. I get that. I may get annoyed due to making it clear what this story is about and stating that they will eventually get together, but your comments are heard yet do not affect my mindset. I know you all mean well and I love that this story brings out your passion. It's emails like these where someone uses a very serious thing like suicide to get a spoiler for a story. I'm sorry, but no one really knows what's going to happen in the future chapters of Intersect. I am not withholding this to be mean and I don't get sick pleasure out of this, but I don't believe in spoilers. (Except for the ones I listed up above.Oops!)

Anyway, I didn't want the majority of my readers to think that my author's note last chapter has anything to do with them. Thank you all for reading. Tell me what you think of all this. I need someone to figure this out with.
Eric finally gives into one of Lily's requests.

I wanted to make this one long chapter that also covered the dinner they will be having at Justin's but it was getting too long. That will be up in the next day or two though and will be a lengthy chapter as well as a little more bittersweet.

Eric would need to work on cooking lessons with Lily. If a peanut butter & jelly sandwich, celery, and crackers could be considered cooking, that is. But letting her spread peanut butter and jelly on the bread after she begged him to was a bad call. He was all about giving her a reasonable amount of independence. He usually let her pick out what she wanted to wear as long as it was weather appropriate and didn’t try to influence her too much when it came to her feelings and interests. So when she said she wanted to make her own lunch because she wanted to learn how to cook, he had been all for it. He directed her to an easier meal to make that didn’t involve the stove and wouldn’t let her touch anything sharper than a children’s butter knife but other than that he tried not to interfere too much, even when she decided she wanted to put crushed up crackers on her sandwich. She insisted that it was MUCH better that way. Bullshit. He never put crushed up Goldfish Crackers on a sandwich in his life, for her or for anyone else.

The fact she made that decision should have been a good indicator that he shouldn’t leave her alone for thirty seconds to get her favorite cup. Because when he came back, she had decided that her sandwich needed even more peanut butter and got it all over the counter, her face, her hair, and a few spoonfuls of jelly on the floor. They really should look into getting a maid again.

“You,” Eric says sternly, “Don’t move a muscle and eat your sandwich. Then I am taking you upstairs for a bath.”

Lily purses her lips, “I’m going to have to move to eat! Do you think the food is just gonna come up to my mouth so I can bite it?!”

Eric manages not to laugh at her sarcastic inquiry, “Don’t pretend like you don’t know what I’m saying. Eat your food. You know better than to make a mess like this. Or I thought you did. You
did say you were a big girl. Maybe that just isn’t the case.”

Lily gasps, completely offended, “I am! I am a big girl!”

Lily starts to get up in an attempt to convince him that he’s wrong but he stops her.

“Ah! Get back in your seat right now. You eat your sandwich and celery. Then you can prove to me that you’re a big girl by helping me clean up your mess after you’re done.”

Lily pouts as she takes a bite into her sandwich before pulling a strange face.

“Papa, I don’t really like it.”

“I don’t care. You didn’t crumble those crackers on there by accident. You made it for yourself so you have to eat it. I don’t want you wasting any food.”

“But-”

“No buts, Lily.”

“You are being really mean today. Mean Papa!” Lily fumes.

Eric snorts, “Yeah, I’m just awful. Hurry up with your food.”

He is surprised that Lily ends up eating her sandwich. She leaves the crusts and looks at him defiantly.

“I won’t eat the crusts. I won’t!”

“You never do. I’m telling you, you’re missing out,” Eric tells her as he hands her a wet rag, “Here. Clean the mess and crumbs off the floor while I clean the table.”
Lily does what she’s told with a scowl on her face. Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed, Jesus Fucking Christ.

“All done, Papa.”

Eric gets the last of the crumbs in the wastebasket before picking her up and holding her away from him so peanut butter doesn’t get on his clothes.

“I’m not having you track peanut butter through the house. Up the stairs we go.”

He tries to get her to lighten up by jiggling her a little and making plane sounds but to no avail. He knows she’s just being a little kid and pouting is part of the norm. It probably isn’t anything but the fact that she is such a downer today concerns him.

She stays quiet as he runs the bath water. She takes off her clothes and gets in only to silently look down at the water while he tries to get the peanut butter out of her hair.

“What’s the matter with you, huh?” Eric asks her quietly as he gently scrubs her scalp.

“Nothing,” Lily pouts.

“Come on, you can tell me.”

Lily pouts for a few more seconds before muttering, “You said we could get a pet when we moved here. I don’t see a pet.”

Eric raises an eyebrow, “That’s it?”

“I’m by myself all the time, Papa. There’s no one to play with,” Lily mumbles, lightly splashing the water.
“You’ve made friends at preschool. I can talk to their parents to see if you can meet with them after school or on the weekends once in a while.”

“I play with some of them but they made friends with each other before I came here. They have best friends there. I don’t have a best friend there. When the Miss Thompson says ‘Pick a partner!’ no one wants to be my partner. They made friends when they started school before me. Since there are no extra people left, Miss Thompson puts me in with two other people.”

Eric feels a spike of sadness for her, “Oh, honey…,” he comforts as he rubs her back, “What about Duncan? Duncan is your best friend. You get to see him practically every week, sometimes more.”

But Lily shakes her head, “It’s not the same. I don’t see him all the time. I don’t go to school with him and he doesn’t live with me either.”

“Daddy and I live here with you.”

Lily looks at him with sympathy, “Yes, you do. And I like that you and Daddy live with me very much. But you are both very old and you just aren’t up for playing all the time.”

Eric looks away to laugh. She says the funniest things sometimes. He wishes Brian could have heard that first hand.

“Papa, it isn’t funny. I have no one to play with here.”

“I’m sorry, baby. I shouldn’t laugh. Things are still hectic with work. Daddy just got the Coke campaign and I’m picking up new projects and working in Bensonhurst all the time. We always make sure one of us is here on the evenings and weekends but I don’t want to put any extra stress on Jess with a pet around until fall comes along and things have calmed down. Summer will be over so the vacation, sunglasses, and back to school advertising campaigns will be as well. Daddy will have more time to stay at home with you and my company will be more settled as well. I think that will be a good time to get a pet, don’t you?”

Lily sniffles and lets out a whine before putting her knees to her chest to cry. And it may be over something as trivial as getting a pet but fuck, it breaks his heart. He knows that this move has affected his happy girl. He and Brian make sure she has fun most of the time but he knows she misses Cynthia and the weekend trips to Toronto they haven’t been able to take due to work. He knows she misses Olivia, Tori, and Quinn from her old nursery school and, while she has always
been a social little girl, it has been hard for her to find a close friendship at school like she had with those three girls. Duncan had been a savior. They both were a little out of place in their new preschools due to being the new kids and they have really relied on each other for companionship.

“M-maybe....” Lily cries, “Maybe you and daddy can give me a little sister? Lots of kids at my school have a little brother or sister. I would be a really good big sister. I would take good care of her.”

Eric freezes at the request. It’s a request that hasn’t been made by Lily before but it is something he has actually given some thought in the last year or so. He had hinted the prospect to Brian a few times in Chicago but Brian managed to dodge it very subtly. He wasn’t set on having another kid, per say but he wasn’t against it either. He was really open to having another one and if it did happen, he wanted the baby to be born before he and Brian were too old. Brian would be turning 44 in May and he would be turning 39 in July. They could probably go a couple more years and then have a kid if they did decide to but he wanted Lily and a potential sibling to be close enough in age so that they could enjoy each other. Age-wise, now would be a perfect time. Lily was in preschool so it wasn’t like they would be taking care of two kids all day everyday but she would still be young enough where she could be close to him or her as they got older.

But fuck, the prospect was scary. He hated that she was so lonely and upset but that was a lot to ask for out of the blue. However, he knew he had to do something to placate her. It may be spoiling her, especially when she made a mess in the kitchen, but she had a lot of changes happen in the last few months that she didn’t necessarily want but went with most of it in stride. It was sort of a dick move not to reward her in some way.

“Papa? Are you thinking about it? Are you thinking about a baby sister?” Lily asks cautiously.

Eric shakes himself out of his thoughts.

“Come on. Out of the tub. Let’s get you dried off so I can do your hair.”

“I can do it myself,” Lily pouts as she splashes.

Eric puts a towel around her regardless and she dries herself off. He takes her to her room and sits her on the vanity stool to do her hair as she complains about wanting to do it her way.

“Papa, I want to do my hair myself.”
“Honey, if your hair was straight I would let you try but your hair is curlier than mine. It’s hard to tame and you know that. Daddy and I have to do it for you until you’re a little older or it will tangle all up.”

“Maybe you can straighten it for me and I will do it then. I don’t need these stupid curls anyway.”

Eric kisses her on top of her head, “I love your curls. They’re beautiful and they’re you. I’m going to dry it and braid it, how does that sound?”

“I want to do it.”

“It’ll be quicker if I do it. You don’t even know how to braid.”

“So?”

Eric sighs, “So, you’ll have more time to play before we go to Justin and Nathan’s if I do it. Plus we’ll be able to walk to the pet store down the street so you can pick out a pet. A caged pet.”

Lily lets out the most excited gasp he’s ever heard from her before she starts squealing jumping up and down.

“PAPA!!!!! REALLY?!?!?! I’M SO EXCITED!!!!!!!”

Lily throws herself at his legs as she giggles almost maniacally.

“Only if you sit down and let me get you ready. No running around and putting things off. We’ll run out of time and I might change my mind if that happens.

Lily sits back down and practically vibrates in her seat as he dries and French braids her hair. Those YouTube tutorials have come in handy because he would never be able to do this as a beginner with the way she is wiggling. But he does get it done and she gets up to zoom around the room in excitement.
“What do you want to wear?”

“I have to wear something beautiful because I’m meeting my new pet today! Hmm, let’s see...no, not that. Not that. Maybe that but not that—”

“How about this maroon top and a pair of jeans?”

Lily thinks on it for a few seconds then says, “I think that will look good.”

Eric smiles at her, “Me too. Now go get dressed.”

Lily puts on her clothes in record time before rushing down the stairs to grab her coat off the hanger as well as his own.

“Here, Papa! I got your coat for you. Put it on, put it on!”

Eric takes the coat from her hands and gets Lily’s shoes on her feet.

“I expect you to be good. No running around and no whining if I say no to something. We both have to be in agreement. I want you to listen to the employees at the store about every pet we look at and remember what they say when it comes to how to take care of it. You are going to have to take care of it, you understand? This is your responsibility. I’ll help you but all the heavy duty work will be left to you.”

Lily nods enthusiastically, “Yes, Papa. I will I will. I promise.”

Eric gives her one serious nod, “Out the door with you, then.”

The two of them walk into the garage. He doesn’t know what they are going to end up needing so even though he has barely driven the car since they moved, he takes it down the street in case what they buy ends up being too much to carry. In hindsight, he really should have asked Brian before he went through with this. He knows it would have been harder to convince the man that Lily
really needed a companion at home. He also knows that once he did convince him, he would have wanted to be there for it to experience seeing Lily’s happiness.

Fuck, he’s a dick. He knows it’s too late to back out now but really needs to keep himself in check. He gets Lily in her car seat and drives to the pet store that’s close to their apartment. It seems like such a waste in gas but Eric has a feeling that he will be thankful he drove here.

“Honey, stop for one second,” Eric tells her as he holds onto her hand with one hand and gets his phone out with another.

“One! Okay, let’s go!” Lily exclaims as she tries to pull Eric closer to their destination.

Eric gives her a playful glare and clicks on Brian’s name in his contact list.

“Brian Kinney speaking,”

Eric snorts, “Shut up, you know it’s me.”

“He senses Brian’s smile even though the man isn’t there.

“What are you and the spawn up to on this lovely Sunday afternoon?”

“Not working like a maniac, unlike some people.”

Brian laughs, “I’ll be home in a couple of hours. I just had to take care of some paperwork.”

“And you made sure that you would be free from the 18th to the 28th?”

“Of this month? I think it’s too late for that.”

“Of April, smartass,” Eric smiles.
“Yes, my dearest husband-to-be,” Brian says sarcastically, “Malia is getting insulted because she thinks I assume she’s incompetent of remembering that she can’t schedule me for anything on those dates. Don’t worry. It’s set. Any big corporate heads that demand a meeting during that time will just have to wait. We’ll be free to fuck and suck and-”

“Sightsee?” Eric suggests.

“If there’s time. And all will be done without a care in the world since Emmett and Drew agreed to take Lily until we get back.”

Eric freezes as he and Lily enter the store. Shit. He thought this through even less than he originally realized.

“Uh...Brian? How mad do you think Emmett and Drew would be if they watched Lily and maybe...I don’t know, a guinea pig? Or a hamster?”

“A snake!” Lily squeals as she runs over to the glass display.

Brian is silent for a few beats and Eric closes his eyes, anticipating the man’s anger.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing yet. I know I should have told you. It was a horrible move not only as a partner but also as a co-parent not to talk to you about it before saying yes. You didn’t hear her today though. She’s so sad, Brian. The idea of this is making her so happy.”

“You should have waited until after the wedding,” Brian mutters, “It’s not fair to Emmett and Drew to throw a fucking pet at them while we’re off honeymooning.”

“I know that now. I didn’t think about the honeymoon,” Eric confesses, “I was too focused on Lily and how she was feeling. She’s so lonely, Brian,”
Brian lets out a sigh, “I know. I get it. I may have given in too.”

Eric huffs out a breath, “No, you wouldn’t. Not as easily as I did.”

“Don’t make it out like you did a bad thing. Listen, don’t get anything until you get a hold of Emmett or Drew to make sure it’s okay. Stella is good with the kids but who knows how she would be around another animal. Call them and if they are okay with having the pet stay then it’s okay with me if she gets one. But not a fucking snake. I heard her in the background.”

Eric looks over to see Lily absolutely mesmerized by the slithering creature.

“Yeah, I’ll pull her away as soon as I call Emmett. Thanks, Brian. I’m sorry for saying yes to her without discussing it first. I just felt so bad.”

“We’ll talk about it when I get home, alright? You can tell me what she said and we’ll figure it out. Now go call Emmett before she gets too excited.”

“Alright. Love you. Sorry again.”

Brian huffs, “Eric, chill out and hang up. But you too.”

Eric hears a click on the line and he stands closer to Lily so that she doesn’t wander off before calling Emmett.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Emmett. It’s Eric. I hate to spring this on you and it’s completely my fault that I have to, but I was wondering if I can ask for a favor.”

“Of course, baby! Ask away! Duncan, sweetie! Go eat your lunch! You can play with Stella after you’re done. Sorry, Eric. Go on.”

“Right...so I sort of gave into one of Lily’s requests earlier. She’s been feeling down about moving
and has been asking for a pet for months. We’re not getting a dog or anything. We want to start her out with something small and easy to take care of. To be honest, it is to get Brian more used to an animal in the house rather than Lily. Anyway, she was having a bad day today. I’m not sure what brought it on. She wasn’t on her best behavior and she had a temper. I knew something was driving her to act out. I got her to talk to me and she just got so upset because she missed Chicago and is feeling lonely here. I told her we could get a pet when we moved into the house and she brought it back up today. I don’t know...I know I shouldn’t reward her when she was sassing me earlier but I think getting her a small pet might help a lot so I am giving in.”

“And you are on your way to the pet store as we speak, aren’t you?” Emmett says knowingly.

“We’re actually already there.”

“Have you told Brian?”

“I just did. He’s pissed but he’s not going to deny her of it when I said yes already.”

“Well, I think it will be good for her. She’s a sweet little girl and she deserves a pet. I don’t think it is spoiling her when she’s gone through a move and several changes in the last few months. Duncan is crazy about Stella but we had her first, of course.”

“I’m glad you agree. So...I was just wondering if I could ask you to watch the pet while Brian and I go on our honeymoon? I would pay you of course and give you everything you need to take care of it. It’ll be a caged pet and we could bring it in the day before the wedding so that you don’t have to stop at the house afterwards. But if you don’t want to that is completely fine. We can probably hire someone to come feed it and interact with it while Lily stays with you-”

Emmett laughs, “Eric, it’s fine. We can put the cage in Duncan’s room and if Stella seems like she might be getting too excited when the kids get it out, we can put her in the parlor for a little bit until it’s back in its cage. What have you decided on getting?”

“Papa, a snake!” Lily exclaims, pointing out the obvious.

“Um...Did I hear her say snake? About agreeing to take care of Lily’s pet for the week-”

“She’s not getting a snake,” Eric says pointedly.
“But-” Lily starts to protest but Eric puts a finger to his lips.

“Oh, thank god. I don’t think I could handle feeding one. As long as I don’t have to feed your pet something alive, I can handle it with no problem. I know Lily’s taste tend to be a little eccentric but I lived on a farm and I’m good with all different sorts of animals. Good luck finding your new addition!”

“Thanks Emmett. It will be something easy, I swear.”

The two say their goodbyes and Eric hangs up. He feels Lily’s head brush against his leg as she looks up at him.

“Who was that?” she asks.

“Emmett. I wanted to make sure he would take care of a pet when you go and stay with him for the week after the wedding.”

“Or my pet and I can go with you and Daddy,” Lily suggests.

“Daddy and I need alone time,” Eric tells her because, as much as he loves his daughter, she is not coming on their honeymoon with them.

“I would be good,” Lily says, trying to tempt him.

“No. Besides, Duncan would be upset that you didn’t come stay with him.”

“True,” Lily concedes, “Now, come on! We have to find my new pet!”

They look at all the animal displays and Lily oohs and ahs over every single animal. Every. Single. One.
“So what do you think about a goldfish?” Eric suggests when they get to the feeder tank. They were twenty cents and it would be easy enough to replace in case it ended up dying. His older brother George had a fish that lived for thirteen years. His parents ended up installing a pond to put in their backyard. Felipe spent the last five years of his life in that pond and grew exponentially as soon as they gave him the bigger space. His parents bought a couple of Koi fish to keep it company. If Felipe would have died peacefully, he would have looked back at that fish and thought he lived a good long life for a preschool carnival fish. But Felipe didn’t die peacefully. Felipe was eaten by a bobcat that climbed over their fence. It was totally fucked. It was even more fucked that every goldfish Eric had as a kid, no matter how well he took care of it, died within a month. George forgot to feed Felipe several days at a time. Such bullshit.

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea,” Lily answers as she presses her nose against the glass.

“How come?”

“Becaussssee,” Lily starts before pausing to think of the reasons, “I can’t cuddle with a goldfish. If I play with him he would die because he needs water. So he would have no one to play with and I wouldn’t have anyone to play with. I would have to get two so he could have a friend. But there are so many. What if I take him away from his family? We don’t know. I don’t want a goldfish, Papa. Not right now.”

Her reasoning is actually pretty sound, despite her overthinking some of it. He’s surprised by it though so he nods in agreement.

“You’re right. A pet rock it is.”

Lily giggles, “Papa! You can’t have a rock as a pet!”

“They exist, I kid you not.”

Lily shakes her head, “That’s just silly. A rock can’t play with you and a rock can’t love you. They can’t eat or drink. They’re not pets!”

“I suppose you’re right. What do you think would be a better pet?”

“Hmmmm...maybe this one,” Lily says as she approaches a tarantula tank.
Eric immediately turns Lily around and directs her elsewhere.

“What about some of these fluffier animals? They’re awfully cute, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, they’re really cute!” Lily exclaims as she sits on the floor to look at the rats.

Eric can’t help but sigh.

“But what about these guinea pigs? Or these teddy bear hamsters? I think this one likes you!”

Lily looks up at the hamsters and the one standing up on his hind legs to press his face against the glass does get her attention.

“He’s so cute! But he doesn’t have a pretty tail like the ones down here do,” Lily informs him as she sits back down.

“You two need any help today?” an associate asks as he approaches them.

“My daughter here is here to pick out her first pet. We have some differences when it comes to what we want though.”

“I want the one with the red eyes!” Lily exclaims as she looks up at the employee.

“Oh, I know him. He’s a sweetheart,” the man says to her.

“I was thinking she should get a teddy bear hamster. They do well alone, don’t they?” Eric asks.

“You’re right there. It isn’t advised for two Syrian hamsters to share a cage. Dwarfs are fine together but Syrians tend to get aggressive if they have to share their home.”
“But what about these? I want a rat. They are so cute!” Lily squeals as she giggles at two of the rats tumbling around.

Eric looks down at them, “I don’t know, Lily…”

“Rats actually make great pets. They’re fantastic companion animals and very smart. They like humans more than hamsters generally do. They’re very loyal. We’re not like other pet stores. We get all our pets from independent breeders and affiliated rescues so they are healthier than the mill rats and we also have papers on them that explain any history that we were given. Rats do tend to have health problems as they get older and they only live for 2 to 3 years but they are fun while you have them. There are a couple of rescue rats in there that we don’t know the full history of but they’re both females. I think my co-worker is considering taking them home. But we have papers on the albino. He came from a breeder in Staten Island.”

Damn. He hadn’t been expecting the guy to push the rats. Probably because no one really wanted them.

“Papa? Papa Papa Papa? I want a rat. They are so beautiful.”

“Uh-”

Luckily the employee senses his discomfort, “Why don’t I get a hamster out then one of the rats so you can hold them and see which you like better?”

Lily gasps, “I want to do that. Papa, do you want to do that?”

“Sure. We can do that. Why don’t we see the hamster first?”

Lily nods, “Okay. And then we’ll see the rats.”

Eric suppresses a groan, “Fine.”

The employee gets the most social hamster out and squats down to hold it in front of Lily so that she can pet it.
“Now Lily, be gentle. Don’t get loud or excited around it. That might scare it.”

“I won’t,” Lily whispers loudly, “He’s really cute. Is he a he?”

“She’s a she, actually,” the man says, amused, before looking up at Eric, “You okay with your daughter holding her?”

Eric looks down at Lily’s pleading eyes, “You have to be really careful. Don’t drop her.”

“I would never do something like that,” Lily whispers as she gently takes the hamster in her hands.

The hamster crawls from hand to hand and Lily softly giggles as the hamster sniffs her.

“Wanna hold her, Papa?” she asks as she holds her hands up in offering.

Since Eric wants to make his child happy, he gently takes the hamster from her hands. He holds the rodent up to eye level, tries to judge its character, and promptly gets shat on.

“That’s hamsters for you,” the associate says as he takes the hamster and hands him a wipe and some disinfectant.

Eric wipes his hands and looks down to see Lily hiding a laugh behind her hands. When she sees that she’s been spotted, she looks around the store aimlessly and innocently as though the fit of giggles never happened.

“Time for the rats now, Papa!” Lily reminds him as she bends back down.

“Lily, I don’t know-”

“Papa, please?” Lily asks, eyes big.
Eric looks over to the associate and nods.

“You said you wanted to hold the albino rat, right?”

“Uh huh! He’s really cute.”

“Okay. Hold out your hands. He might try to crawl up your arm.”

Lily hold her hands out and the rat immediately starts sniffing Lily and crawling up her arm to perch on her shoulder. He sniffs her face and hair as Lily giggles in delight. And then it curls up against her neck, paws holding onto her shirt so he won’t fall off her small shoulders.

“Papa, he is the the best pet I could ever ask for,” Lily says in awe.

“Now the thing about rats is that they are very social. It’s recommended you get two. They can be relatively happy as a single rat if they get a lot of attention but they are companion animals. It’s best to get a cage mate.”

Lily gasps, “Papa, that means I can have TWO pets! That’s good!”

“Is it?” he asks her without humor.

“Uh huh. I can watch them play and they can play with me and we’ll be best friends.”

Eric lets out a groan. He already knows what his answer is going to be. Brian is going to kill him. Literally kill him. His blood will be splattered throughout their home as the rats feed on his body.

“Is there another rat in there that this one is attached to?” Eric finally asks, accepting his fate.

Lily holds back a squeal and vibrates with excitement as the associate points out one of his brothers, who is a reddish cream colored rat. She visits with that one as well. He seems to be sweet
and inquisitive as well, although more active and a little less cuddly. Lily promptly starts giving him the puppy eyes and Eric finally agrees then lets the associate direct them to everything they need to get. After they buy the cage, travel carrier, a smaller but more size appropriate cage than the travel cage to take to Emmett’s in April, food, supplies, and toys, he is definitely glad that he brought the car. He signs some papers, agreeing to keep the rats as his own and to not give them away as well as also agreeing that he will bring the rats back if they die within a week to get a refund or an exchange.

The associate helps them get their purchases to the car and they load them in the trunk after he puts Lily in her car seat and the travel carrier beside her.

“No getting the rats out until we get home. Sit tight,” he orders before he goes to make sure everything fits in the back.

“Kay, Papa.”

They manage to get everything in and he slips the man a tip, even though the associate originally insists on not taking it. After the man goes back inside, Eric goes to the other side of the car and gets into the driver’s seat.

“Papa?”

“Yes, Lily?”

“Thank you.”

Eric smiles, “You’re welcome. Your daddy is going to kill me but you’re welcome.”

Lily shakes her head, “I don’t think he’ll do that. He won’t when he sees how cute they are. I’m gonna let him name one and I think he’ll like that.”

“We’ll see, I guess.”

Eric drives around the block to go back to the apartment. He and Lily lug the stuff in after she takes
the rat’s carrier to her room. Then they clear out the corner of her room and get to work on the cage. When the rats go in the cage to play around and investigate, Eric can admit that they are maybe a little cute. And when Lily gets them out and he sees that they are actually very sweet and well behaved pets, he can admit that maybe it was a good choice on Lily’s part.

He can only hope that Brian thinks so too.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please review to let me know what you think! :)
Metropolitan and Lorimer

Chapter Summary

Love is in the air at Justin's dinner party and the only person who doesn't think it is the cutest thing ever is Brian.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Brian knew he was not going to be that happy when Eric immediately ran up to him at the door, kissed him, then said, “Hey, babe! How was the office?”

Not that Eric never greeted him. But the fact that he was so quick to keep him from making his way past the foyer made Brian suspicious.

“Did you eat? I know we’re all heading to Justin’s in a couple of hours but I know how you skip meals if you get too busy. Do you-”

“Where is it?” Brian asks, eyebrow raised.

Eric bites his lip before muttering, “Wrong pronoun.”

“I don’t know if it is a boy or a girl so how am I-”

“I meant the word “it” implies singular. ‘Where are they?’ is what you are looking for.”

Brian glares and looks for the joke. Shit. Eric’s not joking.

“I thought we agreed on one pet when we talked about this before we moved.”

Eric puts on a nervous grin, “Well, it turns out the pets she chose do better in pairs. It would actually be more work to get one since they are companion animals and need attention.”
“Eric, just tell me what they are.”

Eric opens his mouth to speak but they are interrupted by their daughter coming into the room with a huge smile on her face. But it isn’t just their daughter. No, it couldn’t be just that. In her hands is something that he didn’t want his child holding. And, more so, he didn’t want one balancing on top of her head.

“Daddy! Papa! Look what I taught Bianca to do!” Lily giggles as she points to her head, where the rodent has decided is a good place to perch.

Brian rushes over to throw the thing outside but Eric puts a hand on his arm and gives him the look before gently detangling the animal from their daughter’s hair and handing it back to her.

“Lily, he may poop in your hair if you don’t watch out,” Eric carefully warns her.

Lily shrugs, “I can wash it out.”

Eric rolls his eyes before getting a questioning look on his face, “You know Bianca is a girl’s name, right? Your rats are both boys.”

Lily looks at him bewildered, “So?”

“Right. Why don’t you introduce your pets to Daddy?”

Lily nods, excited, before rushing over to him and holding each rat up high so that Brian is forced to look at him.

“These are my new pets, Daddy! They are the best pets in the entire world because they are so cute and smart and funny and nice! This one is named Bianca. He looks like a Bianca, don’t you think? I love him because his fur is like snow and his eyes are like cherries. And this is his brother. I love him because his fur is like sand and his eyes are like black crayon. I didn’t name him because I want you to name him!”
“Vermin,” Brian whispers with distaste.

“You mean Vernon? Like our old neighbor? Okay!” Lily agrees before cooing, “Hi, Vernon! You are so cute, Vernon. I love you, Vernon. Do you love Vernon and Bianca, Daddy?”

It’s probably a good thing that Eric jumps in before Brian can break their daughter’s tender little heart.

“Lily, why don’t you go watch them run through their obstacle course in your room? Daddy and I will come watch them with you in a few minutes.”

Brian turns to give Eric a disgusted look but is ignored until Lily skips out of the room, humming.

Brian turns on Eric with a scowl.

“Rats? Fucking rats?” Brian seethes.

“She was set on them. It seemed like the lesser evil in comparison to a snake or a tarantula,” Eric reasons as he leads Brian to the couch.

“No,” Brian insists, pulling away and not giving in, “They’re rats, Eric. We see them eat trash and the dead carcuses of their family members in the subway tracks. She can’t keep them.”

“They aren’t street rats. They are Dumbo Rats. They have big ears ready to flop over and cute faces. They are sweet and gentle with Lily.”

Brian glares, “Lily brainwashed you while I was in Manhattan. This isn’t you.”

Eric purses his lips, holding back a laugh, “Yeah, you’re probably right. But they make her happy.”

Brian lets out an aggravated sigh before throwing himself on the couch, “But rats?”
“I tried to convince her to get a goldfish, hamster or guinea pig but they didn’t have ‘pretty tails.’”

“She thinks they have pretty tails?” Brian asks, disgusted.

“There’s no accounting for taste,” Eric comments.

“She must get her tastes from you.”

“That’s actually insulting you, considering you are just my type,” Eric points out before kissing him on the cheek.

“They are both males. They might fight when they get older because they get too territorial living in the same space. Lily could wake up to bloodshed.”

“We’ve been living together for over five years and I haven’t made you bleed yet.”

“I don’t know, sometimes you get pretty wild when I take you on your back,” Brian smirks before getting back to the point, “I’m serious though.”

“They’re neutered. They came from a breeder who regularly works with a vet so the animals that can be fixed do get fixed. The pet store down the street is actually pretty cool and will only work with independent breeders and rescue groups. Vernon and Bianca are also from the same litter so they know each other and are close.”

Brian snorts, “Bianca. First the thing gets his balls chopped off and then a little girl gives him a name meant for a woman. He’ll be so confused. How much did you pay for fixed rats, anyway?”

Eric flushes, “That’s irrelevant.”

Brian stares at him, “I don’t want to know, do I?”
“Considering the price of neutering, it wasn’t bad at all. For the rats, that is. But for the food, toys, cages, this ridiculous obstacle course they love, and a bunch of other shit...It sort of added up.”

“You should have vetoed the idea.”

But Eric shakes his head, “I couldn’t. We already told her she couldn’t get a puppy or a kitten because we wanted to start her out with a caged pet. She wanted a ferret before since Quinn had a couple but ferrets are illegal in the city. She wanted a snake and a tarantula but I told her no, of course. And before that when she was crying and asking us to maybe giving her a baby sister instead, I didn’t answer her.”

Brian feels himself tense up at the last sentence out of Eric’s mouth. He knows his partner would have avoided bringing what Lily said up if it was something he didn’t want or even something he didn’t have a current opinion on. Shit. He didn’t want another kid, did he? Lily and Gus were enough for him. Sure, he’s thought about it when Eric mentioned it in passing. Cynthia did leave them a few extra eggs in the possible scenario that they wanted to try for another. He loves his kids and would love a third one just as much. But Lily was a handful. But he also knew deep down that she would love having a younger sibling. He knew that he and Eric were stable and fucking loved each other and that meant something in terms of raising another child together. They were raising a great kid already and he knew that two kids under their roof wouldn't end up like he and Claire did. The chances that Lily would have a great and supportive relationship with a younger sibling were quite high. It might make him stress out to the max and make him get no sleep. It also might make Eric and him happier than ever. It would probably do all of the above.

God, he’s become so fucking stepford. How the mighty have fallen. He knows that if his younger self found out about where his life would lead, he would off himself before Brian could tell him that he would actually end up loving how things turned out.

“Brian?” Eric asks him, looking cautious and surprised, “What are you thinking right now?”

Brian gets up, “I’m thinking that this is a conversation for later.”

“Wait, are you actually considering it?”

Brian just shrugs before heading up to Lily’s bedroom where he finds her sitting on the floor so she can watch her goddamn rats run through the obstacle course.
“Daddy!” she calls out suddenly as she turns around, “Sit down next to me so you can play with me, Bianca, and Vernon.”

Brian closes his eyes and counts to ten before sitting cross-legged next to her.

“Aren’t they cute?!” She asks him, looking at him with pure happiness, “They are so beautiful.”

Brian snorts, “You think everything is beautiful. You use that word all the time.”

“There’s lots of beautiful things. I say they’re beautiful so that they know they’re beautiful and other people can see that they’re beautiful too.”

Brian feels his eyes soften before he puts his arms around her to plant a kiss on top of her head. She returns the hug and they just sit there and watch the rats crawl through the tunnels. Lily gets them out after several minutes and makes him hold one. He tries to hold back his shudders before handing him back to Lily to put back in the cage, which of course she doesn’t want to do.

“We’re going to leave soon. They’ll still be here when you get back, unfortunately, so you can be away from them for a few hours. They’ll be fine.”

“Daddy, I can’t. They have to come with us. They just HAVE to,” Lily insists as she goes over to get the carrier.

Brian steps in front of her and picks her up, “Sorry, babe. We can’t bring them to Justin’s. I’m not going to come off as the weird guy who carries rats around.”

“But they’re my rats. I’ll carry them around. They’ll like it,” Lily tries to reason with him.

Brian shakes his head, “It’ll just stress them out. It’s been a big day for them. They need to get used to their new home and take a nap. Remember how tired you were when you first moved to New York?”

“But I was from far away. We got them from up the street!”
“Lily, it’s a no.”

Lily crosses her arms, humphs, and looks away, “Meanie! Mean mean-”

Brian lets out a fake cry, “Oh, you break my heart! And here I thought we had a moment a few minutes ago!”

Eric walks in and raises an eyebrow, “Lily, why are you making your father cry?”

Lily glares, “He’s not crying! He’s faking it!”

“You got your rats. I’m glad you love them but they are staying here. Don’t start acting like a brat when you got your way. We can always take them back,” Brian tells her sternly.

Lily lets out a panicked whimper but keeps her mouth shut. Brian lets her down before ordering her to go get her coat and boots on and they would be in to help her if she needed it.

“She’s been like that since she woke up,” Eric comments, “Stubborn and sassy as fuck. Irritable and angry. She wouldn’t take a nap before lunch. Made a mess in the kitchen. She’s lucky I caught onto the fact that she was feeling off. I might not have been as understanding and concerned. The way she’s been feeling is worrying me. She’s the new kid who has busy parents and no siblings living with her full-time but on top of all that, she’s extremely bright. Her mindset is a little different than other kids her age because she’s more advanced so that might be another reason she is having a hard time making a close friend. She’s won’t even be four for another month and a half and she’s reading. I think it’s probably why she and Duncan get along so well. His vocabulary isn’t as big but he takes in a lot. He listens to her and understands everything she says. He’s more knowledgeable to how shitty life can be but he’s strong and takes it all in stride and I think that gives him more wisdom than a three year old should have.”

“Yes. We’ve established that Duncan and Lily are a good match. But she needs to be finding at least a couple of close friends at school. Duncan doesn’t live in the same school district. Maybe we should consider getting her tested again so she can be considered for kindergarten next year instead of another year of preschool.”

“I don’t want to move her up in grades unless she is feeling completely unchallenged. It may make her feel out of place at the age she’s at right now. Age differences matter more when you’re little.
The gifted program starts once she enters kindergarten so we’ll get her into that before sticking her in with the older kids.”

Brian thinks for a second, “Then maybe we can find a group extracurricular for her that she’ll like. One that’s about to start so she can make closer friends. There’s a lot of things going on in the city. Maybe dance or swimming lessons would be something she’s interested in. Hell, maybe she can do both. If we can’t find anything starting for a while, we can get her involved in something else.”

Eric smiles, “I think she would like either one but I really believe that she would like dance. You know how she is, always dancing, skipping, and jumping around the house to different songs. Oh, think of how cute she would look in a tutu! She would be in recitals and we would get to see her on stage-”

“I’m sure it will be adorable,” Brian snarks before sobering up, “We’ll look into different dance studios and talk to her about it. I’m sure she’ll love the idea. Hell, maybe we can convince Emmett and Drew to let Duncan start with her so she can go in with a little more confidence.”

“You think Drew would be okay with his son taking dance classes?”

Brian laughs, “Drew actually took dance classes. Emmett told me he did it for years to help with his balance and coordination in football.”

“Well, it may be something to ask about when we see them at dinner,” Eric smiles before kissing him. Brian brings Eric closer to deepen the kiss but is forced to break it when Lily comes in with untied boots.

“I thought you were coming down to help me,” Lily says as she looks up at them.

Brian bends down to ties her shoelaces, “I thought you were starting to get the hang of this.”

Lily shrugs, “I’m not good with these strings. They’re too short. You’re better at it.”

“We’ll practice with them this week,” Brian tells her before leading her back down the stairs.
The subway is packed when they get on and Brian has to hold Lily with one arm and grab onto one of the poles with another. The train they transfer to isn’t as bad and he lets Eric take the one available seat so he can hold Lily in his lap. Lily, of course, charms the people sitting close to her by telling anyone who will listen about her new pet rats and how much she loves them. Some of them gross out good naturedly to make her laugh and gleefully confirm that she has pets that people are scared of. One woman tells her that rats make great pets and she had a couple as a teenager. One fucking asshole just ignores her completely and glares when she talks to him. Dick.

But they get away from the asshole soon enough and get off the stop closest to Justin’s apartment.

“I’m so excited to tell Duncan about Bianca and Vernon,” Lily says conversationally as she holds Brian’s and Eric’s hands, “He will be so excited to meet them. I’m so excited!”

Lily lets out a squeal and jumps up and down. Brian closes his eyes and shakes his head before ringing Justin’s and Nathan’s doorbell.

Nathan’s voice comes through the intercom and he buzzes them up then greets them at the apartment door.

“Hey,” Nathan says as he offers to hang their coats up, “Justin’s in the kitchen cooking. Petra, Nadia, and Sebastian are in the living room and Emmett and Drew should be here with Duncan soon.”

“Hi, Nathan!” Lily calls out before hugging his legs. Nathan looks taken aback and pats her on the head, “Hi, Lily. How’s life?”

“It’s the bestest thing ever! Guess what?”

Nathan gives her a questioning look, “What?”

“I have pet rats!”

“...Cool!” Nathan tells her, faking enthusiasm.
“I know!”

“You should go tell my friends. Petra is terrified of rats,” he conspires.

“Hmmm...okay! Come on, Papa and Daddy. Let’s go talk to Nathan’s friends,” Lily commands as she pulls on their hands.

“Daddy can go with you,” Eric says as he slowly pulls his hand away, “And I can go see if Justin needs help with dinner.”

“Come on, Daddy,” she says, accepting her papa’s answer.

Brian looks over to Eric to see if there is any other intention in going to help out Justin. Eric looks as though he is being pretty genuine though so Brian heads into the living room with Lily and tries not to think too hard about the two significant men in his life chatting in the other room. He manages to inquire about how the shows on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday and gets positive answers before Lily butts into the conversation to announce that she has pet rats.

“Rats?! Why would you want rats?” Nadia asks, laughing.

Lily beams and jumps in place, “Because they are beautiful and have pretty tails. Bianca sits on my head. He’s so funny.”

“You mean she?” Petra inquires.

Lily shakes her head and rolls her eyes, as though Petra just asked a ridiculous question, “No. He. Bianca’s a boy. And so is his brother, Vernon. Bianca has red eyes and is white all over. Vernon is sandy colored and has black eyes.”

“Well, I’m sure they are gorgeous,” Petra smiles before glancing over at him to check him out. Again.

“I like rats,” Sebastian says quietly, which takes Brian by surprise because according to Nathan he barely talks at all, “They’re really smart. I had two rats when I nine. They were girls.”
Nadia snorts, “You would have rats.”

Sebastian raises an eyebrow before Nadia kisses him. Petra looks away and it seems as though she is suppressing a gag.

“That’s a new development,” she explains to him, “It’s disgusting.”

Nadia turns her head and smirks, “Don’t worry, Petra. My offer to go down on you still stands. Seb and I are in an open relationship since he knows I still have certain needs that need to be met.”

“There is a small child in the room, Nadia. Jesus Christ.”

“Says the woman who has been checking out that child’s gay father.”

Petra shrugs, “Can you blame me? Just look at him.”

“He is attractive for an older man,” Nadia agrees.

For an older man? Fuck her. He’s attractive period.

“Do either of you know how to act around kids?” Nathan asks as he walks back in the room, “Sorry, Brian. Usually they just talk about you behind your back.”

Brian raises his eyebrows, surprised that Nathan would actually admit that his friends find him attractive. He bet that was hard for him to swallow at first. Ha.

He looks down at Lily who seems to have lost interest in the whole conversation and is hopping around the room. She can only talk to adults for so long, he supposes.

The doorbell buzzes, which startles Lily before she gasps, “Duncan?”
“Might be.” Nathan says before he leaves the room again. Brian can tell he’s out of his element with kids. He will give him props for trying though.

It turns out not to be Duncan. It’s Justin’s friend Liam and his girlfriend Carmen. Lily hangs back next to Brian and climbs onto his lap. She’s being uncharacteristically shy but Brian chalks it down to dealing with too many people she doesn’t know that well at once. Carmen goes out of her way to talk to her. She comes up to Lily, compliments her braid, and soon Lily is off his lap and chatting to Carmen and Liam about her rats and god knows why she thinks that’s a great conversation starter but she does impress Carmen by starting a conversation in Spanish when she catches onto Carmen’s accent. That wins Carmen over completely and he can already tell that Lily already considers her a best friend or something.

Brian takes that as a cue to go see what Eric and Justin are up to so he gets up, crosses the room, and stops in front of Nathan.

“I’m going to go see what Eric’s up to. Watch Lily for me?”

Nathan pales, “Uh-”

“You’re a great host. See you in a few,” Brian interrupts then goes to the kitchen.

Brian stops when he hears Eric and Justin talking to eavesdrop just a little bit before making his presence known. When he hears what they are talking about, he rolls his eyes at himself. They are talking about what they usually talk about if they are left to their own devices: art & architecture.

“You’ll love Portugal,” Eric tells Justin, becoming excited just talking about it, “I know you’ll only be there for a week for your show but it’s beautiful. There’s a bookstore called Livraria Lello. It’s one of the most beautiful buildings I’ve ever been in. It’s nice looking on the outside but the inside is absolutely incredible. You’ll want to stay there for hours just looking at the place. Then you’ll stay for a few hours more to browse the books.”

“I’ll make a point of going there when I go there near the end of July,” Justin assures him, “Speaking of architecture, thank you for taking on Caleb as an intern. He loves working on the synagogue. When he interned for me a year ago as a freshman, he was great. But I could tell he was more interested in building rather than painting, decorative art, and commissioning. He was really into woodworking and making furniture when he entered one of the shows. When he did paint or sketch, it was always of houses and buildings from his mind. I’m glad you’re giving him an
opportunity to explore that more. He’s already changed his major and everything.”

“He’s very talented and has a lot of potential,” Eric agrees, “He even has the math and physics needed down pretty well. I think he’s going to go far.”

“That’s good to hear,” Justin grins.

Brian comes up behind Eric and Justin and puts his hands over their eyes.

“Guess who.”

“Debbie Novotny?” Eric calls out with sarcastic hope.

“Jim Stockwell,” Justin says, playing along.

“RuPaul,” Eric guesses, giving it another go.

“Hillary Clinton.”

“Donald Tru-”

“Don’t you dare finish that guess,” Brian tells Eric as he kisses his cheek, “My hair will never be as catastrophic as that successful lunatic’s.”

Brian puts his hands down and both Eric and Justin turn to him and feign surprise.

“Oh, Brian! Last person I would expect.”

“Nice of you to come over, Brian.”
Brian looks at both of them and shakes his head, “Such a strange type I have.”

Both of them tilt their heads in genuine confusion but Eric brushes it off first.

“Where’s Lily?” his fiance asks as he goes over to wash his hands.

“I left her with the rest of the children here,” Brian mutters.

Justin smirks, “Feeling a bit old, Brian?”

Brian glares at Justin but turns it into a smile, “No. Just mature.”

Eric and Justin look at each other before they start laughing.

“Seriously. One of you need to come out with me so I’m not sitting out there with my kid while a bunch of 20 somethings talk about their constant partying and conquests.”

Justin snorts, “Come on, Brian. You don’t need anyone to sit out there with you and hold your hand. Just dredge up the past and you’ll be able to blow their numbers out of the water.”

“If his elderly mind can remember it-Oh my god, Brian! Stop tickling me! You’re not old, I was joking!” Eric yelps and lets himself be led away by Brian but protests, “Justin might need more help.”

“I’ll be fine,” Justin tells them, “We got everything in the oven and I just need to prepare the desserts to put in the fridge. I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

“See, darling? Your kitchen duties are done,” Brian tells him as he drags him out of the room.

Brian and Eric go out to the living room and find Lily singing for an audience. Brian gives her a strange look and Eric gets out his phone to film it. Big surprise there.
Nathan gives Brian a long-suffering look. He thinks that’s a bit rude. Lily has a decent singing voice for a three year old in his opinion.

The doorbell buzzes once again and Lily stops mid-song.

“Duncan?”

“Most likely. Am I off babysitting duty now?” Nathan asks, a strange combination of annoyed and amused.

“I suppose,” Brian dismisses.

Nathan shakes his head and huffs out a laugh before ringing Emmett, Drew, and Duncan up.

"Sorry we're the last ones here!” Emmett says to the group, "The trains were backed up In Hoboken. How are-oh hi, baby girl!"

As expected, Lily hugs Emmett’s legs but ignores the greeting and runs straight for Duncan to tell him about her rats. Duncan nods and smiles as she tells him about her precious pets before pulling a slightly crumpled rose from his coat pocket to give to her.

“A flower!” Lily gasps as she gently takes it from Duncan and hugs it to her chest.

What the fuck does Duncan think he is trying to pull?

“Duncan, sweetie? Where did you get that?” Emmett asks his son cautiously.

“I picked it for Lily!” Duncan exclaims before smiling at Lily.

“Uh, I don’t remember passing any rose bushes at the end of February. I especially don’t remember passing any rose bushes with dyed electric blue roses...so answer my question.”
“Duncan?” Drew asks, “Did you take that from the flower shop we passed?”

Duncan seems to realize he may have done something wrong but stays petulant, “I wanted to give Lily a flower.”

“I love my flower, Duncan,” Lily says shyly as she turns her body left to right.

“Oh my god, they’re so cute together!” Nadia coos.

“It’s like they’re boyfriend and girlfriend,” Petra chuckles.

“They love each other,” Carmen sighs.

Brian glares at the women and he hears Justin and Eric laughing over it all, as though they think this is cute when it isn’t at all.

Duncan beams and Drew lets out a groan.

“That’s stealing, Duncan. We aren’t supposed to steal.”

Duncan pales as much as his dark skin allows and gets a blank look on his face.

“I should make you take it back to the florist and have you say sorry.”

“No! I can’t! It’s Lily’s flower! It’s for her!” Duncan insists as he pushes Lily’s flower wielding hand behind her back to hide the evidence.

Emmett sighs, “Never do it again. If they are still open after we leave, you can give the man a couple of dollars to cover the cost.”

“Am I in trouble?” Duncan asks with a pout.
“No. You’re not in trouble. I know your heart was in the right place and you didn’t understand. Don’t do it again though or you will be because now you know you can’t pick those flowers. Understand?”

“Uh huh,” Duncan nods solemnly.

“Daddy?” Lily asks as she comes up to him with her flower held out in front of her chest as though it is a bouquet, “We should put my flower in water so it is stays beautiful forever and ever. Duncan gave me it. It’s special.”

Brian stares at her innocent and loving eyes and doesn’t even know what to say to that.

“I can go get her a small vase to put it in,” Justin says as he gets up then mutters, “You look like you are on the verge of an eye twitch. Protective much?”

Brian scoffs and goes to sit down next to Eric. Justin bends down to hug Duncan and give him a kiss on the cheek before going to get a vase for Lily. Duncan takes the opportunity to greet everyone he knows by giving them hugs. He greets Eric first and Eric of course makes a fuss over him and asks him what he’s been up to.

Then Duncan comes over to Brian.

“Hi, Brian!” Duncan says as he hugs his lap.

“I’m onto you,” Brian tells him as Duncan looks up at him with big eyes, “Courting my daughter right in front of me. Did you think I wouldn't catch on? You think you are pretty smooth, don’t you?”

Duncan only giggles in response.

“What are your intentions by giving my daughter a rose?” Brian asks him as he lifts him up onto his lap.
“I gave Lily a flower!” Duncan answers.

“That’s been established,” Brian says seriously, “But why did you give her a flower?”

“’Cause I like her a lot! And it’s pretty like Lily’s pretty. Except Lily is prettier,” Duncan tells him seriously.

“Oh, my baby is such a romantic ladies’ man! I’m so proud!” Emmett sighs as he wipes a fake tear from his eye while Drew snickers.

“Is that what you are? A ladies’ man? Is that why you are courting my daughter?” Brian interrogates while he tickles the little boy.

“What’s...that...mean?” Duncan manages to gasp out and ask through his belly laughs.

“Brian, are you seriously having this conversation with a three year old right now?” Eric butts in, amused.

“I’m almost four!” Duncan reminds them, semi-offended.

“I know you are!” Eric says, feigning excitement, “You and Lily both have a birthday coming up in a little over a month. That’s exciting, huh?”

“Uh huh! Daddy and Pa said I could have a Star Wars party,” Duncan says, bouncing on Brian’s lap.

Brian clears his throat, “Duncan, we’re off topic-”

“Daddy, I’m thirsty,” Duncan interrupts as he hops off Brian’s lap and runs over to Emmett.

“And he’s gone,” Eric says before elbowing Brian in the side, “Oh, Brian. Their puppy love is adorable and innocent and here you are worrying about Lily’s virtue. I bet if it were a little Gus getting courted by another child, you would be proud of how in demand your son was.”
“It would be different if it would have been Gus,” Brian tells him slowly because he’s stating the obvious, “Gus is a boy. Lily is sweet and innocent and boys just aren’t built like that. They are after one thing and don’t care if they hurt someone. Believe me, I was the epitome of that.”

Eric snorts, “That’s so sexist.”

Brian shrugs. He doesn’t really care if it comes off that way. It’s true.

The rest of the night before dinner is filled with more adult conversation while the kids do their own strange thing. He can tell that Nathan and his friends aren’t used to being around kids. They’re young and probably don’t have plans for children anytime soon if at all so Brian gets that they feel a little weird about kids running around on a night where they thought they would just be hanging out. Carmen and Liam seem to like them a lot but they also look like they are closer to Justin’s age opposed to Nathan’s. But the kids do end up falling into the background and stop being attention seekers. They try to watch their language around them to an extent while they talk about Nathan’s band and how rehearsal is going, Justin’s upcoming show, the synagogue, and Emmett’s bridezilla client. Eventually they end up breaking off into groups to speak to each other. Nathan talks with his friends and Justin talks with Emmett, Drew, Eric, and him. They talk about Pittsburgh and how they miss it but none of them ever plan on moving back. They are all happy and have built full lives here for themselves. Drew proves that by mentioning the new event he and Emmett are constructing to raise awareness for the high percentage of foster children who need adopted in the city and Brian offers to do advertising for it for free.

“What’s the catch?” Emmett asks, suspicious.

“No catch. I’d just like to help,” Brian shrugs.

“Last time you organized an event for free, it was for Rage. And-....That is a story for another time,” Emmett finishes as he sees Eric sitting there and Justin shaking his head, “But fine. It would be great to have your help. Thank you for offering to provide it. Justin, speaking of Rage, have you and Michael started on the reboot issue yet?”

“We’ve sent each other notes back and forth and I’ve sent him some sketches of possible scenarios to have on hand. I’m going up to Toronto next week to meet with him and see the rest of the gang. We need to brainstorm in person. We’re trying to work things around to figure out where Rage and JT would be after a time jump,” Justin admits, avoiding his and Eric’s gaze.
“I’m sure you can figure it out,” Emmett says, breaking the tension, “Anything can happen in Rage. Goodness, anything can happen in life. Look at how everything’s turned out. Gay marriage is legal in several states, including New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Brian’s a full time father and getting married. You’re a famous artist with a sexy young partner of your own. Drew and I adopted a little boy. Ted just asked Blake to marry him last week! They want to get married right in good old Pittsburgh.”

“Ted proposed to Blake?” Brian asks as he perks his head up, "He must have forgot to tell me. What a dick."

"I wasn't supposed to say anything yet, to be fair, so don't tell him I told you. He is coming up to New York again in a couple of weeks for your Coca Cola campaign and planned on telling you, Eric, and Justin and Nathan if he got to see them. He isn't going tell the rest until he came in for the wedding in April."

"Well, he sure as hell better wait until Eric and I leave for the honeymoon to break his news. If he even thinks about directing the attention to his relationship at the reception I'll fire him."

Emmett breaks into laughter, "You are worse than some of my bitchiest brides. God forbid the attention leave you for one second."

Brian purses his lips and only says, "It's not his day."

"Brian Kinney is actually getting married. It's still hard to believe."

"He said yes when I asked him without any hesitation," Eric says a little defensively, "He was willing to get married before we met to Justin. It just took him a while to get to that point."

It takes Brian by surprise, to say the least, when Eric subtly brings up his first attempt at matrimony, especially with his ex-fiancé in the room.

"That came out wrong," Emmett says, putting his hands up, "What I meant was that we have all come a long way. I met Brian when we were 22 years old and still immersed in our wicked ways. It's strange to think that I have been friends with him for over 21 years. Comparing our lives back then to our lives now makes me feel disoriented. I never thought I would end up here. Having a child wasn't something I wanted until just a couple of years ago. Being around Lily, Gus, and JR played a big part in my change of heart. I am so happy with my life, even if I didn't expect this
route at all. It’s probably a testament to how old I am. To how old we all are.”

Brian raises his eyebrow, “Speak for yourself, Honeycutt. I’m not old. I’ll never be old.”

Emmett laughs, “I’ve noticed a grey hair on you, Kinney. Especially when you had that cute beard. It was a fleck but it was there.”

“It just showed how distinguished I am.”

Emmett rolls his eyes, "Brian probably didn’t expect to take this route either back in the day but one look on his face and you can see that he’s never been happier.”

Brian glances over to Justin to see him looking down, hiding the sadness that Brian can easily see through because he still knows Justin as well as he knows himself despite the years of silence that occurred between them. If he and Justin were alone he might try to talk about it with him. See how he actually feels about everything since every time the subject has been brought up, in front of others or just between the two of them, he either stays silent or says generic well wishes and assures Brian that he’ll support him by being at the wedding. And Brian doesn’t want to say Justin is just bullshitting him. But he knows that Justin’s feelings are a lot more complex than he lets on. He knows that because it’s the same for him when it comes to Justin Taylor.

But he’s sure about one thing.

“You’re right,” Brian agrees, “I never have been happier.”

And even when he sees Justin blink the moisture out of his eyes before he excuses himself to check on dinner, he wouldn’t take back what he said. It’s the truth. He was happy with Justin and now he’s happy with Eric. Hell, probably even more happy since he has Lily too.

He doesn’t regret it. Not at all.

But when he looks at Justin, it doesn’t mean he doesn’t wonder what could have been. He wonders about that on a semi-regular basis. He can’t help it.
He doesn’t voice it. He keeps it hidden just like he used to with other emotions. He refuses to risk screwing up what he has now.

Justin's happy. He may be going through a lot right now but he is probably content. Brian's fucking great. What could have been isn't what's going to be and, when it comes down to it, that's the way he wants it. He wants friendship with Justin. He wants the man in his life, even if he has to keep himself in check around him.

Justin is still a great cook and even Lily and Duncan give their complements to the chef. Generational gap aside, the whole group gets along and he even manages to make conversation with Nathan. He and Justin are able to joke about things that happened when they were together and it doesn’t come off as weird and Eric and Justin are able to talk as though they don’t know practically everything about Brian extensively and come off as good friends. Lily and Duncan both giggle, flirt, and argue at the dinner table like the oddballs that they are. And he learns a few things about the rest of the table. Carmen and Liam announce that they are expecting a baby which their friends get excited about. He doesn’t get ecstatic over it, just like Emmett, Drew, and Eric don’t because they don’t know these people but hell, good for them. Nadia is teaching herself how to play the saxophone. Sebastian says she still needs a lot of work on and percussion will always be her field, which pisses her off. Petra still checks him out and all Eric can do is say, “He’s fucking hot, isn’t he?” to her. Whatever happened to good old fashioned jealousy?

He leaves with Eric, Emmett, Drew, and the kids around 7 since they have to be up for preschool tomorrow. Nathan tells them goodbye as Justin walks them to the door. Things are good. They are so good that Justin hugs them all before they leave including him. And his hug isn’t all that different. Maybe the rest of them didn’t notice the scent of Justin’s shampoo, the same he used for years, or the brief feeling of warm breath on his neck.

“I know you said something about talking to Molly about what was going on with everything but if you need a sounding board we can meet for lunch again soon,” Brian offers, ignoring the curious faces that Emmett and Drew are making.

“Yeah, that sounds good. Just call or text me and we can meet,” Justin says, forcing a casual tone.

“Later.”

Justin’s lips form a small smile at the words before closing the door behind him.

“We’re going to the same train station, aren’t we?” Drew asks, taking Duncan by the hand.
“We’re heading to Lorimer to take the G. You’re taking the L from there, right?”

“That we are!” Emmett exclaims before looking down at the kids, “Looks like you two get a few more minutes to talk before heading home for the night.”

The six of them walk down the street and make plans to have Duncan Thursday evening so that Emmett and Drew can go to a fundraiser. It’s still strange that Emmett is the one who he makes plans with the most out of all of his friends. He knows he’s the closest in distance besides Justin so it makes sense but it’s jarring that their kids are best friends and that they arrange play dates and dinners and couples’ outings and fucking movie nights. It’s even stranger that he doesn’t mind it. Emmett may have been on to something when he said age made them all soft because in the back of his mind he can see his younger self laughing hysterically at the prospect while Emmett throws him disgusted looks.

“Wait,” Emmett says as he stops walking and looks down the street, “Duncan, was that the stand you got the flower from?”

Duncan looks at the ground and mumbles, “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Come on then.”

Emmett holds out his hand for Duncan to take and Duncan shuffles his feet as he walks with his father while the rest of them trail behind.

“Sir?” Emmett calls out to an old man in the beginning stages of closing up the stand for the night.

“I’m about to close here. But if you would like to buy some flowers, I would be more than happy to assist you,” he says kindly.

“It isn’t that, but I would like to give you a couple of dollars. My son here picked one of your flowers on the way to our friend’s house for dinner. He didn’t understand that he wasn’t supposed to do that and had his heart in the right place but I also need to show him that he needs to be honest. What would cover the damages?” Emmett asks as he gets out his wallet.
The old man smiles as he bends down closer to Duncan’s level.

“Which flower did you like?” he asks the little boy, staring up at him.

“The blue one,” Duncan answers shyly as he starts to partially hide himself behind Emmett’s leg.

“And why’s that?”

“I wanted to give it to Lily because she’s the prettiest girl in the world!”

Brian slaps a hand to his face and shakes his head. He can see Emmett holding back the squeals that want to overwhelm him and Eric not quite managing to hold back laughter. He looks down at Lily and sees her blushing furiously but holding back what wants to be a huge grin. Jesus Christ.

The florist looks at Lily and gives her a grin and a wave.

“She is absolutely gorgeous. I can see why you like her. But my flowers come by the dozen! You only took one and left the rest. A girl like that deserves a lot of flowers.”

Duncan nods in agreement, wide eyed and taking everything in.

“Tell you what. I’m closing up shop for tonight and didn’t sell the bouquet you picked it from. I saw you do it but I knew a handsome fella like you was giving it to a nice girl. I’d like to see them go with someone so they won’t be thrown away. Why don’t you take them off my hands for me?”

Duncan smiles, “Okay!”

“Oh sir, that’s so nice of you but you don’t have to do that. Let us at least pay for them-” Emmett starts to offer.

The man waves him off, “What’s better than two kids in love?”
Brian starts to groan with that but Eric manages to shush him by pinching his side.

The man gets a bouquet of electric blue roses and hands them to Duncan.

“You give those to whoever you like or keep them for yourself. I know whatever you choose they’ll be appreciated.”

“Duncan, what do you say?” Emmett prompts.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Duncan immediately turns around and marches to Lily and hands the flowers over to her, completely smug and proud.

“Here you go!” he exclaims.

Lily gasps with delight, “Thank you!!”

Their little girl jumps up and down and squeals with glee as they wish the man goodnight.

Lily and Duncan hug and don’t want to leave each other once they get in the station and he and Drew have to resort to prying the two away. Lily stays quiet due to the disappointment of leaving her friend as she cradles the flowers in her arms.

Eric sits her down in a seat when they see that they have seven minutes until their train comes and comforts her.

“You’ll see Duncan on Friday, baby. It will go by like that. And now you have Bianca and Vernon to play with at home.”
“Yeah. I know,” Lily answers as she tries to keep her chin up.

There’s nothing much else they can do so they just talk over her head and have their own conversation until they’re interrupted.

“Brian, what time is your meeting with-”

“HEY, LILY!!!!”

Lily’s head shoots up and they turn their heads as well only to see Duncan across the station on the other platform jumping up and down and dancing away.

Lily jumps up too and starts dancing like a fool as well as she giggles hysterically and waves.

“Kids,” Brian says as he rolls his eyes.

Eric looks at him and smiles, “I don’t know. Their love story is already giving a lot of couples’ a run for their money.”

Brian gazes at Eric before turning back to watch his daughter dance around and jump in place until their train comes.

Brian prepares himself for Lily to feel down again when they get on the train but all she does is sit in her seat with a goofy grin on her face, lost in her own thoughts. It’s obvious that those thoughts are about weddings with Duncan dressed as a prince and her dressed in a flowing rainbow dress as she rides on an elephant down the aisle or whatever her plans are.

She makes it look so easy. This whole love thing. For the longest time, he didn't want the marriage or the love or the monogamy or the 2.5 kids caged behind a white picket fence. Lily could grow up not wanting any of those things either. She could cast Duncan aside or maybe he would break her heart and move a few hundred miles away to pursue a career. Maybe she would have a string of boyfriends or girlfriends before choosing “the one” or whatever.

He always knew life would get harder as he got older. He knew there would be aches and pains,
fading eyesight, less tricking opportunities, and wrinkles and gray hair. He didn’t expect “the one” and when his innermost thoughts used to tell him Justin was “the one” he didn’t expect to find another one after the first one left. The fact that he could say that he’s met “the two” is so fucking confusing.

He doesn’t want Lily to face confusion and heartache. While he does hope she finds another great love if the first one bails, he doesn’t want her to face the pain of losing the first one in the first place. He wanted that goofy smile on her face 24/7.

She’s not even four years old and it's ridiculous to think about all of this but he doesn’t care. He doesn’t want her outlook changing anytime soon.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be a more emotional B/J chapter so prepare yourself for that. Let me know what you think by reviewing! Thank you so much for following this story.
With the wedding preparations almost prepared, Brian anxiously waits for his late partner to come home.

So this chapter is yet another one that was supposed to cover more of the story. It was supposed to cover this, a solo Brian/Justin scene, and Lily and Duncan's party but that didn't happen since it felt odd to move straight to Brian/Justin after this scene ran long. So next chapter will be focusing on B/J and end with the birthday party. Sorry to those who may be disappointed. But I will try to get the next chapter up in the next couple of days so you won't have to wait long for the B/J scene!

“I know you two lovebirds want to stay elegant and tasteful so black and white as part of your color scheme are givens. But you need a flair of color. I was thinking you could maybe do red or blue. Red would be more striking and red roses are easier to come across. If you want to go with blue, you could do dyed orchids. Or you can go with-”

“Roses are overdone and cliche. Do the blue orchids,” Brian tells Emmett while he checks his phone to see if Eric has texted him yet.

“Okay, bridezilla. I’m going to wait until your fiancè gets here,” Emmett says, hesitant to put in the order and information until the other half other couple got back.

“We’ve put off the finishing touches long enough. The wedding is a month away. He likes blue. Lily likes blue. It’ll be fine.”

Emmett rolls his eyes at Brian’s answer but obviously sticks to waiting for Eric to come home. In all honesty, Brian doesn’t really care about the flowers. He was telling the truth when he said that roses were cliche but the finishing touches didn’t matter to him. Yeah, he knows that he should want it to be perfect. But he also knows that the only thing he cares about is that Eric, his son, and his daughter are there. Of course he wanted his friends there but those were the three who mattered the most. He’s been with Eric for more than seven years. Besides, he knows him well enough to know that he liked blue more than red.
“Well, Eric picked out this dress for Lily last week,” Emmett tells him while he pulls up a picture on his laptop, “the seamstress can choose a shade of blue that is a close match to the flowers on display for the petals sewn on the bottom, for the sash, and for the headband. He has a similar one picked out for JR that’s more appropriate for an 11 year old. We’ve already bought Duncan’s suit and we’ll get him a tie that matches Lily’s dress since the ring bearer should match up with the flower girl. I know you are just wanting to do black but maybe Eric, Gus, George, Rick, and Michael will be interested in matching the decor.”

“I told you we’re not into the matching color correlation,” Brian mutters but looks over Emmett’s shoulder to remind himself of the dress again. Lily will look fucking adorable. For a minute, the image takes him away from his growing worry of why Eric hasn’t gotten back with him despite the fact he was supposed to be back over an hour and a half ago.

“Eric is on the Upper West Side overseeing the renovation of that old hotel, isn’t he?” Emmett asks, seeing the guarded look appear on Brian’s face, “Train traffic is sort of shitty around this time. Maybe he got hung up. You still can’t get service in a lot of spots underground.”

“Yeah,” Brian responds.

He knows he’s being paranoid but he feels like something is off. That he should be worried. He knows Eric. Eric is the responsible and rational one. The more thoughtful one. Brian knows Eric would let him know if he would be this late, especially since he knew Emmett was coming over so they could make their final decisions.

And he also knows Emmett is trying to distract him to keep him from overreacting. He doesn’t know if he should thank him or snap and say Emmett would do the same if he were in his position.

“I’m glad we agreed it would be for the best to have a joint birthday party for Duncan and Lily. I think they’ll be really surprised when they get to Central Park only to see their friends and a Carnival themed birthday party! I invited the children and family Duncan fostered with before we adopted him plus a few classmates so I think he’ll be excited about that. I also think the Carnival theme was a good compromise. It’ll be something they both enjoy, it will be less work and money overall, and it’s only one party instead of two. I won’t be loaded down with planning two birthday parties, your wedding, and all of my other projects for April. This spring has me almost burnt out. Maybe I’ll retire.”

Brian smirks, “You can’t retire yet, Honeycutt. You still have to plan your own nuptials with Drew.”
Emmett scoffs and shakes his head, “No way. I am not getting married. It’s enough work to plan other people’s weddings let alone my own. Yeah, I would know what I want but I couldn’t oversee everything while the wedding went on.”

“Then hire someone else.”

“I don’t trust anyone else with my big day! They’d screw it up!”

“You just said you weren’t having a big day.”

“My hypothetical big day. Why are you trying to talk me into getting married anyway?”

“I’m not.”

Emmett’s gaze softens, “You want me to experience the ultimate married hetero life that you have oh so embraced. Brian, that’s so sweet.”

Brian lightly shoves his shoulder and lets out a small laugh, “You wish.”

Emmett laughs and looks down at his watch, “I think Drew said that bubble play ends at 7 so he should be back with the kids by 7:30. You want to do dinner here or go out somewhere?”

Brian suppresses a growl, “I don’t know. I need to know what’s going on with Eric first before I make any plans.”

Emmett nods, “Alright. Did you try calling his office to see if anyone was still there?”

Brian nods, “Yeah. No one answered.”

“I’m sure he’s fine, sweetie. Like I said, the trains get backed up on the weekends sometimes.”
Brian is about to retort that it shouldn’t make Eric two fucking hours late but he hears an engine purring outside of the house and he rushes over to the window to look through the glass. Outside, Eric is giving the taxi driver some cash before heading into the house. Brian walks over to the foyer so that he can meet him.

“Hey! Where have you been?” Brian asks as he turns into the hallway, “Emmett has been here for over an hour.”

“Sorry,” Eric tells him, looking away. Brian waits for Eric to elaborate but he doesn’t.

“What’s going on?”

Eric shrugs as he takes off his shoes, “Nothing.”

Brian walks over to him and puts a hand on his shoulder to turn Eric around. Something is wrong. He can see how fucking sad Eric’s eyes are as he looks away. He pulls him closer and can smell alcohol. It isn’t strong but it’s there.

“You been drinking?”

Eric sighs, “Just a few drinks. Is Emmett still here?”

Brian ignores the question, “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I told you it’s nothing,” Eric snaps, “We need to go talk to Emmett so we can have everything set, right? That’s more important.”

Eric brushes past him after that. What the fuck?

Right off the bat he can see that Eric is drunker than he is letting on. He doesn’t know if Emmett can tell but Brian’s lived with Eric so long that he can tell whenever Eric is feeling off, even about the smallest things. But Eric does approve colors, flowers, and tie patterns with a gruff affirmative
noise and that’s that. His fiancè, the one who had been so excited to plan everything about their wedding that he had even gotten Brian excited in the process, was barely talking about the fact that everything was practically ready.

“Are you sure you are okay with everything you said yes to?” Brian mutters as Emmett excuses himself to get a glass of water, “You don’t seem happy.”

“It’s fine, Brian.”

Brian glares, “Why are you drunk?”

Eric glares back, “A few colleagues invited me out for happy hour at a bar uptown and I said yes. That a problem?”

Brian sighs and rubs his eyes, “No. But my calls went straight to voicemail.”

“My phone died.”

“I was worried about you,” Brian confesses before giving in and asking, “Are you mad at me? Did I do something wrong?”

Eric’s eyes become tender before he takes Brian’s hand.

“No, babe. It’s not you. I’m sorry I made you worry. I don’t want to talk about it in front of company though, alright? Don’t worry about it.”

“Too late for that,” Brian tells him, “Eric-”

“Drew and the kids are back!” Emmett calls out.

On cue, Brian hears the sound of little footsteps pattering towards the living room. Lily and Duncan come in, eyes bright and happy. Lily runs over to Eric and Brian is relieved when Eric melts and smiles for their daughter despite whatever is going on.
“Hey, baby!” Eric says as she hugs him, “How was the show?”

Lily, at a mile a minute while bouncing on her heels, answers him.

“Papa, it was the coolest show in the whole wide world! There were bubbles EVERYWHERE! There were big ones and little ones and colored ones and funny shaped ones. I loved it loved it loved it LOVED IT!”

Eric turns to Duncan, “Did you like it, Duncan?”

“It was cool!” is all Duncan says, “I liked the bubbles!”

“Well, those were raving reviews. You two should critique for the New York Times. I’m sure the show’s marketing team would appreciate it,” Brian remarks.

Eric smiles a little at the sarcasm and it makes Brian’s heart twinge with affection.

“Huh?” the kids ask, both confused by the suggestion.

“I’m glad you both liked it,” Eric tells them.

“I will take you and Daddy to see it very soon,” Lily promises as she goes over to Brian and gives him a big hug as well. “I have to go tell Bianca and Vernon about the show! Come on, Duncan!”

Lily races Duncan upstairs and soon they are out of sight.

“Emmett, can I talk to you for a second?” Brian asks his friend as he gets up.

Emmett nods, “Sure, Brian.”
Brian leads him into the kitchen and lets the door swing shut.

“I know it’s asking for a lot, especially of Drew since he just had the kids for a few hours on his own, but would you mind if you and Drew took Lily and Duncan out to dinner while I stayed here with Eric?”

Emmett looks at him, “You’re not asking for a lot. We love Lily, you know that. It’s not a problem. Is Eric okay? He seemed off when he came back.”

Brian shakes his head, “Something’s wrong. He won’t tell me while there’s people here. I need to know though and I don’t want Lily to overhear in case it’s something upsetting.”

“I understand. We’ll take the kids to Park Plaza for dinner and head down to Dumbo for ice cream. It’ll give you two some time. Let us know if there’s anything else we can do.”

Brian nods, “Hopefully it’s something he gets over pretty quickly. Let me go get some money from my wallet to cover her meal and dessert—”

Emmett waves him off, “Please, you’ve been paying me too much for the wedding already. I think I have twelve bucks to spare for her. Help me pry them away from the rats so that Drewsie and I can take them and be on our way.”

Brian walks with him upstairs and, Emmett was right, they do have to pry them away. But soon enough, they are lured in by the idea of food and comply.

“Why aren’t you and Papa coming?” Lily asks as Brian puts her shoes back on.

“Because Papa and I need to talk about some stuff.”

“You can talk in a restaurant. Duncan and I talk in restaurants,” Lily informs him as though her relationship with Duncan is on the same level.

Brian rolls his eyes before taking her head in between his hands and kissing her on the forehead.
“We need to talk alone. Without little kids around.”

Lily huffs, “I’m NOT little-”

“Lily, please. Papa and I will be here when you get back in a couple of hours. We might let you stay up even later after you get home if Emmett and Drew tell me you’re good.”

Lily’s eyes brighten at that and she stops with the inquiries and arguments.

Brian leads them downstairs and sees Eric getting up and going to the coat rack. He puts a hand on Eric’s shoulder and shakes his head.

“Emmett and Drew are taking them and we’re staying here. I’ll make you something if you’re hungry.”

“Brian, it’s-”

Brian gives him the sternest look he can muster. Eric stares back, sighs, then turns to Emmett and Drew.

“Have a good meal, guys.”

“Will do!” Emmett exclaims. “Now you and your husband-to-be take advantage of this time, you hear me?”

The four go out the door and walk down the steps, leaving Eric and Brian alone. Brian turns to Eric, puts his hands on his cheeks, and makes Eric look him in the eyes.

“Talk.”

Eric lets out a shaky sigh and pulls away, “It doesn’t matter, Brian. I don’t want to talk-”
“Don’t give me that. We’re partners. I need to know what’s got you in such a shitty mood.”

“I don’t want to think about-” Eric breaks off, voice trembling and his eyes filling up with tears.

“Hey…” Brian murmurs, “Hey, shhh. What’s going on?”

Brian brings him in for a hug and Eric sniffs into Brian’s neck.

“I’m so fucking pathetic,” Eric chokes out as his tears wet Brian’s neck.

Brian frowns, “What the fuck are you talking about? Don’t say that.”

Eric doesn’t answer so Brian leads him to their bedroom and makes him lie down. He gets in the bed behind his lover and holds him around his stomach.

“You need to tell me what’s going on. Right now.”

Eric’s breath hitches and Brian rubs slow circles into Eric’s skin until he finally speaks.

“I talked to George today. He called to ask if he could bring his new blonde surfer vegan hippie bimbo girlfriend to the wedding.”

“Another one?” Brian asks, raising an eyebrow, “No wonder you’re upset.”

Eric doesn’t laugh at the comment like Brian expected him to and just goes on, “I told him he could. He’s one of my best men and deserves to bring a date. I didn’t really care. I want my brother to be happy and, while she is probably just another notch on his belt in the long run, he seems to like her. That isn’t what’s wrong.”

“Then what is?”
Eric lets out a shuddering breath, “...I sent my parents invitations to the wedding.”

Brian frowns, “You didn’t tell me that.”

“I don’t know why I didn’t tell you. I guess if they said no and no one knew, I could pretend I never invited them. But they never answered. Never called or wrote or sent a fucking email to even decline the invitation. So when George called, my curiosity got the best of me and I asked if they said anything about it. George doesn’t get nervous. He’s so blasè about everything but he was too fucking chicken to tell me what he knew about how our parents felt about me getting married. So I told him I would see him in a few weeks and hung up with him. Not knowing bugged me all fucking day. So I ended up going into a room in the hotel to call Amanda. She was busy with Julian and Carlos. Julian hasn’t turned two yet but he’s already hitting that stage and Carlos is only two months old so you know how that is. I wasn’t on the phone with her long but she was more forthcoming with what she knew. She didn’t want to be the one to tell me but she did let me know that Mom and Dad weren’t coming to the wedding. I...I got upset. Asked her to tell me what they said. She told me she didn’t talk to them much about it. She had tried to get them to consider going but they wouldn’t listen.”

Eric takes a shaky breath and Brian kisses his shoulder a few times in an attempt to calm him down.

“I should have stopped there. I should have accepted it and moved on. But I couldn’t. The more I tried the more pissed off I got. So I called my parents’ house. Mom answered. She claimed Dad was out playing golf. When she realized it was me, she became so guarded and cold. I tried to be nice. I asked her how she was doing and she would give me these clipped responses. Then she tried to excuse herself and before I knew what I was saying I asked her, “Why don’t you want me to be happy?”

Eric lets out a small sob and Brian lets his arms tighten around his partner.

“She told me she didn’t have time for silly conversations but I interrupted her and pointed out that I have been with you for seven years. That we were raising a beautiful little girl together that she barely knew because she and Dad didn’t want to be around us. That things have changed in the last decade and gay relationships are a lot more accepted now. I asked her again why couldn’t she just be happy that I was happy and s-support me. Up until I was in college, she was proud of me. And...she told me that...she told me that it was my business to be in a perverted relationship. She wouldn’t support my relationship but I was a grown man and she couldn’t stop me. But she won’t come to our sham of a wedding only to get her heart broken due to seeing her granddaughter in such an awful living situation. She told me that we were horrible parents for corrupting and confusing an in-innocent little girl and that we should be deeply ashamed of ourselves. I...I lost it. I
cursed her out and yelled and cried. I know it didn’t help my case at all. She just hung up on me. Why would she say that? Why do they both hate me so fucking much? Why-”

Brian’s heart cracks when Eric lets go of his hands only to cover his face and sob deeply. Brian feels his own eyes get teary as he tries to comfort Eric only to realize that his partner was far too upset to calm down.

“Eric, don’t let that shit get to you. You know none of it is true. Hey, shhh...shhh, it’s okay. It’s going to be okay,” Brian whispers into his ear. He’s not sure if Eric hears him or not.

Brian gets up to come kneel beside the bed and pull Eric’s hands away from his face.

“Listen to me,” Brian tells him sternly, “Fuck her, alright? Fuck your dad too. They are ungrateful fucking bastards. They don’t know how fucking lucky they are to have a son like you. They don’t know how fantastic you are at being a father. They don’t know how happy Lily is. What she said is complete bullshit and you know that. Forget about them.”

“I can’t! I-I can’t-” Eric gasps out.

“Try. I hate them. I hate them so fucking much. You are such a loving and happy person but whenever you talk to them you get all fucked up and I want to beat the shit out of them every time it happens. Stop trying to get them to accept you. It isn’t your job,” Brian begins to rant without even thinking about it.

“I just want them to be happy for us,” Eric croaks out.

“We don’t need their happiness and approval. I’m happy for us. You’re happy for us too. That’s all we need. We don’t need them at our wedding for our relationship to be validated. Hell, we don’t even need a wedding at all. I’ll take you to the courthouse on Monday just to prove it to you.”

That does bring a small smile out of Eric, “I think Emmett would be pissed if we canceled it now just to run off and get married at City Hall. I guess we’ll just have to go through the whole wedding regardless.”

Brian smiles back but then gets more serious, “I mean it, Eric. It’s their loss.”
Eric nods, “I know that logically. I was just so fucking mad and devastated. A few of the construction workers caught on pretty quickly. Hardened, manly, native New Yorker boys. They asked me to tag along for some drinks and I didn’t even think about the time while I was there. I had a few drinks with them and we did a round of shots. They know I’m gay and seem fine with it. It’s strange, looking at them you would think they would make snide remarks but they don’t. The oldest one has a son who’s bi and a daughter who’s a lesbian so I think he may have educated the other workers on his team.”

“I’m glad you are meeting nice people,” Brian tells him, “Feel free to invite them.”

Brian leans forward and puts his forehead against Eric’s before kissing his tear tracks.

“Love you,” Eric mumbles as he nuzzles into Brian, “You make me feel so much better when I feel like complete shit.”

“What can I say? I am absolutely fantastic,” Brian drawls as he gets on top of his partner.

Eric lets out a small emotional laugh, “Yeah, you are. Show me how fabulous you are.”

Eric brings him down for a desperate kiss and Brian feels himself growing hard against Eric’s leg. He grinds into his fiancé and they both rid themselves of their clothes.

“Fuck me,” Eric rasps out, “I want you to fuck me hard.”

And who would Brian be if he ignored a request like that?

“I feel bad about coming back so late. Especially since Emmett was here. I hope he’s not pissed,” Eric tells him, his head on Brian’s bare chest.

Brian shrugs, “He likes you more than he likes me, I think. The only thing that probably has him pissy is that he would have rather hung around with you than me.”
Eric huffs, “Emmett is crazy about you. We’ve been seeing him at least every week since we got here and you two go out by yourselves to bars every couple of weeks too. You hang out with him more than I remember you hanging out with Michael.”

Brian thinks about the last couple of years he and Michael lived in the same city. Shit. Eric’s right. Granted, when he hangs out with Emmett 75% of the time it’s for Lily and Duncan’s benefit but they have a great time together.

“You miss Pittsburgh? Being around your family?”

Brian shrugs, “Sometimes. I miss when I could see all of them whenever I want. I miss what Michael and I used to have once in a while. We text and talk on the phone a lot but it isn’t the same. I miss the diner and Debbie’s house.”

“You bought Debbie’s house so she could go stay in it when they went back to Pittsburgh to visit,” Eric points out.

“Yeah,” Brian admits, “It isn’t the same though.”

“I remembered wondering why you didn’t want to relocate to Toronto instead of New York,” Eric tells him, “I know that business was the best here but I figured if we moved again it would be closer to Gus.”

Brian shrugs, “It was the best for Kinnetik and I have enough money to fly up to Toronto or Gus down here whenever I want. I miss Gus when he’s not here and I thought about relocating the three of us to Toronto at one point, you know that. But I know Gus wants to come back to the U.S. after he graduates high school. He’s only a freshman so that could change but he’s talked about moving to New York ever since he was nine when I brought him here for vacation, just the two of us. I figure it’ll be nice for him to have a home base if he ends up going to college here. Besides, I like my life here. I have you and Lily.”

Eric smiles and kisses his cheek, “I love my life here too. I worried about the move. So much space in this city is already taken up. But business here has been good. If I need to build something grand then I can always take a trip and do it somewhere else and come back home to you.”

“Like you are doing in August by going to New Orleans for a whole damn month?” Brian asks.
Eric sighs, “I thought you were okay with that.”

“I am. I just think you need to reconsider since I know you’ll miss Lily,” Brian points out.

“Of course I will. Maybe I could take her-”

“No,” Brian interrupts, “Not for the whole month. I’ll bring her to see you and maybe you can have her for a week or two but not for the whole entire month. Last time you kept taking her on your projects abroad it ended up causing us to fight non-stop.”

“I remember that,” Eric reminisces, “You were so fucking pissed all the time and finally blew up at me when I literally came back just for a day. That was a busy six months. I jumped right back into work right after Lily’s first birthday and had things set up all over the US, Canada, and Mexico. I was barely home. I’m surprised you stuck around.”

“Love has made men do crazier things.”

“I’m glad you did. I can’t imagine a life without you in it.”

Brian can only take so much mush so he lightly shoves Eric off of him with an indifferent, “Yeah, same.”

Eric smirks at Brian’s response and says, “We should probably get dressed. Emmett and Drew should be back with the kids soon.

Brian groans, “I miss the days when I could walk around the house naked.”

Eric laughs, “I can tell. When Lily went to Emmett’s to spend the night last week your clothes were off as soon as they were out the door.”

“And I got you to take your clothes off too. That was a great day.”

Eric snorts, “Put your pants on, Brian.”
Drew is holding Lily and Emmett is holding Duncan when they get back from Dumbo. Both kids look exhausted and Brian knows Lily won’t be staying up later like he said she could.

“They both enjoyed themselves,” Emmett says softly while Drew hands Lily over to Eric, “She got some ice cream on her dress so you’ll need to pre-treat it.”

“Got it. Thanks, Honeycutt.”

“Don’t call me Honeycutt,” Emmett answers fondly before heading out the door with Drew.

Eric heads up the stairs and Brian follows to get Lily into her pajamas and into bed. The little girl barely makes a peep until she is tucked in and says, “Night, Daddy. Night, Papa. Love you.”

And of course they tell her they love her back before turning on her nightlight and gently closing the door.

Brian can tell Eric is still upset about his parents. He lets Eric rest his head in his lap and Brian plays with his hair as they watch a movie. It’s so fucking domestic but it’s nice and he can feel the tension and heartache slowly leave Eric’s body as he gets more and more tired. He hopes sleep doesn’t bring Eric nightmares or distress of any sort due to the day’s events. He wants Eric to sleep peacefully. Maybe if he just sits here and keeps petting him, Eric will let what happened today go.

Chapter End Notes

Please review if you have read this chapter! It means a lot to the author! That would be me. ;)

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Another Author's Note

Chapter Summary

This has gone too far.

I am concerned about the affect this story has on a certain reader. The same reader who has wished death upon me in their reviews on Midnight Whispers has now sent me pictures of what appears to be their bloody wrist. I am not aware if the photos are authentic or not and do not wish to post them. The first one looked like it may be fake but I am unsure if the second one is even though the incision mark appears to be above the skin. Regardless, both photos were obviously taken in the same place. If any of you feel like you might be able to decipher if they are real, email me at anne.e.s120@gmail.com and I will send you the files. Regardless, this has me very scared for this person's sanity. I lost my patience with them and even told them they were acting crazy but asked them multiple times to seek help and tried to point out their behavior was completely out of line.

As a response to their photos, I sent them this:

Why are you doing this? Why would you do that to yourself over a fanfiction? Please, just stop doing this. Brian and Justin will have a happy ending in my story now please don't hurt yourself. Please, tell me a number I can call for you so that you can get help. I don't mind spending the money to make the long distance call. I want you to please get help and not harm yourself.

And they sent this:

It's not abt u it's abt ur story who started my nightmare u can't even imagine in what condition I'm I know it just a story but it started my night mare u say wht to do.....
Will Brian marry to Eric??

I don't know what else to do at this point. I need some support, honest opinions, and input. I am very scared for this person. Should I put a hold on this story? Delete it all together? This was supposed to be a three part tale but I'm unsure if I should go forth now since I am being harassed to this extent. GMail is making it very difficult to ban her. Her messages still pop up and I'm not sure why. The only reason I answered her email is because she started out by apologizing yesterday. Ugh. This is too much.
Chapter Summary

Regarding my previous note and how my stalker is really dense.

Regarding my previous note:

I am no longer concerned about whether or not I should continue my story. I am definitely continuing it. This person is a liar. At the risk of coming off as a total b**** I will tell you what I did.

I reverse searched every one of her pictures and they are all fake. I am carrying on with the story and won't let myself be affected by this complete troll. Two of the pictures were from 2009. I swear, she's pathetic. I don't like to say that about people but for someone who can't be smart enough to realize images can searched to find duplicates is ridiculous. Anyway, I will not be answering her any longer. I've sent her the links to her pictures to show her she's dense and have moved on. The next chapter should be up soon. :)

Author's Noter: Whew!
79th and West Drive

Chapter Summary

Being around Lily makes Justin realize how much he would like to have a kid of his own one day.

Chapter Notes

Long chapter so I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Splashes of red, black, grey and white decorate the canvas. Justin hasn’t been this immersed in his art in months. He hasn’t suffered a block by any means but he feels so fucking passionate to the point where he both knows exactly what he wants on the canvas but can’t foretell what the result will be so he keeps at it until the desire leaves him. He loses all track of time and just does what he loves to do.

Distantly, he’s aware that there’s a knock on the door but he can’t pull himself away. He physically can’t. His parents always got annoyed when he got like this as a kid but he likes the hyperfocusing because it allows him to shut everything else out.

“Justin.”

“Justin!”

Justin turns around, aggravated that he’s been interrupted, only to find that Nathan let himself into his studio. He calms down and shakes himself out of it.

“Hey! What time-”

“Midnight. You missed our set. I looked for you after and couldn’t find you.”
Justin looks up at the clock. Shit.

“Fuck, Nathan. I’m really sorry. I just got into this painting and lost track of time.”

Nathan’s lips form into a grim line, “I tried calling you before and after the show.”

Justin goes over to where his phone is charging and sees three missed calls and several texts, “It was on silent. I guess I never switched it over after I had dinner with Grant earlier this evening. That went well, by the way. He wants to book a show this coming November.”

“I’m glad your career is going swimmingly.”

Justin purses his lips and looks away, “How was your set?”

Nathan shrugs, “Great. But you wouldn’t know that.”

“I said I was-”

“Sorry,” Nathan finishes for him, “Yeah, I heard. I just really would have liked it if you had been there.”

Justin doesn’t really know what else to say so he doesn’t say anything. Nathan has every right to be pissed and he also knows that his boyfriend isn’t up for any groveling Justin could throw at him.

He expected Nathan to leave but instead he comes closer to Justin’s painting, crosses his arms over his chest, stares at the piece, and shudders.

“It’s really unnerving, Justin,” Nathan admits grimacing as his eyes take it in.

“It’s supposed to be.”
“It’s good. More than good, you know that. But I don’t want it in the apartment. It makes me feel sick. I know it’s personal to you and it’s your way of dealing but I don’t want it.”

Nathan turns around and starts to walk out of the room before pausing.

“Are you coming?”

“In a little bit,” Justin tells him, “We only live a few blocks away so I want to stay here and work on it longer.”

Nathan stays silent for a few seconds until he clears his throat and says, “You should get to bed soon. You’re meeting Brian tomorrow for lunch.”

“I’ll set my alarm,” Justin says distractedly, “I won’t be late.”

“Of course you won’t,” Nathan mutters, “Not for him.”

Justin closes his eyes with guilt, “Nathan, I didn’t mean-”

“I’ll see you back at home, Justin.”

Justin hears his studio door shut and he stands there, still in the silence. He is such a fucking asshole.

He shakes himself out of his self-disgust. He missed his boyfriend’s set because of this fucking painting so he might as well make it look good.

Dipping his brush into the red, he adds a stain to the white scarf.

He gets home at almost 2 in the morning. The apartment is mostly dark but Nathan kept the light in the foyer on for him.
He changes out of his paint smeared clothes, takes a quick shower, brushes his teeth, and curls up behind Nathan’s form. He can tell that his boyfriend isn’t sleeping so he gently puts an arm around him and lets his face rest against his shoulder.

“I really am sorry, Nathan,” he says quietly, “Getting wrapped up in my painting is no excuse. I should have been there.”

Nathan sighs, “You come to a lot of my performances. It’s not a big deal.”

“It is. I said I would be there, I wanted to be there, and I wasn’t. You have every right to be mad.”

Nathan stays quiet. After a minute or so Justin realizes he isn’t going to say anything else.

“Goodnight. I love you,” he tells as kisses his shoulder.

“You too,” Nathan croaks out.

Justin catches on to the distress in his boyfriend’s voice and sits up to get a better look at him but all Nathan does is squeeze his eyes shut and pretend like he’s asleep.

With a sad sigh, Justin lies back down and tries to force himself to fall asleep as well.

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Like he has a few times before, Justin goes to meet Brian at Kinnetik so that they can walk to lunch together. He chats with Malia when he passes by her new office before he says hello to Diana, Brian’s new assistant. Brian comes out within a few minutes, sees him, and, to Justin’s surprise, looks guilty.

“Diana, I’m leaving the office for the day. I know I said I wasn’t leaving until 5 but something came up. Have Malia take my 4 o’clock and look for an email from me in the next few hours. The art department just sent digital copies of their storyboards to me for the Springtime in the Park Coke Commercial. I’ll send you as well as Evan a list of what’s good and what isn’t. Your job is to make sure they change everything I make a negative note about on the list before they leave here today.”
Diana shrugs, “Alright. Have a good day, boss.”

Brian leads Justin to the elevator and says, “I have to go pick up Lily. At least one major pipe burst at her preschool and the place is flooded. They just called me a few minutes before you came and that’s why I kept you waiting. I would send Jess to get her but she sprained her ankle a couple of days ago when I was walking her to the train.”

“That sucks. Do they think it is going to be an easy fix?”

“The pipe or the ankle?”

“The pipe, Brian. Wait, is Jess’s sprain that bad?”

“Jess should be back to normal in a week. Eric’s been going to pick her up in the car before getting Lily so that he can drop them off at the house and get back to work but he’s busy and hands-on with the renovations uptown today. It’s not a big deal for me to get her. Today is a day where I can work from home. I don’t know how quickly they can get the pipe fixed. All I know is that Lily, her teacher, and a few other girls from her class were in there when it happened and it was basically like a tropical storm. She’s soaked.”

“Where does she go to preschool?”

“Park Slope. It’s this place called Beansprouts.”

“I know Beansprouts. I lived a few blocks away from it about six years ago. My boss at the time took her son and daughter there. It’s really hard to get into, isn’t it?”

Brian huffs, “Yeah. It was a bitch to get her in since she started in January. We brought her in last August and made them realize she was brilliant. I’m pretty sure the whole private preschool bullshit is about the parents feeling good about their financial status rather than the kids though. Lily’s an exception of course but I don’t see what’s so special about half of her classmates. We thought about just waiting until the fall so that we could get her into the Montessori School near our apartment but that place is $20,000 a year. Beansprouts is half as much but it’s definitely fucking enough to have decent pipes in the joint.”

Justin laughs but agrees with him as they step out of the elevator before he turns to Brian.
“Well, I understand. Maybe we can have lunch in a few days if you aren’t busy. Tell Lily I said hello-”

“I was actually thinking of inviting you back to the house to eat and hang out. If you wanted to, that is.”

Justin is taken aback by that and it must show on his face because Brian shrugs and says, “I mean, if you don’t want to that’s fine. Lily will probably make you watch Beauty & the Beast anyway so I can’t blame you if-”

“I like Beauty & the Beast,” Justin says quickly.

Brian smirks, “Into beastiality now, are you Sunshine?”

Justin playfully gives a light shove to his shoulder, “I was never even into bears, Brian.”

Brian laughs at that, “Alright. We need to get on the F to pick up Lily and you can watch my kid with me until Eric gets back. Maybe you can call Nathan around then and the five of us can have dinner.”

Justin blinks a few times. Having what is essentially a double date with Brian and Eric is daunting enough but it has been done a couple of times before. Spending several hours with Brian by himself beforehand? That has never happened. Not in the last 8 years, that is.

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

The two of them get on the F and take it to the 7th Avenue stop in Park Slope. When they get there, they see several mothers and a couple of fathers with their kids in hand. Brian and Justin go inside the building and already see water in the hallways. They enter the office, wait in line, and get to the front so that Brian can request his child.

“I got a call saying my child had been completely soaked by your faulty plumbing system?” Brian says, mouth turned into a frown. Justin himself couldn’t completely tell whether or not Brian was actually pissed about it.
“Oh, um yes. Mr. Kinney, right?” the secretary nervously asks as she flips through the book and crosses off a name.

“That would be me.”

“We gave her a spare shirt we had leftover from summer camp. One of the adult shirts since she was wearing a dress and tights. We have her clothes bagged up and she’s ready to go.”

“How long are you all planning to be shut down? I am paying this school good money so that she gets a good education. The kids can’t come as long as the water is shut off.”

“Yes, Mr. Kinney, you are completely right to be upset. We are hoping that this is a problem that can be fixed quickly. A plumber will be here first thing tomorrow so the school will be closed then. After we find out what time frame is needed for the labor, we will give every family a personal call to discuss the matter further. Should we find out that it will take more than a couple of days to fix the plumbing, we have called several schools in the Brooklyn area to see if they can take temporary placements until the issue is resolved.”

Brian nods, satisfied, “Thank you for the explanation. Is she in Miss Thompson’s classroom right now? I can go up and get her.”

“Yes, but please be careful and watch your step. The flooding is up to a few inches in some parts of the hallway. Miss Thompson’s classroom is on the second floor. Just go to the end of the hall, take the stairs on the right, and it’s the second door on the left when you get upstairs.”

“I know where it is. Thank you for the call. Come on, Justin.”

Justin follows Brian out to the main hall. They walk carefully and he hears Brian groan.

“I should charge them for my dry cleaning,” Brian grits out, looking down at his wet ankles.

“What kind of suit is that?” Justin asks, “Prada? Armani?”
“Hugo Boss.”

“Still a label queen.”

“Absolutely. And here you’d think that your taste would have gotten more refined as you built your fortune.”

“Why would I want to wear something expensive if I am just going to get paint on it?”

“Touchè.”

Despite the pond in the hallway, they make it to Lily’s classroom and find her over with a few other girls talking animatedly with very wet hair and a large green t-shirt on.

“Hi, Mr. Kinney,” Lily’s teacher greet him before looking at Justin, “I don’t think I’ve met you. I’m Caroline Thompson.”

“Miss Thompson, this is my old friend, Justin Taylor. He was meeting me for lunch when I got a call from downstairs.”

“Yes, I really do want to apologize, Mr. Kinney. Lily, Viola, and Margaret were on the stools washing their hands one second and getting sprayed and soaked the very next. It is from the sink though so it is clean water. Thank god it wasn’t the sewage line. Anyway, here are her clothes. When I get word from the principal about what the deal is, I will give you a call.”

“I would appreciate that.”

Brian walks over to his unsuspecting daughter and taps her on the shoulder while Justin hangs back by the door. Lily turns around and sees her father and dives into her exciting day. She’s projecting so it makes it easy for Justin to hear her.

“Daddy, the CRAZIEST thing happened today! We planted flowers outside and came back in to wash our hands because lunch time is coming up soon. So I’m just there, washing my hands like I always do and THEN water is spraying EVERYWHERE!!!! I got wet, see? And I got new clothes!
I have been so busy that I just forgot about lunch!”

“Maybe it is because your lunch is not until 12:45 and it’s only 12:30. I decided to go ahead and get you now. You mind eating at home today?”

Lily sighs, “I guess I can come with you.”

Lily turns to the kids she was talking to.

“Bye! My daddy is taking me back home before lunch because I’m all wet!”

“Bye, Lily!”

“Bye Lily’s daddy!”

“Bye!”

Brian smiles and takes her hand before bringing her over by Justin.

“Hi, Justin! I got all wet today!”

Justin smiles, “I heard you got all wet! You must have quite a story to tell.”

“Ohh huh! I’ll tell you all about it! What are you doing at my school?”

“I tagged along with your dad to see you. That okay?”

“Yes, I can show you around!” Lily says, pulling her hand out of Brian’s to take a hold of Justin’s.
“Lily?” Brian interrupts, “Why don’t you just show him to your cubby hole, get your coat, and wait until your school’s not flooded to give a tour? We need to get home.”

“Ugh, fine! Come on, Justin!”

Lily leads Justin over to her cubby hole to get her coloring pages and worksheets then points to her coat so that Justin can get it for her while she chatters away.

“-It was crazy and scary at first but so much fun! It was like a pool in there!”

“And you aren’t mad that your clothes got all wet?”

Lily shrugs, “Nuh uh. They’re just clothes. Anyway, Miss Thompson was like-” Lily breaks off to check and make sure Miss Thompson is distracted, ‘Oh no! Girls, stop!’ But me and Margaret and Viola laughed so much because it was so funny!”

Justin laughs, “Yeah, possible structural damage is hilarious. I think your daddy is getting impatient.”

“We better go back to him,” she concedes before walking back over to her father.

Brian looks down at her feet.

“Looks like you’re getting carried. No socks with dress shoes means blisters and I don’t want your feet hurting.”

Brian lifts her up and they walk out of the room and back down the hall, only for Brian to stop by the stairs.

“Lily, you didn’t pee yourself, did you?”

Lily gasps in absolute outrage, “No! Daddy, I would never do that!”
“Okay, okay! You just feel wet down there,” he says, gesturing where his hand is propping her up on his waist.

“My undies are still wet. I told you how wet I got.”

“Jesus, what did you do? Take a bath in there?”

“No, me and Margaret and Viola danced around and jumped in the puddles before Miss Thompson told us to stop.”

“I’m not surprised at all,” Brian snorts before sounding a little hopeful, “Are you friends with Margaret and Viola? You haven’t really mentioned them before.”

Lily shrugs, “They’re nice. We eat snack together and nap by the books. But I still want a baby sister.”

Justin does a double take while Brian flushes, shrugs, and looks away.

“Let’s not talk about that now, Lily. I was just asking about them because I know you’ve been missing your friends in Chicago. Maybe Margaret and Viola can come for your birthday if you like them.”

“Oooh oooh! I want that! I want them over for my birthday! They can meet Duncan!”

“Great, I’ll see if I can get their contact information. Now don’t go talking about who you are inviting to your birthday. It’s just going to be a small get together at home. Your papa doesn’t want any kids in your class feeling left out.”

“I know,” Lily says, exasperated.

Brian winks and Justin knows it’s because Lily doesn’t have a clue about the big surprise birthday party that he, Eric, Emmett, and Drew have planned in Central Park for her and Duncan. Justin
knows about it since he and Nathan were invited. Nathan had been a little put on the spot when Justin gave Eric their RSVP and had said, “I can shop for Duncan. That’s fine. But I don’t even know what little girls like, Justin. She’ll hate whatever I get her.”

Lily seemed pretty open to things though. Justin could tell that a present was a present in her eyes. He was sure he and Nathan would figure out something.

When they get outside Lily starts to whine and shiver, “Daddy, I’m cold!”

Brian sets her down and looks at her to see what he can do.

“My legs and hair are cold!”

“I’ll sue them.”

Justin snorts, “Brian, please. We can get her more comfortable.”

Justin takes off his own jacket, then takes off Lily’s. He bends down, throws his jacket over her body, zips it up, and makes sure it goes past her knees before he takes her sweatshirt jacket to wrap it around her hair like a towel.

“Justin, she looks ridiculous.”

But Lily doesn’t seem to mind, “I feel so much better, Justin! Thank you!”

Lily launches herself at him to give him a big hug and he finds himself hugging her back. She is so damn sweet.

When they let go, Justin looks up from his squatting position to see Brian looking down at them with soft, fond eyes but quickly shakes himself out of it.

“Come on, little girl! Back in the air we go!”
“Daddy, I’m NOT little!” she scolds him as she is lifted back up on Brian’s hip.

“Of course not. I mean, you were in the front row in your class picture because you couldn’t be seen anywhere else but that doesn’t mean you are little,” Brian smirks.

And the look Lily gives him. The silent, intense stare that says, “you hit below the belt, Daddy” is both frightening and hilarious.

“...But you’ll grow really soon. I bet you’ll almost be as tall as Papa,” Brian finally says, alarmed by the intense stare.

Lily shakes her head, “No, I’ll be taller than you!”

“Okay, we’ll see.”

“I know I will be taller than Justin. I know that for sure,” Lily says snidely.

Justin looks at her, shocked by the jab, while Brian tosses his head back and laughs.

“Hey! I gave you my coat!”

“Thank you for giving me your coat. But I am still gonna be bigger than you.”

“It’s best to not argue with her. She usually gets the last word when it comes to topics such as this one,” Brian tells him.

“I figured. I also figure there’s a good chance that she’s probably right. Molly was right when she told me she would be taller than me. It’s only by an inch but she still won’t let me live it down.”

The three of them hop back on the F so they can make it to their transfer. It’s not crowded so they all get to sit down. Brian sits Lily between them and turns to speak to Justin over his daughter’s
“How is Molly, by the way?”

Justin sighs, “I don’t know. She’s been a bit closed off. She’s been spending some weekends with our Dad to keep an eye on him. I think she’s mad that I told her what was going on. She semi-cut him off when she turned 18. She’s been weird in general though so I think maybe there’s some stress with her job since she wants to go back to school to become a medical researcher. She also might be seeing someone but she won’t tell me anything. She made some hints but her lips are sealed whenever I try to get anything out of her. It’s weird. We became close after she came here for her internship and haven’t been on the outs since so for her to pull away, especially now, hurts.”

“I’m sure she’s not pulling away on purpose. She’s probably just dealing with her own problems since she lives closer to your father. As for her seeing someone, she’s seeing Hunter.”

“Wait, WHAT?!”

Lily looks up at Justin’s outburst, “Why’d you shout, Justin?”

Justin shakes his head, “No reason.”

“Kay.”

“Are you fu-messing with me? How do you know that?”

Brian shrugs, “I’m not messing with you. I talk to Michael a lot. Michael is his father for all intents and purposes. Apparently the little ex-hustler is quite taken with her and is staying with her in Morgantown for a few weeks now that filming has wrapped up on that show he works for.”

“He lives all the way across the country. She’ll end up with her heart broken.”

Brian looks away, “Distance does do that, doesn’t it?”
Justin glances over to Brian and sees the sad and far away look on his face. Before he can say anything, Brian says, “Here’s our stop.”

They wait for the train to Brian’s house and Justin can’t let the subject go.

“Why wouldn’t she say anything? Why wouldn’t she tell me? She told me when she was dating Jeff and Nick. She told me when some asshole she had one date with was stalking her. Why wouldn’t she tell me about Hunter?”

Brian smirks, “Maybe because she thought you would be weird about it.”

Justin scoffs, “I’m not being weird about it.”

Brian’s smirk turns into an ornery smile, “Of course you aren’t. It’s still pretty new. Michael said they hooked up a few times when they were both here for Christmas. A couple of times in Hunter’s hotel room and once in a bathroom stall at your gallery on New Year’s—”

“Oh my god, stop! Don’t tell me anything! Does Hunter tell his parents everything?! Jesus, that little shit better not keep running his mouth about my sister!”

“But if he loves her then he should talk about how much!” Lily pipes in.

Both of them look at her and are reminded that she takes in a lot more than she lets on. Brian clears his throat.

“I think he was overwhelmed with the distance and how strongly he feels for her so he ended up spilling the beans to Michael and Ben when they visited him last month. You know that Hunter has never been one to shy away from certain topics but I don’t think he has been boasting. I guess he respects her a lot. Michael and Ben both thought Molly was great when they saw her at Christmas but are afraid it’ll end badly due to the distance. Anyway, he’s been worried about her so he decided to stay in Morgantown for a few weeks.”

“I’ll call her about it later. Let her know that I know. Make sure she’s being safe.”
Brian’s expression gets serious, “Hunter would never put anyone in that type of danger. He’s very careful about it because he would be devastated if he passed it along.”

Justin lets out a breath, “I know he’s careful. I’m just worried, don’t mind me. And you should be worried too for running your mouth.”

Brian shrugs, “None of them live here. What are they going to do to me?”

Justin huffs out a laugh and they step onto the crowded train, “You’re more talkative than I remember you being.”

“Hey, you were were worried about her. I was just trying to placate you by getting you pissed off.”

Justin looks at him and raises an eyebrow and Brian just raises one back. They are practically chest to chest in the train and Justin stumbles into him when the train lurches. He tries not to blush about it when Brian looks down at him with slightly dilated pupils. He shakes himself out of the moment and stands back up straight.

The walk back to Brian’s house is filled mostly with chatter from Lily. They get inside and Justin waits downstairs while Brian takes Lily up to her room to get changed. Brian wasn’t kidding when he said Justin could come by and help him watch his kid. As soon as Lily comes running down the stairs, she takes Justin’s hand and says, “Come on, Justin! You haven’t seen OR played with Bianca and Vernon yet!”

Brian passes them on his way down the stairs and says, “I’m going to make lunch. We have leftover chicken breast from last night so do you want that with fresh basil, tomato, fresh mozzarella, and balsamic vinaigrette? I can do it on a sandwich or in a salad.”

“Sounds fancy. Whichever is fine. You know I like carbs,” Justin offers before being pulled up the stairs by Lily.

“Watch out for Vernon! He likes to run around!” Brian calls out before going into the kitchen.

Lily tells him to sit on the floor while she opens the door to the cage to hand him a white rat.
“That’s Bianca. He’s really cute, huh?”

Justin looks at the rat and he’s cute enough so he goes along with it.

“So cute. He’s the friendly one, isn’t he?”

“Uh huh! And this is Vernon. He’s nice too but he’s shyer than Bianca. He loves me though.”

“Of course he does. Who wouldn’t love you?” Justin grins.

“There’s a boy at my preschool who pulls my hair and says I’m a sissy. He’s really mean and never leaves me alone.”

Justin frowns, “You tell your parents about him?”

Lily shrugs, “No. I don’t like him either. He’s really mean.”

Justin leans in, “You know, boys can be dumb. Especially when they like a girl. A lot of times they’ll tease a girl because they are too dense to tell a her that they like her. It sounds like he may have a crush.”

Lily gets a disgusted and horrified look on her face, “Ew ew ew ew! I will NEVER like Joseph! Yuck! That’s stupid anyway. If he likes me then he should be nicer and let me play with the blocks.”

Justin nods, “I agree. He sounds like a piece of work.”

“Uh huh! If you like someone, you should give them flowers and play with them like Duncan does. Here! I think Vernon wants you to hold him now!”

They switch rats and after a couple of minutes Lily takes both of them so they can run on the
obstacle course. Lily giggles at their shenanigans and Justin stays with her until Brian comes back upstairs to fetch them.

“Bianca and Vernon need to eat too. I’ll bring them down,” Lily tells her father as she picks up the rats.

“They can eat in their cage,” Brian tells her sternly, “Now, come on. Put them away. Maybe you can bring them downstairs later when Papa’s home.”

Lily pouts and stomps over to the cage to put them back in and follows her father and Justin downstairs. Brian made him a sandwich and himself a salad while he gave Lily a lunchables and a Gogurt. Brian looks at the tube of yogurt and says, “I did their ad campaign and got their sales back up. They send me coupons for free boxes all the time. Lily loves them.”

He sits Lily in her chair and opens up her meal to put her pizza together then motions for Justin to sit down by him at the island.

“So what have you been up to since we saw each other last?”

Justin shrugs, “I’ve gone to a few of Nathan’s shows. Painted last night. Set up some upcoming exhibits up in the city. I’m working on a solo show at my gallery with an up and coming artist in Bed Stuy. He’s really good.”

“Sounds like you’ve been busy. I haven’t been to the last couple bookings The Accidental Natives have had but I always send someone. I think they’re more than ready for the show. I put out some feelers and hear that there are some labels interested in signing them once their contract with the show ends. Don’t say anything to the band yet.”

Justin looks at him, “You aren’t their manager. Why are you taking so much interest?”

Brian shrugs, “I like things I am involved in to do well. Just because I’m pulling back a little now that everything is set up doesn’t mean I’m not going to check in and make sure they are doing their best. I’m impressed with them.”

“Can you tell him that when you see him? Because he’s been working his ass off. Between the performances you have them doing on the weekends and what they pick up during the week, he’s
lucky to get a night off. I know you don’t throw around praise but I think he would appreciate it.”

Brian purses his lips and looks as though he is holding back a grin, “We’ll see. Or I’ll make you a deal. Help me out with some of the storyboards once I put Lily down for her nap and I’ll tell your boyfriend how wonderful he is.”

“Deal,” Justin agrees.

Justin asks about the Coke Campaign how many commercial shoots they have set up at the moment so far and they talk about Kinnetiks projects abroad and possible expansions.

“If you expand to LA, will you move there or let someone else take the reigns?” Justin asks, queasy about the possible answer.

“It’s way too early to tell if we will expand over there. I don’t want to spend that much again for at least another few years. I also don’t want to keep moving Lily around. Emmett, Drew, and Duncan are here...you’re here. I want her around people who care about her. The only places where she’s going to get that are here, Toronto, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and D.C. since Eric’s best friends live there and go out of their way to see her. I don’t want her to keep having to form new relationships just because she has to. I think we’re here to stay.”

“What about Eric’s family? I’m sure they care.” Justin won’t ask about Brian’s family. He knows the answer there.

Brian shakes his head, “Eric’s brother and sister care. His brother is actually in the Venice Beach area so I guess that would be a plus when it comes to Southern California but his parents...I’ll explain that situation to you maybe when Lily’s asleep.”

They go outside in the garden area behind Brian’s house after lunch. Brian gets Lily to run off some energy on the swing set Brian said Eric built over the weekend.

“You know how long it took me just to assemble Gus’s swingset? It probably took just a few hours more for Eric to build a sturdy and far more superior one from scratch. Such bullshit.”

“Designing and building is his job,” Justin comments as he watches Lily go up the spiral staircase into the tower, “But he did all of this in a day?”
Brian nods, impressed, “Yeah. He needed to take his mind off of some things. He got up ridiculously early on Sunday, went and got supplies from his office and IKEA then brought it back in one of the work trucks. He worked on it all day. He was hyperfocusing, sort of like you used to sometimes. He wouldn’t have stopped to eat if I hadn’t reminded him.”

“Daddy, watch this!” Lily exclaims right before she goes down the slide.

“Wow, I’ve never seen that before!” Brian says with subtle sarcasm as his daughter climbs back up to the top.

“I’m gonna show you again! Watch this!”

Lily goes down the slide once more before asking Brian to push her on the swings.

“Remember how I told you to pump your legs? You can do it yourself.”

“Yeah, but I’ll go higher if you push me,” Lily informs him then sits there and waits.

Brian gives her an exasperated look before getting behind her to push her.

“Higher, Daddy! I wanna go higher!” Lily giggles.

Lily does go higher and seems content on the swing until Brian tells her it’s time to go inside for her nap. Lily complains but he stays firm. Justin sits on the couch and as Brian takes his daughter upstairs, he hears Lily ask, “Will you sing me a song before I go to sleep?”

“If it helps you fall asleep, then sure,” Brian tells her quietly.

He hears her bedroom door close. Justin lets out a breath and, even though he’s been around Brian on occasion in the last few months, it’s still awe-inspiring to see him like this. It’s so obvious that Brian is so fucking happy even if at times they stare at each other for a little too long or text late at night. He never wants to ruin what Brian has with Eric and Lily. He would never wish for Brian to
But being around Brian and Lily makes him realize how much he wants something like this as well. That he could have had it with Brian if he had settled down despite not being ready for it then.

Justin tries to be rational about it. Nathan is young. He won’t even be 24 until August and Justin can wait a few years for him to be ready for something like this. He was once in the same position as Nathan is. But it is something that probably should be talked about sooner rather than later. He needs to see if Nathan would be open to it in the next few years. See if he wants a kid of his own or if he wouldn’t mind raising Justin’s biological child. Considering how up and down they’ve been, Justin doesn’t know how to bring something like that up or when the right time to do it would be.

Brian makes his way back downstairs about ten minutes later and comes over to sit next to Justin on the couch.

“She fall asleep?”

“Yeah. The excitement caught up with her. I hope she didn’t get on your nerves or anything. Sometimes she can be a bit much for some people.”

“She’s amazing,” Justin says, cutting him off right there, “You’re really great with her, Brian.”

Brian purses his lips and looks away, “I’m okay.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. She’s crazy about you.”

Brian’s lips form into a small and subtle smile. Justin is glad that he knows that much.

“So are you going to do it?”

Brian looks confused, “Do what?”
“Give her what she asked for?”

It takes a few seconds for recognition to appear on Brian’s face but once it does, his eyes widen.

“Shit, I don’t know. Eric and I just started talking about it because Lily asked a couple of weeks ago. We haven’t decided on anything. We’ve been so busy with the wedding planning and Eric’s been hung up on his asshole parents even though he swears that he isn’t. So it’s just been thrown around a few times. I can tell Eric wants another kid...I’m not against it.”

Justin stays quiet and looks at Brian. Stares at this man who has grown vast amounts in the last ten years and changed so much from the man he met outside of Babylon. It was so strange but Brian has taken on this role so well.

“What? You shocked?”

Justin finds himself shaking his head.

“No. Not anymore. You’re a changed man and that’s okay.”

Brian gives him a soft smile, “You’re good with Lily. You’ve always been great with kids. When are you having one?”

Justin flushes and Brian smirks.

“Now you know what it feels like to be put on the spot, don’t you?”

Justin laughs at Brian’s comment, “I don’t know. I’ve been wanting a kid more and more the past few months. Maybe it is because I’m around Duncan and Lily but I want it and it’s getting to the point where I am wondering when I will actually have one.”

Brian tosses up his hands, “That’s one of the many beauties of being rich. Just pick an egg and pick a womb, jizz into a cup and outcomes baby Taylor nine months later. Or you can go Emmett and Drew’s route and adopt.”
“I know that. And I’m ready for either option. But I don’t think Nathan is. I can wait a few years but I don’t know if that’s what he wants at all.”

Brian’s gaze becomes more knowing, “Ah. The talk. I had it with Eric two years in. Let him know I was okay with it if he wanted a baby.”

That does take Justin by surprise, “You brought up having kids? Not Eric?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t something I thought that hard on but he had mentioned wanting a family when we became friends in the beginning and it stuck with me, especially since he stuck with me through a bunch of shit. I thought on it and I knew I wanted him to have the family that he wanted. I knew that a kid would be lucky to have him as their dad so I brought it up, we talked to Cynthia, and now we’re here. If another kid would make him happier than he already is, then I’m for it. Especially after what his parents pulled.”

“Are they homophobic assholes?” Justin asks, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah. I can’t stand them. I’ve only been around them a few times but they suck. They love Lily, even though they don’t come around enough to really get to know her. She looks a lot like her grandmother, except her skin is a little lighter and she’s a much better person. But I can even tell that deep down Eric’s parents still love him but they treat him like dirt. They usually act like I’m not in the room. It’s a shame. He was really close to his mother. His dad too but they always had different views on politics. But his mom and her family were the ones Eric hated losing. He still had his grandfather but he died last year from a plane crash. He and his friend were flying in some tiny junker. He was 90 and in perfect health. But other than Eric’s grandfather, his mom’s family is religious and his father’s family distanced themselves from his dad when he married a Mexican woman.”

Justin feels pissed on Eric’s behalf, “You’d think his dad would understand what it feels like for your family to shun you because of the person you love.”

Brian snorts, “Believe me, we have both pointed the irony out to them before. They still refuse to come to the wedding. Eric’s mother said she won’t support our lifestyle by attending and she especially won’t see her innocent granddaughter raised in such an awful living situation.”

“That is bullshit!” Justin fumes, standing up, “Anyone who has seen you and Eric with Lily knows that that’s bullshit.”
“Justin,” Brian says, putting a hand on his wrist, “I love your passion and support but remember that Lily is sleeping and I do not want to have to deal with her hyperactivity for at least another hour.”

“Right. Sorry.”

Justin sits back down next to Brian and a thought suddenly comes to him.

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

Brian shrugs and looks away, “You have been sharing with me these past few weeks so I thought I would share something with you. Do you mind?”

“No,” Justin says quickly, “I actually really appreciate it. I guess this Open Brian Kinney is something I have to get used to.”

“I used to be open about stuff,” Brian points out, “I was always honest.”

“Yeah, when it came to logic or reality checks, you were the guy to go to. But verbally expressing affection or any problems that were going on was never something you did. I’m glad you do now. Your old way was unhealthy. Tessler must have helped you a lot.”

“She did,” Brian admits, “But not as much as Gus and Eric and Lily. Not as much as you.”

And there they are, caught in that damn stare again. The one that almost dares the other one to move just a little closer. The one that forces Justin to control himself and not think solely of himself. It lasts for about fifteen seconds until Brian turns away and clears his throat.

“You said you’d look over the storyboards with me. I’ll go get my laptop so we can judge how competent my art department is.”

Justin knows that Brian is looking for a way out of their deep conversation and he’s almost grateful
for it. Justin watches the older man get up and go to his office to get his computer then plop back down beside him and sign into his email.

Right off the bat Justin can tell that, while there are some good ideas here, the coloring and the angles aren’t as well executed. So he points them out to Brian and offers alternatives to him. He sees the anger rise in Brian so Justin is quick to point out the good things his art department has done as well. Brian starts typing up corrections that Justin suggested as well as his own before he sends out the email to Diana and Evan.

“Are you looking for a job? I might be hiring a new art department head soon,” Brian proposes suddenly.

Justin snickers, “Maybe when the rest of my year isn’t filled up with three upcoming shows to paint for, four exhibits at my gallery, and drawing Rage. Maybe then I will take you up on it.”

Brian sighs, “I suppose Evan will have to do for now. So what’s going on with Rage?”

“Michael and I settled down and got two issues finished. The first issue is coming out this summer.”

“You know I know that. Red Giant hired Kinnetik to handle the promotions for it. But I’m asking how Rage is doing.”

Justin tilts his head, confused, “He’s fine, I guess.”

“...Don’t make me ask,” Brian says under his breath.

Justin closes his eyes. He thought Brian was aiming for a lighter conversation route after moving onto the storyboards. Apparently not. So Justin bites the bullet and comes out with it.

“It took a while to decide what to do when it came to Rage and JT. On the one hand they are ultimately fictional characters so their path could go anywhere. The publishers were initially pushing to open up with Rage and JT together with their son but since several years have passed we figured that the old audience might appreciate something a little more unexpected. Someone mentioned to us that Rage or JT should be broken up and have double agent love interests who were just after hurting them in the long run. I told Michael that I wouldn’t draw that. So what we
finally came down to is that Rage and JT were done as a couple. They went their separate ways because it was for the best. They weren’t in sync anymore. After the break up, Rage fell in love with this amazing man, a hero in his own right. Despite refusing love for so long he found it again rather quickly and it was so right for him. JT was sad at first. Hurt. But eventually he became happy for Rage as well. JT ends up finding his new partner by chance. A young man who has a dark past but a bright future. JT takes him under his wing and he ends up slowly falling for him. And soon, Rage and JT realize they are living completely separate lives but they are miraculously still happy. They don’t see each other but still hear how the other one is doing with their mutual friends and family.”

Justin is glad he isn’t looking at Brian. He does think he could say the next part if he was.

“They’ll always love each other. They’ve gone through too much to ever stop. They know each other too well despite how much the years have changed them. But they love each other enough to let the other be happy and in love with someone else.”

Justin finally looks back at Brian and...fuck. Brian’s crying. The man is looking away and he isn’t making a sound but the tears are leaking over before he swipes a hand across his eyes and sniffs. Justin stays silent and lets Brian quickly gain back his composure.

Brian clears his throat, huffs out an embarrassed laugh, and says, “That sounds way too deep for the Rage fanbase, Sunshine. Whatever happened to making guys choke themselves to death on their own cocks?”

Justin grins, “Don’t worry. That kind of stuff is in there too. I just didn’t want to spoil you on the real drama.”

Brian hmmms before asking, “So are Rage and JT destined to have separate storylines in this reboot? Will it go back and forth, issue to issue, to cover their lives?”

Justin shakes his head, “Rage and JT join forces again after a few issues. With their partners. They learn to work together and enjoy each other’s company again. The four of them, plus Zephyr and the Professor, are a team. I guess we’re forming a gay justice league...Despite all of the drama and the problems brought on by Gayopolis, I think that they are all really happy with their lives and everything turned out for the best.”

Brian looks at him with kind eyes, thankful eyes, and reaches over to grab Justin’s hand. Justin finds himself lacing his fingers with Brian’s in return. They end up just sitting there like that until Lily wakes up.
Eric gets home around 6 and Nathan makes it over just a little bit after since he caught a movie with Sebastian in Cobble Hill and was close by. Nathan seems to be mostly over what happened the night before. Justin greets him with a hug that’s a little too long and Nathan looks at him with fondness before they both go into the kitchen to help Brian with the meal while Eric reads with his daughter at the kitchen table. They talk and they laugh and, even though Justin can tell that Nathan is still not that comfortable around Brian, he still seems to be enjoying himself. Justin’s glad. He really wants them all to get along.

They all sit down for dinner and make conversation with one another. Justin asks Eric about the hotel since the building and history of the place always fascinated him. Brian praises Nathan like he promised to, even if it is in his own Briany way. Lily talks about how much fun she had at preschool and Nathan surprisingly laughs with her and is entertained by her story. It’s a good night.

“So Justin, are you working on any paintings right now?” Eric asks as he puts down his fork.

Nathan visibly shudders and Justin glances at him before answering Eric.

“Yeah. Nathan hates this one but I have all but the finishing touches done on one.”

Brian tilts his head, “What don’t you like about it?”

Nathan looks at Brian, “It’s not that I don’t like it. I just am not a fan of the subject matter.”

“What’s the subject matter?”

Justin realizes the possible conflict and interrupts, “Nathan, let’s not-”

“Justin’s prom night. The parking garage.”

The silence is deafening and even Lily knows to be quiet. Brian pales at the words before he finally looks to Justin and says in a low voice, “Why the fuck would you paint that?”
Nathan is the only one who actually knows why he started painting the parking garage again. He used to do it to try to get himself to remember the dance. He thought that maybe if he painted what he did remember, he could trace his steps and maybe remember the dance.

When he started painting it again a year ago, that wasn’t the reason. With a completely straight face, he tells Brian what the true reason is.

“Chris Hobbs called me about a year ago from his death bed. He had a brain tumor and was genuinely trying to make amends. He moved to Maine a few years after I left for New York, went into therapy, and eventually met a guy at church. I guess he found God and his gayness around the same time. I’m not sure how hypocritical that is. A few more years pass and he’s diagnosed with an inoperable malignant brain tumor. He starts calling the people he’s hurt in the past and the last person he called was me. I listened to his apology and I told him to go fuck himself. He died the next day. So Brian, sometimes when I’m feeling a bit strange about that, I paint things related to Chris Hobbs. Sometimes I paint him in a hospital bed, looking like death with a bloody baseball bat in his limp hands. And every once in a while I paint myself in the parking garage. I find it therapeutic.”

Brian stares at him with anger and fear before getting up.

“Nathan, I need to talk to you.”

Nathan looks up at Brian in surprise, “...Okay?”

Nathan follows Brian out of the room and Justin, Eric, and Lily are left alone. Eric turns to Justin and actually looks understanding.

“I get it.”

Justin raises an eyebrow, “You do?"

“Of course. And I know Nathan gets it too, even if what you are creating scares him. You’re an artist. That’s how you emote when it comes down to it. You put all of your focus into what you are doing and you create something new. I did the same with that swing set out there this weekend. I was pissed at my parents and wanted to prove that I would be a better one then they could ever be. So I put my focus into doing something I loved to make my daughter something that she would love. You feel pain over what Chris Hobbs did to you and confusion over his somewhat ironic
“death so you put those feelings into creating something vivid and physical to help get it out. Every
time Nathan gets on stage he puts every single emotion he has into what he is singing. Brian is a
very creative man but advertising doesn’t give him the same outlet. He can throw himself into
work when he’s feeling a certain way but the result isn’t something that represents healing. He
doesn’t completely get our methods.”

Justin’s eyes are wide with shock before he asks, “So you’re a psychic, right?”

Eric snorts, “Far from it.”

Brian and Nathan come back in and sit back down at the table. Justin looks back and forth between
the two of them and they both act like nothing had been said. The rest of the night goes smoothly.

The get home around 9, fuck in the shower, then go sit in the living room to watch True Detective.

“How was your day with Brian?” Nathan asks him, halfway through the episode.

Justin shrugs, “It was fine. We talked about the wedding and Rage but mainly watched Lily.”

“She’s hard to keep up with. Cute though.”

Justin nods, “Yeah. She’s adorable. And she’s so smart. Literally just keeps you on your toes with
the things she says.”

Nathan huffs out a laugh, “It sounds like you want one.”

Here it is. The topic he has been worried about trying to find a way to bring up is now presenting
itself.

He might as well ease into it.

“I do. I would like to have a kid.”
He feels Nathan freeze next to him. Shit.

“Nathan, I’m not trying to put you on the spot. I know you’re young. I can wait.”

Nathan nods slowly, “Okay. I don’t know if I want that.”

“Oh. What about in a few years?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’ve never been around kids.”

“Neither had Brian and he did okay with Gus and Lily.”

“My upbringing was a lot different from Brian’s.”

Justin sighs and rubs Nathan’s back, “I know, baby. I know it was so fucking hard.”

“I refuse to end up like him.”

“You won’t,” Justin hisses firmly, “You are nothing like that sorry excuse for a father.”

Nathan takes a few shaky breaths, “The only way to make sure I don’t end up like him is to make sure I don’t have a kid to abuse, torture, r-rape-”

“Babe, don’t go there. Pull yourself away. Don’t think about him right now. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry for making you think about him.”

Nathan takes several more breaths before he finally calms down, “It’s not your fault. You were talking about something normal. Something a lot of normal people want. I’m not normal though, Justin. I don’t know if I will ever be ready for that.”
Justin closes his eyes and nods his head, “Okay. That’s okay. It doesn’t matter.”

Nathan looks at him closely, “You’re sure it doesn’t matter?”

“Yes. You’re more important to me, okay?”

Nathan nods, “I’ll try to think about it more. Work harder on myself and maybe the idea will appeal to me more one day. It just doesn’t now.”

“I understand.”

“Can we go to bed? I want to lie down with you.”

Justin nods as he gets up and holds out his hand for Nathan to take then leads him to their bed. They hold onto each other until they are both fast asleep.

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On April 4th, Justin wakes up to an empty bed and goes out into the living room to find Nathan finishing wrapping up a present in a decent sized box.

“Hey,” Justin yawns, “What are those for? I got presents from us last night and some gift bags to put them in.”

Nathan looks up before shrugging.

“Duncan and Lily are family, right? And they only turn four once. They deserve a present from each of us.”

Justin grins and gets on his knees to kiss him, “What did you get them?”

Nathan smirks, “I’ll let you be surprised. You need to go get ready. I let you sleep in because you were up late painting last night but it’s time to get a move on.”
After Justin hops in the shower and brushes his teeth, he gets the presents in their respective gift bags. He got them both a children’s canvas set as well as a Furby for Lily and the Toy Story Trilogy for Duncan. He meets Nathan by the apartment door and wonders how his boyfriend is managing to carry whatever he got them. Then they both head out and hop on the train to 59th Street. They’ll have to do some walking since they are having it by the castle in the park. He can’t imagine his parents throwing him a birthday party this expensive, let alone at the age of four. But Lily’s and Duncan’s parents can afford it and they were great kids so he was excited to see the looks on their faces.

They get there a little early. Eric and Emmett are there to help the crew set things up and Emmett calls them over to show them where to put the gifts.

“Hey, babies!” Emmett squeals as he hugs both of them, “I’m so glad you could make it! This is such a great day!”

Eric walks up smirking at Emmett’s enthusiasm, “Emmett has been on a bit of an emotional rollercoaster.”

“My baby’s growing up so fast! I can’t believe it!”

Justin squints, “Emmett he has only been your baby for a few months.”

“Yes, but it feels like I have known him my whole life. He’s grown almost two inches since his first night with us, can you believe that? He’s going to be a tall one, just like me!”

“I’m happy for you, Emmett,” Justin smiles, “Do you need any help from us?”

“Actually, yes. If you could help us set up this extra table, that would be great. We took a lot of precautions but we wanted to surprise Brian and have Gus, JR, Lindsay, Mel, Michael, Ben, Debbie, Carl, Ted, Blake, and Cynthia come to the party. Since Brian was a part of the preparations, we had to take a few matters into our own hands and get the extra supplies from somewhere other than ThemeKids. But we worked something out and they should be here soon.”

“All of them? That’s great!”

“Hunter couldn’t make it but sends his love.”
“Yeah, he’s too busy loving on my sister,” Justin says, semi-disgusted.

“Oh my god, Molly’s the long distance girl he’s seeing?! That is too cute for words,” Emmett sighs.

“She hasn’t told me too much but did confirm that he was there and they were...I don’t know, something. How do you want this done?”

Emmett showed them the way the napkins needed folded. He was lucky that Justin’s an artist because Emmett was really going all out with the napkin oragami. The performers started to come in, stands were set up, a couple of ponies were brought in. People started to arrive and eventually all the guests were there for the kids’ party. Justin hugged everyone in the gang as soon as he saw them, even Ted and Blake who he hadn’t really talked to all that much in years. It was definitely already a great day.

“Brian just texted me,” Eric announced, “He and Drew are walking with the kids now. They’ll be at the park in five minutes. So everyone be ready to greet them enthusiastically by singing Happy Birthday when they get here.”

Everyone in the party kept a sharp eye out for them and anxiously waited for their arrival. When they made out their forms, they waited for the kids to stop in their tracks in suspicion before singing at the top of their lungs.

**Happy Birthday to you!**
**Happy Birthday to you!**
**Happy Birthday, Duncan & Lily!**
**Happy Birthday to you!**

“What-What is this?!” Lily squealed as she ran around to everything and everyone while Duncan takes in the exciting party in wonder, “Wha-You said-I thought-”

“It’s a surprise party, baby. We wanted you and Duncan to have a memorable birthday.”

“It’s….It’s-”
“Eric, I think she’s short circuiting,” Brian says, amused.

“AUNT CYNTHIA!!!!”

Brian actually takes a look at the guests and sees his family. Justin sees the moment when he spots his son because he gets a huge grin on his face and strides over to the teenager to wrap him up in a strong embrace. Brian pulls a smiling Eric into the hug as well. They look so happy.

The rest of the party goes smoothly. Pony rides, balloon animals, magicians, and sword swallowers keep the kids occupied until it’s time to open presents. It takes a bit of time to get Duncan and Lily to settle down enough to sit in one place to open them but the lure of wrapped gifts does eventually win over. People grab their presents so they can bring them to the children one by one and soon enough it is his turn.

Justin goes over to them and kneels down in front of them to hand them their gifts.

“Happy Birthday, you two. You both deserve the best in life, you hear me?”

“My birthday was on Wednesday,” Duncan tells him.

“And my birthday is next Wednesday. You are all giving us presents and it’s not even our birthday!”

Justin stifles a laugh as they open their gifts. Apparently they didn’t hear the most important message in his greeting to them.

“Thank you, Justin!” Lily gasps as she pulls out her Furby and canvas set.

“Thank you!” Duncan exclaims very sincerely as he hugs the movies to his chest.

“You’re welcome.”
Justin goes back and nudges Nathan to get him to go up and give his presents to the kids. Nathan nods in understanding and takes the gifts up to the little boy and girl before he squats down.

“Having a good birthday?”

“Uh huh! It’s the best birthday ever!” Duncan grins.

“I’m glad it’s a good one. I hope you like the present I got each of you. My mom got me one when I was eight years old. It was the best present I ever got in my entire life and even though you are both a bit younger than eight, you’re both a lot smarter than I ever was. I think you’ll be able to figure out this gift.”

The kids open up take the wrapping off the boxes and get the boxes open only to find high quality childrens’ guitars in the cases inside. Justin knew as soon as Nathan said the age but to actually see how much thought Nathan put into what to get them actually gets Justin a little emotional, knowing the backstory of it all.

“THIS IS SO COOL!” Lily yells, “Thank you thank you thank you!”

“I’m gonna learn to play it right now!” Duncan says before strumming the strings and singing nonsense with the noise.

Nathan pats them both on the knees and is stopped by Emmett, Eric, Drew, and even Brian telling him he did good.

“I think you won them over,” Justin laughs as he watches the kids play their guitars and ignore their other gifts, “The rest of the gifts will pale in comparison.”

Nathan blushes, “Well, I don’t want that to happen.”

“And here you said you didn’t know how to act around kids,” Justin says fondly, “You were great with them.”

It’s not the reaction he was hoping for, especially when he sees Brian holding Eric from behind while they watch their child bask in happiness and pure joy. They love her so fucking much. They’re a real family.

He just wants to know what that’s like.

Chapter End Notes

Please read and review! It means a lot to the authors to get feedback. We do put this all up for free and a few of us deal with some nasty people in the process. The support, constructive criticism, feedback, and reactions mean a great deal!
Chapter Summary

Brian's last night as an unmarried man is a busy one, but he can't complain.

Chapter Notes

Hope you enjoy this chapter. I should warn that Gus and Brian have another (but more in depth) sex talk, so there's that. Other than that, I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The blushing bride-to-be is here!”

Brian rolls his eyes as he walks through Emmett’s front door with the rats’ carrier in his left hand and Lily’s hand clasped in his right.

“If my hands weren’t full I’d hit you in the ribs. Go make sure Eric isn’t having any trouble with Lily’s stuff and that damn cage. I offered to help but he wanted the rats and Lily safely in the house.”

“Fine, fine. Our friends are in the other room. Go be a grump to them. Drew! Why don’t you take Vernon and Bianca upstairs and get the cage set up so that Brian and Eric can settle down and Lily can visit with the kids?”

Drew walks up to relieve Brian of the rats before heading down to take some stuff from Eric.

“Lily, Duncan’s with Gus and JR. You want to see them?”

Lily nods her head vigorously before running into Emmett’s living room. Brian follows her and sits down next to Michael.

“Last night as a free man,” Ted remarks.
Michael says as he turns to him, “Yeah, Brian. I mean, you were engaged before but your wedding is tomorrow. How does it feel?”

Brian shrugs, “Not that different. I’ve been raising a kid with him for four years. God, I’m trying to remember when we even trick-”

“Brian,” Melanie interrupts, “Four kids in the room.”

“It’s not that hard to figure out what he was going to say-”

“Gus,” Lindsay warns before turning her head to smile at Brian, “I hear some of your guests already have rooms up at the resort nearby. Hunter and Molly went ahead and got a room for tonight. We called Justin to have lunch but he and Nathan rented a car with the rest of the band to go up there this morning. He said it was beautiful up there. I can’t wait to see it.”

“Yeah, it’s great. It’s not too far but completely different from the city. The weather is supposed to be warm so both the wedding and reception are going to be outside. Gus and Michael know the plans.”

“So the rehearsal went smoothly?” Lindsay asks hesitantly.

“It went smoothly,” Gus cuts in abruptly, “It was for the best that only the people in the actual wedding party were there so there wouldn’t be any distractions.”

Mel raises her eyebrows at Gus’s demeanor and Brian does too, but for a different reason. He never really told Gus why he only wanted him, Michael, Emmett, JR, and Lily along with Eric’s side of the party up at Solé East but it was partially because he was worried that too many people, people who knew what he was like before, might try to make him change his mind about this.

Again.

Logically he knew that they knew he was a changed man now but the fact that he let the opinions of others get to him the first time around made him cautious. Maybe he wasn’t ready for marriage ten years ago but he had been happy about it until he started listening to other people.
“We just did a run through of the ceremony and went out to eat after. Nothing too special. The only person there who wasn’t a part of the wedding party was Amanda but that’s because Julian is two. He got distracted a couple of times but Duncan kept him in check, didn’t you kid?”

Duncan looks around and realizes he is being talked to before nodding and saying, “Yeah, uh huh.”

“I’m sure it will go great,” Lindsay says, eyes shining, “I’m really happy for you, Brian.”

“I just want to go on the honeymoon and take a break from work,” Brian groans, “I’ve tried to not go the office the last couple of days but it is so close that I can’t help it, even if it is just for a minute.”

“I’m sure it will be amazing. Eric told me all about it,” Michael says to him, grinning.

Brian turns his head and studies his oldest friend, “Really? And what exactly did he say about our upcoming trip?”

“Don’t you dare tell him, Michael. He’s been trying to weasel it out of me so I know he will try to get it out of you too.”

Eric steps back in the room and puts his hands on Brian’s shoulders to massage them, “I don’t want him worrying about it. As stressful as this move has been for me, it has been even more stressful for him. All he needs to know is that I’ve planned something relaxing. He’ll figure it out when we go to the airport Sunday anyway.”

“At least tell me the time the flight leaves,” Brian reasons with him.

“So you can look up all the flights from JFK and Laguardia then narrow it down? I don’t think so,” Eric laughs, “You said I got to pick the honeymoon and I want to surprise you with something beautiful.”

Brian’s eyes crinkle at the familiar words and he turns his head upwards. Eric instinctively knows what he wants and bends down to kiss him.
“How adorable,” Emmett sighs as a few others in the room coo or gag.

“Take care of my man and my kid, Honeycutt,” Eric tells him before he gives a confused Brian another kiss. He attempts to walk away but Brian grabs his wrist.

“You want to leave already?”

“Yeah, my brother and Clover are back at the house. I’m not leaving someone named Clover Starlight Perkins at our house unsupervised for long periods of time.”

“You’re right. We should go,” Brian says as he gets up.

“Yeah, you’re not going anywhere.”


“I took everything you packed for the honeymoon while you were getting Lily ready and snuck your bags in the trunk. Everything is upstairs in the guest room and Emmett has your suit. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“What are you-”

“It’s bad luck to see the groom before the wedding,” Eric shrugs, “I’m not going to jinx anything.”

Brian stares at him, “Are you kidding me?”

“Nope. You’re staying in one of Emmett’s guest rooms.”

“But they are all-”
“Gus, JR, and Lily are sleeping on a large air mattress in Duncan’s room and Ted and Blake lost the coin toss so they are sleeping on the pullout couch. You are guaranteed the most comfortable guest room I have, since this weekend is all about you and Eric. Except here, tonight is about you since Eric is going home,” Emmett cuts in.

Brian blinks a few times, “So what, we’re just going to have one big sleepover?”

“Yep! It’ll be fun! The original gang can all catch up.”

“It doesn’t mean Eric can’t stay.”

“Brian, you know the rules,” Eric insists as he starts to back out of the room.

“I can’t believe I’m only finding out now that you are superstitious,” Brian sighs.

“Not usually but I’m not taking any chances.”

Brian stares at him for several seconds before raising his hands in defeat, “Alright. I’ll walk you out.”

Brian leads Eric into the hall and Eric turns to him.

“You going to miss me?”

Brian smirks, “Of course not. Why would I miss you?”

Eric leans in to kiss his neck, “Because this will be the first night in months where we haven’t fucked.”

Brian groans, “God, fuck you.”
“Didn’t think of that, did you?”

“Stay here. We’ll get your stuff in the morning before we head out.”

Eric laughs, “Tempting but I’m not giving in, sorry.”

Brian brings him in for a kiss and, yeah, he’s putting a lot of effort into it so he doesn’t have to sleep alone tonight but too soon Eric breaks it off and looks into his eyes with so much love and affection.

“I love you so much. I can’t wait for tomorrow.”

Brian feels himself smiling, “I love you too. I’m nervous as hell but I can’t wait for tomorrow either. Mainly so we can get it over with and fuck all week in destination unknown.”

Eric huffs out a laugh, kisses him on the cheek, and says, “Let me say goodbye to Lily. I’m guessing she’s upstairs with JR and Duncan.”

Brian follows him up and they find JR trying to teach the kids how to play go fish.

“I got a match! I win!” Duncan yells as he throws a four of hearts and a seven of diamonds down on the floor.

“No, Duncan. Those are the same color, not the same number. See?” JR says as she points at the numbers.

“JR, what about my cards? Are these a match?” Lily asks as she scoots over to show JR her whole hand.

“Lily, I’m not supposed to see them.”

“Why not?”
“Because then I will know what you have and ask for any of the cards that match mine.”

“Why would you do that? I didn’t know and you’re not mean anyway.”

JR looks at her before clearing her throat, “Lily, do you have any Jacks?”

Lily looks at her cards and gasps, “Hey! Why did you do that?! You’re mean!”

“You’re the one who showed me your cards.”

“But that’s not fair!”

“That’s what you get when you show someone your cards. So don’t show them to people.”

“But I needed help!”

Eric steps in at that point, “Lily, you’re not supposed to show your cards to any other players. Now you know so it’s a lesson learned. JR was helping you by teaching you it.”

Lily’s eyes start to leak and her voice cracks as she whispers out, “But I didn’t know.

Brian looks at her incredulously, “Are you seriously crying over a game?”

But Lily turns away to hide her face and cry into her hands. JR looks up at them helplessly and Duncan goes over to hug the little cry baby and pat her on the back. Jesus Christ.

“I was just showing her what happens. She can have the card back,” JR offers, tossing the card back near Lily.
“It’s not your fault, JR. She usually doesn’t do more than pout when she loses a game but these last few days have taken a lot out of her. My family has been in and she’s been excited that her cousins are here, she’s had to go to the Hamptons with us a couple of times this week, and she hasn’t been sleeping that well because she’s so excited over everything. What she needs is a nap.”

“I-I don’t n-need a n-nap!” Lily cries, sobs in full force.

Eric sighs and bends down to pick her up, “Then why are you so upset?”

“B-Because J-JR is mean!” Lily wails.

Eric snorts, “She is not. You love JR. I’m leaving soon. Daddy is staying here at Emmett’s with you tonight. Why don’t you try to lie down in the room he’s staying in for a little bit so you’ll feel better?”

“I don’t need a n-nap,” she hiccups as she rubs her eyes.

“Uh huh, sure. Come on. Daddy and I will sit in there with you.”

They take her to the guest room Emmett put him in upstairs and set her down on the queen sized mattress and tuck her in.

“W-Why are you not staying with me and Daddy?” Lily asks, inexplicable tears still rolling down her cheeks.

“Because we’re getting married tomorrow and it’s tradition to not see each other until the ceremony,” Eric tells her as he wipes her cheeks.

“That makes no sense.”

“My thoughts exactly. Up top,” Brian tells her to cheer her up. Lily giggles through her hiccuping cries as she sits up a little to give him a high five.
“I’ll see you tomorrow though. I can’t wait to see you as the flower girl but I’m more excited to dance with my baby at the reception,” Eric says before he kisses her on the forehead.

“I’m not a baby,” Lily tells him but puts her arms around Eric’s neck and gives him a kiss on the cheek.

“Bye bye, Papa. I love you.”

“I love you too. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

Brian bends down to kiss her on the forehead only to get a hug and kiss from her as well.

“Try to sleep. I’ll wake you up here in about an hour for dinner.”

“Okay, Daddy. I’m sorry I cried. I was just so sad.”

Brian holds back a laugh, “It happens to the best of us. You’ll feel better when you wake up.”

Lily is already starting to drift off before they even leave the room.

“Well,” Eric says after they get back down to the first floor, “See you later.”

Eric starts to walk away humorously and Brian pulls him back for one more kiss.

“Call me tonight.”

Eric shrugs, “I can’t. It’s against the rules.”
Brian scowls, “Then at least send me a text to let me know you get back safe. Along with a dick pic.”

Eric laughs all the way out the door. Brian thinks he convinced him to do it though.

He goes back into the living room to go sit with his friends and of course they inquire about what he and Eric were doing.

“Look who’s finally back. Wishing your soon-to-be husband goodbye sure did take a while. Let me guess: You let him know exactly what he would be missing tonight?” Debbie snickers.

“If by knowing what he’ll be missing you mean putting a semi-hysterical four year old down for a nap, then yes.”

"Oh no," Debbie empathizes, growing serious, "What happened?"

"She's exhausted from everything going on this week and doesn't want to show it. JR schooled her in Go Fish and Lily had a meltdown when her actions worked against her."

Debbie laughs, "I played Monopoly once with Michael when he was seven and he wouldn't talk to me for hours after I bankrupted him. He ran up to his room crying."

"Aw, poor wittle Michael," Brian mocks as he pinches his friend's cheek.

Ben laughs at the indignant look on Michael's face as he scolds his mother.

"Ma, why did you have to bring that up?"

Debbie shrugs, "It was related to what we were talking about! Don't you want Lily to feel less embarrassed?"

"Lily's passed out upstairs!"
Debbie bites back a laugh as Brian says, "Now that it has been established Mikey still has a temper, do we all have rides set up for tomorrow?"

"Yes. I have four SUVs coming to pick us up and a limo for you. I have a limo and SUV picking Eric, George, Clover, and Rick up. We’ll all leave the city around 10, ideally be there around 12:30, and have time to get ready for guests and have the wedding at 5 as planned. It’ll all be fine.

“It better be fine,” Brian mutters.

Emmett raises an eyebrow, “Brian, I made Time Out’s list of Top 10 East Coast Wedding Planners You Need to Look Into for Your Special Day for a reason.”

“Ah, yes. I think I remember that list. But you only mailed me seven copies of that issue, so I can’t be sure,” Brian muses.

Emmett gives him a light slap on the shoulder before giving him a smile, “It’ll be great. Like a fairy tale. Literally. There will be so many fairies there. I hired drag queens as servers.”

“I don’t think the term fairy is politically correct anymore, Emmett,” Lindsay says softly.

“Was it ever? I’ve never been one for political correctness but I don’t see the insult. Fairies can grant wishes. They can fly. They have great dresses. I think the term is divine.”

Mel laughs, “No one looks at possibly derogatory terms like you do, that’s for sure.”

“I always try to be a glass half full kind of gal. Optimism gives you confidence. And I am confident that the Davisson-Kinney wedding will be the best wedding I’ve planned yet,” Emmett proclaims then pauses, “Speaking of Davisson-Kinney, what are you two doing about names?”

Brian’s an asshole. This has never changed. And he really just wants to fuck with them.

“Actually, I’m changing my last name to Davisson, both in my personal and professional life. It
just seems right. I’m not close to any of my biological family besides Gus and Eric is at least close to some of his so it is the next logical step.”

His friends look at each other before they look at him in bewilderment before they try to give confused approval.

“Oh wow, that...that’s going to take some time to get used to but I think it’s wonderful!” Debbie says first.


“I figured it would be the other way around,” Mel admits.

“G-Good for you, Brian,” Lindsay stammers.

Brian looks at them before bursting into laughter.

“I’m just fucking with you. We’re doing the hyphenated thing on our driver’s licenses and with the state but I’m still going by Kinney professionally and most likely when I introduce myself to people and Eric is doing the same with Davisson. God, did you really think I would be the woman in this relationship?”

“You are so sexist,” Mel mutters.

“Nice little joke, Mr. Davisson-Kinney,” Lindsay says as she stands up, “Can you come upstairs for a second with me? I need to give you something.”

Brian sees Gus give her a slightly panicked look out of the corner of his eye and that makes him even more intrigued by what is going on so he nods and gets up to follow Lindsay upstairs.

Lindsay takes him to the guest room she and Mel are staying in and closes the door then starts pacing.
“What was it that you needed to give me? A headache from watching you walk in circles?”

Lindsay pauses to look at him before shaking her head, “No, I just ended up getting you and Eric a Visa Gift Card and a water buffalo statue. I didn’t know what else to get. You are both hard to shop for.”

“So you got us money we don’t need and a statue that will be out of place in every room in our house. Good thinking.”

Lindsay groans, “Try to be grateful, Brian. This isn’t about what I got you as a wedding present anyway.”

“Then why did you pull me away to speak in private? Look, if this is about questioning if I want to get married or not I don’t want to hear it-”

“Brian, no. It’s not that. I know you love Eric and want to get married to him. This has nothing to do with the wedding.”

“Then what is-”

“Gus is having sex.”

Brian blinks a few times, “That’s it?”

Lindsay scoffs, “That’s all you have to say? He’s not even fifteen yet!”

Brian shrugs, “Neither was I.”

“Brian, Gus is sleeping with his girlfriend on what looks to be like a frequent basis. You gave your gym teacher a blow job. That was completely inappropriate and abusive on his part. It’s different.”

It was more than that. A lot more. Not that he’ll tell her. Only Tessler knew the details of how he enjoyed sucking on the teacher’s cock only to be pushed into his office and bent over the desk
while he panicked and cried over not knowing if he was ready to be fucked and how much it hurt when the choice was made for him. So excuse him for being relieved above all else that Gus had a better experience than he did.

“He’s in high school and has been with her for how long? Seven months? All that matters to me is that he’s playing safe and isn’t being pressured into anything.”

Lindsay does a double take, “Wait, do you think Penelope could have pressured him? I mean, she is several months older-”

Brian rolls his eyes, “Lindsay, please. He’s head over heels when it comes to that girl and, I only met her twice, but I can tell she feels the same way.”

Lindsay moans and sits down on the bed, “He’s so young.”

“He’s an early bloomer, I guess. And a knock out. What did you expect?” Brian tells her as he sits down next to her and puts an arm around her shoulder.

“I told you to give him the talk.”

“I did,” Brian confirms, slightly annoyed.

“What did you say?”

Brian shrugs, “Most of it is between us. But I told him that he shouldn’t be afraid to try anything thinks he might be into or tell someone no. To tell us if someone forced him to do anything. As long as he is safe and honest with whoever he is sleeping with, he could mess around as much as his heart desired.”

“Jesus, Brian!” Lindsay exclaims as she stands up quickly, “You should have told him to save it until he was absolutely sure! After he had been with someone a long time and he was old enough to know the ramifications that sex can bring!”

Brian glares, “But that would be total bullshit.”
“No, it’s not-”

“Maybe that is for the best for some people, but if you wanted Gus to believe what does not fit the majority of people then you should have gotten another person to give out that message. I gave him the facts. I told him that sex is fantastic and if he wanted to have it with his girlfriend or someone else entirely then that was up to him but not to jump into anything he felt like he wasn’t ready for. I told him to get checked regularly once he started and to always use a condom. Then I gave him some to drive the point home.”

“Oh, so you’re the one who gave him the condoms,” Lindsay concludes as she purses her lips.

Brian shrugs, “Of course I am. Just a twelve pack of Trojans. Enough to have him covered if he needed more than one but not enough to intimidate him. I wanted him to have them on hand if things got heated rather than have the raging hormones of two teenagers win out and make them decide to try the pull out method instead just because they didn’t have any.”

Lindsay lets out a sigh, “I get it. And I’m glad that you made sure he was prepared. You did the right thing while I let my emotions over the whole thing get the best of me.”

Brian tilts his head, “How did you find out about it?”

Lindsay sits back down, “You know how we take turns doing the laundry. It was my day to do it a few days ago and I decided to put away his clothes for him since he’s been busy due to testing and homework. He has been going out to study with friends almost every day.”

“Right. He was studying,” Brian smirks.

Lindsay opens her mouth to defend Gus then just thinks on it and nods, “Okay, you’re probably on to something there. Anyway, I opened one of his drawers only to find a condom box with only one condom in there. I was shocked. I know I shouldn’t have been but he’s my baby.”

“Let me guess: You imagined them holding hands and him giving her flowers. Jesus, Lindsay. They aren’t Duncan and Lily.”
She gives him a light smack on the arm, “Oh, stop it. I’m not completely blind. I walked in on them making out at least a couple of times. He had his hand up her shirt on one of those occasions. But I thought they were just...I don’t know, groping!”

Brian shakes his head, “I had the impression they had done more with each other than just kiss back when I talked to him. He got pretty flustered and not just because I was bringing up sex. He definitely hadn’t gone all the way with her at that point but I had a feeling that she jerked him off or something.”

“Oh god, don’t say that!” Lindsay scolds him as she covers her ears.

“Stop being such a prude. What does it matter if it is his hand or someone else’s?”

“Brian, please! Why are you torturing me?”

“Wait a second,” Brian says suddenly, “You haven’t forced yourself to believe he doesn’t do that either, have you?”

“Of course not,” Lindsay brushes off, back straight, “I’ve washed his sheets since the day he was born. I saw the evidence when he started up until he became a master at hiding it.”

“Well, it’s all a part of growing up,” Brian says to her, “So I’m guessing he knows that you know, with the way he acted downstairs. What did you say to him to get him so pissy?”

Lindsay sighs, “He got home from school around 4. Mel wasn’t home yet and I probably should have waited until she was there but I literally just found them an hour before and wanted to get it out in the open. So I asked JR to go up to her room and had Gus sit down at the kitchen table with me. I put the box on the table and asked him if he had anything he wanted to tell me. I probably sounded disapproving and I can admit that I was. I still am to an extent. I still think he is too young. But when I asked him all he did was glare at me and say, ‘No, not really.’ I scolded him for sassing me before I told him I thought he was too young to be having sex. I said I wasn’t going to be condoning it and that I disapproved of him jumping into sex without telling anyone. He just told me that he didn’t give a shit what I thought about it. He said he wasn’t doing anything wrong and that he and Penelope were about the same age and they were being safe so I should either accept it or look the other way and be grateful that he was just having sex with his girlfriend. Then he said he would just keep doing it behind my back like he had been doing for the last couple of weeks so it didn’t matter if I condoned it or not. He was...he was mean to me about it! Honest, but cruel. It was the first time I really saw you in him when it came to something other than his looks. He’s barely talked to me the last couple of days.”
"You posed a threat and he reacted."

Lindsay scoffs, "I don't think being concerned is a threat."

"He started having sex and he loves it-"

"Now we don't know that he lo-"

The look Brian gives her is enough to make her realize how ignorant what she was about say was.

"He loves it. If he didn't, he wouldn't have had it eleven times in what? Two weeks or so?"

"I think it's been less than that. He started acting different after we came back from New York. I don't know how he swung that number since there's been a couple of days where he hasn't seen her."

"Maybe he's sneaking out, maybe she's sneaking in. Maybe he's done it with her a few times in one visit. If it's that last one, I'm proud that he inherited his stamina from me."

“Brian, can you be serious for just a few minutes?”

Brian shrugs, “I am being serious. And he probably seriously thought you were going to try to force them to stop fucking. He just discovered the wonders of it. The thought of becoming celibate probably pissed him off. Look at it the way I do. I’m just glad he’s enjoying it with someone he cares about and it’s not something worse. So don’t make him feel bad about sleeping with his girlfriend. It’s inevitable and going against him will just drive him away.”

“So I should just...encourage him to talk to me about it? Encourage that behavior?"
alone with her.”

“I’ll...I’ll try that approach with him. If he ever stops being pissed at me.”

Brian stands up, “I’ll talk to Gus tonight. Threatened or not, he shouldn’t have spoken to you like that. Deep down, he has to know that you didn’t mean anything bad by it.”

At that moment, Brian’s phone buzzes and he takes it out of his pocket to look at it

**Made it home safe.**

The following picture both makes his dick harden and grin with glee.

“I can’t believe I sought advice from a man who gets dick pics,” Lindsay mutters before she covers her face, probably trying to get the image out of her lesbian brain. Brian thinks she should savor it. Eric’s dick is one of the best dicks he’s ever seen.

“God, I’m so fucking lucky,” Brian sighs at he stares at the picture, “Just look at it, Lindsay. Eight and a half inches cut, thick but not so thick that it’s terrifying, slightly curved. He sent that to me to make me happy. Because I asked him to as a joke. **And he did it.**”

“Yes, Brian. He’s the perfect man. You are lucky to have him,” Lindsay tells him seriously before getting up, “We’ve been here a while. I didn’t mean to keep you away from Gus and Michael. I just needed to talk to you about all of this.”

“Like I said, I will talk to him about it,” Brian says, getting up as well, “And Lindsay? I want to know about this kind of stuff, you know this. Don’t think you are bothering me when it comes to Gus. I need to go wake up Lily so she doesn’t keep me up all night. I’ll meet you downstairs.”

Brian goes to the guest room where Lily is still passed out and gently wakes her up. It takes a couple of minutes to even get Lily to stir but she eventually blinks her eyes groggily and tries to turn over to go back to sleep again.

“Hey, none of that. Come on, I’ll carry you downstairs.”
Brian picks her up and Lily lays her head on his shoulder as he carries her down and sits on the couch.

“Someone is still a bit sleepy,” Debbie comments as she comes over to pet Lily’s hair.

Lily lets out a muffled whimper before turning her head to press her face into Brian’s neck.

“Duncan and JR are down here,” Brian tells her softly when he spots the two across the room, “Don’t you want to play with them a little more before dinner?”

Lily doesn’t say anything and just clings onto him, trying to sleep just a little longer.

Brian lets out a sigh and tries to untangle himself from her grasp, “Come on, Silly Lily. I need you to wake up. We both need to sleep tonight. Tomorrow’s a big day.”

Lily lifts her head and turns in Brian’s lap squinting with sleepiness and confusion.

“Wake up,” Brian coaxes her, before he lightly tickles her sides.

“Nooo!” Lily whines before glaring up at him.

“Come on. You are still half asleep. I have to wake you up somehow.”

Lily takes a few amusing calming breaths before she gets down from his lap and crosses the room to sit by JR and Duncan. Duncan gets her excitement back up and soon enough they are running around the room and acting cute until Emmett calls them all in for dinner.

Dinner tastes great. Emmett made a Thai-inspired dish to please him and he appreciates the thought Emmett put into the meal. Despite having to know that Brian knows about his sexual status now, Gus still sits next to him. Maybe it is because he knows that he won’t make a big deal over it but it’s nice that Lindsay taking him away to talk about Gus’s recent activities and behavior didn’t make Gus distance himself from him.
He is a little disappointed that he didn’t hear it from Gus himself though. He really tried to keep the sex talk as real and open as possible and when he was in for Christmas and New Year’s. He thought he kept the conversation open enough so that Gus could approach him or call him if he thought he and Penelope were getting close to that stage in their relationship or after the fact. Brian has been busy. Maybe Gus felt like he shouldn’t bother him with it. That worries him more than just being embarrassed to tell him. He’d talk to him about it later. Call him upstairs tonight and maybe get everything out in the open.

He turns to his other side and sees that Lily is giggling with Duncan, Emmett, and Drew. It’s strange having two kids in such different stages in their lives. One is past puberty and becoming this very handsome young man almost done with his Freshman year of high school. He’s sexually active with his first serious girlfriend. And then there’s Lily who is giggling hysterically while she and Duncan explain an episode of Spongebob. She still has her round cheeks, baby smooth skin, and won’t even enter kindergarten for another year and a half. He feels like he has to be two entirely different people for his children, even though they are both just that: his kids.

Lily giggles over the episode and says, “And then Spongebob started eating his arms because he was scared of the hash...the hash slinging-”

“The hash slinging slasher!” Duncan tells her then laughs.

Brian rolls his eyes. That had been a weird episode.

“Daddy, do you remember that episode?” Lily asks as she turns to look at him.

“I do. It’s the one with Nosferatu, right?”

Lily thinks, “That’s the funny looking bald guy at the end, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then yes. That’s the one. It’s so funny. Have you seen that one, Gussy?”

Gus bends to look past Brian, “Yeah, I’ve seen it. It’s a good one.”
“Lily, you aren’t even eating your meal. You talk too much that it makes it impossible for your mouth to do anything else.”

“I’ve eaten some of it,” Lily tells him, “I just wanted to talk to Emmett and Drew.”

Brian snorts and picks up a spoonful to put towards her mouth, “Take another bite.”

Lily opens her mouth wide and chomps down on the kiddie spoon to eat the food.

“Now eat. I trust you enough to know you can do it yourself.”

“Kay, Daddy.”

Everyone finishes up with dinner and people start chipping in to help with the cleanup. Brian offers but is shooed away by Emmett when he says, “This dinner was for you, baby. You’re not lifting a finger.”

Brian is glad that Emmett said that because it gives him the perfect excuse to pull Gus aside.

“Want to come upstairs with me? I feel like we haven’t talked much since you got here.”

Immediately, he can tell that Gus knows what this is all about when the boy purses his lips and shrugs.

Brian laughs and pats him on the back, “I promise not to torture you for too long.”

Gus follows him upstairs and sits down on the bed in silence. He looks at Brian suspiciously and Brian just raises an eyebrow in return.

“Anything you want to talk about?” Brian asks him.
Gus scoffs, “Don’t play dumb, Dad. I know you already know. You and Mom wouldn’t have been up here for an hour if she hadn’t told you.”

“Oh, you mean the sex thing? Yeah, I know about that.”

“No shit.”

Brian rolls his eyes before sitting next to him on the bed, “You’re being safe?”

Gus looks at him, “Of course I am being safe.”

“Every single time? It only takes one fuck up to get yourself into a fucked up situation.”

“I know that, Dad. I’ve had sex with her eleven times already.”

“No condoms broke? No mishaps while putting it on?”

Gus shrugs, “Of course not. All you do is pinch and roll. I knew that before I even talked to you. I knew what I was doing by the first time we did it and I know even more now.”

Brian smirks throws an arm around his shoulder, “Well, aren’t you a pro? Eleven whole times and now you’re a stud.”

Gus groans, “Dad, stop! God, you’re so embarrassing.”

“You know, I went back and forth on whether or not you would be an early bloomer or a late bloomer. I’d love you either way, of course, but it was something that I couldn’t foresee when it came to you. Looks wise, people would figure you were an early bloomer. You hit puberty faster than I did and you are lean and muscular, while I was more lanky and...well, I can admit now that I was a bit nerdy. I was in the chemistry club and was a bit of an outcast in school while you are becoming more popular. But you have always been so sweet and inquisitive. You came off as so innocent. Now I know that you are not innocent at all. But I accept it. Besides, now that you have
slept with her you can figure out what you are into.”

Gus blushes, “Dad, shut up!”

Brian laughs, “Why are you so embarrassed?”

“Because I don’t want to talk about it with you.”

Brian throws a hand to his chest, “I’m hurt.”

Gus stares at him, “Are you doing this because you’re mad that you didn’t hear it from me?”

Okay, Gus has always been intuitive but Brian is surprised that he caught onto him this quickly.

“Not mad. Disappointed. I thought I kept the conversation we had after Christmas open-ended. I just wanted to make sure that you knew that.”

Gus shrugs, “You did. But I didn’t want to talk about it over the phone. I don’t get to see you as much as I want to.”

Brian frowns at that, “Gus, you know that you are always welcome to come visit. I’ll pay for your plane tickets.”

“I can’t because of school. I’m in all advanced classes and I am studying all of the time. I wanted to ask you to come up to see us in Toronto so that I could talk to you about stuff but you’re so busy with the wedding and work and Lily. I didn’t want to bother you like that time a few years ago.”

Brian closes his eyes in shame when he remembers blowing up at an 11 year old Gus over the phone. Out of every asshole move that he’s made in his life, that is the one he still feels immense guilt over when he thinks about it.

“Gus, that was fucking awful on my part. I had been so stressed out with a new baby, work, lack of sleep, and guilt over not seeing you and I took it out on you. There was no excuse for it. I still feel
Gus must see his anguished expression because he grabs onto his father’s arm, “Dad, don’t feel bad over that anymore. I know you didn’t mean to get upset with me then. I know that. I just didn’t want to put you on the spot again.”

Brian takes a calming breath, “You aren’t putting me on the spot by asking me to come see you. Ever, you hear me? Look, I know you were only here for a day for Lily’s party and you’re only here until Sunday for the wedding so we aren’t getting to spend that much time together but I’m going to make some time to come up there for a few days. I get back from the honeymoon next Sunday I’ll make a trip up there the weekend after. I’ll even make it a long weekend.”

“Dad, I honestly didn’t mean to guilt you at all.”

“I know, but I want to.”

Gus nods, “Okay. I’d really like that.”

“I’ll take you and Penelope out for dinner.”

“Okay, Dad.”

Brian nods, “So any concerns you want to bring up now? Any questions you want to ask?”

Gus rubs the back of his neck and looks down, “Um...no.”

Brian purses his lips, “You’re sure?”

“Fine. Can we go out later and get more condoms? I would buy them myself but I can’t get a job yet. Mom and Ma don’t give me that much for allowance and they aren’t that cheap.”

“Yeah, there’s a CVS down the street. I’ll show what to buy and what not to buy. For some reason they keep the fucking things locked up now. I guess so kids won’t steal them. If you ask me, it
makes it so they are too embarrassed to ask an associate to open up the case and more likely to make them go without.”

Gus nods, “Thanks, Dad.”

“And what makes you think that? I told you I have slept with women before.”

Gus huffs out a laugh and looks away, “But I doubt you’ve ever...you know, gone down on a girl.”

Brian freezes and why the fuck is he blushing over something like that? Even if he hasn’t done something, it never bothers him to talk about it. Maybe because it’s Gus. Yeah, it’s definitely because it’s Gus. He never imagined his little boy saying something like that. For the first time since Lindsay talked to him, he sort of gets where she is coming from.

“Um...have you uh...did it not work out when you tried it or something?”

Gus shakes his head, “I haven’t done it yet. But she gave me a blowjob and I thought I should return the favor. I want to know what to do so she’ll be into it.”

Brian grimaces at the thought of going down on a woman, “Well, I hear tracing out the alphabet on their…”

“Clit?” Gus finishes.

“Yeah. I hear that’s a good place to start out until you figure out what they like the best. Fuck, Gus. Just ask your mothers about that one, okay? They do that shit all the time. Thinking about that, especially you wanting to do that, freaks me out.”

Gus looks at him with evil innocence, “But I thought I could come to you with any questions.”
“You can,” Brian asserts, trying to get past his own discomfort before admitting, “I guess I can only be so cool about this kind of stuff when it comes to you.”

Gus shakes his head, “Don’t worry, you are being a lot more open about it than Mom and Ma are. Ma is not that upset about it. She’s mainly upset that I’m fighting with Mom. I don’t think she’s thrilled about it but she hasn’t sat down and talked with me about Penelope yet. I think she’s waiting until after we get home. Mom’s a different story though."

Brian nods, “Your mom didn’t have sex with anyone until college. She never went all the way with her high school boyfriend. Partly it was because she was confused since she liked girls. You have to remember how conservative your grandparents are, Gus. They wanted her waiting until marriage and taught her to do that. She started to let loose more in college. She slept with one guy and a couple of girls before we hooked up and, like I said, she figured out that she liked women more and I already knew I liked men a lot more. But to see you comfortable with having sex years before she was comfortable with it seems to have taken her for a loop. And besides, you’re her child. She’s always going to see you as that to some extent. And while she doesn’t think your experience should match her experience, I don’t think she expected you to have sex this soon. She should have been more accepting and open about it and my opinion obviously differs with hers but she’s not trying to hurt you by saying she doesn’t think you are ready. She’s just concerned and doesn’t want you to get yourself into any kind of trouble or heartbreak. She means well. You would be lucky to have one mom that cares so much about you and you have two.”

“I know that,” Gus says softly, “I know she loves me and is worried. But she just jumped into saying that I wasn’t ready and didn’t even wait to have a conversation with me about it.”

“I know that. And I think she’ll apologize for it. But you need to apologize too. She’s always been a good mother to you and I didn’t like hearing you were a total dick about it.”

Gus raises his eyebrows, “She said I was a dick?”

“No. I’m saying you were a dick, even if you had a reason to be. She just said you were mean.”

Gus sighs, “I know I came off as too harsh. She just came off as so judgmental.”

“I talked to her. She’s going to try to change her approach. She wants you to be able to talk to her too. She still thinks you’re too young but she realizes that trying to get you to stop will just push you away. Give her a chance next time she tries to talk to you about it, alright?”
“Fine,” Gus mumbles.

“Alright then,” Brian says as he stands up, “Let’s get to CVS before it gets too late. I’ll let everyone know we’re getting some more condoms for you and see if they need any too.”

Gus’s hands wrap around his wrist like a vice grip as he hisses, “Don’t you dare.

Brian laughs and ruffles his son’s hair, “Stop being such a prude and go get your coat on.”

“Dad, please don’t tell them. That’s fucking weird. I don’t want to be stared at for the rest of the night by Grandma and Michael and-”

“Shit, Gus. I was kidding. Lighten up. Now get moving.”

Brian leads the way downstairs and heads out the door with his son. He’s really impressed with how much his son is growing up. The kid only blushes briefly when Brian tells the associate, “I need someone to unlock the rubbers. My son is a man now and is going at it on a regular basis.”

He should have pretended they were for him but what would be the fun in that?

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“So are you nervous at all?”

Brian looks over at Michael then looks back to the view on Emmett’s deck.

“No. Not really.”

Michael nods, “I’m really happy for you, Brian. I’m glad you found someone...you know, after Justin.”

“I’m glad I found someone too,” Brian admits, “He’s a fantastic someone.”
Michael grins, “You really are gone for him.”

“I am,” is all Brian says because what’s the point in hiding it?

“Did you ever...did you ever think about how it would have ended up if you had married Justin? If he hadn’t left for New York?”

Brian clears away the small lump that enters his throat, “Of course I have.”

“How do you think things would have turned out?”

“I don’t know. Justin was so young when I asked him. And I had jumped into it, partially out of fear. Maybe we would have been really fucking happy. Maybe it would have ended in heartbreak. I thought everyone was right when they told me I asked out of being in shock due to the bomb. It scared the shit out of me, the thought of losing him. But when he left, I thought wanting something more might eventually go away. Maybe it was because we kept seeing each other for two years but I wasn’t even tricking much anymore despite the distance. I realized that wanting to be with him and only him wasn’t going away. And then when I told him what I still wanted…”

“You broke up,” Michael finishes for him.

“Yeah, I don’t really want to talk about that,” Brian tells him.

“Did you miss Justin when you got with Eric?”

“At first and I would still think of the what ifs. But then, fuck, I fell hard for Eric. He’s so good and understanding. I started loving him as much as I loved Justin and I accepted and embraced that, while with Justin I denied it for such a long time. It felt so goddamn amazing. And we had a lot of bumps in the road at first but he knows me better than I know myself. We have Lily and we’re so happy...I can’t think of anything I want more than this.”

“It’s still weird to hear you talk like this,” Michael admits, “So open and in love with someone. You’ve grown up a lot.”
“Had to sometime.”

Michael nods, “I am so fucking happy for you, Brian. I really really am.”

Brian stands up and takes Michael’s hand to get him to stand too before pulling him into an embrace.

“Thank you, Mikey.”

“Love you,” Michael says into his shoulder, “Always have.”

“Always will,” Brian finishes before lightly kissing Michael on the temple.

His mind had been racing for two hours. About the wedding and all the people he would have to talk to. About Gus and Penelope and about leaving Kinnetik for several days at a time. But finally, at 2 o’clock in the morning, he was drifting off. His eyelids were getting heavy and he was welcoming sleep with open arms and-

Someone is knocking on the door. Why is there someone knocking on the door?

Brian rubs his eyes and forces himself out of bed to open the door for the asshole who-

“Hi, Daddy,” Lily says, standing there in her blue and yellow floor length nightgown with her stuffed giraffe.

“Hey, baby,” Brian tells her in a tired voice, “What are you doing out of bed?”

“I can’t sleep,” Lily informs him, “I had a really bad dream and got scared and wanted you.”

Brian holds back a sigh and lets her in. She marches up to the bed and climbs up on top of it.
“What was your nightmare about?”

Lily’s eyes get slightly panicked, “I was at school and was playing with blocks when this mean boy I go to school with kicked over the tower I was building. I told him he was mean and he pulled my hair and pushed me so I ran away. I ran into this dark room and I couldn’t see so I was crying and trying to find my way out when I saw red eyes across the room! A little light turned on and it was Joseph with red eyes! He asked me if I wanted to play then turned into a bear! It was so scary, Daddy!”

Lily quickly crawls into her father’s embrace and Brian can feel her shaking profusely. He holds her tight and whispers, “Shhh...it was just a dream. People can’t turn into bears.”

“I know,” Lily whispers, “But I didn’t know when I was in the dream.”

“Is Joseph that kid you said wouldn’t let you play with the blocks? Justin mentioned you told him that there was a kid picking on you at school.”

“Uh huh. He pulls on my curls and tells me girls can’t play with blocks. He only picks on me and no one else. Me and Margaret and Viola don’t know why he picks on me. I never did anything to him.”

“I’ll call his parents and tell him what an asshole their son is,” Brian fumes quietly.

“Daddy,” Lily gasps, “You said a bad word.”

“Well, I never claimed to be perfect.”

“Can I sleep with you? I’m scared,” Lily whimpers as she hugs him tighter.

Brian sighs, “Yes, you can sleep in here. But go straight to sleep, alright? No giggling or trying to keep me up. We both need rest for tomorrow.”
“Okay, Daddy. I’ll be good, I promise.”

Brian lies down and holds an arm out so that Lily be clingy like she always is after a nightmare. It always gets her to fall asleep quickly and this time is no exception.

He wakes up to Emmett coming in to coo over him and Lily before telling him that he has breakfast on the table.

He wakes Lily up and goes downstairs to sit with the rest the gang and stays pretty quiet at breakfast. The feeling of, ‘Oh, shit. I’m getting married’ is sort of hitting him now. It was only a matter of time. It isn’t a bad feeling but there is a panicky element that comes along with it.

“You okay, Brian?” Ted asks, noticing the blank look first.

Brian swallows a couple of times, “Uh huh.”

“Shit,” Ted mutters, “Are you getting cold feet?”

Brian glares, “No, Ted. I’m not getting cold feet.”

“You look like you are starting to panic.”

Emmett comes over to and overhears the conversation.

“It’s okay, baby,” Emmett says as he puts his hands on his shoulders, “This happens to almost all of my grooms. They’re happy but they get overwhelmed and panic the morning of the wedding. I can only imagine what you are going through, considering your dramatic change of view on marriage in the last several years.”

Brian takes a few shaky breaths and tries to nod.

“Dad, are you alright?” Gus asks, concerned.
Fuck. Gus noticed. He doesn’t like to appear too weak in front of his kids, especially when the situation doesn’t directly pertain to them, “I’m fine, kid. It’s nothing.”

Gus nods, “It’s going to be great, Dad. You’re going to have a good day.”

Brian runs a hand over his face, “I know.”

Emmett clears his throat, “We should be going soon. You ready, Brian?”

Brian thinks about seeing Eric, handsome in a tux and beaming with pride and love. That’s enough to get him to nod and give them a small smile, “I’m ready.”

They get everything together and Emmett leads Brian to a limo that he is going to ride alone up to the Hamptons.

“Oh, look! There’s a little television in here you can watch! I’m having John drop you off on the east side of the building so we can get everyone in your party ready. See you in a couple of hours!”

Emmett shuts the car door and the limo starts to move a couple of minutes after. Traffic out of the city isn’t bad so they’ll make good time.

Leaving Brian alone probably wasn’t the best decision on his friends’ part. It leads to him having old insecurities pop up. They try to make him believe he isn’t good enough for Eric. For marriage. For anyone. It’s stupid and he knows that but he can’t help it. He just wishes someone was here to sit with him or talk to him even for a-

His cellphone rings. He looks down at the screen then both smiles and blinks the sudden tears out of his eyes before answering the phone.

“Emmett said you seemed nervous,” Eric says softly when he picks up, “I thought you might need someone to talk to.”
Brian lets out a wet laugh, “I really do. I wish you were riding up with me.”

“I do too,” Eric says, and Brian knows he’s smiling, “I would be able to get a better read on you if you were right in front of me.”

“But we can’t break tradition,” Brian says to him.

“Are you okay? You don’t want to...you know, postpone anything, do you?”

Brian feels himself shaking his head before he remembers Eric can’t see it, “No. I want this. I really do.”

“You’re sure? Until death do we part?”

“I’m nervous but when I heard your voice over the phone, I felt like everything was immediately going to be alright. So yeah, babe. Until death do we part.”

Eric lets out a shaky breath, “I love you, Brian. I love you and Lily and Gus more than anything. I’m so happy with you.”

“I love you too. I’ll see you up at the alter.”

Eric laughs, “If you just want to meet up when we get there, we can.”

Brian smiles, “We went all night. What’s a few hours more?”

They say their temporary goodbyes and hang up. Who knew a two minute conversation could make him feel so much better? Brian looks out the window and feels happy and at peace.

Everything is going to be great.
Please review! It means a lot to the writers!
Justin wakes up to the sound of Nathan’s phone ringing. He had trouble sleeping the night before so he tries to ignore it as Nathan picks it up and begins speaking to the person on the other line.

“Hello?...Okay, what time do you want the reception area set up?....Yeah, sure....That’s fine...We’ll come down to show them where the sound equipment needs positioned. Need anything else, Emmett?...Yeah, I’m sure Justin would be willing to help with the kids too...No, I’m good...What? I’m not good with kids...We’ll see...Yeah, see you at 2, bye.”

Nathan hangs up and Justin feels him shake his shoulder.

“Justin, it’s past noon.”

Justin lets out a sigh and tries to drum up just a little bit more enthusiasm. He told himself he was happy for Brian. He is happy for him. Eric too.

But now that the day was here, it was just hard. He didn’t even want to get out of bed. But he would.

“Alright. Let me get a shower. Did you volunteer me to help watch the kids?”

Nathan shrugs, “You know how hard it is to say no to Emmett. He mainly just wants a hand an
hour or so before they line up since they aren’t sitting with the guests. I guess Brian didn’t want the nanny to take on that many kids and to just enjoy herself and Emmett said it would be fine but I guess me needs help. Who knows why Lindsay or Eric’s sister can’t watch them?”

“Eric said that his sister just had a baby a couple of months ago so she’ll probably be busy with him. Knowing the stages Gus and JR are in, I’m guessing Lindsay and Mel want a break. It’s fine. I told him I would help him if he needed it,” Justin says absentmindedly, “I’ll go get ready. Why don’t you text Molly and see if she and Hunter want to grab something to eat with us in the restaurant downstairs?”

Nathan agrees and Justin goes into the bathroom. He steps in the shower and lets the warm water spray on his neck. Why does he feel such a sense of dread? He’s spent time with Brian and Eric. He knows that Brian is a man in love. It’s so fucking easy to tell. Brian looks at Eric the same way he used to look at him. Sometimes there’s a hint of it there in Brian’s eyes, like when they picked Lily up in Park Slope and spent the day together, but it isn’t the same as when Brian’s eyes light up every fucking time Eric comes into the room. The way his attention shifts from whatever he is doing to his soon-to-be husband. The way that the corners of his mouth lift, just a little bit, as if he doesn’t want to come off as a complete goof and has to suppress the grins Eric brings out of him simply by his presence.

He knows Brian’s tells. There’s a reason why he stuck around so long, despite Brian’s emotional immaturity at the time. After a while, Brian didn’t have to say ‘I love you.’ He already knew. Just like he knows that Brian loves Eric. He’s learned to be happy for them and to become good friends with both of them.

But god, today his heart is aching. It hurts to think that he had planned a wedding with Brian, only for both of them to call it off. It was for the best. He knows that. But sometimes he is irrational when he looks back and it hurts anyway.

He’s being a selfish asshole. It’s not fair to Nathan and it isn’t fair to Brian and Eric, even if he is being quiet about how he is feeling about this. He meant what he told Brian when he said he was really happy for him. He needs to stop wallowing over a relationship that ended almost eight years ago.

So he takes washes his hair and body, rinses, then dries himself off. He puts the towel around his waist and goes back into the room to put on his clothes. He’ll go casual until after they eat lunch. He does not need to stain his white dress shirt before the wedding, even if he’s just a guest.

“Ready?” Justin asks after he makes sure his hair is dry.
“Sure,” is all Nathan says before they leave the hotel room.

When they get down to the restaurant, he can see that Molly and Hunter are already there. Despite wanting to, he hadn’t really gotten to talking to Molly about what was going on with her and Hunter. The four of them had dinner together when they got here last night but it wasn’t like he could talk to her about Hunter when he was sitting right there. Smug little fucker.

Okay. That was a lie. He wasn’t being a smug little fucker but he always had been one before. God, the way he acted around Brian when he first started living with Michael and Ben. The kid had given him the evil eye every time he saw him, as though Brian would be sucking his cock if Justin weren’t in the room. How times have changed. He wondered how Hunter worked out he was straight. Justin always knew deep down that he was gay. The only time he sort of denied it was when a boy in his sixth grade class asked him who he had a crush on. He probably should have said Daphne since they constantly hung out. But he went with someone completely unreachable instead, Alexa Sellers. She had been the one all the boys drooled over, so she seemed like a logical choice. But he really had a crush on Mark McKinley and knew that with all of his being. He gets that people can be confused, especially Hunter who had been forced to prostitute himself at a young age. But he still didn’t completely understand how not knowing worked. He just didn’t want the kid to change his mind and leave Molly for a man. He didn’t want her to get sick. He didn’t want her to be hurt by the distance. He didn’t want her to get hurt at all.

But he had to give Hunter props. He had tried really hard at dinner yesterday. Gone was the snarky attitude he always put on with Justin and in its place was a thoughtful, polite, and slightly nervous young man who held out Molly’s chair and smiled after her like a complete loser. He had known Hunter thought his sister was hot ever since they had both been in New York to visit about three years ago. But he just assumed that Molly would stay way out of Hunter’s league so it didn’t bother him. Guess he was wrong.

“Jester, Nathan! Over here!” he hears his sister call out.

The two of them walk over and sit across from Molly and Hunter. And again, gone was the normal attitude and in its place was a polite pod person who wanted to impress Justin. It was kind of hilarious.

“Did you sleep until noon again, Jester?” Molly asks with slight disapproval lacing her voice, “You’re not a teenager anymore.”

“I didn’t sleep well last night. It doesn’t happen that often. Besides, I don’t have the kind of job that requires me to be up really early like you two do. I paint in my studio and live with a musician who tends to work nights. My schedule it different than yours.”
“Well, while you slept the day away, Hunter and I got up at 6:30 and went for a jog. It’s really pretty out here. You should take a look around the grounds,” Molly suggests.

“You went jogging?” Justin asks.

“Yeah, I’ve been doing it for a few months. It’s easier here though. Morgantown has a lot of hills.”

“You do live in the mountain state,” Hunter says as he grabs a menu.

“So, Hunter. How have you been enjoying the mountain state? Or my sister’s apartment?” Justin says as he tries not to unfairly glare at him.

Hunter looks up, “It’s nice. I used to go down to Morgantown some weekends for parties when I was going to Carnegie so I know my way around. I still have two friends that live down there so I caught up with them at their place for dinner and drinks and introduced them to Molly. I’ve only seen them a couple of times since I transferred to go to film school in California so it was nice talking to them.”

“Gabrielle and Gretchen are very sweet. They’re an awesome couple and invited me to the movies next week which I thought was nice of them.”

“Yeah, they thought you were hot,” Hunter smirks.

Molly slaps his arm, “They did not! They were just being sweet,” but then Molly starts to look flattered, “You really think they thought that though?”

“Who wouldn’t? But yeah. They were fanning themselves over you when you went to the bathroom and told me how great of a catch I had.”

Molly looks quite pleased over that while Justin scowls. He can feel Nathan’s amusement over the situation coming off of him in waves.
“So, Nathan. How have your sets been going?” Molly asks after they order their food.

“They’ve been going really well. We’ve been attracting more fans getting more jobs than usual outside of the schedule Brian set up so that’s good.”

“That’s great. You’re such a great performer. You make all the girls swoon,” Molly says dramatically.

“Well, all those swooning girls will be disappointed,” Nathan laughs.

“Or ship you with Sebastian. That’s the thing to do now, isn’t it? People do it with One Direction,” Molly smirks.

“We are NOT One Direction,” Nathan glares, “We will never be One Direction.”

“Don’t mind him,” Justin cuts in, “Nathan’s a bit of a music snob.”

“I’m not going to be sorry that we have learned to play a few instruments each, write our own stuff, weren’t grouped together by music moguls, and—”

“Don’t conform to the fleeting Top 40 styles?”

“I mean, if you want to add that to the list too,” Nathan sighs.

“I agree with that though,” Molly says to him, “You sort of have a folk glam punk vibe to you.”

“I don’t think ‘folk glam punk’ is a genre, Molly,” Hunter laughs.

“Sure it is! The Accidental Natives made it one. Nathan’s voice sort of sounds like if Jeff Buckley and Freddie Mercury had a baby and the band’s songs vary in style, depending on the message and the tone. I’m bummed I can’t see them perform more,” Molly admits.
“Well, you’ll see us perform tonight,” Nathan tells her.

“Very true. Hey, are you going to be making quips about the couple in between songs? I feel like most wedding performers do that.”

“I’m going to try to keep that to a minimum and just let everyone enjoy the music for the time we’re up there,” Nathan mutters.

Justin can’t help but feel a little bit of relief at that news. It’ll be weird enough that he will have to watch Nathan do a set at his ex’s wedding. It would be even stranger to hear him congratulate and joke with the happy couple.

The waiter comes by with the food and conversation stays pretty light after that. It’s kind of a shame. Talking about something heavy might distract him.

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When Amanda opens the door for him and lets him into her hotel room, he can already see it’s been a rough morning for her. With Carlos in one arm, a bottle in the other, anda disarray of toys and supplies behind her, she looks as though she is a bit on end.

“Hey, big brother!” Amanda rushes out as she hugs him and kisses his cheek, “Sorry about the boys’ stuff being everywhere.”

“Hey! Don’t worry about it,” Eric tells her before his eyes land on his nephew and he gently takes him from her, “Hi, Carlos! I missed you last night. I wish you and your brother would have stayed instead of your Uncle George and temporary Aunt Clover. Yes, I do!”

Amanda laughs, “Please, you would have gotten no rest. I’m glad we got a room up here last night. I can’t imagine the boys acting like they did last night only to drive up here first thing in the morning. Speaking of the boys, can you watch them while I take a shower? Diego went to find a store to get more diapers.”

“Yeah, sure,” Eric agrees as he looks down at his three month old nephew.

“Great. I swear I’ll be really quick.”
Amanda grabs her clothes and rushes into the bathroom and Eric sits on the floor with Carlos and Julian. He positions Carlos in his lap so that he’s sitting on his leg and propped up against his arm then puts the bottle to his lips for him to suck. Carlos surprisingly grabs onto the bottle and when Eric lets go, the little boy keeps it in place.

“Unca Ewric!” Julian greets while running over to him.

“Hey, buddy! How are you?” Eric says, wrapping an arm around his waist.

“Good. Illy?”

“Lily’s with Uncle Brian,” Eric tells him, “Remember Uncle Brian?”

“Uh huh! Unca Bwian is ta, funny, and nice,” the two year old tells him.

“I suppose he has his days,” Eric laughs, “But he’s pretty tall everyday, isn’t he?”

“That’s my bwotha,” Julian says, changing the subject.

“I know, I met him when he was born and when you came over to my house the other day. He’s a pretty cute little brother, huh?”

“Yes, he’s cute! But he’s loud,” Julian says, hanging his head.

“Babies can be loud,” Eric admits, “When Lily was a baby she babbled constantly even though we didn’t know what she was saying. She thought whatever she was saying was the funniest thing in the world.”

“Carlos jus cwies,” Julian mumbles, “Illy is funny. Carlos is not.”

Eric holds back a laugh at that, “I’m sure Carlos will be funny soon enough.”
“Does Illy have a baby bwotha?” Carlos asks.

“No. I promise you, you would have met him if she did,” Eric laughs.

“A baby sista?”

“No, no sister yet either.”

“How come?”

Eric looks around, trying to figure out an acceptable answer, “Because Uncle Brian and I have to plan it out first?”

“Oh. Okay!”

Julian goes over to play with the toys that his sister brought for him and leaves Eric alone with the baby.

Eric looks down at the little guy and, okay, he can admit that his little sister and her husband made two adorable children. He still feels kind of guilty about initially being a little happy over their parents being angry about their impromptu marriage, not that he was openly so. It’s not that he wanted Amanda to face their wrath, but things were getting a bit serious with his boyfriend, Owen, at the time. Owen had just moved in with him and his parents hadn’t been happy over it since at that point they were still hoping he would stop fooling around and find a woman. They had constantly berated him and compared him to his siblings despite the fact he was more financially successful than both of them. And that wasn’t exactly an easy thing to do. George and Amanda were doing very well, both business owners. George had professionally surfed and now owned surf shop on Venice Beach and Amanda owned her own arts and interior decorating store in Beaufort, North Carolina and was an interior decorator herself. But he became a millionaire before the age of thirty. He feels like that should have gotten his parents to overlook the fact he was gay but it hadn’t. The only time they ever backed off was when Amanda married Diego. She had gone to spend her last year of college in Spain, wanting to study abroad in a place where she knew the language. She met Diego, one of the head chefs at a restaurant she frequented. According to Amanda, Diego encouraged her to explore her more adventurous side and they fell into a whirlwind romance that lasted most of the year. When she had to go home, they kept in touch for the next year through letters until Amanda was so upset by the distance that she wrote a letter breaking it off. A few weeks later, Diego was at her front door, down on one knee, and asking her to marry him. And she did. The very next day. So, while she technically did it to keep him in the country, they went through with it because they loved each other. Their parents couldn’t see that at
the time and Eric remembers how fucking pissed they were that their 23 year old daughter married someone they never even met. But, ten years and two children later, he thinks they have accepted Diego as part of the family and realize that Amanda loves him. 

Too bad they couldn’t realize the same thing about him and Brian. He knows he should say fuck it and forget about them but it’s hard when he sees pictures on Facebook of his parents spending so much time with his nephews and going across the country to visit George when they won’t do the same for him and Lily. There had been a couple of times where he built up some hope. They tended to like pictures of Lily or pictures of him and Lily on Facebook but there had been this one time when his father liked a picture of Brian sitting on a swing with Lily. He had commented, “Cute picture. My granddaughter is growing up.” There had been a picture of the three of them that his mother had commented on, saying how beautiful Lily was and that she looked like him when he was a toddler. He knows they care about Lily, and him to an extent, but now he wonders if the likes and comments were just for public appearances. He doesn’t think they will ever change. If he and Brian do have another baby, they would probably do the same exact thing.

But, looking down at his nephew, he realizes he doesn’t care about that. He still wants another kid so much. It had been building more and more ever since Lily asked for a sister, and before that he had brought it up a few times with Brian, but he really thinks he and Brian would be great parents to two children, three counting Gus. As though his nephew can feel the mushiness coming off of him, Carlos looks up at him with big eyes and giggles.

“Are you laughing at me, baby?” Eric murmurs, touching his nose.

The infant gives him a toothless smile and gurgles before reaching up to take a hold of his finger.

“You ever think about having another one of those?” his sister asks from behind him.

“Yeah,” Eric answers, not even thinking about it.

“Really?!?” his sister squeals, rushing over to sit down, “Oh my god, Eric! That’s so exciting!”

“Don’t get too excited. Nothing is set in stone. We’ve just been talking about it,” Eric tells her.

“How does Brian feel about it?”
“Strangely, I think he is warming up to the idea. I know I’m the one who is more baby crazy but Lily keeps bringing up wanting a baby sister and he actually had a conversation with her about it. She was talking about how cute Carlos was but when we had another baby she wanted a girl baby. I was pretty shocked when Brian said that it wasn’t up to us when it came to if we got a boy or girl then asked if we ended up having a boy, did she want us to take him back,” Eric chuckles, “She actually had to think about it before saying no. But she does want us to at least try to have a girl.”

“So you’re at least going to try for a kid then,” Amanda presses.

“...Probably. But I haven’t gotten a definitive answer out of Brian yet. We’ve been too busy with planning the wedding. So don’t say that I told you that. It could easily go the other way.”

Amanda claps her hands together, “I’m so happy for you two!”

“Like I said, keep your mouth shut. Do not jinx anything,” Eric reminds her as he puts the burp rag on his shoulder and pats Carlos on his back.

“Be careful. He’s been known to get spit up on me even with the rag,” Amanda advises.

“At least I don’t have my suit on yet.”

Carlos lets out a burp and Amanda looks over his shoulder to assess the damage.

“You got lucky, Eric,” she says as she takes the cloth to put in the sink.

Amanda comes back into the room and says, “I should put the boys down for a nap. Want to get Julian?”

Eric goes over to pick up Julian and, when he sees the direction Eric is walking in, he starts fussing and shaking head.

“No nap no nap no nap!” Julian cries, kicking his feet.
“Julian,” Amanda warns, “Don’t start.”

Julian juts his lower wobbly lip out and looks up at Eric, eyes filled with tears.

“Unca Eric, pease! No nap!” Julian begs, hugging him close.

“Sorry, kid. You have to listen to your mom.”

“But I don’t wan too!” Julian sobs.

“Julian, the more you cry the more convinced I am that you need a nap,” Amanda scolds, “Now stop giving your uncle a hard time. He might just not let you be a ring bearer anymore.”

“Amanda!” Eric hisses, glaring at her.

Julian freezes and turns to Eric, “Kay, I take nap.”

“Good choice,” she tells her son.

Eric kisses the boy’s dark hair, lays him down in the large crib, touches Carlos’s cheek, and stands back up straight.

“What are you doing until the wedding?” Amanda asks.

Eric shrugs, “Getting George’s ass out of bed so he can come down and get ready. Hanging out with Rick.”

“Trying not to call Brian?” Amanda adds.

“Yeah, I already broke that rule on the way here.”
“Aw, couldn’t handle the time apart?”

“He needed comforted,” Eric says softly, thinking back on the conversation.

Amanda smiles, “He’s lucky to have you.”

“I’m lucky to have him too.”

“He is pretty hot,” Amanda agrees.

“He’s more than that. He doesn’t come off this way but when he decides that he loves someone he...he loves them with all of his being. He would do anything for me, Lily, Gus, his friends. He’s a beautiful person. I wish Mom and Dad could see that,” Eric admits.

“I think...I think they know you two love each other. I think they even respect Brian as a person. They just can’t get over the fact that he’s a man. But like George and I have told you, as well as them...it’s their loss. Maybe one day they’ll regret how they have behaved towards you and Brian but don’t get your hopes up because if it never happens you’re the one who will end up hurt.”

Eric sighs, “I know. I know that. It already hurts enough as it is.”

“I know, Eric. I hate that.”

Eric just shrugs and brings her in for a hug.

“See you later. I have to go get George.”

Amanda nods, “You’re going to have an amazing day. It’ll be one of the best days of your life.”

Eric grins at that, “It will, won’t it?”
And it will be. That’s one thing he’s absolutely sure about. The fact that just thinking about standing up there with Brian while they make things official in front of their friends and family has him wanting to smile and tear up and laugh…

It tells him that his sister is right. It will be one of the best days of his life. It’s something he’s never wanted more.

“Brian?”

Brian straightens his tie in the mirror before turning around to see Emmett standing there.

“Lily wanted to show you what she looks like in her dress. She told me she just couldn’t wait until the wedding.”

Brian smirks, “Well, let’s see it. Where is the kid?”

On cue, Lily walks in to Brian’s dressing room and spins around so he can properly see the whole dress. She’s adorable, with the white lace, blue sash, and fabric petals sewn on the bottom of the several layers. Her perfect curls flow down her back and strands overlap in an intricate crisscross pattern on the top of her head, finished off with a crown of white flowers. Brian feels himself smiling when she laces her gloved fingers together, looks at him with big eyes, and waits for approval.

Ignoring the possibility of wrinkles in his pants, Brian squats down to get down to her level and holds out his harms. Lily runs towards him and he wraps her up in a big hug before holding her shoulders to give her a once over.

“You look breathtakingly beautiful,” Brian tells her honestly as she beams.

“Thank you, Daddy,” she answers in a serious voice before explaining, “Emmett did my hair and Aunt Lindsay got me dressed. I told them I had to look EXTRA pretty today. I went to show Papa and he almost cried but he said it was because I looked so beautiful and grown up.”

Brian nods, “Your papa is a huge sap. I’m not surprised. But he was right. You are beautiful. You
always are but especially today.”

Lily nods, “You look very pretty too.”

“Yes, Brian. So pretty,” Emmett says, holding back laughter.

Brian rolls his eyes and picks his daughter up.

“You going to be good until the wedding without me and Papa there?”

“Yes, Daddy. I promise,” Lily says with conviction.

“Because I have ways of finding out if you aren’t.”

“But I will be good! You don’t have to worry about me. Julian is the bad one,” Lily tells him.

“Most two year olds are. You weren’t an angel at that age either,” Brian laughs.

Lily gasps, “I’ve always been good!”

“Says the girl who got into the flour a week ago.”

“...That was Duncan’s idea,” she finally says.

“Lily, Duncan wasn’t even there that day.”

“Yes, he was. He left before you found the mess.”

“Now I know why you want a sibling,” he mutters, putting her down.
“I wouldn’t be surprised if it was his idea if he had been there,” Emmett laughs, “He threw a whole box of cereal all over the floor and claimed that he just wanted to give some to Stella.”

“Kids are destructive,” Brian agrees.

“And you want another one?” Emmett asks, intrigued.

Brian rolls his eyes before turning Lily around and sending her off.

“Go with Emmett. You better listen to him.”

“I can’t,” Lily insists, “Justin’s gonna watch me while Emmett gets the wedding ready.”

“Is he?” Brian asks, more to Emmett than to Lily.

“I’m going to be all over the place since I have you sitting in opposite wings until it’s time to go outside to walk down the aisle. I asked Justin to stay with the kids until maybe half an hour before the wedding. I figure since Drew will mainly be the one to have Duncan and Lily all week he shouldn’t have to be the one to do it today.”

“Alright. If Justin’s okay with it, that is. I think Gus would get annoyed a lot more quickly with JR and three kids under five so it’s probably for the best. Be good for Justin, Lily.”

“I will, Daddy.”

Emmett takes Lily out of the room and Brian is alone once more. He turns around again and looks in the mirror to see how he looks.

Huh. Despite how much he used to drink, smoke, and do drugs, he doesn’t look bad for someone who is almost 44 years old. Shit. How the fuck did he become so fucking old? How did he even make it this far and end up where he is right now? How could he grow into a person who not only doesn’t regret it, but embraces the life he is living now?
Looking at himself, he realizes he doesn’t care. He doesn’t need those answers. They’re useless for one good reason.

He’s happy.

“Now, the kids are hanging out in this room here. Gus should help you if they get too rambunctious since he’s staying with them until he goes to line up at the front of the alter with Michael. Actually, to be honest with you…he might not help you. The boy’s in love and is texting his girlfriend every five seconds so you may have to break his phone to get his attention.”

Justin laughs at that, “Emmett, I’m sure it will be fine. How hard can three small children be?”

Emmett just looks at him with disbelieving eyes and shakes his head, “Every small child has a little evil monster inside of them, Justin. When you group them together, those monsters conspire and feed off each other, escalating their power to make one huge problem. Fighting, lunging, hair pulling, yelling, crying, and tantrums can easily occur.”

“I think you are being overdramatic.”

Emmett opens the door only to reveal Duncan and a little boy who Justin assumes is Julian playing tug-of-war with a stuffed animal.

“It’s my toy! I let you play with it and now I want it back!” Duncan cries, pulling at the bear.

“I wanna pay!” Julian screams, pulling as well.

Justin looks around the room and sees JR reading a book, Gus texting on his phone, and Lily standing in front of a mirror admiring her dress.

Emmett stomps over, pulls the toy out of both boys’ grasps, and says, “There. No toy. Problem solved.”
Duncan’s eyes fill with tears and spill over, “But Daddy-”

“No buts! I told you no fighting and yelling. You’re usually good about that, Duncan. What’s the problem with Julian playing with your toy?”

“It’s my bear!” Duncan explains, completely distraught.

“I know it’s your bear, baby. But he just wanted to play with it. He didn’t want to keep it.”

“I c-can’t lose th-that!” Duncan sobs.

Emmett sighs and picks the little boy up to hold him, “I know that. I know this bear is special to you. I won’t let anything happen to it, okay? I promise.”

Emmett sits down with his son to calm him down before asking, “Justin, can you go sit with Julian for a few minutes? And Gus! Why didn’t you stop them from getting into it?”

As Justin walks across the room to sit next to the toddler, he turns to see Gus at least having the decency to look guilty.

“Hey,” Justin says to Julian, “My name is Justin. I’m a friend of your Uncle Eric’s and Uncle Brian’s. What’s your name?”

Julian looks up, “Jooian. Dunca stop cwying?”

Justin looks over to Duncan and Emmett. Duncan seems to have calmed down and has become mostly quiet as he leans against Emmett.

“I think so. He’ll be okay.”

“I don wan him to cwy.”
“Yeah, I don’t either. It’s not your fault though. He just got upset.”

Julian nods and says, “I’m gonna cawry rings wit Dunca!”

“I heard! Are you excited?”

“Uh huh!”

“Justin?” Lily prompts as she walks over to him and twirls, “Do you like my dress?”

“I absolutely love it, Lily. I think you look very beautiful.”

Lily beams and pets Julian on the head, “This is my little cousin, Julian. He’s only two so he can’t talk good yet. He’s nice but he wouldn’t give Duncan back his bear.”

“I saw that. I bet it was just a misunderstanding.”

“They are both gonna carry the rings to Daddy and Papa while JR and I throw flowers on the floor!”

Justin smiles at her enthusiasm only to get an unexpected hug from the little girl.

“I am happy you are here, Justin!” Lily says as she lets go.

Then even more surprisingly, Julian launches himself at him to copy his cousin. It doesn’t seem to matter to Julian that he literally just met Justin.

“Happy you here, Jus!” Julian yells out.

“Yeah, of course,” Justin says, hugging the boy back.
“Yay! Justin’s here!” Lily says happily as she hugs him once more, causing two kids to be latched onto him now.

“Okay, now you both are just overdoing it.”

“Look, Duncan!” Emmett exclaims, “I think Justin needs a hug.”

Justin groans when he hears the telltale running footsteps and feels the collision of a solid child colliding with his back.

“Missed you, Justin!” Duncan says happily.

“Well, I better be off. Things to do,” Emmett says, walking away.

“Are they going to let go any time soon?” Justin chokes out.

“Hard to tell. Maybe they will let go or maybe they will decide to pile on top of you.”

“Ahhh!!!” Duncan yells as he jumps onto Justin’s back. The kids quickly follow suit by climbing on top of him.

Fucking Emmett.

“Justin, do you like tickles?” Lily asks, evil totally lacing her voice.

“No,” he tells her sternly, which only makes the evil grow even more.

Luckily Emmett steps in, “Lily, you’re going to mess up your hair if you keep getting rowdy like that.”
Lily gasps with petrifying fear and quickly unlatches herself from Justin to run over to the mirror. Justin manages to get Julian and Duncan off of him without hurting their feelings and stands back up to walk over to Emmett.

“Okay, you were right about the evil thing,” Justin admits, “Anything else I need to know?”

Emmett’s face grows serious as he says in a low voice “Can you just...keep an extra eye on Duncan for me? He was so upset. It isn’t like him. I hate leaving him.”

“Yeah, of course. I wouldn’t be worried, Emmett. It was just a little tantrum. Most kids have them.”

Emmett nods and whispers, “I know, I know. But he’s awfully attached to that bear. His...his mother made it for him, I guess. Before she passed. He doesn’t remember her. He was only ten months old at the time. But he also had it when his dad got shot and killed when he was two. They found him in the apartment two days later crying and clutching onto that bear. I don’t know if he consciously remembers it but he has these awful nightmares about being alone. That bear brings him comfort.”

Justin feels his eyes tear up a little and he clears his throat, “Shit, Emmett. I didn’t know. Poor baby.”

“We haven’t really discussed Duncan’s past with the family. Only with Brian and Eric since he’s stayed over at their house a few times. Good thing too since he had a horrific nightmare one night he was there. I guess it took them almost an hour to calm him down. Like I said, I'm sure he's fine. But-”

"He's your baby," Justin finishes, "I will keep an eye on him."

"Thank you," Emmett breathes out, relieved, "I will come fetch the kids probably a half hour before the wedding. Thank you for sticking with them. And Gus! I meant it when I told you to help Justin."

“I will,” Gus insists, forcing himself to pull away from his phone.

Emmett rushes out of the room and Justin turns to the kids.
“Let’s play a game,” Lily announces, marching around the room, “It’s called...Jungle! I will be a tiger, Duncan will be a lion, Julian will be a bear, Justin will be an elephant, JR will be a monkey, and Gus will be a snake!”

“No,” Gus answers, pulling out his phone again.

“Gussy, you never play anymore!” Lily shouts while stomping her feet.

“I played airplane with you last night,” Gus points out.

Lily huffs and says, “JR will play."

“I’m reading,” JR says as she stays glued her book.

Lily’s lower lip juts out before she crosses her arms and hangs her head.

“Lily, the four of us will play,” Justin says, hoping to get her out of her mood.

Lily perks up, “Okay! Let’s play!”

“What do we do?” Duncan asks, confused.

“Pretend to be animals! You’re a lion, remember?”

“But who wins?”

“We all win! Cause we’re animals! RAWWWWWRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRX
Nathan walks across the grounds after setting up for the reception. There’s still about an hour before the wedding so he figured he would check on Justin before finding both of them a seat. He parted ways with Petra, Sebastian, and Nadia just a few minutes before and agreed to sit close to them as well as Molly and Hunter. Molly and Hunter may know some people here but the band only know Brian, Eric, Drew, Emmett, Duncan, and Lily. He didn’t want them to feel left out.

He probably should have brought someone with him so he wouldn’t get completely lost. The resort was huge. He’s pretty sure Emmett meant this wing when he said Justin was on the third floor in the east wing. It’s possible that he got all mixed around and this isn’t even east though.

As though some higher being knew he was lost, he hears children giggling and Gus opening the door with the phone to his ear.

“-Hold on a sec, the kids are being fucking loud,” he hears Gus say to the person on the other line.

“Hey Gus,” Nathan greets, “Justin in there?”

Gus takes the phone away from his ear, nods, and smiles, “Yeah, he’s playing with the kids. You can go in.”

Nathan walks in and finds himself stopping in his tracks to watch Justin.

“Justin, pick me up with your trunk again!” Duncan laughs hysterically.

Justin makes an odd sound before taking both arms, picking up Duncan, and holding him high in the air.

“You’re a funny elephant, Justin!”

“You think I’m funny, huh?” Justin says as he holds him in the air and spins.

“Yeah! You’re really funny!”
“Then I bet I can make you laugh harder!”

Justin puts Duncan on his hip and tickles his sides. The boy giggles uncontrollably and as soon as Justin stops, Duncan puts his arms around him.

“You’re so nice, Justin!”

“Yeah, Justin!” Lily says, nodding vigorously, “You’re really fun!”

“Yeah!” the little boy, who must be Eric’s nephew, agrees as he holds onto Justin’s leg.

“Well, you guys are awfully fun too,” Justin admits, putting Duncan down.

“Do you have baby, Jus?” the youngest boy asks curiously.

And, even though he can’t see Justin’s face, he knows by the slump of his shoulders and the silence the question brings that his smile probably isn’t as bright anymore.

“...No, Julian. I don’t.”

“How come?” he asks.

“I...I don’t know. I guess it isn’t the right time.”

“Don’t you want a baby? Babies are so cute!” Lily says to him.

“I agree, Lily. Babies are very cute. I really do want to be a dad. I guess we’ll see if that happens or not.”
“I think you’d be a fun daddy!” Duncan exclaims as Justin puts him down.

“Thanks, Duncan.”

Nathan blinks a few times and thinks about turning around to pretend he was never here. But then he remembers Gus let him into the suite and would probably say something if Nathan just walked out so that wasn’t an option.

“Hey Justin,” Nathan says softly.

Justin turns around and gives him a small smile, “Hey! How long have you been standing there?”

“Not that long,” Nathan lies, “I just came to check in. I’ll meet you down there.”

“You could always help me with these kids,” Justin laughs, picking up Julian who is still hanging on to his leg.

Nathan gives him a smile and says, “I’m not good at that kind of stuff like you are, Justin. I don’t think I’ll ever be.”

Justin frowns, “Nathan-”

“I’ll see you down there, okay?”

Nathan heads out into the hall, waves at Gus who is having a “no, you hang up” kind of conversation, and opens the door for the stairs.

As soon as he gets to the first landing, he presses his back against the wall and slides down to sit.

He has told himself for over two years that Justin deserved better than anything he could give him. Justin would flat out deny that but Nathan knows the truth.
God, he wishes he could be fucking normal. Be capable of wanting things like a family.

He just doesn’t. And doesn’t that sound so fucking lonely?

What kind of person would he be if he dragged Justin down that lonely path with him?

Nathan feels his face crumple and a couple of tears fall down his cheeks before he quickly wipes them away.

He has too much to focus on today. He has to perform for a happy occasion. He can’t do this right now.

He’ll think on it tonight and, if it comes down to it, deal with it tomorrow.

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Justin manages to get the quick encounter with Nathan off of his mind when Emmett comes in to collect the kids.

“It’s almost time, guys!” Emmett exclaims, clapping his hands, “Were you all good for Justin?”

“Yes, Daddy,” Duncan answers, “Justin is really fun!”

“He played Jungle with us!” Lily exclaimed.

“I’m unfamiliar with that game,” Emmett admits.

“It’s just the best game ever,” Lily dives in, “You pretend to be an animal from the jungle!”

“There’s no goal really in mind after that,” Justin says in a low voice.

“Well, that just sounds incredible! I wish they had that game when I was little. In Hazlehurst, we just played with spare tires.”
Duncan and Lily give him pitying looks while Julian just sits there, looking confused.

“Oh well. I’m grown up now so it’s much too late to dwell on such things. Time to get you all downstairs.”

Justin joins them to give Emmett a hand as they go downstairs and head out to the tent in the courtyard.

“Now, no popping your heads out and running over to say hi to the guests,” Emmett orders, “I want the way you look to be a surprise. Are you listening, Michael?”

Michael gives Emmett an incredulous look, “Seriously?”

“I’m just messing with you, baby,” Emmett laughs, “Now Lily, I’m letting JR hold your flower basket until the two of you are ready to walk down the aisle.”

“But why does SHE get to hold it?” Lily pouts.

“Because you will want to toss them all over the floor before the music even starts.”

“Will not.”

“Duncan, Julian. I will give you each a ring box right before you go out there. Duncan, make sure you and Julian don’t open the boxes. That’s for Brian and Eric to do.”

“Kay, Daddy,” Duncan says, ready to take on the responsibility.

“Kay!” Julian shouts.

“Okay, okay,” Emmett breathes then starts talking to himself, “Check to make sure the cake safely arrived and is protected. Triple check sound here and in the reception tent. Cue the quartet to start
“Emmett?” Justin asks, concerned.

Emmett breathes out, trying to calm himself.

“Brian still has the rings. I still have last minute preparations and Brian is still in his room and has the rings. Why didn’t he mention having the rings the last three times I was in his damn room?”

“Well, you need to be here checking on stuff, right? Can’t he just bring him down when he gets here?”

“The boys will be going up the aisle by then. Justin... I really shouldn’t ask you to do this and I know I should be paying you for helping with the kids and I will-”

“What room is he in?”

Emmett lets out a relieved sigh, “635. North Wing. Thank you.”

Justin waves the appreciation off, jogs through the property, and goes through the north side entrance. He gets on the elevator and takes it to the sixth floor, finds room 635, takes a breath, and knocks on the door.

Brian opens the door and, when he sees who it is, looks surprised.

“Justin? What are you doing up here?”

Justin clears his throat, “Uh Emmett forgot to get the rings from you to give to Duncan and Julian. He’s focused on his last minute preparations before you and Eric come down and I offered to fetch them for him.”

“Yeah, I should have remembered to hand them over. Come in.”
Justin walks in the room and Brian closes the door behind him before going across the room and unzipping his bag.

“Eric should have kept them. I think since he packed my stuff first he decided to put the rings in my suitcase while he was thinking of them,” Brian says, digging for the rings.

Justin nods, not really knowing what else to say.

“There they are,” Brian says, pulling out two separate boxes, “Want to see them?”

Justin is taken aback by the question then shrugs, “Sure, I guess.”

Justin walks over and Brian pops open the boxes.

“We both went out shopping for them. I think Eric knew I would be pissy if he got down on one knee AND presented me with a ring and he knows I’m picky anyway. I think they were a good choice.”

Justin looks down at the gold bands. What the fuck is he supposed to say about them? He knows Brian isn’t trying to rub his face into anything but does he have to show him the rings?

So all he says is, “They’re nice. I’ll take them down for you.”

Brian stares at him before handing over the rings. Justin takes them from Brian’s grasp before turning to walk away.

“I kept them, you know.”

Justin freezes in place and breathes out through his nose.

“Kept what?”
“Don’t play dumb.”

Justin scoffs and turns back around, “It’s not dumb, Brian. There’s no reason for you to have kept our rings.”

Brian simply stares at him and says, “I told you I would.”

Justin feels his jaw drop when he realizes Brian is telling the truth, “Why...Why would you do that? Yeah, you told me you would but after all this time-”

“I don’t know,” Brian shrugs, “I just kept them. I don’t know why I told you.”

Justin nods and looks down, “Where are they?”

“At the loft in Pittsburgh. In my bedside table drawer. I haven’t looked at them in years but...they’re there.”

“Does Eric know?”

“Yeah. He lived at the loft for a year so it would be hard for him not to know.”

“And he didn’t resent you for it?”

“No. He loves me despite how fucked up I am. Besides, he knew how much they meant to me. He knows I love him as much as I...”

Brian looks away and Justin’s eyes soften at the sudden emotion that hits Brian’s voice.

“I’m really glad you found him. You’re going to have a great life together,” Justin tells him, forcing his voice not to crack.
Brian huffs out a laugh, “He deserves everything. I’m so scared I’ll screw things up. I’ve never known how to show someone that I care about them. He deserves to know how much I give a shit.”

As Brian looks away again, Justin feels for him. He knows feelings of insecurity hit Brian more than he’d like to admit.

So, slowly, he walks back to Brian, close enough so that they are just inches apart, and gently pulls him into an embrace.

“You’ve held onto the wedding bands you presented your old partner with for ten years, even after you fell in love with someone else. You raised a child with your new partner and built a life with him, faced your fears and grew up for him. You’re pretty good at giving a shit.”

Justin steps away and pats him on the shoulder.

“Good luck, Brian. Save me a dance at the reception.”

With that, Justin walks out the door and gets back into the elevator. And, as heavy as his heart feels, he knows that he’s going to be okay.

But, as he approaches the tent and hands Emmett the rings, Justin can’t help but feel a little numb.

The numbness starts to fade when he sits next to Nathan, the band, and Hunter and Molly. They make him laugh and smile as they wait for the music to start. Once it does, it’s relatively easy to appreciate this wedding like he would any other. Cute kids, beautiful flowers, classy set-up, beautiful couple.

And they do look beautiful. Justin can only guess that they couldn’t agree to who would walk down the aisle so there they are, arm in arm, walking down together, looking at each other with hearts in their eyes and smiles they cannot suppress.

The two men make it to the altar and stare at each other in front of the drag queen ordained minister, which is one of the main aspects of this wedding he knows Brian has chosen to make sure
this wasn’t a hetero affair. The queen tells a quick, humor-laced story about how the couple met before diving into the vows and asking if anyone objected to the marriage.

It only takes one glance at the tears in Eric’s eyes and the soft smile on Brian’s face, the way Brian is compelled to stroke the man’s cheek and the way Eric reaches to squeeze his partner’s hands...It only takes those things to know that there is nothing objectionable about their relationship. They’re perfect together.

And that’s why, along with everyone else, Justin stands up and cheers for them when they kiss to seal the deal and walk back down the aisle with big grins on their faces.

Chapter End Notes

I fully expect hate from a couple of readers for this chapter due to its ending. I have come to expect it almost every chapter, even the ones where B/J have several scenes. But if you do enjoy aspects of this story, let me know. And remember that my vision for this story and the two sequels stays the same as I have said countless times before. Remember that I am a human being who puts a lot of effort into this story and, even if you don't like what you perceive as the current direction, remember that I have my reasons for writing this piece. One of those reasons is to entertain you and another is to better my writing. If you don't like the most recent events then please let me know how I can better my writing instead, or that you like the writing style, rather than just putting down the storyline. I would like my comment section to be a friendly environment. Feel free to ask questions and, as long it is not asking me to give anything away (except for what has already been spoiled,) I will answer and discuss with you. I apologize if I ever come off as defensive. This could be because I have been asked the questions multiple times before or you might have predicted a future plot point and don't seem crazy about it. But I hope that, for the most part, I have been welcoming to questions and different opinions.

I also want to thank every supportive reader who has stuck by to follow the updates of Intersect. It truly means a lot that you can accept this story and its slow build style.
2nd House Rd and South Eldert Lane: The Reception

Chapter Summary

The Reception and the morning after.

Chapter Notes

Another long chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They quickly load into the ridiculously huge reception tent, the interior donned with tealights, white wooden chairs and dozens of round tables, a large dance floor, and a stage. Small wedding. Yeah right. There were about 150 people here, which isn’t ridiculous, but Brian and Eric went all out for it. It was nice though. And besides, it let him see a lot of his friends again so Justin was grateful for that.

Justin decides to spend time with Nathan while he can so he takes his hand and leads him over to Lindsay and Mel to say hello.

“Hey, guys!” Mel says, hugging the both of them.

“Hey, Mel! I didn’t get to see much of you earlier today so I wanted to say hello in case you both were busy later.”

Mel waves him off, “Too busy for you? Impossible. You’re one of the few people I’m going to make a point of spending time with tonight.”

Justin chuckles and turns to Lindsay, who is dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

“Linds, you alright?”

Lindsay lets out a wet laugh, “I’m fine, Justin.”
“She chokes up at almost every wedding we go to,” Mel reveals, “The fact that it was Brian’s made it even worse.”

“He just looked so happy and at peace,” Lindsay says in a wobbly voice, “Peter Pan has grown up. I’m happy for them. He is so in love and I am so grateful for that.”

Mel steals a concerned glance at Justin who just gives her a small shrug, letting her know it’s okay.

“They’re a great couple,” Justin agrees, “I was moved by the ceremony myself.”

Lindsay nods and pulls herself together.

“I don’t know why I get like this on happy days. I’ll probably get choked up at Gus’s speech and the first dance too.”

“If they ever get around to it,” Mel laughs, “As soon as Brian and Eric were back down the aisle, I saw Brian drag his new husband away and up to the estate. Probably wanted to fuck his brains out since he was kept from doing so last night.”

Justin raises his eyebrows, “Brian agreed to not see Eric before the wedding?”

“He wasn’t happy about it but Eric was set on it so he gave in.”

Justin is about to reply but that’s when Emmett walks over and lets out a sigh.

“The wedding was beautiful, Em!” Lindsay tells him sincerely, touching his shoulder.

“Thank you, baby,” Emmett answers, “It got a little stressful right before the wedding but it didn’t affect either of the grooms so I call that a win.”

“Duncan also did a great job,” Mel says, knowing Emmett loves to talk about his son.
Emmett’s expression breaks into a smile as he dives in.

“Oh, he did, didn’t he? He’s such a good little boy. I was so proud over how perfect he was. He even was able to get Julian to stay in line. Don’t get me wrong, Julian is a good boy too but he’s a toddler and who can compare with Duncan’s performance?”

Justin has to stifle a laugh at Emmett’s bias before asking, “Do you know what time the band should be up on stage?”

Emmett rolls his eyes, “It depends on when Brian and Eric get back. I told him not to take long and he glared at me. Hopefully they keep it to just one quickie. I texted him to tell him to make sure he let me know when he was leaving the room so we could get everything in place for their arrival. Horny bastard. We have an instrumental band playing during dinner. Then The Accidental Natives will go on for the first dance as well as the rest of their set, and then we have a lady singer from Westchester filling up the last part of the night. If the party is still going on after she’s done, I have music prepared to play on the speakers. It’ll be fine. It has to be fine.”

“Are you always this nervous about the weddings you plan?” Nathan asks, raising an eyebrow.

“No. Just Brian’s. He’s a drama queen perfectionist. Justin, you know this.”

“I do. Although, I did think he would be more blasé about a wedding.”

“It took a while, but he eventually liked the idea of planning everything out. He would ask to meet up in order to make plans since he wanted to surprise Eric with certain things. Don’t tell him I told you, but he really did become a bit of a bridezilla. And besides, he and Eric are two of my closest friends and Eric is so sweet. They deserve a perfect wedding, which they got to have. So now they should have a perfect reception.”

“T’im sure it will be beautiful,” Lindsay assures him.

“If Brian ever brings him back down,” Mel mutters.

“God, fuck me! Right there. Fuuuuuccckkk,” Eric moans as he pushes back to meet Brian’s thrusts.
“Is this...what you expected...when you thought of our first fuck...as husband and husband?” Brian pants out in between thrusts.

“Fuck, Brian. I don’t even care. I’ll make love to you on a bed of rose petals later, okay?”

Brian laughs at that then really drills into the man until neither of them can form words. Eric shoots his load and Brian follows soon after with a groan. He lays his forehead on the back of Eric’s shoulder, kisses his back, and gently pulls out.

“Brian, did you come in me?” Eric asks, reaching back.

“I told you I didn’t have a condom,” Brian defends himself, getting up.

Eric glares and lightly and playfully kicks his thigh, “I don’t want to have the first dance with cum leaking out of me.”

“Just...push it out and wipe it off. I’ll watch.”

Eric snorts, “You’re such a perv.”

“You know that’s why you married me,” Brian murmurs as he lies back down and rolls on top of Eric.

Eric smiles softly as he picks his head up to bring Brian in for a kiss.

“I love you.”

Brian holds his husband’s face and looks into his eyes.

“I love you too. I’m glad I married you. You’re smart, creative, and keep me in check.”
“Someone had to remind you that we needed to hang our tuxes up after we ditched our reception to fuck.”

“We didn’t ditch it. We just...took a break in between the wedding and the party. That’s completely acceptable. It’s a big day.”

“Lily could be looking for us,” Eric reminds him.

“She’s probably hanging out with your siblings or Cynthia. She’ll be fine.”

“We have to get dressed, Brian.”

Brian rolls off of him and puts his face into the pillow, “But I don’t want to.”

“Stop acting like you’re four,” Eric snorts.

Brian feels the movement of Eric getting off the bed so he turns his head to let his eyes follow his husband around the room.

Husband. It’s surprising how easy it is to think of Eric as that.

“You want me to clean you off?” Brian asks, seeing Eric reaching around to wipe himself off.

“This is all your fault,” Eric mumbles as he stands up.

“Oh honey,” Brian says sarcastically as he walks into the bathroom to kiss Eric’s neck, “I thought you liked it when I came in your tight little ass.”

“I do,” Eric admits, “But not when I have places to be.”
“I will let you return the favor tonight,” Brian sings.

Eric laughs, “Oh, you bet I’m returning the favor tonight. I’m returning the favor all week.”

Brian raises his eyebrows, “What? You plan on making me your bottom boy for our whole honeymoon?”

“Fifty percent of the time, yeah.”

Brian smirks, “Forty. Maybe.”

Eric thinks about it and nods, “I can deal with forty. Now get dressed and text Emmett. He’s probably pissed that he planned a wedding for two sluts.”

“He’d be one to judge!” Brian calls out while he puts his boxer briefs back on.

The newlyweds get dressed in a timely fashion, despite Brian sticking his hand down Eric’s pants twice. He texts Emmett to tell them they are on their way back only to get back a,

>:(

Call Brian a dick, but he doesn’t care that he kept people waiting for over twenty minutes. Besides, people who know him should know his priorities. Those aren’t going to change now that he’s married.

They come up to the reception tent and see Emmett tapping his foot, looking pissy. He sees Eric look bashful over it but Brian just thinks the expression on Emmett’s face is hilarious.

“Oh, look at who finally decided to come back!” Emmett says sarcastically.

“Sorry Emmett,” Eric apologizes genuinely.
Emmett turns to Brian and waits for him to say something.

“What? We were gone for less than half an hour.”

Emmett rolls his eyes, “I’ll announce the two of you. Come on.”

The three of them walk in and Emmett reaches for the microphone.

“Ladies, Gentlemen, and anyone in between! May I have your attention, please? While the newlyweds got distracted, they have now decided to grace us with their presence. Please welcome Mr. and Mr. Davisson-Kinney!”

Brian and Eric walk through the room and accept the embraces and congratulatory remarks from friends, colleagues, employees, and family members. It takes longer than expected to reach their table in order to sit down but they do manage to accomplish that. They get to the center of the table, sit between Gus, and Lily, and finally let out a breath.

“Where were you?” Gus asks.

Brian turns his head and tilts it, giving him a look that says, ‘Come on, Gus. Do you really have to ask?’

Gus is his son. He’s not dumb.

“Gross,” Gus mutters.

“You asked,” Brian reminds him.

“But now I need brain bleach,” Gus tells him, rubbing his eyes.

Brian just shrugs and turns to Eric.
“Are you traumatizing Gus again?” Eric asks as Lily crawls into his lap.

“Of course. It’s one of my favorite pastimes,” Brian tells his husband truthfully.

“Daddy, did I do a good job?” Lily asks, excited over the big affair.

“Yes, you did!” Brian tells her. “I was so proud. I bet all eyes were on you and they forgot the real reason they were there.”

“I don’t know about that...But maybe,” Lily admits, “Does my hair still look pretty?”

“Yes, Lily. Your hair still looks pretty.”

“When do we start dancing?”

“After food and cake,” Eric answers.

Lily gasps, “Cake!”

“Lily, you knew there was going to be cake.”

“But I just remembered again!”

Lily sits back in her seat and bounces with excitement.

“We’re not feeding each other in front of everyone, by the way,” Brian says to his husband.

“Oh, fuck no,” Eric agrees, “We’ll take some of it back to the suite tonight and I’ll lick it off your-”
“Oh, Brian! I am so happy for you!” Debbie exclaims emotionally, running up to the grooms’ table to lean over the table to hug and kiss him.

“Thanks Ma,” he tells her, voice muffled by her tits.

Debbie lets go, looks at them, and then cries, “Eric, oh baby!” before doing the same to him.

Brian turns to Gus and they both roll their eyes. Fucking Debbie.

“I met Brian when I was 14 years old,” Michael begins after greeting the crowd, “He had moved to Pittsburgh in the middle of 8th grade and had this elusive, can’t touch me kind of attitude. I was sort of intimidated by him, to be honest. I mean, he was gorgeous but if I saw him coming my way I would go in the other direction. He sat outside at lunch so that he could sneak cigarettes and didn’t really talk to anyone. Never raised his hand in class but whenever the teacher called on him he got the answer right or said something ridiculously on point and profound. He was so different than I was. I never thought he would be interested in being friends with me. But one day, when I was getting called names and stuffed into a locker, there he comes barging in. He got suspended for a week because he punched Timothy Maxwell and broke his nose just because the kid was bullying me.”

“Ha. Fucking Timothy Maxwell,” Brian thinks, ”Getting suspended was worth it. What a dick.

“And from then on, we were the best of friends. I can’t tell you how many times he’s saved the day when it came to bullies or my grades and even money problems once or twice. Meeting Brian, you’d think he would have a standard for friends, like he does with his clothes. But he really is one of the most open-minded and loving people I have ever known. He had a hard time showing it, but it’s true. He doesn’t care how rich you are or how poor you are. He doesn’t care about how much of a nerd you are. He’s faced a lot and had his own ups and downs. He’s not perfect, even though I always thought he was. Despite caring for his friends, he wasn’t always the kindest person. He’s always been blunt and harsh. In your face and controversial. Not very many people could get through to Brian in order to make him consider changing his ways, except for a couple of people.”

Brian can’t help but glance over at Justin at that. When he his eyes do land on him, he realizes that his ex-partner is staring right back. Good. He knows that he’s one of those people then. If he didn’t then Sunshine was a lot dumber than he thought.

“When Brian introduced us to Eric, we were a bit apprehensive. Not because of Eric. Eric’s
gorgeous, kind, and successful. There’s literally nothing wrong with him. But Brian had just gotten out of his only serious relationship less than a year before so we couldn’t predict where it was going to go. Little did we know, his relationship with Eric led to one of the most beautiful and happy romances any of our friends had witnessed. Eric, I don’t know if you realize this but you’ve helped Brian open up so much. He’s so happy and at peace with you and you are such a good match for him. When he talks about you, he has so much pride in his voice. He’s crazy about you and Lily and loves that you immediately welcomed Gus into your heart. I am so happy for you guys. So yeah, that’s my speech and all I really have to say.”

The room applauds for Michael’s emotionally fumbling speech as his best friend walks over to give him a hug.

“You’re such a girl,” Brian mutters.

“I-I’m just really happy for you,” Michael says, sniffing.

“Come here, Michael,” Eric grins.

Michael goes over to give a big hug to his husband. Great. They can both be saps together.

When Eric sits back down, Brian turns his head to look at the rest of the groomsmen.

“Next!” Brian calls down the table, bringing out a laugh from the crowd and a playful smack on the wrist from Eric.

Rick stands up and takes the microphone and Brian sees Eric perk up in anticipation for his best friend’s speech. Rick, in his manly and loud Boston accent, starts to speak from the heart.

“I met Eric when we were in college together at American University. I actually met him through his girlfriend at the time. Yeah, yeah. Times have changed. But I liked him from the get go. Honestly, who doesn’t like Eric? Super nice guy, easy on the eyes. You can’t stay mad at him or you’ll feel as guilty as hell over it, usually because you’re the one that was an asshole in the first place. I don’t know how you can even manage to have a good old fashioned lover’s quarrel with him, Brian. You can’t stay mad at that face. Just look at him. Anyway, we used to go out on double dates. He and Eva would go out with me and the girl I was seeing at the time, Jessica, and we’d have a good time. Even though he wasn’t that into sports and didn’t talk about pretty girls even after he became single, I always liked him and considered him a good friend. He saw past my
bullshit and my walls. He didn’t question that I was smart despite my background or my accent or what I was into and I really appreciated that.”

Brian knows the story of Eric and Rick’s friendship and he does have to wonder if Rick is going to say what happened that made them so close.

“We were both single our junior year of college and decided to get an apartment together. We’d go out and I’d hook up with women. He usually wouldn’t and I would say, “Come on, man! That girl is interested in you.” And he would take the bait less and less. He would go out on his own and not invite me. I found out later it was to go to gay bars but at the time I just thought he was being a dick. But we still had our good buddy-buddy relationship. He’d catch a football game with me and I would go to a museum with him. We supported each other’s interests because we were buddies.”

“It wasn’t until our senior year of college when I realized Eric was going to be one of the most important people in my life. On October 6, I got a call from the priest at my family’s cathedral back home...shit, this is still hard to talk about. But he called to tell me my family had died. Gas explosion. Broken gas line caused it. They had been inside asleep and didn’t have a chance. I was a wreck. I threw myself into planning the funerals and, even though I know I was a total cunt at the time, Eric went to Boston with me to help me bury my family. When we got back to DC, I drank and did drugs. I didn’t know how to cope. I couldn’t fucking cry because I wasn’t a sissy and I thought it was preferable to put my life on the line instead.”

Brian widens his eyes when Eric’s abrasive and very hetero friend gets teary eyed.

“Eric confronted me one day. I had just gotten over alcohol poisoning a few days before. He took care of me then too. But this day he caught me when I was sober. He took my hand and he just looked at me and said, “It’s okay if you’re not okay.” And I just looked at him like I didn’t know what the fuck he was talking about and stood up because I wasn’t going to deal with him. He followed me and spun me around. Let me tell you, I was ready for a fight. But then he just put his arms around me and hugged me and wouldn’t let go. I tried to push him off, said nasty and despicable things, but he wouldn’t budge. And finally I couldn’t keep it in anymore and started bawling my eyes out. I never cried like that in my life. I was taught that you couldn’t be like that, especially in front of another guy. But he didn’t judge me, he just held me. Finally, probably hours later, I had stopped crying and he could tell I was embarrassed. He told me not to be. I said, “Easy for you to say! You have dirt on me acting like a”...well, you know. I wasn’t very politically correct back then. And he’s like, “What? You want dirt on me?” And I said, “You’re fucking Mr. Perfect! What, did you forget to clean your room once?” And he said, “No, Rick. I always remember to clean my room so I can bring guys over to-” Rick looks over at Lily and censors himself, “be with when you aren’t at the apartment.”

Brian glances at Eric, expecting to see him shaking his head at his friend’s foul language only to find him crying over the whole story. Brian reaches over to grab his hand and Eric takes it and
wipes his eyes.

“I was in shock. I thought he was joking. Then he came right out with it and told me he was gay and that I was the first person that he’s told. I wasn’t as open as I am now. I never bullied anyone who was gay but I was an Irish Catholic from Blue Collar Boston so the fact that one of my good friends could be gay this whole time baffled me. But, instead of being a hothead or sticking my foot in my mouth, I took a minute to think about it. This was the guy who had been a good friend to me since my freshman year, saw past my bullshit, took care of me when my family died, nursed me back to health when I tried to drink myself to death, showed me compassion and got me to open up. And I decided who gives a fuck if he’s gay? And the fact that he told me of all people first showed me that my friend was a lot braver than I thought he was. So I said, “Alright, if that’s what you’re into then that’s cool.”

“And then you made it your mission to find me a boyfriend,” Eric cuts in with a wet laugh.

“It was a good way to distract myself! And besides, you were always just sleeping around! You were too sweet for that shit and deserved better!” Rick yells at his friend before lowering his voice back down to a normal level, “I liked all of your boyfriends okay, except for Joshua...and Darren. But when you first told me about Brian, I knew he was different. I had never heard you talk about someone with so much love and admiration. As soon as I got off the phone with you I turned to Sally and told her that you had it bad. And we were so happy for you. You had introduced us and led us to happiness, to marriage, to our kids. We wanted that for you. And when we met Brian we looked at each other and knew you two had something special. So Brian, I want to thank you. You’ve made my best friend the happiest man in the world. You’re a good father to Lily and you treat him well. I can’t thank you enough for loving my best friend in the world. I truly hope you two live a happy life. But if you ever break his heart, I will come to Brooklyn and-”

Rick is cut off by Eric who has gone over there to hug him fiercely. The room applauds and laughs as Gus says, “How am I supposed to follow that?”

“You’ll do fine,” Brian tells him.

Eric comes back to sit down and mutters, “Fucking Rick. Gotta love him.”

Brian pats his husband on the shoulder and watches Gus get up and take the microphone.

“I grew up with three parents in my life. It was unconventional and sometimes I would get strange looks from some kids but it was all that I knew and it didn’t bother me because I knew I was loved by all of them.”
Gus takes a breath and continues, “My moms have been a couple for twenty years. They are so in sync and, even though they argue, they are very happy. And then there’s my dad. I am aware that for the longest time he didn’t want a relationship. He didn’t believe in them and wanted to be alone. Even though that’s okay, I am so glad he changed his stance on that. He because with the two relationships he’s had, he’s given me two people that I can truly depend on when I need someone to talk to. They have both played active parts of my life and I love them both. I guess my dad is officially adding Eric to the family now, but that’s not accurate because he has been a part of the family for years. He’s come up for school events, taken me and my sisters on vacations, spent holidays with me, given me advice, comforted me, took turns with my other three parents when I was in the hospital for appendicitis last year. He loves me like I was his flesh and blood. He’s a really great person. My dad is lucky that he found him. He deserves someone who is good and kind and understanding. Eric’s that person and I couldn’t be happier for them.”

Gus hands the microphone off, sits back down, and Brian puts an arm around the kid’s neck to kiss him on top of the head and Eric comes over to hug him from behind.

“You guys are so touchy-feely today, stop,” Gus complains.

Brian rolls his eyes and lets go as Eric presses a kiss to Gus’s temple and says, “Love you too, Gus. So much.”

“I know,” Gus says softly.

“And now it’s my turn,” a light southern accent says through the microphone.

“Jesus Christ,” Eric mutters, standing back up straight to go sit back down by Brian, “I am terrified right now.”

“Think he took any shrooms like he did on Thursday?” Brian mutters.

“Knowing my brother, probably.”

“My little brother, a married man,” George says shaking his head, “Pretty much anyone who knows the two of us knows that Eric and I have a weird relationship. We aren’t much alike. We don’t talk the same. Besides the eye color, we look like we don’t even come from the same family. I took more after good old Dad and he took after our mama. And our personalities have always
clashed. Growing up, Eric was the golden boy. He got straight As, was class president, well mannered and well behaved, learned Spanish, our mother’s first language, pretty much right out of the womb while it took me a little longer to catch on since I got bored too easily. He was such a good kid while I pissed our parents off constantly. I stayed out late, made a 2.5 average, didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life, our parents caught me with weed all the time, I went through girls like candy. Although, I do have a special girl now. I’m looking at you, Starshine,” George calls out pointing at his current girlfriend.

“I love you, Baby!” Clover calls out, standing up. Brian tries to hold in the laughter as Eric bangs his forehead against his shoulder.

“Eric and I were often at odds because of our differences growing up. Oh, we loved each other but brothers are just like that, especially ones who don’t have similar interests. I called him a lame nerd and he’d call me a pathetic loser. Both of which were probably true at the time. But as we grew older, we started having each other’s backs more often. When I attracted the attention of an agent due to my surfing skills, our parents were pissed that I would even consider taking the professional sports route. They felt that it didn’t fit in with long term goals and it wasn’t like it was something like football where I would make a lot of money. Surfing isn’t televised on big budget stations. But it was something I loved to do and to get a chance to make a living at it intrigued me. Eric, despite our differences and weird relationship, stood up for me and said he supported me if I wanted to do it. It was odd because he was only 13 at the time so it was the perfect age to be a dick about things but he wasn’t. He knew how important it was to me. And I will always remember that kid standing up for me and my dreams. That’s what I remembered when he out to our family when we were in one Christmas. I remember our parents’ disapproval and shame and that just got to me because Eric, you had been the perfect child and had grown into this responsible and successful young man. But the first thing that came to my mind when you made the big reveal was that time you stood up for me and the dream I had. So I want you to know, little brother, that I will stand by you. I will support you for as long as I live and be here for you and Brian, for whatever that’s worth. I respect you and I love you, even though we are very different people. Brian, you better treat him well. A man like that deserves it. Now I don’t like to get serious, but you all needed to hear that. These two are good men and deserve to have a great time. That’s all I’m gonna say because I just gotta hug the both of you and give you some love.”

Eric rolls his eyes as his older brother comes over to envelop him in a bear hug, “That was a nice speech, George. Thank you.”

“Anything for you. And Brian, don’t you think you are getting away! I have enough love to share. We’re brothers now too.”

Brian awkwardly pats the man’s back, “Thanks…bro.”

George hugs Lily and kisses her head and Brian barks out a laugh at Lily’s eyeroll. She really does
Emmett picks up the mic, “I think we need to give another round of applause for the best mens’ speeches. It takes a lot of courage to bare your feelings like that.”

People take the cue from Emmett to applaud and cheer before Emmett speaks again.

“Now, we eat!”

“Thank god!” Lily exclaims, throwing her head and arms down on the table as Brian and Eric turn to look at her in complete surprise, “I thought they would NEVER stop talking! That was so boring!”

Brian and Eric look at each other before bursting into fits of laughter as Lily pouts.

“Why are you laughing at me?”

Brian wipes eyes, “You’re just a funny kid, Lily.”  

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“Just guess what the song will be,” Eric requests over dinner.

“Macarena,” Brian answers sarcastically.

“No, that’s the next song. Guess again.”

“Never Gonna Give You Up.”

Eric glares, “You’re not even trying.”

Brian laughs and softens his gaze, “I’ll Be Seeing You.”
Eric looks like he is about to scold him only to have the words register. His face breaks out into a grin and he leans in to kiss Brian’s cheek.

“You remember.”

“I do. I did initiate that dance. It must have struck a chord with both of us. Is that why you picked it?”

“Yeah. But also because it was the first time in my life I felt like I was living in a romance novel.”

“Because I fucked you in six different positions after?”

“Dad!” Gus says suddenly, “We’re right here.”

Brian sneaks a glance at Lily but she’s too busy convincing Duncan that Rapunzel is a MUCH better Disney Princess than Snow White. Despite Brian’s love of classics, he is inclined to agree.

“Testing 1, 2,” Nathan says into the microphone.

“Who’s singing it? Nathan or Petra?” Brian asks.

Eric shrugs, “I just told them what song I wanted. I never asked or requested who would sing it.”

“Guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

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“It’s that time for the newlyweds to have their first dance! Brian, Eric! Come up here!

From his table, Justin watches as Brian takes Eric’s hand and leads him to the dance floor. As the music begins, Brian puts a hand on Eric’s waist and assumes the leading position and they look into each other’s eyes. It’s like they’re the only two in the room. He remembers how it is dancing with Brian.
“Nathan has such a good voice,” Molly sighs.

Justin gives her a double take, “Are you drooling over my boyfriend? When yours is sitting right there?”

“I’m not the jealous type,” Hunter insists.

“Probably a good thing, considering you are dating someone who could be a model,” Ben says to his son.

Hunter beams and Molly and Justin roll their eyes at the exchange.

They watch the performance and the couple silently for several seconds before Molly breaks the silence again, “They’re really good together.”

“Yeah,” Justin admits.

Molly turns her head and reaches out to touch his hand.

“You alright?” she says in a low voice.

Justin swallows and nods, “Fine.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

He is fine. It’s hard to watch them because it brings him back to all the times at Babylon and the time at Pride but he’ll get through it by being happy for them like he was at their wedding. He watches them as they sway, kiss almost compulsively, and talk and laugh only loud enough for the other to hear throughout the whole song. When the song ends, Brian dances with Debbie and Eric dances with Amanda. Other couples start to join when Eric dances with Lily and Brian dances with Michael and the party goes into full swing.
“Dance with me, Jester,” Molly says when she comes back with Hunter, pulling at his hand.

“I don’t know-” Justin starts but stops short due to the scowl on Molly’s face, “Okay. Let’s dance.”

Molly drags him out on the floor while Hunter goes to dance with JR. The song is an original of The Accidental Natives and it is quicker in tempo. As he and Molly dance, he looks around and sees Lindsay and Mel laughing, Ben bringing Michael in for a kiss, Drew hiding a smile as he follows an enthusiastic Emmett onto the dance floor, Duncan and Lily jumping and dancing in an almost maniacal way that only small children can pull off, and Ted and Blake dancing a bit slower than the tempo calls for.

The song ends and a slow one takes its place so Molly puts her hand on his shoulder and he puts one on her waist then dance to that song as well.

“So, about Hunter,” Justin begins, trying to get her to elaborate more on what’s going on.

“What about Hunter?” she asks, eyebrows raised.

“What...how did that happen?”

Molly shrugs, “He listened to me when I needed someone to talk to about Dad. About you. About my life.”

“So, what? He just had to listen and you fell for him?”

Molly glares, “He’s funny. He’s driven. He’s overcome a lot and he’s doing well. Unlike me, he followed his dreams. He’s fun to be around.”

“He lives across the country,” Justin cuts in.

A flash of pain briefly appears on Molly’s face before letting her expression go blank again. Shit. It’s more serious than he thought.
“I know that,” she insists looking away.

“And he’s positive,” Justin adds.

“That’s manageable. His drug cocktail works really well for him and his cell counts are perfect.”

“That’s good to hear,” Justin tells her, honestly relieved, “But it may become a problem in the future.”

“I could slip and fall right now, bust my head open, and go into a coma. You don’t see me dwelling on it.”

“I would catch you before that could happen.”

“Not my point, Jester. My point is that shit happens. It doesn’t mean he doesn’t deserve someone and it doesn’t mean I should ditch him because things might go south one day down the road. Besides, medicine is advancing and things are getting better for people who are HIV Positive. Ben and Hunter will probably lead full lives.”

“I know. I know that. I just don’t want you getting sick,” Justin finally admits.

“We’re careful.”

“What if you want kids one day?”

Molly laughs, “Jesus, Justin. We’ve only been seeing each other for a few months. Most of that time our conversation was done by phone and skype conversations. Kids are way down the road, if we’re even still together at that point. But if it does happen, adoption is always an option. I could go to a sperm bank. Sperm washing is an option, although it’s an expensive one. If something were to happen by accident, his viral load is almost undetectable so the risk of passing it along is low. Not that he’d risk it. He’s pretty obsessive about not risking it at all whatsoever.”

“Good,” Justin says forcefully, “I’m glad he cares about your health.”
Molly nods, “He cares about me a lot. He hopped on a plane as soon as the show wrapped to be there for me.”

“What happened with Dad that got you so upset?” Justin asks.

Molly sighs, “I witnessed one of his panic attacks. He hadn’t answered his phone for a few days so I drove up to Pittsburgh to check on him. Turns out, he hadn’t left his house and kept muttering to himself. I don’t think he is hearing voices or anything but he’s alone most of the time so I imagine he does it to fill the quiet. He got upset that I saw him like that, started apologizing, then couldn’t catch his breath. I called his psychiatrist and she made a house call. She gave him a mild sedative to calm him down and took him in the other room to talk with him. She changed his dosages and he’s doing better. But we also sat down together and he gave her the okay to tell me what he’s been diagnosed with so far. He was diagnosed with severe depression, anxiety, a panic disorder, and mild to moderate agoraphobia. She says that he’s most likely bipolar. I figured someone would form that earlier in life and she said that it’s very possible that he had a mild form of it since he was a young man but it’s gotten more severe due to him being untreated and getting depressed. Some days he’s almost fine. He went out to eat with a couple of his coworkers a week ago, so that was a good sign. But he was freaking me out the day he had his attack. I was so upset by it and didn’t want to call you and upset you too.

“You could have called,” Justin tells her, “I should know about what is going on with him, especially if he’s this mentally ill.”

“I know it’s still hard for you to talk about him.”

“I’ve called him every week to check in. Nathan calls him too. We care, despite everything.”

“I know. I’m sorry I didn’t call.”

“But you called Hunter.”

“He technically called me. Just to talk. He could tell something was wrong and I broke down in tears. He finally got me to tell him what was going on. The next day he was calling me from the Pittsburgh airport, telling me to come pick his ass up. He helped me with Dad.”

“He helped you. With Dad. He’s met Craig Taylor?”
Molly nods. “Yeah, Dad likes him. He doesn’t know that Hunter is positive or about his past but he knows that he was adopted by Michael and Ben. He approves so far. I don’t know if he would if he knew everything, but we don’t have to tell him yet. But we stayed at Dad’s for a few days before heading back to Morgantown. It’s been nice. He’s going back to LA tomorrow.”

The song ends and, before Justin can respond, he feels someone tap him on the shoulder.

“I told you I would save you a dance,” Brian tells him.

Justin turns and Molly smiles and steps away to go back to Hunter. He looks over to see Eric dancing with Lily once more. Eric looks up, gives a smile and a nod of approval before looking down at his daughter again.

Brian reaches for his waist and pulls him in as Petra’s voice croons through the speakers. They don’t say a word. They don’t need to. They just keep their eyes locked with one another through the whole song.

When The Accidental Native’s set is over, Nathan comes to sit back down and they both have a glass of champagne before Justin pulls his boyfriend out to the floor.

“I’m not the best dancer,” Nathan admits, looking away from Justin.

“Just one dance,” Justin asks, holding out his hand.

Nathan looks at him with a serious expression before nodding and letting Justin lead. Justin kisses his cheek and says, “You guys were fantastic.”

“Thanks. It’s not our usual kind of venue but I think it was a good show,” Nathan admits.

“I did miss you when the couples started dancing though. Molly, Emmett, Mel, and Lindsay took pity on me.”
“And Brian,” Nathan adds.

“True,” Justin admits, “But he’s a groom. He has to dance with everyone.”

“I guess that’s true. Sorry I couldn’t stick around. It’s your fault, dating a musician.”

“I guess it is,” Justin laughs.

Nathan smiles a little but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes and Justin frowns.

“You’ve been strange today. Sad. Is everything okay?

Nathan’s silent for a few beats before saying, “We can talk about it later, Justin.”

“That’s not what I want to hear.”

Nathan sighs, “Don’t worry about it. It’s me, it isn’t you.”

They spend the rest of the song in silence and, when Justin doesn’t expect it, Nathan bends down to kiss him.

“I love you,” Nathan says with emotion.

Justin takes Nathan’s face in his hands and frowns, “I love you too. What’s the matter?”

Nathan shakes his head, “Nothing. I probably just drank too much.”

“Nathan, you just had a few glasses of champagne. Here, let’s go sit down.”
Justin takes Nathan’s hand and leads him back to their table, “Are you alright?”

“I’m okay.”

Justin narrows his eyes, “I wish you would tell me what was going through your head.”

Before Nathan can answer, Eric comes up to them with bashful looking Lily in tow.

“Nathan, I wanted to thank you for saying yes to perform again. I know how busy you guys are getting. You’re a really great friend,” Eric tells him sincerely.

Nathan forces smiles, “It’s no problem. You both have always been very gracious so it’s the least I can do.”

“We enjoyed it a lot. I love your sound, you know that, but I think you have another huge fan. Lily wanted me to take her over here so she could ask you something.”

Lily turns her body back and forth, looks at him with big eyes, and asks, “Will you dance with me?”

Justin looks over at Nathan and he’s surprised to see his boyfriend’s eyes soften, “I would be honored.”

“Yay! Come on, let’s go!” Lily insists, taking Nathan’s hand to pull him to the floor. The little girl surprises Nathan by standing on top of his feet.

“I guess musicians do get all of the girls,” Eric laughs before turning to Justin, “Do you want to dance?”

Justin does a double take.

“Wait, what?” he blurts out.
Eric shrugs, “I’m trying to get a dance in with all of my friends. I even got Rick to dance with me. Granted, he’s kind of drunk. But it still counts.”

Eric stands there, waiting for his answer. So Justin stands up and says, “Alright. Let’s go.”

So there he is, dancing with his ex-boyfriend’s husband. And they are actually having a good time. They talk about art and even exchange stories about the man of the hour. Sneaking a glance at Brian, Justin finds him looking at them extremely baffled.

“I think Brian’s confused by this,” Justin mutters nodding over to the man.

Eric turns his head, flashes Brian an open grin and waves, before turning back to Justin.

“He’ll live. I bet he’s dying to know what we’re talking about though. Watch, he’ll come over in three, two, one-”

“How adorable,” Brian comments, putting his arms around both of their shoulders, “You both move so flawlessly together. What are you guys talking about?”

“Opera music,” Eric lies.

“Lies,” Brian mutters, “Fine. Don’t tell me.”

But Brian doesn’t let go. He just holds onto their shoulders.

Eric sighs, “Brian, would you like to join in on this dance?”

“Well, if you insist.”

Eric takes the arm that his holding Justin’s hand and wraps it around Brian’s waist and, since Justin doesn’t know what to do with his newly free hand, he tentatively wraps it around Brian’s waist too.
“How much have you had to drink now, babe?” Eric asks.

“How much have you had to drink now, babe?” Eric asks.

Who keeps track of trivial things like that?” Brian answers.

Eric laughs and shakes his head, “Don’t get too drunk. We’re not going straight to bed tonight.”

Brian’s eyes darken with lust and Justin looks away.

“‘You know, I can step out of this dance if you wan-’” Justin begins before Brian cuts in.

“No. It’ll ruin it. This song is meant to be danced to by three people.”

Eric turns his head then mouths to Justin, “Drunk.”

It is probably the oddest part of the night, but it is surprisingly not too terribly uncomfortable.

As it gets later, people start to leave the party. Brian and Eric haven’t danced with anyone else in hours, just swaying in the corner and sometimes outside of the tent with each other. Drew leaves around 10 with Duncan and Lily, saying he’s taking them up to the room and he’ll have Lily up to say goodbye to them in the morning. Debbie and Carl turn in as well as Lindsay, Mell, and the kids. They go over to Emmett to see if he needs any assistance and he waves them off with a wink and says, “Enjoy your first night as a married couple!”

Brian decides he can’t wait any longer and drags Eric out of the tent. When they get to their door, Eric decides to fuck with him by using a deceiving amount of strength to pick him up in a fireman’s carry.

“Eric, what the fuck?” Brian growls, “I am not the bride. I repeat: I am not the bride.”

Eric laughs before putting him down on the bed and pouncing on him.
“It’s my turn to return the favor,” Eric whispers huskily before smashing his lips against his.

Brian groans against the kiss and pulls off quickly pulls off Eric’s tux as he feels his own removed from his body.

Eric reaches over to grab the lube as Brian spreads his legs and breathes out, “Fuck me. Want your dick in me.”

Eric prepares him before aligning his body with his and shaking his head.

“I told you I would make love to you later. That’s what I am going to do.”

“It’s fine,” Brian pants, “There’s no rose petals so the previous arrangement is null and void.”

Eric smirks then adjusts his cock so it’s at Brian’s entrance to slowly push in.

“I’m going to make love to you,” Eric repeats, “Slow and steady. Have you begging for more. I want to make you feel good. I want you to know that you’re loved.”

Eric hits his prostate and Brian gasps out only to grip onto Eric’s back.

“I know,” Brian tells him, voice trembling, “I know that I’m loved.”

Eric smiles and gently kisses him and Brian wraps his arms around him, whispering, “I love you, love you, Eric, please.”

Eric slowly moves in and out of him until it’s physically impossible for him to hold back anymore. Brian shoots his load on his stomach and chest then feels the heat and wetness when Eric comes. And, although they take a small break, their dicks perk up and they fuck again. And again. And then one more time.

It’s the perfect ending to a perfect day.
They get their things together and make sure their tuxes are hung up for Emmett before meeting the family downstairs an early breakfast. They don’t have long since they have to go Queens to make it to JFK, which Brian only found out today since Eric even kept the airport a secret. They wanted enough time to say goodbye to Lily though. She seems to be handling it well up until they are heading outside to get their suitcases in the car.

“I don’t want you to leave,” Lily whimpers, tears spilling over onto her face.

Brian sighs and picks her up, “We’ll miss you too. But you’ll have a good time with Duncan, Emmett, and Drew. And it’s only for a week. We’ll be back before you know it.”

“But I’ll miss you,” Lily sobs, wiping her eyes.

Eric comes over to rub their little girl’s back, “We’ll miss you too, baby. But we’ll call you every day and talk to you on the computer. I promise. You’re going to have a lot of fun. Drew is taking you and Duncan to a play on Wednesday. That’ll be fun.”

“Yeah,” Lily says in a small voice, looking down.

“We love you,” Brian says, kissing her wet cheek.

“So much,” Eric adds, kissing her other one.

“I love you too,” Lily tells them, pouting and nodding her head.

“You’re going to be a good girl?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“And you’ll take care of your rats?”
“Yes, Daddy.”

“Okay, baby. We’ll call you tomorrow, okay?” Eric says as Brian puts her down.

Lily runs over to Drew and cries into his leg, which makes them both stop, but Drew waves them off as he bends down and pets her hair.

“She’ll be fine,” Drew says, “Go on.”

The two of them go to get in the back of the car. Eric gets in first and, just as Brian is about to get in, he sees Justin, Nathan, Molly, and Hunter getting into a car several yards away. Justin turns his head and they make eye contact so Brian holds up his hand and waves. Justin waves back and gets into the driver’s seat of the car.

Brian gets into the vehicle and Eric takes his hand and smiles. It’s going to be a good week.

The drive is mostly silent as he takes Molly and Hunter to LaGuardia Airport. Uncomfortably so. He knows the two of them are having a hard time since they are about to part for god knows how long. He can sympathize. He remembers the feeling of heartache when Brian would drive him to the airport to drop him off.

He tries to lighten the mood but it’s hard. Nathan isn’t helping, quiet for unknown reasons himself. Justin wants to think it’s because he’s tired due to not being a morning person but he knows something else is on his boyfriend’s mind. He just doesn’t know what.

They arrive at the airport. Hunter’s plane leaves an hour before Molly’s so they wish him goodbye first and stand back as they watch the two lovers cry and hug it out. Hunter wipes his eyes and turns to walk away when his flight is called and Molly starts walking back over to them.

“Molly,” Justin murmurs as he gently takes her wrist.

But Molly pulls away and chokes out, “I need to go to the bathroom.”

She lets out a sob before going into the women’s restroom, a place she knows they can’t exactly
follow her.

“Poor kid,” Justin says as he sits back down.

Nathan has tears in his eyes and Justin turns to him in concern, “Babe, are you alright?”

“I just feel bad for them,” Nathan sniffs, “Pulling away from him must have been really hard for her. Their lives are in different places.”

Justin rubs his back, “If it’s meant to be then they’ll work out. Maybe things will change one day for them and they’ll be in the same place.”

“There’s no way of knowing that though. Especially when it feels so impossible for them now.”

Justin stays silent and Nathan wipes his eyes before Molly comes back out, looking as though her mini-breakdown never happened.

Justin makes sure to give her an extra long and tight hug and it looks as though Nathan had similar ideas. They walk her up to the terminal and she gets in line for the plane. As soon as she makes it into the air, they make their trip home, a trip that is possibly even more silent than the one to the airport.

When they get back, Justin takes his suitcase to their room and heads to the kitchen to open the fridge.

“Nathan?” he calls out, “Do you want something to eat?”

He doesn’t get an answer so he calls out again but, like before, no response.

Justin walks back out into the living room and sees no one there and pokes his head into the bedroom to see Nathan zipping up his larger suitcase.

“What are you doing?” Justin asks, stepping into the room.
Nathan lets out a sigh and seems to search for the right words.

“I don’t think it’s meant to be, Justin.”

Justin feels his pulse quicken and his mouth dry up, “What are you talking about?”

“I saw you. With the kids. How happy they made you. How you became sad when Julian asked you if you were a dad. You said it doesn’t matter if I end up not changing my mind. But it clearly does. I don’t want to keep you from that. I refuse to make you regret not having a family just because you feel obligated to stay with me.”

“Nathan, stop,” Justin orders forcefully, stepping forward, “Don’t do this. Please, just-”

“Don’t touch me,” Nathan says quietly, backing away.

“Nathan, please,” Justin gasps out, tears starting to form, “It really doesn’t matter. I can wait and if it doesn’t happen, it won’t. I love you-”

“I know that,” Nathan sniffles, “And I love you too. I...I’d really like to try being friends after it hurts less. It might take a while but m-maybe that will be better.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Justin cries, “Just put your suitcase away and we’ll talk.”

As Justin feels his heart cracking, Nathan comes over and puts his arms around him.

“I’m sorry,” Nathan whispers, “I know I’m hurting you. It’s hurting me too. But if hurting you now means I will save you from hurting a lot more in the long run then I’m going to do it.”

Justin softly sobs in Nathan’s neck and forces out, “Maybe you just need a b-break. Maybe just think on it before doing anything permanent.”
“Maybe so,” Nathan admits, “But I am not in a position where I should make a lot of personal decisions right now. I’m still...I’m still so fucked up. Even after seven years. I need to work on me. And you need to look for something or someone that can make you truly happy.”

“YOU make me truly happy.”

“You make me happy too,” Nathan laughs, not able to hold back the tears. He takes a few breaths and stares at Justin in the eyes, “Maybe in a few years we will be on the same page. Maybe we’ll run into each other at a show or a coffee shop or an airport and we’ll decide to give it another go. If we’re meant to be then it’ll work out. But right now, I think this is for the best.”

Nathan steps away, grabs his suitcase, and clears his throat.

“I’ll still help with the rent. We signed the lease together. It might take me a little time to get all my stuff. I’ll have to figure out some arrangements. Petra should let me stay with her for a while though. I’ll be okay.”

Justin closes his eyes, feels a couple of more tears run down his cheek, and suppresses his sobs as Nathan leaves the room.

“I’m sorry, Justin,” Nathan’s voice cracks.

Back still turned, he hears Nathan walk through and close the front door.

Petra’s not even been home for an hour when she hears someone knock on the door.

Her cat, Jim Morrison, jumps off her lap and meows at her apartment door in anticipation for the unknown guest.

She had been hoping to just relax by herself on her day off but with a sigh, she gets up and looks through the peephole to see Nathan on the other side. Unlatching the door, she swings it open and says, “Can’t you call first?”

“I did,” Nathan mumbles, “It went to voicemail.”
“Oh,” she says, remembering that she put her phone on silent. Before she says anything else, she gets a good look at her friend and sees his head hanging down low, slouched shoulders, and a suitcase in hand.

“What’s going on?” Petra asks, alarmed, while she lets him in.

“Can I...Can I stay here for a while?” Nathan says, looking up only to show her he’s barely keeping it together.

“Nathan,” she murmurs, stepping forward, “What happened?”

“I broke up with Justin. He deserves better than...than-”

Nathan lets out a loud and heartbreaking sob, bending over at the force of it.

“Nathan? Oh, it’s going...it’s going to be okay...Come here. Shhhh,” Petra consoles, tears filling her own eyes at her friend’s complete devastation.

Petra lifts him up and he collapses into her, a complete mess. She leads him over to the couch, puts his head in her lap, and just lets him cry.

Chapter End Notes

I think this is the first time I got teary eyed writing a chapter of this. It hurt me to do this to Justin and Nathan but for all of the people rooting for B/J I guess you can think of it as one couple down? Let me know what you think in the comments! Show Justin and Nathan your love and sympathies!
Saint Mark's Place and 1st Ave

Chapter Summary

As Nathan desperately tries to come to terms with his decision to break up with Justin, he looks back to the first month of their relationship.

Chapter Notes

This surprisingly ended up being the longest chapter I have written thus far. It's a bit of a depressing one.

WARNINGS: Graphic descriptions of violence and sexual assault.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nathan looks up at the ceiling and counts the cracks in the plaster. Despite the new money the band was coming into, Petra never has made an attempt to move. He guesses she’s content where she is and the space works for her. He wishes he could feel that way.

He glances over at Petra and she’s fast asleep right next to him. She wanted to make sure he didn’t feel alone so she persuaded him to sleep in the bed with her. He appreciates that. The things going through his head are totally fucked and having someone to lie down next to helps a little bit. He’s still upset, heartbroken, and devastated over what he did earlier. When he thinks too much of it, something that is impossible not to do, he feels like he can’t breathe.

He’s in love with Justin. He never fell in love with anyone before. Then again, he never let himself fall in love before Justin. Never got close enough to anyone to. It had been hard enough to let himself have friends. Petra’s the closest person he’s ever had to a best friend. He knows she considers him hers and looks at him like a younger brother. He really cares about Petra and would take a bullet for her but she doesn’t know about what happened to him. She doesn’t know about his past. She doesn’t even know his real name. Justin knows. Justin loved him and accepted him anyway. He took care of him and tried to protect him from the harsh outlook he had on himself. The thought of a life without Justin in it makes him sick.

But the thought of Justin not getting what he wanted out of life was even worse.

He can’t sleep. He’s not going to wake Petra up to have her keep him company. Even though he would love to think that cuddling up with her while they eat ice cream and watch Netflix would
help things, he knows they won’t. Right now, the pain he is feeling is the sharpest he has felt since his mother died. Since the last time his father did unspeakable things to him. Since he realized that he would be known as Victor Hall’s son for the rest of his life if he didn’t disappear for a while so that he could cut every connection he ever had. And in some ways? This is worse. His mother wanted to die and escaped an awful man in reward. Nathan got to escape his father after that last time. Losing any acquaintances or casual friends he had in high school was worth it since it meant he got to start fresh.

This? This fucking sucks. And he’s the one who did it to himself. But what else was he supposed to do?

In hindsight, he could have talked to Justin about it. He could have sat down with him to explain what was going through his head. But he knows Justin too well. He knows that Justin would have talked him out of it and said it doesn’t matter. He would have told Nathan he’s more important than a child who doesn’t even exist yet.

Sometimes Justin doesn’t know what’s best for him. He knows that if Justin got depressed over the idea of not having children now, it would only get worse as the years went on. He did what was best for Justin. It isn’t the best for him. God, he doesn’t know how he is going to get through this.

Sniffling, he opens his guitar case and starts to strum along. He usually writes music when he is feeling inspired or anguished or happy. It’s too fresh to write anything now. He just wants to distract himself from his phone by playing this guitar.

That lasts six minutes until he goes into his suitcase pocket to pull it out. He’s avoided it all day and it was late. Even if Justin had tried to contact him, he was probably asleep now.

He presses the home button on his phone and the screen lights up. From Justin alone, there are two missed calls, one voicemail, and four text messages.

He decides to listen to the voicemail first. He needs to hear his voice.

“N-Nathan?” Justin says, crying and drunk, which makes Nathan feel like absolute scum, “Nathan, please. Just come back home and we’ll talk. I know you want to break up but we can work at this. We can. We can make compromises. I miss you. I know that sounds pathetic since you just left seven hours ago but I do. I’m worried about you. I’m worried that you...that you won’t have anyone to talk to. I’m worried that you will backtrack. I’m worried that you want to disappear from my life. I love you. Please know that. Shit...I’m sorry. I jus’...I just wanted to tell you that. I probably should’ve waited after I was sober. Just...Just call me when you feel like you can.”
Nathan wipes his eyes and checks the texts on his phone.

Nathan, please call me.

Will you at least tell me you got to Petra’s okay?

I texted Petra. She said that you made it there and were devastated. Please tell me what’s going through your head. I want to try to fix this. I want to be there for you. If you don’t want to be with me, then at least let me be your friend.

Nathan tosses the phone on the couch and opens his suitcase. God, he had been so hasty about his decision. Seeing Justin with the kids had mainly pushed him into considering ending it but Molly and Hunter’s heartbreak had made him realize that it needed to be done. The fact that those two seemed to want similar things but physically being in different places could easily tear them apart actually made it worse. Yeah, they are sticking whatever they share out but how painful would that end up being for both of them? How long would it take for one of them to lose hope and move on to another person? But the thing was, distance could potentially be fixed. One of them could move. If Molly decided to study medicine, she could apply to schools in California or wherever Hunter was working by the time she was ready to apply. They could technically make it work and set up a home base as Hunter moved up the ladder and traveled for work.

His relationship with Justin? That would be a lot harder to fix.

He did think about just agreeing with Justin. Giving his okay to his partner on children. He’s not completely close-minded. Logically he knows he would probably love a child of Justin’s.

Sometimes love isn’t enough though. He knows that he’s too fucked up to be a parent. That even if a few years pass and he becomes more mature, he will always have doubts and this darkness within him.

Justin deserves someone who can live up to the challenge. It doesn’t matter that Nathan is still
completely in love with him.

He goes through his suitcase and finds the framed picture he swiped from the bedroom before going to sit back down on the couch. He should have asked if Justin wanted it or a copy. Hell, he might have said no. Justin already has to look at the stuff he left there. He might not want to be reminded of him.

A friend of theirs had taken it before he moved to London. Stanley was a photographer, a great one at that. He had actually introduced him to Justin and supported him when he entered a relationship with him, even though Stanley had always flirted with Nathan and strongly hinted that he wanted to be more than friends. He was always taking pictures that would catch people off guard but they would turn out beautiful. Every picture that man took captured so many emotions. This one had been at Petra’s apartment, on the same couch he’s sitting on right now. He and Justin had only been together for a couple of months at this point. He had opened up to him just a month before, despite all that, things had been going great.

Even though things were rough right now, he really hoped Justin wasn’t destined to stay in his past too.

February 2, 2013

“I think it would be good for us to take the festival gig up in Boston this summer,” Petra says to the band, “There could be labels there and we may attract the attention of someone who hasn’t seen us in New York.”

“We’re doing okay here,” Nadia answers, “Besides, we’ll have to pay for expenses. It might not be worth it. New York has more to offer than Boston does.”

“We could enlarge our fanbase and, like I said, reach out to any possible agents that could be there. Stanley said he would tag along and take pictures to use on the website for promotion.”

“He only offered since he has a constant hard-on for Nathan,” Sebastian smirks.

Nathan shakes his head and concentrates on tuning his guitar.

“That’s right,” Petra says with glee in her voice as she drops the Boston subject, “Stanley drools over Nathan. Who can blame him? Just look at the guy. Nathan, why don’t you give Stanley a chance?”
“Because I don’t want to ruin a perfectly good friendship?” Nathan excuses, getting up.

“But you never date and he seems to really like you!” Nadia cuts in.

“I’m not really interested,” Nathan shrugs.

“Don’t you ever get blue balls? You never even fuck around.”

Nathan looks away from Nadia. Why do they have to bring this stuff up?

“We need to get ready for the show,” Nathan says, ignoring Nadia’s comment.

Nadia shrugs before turning to do her own thing and feels Petra pat him on the shoulder.

“She’s a kid,” Petra says quietly, “She doesn’t mean anything by it. You do what makes you happy. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot like that.”

“It’s fine,” Nathan mutters, brushing her off.

Technically, it isn’t fine. He’s 21 years old and has never even been on a date or had a boyfriend. He did used to makeout and exchange handjobs with a boy at his high school but that hadn’t ended well for either of them. He sometimes will find himself kissing some guy at the bar if he’s had too much to drink but he stops it before it goes any further. Sometimes the guys are nice about it and sometimes they get pissed off and call him a tease. He doesn’t mean to be but every time he gets even a little close to having sex, he can’t do it. He knows he has time. He knows that there are people who are older who decide to wait to have sex. But the one time it had happened had been the most terrifying thing he has ever gone through. He doesn’t know if he’ll ever be able to open up enough to be with someone. Besides, even though Stanley was nice and Nathan liked him as a friend, he didn’t really like him in a romantic sense.

As if he had sensed he was being talked about, Stanley walks in with a smile on his face, looking at him flirtatiously.
“Hey, Stanley!” Petra greets, “We were just talking about you!”

“Good things, I hope?” Stanley says, looking at Nathan more than Petra.

“Of course. What are you doing back here?”

“I just wanted to ask if you all wanted to come out with me and a couple of friends after you make the rounds here. We’ll help you get the instruments back to Brooklyn and go from there.”

“Can I even get in?” Nadia asks.

“The club isn’t 18 and up but I know the bouncer so you’ll be alright,” Stanley says.

“Well, I’m in,” Petra confirms.

“I’ll check it out too,” Sebastian says.

The four of them turn to Nathan.


“I don’t know. I’m not really in the mood.”

Nathan tries not to stiffen when Stanley puts an arm around his shoulders, “You’re never in the mood. Come on. You’re 21 years old. You have to get out once in awhile!”

“I do,” Nathan says, a little exasperated, “I’ll think about it, alright?”

“That’s all I ask.”
Stanley gives him a squeeze before heading out the door and Nadia smirks, “He totally has a thing for you.”

Before he can answer, they are given their five minute warning and they line up behind the stage, ready to go on and set up after the current band.

“This group will make us sound even better than we actually are,” Petra giggles.

Nathan doesn’t like to poke fun at other musicians, knowing that anyone can have a bad night, but she’s right. Strep Negative is off their game tonight. He knows they’re good. He did a solo performance last year and they had played but they were known to get fucked up after performances. Apparently they decided to get fucked up before this time.

“Get off the fucking stage!” Someone yells from the crowd.

“You suck!”

“Yo, fuck you assholes! No fucking respect!” Warren, their lead singer, slurs out.

“Let’s hear it for Strep Negative!” the host of the evening nervously cuts in.

A few polite claps are heard amongst the boos throughout the audience as the band stumbles off stage.

“Coming up is a band who just formed last year but are developing quite the following! Please put your hands together for The Accidental Natives!”

The audience is much kinder to them, even though they are skeptical due to the previous band’s performance. But they prove them wrong. In Nathan’s opinion, it’s possibly one of the best sets they’ve ever done. A girl throws her fucking bra at him. If it happened off stage, he would be disturbed. But he becomes different onstage. He’s confident. He’s sexy. He’s Nathan Ash. He’s not the person he really knows he is. So, since he feels confident, he gives the girl a smirk and a shake of the head then says, “Thanks for the gift but it really isn’t my style” before tossing it to Petra, who of course wears it for the duration of the set. They keep things fun and they sound great and, after their last song, they get several requests for an encore. By the time they leave the stage, he’s feeling good. They go out to the crowd, talk to the fans, and sell practically all of their CDs before
going to find Stanley.

“There they are!” Stanley exclaims, “The band of the hour. You guys were awesome.”

“Thanks, Stanley,” Petra says, “It was a good show. Nathan and Sebastian had the girls drooling.”

“That’s to be expected. Look at them. Here, I’d like to introduce you to a few friends,” Stanley says, turning to his group, “This is Kate. She’s a model I just worked with for a couple of projects. Gorgeous, right?”

“Very,” Nadia purrs, checking her out. She’ll probably lure her into bed by the time the night’s over.

“It’s great to meet you,” Kate says, smirking at Nadia.

“This is Tom. We went to school together. He does graphic design.”

“Nice to meet you,” Tom greets, putting a hand up.

“Where’s Justin?” Stanley asks.

“Over there,” Tom says, nodding over to the merchandise table.

A blonde man is over there, buying a CD before heading back over to the group.

“Tell someone before you take off, huh?” Stanley tells the man, patting him on the back, “I turned to introduce you to my friends but you weren’t there.”

“Sorry,” Justin excuses himself, “I wanted to get their CD. They’re almost out.”

Justin turns to them, “You guys were great. I’m Justin, by the way.”
Justin shakes their hands and gives them this bright smile that puts Nathan at ease with its kindness.

“Justin is holding a show for me at his gallery. He’s an artist and a great one at that. Already famous and he’s not even dead yet.”

“What’s your last name?” Petra asks.

“Taylor,” Justin tells them.

“Hey, I’ve seen your stuff. I went to the MoMA and you had a display there a few weeks ago,” Nathan remembers suddenly, “You’re really talented.”

Justin’s eyes twinkle and he grins, “That means a lot, coming from someone as talented as yourself.”

Nathan feels his pulse quicken as he blushes, smiles, and looks away. Stanley puts a hand to his heart and dramatically says, “Isn’t he adorable? Such a confident god onstage but once you meet him he is so sweet and humble. It’s no wonder he has my heart. But alas, he feels we’re not meant to be.”

“Maybe he just doesn’t appreciate how forward you are,” Petra tells him, putting a protective arm around Nathan.

“I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” Stanley says, reaching over to touch Nathan’s arm, “Don’t mind my crush. I get them so easily.”

Nathan snorts, “So I’ve witnessed before.”

“What time do you want to be there by?” Petra asks, looking at her phone, “It’s 10 o’clock now and we’ll have to make a transfer. With the instruments-”
“I got Justin to bring one of the smaller vans he has at the gallery so he’s going to take your stuff. One of you can ride with him and show him Nadia’s place. I figured that would be the best place to put them so she won’t have to transfer the drums later. It’ll be easier to get your guitars and bass back to your own apartments.”

“Good idea. We’ll get our stuff and bring it out here.” Nadia tells them before leading the band backstage.

They get to the small dressing room and Nathan puts his guitar strap over his shoulder before grabbing one of Nadia’s drum cases and her bag for the drum stands. Sebastian grabs the kick drum, Petra grabs the snare and the symbols, and Nadia grabs one of the tom-toms. Even though they are loaded down, they don’t really need any help. They’re used to making it work and getting along themselves.

“Who is going to ride with Justin?” Petra asks before they leave the dressing room.

“Not me,” Nadia jumps in, “Kate and I had a connection. I’m going to get to know her.”

“You had a connection, of course you did,” Petra mutters disbelievingly, “Whatever. I think Nathan should ride with him anyway.”

“Why?” Nathan asks.

“He was totally into you and you were into him. Blushing and smiling when he said you did a great job. And he’s cute. You’re going.”

“I wasn’t into him,” Nathan denies, “I don’t even know him.”

“But you thought he was hot.”

“Well, yeah, but that doesn’t mean-”

“Then you can ride with him in the van. I don’t mind. Nadia definitely doesn’t mind. Seb doesn’t mind. Do you, Seb?”
“Knock yourself out, Nathan. He seems really nice.”

Nathan rolls his eyes and secures the strap on his shoulder, “Fine. I’ll ride with him.”

Petra puts down the drum to clap her hands, “He’s much more your type than Stanley is. I can tell.”

“Let’s not keep them waiting. Come on,” Nathan says, changing the subject as he tends to when it comes to his friends wanting him to hook up with someone.

They head out to the front and Nadia announces, “Nathan is showing you to my place.”

Justin gives him a kind smile, “That’s great.”

“I’ll hail down a couple of cabs,” Stanley says, “My treat.”

The rest of them load the equipment in the back of Justin’s van while Stanley whistles down a couple of cabs for the rest of the group. Justin and Nathan walk with them to send them off and, as they are discussing how to split up, Nadia makes a suggestion.

“Why don’t we do girls in one cab and boys in the other? Sometimes girls just need their time. And I have to talk to Kate about her blossoming career,” Nadia interrupts with fake innocence.

Stanley huffs out a laugh, onto her, “Whatever works. We’ll meet you back at your place.”

Nadia puts a hand on Kate’s back, leading her to the taxi as Petra turns to Nathan and mouths, “Save me.” Nathan shrugs and says, “I’m riding with Justin. Sorry.”

Nathan turns to Justin and puts his hands in his jacket pocket, “Ready to go?”

“Of course. Hope you are up for the challenge when it comes to being my navigator. I’ve been
here since 2005 and I still get lost.”

“I was born and raised, so I think I’m up for the challenge,” Nathan winks before he hops into the passenger seat. Justin gets into the passenger seat and starts the engine.

“So how long have you been playing?” Justin asks as he starts driving in the direction of the Brooklyn Bridge.

“Since I was 8,” Nathan tells him, “I always loved music but my mother saved up for an acoustic guitar for Christmas.”

The thought of his mother makes his throat feel like it’s closing up but he swallows a couple of times and tries not to make a scene.

“That’s great that you have been at it for so long. I really thought you did an incredible job,” Justin says sincerely, “Did you take a lot of lessons growing up or-”

“I’m self-taught. I couldn’t afford lessons so I bought books and figured it out for myself.”

That’s not completely true. Or at least it wasn’t always true. The books he couldn’t get out of the library he had stolen. He felt guilty about it. He even got caught once but the store owner had taken pity on the 10 year old who had a panic attack over the possibility of his father finding out and realized that Nathan just really wanted to learn everything he could. Even though the man had every right to call the cops on him, he hadn’t and made him copies for him to pick up every time he got new shipments in before hiring him once he turned 16. He misses Mr. Santos. He hasn’t seen him since before everything went down. He promised himself that he would never look back and that included the people who had shown him kindness, unfortunately.

“Seriously? You’re self taught? You never took a class?” Justin says, gaping, “That’s amazing! You’re a complete natural.”

“I wanted to take lessons but I couldn’t afford it. My dad wasn’t what you would call supportive so he wouldn’t pay for it either.”

“I completely understand there,” Justin sympathizes.
He probably doesn’t understand. Not really. But Nathan appreciates the sentiment.

“He paid for some summer art workshops and encouraged it as a hobby but when I decided I wanted to make a career out of it, he got pissed. I mean, he already kicked me out because I was gay but that was one more thing on the list.”

That’s one thing Nathan actually doesn’t get. Victor Hall never cared that he was gay. He didn’t care about him at all. He wanted him to suffer until he broke regardless of his sexual orientation.

“So has your Dad admitted he was wrong now that you’re successful?”

Justin’s features darken, “No. I haven’t spoken to him since before I moved here eight years ago and before that it had been two years since we spoke. What about yours? You are moving up and building a fanbase. Your songs are fantastic-”

“My parents are dead,” Nathan interrupts, purposely keeping the emotion out of his voice.

Justin stays silent for a few beats, “Shit. I’m really sorry if I brought up anything-”

“It’s fine. Turn left here.”

Justin turns left and follows Nathan’s directions for the rest of the way.

“Sorry if I made you uncomfortable with that,” Nathan says as Justin pulls up to Nadia’s house, “I just figured it was the best to get that little fact out of the way since we were talking about it. I can be a little too abrupt sometimes.”

Justin nods, “It’s completely okay. I just hope I didn’t make things uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t.”
Justin’s quiet for a few seconds before he says, “I’m sure they would be in awe if they saw you on stage.”

Nathan snorts, “I don’t know about that.”

“You captivated the whole room. My eyes were glued to you the whole time.”

Nathan feels the blush return and he sneaks a glance at Justin, who is biting his cheek to hold back a smile.

“I feel like I should say that your paintings did the same thing for me but there were so many people there that I couldn’t get good enough look to connect with them. The portions that weren’t blocked by people’s heads were good though.”

Justin laughs, “Hey, at least you are being honest. Maybe you can come to my gallery to see a few sometime.”

Nathan feels himself smiling at the exchange but before he gets to answer he hears Nadia knock on the passenger window.

“Come on, bitch!” she calls out to him. Nathan bites back a groan. He loves her, don’t get him wrong. Not even 19 yet, she’s the little sister of the band. But fuck, she can be annoying.

Nathan steps out of the van and Justin unlocks the back so they can all get something and carry all the equipment to Nadia’s four floor walk up in one go.

They can hear someone yelling through the other side of the door and Nadia groans.

“Sam is here. Don’t make direct eye contact with her or she won’t shut up about how much she hates the ex-boyfriend she’s trying to win back.”

They quickly put the instruments in Nadia’s bedroom and make it out before Sam even has the opportunity to display her wrath against her one true love.
Stanley kept the taxis waiting but Nathan goes ahead and rides with Justin. He isn’t sure why. Justin’s taking the van back to his gallery then catching the L. And he knows he’s making Petra suspicious too. But he liked talking to him, even when things got a little awkward. And when he asked Justin if he wanted some company, Justin smiled and nodded then opened the passenger door for him.

“Where is your gallery?” Nathan asks, once they are on the road.

“Williamsburg. It only opened last week. It’s called Bedford Gallery.”

“I only live a few blocks away from there. I meant to check it out but we’ve been lucky with shows. Do you live in the area?”

Justin shakes his head, “No. I’ve been living in SoHo for the last two years. I have a loft there. I used to live in Park Slope. I kind of regret moving to Manhattan. I like Brooklyn more.”

Nathan nods, “The other boroughs have more personality. I grew up in Astoria, Queens but moved to the Bronx when I came back to the city. I’ve been in Brooklyn for about a year now.”

“Oh, you moved away for a while?”

Nathan winces. He doesn’t know why he’s talking so much about his past. Usually he just doesn’t say anything at all or lies. He doesn’t know why this time is any different.

“Just for two years. It’s was good to get out of the city but it’s home,” Nathan decides to say. He needs to stay vague about this like he always does. Justin doesn’t need to know.

“It took a while for me to think of it as home,” Justin admits, “I left Pittsburgh, my hometown, sort of suddenly to pursue a career. I missed my friends but I was making new ones up here. I was in a long distance relationship at the time so that was hard. It was even harder when we broke up but after a while things became easier. I ended up loving it here. Here it is.”

Justin pulls into the garage and parks the car.
“Ready to go?”

Nathan shrugs, “Whenever you are.”

Justin looks around, “You said you didn’t really get to see my paintings at MoMA. I can show you around here. I have a few of them up. If you’re interested in seeing them, that is.”

Nathan smiles and nods. He’s always felt awkward in clubs so he doesn’t mind putting it off.

“I’m interested.”

Justin leads him through a door and into the gallery before turning on the lights.

“It looks really nice,” Nathan tells him as he looks down at the polished floors and exposed brick wall, “You can’t even tell it used to be an auto repair shop.”

“It took some renovations, but I’m proud of the result. There’s three floors but we won’t have anything upstairs until Monday. I guess it’ll be a short tour.”

Justin takes him over to a wall filled with strategically placed photographs and Nathan immediately recognizes them as Stanley’s.

“This is Stanley’s exhibit. Even though his results are completely different, he went a little Warhol. I like the darker colors he used with the silkscreen printing though.”

Nathan looks through them. Many of them are of Kate but there are a few taken outside of his shots of her. For instance, he spots a picture of The Accidental Natives. You can’t really tell it’s them. Just more of an impression of the band. It would make a good album cover.

“Hey, is that you?” Justin asks looking at the photo.
“Yeah.”

“Stanley seems to be into you. Literally wouldn’t shut up about how hot you are.”

“I bet the way he built me up made you underwhelmed when you met me,” Nathan snorts.

Justin laughs, “No, if anything I couldn’t blame him for being head over heels.”

Nathan blushes like a fucking schoolgirl again before saying, “I feel bad because Stanley is a good friend but he really—”

“Isn’t your type?” Justin asks.

“He’s good looking so it isn’t that. But he’s a bit dramatic and falls for six guys at once,” Nathan laughs, “If for some reason I would decide to give in, he would probably have me pissed at him within a week.”

“Sounds about right.”

“Where are your paintings?”

Justin leads him over to a wall near the back and Nathan studies each one. He’s really good. Nathan can see that. He doesn’t know a lot about art. He isn’t completely ignorant on the subject and can tell apart the bigger household names but he doesn’t know what makes a piece good. But Justin’s paintings make him want to know because Justin’s pieces are so moving and visceral.

“You’re fantastic. My eyes are glued to them,” Nathan tells him sincerely, recalling Justin’s words from before, “This one is my favorite though. I love it. It makes me happy.”

Justin scratches the back of his head, “Uh, yeah...I painted that while I was on acid. It had been something I hadn’t done in years and my friend brought some over for some reason. I took a tab and ignored him for the rest of the night to paint that. It was a good high so I was pretty happy while making it. Despite its weird origins and it’s strange setup, it’s one of my favorites too.”
Nathan stifles a laugh at that before he admits, “I’ve never tried acid.”

“And here I thought you were a rockstar.”

Nathan shrugs, “I don’t know. It’s not like I have never been curious but I only drink and smoke weed occasionally.”

“That’s usually the case for me too. I was pretty wild when I was in my late teens to early 20s though.”

“The band thinks I’m boring, I’m sure.”

“I think you’re interesting.”

Nathan grins, “Well, maybe I’ll let loose tonight. We should probably go meet them at the club. We’ve been here for a while.”

Justin nods so they head to the L train and take it to Union Square and walk from there. Nathan texts the group to make sure Stanley knows to meet them at the door. When they get there, they are able to bypass the line and go in.

“Where have you two been?” Stanley asks, suspicious.

“At the gallery. Justin showed me your photos and his paintings,” Nathan tells him honestly.

“I hope he showed you my stuff first so it wouldn’t be a complete letdown after his masterpieces,” Stanley laughs.

“I did see your stuff first. But both exhibits were good. Where’s Petra?”

“Getting hit on by some guy over at the bar.”
Nathan looks over and sees Petra standing there, looking a bit annoyed by some Jersey Shore wannabe. When she glares at him Nathan decides to go over.

“You need to back off,” Nathan tells him, putting an arm around her waist.

The man scoffs, “Have fun being with a frigid bitch, dude.”

“My hero!” Petra croons after the man walks away before getting suspicious, “You’ve been AWOL for a while. Where have you been?”

Nathan shrugs, “Justin showed me a couple of exhibits in his gallery.”

Petra gets a huge excited grin on her face, “He did? And how was that?”

“Fine. He’s really talented.”

“Uh huh. Did he happen to exhibit any physical-”

“No. We just talked. He’s very nice.”

Petra looks behind his shoulder, “He’s looking at you.”

Nathan turns to glance at him and Petra wasn’t lying. Justin is looking at him and smiles at him, a little embarrassed that he’s caught, before turning away. Nathan feels his eyes crinkle.

“Oh my god. This is perfect. It’s like love at first sight-”

“Stop it,” Nathan warns.
Petra smiles and gets them each two shots of tequila.

“Let’s celebrate. I want you to loosen up tonight and have fun. Maybe ask your new boyfriend to dance.”

“Petra, come on. I’m sure he isn’t as interested as you think he is. He just met me-”

“It doesn’t mean he’s not interested in you. Believe me, Nathan. He keeps looking at you. Now take these shots with me.”

Nathan sighs but does what he’s told. Since he’s feeling pretty good tonight it might make him feel even better.

The whole group drinks and dances and, even though he’s standing up and feeling good, he’s well past tipsy. That’s something that doesn’t happen often. He’s always worried he’ll let something slip or go to some dark place, which has happened before. But he’s having a good night and, when Justin asks him to dance, he feels even better.

“I’m not a very good dancer,” Nathan warns as Justin takes his hand and drags him to the floor.

“I don’t mind,” Justin insists as he puts his arms around his neck.

They sway to the music and look into each other’s too bright and drunken eyes. Nathan looks down at Justin’s lips and wants to kiss them but he knows he shouldn’t because it could lead to other things that he can’t do and it will ruin the whole night. That’s happened before. He’ll get too drunk, make out with whoever he’s talking to then piss them off when he doesn’t want to go home with them. He thinks it would hurt even more if Justin reacted like that. He’s so kind and smart and talented and so fucking beautiful that Nathan would hate himself for weeks if he couldn’t get over his shit even to mess around with him.

“You’re beautiful,” Nathan blurs out, as if he has no filter. God damn it.

“Yeah?” Justin says, grinning, “I think you’re beautiful too. So fucking hot.”
And, before he can overthink it, he meets Justin for a kiss. He doesn’t know who initiates it. It’s as if they know the other one was wanting to do it so why the fuck not? It starts out as chaste but builds into something passionate. They grind against each other and breathe into each other’s mouths, wanting more and fuck, Nathan does want more. He’s never actually wanted to fuck or get fucked before while he was so close to possibly having that but god, he wants it now. He can feel himself getting hard and Justin growing thicker against his leg and they are probably starting to look obscene but he’s beyond caring. Whether that is due to the alcohol or the euphoria of Justin or a combination of both, he doesn’t know but he feels so good that it doesn’t even matter at this point.

“I live a couple of blocks away from here,” Justin says in between kisses, “Want to come home with me?”

Nathan is breathless when he nods before diving in to kiss Justin again. It takes a while to stop their pheromone driven makeout session long enough to go say goodbye to the rest of the group.

“Well, look who stopped sucking face long enough to greet us,” Sebastian says before he takes a gulp of his beer.”

“See you guys later,” is all Nathan slurs out before grabbing Justin’s hand.

“You sure you’re good, Nathan?” Petra asks, concerned.

“I’m good...I’m great,” Nathan answers, waving her off.

“Take care of him, Justin,” Petra says.

“I will,” Justin answers sincerely before putting an arm around Nathan’s waist.

They go out the front door and compulsively kiss each other as they walk to Justin’s building. When they make it up the stairs and are inside, they are taking off each other’s shirts and stumbling to the bed. Justin lays him down, grinding his crotch against his as he presses light kisses to his neck, collarbone, pecs, and jawline. It feels so fucking good. Nathan lets out a sigh and takes Justin’s face into his hands to get another kiss from him. Their tongues dart out to caress each other as Justin reaches down to unzip and pull off his jeans for him before taking off his own.
It’s when Justin gets to his underwear that Nathan starts to feel queasy. When Justin gets those off and reaches down to rub his hole, he starts feeling sick and flashes back to then.

“Stop!” Nathan demands, crying out due to the invading memories overwhelming him.

Justin stops kissing his neck and looks at him concerned, “Nathan, what’s wrong?”

“I have to go,” he mutters, shaking profusely as he grabs his boxer briefs to put them back on.

“What’s going on? Are you okay? Is it something-”

“It...It wasn’t you. You’re amazing.”

Then what is it?” Justin asks, reaching out to grab his hand but Nathan pulls it away.

“I can’t do this. I’m sorry”

Justin holds his hands up, “That’s okay. I’m not mad.”

Nathan bites his lip and gets the rest of his clothes on before Justin gets up to put an arm around him.

“Did something happen to you?” he asks quietly.

Nathan lets out a whimper but shakes his head, “It’s nothing.”

“It’s...It’s obviously something. You’re shaking-”

“Look, I don’t even know you. I’m not going to pour my guts out while you hold my hand or some shit. I have to go. I can’t breathe I need to get out I can’t deal with this I can’t-”
God, he’s such a fucking wreck of a person. Justin looks at him with such concern and worry as his panic overwhelms him. He must think he’s such a freak.

But Justin quickly puts his own clothes on, comes over to him, and leads him to a chair.

“Put your head in between your knees. It’s okay. You’re safe. Shhhh.”

He feels Justin, a man who is practically a stranger, rub his back as he tries to get his breathing under control. Adding the embarrassment to the fucking torment and lack of breath, he honestly wants to die.

“Why are you doing this?” Nathan asks, when he’s feeling a little bit more in control, “Why haven’t you kicked me out?”

“Why would I kick you out?” Justin asks quietly as he strokes his hair.

“Because you have no idea who I am? Because I decided not to sleep with you? Because I’m having a fucking breakdown in your loft and you aren’t obligated to care about it?”

“As much as I love sex, I’m not going to be angry over someone changing their mind, especially if they are upset about something. I’m not going to watch someone have a panic attack and not help them.”

Nathan clears his throat and sits back up, “Well, you’ve helped. Thanks. I appreciate it, but you can stop pretending to be interested now. It was nice meeting you.”

Nathan gets up and grabs his jacket before Justin can get another word out.

Nathan is walking quickly down the stairs when Justin calls out, “Wait a second!”

Nathan closes his eyes and sighs then stops on the steps as he waits for Justin to come down to him.
“You forgot your wallet.” Justin tells him as he hands it to over, “You probably wouldn’t have gotten far without it.”

Nathan nods and mumbles a thank you before turning back around.

“...Nathan, are you sure you don’t want to just go sit do-”

“I’m fine, Justin.”

Justin clears his throat, “Maybe we’ll see each other again sometime.”

Nathan ignores the comment and just goes down the stairs.

He hoped he didn’t see him again. Not that he didn’t like Justin. He really liked Justin, from what he knew about him at least. But he wouldn’t be able to face him now that he knew he was a freak. He hoped that he didn’t tell Stanley what a freak he was either. Stanley had a big heart but also a big mouth. He would probably show his concern by telling the band and then they would know he was a freak too. If he would decide to keep everything in, they might think he’s like that for no reason and if he told them who he really was...he doesn’t want to think about their possible reactions to that.

He walks to the train and gets his wallet out to get his Metrocard only to find a business card tucked into the front. It’s Justin’s. It has his the number to the gallery as well as his cell phone number. He doesn’t know why Justin would give him that.

But he leaves the card in the wallet and goes through the turnstile. It’s late so it takes a while but he makes it back to his small apartment in Williamsburg and tries to sleep. It ends up taking three nightmares, the last one ending in tears, before he decides sleep isn’t going to happen. When Petra calls in the afternoon to get the details on how good Justin was in bed, he tells her the truth and says they didn’t get that far.

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It doesn’t take long to run into Justin again and it’s on Valentine’s Day of all days when it happens. They are doing another show, in Dumbo this time. It’s a longer set since they are just one of two bands. The show goes over great and he’s able to find the confidence he has always had while performing. They outshine the opening band and get asked for autographs and pictures, which is weird since they aren’t famous but it’s flattering, nonetheless. And it’s when he think...
are finished that he sees *him*.

“I never got to ask you to sign my first copy,” Justin says, handing him the CD, “So I bought another. I figured it could be worth something someday.”

Nathan stares at him and ignores Petra and Nadia fangirling then hesitantly takes the CD from his grasp.

“You bought another CD?” Nathan asks quietly as he signs the cover.

“Might as well have a backup.”

Justin hands the CD off to Petra so the other three members can sign it then says quietly, “You never called.”

Nathan huffs, “What would I have said?”

Justin shrugs, “Whatever you wanted to say. You could have called to say hello or if you felt like you needed someone to talk to.”

Nathan purses his lips, nods, then stands up to walk away, “I appreciate that. I do. But you don’t have to feel pity for me.”

Justin follows him gently takes his arm, “I don’t feel pity for you. I...I admire you. I think you seem like a strong person.”

“Believe me, Justin. I’m anything but. If I were stronger, you would have gotten to fuck me.”

Justin shakes his head, “No. You had the guts to tell me no because you felt uncomfortable. That isn’t weak. I just...I gave you my number to let you know I am still interested. I am attracted to talented, confident, and gorgeous men. I can’t help it.”

“I’m not really confident. That’s just a stage thing. I’m not that confident in real life.”
“You still have it in you.”

Nathan sighs and looks at the man, “I’m not looking to be a fuck buddy.”

“Good. I’m not asking you to be fuck buddy.”

“I’m not relationship material. If it ever happened, I would probably need to take things slow.”

“I’m not asking you to commit to anything. I’m...I’m just asking to get to know you.”

“Why?”

“Because...you have so much life in your eyes. You seem to feel things so deeply. And I don’t mean just on stage. I saw it when we were dancing. I saw it when we were at the gallery. And when you left my loft, I felt worried for you. I felt sickened by whatever it is you went through that made you think I should have kicked you out. In all honesty, you’ve been on my mind a lot. You fascinate me.”

Nathan snorts, “Persistent, aren’t you?”

Justin gives him a wry grin, “It’s one of my most endearing qualities.”

Nathan looks over to the band, rolls his eyes when he sees Petra trying send him signals to ask what is going on, before turning back to Justin.

“We can...we can go to a diner or something. If you want.”

“When do you want to go to this diner?” Justin asks, eyebrows raised.

Nathan shrugs and figures, fuck it. He might as well be a little spontaneous.
“Why not right now? I don’t have a date for Valentine’s Day and, unless you ditched yours to come here, I doubt you do either. I’ll just go and tell Petra to take my guitar back to her place and we can go.”

Justin smiles widely, “That sounds great.”

“Stay here for a second.”

Nathan goes over to Petra and clears his throat.

“I’m going out to eat with Justin. Can you take my guitar back to your place? Maria and Reina will help with the drums, right?”

Petra nods eagerly, “It’s great having such devoted groupies, isn’t it? I’m so happy for you, Nathan. Go on, we’ve got it from here.”

Nathan rolls his eyes, “Don’t be happy for me yet. We haven’t even left the bar.”

“Good luck.”

Nathan goes back over to Justin and follows him out the door. They decide to get on the train to go to Yaffa Cafe, a 24 hour place in the East Village that has an eclectic variety of food and even more eclectic decor and music. They sit in the back corner of the dim restaurant, a small candle lighting their table, and put in their orders. After sitting there for a couple of minutes just staring at each other, Nathan finally breaks the silence.

“I’m not really sure what I should say to you,” he admits, “I’m still embarrassed over what happened before.

“It’s fine. We’ll just sit here and wait until something comes to mind.”

Nathan raises his eyebrows, “You’re kind of weird, you know that?”
“I’ve been told that once or twice.”

“Seriously, Justin. Why did you come to the show?”

Justin looks at him, “You told me to stop pretending I was interested. I wasn’t pretending. So I decided to show that.”

Nathan looks down at his water and mutters, “Do you always show interest in guys who freak out at your apartment?”

“I don’t know. I’ll admit that it’s a new technique I haven’t seen before. Maybe there’s something to your methods.”

“It’s not-” Nathan breaks off and growls, “Look, I just want to know why. Don’t give me the bullshit about me being a tortured soul who needs to be taken care of. Because that’s fucking creepy and untrue.”

Justin snorts, “I wouldn’t say that. You told me you didn’t want pity.”

“I just want to know why a guy who could have practically anyone he wants would want to do whatever this is with a guy like me.”

Justin stares at him and doesn’t flinch as he says, “Because that guy who can “practically have anyone he wants” saw a lot of himself in a guy like you.”

Nathan scoffs at that, “Yeah, okay.”

“That guy got bashed by another student with a baseball bat when he was 18 and had panic attacks for years afterwards. Still has physical impairments due to brain damage. He might not understand the particular things you went through but he gets trying to overcome something that truly fucks you up in order to become a big fat success. He thought you could maybe understand where he was coming from too.”
Nathan blinks a few times before looking down, “Shit. Sorry. You can start talking in the right person now.”

“You didn’t know. But you should know that I don’t pity you. I don’t think you need to be taken care of. The problems you are facing aren’t deterring me. Even if I hadn’t gone to the show with Stanley and I went on my own, I still would have found a way to talk to you in order to try to get somewhere with you.”

“And if I had gone through with it? Acted like a normal person, hooked up with you...would you have gotten what you wanted and kindly asked me to leave the next morning?”

Justin huffs and puts his napkin in his lap, “I’m not saying I’ve never done that. But I liked you. I asked you to look around my gallery because I wanted to get to know you and I asked you to dance because I wanted to dance with you and no one else in the club. So I feel like I would have asked you out to breakfast so we could talk some more.”

Nathan stays silent at that and runs a hand through his hair before saying, “Look, like I’ve already said, I really appreciate it. But you have to realize that I have...I don’t know, trust issues. Not in a super jealous or nosy way but I can’t open up to people about my life. It’s hard for me.”

“I get it. Sometimes it’s hard for me to talk about stuff too. I paint to help get through that.”

“I write music. It helps a lot.”

“I can tell. You put so much emotion into your music. You come off as so much wiser than what? A 25 year old?”

“Twenty-one,” Nathan smirks.

“Shit. That makes me feel old,” Justin says, laughing.

“You can’t be more than 26 or so.”

“Wrong. I turn thirty next month.”
“Are you usually into men who are almost a decade younger than you?”

“You’re actually the first younger guy I have tried to pursue more than just a one night stand with.”

“Well, now I feel special,” Nathan says, a little teasing.

“You should,” Justin says, biting his cheek.

Nathan didn’t expect this. He didn’t expect for Justin to ever contact him again for one thing, let alone straight out admit that he was interested in him despite everything. They were just eating dinner but he felt like he had been pulled on a fast moving train and he was barely hanging on, both willing it to stop and for it to go faster. It felt exhilarating when they were just sitting here on only their second meeting. How would it feel on their third or their fourth? How would it feel to kiss him hello or to call him to tell him about his day? How would it feel to actually sleep with him, not just fuck, but sleep together after the fact?

He knows he should cut him loose before they even think about getting attached. He knows Justin is too good for him.

But he wants to know if he can do it. He wants to know if someone could actually love him.

So they eat, talk, and laugh until they realize that a couple of hours have passed already. Justin insists on picking up the bill before they head out and then they walk around the East and West Villages, just talking about what they like to do and their favorite places. Their pasts are rarely mentioned and Nathan finally feels at ease, which is weird because he’s just met Justin but the man seems to lure out a little bit of Nathan’s real life confidence.

Justin takes the train with him and walks him up to his apartment, even though Nathan tells him he doesn’t have to.

“I’m heading to the gallery. I have a small studio there. I feel inspired,” is all Justin says with a smile.

As Nathan unlocks his door and stands in his doorway, he looks down at his feet before looking
into Justin’s bright blue eyes.

“Well, goodnight,” Nathan says to him.

Justin pats him on the arm, “Goodnight, Nathan.”

And you know what? Fuck it. He needs to ease himself into this. He doesn’t have to invite Justin in or fuck him out in the hallway but he does need to make a small move.

So, affectionately, he leans in to give Justin a kiss on the cheek. Justin smiles happily and it takes all of his will not to smile like a complete goofball in response before going into his apartment and shutting the door.

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They meet up several times as well as text back and forth for the next three weeks and Nathan feels his heart flutter every time he sees Justin’s name appear on his phone. They haven’t slept together yet but have kissed several times and there were a few instances where they got so into their makeout sessions that they almost went further but Justin realized Nathan was getting too nervous and backed off without judgment. They’ve been dating and going to different places throughout the city. It’s the best time Nathan has ever had.

“Has anyone ever told you that it’s rude to text when you’re out to eat with someone?” Petra asks sarcastically as she takes a bite of her salad.

“Sorry,” is all Nathan says as he types out his message.

Yeah, I’ll stop by the gallery later :)

“So how goes it with your Mr. Van Gogh?”

“Good. Justin still has both ears so that’s working in his favor.”

“Smartass. Have you seen him pretty often?”
“Yeah, several times. We went to the Brooklyn Museum and saw Kinky Boots on just the other day.

“Fun! And expensive. He paid for it, right?”

“He was going to pay for all of it but when he told me he got tickets for the show I demanded to pay for the museum.”

“You see, I just let the other person pay for as much as possible,” Petra tells him, “Why spend my own money if someone else is willing to pay for me? Especially when they’re rich.”

“I don’t want to take advantage. He’s really nice and I wanted to make sure things stayed a bit even. Besides, I got my paycheck from Showtime for doing the music for that documentary they produced.”

“A man of many talents is what you are. I don’t have the patience for scores. That’s why you’ll be richer than me.”

“If you would just broaden your taste then maybe you’ll like the instrumental pieces. I enjoy what we do more but it helps pay the bills. Writing the commercial jingles grates on my nerves though. I try not to do those unless I have to.”

“Yeah, I’m not about that. I prefer actual performances. But I am proud of you. Not just for doing that stuff in your career too but for other accomplishments.

Nathan tilts his head, “What do you mean?”

Petra waves her hand, “I mean that you’re...you know...giving him a chance. I know it’s hard for you to give your heart to someone. You won’t tell me why but I understand that it is extremely difficult for you. You don’t know how happy it makes me to see you falling for someone.”

Nathan nods and, even though he’s always been one to brush off the subject, he wants to open up to Petra. Just a little.
“It feels so fast. Even though I know it’s not that fast, it sometimes feels that way.”

“You’ve never had a relationship before, baby. It’s a new feeling.”

“I can’t explain how it feels—”

“Terrifying? Breathtaking? Amazing? A bunch of feelings jumbled up all at once?”

Nathan laughs a little and nods.

“You’ll do fine. He’d be crazy not to fall for you.”

“I’m meeting him after dinner at the gallery—”

“So you want to get going. I get how it’s going to be now,” Petra tsks before calling over the bill.

Petra gives him a longer hug than usual before they part and Nathan walks the eight blocks to the gallery. He walks in through the front door, sees Justin’s office door open, then spots him standing at his desk with Max, his new intern.

“Hey, Nathan!” Justin calls out, waving him over, “Come in!”

Nathan makes his way into the office and Justin finishes with Max before shutting the door.

“Hey,” Justin breathlessly smiles before coming up to greet him with a kiss, “How was dinner?”

“It was good. Petra picked the place and we just talked. How has your day been?”

“Busy. We just wrapped out and sent our sold paintings and we’re getting new pieces in tomorrow morning. The walls are pretty much bare right now.”
“I saw that my favorite piece of yours got sold,” Nathan pouts, “I’ll miss it.”

“There will be more paintings. Maybe not many acid induced paintings but there will be more. Let’s go for a walk.”

Nathan follows Justin outside and they walk to the river hand in hand. When they get there, Justin sits down at the bench and pulls Nathan into his side. They’re practically snuggling right there in the open. But it doesn’t make him nervous. It makes him feel wanted and safe, two things he has never felt in his life.

“You should come meet me on Saturday at my apartment,” Justin comments, “My friends who live in Hoboken are coming in for a few hours to have dinner. I would love it if they met you.”

“...You sure?” Nathan asks hesitantly.

Justin smiles and kisses him softly, “Of course I’m sure. They’re great people and I’m sure they’ll love you.”

They get up and walk together until they are back at the gallery. Before they part, Nathan bends down a little to give him a kiss goodbye and feels practically giddy on the way home. This must be what other people feel when they start to fall hard for someone.

When he gets back to his apartment, he sees a large package outside of his door and is pretty confused because he wasn’t expecting anything. He bends down to look at the return address and his heart skips a beat when he sees it is from the Bedford Gallery.

He didn’t.

With shaky hands, he takes it inside and unwraps the package only to find the painting. The one he loves so much that Justin implied that he sold. Through watery eyes, he sees a note attached and he takes it off the back to open it.

*For the man who accepts the strange rough edges and sees and embraces the good when many would dismiss it. You did that for this odd painting. So please know I would do the same for you.*
He already feels the tightness in his chest and his lip trembling before he pulls out his phone.

“Hey,” Justin says softly.

“You didn’t... You didn’t have to do that,” Nathan tells him, feeling overwhelmed.

“I wanted to.”

“You’re the one with the birthday next week,” Nathan says with a wet laugh, “I’m the one who should be giving you a gift.”

“I beat you to it,” Justin teases.

“You still at the gallery?” Nathan asks, feeling forward.

“Yeah, why do you-”

“Come over.”

Justin laughs, “You don’t have to ask me twice.”

Nathan gulps, “See you soon.”

It takes Justin less than twenty minutes to get to the apartment. Nathan is pacing after he buzzes him in and, when he hears the knock on the door, he takes a deep breath and opens it.

“Hey, what-”

Nathan cuts him off with a searing kiss, the kind that makes both of them lightheaded. The kind
that sends a message that’s pretty hard to interpret as anything else.

“You sure?” Justin gasps out, stroking Nathan’s face.

Nathan nods before capturing Justin’s lips once more and leading him to the bedroom before Justin stops him again.

“Nathan, are you absolutely su-”

“Justin. You don’t have to ask me twice,” Nathan tells him before sticking a hand down the man’s pants.

Justin gives up the concerned inquiries after that.

And Nathan tries to mean what he says. In many ways, he does want this. Fuck, he wants it so much. He gets through Justin stroking his cock and he enthusiastically sucks off the older man. He does start to get a little nervous when he tells Justin he has lube in the bedside table drawer (which he bought to practice with but he’s not going to tell him that.)

He gets on his stomach and Justin puts a dab on his fingers before gently working his way in. Nathan starts to feel himself stiffen at the intrusion as his breathing quickens.

“Nathan?” Justin asks, concerned, pulling his fingers out.

“I’m fine,” Nathan answers shakily, “Y-You can keep going.”

“No. Not until you’re completely sure,” Justin tells him softly.

Nathan groans into the pillow and tries to ignore the tears springing to his eyes and his obvious hard on.

“Do you think...I would understand since you’re several years older than me but…” Nathan trails off, throwing a hand up helplessly.
“What? You want to fuck me?” Justin asks him.

“I understand if you don’t want to—”

“Oh, I want to.”

Nathan looks up and sees Justin smirking before the man lies down on his back and smiles at him.

Nathan leans down to kiss him as he gets between his legs. He feels a little less nervous now as he puts the lube on his fingers and slowly preps Justin. Justin gasps as he brushes his prostate so he does it two more times before Justin reaches over and gets the condom. He opens it and slips it on Nathan’s dick before putting his legs on his shoulders. The action alone makes Nathan want to come right there.

Forehead against his Justin’s, he lines up his cock and lets it sink in slowly and only speeds up when Justin is moaning for more. They kiss each other, mouths wet and open, teeth clacking on occasion with the force. After several minutes, Nathan starts to feel close so he wraps his hand around Justin’s cock and jerks him in time with the thrusts, making him cum right after him.

“Fuck, that was great,” Justin sighs.

He manages to nod before his face crumples. And here he was, feeling accomplished.

“Hey,” Justin says alarmed, “Come here.”

Nathan turns and rests his head on Justin’s shoulder, letting the tears wet his neck.

“Did I do something wrong?” Justin asks, sounding distressed.

Nathan shakes his head. He doesn’t know how to explain it. He feels happy, terrified, overwhelmed, possibly in love. He just accomplished something that he never saw happening to him just a few weeks ago and here he is, bawling.
“I’m just happy,” Nathan croaks out.

“Shhh, I’m happy too,” Justin says with a sweet chuckle, “I think I’ll stay here tonight, if you don’t mind.”

Nathan nods and throws his arms around Justin’s torso. He falls asleep quickly and sleeps better than he has for as long as he can remember.

Until he wakes up gasping from a nightmare at 8 am.

Justin is sitting up and looking down at him, alarmed and frightened. Shit.

“You awake?” Justin asks, touching his hair.

Nathan feels his face flush and he tries to get up but Justin takes ahold of his arm.

“What was your dream about?”

Nathan says nothing and just sits there, trying to will Justin’s curiosity away.

“You were begging someone to stop. You were hysterical and seemed like you were in so much pain,” Justin reveals, voice cracking, “What happened to you?”

Nathan wants to tell him. He knows Justin deserves to know. He just can’t. Justin might leave and the thought of that is starting to scare him. It’s only been a few weeks. He wants to enjoy having him around a little longer.

“Did I trigger it?” Justin asks out of the blue, “Fuck, did us sleeping together cause you to have a night terror? Nathan, we don’t have to jump into it so soon. We can-”

“You didn’t trigger it,” Nathan interrupts, stopping Justin’s train of thought, “If anything, you
helped. I haven’t slept eight hours straight in a very long time. Usually I have a couple of nightmares a night.”

“...That breaks my heart.”

Nathan lets out a humorless laugh before lacing his fingers with Justin’s, “You and me both.”

“I need to know what happened to you. I told you what happened to me,” Justin points out.

“I know you did. And I will. I just...I can’t. Not yet. I need a little time to figure out how to say it. I don’t talk about it. Ever.”

Justin stares at him for a few seconds before nodding, “Okay.”

“You don’t have to sleep over anymore if you don’t want to,” Nathan tells him, giving him an out, “I would understand.”

But he feels Justin come over on the bed and wrap his arms around his shoulders from behind, “You said that it was one of the best nights you had. Maybe it’s because you had someone who cares about you lying next to you. Expect me on a regular basis.”

Nathan hugs Justin’s forearms and nods. He knows it’s selfish of him to accept that kind of sacrifice from Justin but he really has a hard time not accepting the affection.

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A week later, they leave Justin’s apartment for his birthday dinner. He already gave Justin his presents. He wrote and performed a song for him, which surprisingly made Justin tear up. He gave him a few books and a special Blu Ray edition of The Yellow Submarine, all of which Justin seemed to love. Nathan wanted to get more but told himself not to overdo it, even though Justin deserved anything that would make him happy. It had been a really good week, despite Justin knowing about the nightmares. It’s probably from the euphoria of fucking but he finally saw what the big deal was about now. Justin was fantastic in bed. It didn’t matter if they were slow and sensual or fast and playful. He always knew what to do. They hadn’t gotten around to switching positions yet but Nathan was feeling a little more confident so he hoped they could try that again one day.

The birthday party is just with several close friends of Justin’s plus the band. Stanley is there,
which makes Nathan feel a little guilty when the man gives him a sad smile. Emmett and Drew are there too and Nathan’s glad they made it since they just got back from Toronto that morning. They have a great time. Justin puts an arm around him as he talks and laughs with his friends around the large table. He catches up with the friends he hasn’t seen in awhile as well as Emmett and Drew by asking them about how the gang was.

“Oh, they’re wonderful. Gus is shooting up like a weed and JR is a total bookworm. You saw them just a few months ago and you talk to Gus on Skype but I’m telling you, they’ve grown. Both are making great grades. Debbie and Carl finally got their stuff situated at the new house and Ben has been loving his job at the university up there. I have some pictures if you want to see.”

Emmett hands Justin his phone and Justin looks through them smiling and inquiring about the backstory on certain photos until his smile starts to fade.

Justin looks over to what the picture is of and so does Nathan. All Nathan sees is two men with a little girl, maybe two years old. He looks at Emmett and is surprised when the man winces.

“They’re doing great,” Emmett says to Justin softly, as if he knows the question Justin wants to ask, “Lily is turning two in April and is a complete handful. I’m surprised she hasn’t given Brian a heart attack yet. She’s so smart and sweet though. Talks up a storm, even though you can’t understand everything she says. Brian and Eric seem to be able to though.”

“She’s adorable,” Justin murmurs, still looking at the picture, “She’s grown a lot too. The last pictures I saw of her were ones that Debbie posted on Facebook six months ago.”

Emmett smiles, “I’m sure he wouldn’t mind hearing from you. Especially if you talk about how cute his kid is. He loves talking about her.”

“I wrote him that letter once and I never heard back,” Justin reminds him, “I’m not going to push it.”

Emmett nods sadly and takes his phone back.

“Was that Brian?” Nathan asks him quietly.

“Yeah,” Justin admits, “That was him.”
“You seemed sad talking about him.”

“There was a lot of history there. He helped shape me into who I am. Even though I haven’t seen him in years and don’t know who he is anymore it would be nice to hear how he and his family are doing. Things ended on a bad note though, you know that.”

“You’ve said that, yeah.”

Before anything else can be said, a couple of servers come with their food and Justin is happy once more. He gets over the slight awkwardness of Justin’s ex being brought up as well and lets himself have a good time and that’s how it stays until a busser takes the plates away.

It takes a second glance to realize who the woman is. Her face is scarred and it’s hard to remember what she used to look like when they were showing her picture on the news. But once he realizes it, he struggles to get up and out of the restaurant.

“Nathan?” Justin asks, watching him go.

“I need to get home,” Nathan mutters, ignoring the strange looks from the rest of the party and Petra’s calls after him.

He walks faster as his breathing gets more ragged and he hears Justin jogging after him but he can’t get out the words, “Just go back to your party, Justin!”

God, he sucks. He ruins everything, even his boyfriend’s birthday party.

“What’s going on?” Justin asks, starting to catch up.

“Pl-Please, Justin! Just go back!” Nathan says waving him off.

He hears Justin whistle and feels the man tug at his arm.
“What are you doing?!” Nathan yells as Justin shoves him into the cab.

“Getting you home,” is all Justin tells him as he gently pushes down on Nathan’s head to get him to put it between his knees.

Nathan wheezes as Justin quells the driver’s concerns.

They make it to Justin’s loft and all Nathan can do is moan, “Justin, just go back to your party!”

“You’re freaking out! Forget my party.”

When Justin unlocks the door, Nathan runs for the bathroom to puke up his dinner. Justin rubs his back as Nathan slides down and sits on the floor. They sit there in silence for the longest time and Justin waits patiently until Nathan gets his breathing back in control.

“What happened?”

“I can’t-”

“No, Nathan. I need to know. You vomited because you were panicking so much. You need to tell me, not just because I need to know as your boyfriend, but because you need to talk to someone.”

“I’ve talked to therapists before. It only helped so much.”

“You need someone in your personal life knowing whatever happened. I promise I will not judge you. I will not leave you. I won’t look at you any differently. Now, please. I need to know.”

“I don’t want to ruin your 30th birthday,” Nathan says in a small voice.

“It’s fine. I saw my friends, you wrote me a beautiful song, I had a good dinner. All in all a great day. Now tell me.”
Nathan lets out a defeated sigh and gets up from the bathroom floor, “Not in here. I want to go sit on the bed.”

Justin follows him to the bed and sits next to him. He rubs the spot between his shoulder blades to keep him calm and after several minutes, Nathan decides to start from the beginning.

“My mother moved to New York when she was 19 years old. Her name was Dima and she was from Syria. She had the American dream in place but the only way she would be able to enter the country without her family knowing was to do so illegally. She couldn’t find a job easily because she couldn’t speak English so she spent what she could on a tutor. That tutor ended up being my father. He was the head of the language department and knew like six different languages so he began teaching her English. He got her comfortable with him then threatened to call deportation on her if she didn’t obtain citizenship. He supposedly said he couldn’t keep up the farce any longer and a true patriot wouldn’t hide such a lie. It was total bullshit. He didn’t care that she was illegal. He just wanted to manipulate her. He told her that if she married him, he could get her into the University he worked at tuition free and she would be an American citizen. So she ended up agreeing. He didn’t get her into the school. He lied to her.”

“He raped her. On a regular basis. She was afraid to leave. I’m sure I’m the product of spousal rape. I’m shocked that she had it in her to love me but she was a strong woman who knew that I wasn’t at fault for my father’s darkness. I was close to her. I loved her. But it wasn’t enough. He beat the both of us to keep us in line. She wasn’t allowed to spend her money she made at the restaurant she worked at. She was to give all of her tips and checks to him. But at some point she decided skim money off the top of her tips and save up for some Christmas presents for me. We weren’t allowed to celebrate or buy instruments. One year, she got a small tree from the neighbors that they didn’t want and he left her bruised and bloody before throwing the tree out. But this time she bought a tree, a real one, and even got some ornaments for it. We weren’t allowed to decorate or buy instruments. One year, she got a small tree from the neighbors that they didn’t want and he left her bruised and bloody before throwing the tree out. But this time she bought a tree, a real one, and even got some ornaments for it. I came home that day and the whole living room was decorated. I was so fucking happy that I couldn’t see that it was one last ‘fuck you’ to my father. He came home later that night, saw the place, and whipped her with his belt before throwing the gifts in the dumpster and setting them on fire for good measure. I cried at the sight of my mom’s wounds but what hurt even worse was her lifeless expression. I should have known she was thinking about doing something drastic but I was eight so I wasn’t sure what was going through her head. She sent me to bed, kissed my forehead, and told me that she loved me. Then I woke up to find her hanging by the ceiling fan.”

He can hear Justin sniffling but he keeps going. If he stops now, he’ll never find the courage to continue later.

“The police ruled it as a suicide. It probably was. I don’t know. I don’t want to think of the possibility of my father murdering my mother. But even if it was a suicide, I don’t understand why they didn’t look into her bruises and welts. It had to be obvious she was getting abused. I think he might have had a couple of friends on the force at the time. I wouldn’t know. He never brought anyone around and I didn’t know anything about his life at his job or outside our home. But I was left with him for eight more years. My mom had hidden a guitar in my closet. It was one of the
presents she got me right before she died and I didn’t find it until after she passed. I still have it at
my apartment. I’m still shocked that my father didn’t destroy it to rip my heart out.”

“God, Nathan. Fuck-” Justin cries.

“I’m not finished,” Nathan croaks out.

“The next eight years...they were bad, Justin. I was hit and burned. I received broken bones and
bloody noses. I truly believed I was worthless because he told me that everyday. He got pure joy
out of hurting me. He reveled in it. I honestly believed that one day I would die at his hands and I
even tried to tell someone once but they knew him as this upstanding person in the community and
it didn’t get that far. I ended up paying the consequences. Even though my dad hated me and loved
to see me completely broken, he didn’t seem to care all that much that I was gay but if he could
hurt me in other ways and that was something he could use, he would do it. I was seeing this boy
from my class. It was in secret. His parents were strict Muslims and I didn’t want to give my father
any ammunition. He told me he was going to be gone all week at a conference so I took a risk and
brought Mo back to the apartment. We hadn’t done much at that point. Exchanged a few handjobs
in the boy’s locker room and made out basically. All we were doing was kissing when my father
walked in. Most parents would be angry or embarrassed. The look on his face was evil. It was just
this really subtle smile. One that said, “I know how to fuck you over and I’m going to do it.” He
ended up calling Mo’s parents and they sent him away. I never saw him again. I’m guessing he
still hates me.”

Nathan takes a deep breath. This is the last part. Only a few more things to say and he’ll be done.

“He went to several conferences, weekend getaways, shit like that. I loved when he would leave
because I wouldn’t have to worry about him hurting me. But I found out what the trips were for
when he left his bedroom door open and I saw some of the clothes from his suitcase on his bed. I
saw this...this shirt with blood on it. I usually avoided his room like the plague but something was
telling me to go in and look at what it was. I knew that something sinister was going on in my
father’s world. The shirt had been sprayed with blood. There aren’t many excuses for that sort of
thing. Maybe it was an animal he hit or whatever but I knew deep down that wasn’t the case. But
what told me that my father was a murderer were the locks of hair he had in his suitcase.”

“I heard his voice behind me. He said, “Well, aren’t you quite the detective?” I was scared down to
my core but I asked, “What did you do?” He laughed and tilted his head then said, “What does it
look like, son?” I told him he was insane. That he was evil. I kept crying and saying what did you
do over and over, even though I knew what he was now. He grabbed me by the shoulders and
tackled me to the floor, held my hands above my head and pulled my pants down. He whispered in
my ear, “I’ll show you what I did to those women. First thing I did was fuck them until they
screamed.” And that’s when he...fuck, out of all the times he hurt me, I had never felt that much
pain and terror. He made me bleed. He...he kept going and grunted in my ear, hitting me whenever
he felt the urge. By the time he came in me, I was in shock. I was just lying there not even moving. He pulled out, kicked me in the ribs and in the stomach then said, “If you say a word, I will make sure you suffered more than they did.”

He can feel Justin crying into his neck, whispering, “Oh god! Nathan, please! God!”

But he keeps going. He can’t stop.

“He left and went in the other room. And I just stayed there for a few minutes. I knew that my father would figure out a way to make sure I didn’t talk. Whether that be by pulling me out of school to hold me in some cellar like he did those women or just by killing me immediately, he would do something. And I...I went crazy for a couple of minutes. I realized that I couldn’t live in a world where he controlled me.”

He’s feeling really tired. But Justin deserves to know. He deserves to know why he deserves better than Nathan.

“I...I went to get a butcher knife from the kitchen and held it behind my back. I figured I wouldn’t be able to beat him. He was stronger than me. But if the knife was there when he disarmed me, maybe he would use it on me and I could be with my mom. So I went up to him and I told him I was going to ruin him. That I would make sure the world knew he was a sociopathic killer. That he would rot in hell. By the look on his face, I knew he didn’t expect that stuff to come out of my mouth. I was always too afraid to talk back to him. So he charged at me and grabbed my throat and, I don’t know if I acted out of reflex or changed my mind but I...I stabbed him. In the stomach and then in the chest. He was dead before I could call 911. I became him. I did. I became-”

“Oh, baby. You didn’t,” Justin says, gasping as he brings Nathan’s head down to his chest, “It was self-defense.”

“That’s what it was ruled by the police. I didn’t go to federal court. Just had a small hearing where I told them pretty much everything I told you. They found the hair and the bloody shirt and were able to determine that it belonged to a missing woman from New Jersey. He usually killed women from New Jersey. He would torture and rape them, keeping them alive for days before ending their lives. They confirmed at least three killings. You’ve probably heard of him. Victor Hall?”

When Justin stiffens, Nathan knows the man knows exactly who he’s talking about.
“That was a big case. They mentioned that he was killed in self-defense by a potential victim. I don’t remember your or any name, for that matter, in the papers though.”

“I was a minor so my identity couldn’t be used by the media and I kept my head down. I changed my name anyway. I just closed my eyes and pointed in an old phonebook for a first name and for a last name and got Nathan Ash out of it then changed it legally once I was living with this foster family in Illinois. Despite having all this shit happen here, New York has always been my home and I knew I wanted to live here. The thought of being Victor Hall II for the rest of my life, especially in this city, made me sick.”

“I...I don’t blame you,” Justin tells him, tears still coming down his face.

Nathan lets out a sigh, “Anyway, I don’t know if you remember this, but the reason they found his cellar was because someone he left alive to return to in order to torture more escaped. He had left her with all these gashes but she made it out. I heard a plastic surgeon offered his services for free to minimalize the damage but some of the deeper scars he couldn’t completely get rid of...She was at the restaurant.”

“...The busgirl?”

Nathan nods, “I should have said something to her. Like, ‘I’m so fucking sorry my father tortured you and you are so strong for escaping in a way that I never could.’ But all I could feel was panic and guilt. I had to leave. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Justin says forcefully, “None of this is your fault. Your reaction was completely normal. I don’t know what I would do. God...fuck. I am so fucking sorry Nathan. I am so sorry you had to go through that for such a long time. It breaks my heart.”

Nathan sniffs and covers his eyes. He struggles at first but he gives in when Justin has him lay his head on his shoulder. He takes comfort in the soothing sounds Justin makes as rubs his neck and hair.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Nathan chokes out, “No one knows. Not the band, not any of my friends. No one would want to sign us if they knew.”

“I’m not going to tell anyone,” Justin sighs, “I think you should tell Petra someday though. She really loves you.”
“I know that. I just can’t, okay? I talk to a therapist sometimes but there’s really not much left to say.”

Justin doesn’t seem to know what else to say either so he pulls Nathan’s face away from his neck and kisses him gently on the lips.

“We’ll figure it out. Get some rest. I’ll hold you while you fall asleep.”

He doesn’t know how he can be tired after rehashing the nightmare that was his life but as soon as his head hits the pillows and Justin’s arms wrap around him, he feels his eyelids get heavy and he’s asleep within ten minutes.

He wakes up the next morning, groggy and exhausted. However, the smell of bacon and eggs does remind him he threw his dinner up last night and he was actually pretty hungry.

“Stay right there!” Justin calls out, “I don’t want you moving a muscle.”

It takes a few seconds but Nathan starts to feel the shock go through his body. He told someone. He told someone *everything*. But Justin’s still here.

Justin loads two plates up with the food and puts them on a tray before carrying them to the bed.

“Hold that,” Justin requests, handing him the tray, “I’ll go get the juice.”

Nathan stares at him in bewilderment as Justin goes back to get the kitchen to get the filled glasses.

“Good morning,” he tells Nathan, giving him a peck before joining him on the bed.

“...What is this?” Nathan asks.

“Breakfast in bed,” Justin answers simply.
Nathan nods absentmindedly as he takes a strip of bacon from the plate.

Justin fills up the silence with chatter and Nathan stares straight ahead, trying to figure out what the fuck is going on.

Yeah, he can’t figure it out.

Fuck it.

“No, Justin. What is this?”

“I told you-”

“And I told you one of the most horrific life stories last night.”

Justin swallows a piece of egg, “You did.”

“Then what...then why-”

“I told you I wasn’t going to dump you, no matter what you told me. I told you I wouldn’t judge you and I haven’t, unless judging in your favor counts.”

Justin lets out a sigh and makes eye contact at that point, “I told you I wouldn’t look at you any differently. That was a lie. I had expected abuse and some sort of assault. I’ve seen the scars on your arms and torso. I didn’t realize that you lived through something the majority of people can’t even comprehend. I didn’t realize how fucking strong you were. The fact that you could survive that and still be here amazes me alone. But you are working towards your goals. You’re a wonderful person. You’re so fucking talented. You’re the bravest person I have ever met. I think even more of you than I did before.”

Nathan blinks his eyes several times and chokes out, “You didn’t even know my name until last night.”
Justin smiles, “Sure I did. It’s Nathan. It fits you much better than your old name did anyway.”

Nathan lets out a laugh that comes out more like a sob. He closes his eyes as Justin brings his head over to kiss it. He’s never felt more relieved.

Justin declares that they will stay in bed for the rest of the day and, after he lets Nathan fuck him, they watch The Yellow Submarine. Nathan can’t hold back a smile as Justin quietly sings the songs under his breath. Not only because Justin looks fucking adorable while doing so but because it’s the moment he realizes he’s in love.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think, if you could! This chapter not only served as a look into the beginning of the J/N relationship like chapter six did for B/E, but also as a way to show how much Nathan has healed, despite still being ver troubled. And, of course, the big reveal of what his father actually did to him.

We will be back in present day for the remaining chapters. :)
Rue des Normands and Rue de la Plage

Chapter Summary

Brian and Eric go on their honeymoon.

Chapter Notes

I feel like it should be unnecessary and redundant to warn about Brian being in love and having unprotected sex with another man at this point but there are extra scenes depicting that so...warning! Hope you enjoy!

He only finds out the general area of where they will be going when they check their luggage in. The Caribbean. They are flying to Saint Maarten but Eric insists that’s just where they are stopping and that it isn’t their final destination. He does get him to say it’s within the general area though.

Despite traveling for work and pleasure, he’s never been to the Caribbean. He didn’t go on his first real vacation until he was in college and saved enough money to go to Baja California with Lindsay and a few of their college friends. He took Justin to Paris with him the year after his ex had moved to New York. He went to places like Los Angeles and Tokyo for Kinnetik as well as Ibiza a year before he met Justin and Miami a year after, both for the White Party. He went on more than a couple of weekend trips for the White Party. But even more so, he’s gone on several trips with Eric. The first had been to Toronto to meet spend time with Gus, of course, and the second had been a weekend getaway to Provincetown. They went to Mexico when Eric’s grandfather wanted to go back and visit his hometown so he and Eric had accompanied him. They visited Dublin together a year before Lily was born, spent some time in Spain and Italy on a two week vacation. They had gone on trips with Gus, Lily, and sometimes JR to places like Disney World, New York, Boston, DC, and London. He had traveled more in the last seven, almost eight, years with Eric than he had at any other point in his life. But this was the first trip that had been solely planned and paid for by only one of them.

“You’re sure you are fine with paying for everything?” Brian smirks, “You know I’m not exactly hard up for cash.”

Eric scoffs, “Excuse me, but who was the wealthier one when we first got together?”

Brian laughs at that. Eric actually has him there.
“Yeah, but I’m definitely the rich one now.”

Eric rolls his eyes, “Yeah, you’re a big shot with the Coca-Cola Campaign but I just designed and built the new Apple Headquarters building before we moved and have four more projects lined up for the year and that’s not counting the projects I passed over to my employees to oversee.”

“Fine. Let’s look it up and see how much wealthier I am.”

Eric shakes his head, “You know, some people play the alphabet game while they have to wait for something and we’re just looking our net worths up on Google.”

“It’s only sickening if you let the shallowness of it bother you,” Brian tells him.

Brian looks over Eric’s shoulder as his husband types in “Eric Davisson total net worth.”

“60 Million,” Brian whistles when he sees the number Google claims his husband’s salary, properties, and business ventures and investments are worth, “I married one wealthy man.”

Eric laughs as he types in ‘Brian Kinney total net worth’ and even Brian raises his eyebrows at the number. He knew it would be high but not that high.

“Brian Kinney, the CEO of Kinnetik Enterprises, has an estimated net worth of 100 million dollars. This estimation takes into account his salary, Kinnetik’s offices in Pittsburgh, Chicago, and New York, residential and commercial properties, his various business investments, and recently signed business contracts. His most profitable year to date is 2015 when Coca-Cola signed a two year contract with Kinnetik worth three billion dollars per year.”

“Well, aren’t they on top of things? They got Coca-Cola in there and everything. Even I haven’t completely accounted my current and upcoming earnings for that yet. They must have talked to Theodore.”

Eric looks to be a combination of shocked, a teensy bit jealous, and proud of him which puts a myriad of expressions on the man’s face before he leans over to kiss him.
“I’m proud of you but our combined wealth is absolutely disgusting,” Eric murmurs, “Maybe we should spend our honeymoon helping out at a soup kitchen instead.”

“Too late for that. They are calling our flight in ten minutes,” Brian shrugs, “And besides, you promised me a relaxing time. Serving one bowl of soup after another doesn’t sound relaxing to me.”

Eric rolls his eyes as Brian slouches a little bit to put his head on his shoulder.

“You tired?” Eric asks quietly.

Brian nods sleepily. He feels like he hasn’t slept in weeks with the wedding preparations, work, family coming in, his four year old waking him up the night before he walked down the aisle, getting married, dancing and mingling for the whole reception, fucking Eric half the night last night, getting fucked by Eric the other half of it, and getting up early to get to the airport by 9 for their 11 am flight.

“You can sleep on the plane,” Eric tells him as he puts an arm around him to run his fingers through his hair, “I won’t mind.”

“Have to join the mile high club,” Brian mumbles as he nuzzles his husband’s neck.

Eric laughs at that, “We already joined that club. Twice. Unless you mean you want me to fuck you this time around. We haven’t joined the mile high club in that manner yet.”

Brian scoffs, “Yeah, keep on dreaming. I’m not going to get caught getting fucked over the toilet.”

After letting Eric know of his decision, he closes his eyes for a few minutes and lets the fingers running through his hair relax him. He would love to take a short nap but their flight gets called for boarding before he can get that far. Eric picks up both of their carry-ons like the gentleman he is (“You’re tired and it’s not like they’re heavy. Now, come on.”)

They go through airport security and go through the gate to get on board. Eric tells him to take the window seat because he’s flown this way before and he wants Brian to see the view when they’re
close. After they are mimosas, which they do take, he tries to stay awake because there are more important things to do but Eric rolls his eyes and takes control.

“Get some rest. I’d rather you be awake and alert so you can fuck me all over our villa rather than wearing yourself out in a cramped bathroom and not wanting to do anything when we get there.”

“Me? Not wanting to fuck? Impossible,” Brian yawns, “…Make sure I don’t snore or anything. Wake me up if I start doing that.”

Eric snorts, “I’ll wake you up if you reach an inappropriate sound level. Keeping you from snoring completely might be difficult.”

Brian turns to glare at the man he swore to spend his life with before he realized he was such a dick as Eric looks at him innocently.

“Love you,” Eric purrs, kissing his cheek and changing the subject, “Sleep tight.”

Brian gives in and lets his head rest on the wall of the plane. Eric was more comfortable but the man took the outside seat so he doesn’t want to cramp him even more. He does smile a little when he feels him lace his fingers through his. Brian squeezes his husband’s hand a little and lets himself drift off.

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He knows he must have slept pretty soundly because they next time he opens his eyes, Eric is shaking his shoulder and three and a half hours have passed.

Brian rubs his eyes and must come off as disoriented because Eric chuckles and says, “It took a few tries to even get you to wake up. You even slept through the turbulence. Look out the window.”

Brian turns and he can see why Eric wanted him to look at the view. It’s beautiful. He’s never seen bluer waters or brighter sand.

“It’s beautiful,” Brian admits as he looks out the window.
“It’s one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been to. I haven’t been here since I was 25.”

Brian did know that Eric’s designs and technique got noticed by some hot shot CEO back when he was fresh out of school which led him to start building homes and resorts in budding vacation destinations, something no one in that field could dream of doing at that age. The Caribbean had been one of the places Eric mentioned, now that he’s thinking about it. Suddenly Brian feels a sense of excitement.

“We’re staying in a place you built, aren’t we?” Brian asks, proud that he figured something out before Eric got the chance to tell him.

Eric sighs at his correct assumption, “I wanted you to be surprised.”

Brian laughs at Eric’s crestfallen expression, “Hey, you designed multiple places here, right? I’ll still be surprised.”

Eric smiles, “This one was my favorite. It’s not on this island. We’re taking a ferry over after we get off the plane.”

Brian nods and looks out the window again to see the plane lowering to the point where they are just 60 or 70 feet above the beach. He sees the tourists wave at the plane as they fly over their heads before they go past the beach and prepare to land on the landing strip.

“We have now arrived at our destination, Saint Maarten,” the stewardess says over the intercom, “Please stay in your seats with your seatbelts fastened until we arrive to a complete stop. If you are catching a connecting flight, please don’t hesitate to ask our staff any questions about the location of your gate number. If you are taking a ferry to another island, there are shuttle buses available to the port. Thank you for flying with Caribbean Airlines. Have a great trip.”

After the seatbelt sign turns off, the two of them get up and Brian gets their carry-on bags from the overhead compartment before getting off the plane. After they get their luggage from the carousel, they follow the signs to the shuttle buses, only have to wait for a couple of minutes, and arrive at the port within 10 minutes, just in time for their ferry.

The trip to the island is an hour long and Brian only gets a little seasick, which Eric looks so guilty about that it’s almost comical. It’s manageable though, even if he says no to the complimentary snacks and drinks because of it.
“We’ll take a plane when we leave or if we want to go to any of the other islands,” Eric tells him seriously, “I just chose this route because we would have to wait a few hours for the connecting flight and I thought you would want to see the view.”

Brian smiles and tries to placate him, “I love the view. It’s really not that bad, I swear. I guess I’m not used to it.”

“You don’t need a bag to hold onto or anything, do you?”

“It’s more my head. I’ll be fine.”

And he is fine. The trip is worth it as he gets a view of the island once they come closer to shore. The captain announces their arrival in French first and English second to tell them they are arriving at Saint Barthélemy.

With their luggage, they make their way off the boat and Eric leads the way to a driver holding a sign that says ‘Davisson-Kinney’.

“Hello, welcome!” the driver greets in a French Caribbean accent, “My name is Omah and I will be taking you to your villa. Let me put your bags in the trunk.”

Omah quickly and efficiently loads the luggage on his own and opens the the door to the limousine for them. The villa is at one of the higher points on the island but close to the beach so it only takes a few minutes to arrive to the home. Brian’s jaw drops when he sees the place it’s modern, gorgeous, made from hand cut stone. When Omah pulls over to the side of the house, he parks the car and gets their luggage out of the trunk before handing Eric the keys to the house and to the Porsche convertible waiting parked further up in the driveway.

“I drove your rental over earlier today so you wouldn’t have to wait until morning,” Omah tells them, “Would you like some help getting your bags inside?”

Eric shakes his head and gets out his wallet to tip the man, “We can get it from here. Thank you so much for getting the car. It’ll make things a lot easier.”
Omah nods and tips his hat as he tells them to have a good week before driving back down the hill.

Eric turns to him and smiles, “Come on. We’ll enter through the back. The view from there is fantastic.”

They get their things and go to the back of the house. The terrace is fucking huge, complete with a gigantic infinity pool. Brian already has images of fucking Eric in the water after a late night swim.

“I know that look,” Eric smirks, “You can fuck me in there all you want. There are a lot of places in this house that will appeal to you. Turn around.”

“Shit,” Brian says, awed by what he sees, “Is this place costing you an arm and a leg?”

Eric shrugs, “I know the owner so I got a deal. Besides, I’m the one who built it. I deserved the discount anyway.”

Brian keeps staring at the scenery until Eric pushes him against the door and gets down on his knees.

“Tired of the view?” Brian smirks as he watches his husband unzip and pull down his pants.

“I wanted to look at something prettier,” Eric snarks before putting his lips around his cock and taking him down to the hilt.
Brian lets his head rest against the door and groans as Eric works his cock like the expert that he is.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come,” Brian pants after just a few minutes.

“Good,” Eric murmurs before taking him back into his mouth.

“No no no, I want to come in you.”

Eric takes the cock out of his mouth with a pop and stands up again before ripping off Brian’s shirt.

“Out here?” Brian smiles, his dick growing harder if that was even possible.

Eric nods before crashing his lips against his again. They kiss obscenely, their tongues almost batting each other for dominance, until they break it for a breath.

“Clothes off,” Brian orders, pulling up Eric’s shirt, “We’re too uneven.”

Eric is too turned on to even chuckle. All he does his pull off his shirt and kick off his pants and boxer briefs, grab the lube out of his carry-on before pulling him over across the terrace.

“I want you to fuck me here,” Eric demands, “Against the wall.”

Brian stares at it. This beautiful, wonderful idea made by a fucking genius. His genius. Jesus, what he would have done for something as simple as this as a 20-something who fucked everyone and everywhere left and right.

“You’re a genius,” Brian tells him, “This is beautiful. Why don’t we have one?”

Eric snorts before going over to turn on the water, letting it cascade over his toned form.
“It’s just a shower, Brian. We fuck in the shower all the time.”

“No. No, this is more than a shower. It’s a shower that’s outside. Made from hand cut stone.”

“So I’ve heard,” Eric muses as he tosses him the lube and braces his hands on the wall.

Brian steps behind him, lubes up a couple of fingers, before inserting them one by one into Eric. He watches Eric writhe and push back on them as Brian watches them disappear inside his lover.

“Brian, please!” Eric gasps out.

“Not so cocky now, are you?” Brian purrs into his ear before playfully biting Eric’s earlobe.

Eric groans so Brian takes pity, pulls out his fingers, lubes up his cock, and pushes in slowly. Eric starts to push his hips back but Brian holds him in place, making him wait for hit, which drives Eric crazier.

“Fuck...Brian...God, fuck me!”

Brian lets his hands leave Eric’s hips for a second to run his hands up and down his husband’s wet torso. He presses kisses against Eric’s neck shoulder before giving into a particularly hard thrust that makes Eric shout out.

“You like that?” Brian whispers in his ear, starting to fuck him just a little harder and faster.

“Yeah,” Eric pants out, finally getting to meet him thrust for thrust, “Come on, harder.”

Brian stifles a laugh, “You’re so impatient. I told you we should have fucked on the plane but you didn’t listen.”

“You were out ten minutes into the flight. I wanted you to regain...your strength...to fuck me be hard in this shower. So do it.”
Brian pushes on Eric’s shoulders to make him bend down more before taking Eric by surprise by pounding into his tight ass. As he grunts and Eric moans, he gives the man light slaps to his rear because Eric’s so fucking naughty and dirty when it comes down to it so he know it will make him come until the man sees stars.

He doesn’t know how close the other villas are. He didn’t bother paying attention, too focused on Eric’s creation and Eric himself, imagining fucking the man all over the property until he was leaking with his cum. Maybe he should quiet Eric down a little but the thought of other people hearing him, hearing what Brian does to him, even distantly, turns him on so fucking much. So he lets his husband cry out and scream.

“So fucking close! Brian, fuck! Come in me, baby. Want it so much,” Eric cries out.

Brian reaches around to stroke Eric’s cock as he feels his own dick pulsing. Brian moans into Eric’s ear as he fills his husband up and feels Eric’s cum coat his hand before it is washed away by the steady stream.

Brian pants against his Eric’s neck as Eric tries to catch his breath as well. Then, as the water still runs, Eric turns around and pulls Brian in for a kiss.

“Fantastic way to start out the honeymoon,” Brian says breathlessly against his lips.

“Mmhmm,” Eric hums before lightly darting the tip of his tongue into his mouth, “Can’t wait to turn the tables and fuck you out here.

Brian smirks and decides to surprise him, “I can’t wait either. It’ll be so fucking hot.”

Eric’s pupils blow and Brian can tell his husband wants to turn him around and do just that.

“But we have all week. It’ll happen. Right now I want you to give me a tour so I can choose where you put your dick in me first.”

Eric nods, eyes wide, before clearing his throat and turning off the water.
“Follow me then,” Eric requests, trying not to let his brand new hard-on keep him from walking properly.

Eric goes back over to their suitcases, doesn’t even bother putting his clothes back on and just throws his pants, shirt, and underwear over his shoulder before getting the keys open before sliding the side doors completely out of the way, opening up the living room completely.

“This is the living room,” Eric announces, putting their things in the corner so Brian follows suit, “It’s an open floor plan in this part of the house so it leads right to the kitchen and dining area. The office is through this door and the first of seven bathrooms is through that one. There are three bedrooms on this floor, two on the left and one on the right, with connected bathrooms. And there are two bedrooms with connected bathrooms down on the lower level. There’s also an exercise and recreational room, laundry room, and a little massage parlor down there. Along with another bathroom. Melvin really wanted an abundance of bathrooms in this place.”

After Brian looks into the bedrooms, he lets Eric take his hand and lead him downstairs.

“I’m the first person you’ve ever given a ‘clothing not required’ tour to, right?” Brian smirks, biting his lip in a failed attempt to hide the grin when Eric gives him a light smack on his ass, “Hey! It was a serious question.”

Eric laughs and spins him around to kiss him, “You know I wouldn’t give a naked architectural tour to just anyone. I’ve been saving that for you.”

“Well, aren’t you quite the virgin?” Brian snarks as Eric rolls his eyes and leads him into the
largest room downstairs.

“There’s even a pool table for my dearest pool shark,” Eric smiles before leading him into another room.

Eric gives him a light push inside, puts his arms around his waist from behind, and whispers, “Get on the table. Lay down on your stomach.”

Brian smiles a little, “I thought I was going to be choosing where I got fucked.”

“But I want to do things to you before I fuck you,” Eric insists, “Like deep tissue massages. Deep prostate massages.”

“Sounds startlingly similar to the start of a porno.”

“That one we watched a couple of weeks ago gave me ideas,” Eric purrs, “So get on the table.”

Brian raises his eyebrows but turns around and does what he’s told. Eric gets the oil to massage him and, fuck, the man has talented fingers. His husband takes his time with his back, buttocks, hamstrings, calves and feet and Brian finds himself moaning, not necessarily because he’s turned on (even though he is), but because he feels so good. If he didn’t know better, he’d say Eric was a professional because his tightened muscles start to feel so loose and relaxed. He becomes so loose that it’s almost as if Eric is working him into jello.

“Turn over, babe,” his husband tells him softly.

Eyes closed, he obeys and lets Eric work his arms, torso, and thighs before spreading his legs for Eric’s fingers.

Eric does as promised and gives him a deep and thorough prostate massage, one that lasts several minutes until it has Brian moaning incoherently. He feels so relaxed and euphoric that he completely welcomes Eric’s cock once it enters him and revels in the feeling of it. The way Eric is fucking him feels like a massage itself and it’s quite possible that it’s the most relaxing fuck he’s ever participated in.
Before he knows it, he’s coming and Eric follows him soon after. After his husband pulls out, he goes over to get a towel and wipes Brian off before he can even think about getting up.

Brian’s never been a big bath fan, usually opting for showers, but soaking in the large hot tub with Eric sitting between his thighs might make him change his stance on that position. They must be in there for an hour, just holding each other and relaxing in each other’s presence. There’s talk about going into town to go out to eat but they don’t even want to get dressed. Brian ends up sitting in the kitchen naked, watching Eric, also wonderfully naked, cook chicken marsala compiled from some of the groceries that stock the fridge and pantry. They eat outside on the terrace, watch the sunset, and just talk, laugh, and share touches until nightfall.

Since they are already in the perfect outfits, Brian leads Eric over to the pool and, when he least expects it, pushes him in. He can only do so much romance.

Eric quickly comes up from the surface, sputter, glaring, before bursting into laughter and saying, “Get in the water, Brian.”

Brian sits down on the pool wall to do just that but Eric pulls him in by the waist and they hold each other closely as they float. He doesn’t know how much time they spend just kissing in that pool, gazing at one another as though they just can’t get enough of each other. It’s surprising that he’s so content at the thought of staying this way for even longer. He feels loved, turned on, so breathtakingly happy. It ends up being Eric who initiates another round by leading Brian to where he can stand and wrapping his legs around him, telling him he’s still stretched from before so it was okay. The water lets him hold Eric up and gently pull him down on his cock as it lightly splashes around them. Eric looks down at him, face lit by the lights from the pool, and fuck, he looks beautiful. He's so goddamn lucky.

After they finish with their swim, they take a quick shower outside but refrain from doing more than touching there. He knows he’ll give in at least once and let Eric fuck him there but they’ll probably wind down and fuck once or twice more in bed so there’s no need to overdo it.

Clean and dry, they curl up together in the bedroom with the best view, taking it in and talking about what they want to do. Just by the way Eric describes the island and the surrounding ones around it, he knows it’s going to be a great trip.

He really should remind Eric of the 60/40 arrangement that he agreed to yesterday but he’ll just do it tomorrow because he’s too tired yet into it when Eric rolls him over on his side and spoons behind him before letting his cock slowly enter his hole. Brian bends his leg so that Eric has easier access and pushes back to meet him partway. They both come quietly but satisfyingly and Eric reaches over to clean him off with a tissue before wrapping his arms around him again so they can both fall asleep.
“PAPA DADDY PAPA DADDY PAPA DADDY!!!!”

They hear Lily before they see her on the webcam, footsteps dashing on Emmett’s hardwood floors as she makes a run for the computer.

When she gets in front of the screen, she waves enthusiastically and jumps up and down, telling them all about her day at Duncan’s preschool, who had been surprisingly easygoing about Lily going there for a few days while her parents were away. It could have been because Brian paid them more than necessary though. He and Eric just wanted to make sure Emmett and Drew didn’t get too stressed about taking Duncan to school Hoboken and Lily to school in Brooklyn.

“Duncan and I just had so much fun! We colored and played and I saw his friends Nick and Chelsea again and they were really nice!”

Eric grins, “That’s great, sweetie.”

“It is, it is! What did you do?”

“We went to the beach,” Brian tells her, “Do you remember when we went to the beach in Florida?”

Lily thinks on it, “I think. We made sandcastles?”

“Yeah, we did. And your papa was set on making a masterpiece,” Brian teases.

But seriously, Eric had been. He was carving out faces into the walls of the castle and everything. Nerd.

“Did you and Papa build sandcastles today?”

Brian laughs, “No, baby. Not today.”
“Then what did you do?” she asks curiously.

Brian edits out their morning activities, which included fucking on the empty beach before telling her they just swam and surfed.

“Your daddy tried to surf,” Eric corrects, smirking, “I tried to teach him but he kept falling off the board.”

Lily gasps, “Did it hurt?”

Sometimes it had if he fell the wrong way but he wasn’t going to let Lily and Eric know that so he shakes his head.

“No. And I wasn’t that bad.”

Eric smiles and looks away which makes Brian want to poke him and convince him that he really wasn’t that bad but he refrains. Whatever. He can make fun of Eric’s inability to play soccer later.

“You wanna see that house, Lily?” Brian asks her.

Lily nods and Brian takes her on a tour, telling her that her papa designed everything for this house and helped build it which really impressed her. Even though she technically knows what they do for a living, she doesn’t really understand what it entails until Brian points out a commercial he had written or directed or Eric points out a house or a building that he had built. They both take her out onto the terrace so that she can see the ocean and she oohs and ahhs over the sights before pouting over not getting to come with them to swim in the pool.

After she gets over it and tells them about her rats, they tell her they love her and that they’ll talk to her tomorrow before Emmett comes back over to say his goodbyes and logs off.

“So,” Eric starts, “It’s 3:30. I have dinner reservations for us in a couple of hours. What do you want to do until then?”

They could fuck. And god, Brian wants to (he usually does.) But they decide to drive downtown
for a bit to look around for some souvenirs to take back for Lily, Gus, Duncan, and JR as well as the adults in their life. They don’t get everything one trip. They stock up on premium coffee beans and booze for Emmett and Drew as well as for themselves. They find masks as well as some neat toys for Duncan and Lily. He gets Gus and JR t-shirts and shell bracelets before deciding to head back and do more shopping another day so they can get ready for dinner.

Eric asks if he wants to go to a club later on the island and of course he says yes. He doesn’t really go clubbing anymore. It’s basically only if he and Eric have a babysitter and some special event at one is going on. But fuck, it’s their honeymoon. That’s a special event in of itself. Keeping it in mind, he dresses in clothes that are both appropriate for a nice restaurant and a club.

It’s a ten minute drive to Le Tamarin, the restaurant they decided on. Brian drives this time around. That’s one thing he misses: driving on a regular basis. It isn’t practical to drive the car they have in the city unless they absolutely need to. They’re lucky enough to have a garage built into their home. If they didn’t, he’d probably sell the car. He does miss living in a place where it was a little easier to own one sometimes. Being able to drive a great car on a beautiful night with a beautiful man does make him feel good.

They pull up to the parking lot across the street and walk up the lit path to the restaurant.

“Lily would love this,” Eric tells him, not having been here before either, “It looks like a fairy tale.”

After they make it up the walkway, they are led to their table. They put their orders in, get their wine and their meals.

“I love it here,” Eric proclaims after taking the first bite, “No where in New York could you get food this good, this great of an atmosphere, and a piano player setting the tone without having to wear a suit and tie.”

“They probably keep in mind that the majority of their clientele are tourists. Rich tourists, but tourists nonetheless,” Brian answers, looking around the room.

“Probably so...I’m really happy that I’m here with you. Like ridiculously happy. It’s probably concerning how happy I am.”

Brian chuckles, “At this restaurant? I mean, I know it’s good but you make it sound as though you
are delirious. If that’s the case I will just have to get them to expand to New York.”

“I meant this island. I meant this new chapter. I just really love you. I love being around you all of the time. Well, most of the time.”

Brian bites his lip to hold back the grin before standing up and deciding to be spontaneous.

“Dance with me,” Brian requests, holding his hand out.

Eric looks at his hand first before staring up at him with bright eyes, “Seriously?”

Brian chuckles, “No. I just asked to get your hopes up.”

Eric looks around, “But no one else is dancing.”

“Then maybe they’ll follow suit.”

Eric’s face breaks into a big smile before letting Brian take his hand to lead him over to the dance floor. Once they get to the center of the floor, Brian pulls him close and they move gracefully together. Even though he knows they have captured the attention of many other couples in the restaurant, he can only focus on Eric and Eric can only look at him. Despite the tables that are filled and the murmured chatter, they are the only people in the room.

It’s surprising how breathlessly blissful they are after they leave the restaurant. He doesn’t know if it is the great food or the dancing, the relaxation the trip has brought just a little over 24 hours, or just getting to be alone with him without having to worry about work, the drama within their family and friends’ lives, parenting (even though he knows he’ll be itching to be back with their little girl again by the time their trip comes to a close.) All he knows is that he’s having the time of his life.

The drive to the club, the first of a couple they could go to this week is what Eric tells him. It isn’t a gay club. The island is too small for that. However, it is an impressive one. Crowded yet spacious. Well constructed and well thought out. The crowd seems pretty open-minded even though there are more traditional aspects of the island they have to watch for in general. Besides for a little light conversation with another newlywed couple, exchanging why they decided to come to St. Barts for their honeymoons, he and Eric mostly keep to themselves as they dance to the
thumpa thumpa, a beat that has changed in style over the years but Brian has let himself grow accustomed to. Maybe it was because of Gus and JR. Maybe the new generation of music had grown on him. Maybe it’s because he’s getting tipsy. Eric will probably have to drive back to the house. That’s okay. He probably knows the way back better anyway.

Things get a little heated. Eric kisses, nips, and licks at his neck and Brian groans as their groins touch when Eric gets closer.

“Fuck, where’s their backroom?” Brian asks, looking around.

Eric bursts into laughter, “I don’t think they have one. Most clubs don’t.”

“That’s such a travesty. But I guess that’s why Babylon remains on top,” Brian sighs.

“I’m sure if this place did have a backroom, we would draw some attention. Look at all these straight couples. Could you imagine?”

Brian suppresses a gag, “I could, but I don’t want to.”

“I don’t either. I’m horny and want to keep it that way. Let’s dance to one more song and head back to the house.”

They do just that. Brian downs his drink in one go, they dance to one more song, and, hand in hand, they make their way to the car.

They drink together when they get back. Brian also reveals the weed he smuggled into the country which both excites and angers Eric. It’s amusing to watch. They aim not to get completely wasted since Eric’s making him go snorkeling with him tomorrow but they do get inebriated enough for Brian to let Eric fuck him in the outside shower like he promised. It’s rough and playful and needy and it hits the spot perfectly as Brian shoots so hard that he hits the stone wall in front of him. After they are finished, it’s obvious that he can hold his liquor better than Eric when his husband thinks it would be a fantastic idea to stumble to the pool, slurring that they should go swimming. Brian stops him before he falls in and takes him into the kitchen to sober him up as well as himself. They don’t even fuck before they go to sleep. Eric is out practically as soon as his head hits the pillows. He makes up for it the next morning when they are both woken up by the sunlight pouring in through the windows and lets Brian fuck him into the mattress.
When they head down to the boat and go to another island, Eric shells out extra money for snorkeling masks with cameras in case they see something. They opt for the quick learning course, literally diving into it head first. When they really start to snorkel in the water, they’re lucky enough to run into a couple of dolphins and a sea turtle, along with various tropical fish. He knows Lily will love these pictures the most so he makes sure to take some extra pictures for her. It’s probably their most touristy day of the honeymoon, packed with sightseeing, boat and plane tours, drinking during brunch, swimming in the ocean, and lying in the sun.

When they go back to the house that night, Brian expects to wind down and fuck around but Eric has different plans.

“Put your swim trunks back on,” he orders, getting undressed and redressed right in the middle of the living room, “We’re going out.”

Brian raises his eyebrows as Eric puts his credit card in his pocket and fastens it in.

“Planning on shopping around in your swim trunks?” Brian asks.

Eric shakes his head, “No, you’ll see.”

Brian does what Eric tells him to do and follows him out the door and to the car. They arrive in front of a club and Eric gets out of the car.

“So we’re just going in? Shirtless and dressed like this.”

“Yep!” Eric replies as he walks ahead.

Brian’s confused until he gets inside. It becomes clear then.

Eric goes over to get them drinks and they walk in the pool, dancing in the water and almost acting like children. He’ll admit that the club gives Babylon a run for its money. Maybe he should have Theodore arrange for a pool at Babylon. It would stick out like a sore thumb but wet skin against wet skin has always been a turn on for him.
The night before their trip home comes too soon. Their stuff is packed and they just finished another round of fucking. They’ve been trying to get as many rounds in as possible before heading back to the real world.

“Fuck, I’ll miss it here,” Brian tells Eric honestly after he rolls off of them man, “I want to stay.”

“Yeah, I’m sure Emmett and Drew won’t mind raising Lily,” Eric chuckles, still catching his breath.

Brian rolls his eyes, “She would obviously come and live with us. Emmett could send her down in a couple of weeks so I have you all to myself for a little longer and we could be one big happy family. You could build and renovate homes and resorts all across the Caribbean and I could work from home, only leaving this place when absolutely necessary for business meetings.”

“You’re vacation happy,” Eric says softly, “You’d get bored without a big city to wander around in.”

“Maybe. But I might be able to give that up for this paradise.”

Eric gets on top of them and looks down, “You don’t have to give either up.”

Brian gives him a strange look, “I was just joking. Sort of. I really will miss it here though.”

“No, I mean that we can get a vacation home here. If you wanted to, that is.”

Brian raises his eyebrows, intrigued, “Would it be as perfect as this one? Would it be built by you?”

“It would be this one,” Eric tells him, “Melvin’s selling. He knew I was proud of it and asked if I would be interested in buying it. He’s even willing to give me a good deal on it.”

Brian blinks, “And you are telling me this now?”
Eric shrugs, “I wanted to see if you liked it before I bought it for us. It could be an investment. We could rent it out while we weren’t using it.”

“Of course I married someone with a business plan in mind even when planning our honeymoon,” Brian says fondly.

Eric just smiles and waits for his answer.

“Yes,” Brian tells him, “You know I love it. It was already a given that we would retire and grow old in some palace that you built but I want this one.”

Eric squeals a little and takes his face in this hands to kiss him, “It makes me so happy that you said yes! We can bring our friends down here and have family vacations. We could bring Gus and Lily and-”

“Another baby?” Brian asks.

Eric freezes and stares at Brian.

“Don’t fuck with me. I’m buying you a mansion.”

Brian laughs and shakes his head, “I’m not. I’m not fucking with you. I want it. Maybe it’s because you can show a guy the time of his life but I really want it.”

Eric swallows, tears springing to his eyes, “Brian...are you sure?”

Brian puts a hand on both sides of Eric’s face and gives him a small smile, “Yes, I’m sure. It will make you and Lily happy. And I know it will make me happy too.”

Eric’s lower lip trembles before bending down to kiss him.

“Have I mentioned that I love you?” he asks, teasing.
Brian pretends to think on it, "I think maybe once or twice."

"Well, in case you forgot, I do. So much."

"I figured. You did marry me, after all."

"Whose sperm will we use?" Eric asks excitedly as he goes back on the baby subject, "I think we should use yours. We made Lily with my sperm so now it's your turn."

"So? I made Gus with my sperm so we're even right now. Who says it isn't your turn?"

"Gus came first. Then Lily. So now it's your turn. Plus, you're so hot. We should bless another child with your good looks. It would be the decent thing to do," Eric reasons.

"You're just as good looking as I am. And you have better genes. Cancer and Alcoholism runs in my family. Your grandfather lived past 90 and died because he was a daredevil. You don't know one person who you are related to who has suffered from addiction or severe health problems. Besides me, I guess, since marriage is sort of a relation. Believe me, we are probably better off using yours."

Eric considers it, "We will have to compromise then. We'll both just have to jizz into a cup and let the best sperm win."

Brian stares at his husband, "Well, there's no pressure there at all."

"I don't see why," Eric shrugs, "We'll love the finished product just the same no matter what."

Brian's gaze softens and he can't deny it.

"Okay," Brian agrees, "May the best sperm win."
Both of them grin at each other before meeting for a kiss again. As Eric gasps out when Brian enters him once more, he doesn't feel as disappointed about leaving this paradise. He knows they can always come back now that he knows they will be buying it before it hits the market. Maybe they'll bring their friends to show them how talented Eric is, if he hadn't made that known already. Even if it takes a while before they can come back, that's okay. They're going on a new adventure that will be just as exciting.
21st and Queens Plaza North

Chapter Summary

Brian and Eric arrive home only to find out some news.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. I guess I needed a little break. Hope to not keep you waiting as long for the next chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They get to the airport around 4 o’clock, tired, tan, rested, and, okay, Brian was already itching to go back to their island retreat. But he was also itching to check in with Kinnetik to make sure none of the branches burned down. And, most of all, he was looking forward to seeing Lily. They both hadn’t been away from her for more than a weekend since she was born. Sure, Eric might have to leave for a couple of weeks to work on a project or Brian might have to go out of the country to work on an international campaign but one of them was always there and they hadn’t taken more than a weekend getaway without her. So, despite wishing that their honeymoon had been a little bit longer, he missed the little drama queen.

And he knows Eric missed her too. His husband had a feeling that she was at the airport with Emmett and was close by. It wouldn’t surprise Brian if Eric’s hunch was right. The man is pretty intuitive. And, within minutes, Eric’s intuition is proven right yet again when they see Emmett sitting next to Lily. Emmett looks up and sees them but Lily is too immersed in her artwork to notice Brian puts a finger up to his lips to tell Emmett to stay quiet, takes Eric’s hand, and quietly walks over to their daughter.

“Is that picture for me?” Brian says in her ear, startling her to the point where she yelps in the process.

“DADDDDDYYYY!!!!” Lily screams, once she gets over the jump scare, “PAPA!!! You’re home! You’re both home!!!!”

Lily jumps up and down, taking both of their hands as she does so, as she looks at them with so much love and admiration. It brings a fantastic feeling to Brian’s heart. He never wants her to grow out of this. It makes him feel more important and amazing than he is plus if she gets older that means he does too.
“Lily demanded that I bring her with me,” Emmett informs them as he stands up. “She was so excited and could barely stay still the whole ride here. Duncan and Drew are back at your place, making dinner. We figured getting her things and the rats back to your house would be easier than taking you into New Jersey to get her things only to go to Brooklyn afterwards.”

“Thanks, Emmett,” Eric tells him, picking Lily up to put her on his hip. He kisses the little girl’s cheek and smiles.

“I missed you, sweet girl. Were you good for Emmett and Drew?”

Lily nods her head exaggeratedly, “Yes, Papa. I was PERFECT.”

Brian glances at Emmett. Somehow he just doesn’t believe that. But Emmett’s expression tells him that, while Lily is definitely exaggerating, she was pretty good.

“Other than a few tiffs she and Duncan got into and a couple of mini-breakdowns over missing her papa and her daddy, everything went very smoothly. Oh, and there was this one meltdown she had where she was devastated that she didn’t have a certain pair of shoes with her. But that was completely understandable. She made them sound like the best shoes in the world so who could blame her?”

Brian snorts at that before turning and giving into Lily’s grabby hands and taking her into his own arms. Lily gives him a long hug and he returns it, holding her close as she lays her head on his shoulder.

“I missed you, Daddy,” Lily tells him softly, still not letting him go.

“I missed you too,” Brian tells her, a small smile forming on his lips.

Apparently Lily is in a mood to be held because Eric rolls his eyes and takes Brian’s carry-on for him before they head to the carousel to get their luggage. Lily accepts that she is getting put down as they get their suitcases and they are on their way to the parking lot. Emmett opens the trunk and gets Lily in Duncan’s car seat while they load their things in the back before making their way to Brooklyn.
Between Lily and Emmett, the two of them fill up anything that could resemble silence as they make their way into Queens. The seating is less than ideal. With Brian in the front and Eric in the back with Lily, he has to show his affection by reaching behind his seat to tickle his knee rather than making out with him in the back to make Emmett uncomfortable. But Eric kicks his seat in retaliation, making Emmett go into father mode.

“Both of you stop it right now! I have to switch lanes and traffic is way too hectic for my liking. I swear you are both worse than Lily and Duncan. Lily, I bet you have to keep these two in line, huh?”

“Yes,” Lily nods while playing with two of her dolls, “They are both really silly.”

“That’s what I thought,” Emmett says, pursing his lips, as Eric laughs and Brian just shakes his head in amusement.

“Thank you again for watching her, Emmett,” Eric tells him, “I know she enjoyed herself and wouldn’t have wanted to go anywhere else.

Emmett keeps concentrating on the road but Brian can see his gaze soften, “We love Lily, you know that. She welcomed Duncan with open arms and lets me indulge by buying clothes of the more feminine variety, something I don’t get to do with my butch son.”

“I don’t know, Emmett. There was that time he wanted to be Queen so he could boss Lily around,” Brian smirks.

Emmett sighs, “I still wish I had been there. Seeing it through FaceTime just isn’t the same.”

“Well, you know we feel the same way about Duncan,” Eric tells him, “He’s such a sweet little boy and really helped Lily with the move. She adores him and if you and Drew ever want to get away for a week, we’ll do the same for you as you did for us.”

“Oh, I appreciate that. We probably won’t take a trip that long without him for a while. I’d like to have at least one of us there for him. We have one trip planned for the summer but I’ll let Drew tell you about that. Without him though? I don’t think I want that until he’s been with us for at least a couple of years. He’s only been with us for a few months and he still has nightmares but maybe Drewsie and I will take a weekend getaway in a few months and take you up on your offer. I just can’t see myself leaving him for more than a day or two...not that I am judging you two! It was
your honeymoon and it was a well-deserved one. You two came off the plane radiant and so in
love.”

He can hear Eric stifle a laugh and Brian feels himself roll his eyes, “Give it a couple of years,
Emmett. Maybe even less. A break might not sound so bad then. As much as we missed her, it was
nice getting away from this little rascal.”

Lily gasps then crosses her arms to pout, “Hey!”

“He’s just teasing you, baby,” Eric tells her as he strokes her hair, “He talked about you a lot on the
plane ride back. I think he’s excited to take you to your first ballet class this week and I can’t wait
to take you to flamenco on Saturday.”

“So I’ll see you there, Brian!” Emmett exclaims, “I know they only get to dance together the last
half of the class since they work on the boys and girls separately for the first half but I feel like
ballet will be good for both of them. I’m glad you brought up the idea. Duncan is a little hesitant
and shy about it still but jumped on board when Drew told him that he took it for years to stay in
shape and coordinated for football. Drew actually enjoyed it. He is a wonderful dancer. Did I ever
tell you about the time he faced any fears he had left and asked me to dance at a fundraiser gala? It
was only a month after we got back together and I was still a little worried that he wasn’t ready.
But he took me as his date, ignored the sneers that a few of his teammates and rivals gave him, and
swept me off my feet! It was wonderful. I want Duncan to be able to do that for Lily.”

“You’re a little too set on our kids getting married, Honeycutt,” Brian tells his friend, huffing out a
laugh.

“I know, I know. I’m a romantic but I have a feeling, what can I say?” Emmett shrugs, “Jesus,
finally!”

Emmett gets onto the Brooklyn Bridge, thus out of traffic, and they arrive at the house several
minutes after. Lily managed to fall asleep within the last 10 minutes of the ride so she’s not happy
to be woken up but doesn’t fuss or get pissed over it and surprisingly takes one of their carry-on
bags into the house for them. They get everything inside in one go and, after getting it upstairs,
they come back down to find Drew cooking with Duncan standing on a chair next to him.

“Why are you adding that?” Duncan asks, looking down at the deep-sided pan.
“The same reason I added the last thing, little man,” Drew answers, amused, “To add flavor.”

Drew’s about to add something else but Duncan stops him by saying, “I wanna add it. I’m cooking too.”

Drew looks a bit conflicted but compromises by throwing a dash of herbs into the little boy’s hand so he can toss it into the pan.

“I did it! See?” Duncan tells his father excitedly.

“You sure did!” Drew says, “You’re just a gourmet chef, aren’t you?”

Duncan nods and keeps watching what his father is doing as Emmett decides to snap out of the tender gaze he has over watching his partner and son together by announcing their arrival.

“We’re back!” he exclaims, coming into the kitchen to kiss Drew on the cheek, “Hit some traffic but made good time, considering. How’s dinner coming along?”

“The chicken marsala is coming along well. I’m just waiting for the water to boil for the pasta, which I assume Brian is going to skip out on.”

“Oh, Drew. You know me so well,” Brian says sarcastically has he sits down at the kitchen table.

“I made the pieces of chicken big enough to be served on their own.”

“And I helped!” Duncan adds, turning to Brian.

“I’m glad,” Brian tells him, “With Lily taking off for the airport, I needed someone here to make sure your Pa didn’t burn down my kitchen.”

Duncan giggles at that as Lily comes in with her rats. Brian tries not shudder as she puts Bianca into his lap and looks up at him with big eyes.
“Bianca missed you, Daddy,” Lily tells him as she cuddles the other rat, “Vernon didn’t but Bianca missed you so much!”

Brian closes his eyes and picks the rat up to look at it before handing it back to his daughter.

“You know I don’t like holding them, Lily,” he tries not to scold too harshly.

“But he MISSED you,” Lily informs him, trying to give the white rat back.

Luckily Eric swoops in and keeps him from having to hold the rodent again. Brian looks up to give his husband an exasperated look as he watches the man fake coo over the rat.

“Lily, are you saying that Bianca didn’t miss me?” Eric asks.

“He missed you too,” Lily admits, “But he missed Daddy because Daddy doesn’t play with him and he wanted him to.”

Despite the lack of logic in that statement, Eric nods solemnly before turning to him.

“Brian, you really should take Bianca’s feelings into account.”

Brian glares at him before standing up and stepping away from the rats.

“Lily, they are acceptable when they aren’t near me.”

“Why do you think they’re icky?” the drama princess cries out, stomping her foot in the process, “They are NOT icky! They’re my friends and I love them!”

“They aren’t supposed to be in the kitchen anyway,” Eric reminds her, ushering her out, “Go put them away. Drew will be done with dinner soon.”
“I’ll take one up!” Duncan exclaims, jumping down from the chair and holding his hands out.

Lily hands over Bianca before they both go up to her room to put them in their cage.

“They are crazy about those rats,” Emmett comments, “Duncan has started hinting around to wanting one.”

“Oh, didn’t you know? You can’t just get one rodent. You have to get two,” Brian mutters, getting back in his chair, “Why couldn’t have we just gotten her a puppy?”

“Oh no, you aren’t going to pull that now. I wanted to get a dog or a cat and you were the one who wanted a starter pet that could mostly stay out of sight and out of mind.”

“Lies. I didn’t want a pet. But I had to compromise in some way. Looking back, I went the wrong way. We should have gotten her a dog.”

“We still can,” Eric hints not-so-subtly, “Two rats and a dog isn’t overdoing it.”

“Maybe after the baby is here.”

And he didn’t even think about it when he said it. It was only recently decided but they had talked about it. A lot. They talked about it last night, this morning, on the flight back. If he wasn’t a little excited about it himself, Eric’s excitement would have eventually rubbed off on him. But apparently all those years hanging around Mikey had given him foot in mouth syndrome because he did not mean to say that in front of Emmett and Drew.

“What? Wait, what? I thought...I thought that a baby was just something Lily asked for! I didn’t know you were already in the process-”

“We’re barely in the process,” Eric corrects, looking at Brian with a raised brow, “We called Cynthia this morning before we left to get her blessing but we won’t be making calls about a surrogate until later this week.”
Emmett claps his hands and squeals as he rushes over to hug them. Eric first, then Brian. The hug Brian receives lasts longer than he’s comfortable with but he returns it until he pushes Emmett away.

“I’m so happy for you both! This is so exciting! This-”

“Is not something we want to discuss with or in front of Lily until the surrogate is pregnant and near the end of her first trimester,” Eric finishes as they hear the telltale signs of footsteps coming down the stairs.”

“Congratulations,” Drew says before they arrive in the kitchen, “We won’t say anything to anyone. Will we, Em?”

Emmett sighs, “It'll be hard but my lips are sealed.”

“Dinner ready?” Lily asks, skipping into the kitchen, curls bouncing with her steps.

“It sure is,” Drew tells her as he turns off the fire underneath the chicken marsala.

Along with the salad and brown rice that Drew had thoughtfully made for him, Brian will admit that the guy is a better cook than he thought he would be. He likes Drew. The guy’s hot, for one thing. Brian may do the whole monogamy thing now but he can still appreciate gorgeous men. He would say that Emmett was lucky to bag him but, maybe it is his loyalty to the person who has been his friend for twenty years, he knows it is the other way around. Emmett was a good man and he’s glad Drew pulled his head out of his ass and fought for Emmett’s undying devotion or whatever the fuck. They’re good parents who were lucky enough to adopt a great son. They’re incredible friends who have been there for them and have shown Lily so much love-

Obviously the feelings that the wedding and the honeymoon brought on haven’t left yet and are trying to extend themselves to his friends. He’ll just blame Eric. That’s the kind of stuff he thinks and says out loud, not him.

Dinner goes smoothly and he’s surprised that Lily tries the marsala and likes it. She doesn’t eat the mushrooms, but she eats the penne and the chicken with no problem. Duncan is already becoming a human garbage disposal who rarely finds something he doesn’t like. There had been this one time when Brian had both of them and Lily was being picky about dinner while Duncan said yes to everything Brian had suggested. Brian had asked what he didn’t like and the only two things
Duncan could think of were broccoli and cottage cheese. He can’t blame him on the cottage cheese.

“So, Duncan. Did you have Lily’s back at school and make sure she didn’t get into too much trouble?” Eric asks the boy.

“I would never get in trouble!” Lily corrects firmly, “I just like to have fun!”

Brian snorts at that and Duncan shakes his head.

“We were good!” he replies before taking a big bite of his pasta, “We got gold stars one day.”

Lily nods her head enthusiastically and Eric smiles.

“Good for you! I’m proud of you guys. What were the gold stars for?”

“Clean up time,” Lily supplies, “We got all the toys and crayons put away extra fast and Miss Jefferson said that was the fastest clean up she’s ever seen! And we got another one for being extra smart because we are.”

Duncan nods in agreement and Brian snorts at the explanation.

“Why can’t you do clean up time when it comes to your room then?” Brian mutters.

“I do too much of that at school. And you and Papa make it look good when you help,” Lily dismisses before quickly changing the subject, “You said you went swimming and saw dolphins and turtles and fishies! I wanna see, I wanna see!”

“Let’s get the dishes in the dishwasher first, then we will show you all the pictures we loaded onto the laptop.”

They clean off the table and head into the living room where they let Emmett and Drew sit on the couch and man Eric’s laptop. Well, Emmett does. Drew only glances at the photos while he
watches a baseball game on Root Sports. Lily and Duncan ooh and ahh over the pictures, especially the underwater ones, and Eric stands behind the couch to give commentary.

“It looks so pretty!” Lily squeals.

“You like that house?” Eric asks.

“Yes! And you built that?” Lily asks in awe.

Eric nods, grinning and proud over their daughter being so impressed.

“I am in complete awe as well,” Emmett admits enthusiastically, “The place is beautiful! I’m envious! Drewsie, look at this palace.”

Drew looks and raises an eyebrow, impressed, “Wow. That place is great. I hope the person who rented it to you gave you a good deal since you built and designed it.”

“He actually let us stay in it for free,” Eric informs them, including Brian who hadn’t known the cost of the rent, “It would have been $40,000 a week otherwise.”

Drew whistles, “That’s a bit steep. I mean, we could afford it but not very many people could.”

Emmett looks at Drew quickly, “Drewsie, are you implying that you want to take me on a vacation?”

“You. And Duncan. Maybe when things die down with the WWO,” Drew tells him.

“Oh! Speaking of which,” Emmett starts as he turns to them, “Drew has been doing so much for different organizations here that the Worldwide Orphan Foundation asked him to become Ambassador of Sports for them. He’s already been doing things like getting kids on the east coast involved in different types of sports and creating scholarships for them but he’ll be going to Ethiopia this summer for a month to work with the kids there. There’s a high interest in sports there so they figured that would be the best place to start. I’ll be joining him for the last week he’s there and Duncan will be coming along as well. Drew has been talking with them about visiting other
countries to start sports and educational programs. It looks like he might do Vietnam as well, but nothing has been planned yet. For right now, Ethiopia is his focus but hopefully he will be able to do as much as he can for more affected areas.”

“Emmett offered to give a hand when it came to planning some events for the community to raise awareness on the children in need there. It’ll all be free and, if it doesn’t get them adopted within their own country, which hopefully it will, it could at least give more community members initiative to help out with the building process of better facilities that’ll help the kids which can eventually lead to more jobs and a better economy, both for the community in general but even more so for the kids who age out of the system.”

“Oh my god, that’s fantastic!” Eric exclaims, “I’m really proud of you, Drew. You really have been doing a lot and I’m glad you found something that means so much to you.”

“I’m so proud of him,” Emmett gushes, “There will be a ceremony officially welcoming him at the end of May and he’ll be leaving in the middle of June. You are all invited to that and his Au Revoir party, of course. I know that I said I wanted to wait for Drew to tell you about the trip this summer but I’ve been dying to tell someone about what he’s getting accomplished.”

“I can’t blame you,” Eric smiles, “It truly is impressive. We’ll miss you while you’re away though.”

“At least Duncan and I will still be here until the last week he’s there so that’ll soften the blow for you. I couldn’t let him miss too much of his extracurricular activities this summer. We already arranged for him to do dance and swimming this summer so we didn’t want to pull him out of those plus he’s still getting used to things and we want to get him into a routine.

“The places I will be staying won’t be that comfortable, either,” Drew adds, “Hopefully that can start to change once we better the conditions but I figure it’ll be easier on Duncan to stay here for the most part. I hope the week that he is there will be a good learning experience though.”

“It probably won’t be as comfortable as that beautiful villa you built,” Emmett adds.

“Well, when you get back, you can stay in it for free whenever you want,” Eric informs them, “I bought the place.”

Emmett gasps and claps his hands, “Oh, that’s wonderful! I can see it now: family vacations,
meeting with Michael, Ben, Lindsay, Mel, Debbie, Carl, and the kids for one big reunion, enjoying the beach and the sand—"

“That was the plan,” Eric laughs, “Now I feel even more indulgent than I was feeling before. I’d love to donate something to help out with the process of what you are trying to accomplish down there.”

“Oh, that would be nice. You could donate on the website but Drewsie can give you the director’s email address if you want to correspond with her about what you would like the money to go towards.”

Eric nods and Drew goes ahead and forwards the address to Eric.

“I would offer to help more but, with what we told you in the kitchen earlier, I don’t think either of us will have the time for long term projects and trips for a while. I’m working in New Orleans for a month myself and might shorten that trip by a few days if everything goes smoothly. But you sound so passionate that I am tempted to offer to design housing and facilities for—"

“You’re not taking off for Ethiopia for god knows how long,” Brian interrupts, looking pointedly at his husband.

Eric rolls his eyes and Emmett smiles, “That means so much, baby. You’re busy but I bet if your name got thrown around when it came to designers, the whole organization would be over the moon.”

“...Maybe I can speak with them and, if they are interested, I can just get quick measurements of the locations, design from home, and they can employ people in the area to build.”

Emmett looks at Drew excitedly and Brian stares at Eric disbelievingly.

“This is why we always end up with girl scout cookies and fucking Yankee Candle from the elementary students that knock on our door. You can never say no.”

“To be fair, we didn’t ask. He just offered,” Emmett teases in a singing tone.
“Don’t worry, my love,” Eric tells him dramatically as he walks over to the arm chair, “I would never leave your side for too long.”

Brian smirks before taking the man by surprise by pulling him into his lap to kiss him. He probably should be more chaste around the kids and maybe around Emmett and Drew too because Emmett clears his throat pointedly and stands up.

“Well, that’s our cue to get on the road. It’s past 7 o’clock anyway and Duncan and Lily both have to be up for school tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to go,” Lily pouts, “I want to stay home with Daddy and Papa.”

“We’re both going to work tomorrow,” Eric says from Brian’s lap, “We won’t even be here.”

“That’s why we all skip!” Lily says, as though a lightbulb has gone off over her head.

“No can do, kiddo,” Eric sighs, standing up, “I have meetings lined up tomorrow and have to help with construction in Bensonhurst, your daddy has a meeting with Coca Cola, and you need to get back to your own preschool so you can get back into the swing of things. Don’t you miss Margaret and Viola?”

Lily shrugs, “I guess. But I want to be with you all day!”

“You can be with me all day this coming weekend. Daddy is going to see Gus but I’ll be here.”

“…Daddy…” Lily pouts as she juts her lip out.

“Come on,” Eric says softly, squatting down in front of the couch, “Your daddy misses Gus and doesn’t get to see him as much as he sees you. He’ll just be gone for two days. Now hug Duncan, Drew, and Emmett goodbye before I take you up for your bath.”

Lily gets up, shoulders slouched, before going over to Drew to quickly hug his legs, going to do the same to Emmett, and putting her arms around Duncan’s neck to hug him tight.
“So moody,” Eric mutters as he watches their daughter go up the stairs with her head down, “Thank you so much again. I better get up there to get her bath ready. Brian, you want to see them out?”

Eric gives them quick hugs goodbye, kisses Duncan on the forehead, and heads upstairs after Lily. Emmett goes to get a couple of toys of Duncan’s on the other side of the room and Brian follows them out to their car.

“You get everything?” he asks Emmett after Drew gets Duncan situated and goes to sit in the driver’s seat.

“I think we’re good. We only brought a couple of things of Duncan’s and a few groceries to make dinner. But if we did miss anything, it’s not like we won’t see you again.”

“Yeah, it’ll probably be a week tops...well, thanks for taking her for the week. We really appreciate it.”

“Anything for one of my best friends,” Emmett smiles, “And for you too, I guess.”

Brian puts a hand to his heart, “Oh, how you wound me.”

Emmett lets out a laugh before rubbing the back of his neck.

“So, you and Justin are friends now, right?”

Brian squints, trying to figure out where Emmett is coming from, “I guess so. We’ve been talking and hanging out. Eric gets along with him and Nathan really well. Why?”

Emmett holds up his hands, “I don’t want to be one to gossip-”

“Yeah, right,” Brian quips, but is already intrigued.
Emmett glares, “I’ve grown up too, you know. Like I said, I don’t like to gossip but I figured since you, and Eric for that matter, have been spending time with them, you might be able to provide some kind of support and could talk.”

“What are you talking about?” Brian asks, intrigue turning into concern.

Emmett sighs sadly and looks at him, “Justin and Nathan broke up. I only know because I stopped by the apartment when I was in the area. He’s so heartbroken, blindsided by it. Daphne, bless her, came in on Friday and is in until Tuesday. She’s staying with at his apartment.”

Brian blinks, “Wait, why did they break up?”

“They wanted different things. Kids, I guess. Justin thought they could compromise or work it out. Nathan couldn’t so he called it quits. I haven’t talked to Nathan. I consider him a friend but I’m, what? Twenty years older than him? I don’t think he would pour his heart out to me and he has friends closer to his own age. Shit, Justin won’t even say much about it.”

Brian runs a hand down his face and stays silent for a few seconds.

“He loves him.”

And it’s not a question and he doesn’t think his friend assumes it is but Emmett nods anyway and seems surprised that he would even say it in the first place.

“He felt protective of him. Responsible. Nathan had it rough, Justin helped him, and Nathan left when Justin didn’t even see it coming.”

Emmett sighs, “Brian, come on. We don’t even know the whole story and you know there are two sides. I’ve known Nathan practically since he started dating Justin. He’s a good guy. He’s just young and seems to have had a traumatic upbringing.”

Brian looks away. A couple breaking up shouldn’t bother him. It’s none of his business so he shouldn’t even be involved in it. He’s happy in his own relationship and that’s what matters.
“I didn’t tell you so you could take someone’s side. I told you because you are Justin’s friend now. And not only are you his friend, but you are the one he talks to about his dad and stuff. You’re blunt and sometimes harsh when someone is going through something but you know what? Most of the advice you give out is really sound. So I thought I would let you know. Besides, Justin needs all the friends he can get. He seems to be hesitant to lean on anyone for support, even Daphne. Breakups are hard.”

“Don’t I know it?” Brian mutters.

Emmett purses his lips before patting Brian on the arm.

“I’ll see you later,” he tells him, “I need to get Duncan back to the house, bathed, and in bed. If I don’t see you by the time you go to Toronto, tell everyone that I love them and miss them already and give Gus and JR long hugs from me-”

“Goodbye, Emmett.”

Emmett rolls his eyes and gets into the passenger seat. He hears Drew’s muffled voice saying, “Took you long enough” before they drive in the direction of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Brian makes his way up to the bathroom and walks in to find Eric helping Lily out of the tub and draining the water.

“I think she wants you to get her into her pajamas since I helped with her bath,” Eric tells him.

Brian looks down at the little girl and smiles when he sees her looking up at him, hooded towel in place and curls already starting to spiral. He puts his hands on top of the hood, squeezes the hair underneath it, then ushers her into her bedroom.

“What pajamas do you want to wear?” he asks when he opens the drawer.

Lily taps her chin then walks over to the dresser with purpose and Brian tries to bite back the sigh. He already knows she’s in the mood to be picky.
“Hmm, let’s see! Not that one, or that one, I don’t want that one either—”

“What about the purple nightgown?” he asks as he starts to get it out.

But Lily puts her hand on top of his and shakes her head.

“Daddy…no.”

He gives her another minute of indecisiveness before taking two sets of pajamas out of the drawer and closing it.

“Pick one,” he orders, holding them up.

“But—”

“Lily,” he warns her. Of what, he doesn’t know. But it seems to work.

Lily lets out a put-upon sigh and points to her yellow tank top with white polka dots and her rainbow pants. The tank top is from one set and the pants are from another but he doesn’t care right now. He grabs a pair of underwear for her and helps her get everything on before letting her come downstairs to let her hair dry.

They read a couple of books with her until 8 and work on her with addition and subtraction basics until 8:30. Even though he experiences the child that is his daughter every day, he’s still amazed by how advanced she is. While she is definitely more right-brained, she is ahead in math as well. Eric is convinced it’s because she’s left-handed and they are more likely to be creative, off-the-wall geniuses. He isn’t sure if the study on that is conclusive, but it does describe his kid.

When they take her to bed, Lily insists on making up a bedtime story for them. He doesn’t know what he was expecting when she started but it definitely took a strange turn.

“Once upon a time…there was a princess named Rosie. And she lived in a castle in…Chicago! And one day, she got a lion and a wolf and a turtle and a duck! She loved them. She had two rats too. One day after that, they all saw Taylor Swift singing! And she said, “Princess, please come sing
with me! I can’t sing today. My throat’s all scratchy and yucky!” So Rosie told her she’d sing for her but only this one time! Then, a dragon came! And he blew fire, EVERYWHERE!”

Brian and Eric glance at each other, waiting for her to continue.

“What happened next?” Eric prompts, when she doesn’t reveal any more of the story.

“Oh,” Lily says, suddenly remembering that she forgot a part, “The End!”

“...What-” Brian starts, bewildered before Eric cuts in.

“Wow. That was a really intense story. Very ambiguous and open-ended ending that can be interpreted in so many ways. Were Rosie and Taylor okay?”

“Mmmm...Yes! They were fine. So were the lion and the wolf and the duck and Bianca and Vernon.”

“What about the turtle?” Brian has to ask.

“No. He got hurt.”

“Poor thing,” Eric says before he kisses her on the forehead, “I hope he makes it through. I love you, baby. So much.”

“I love you too, Papa,” she tells him as she lays her head on the pillow.

Brian bends down and gives her a kiss as well.

“Love you. Get some rest so I won’t be dragging your butt out of bed in the morning.”

Lily nods and closes her eyes before Brian turns on her nightlight and follows Eric out the door.
They fuck around in bed. Eric gives him a spectacular rim job and Brian blows him in return. There’s something weighing on him though. Maybe he’s tired from the flight or maybe it’s what he’s heard about Justin but he’s not feeling as driven by his sex drive as he usually is.

Eric catches on. The man isn’t stupid. If he was, Brian wouldn’t have married him.

“What’s going on?” Eric asks as he lifts Brian’s head off his cock.

Brian glances at him, “What makes you think something is going on?”

Eric raises an eyebrow, “I know you, Brian. You’re quieter than usual. Something’s on your mind.”

Brian sighs, “Let me finish you off first.”

It takes longer than usual. Probably because he’s making Eric worry over not knowing what’s bugging him. But as soon as Eric comes and Brian swallows it down, he stretches back up to the top of the bed, gives the man a kiss, and opens his arms to let Eric lay in them.

“Seriously, what’s up?” Eric asks, patting him on the chest.

“It’s nothing that really concerns us. Just something that Emmett told me,” Brian admits.

“Obviously it’s concerning you, even if it doesn’t deal with either of us.”

Brian thinks on it for a few seconds and weighs whether or not he should say anything. It might be better to keep quiet and let Eric find out for himself but that always risks the chance of Eric casually calling Justin or Nathan and inviting them over for dinner and wouldn’t that be awkward, especially if he found out Brian already knew?

“Justin and Nathan broke up.”
He feels Eric still in his arms before turning to look down at him.

“What? What happened?”

“I guess Nathan took him by surprise and called it quits.”

Eric squints before shaking his head, “Brian, Nathan loves Justin. I mean that, he loves him. I talk to him more than you do and Justin is the only person he’s ever had a relationship with.”

That’s news to Brian but he tries not to show surprise at the announcement.

“Well, apparently he didn’t appreciate it enough.”

“Bullshit. He wouldn’t just leave him without a good reason,” Eric glares.

Brian raises his eyebrows, “Are you taking Nathan’s side?”

“No. I’m not taking any sides. I just think you are biased.”

Brian snorts, “I’m not biased.”

“Yeah, okay. What’s the reason Nathan ended it?”

Brian shrugs, “Justin’s, what? Nine years older than Nathan? He’s ready for kids and told me himself he wanted them. Nathan doesn’t. And it isn’t like Nathan just doesn’t want them right now. Justin even told me he was willing to wait until Nathan was ready. But apparently he doesn’t want them at all and broke up with Justin because he did.”

Eric sighs, “Poor Justin. Poor Nathan.”

“I don’t get why you feel all that sorry for Nathan. It doesn’t seem like he was even willing to
“Don’t jump to conclusions,” Eric scolds, “We don’t even know the whole story. And besides, how well can you really compromise something like that? It isn’t like they were talking about how many kids they should have. If Nathan doesn’t want them then he shouldn’t have them. And he probably let Justin go so that he could.”

“Now who’s jumping to conclusions?” Brian mutters.

“But my conclusions are often right.”

“Well, it’s none of our business anyway.”

“They’re our friends. Justin’s your ex. I know you want him to be happy when it comes down to it.”

Brian stays silent as Eric traces a finger over his abs.

“I’ll call Nathan this week,” Eric tells him, “See how he’s doing and let him know that our door is still open.”

“Nathan has friends his own age.”

“So does Justin and I’m not going to stop you from checking in on him. I’m still going to consider both of them as my friends unless one of them cuts me off. And who could do that? Just look at me.”

Brian can’t help but chuckle at that and watches Eric get out of bed and go into the bathroom to brush his teeth. Brian gets up and follows him to brush his own, side by side. Eric spits and rinses first before Brian does the same and they stand there for a few seconds, just staring at each other’s reflections.

“Why do you care so much?” Brian asks.
Eric puts on a small, sad smile before answering.

“I may not be able to strongly relate but I knew after the first few times I met Nathan that he had a dark past. He never seemed to want to talk about his parents or his childhood in any way. It’s not like I asked many questions about it but most people refer to nostalgic stories about their families and childhood memories from time to time, even people who were more or less disowned after coming out. I’ve only met one other person who avoided the subject like he did. You. So, Brian, I’m not going to villainize him just because he broke Justin’s heart. I’ll talk to Justin and be his friend, don’t get me wrong, but I won’t cut off a friendship with someone who reminds me of my favorite person in the world.”

With that, Eric kisses him on the cheek and pats him on the shoulder and heads back to the bedroom.

Brian could stay up longer but he wants to lay by the man and spend time with him, even if he’s sleeping. So he gets under the covers, puts an arm around his lover, and watches him start to fall asleep.

“Want me to call the surrogacy agency in the morning when I get to work?” Brian asks before Eric is completely asleep, “I’ll remind them how prominent we are and get us bumped up on the list, if you want.”

Eric’s eyelashes flutter and he smiles, “You are excited, aren’t you?”

Brian shrugs nonchalantly and waits for an answer.

“Tell them we can pay the full amount upfront too,” Eric reminds him.

“Look at you, taking advantage of your privelaged position of financial wealth and prominence.”

“You must have rubbed off on me,” Eric mumbles as he closes his eyes once more.

Brian smiles, touches his forehead against his, and lets himself drift off too.
He isn’t sure why he heads to Williamsburg after work the next day. Possibly because he knows Eric’s day is ending by the time Lily gets off of school so he doesn’t have to worry about relieving Jess but also because he’s been worried about Justin. He’s probably not even home. Maybe he took Daphne out on the town or is working in his studio. He could be at the gallery but Brian would be able to find him easily then but, knowing Justin, he wouldn’t open up to him there.

But his doubts are proven unfounded when he’s about to ring the bell and sees Daphne Chanders walking up to the stoop with groceries in her hands.

Brian quickly walks over, taps her on the shoulder, and Daphne turns around. The quick recognition and shock that wipes over her face is humorous.

“...Brian?” She asks disbelievingly, “Oh my god, hi!”

Daphne puts down the groceries and reaches up to give him a hug.

“I haven’t seen you since...Jesus, since before you left Pittsburgh.”

It’s been awhile, hasn’t it?” Brian comments, “How have you been?”

“I’m working on my last year of residency at Penn Presbyterian Hospital in order to become a neurosurgeon. Max officially became a cardiologist over a year ago.”

“Max...your boyfriend, right?”

“Fiancé,” Daphne corrects, flashing a ring. You mean you didn’t go a year back with my Facebook when you accepted my friend request a couple of months ago?”

“I’m not on it that much,” Brian dismisses, “What ever happened to I’m never getting married?”

Daphne shrugs, “I was still dead set on it until Max proposed for the second time last year. I had realized that I had been with him for almost a decade and wasn’t going anywhere. There was no
need to be tied down because I wasn’t moving, you know? So I said yes. We’re taking our time with it but it should eventually happen in the next couple of years. Congratulations, by the way. On your marriage, I mean. The pictures you were tagged in were great.”

Brian smirks, “You can still find time to look at your news feed while you operate on a brain?”

Daphne smirks right back, “I can multitask.”

Brian smile and clears his throat, “I know about the breakup. How’s he doing?”

Daphne seems to weigh whether or not she should answer before becoming serious, “...Not well. He’s taking it pretty hard. Mainly because Nathan has barely talked to him since taking off. He answered a text of Justin’s the other night and that’s it. I don’t know...I mean, I like Nathan. He’s actually one of my favorite boyfriends of Justin’s. Their personalities were different and there was this struggle that sometimes went on between them but when they were on a good streak, they were beautiful together. Justin was so loving and protective over him and you could tell Nathan loved and adored him more than anyone else in the world...I don’t know, I wish they would have worked something out. I at least wish that Nathan would talk to him. Justin’s worried sick.”

“Nathan’s probably trying to cut ties. That’s what people often do, right?”

Daphne shrugs and looks away, “I don’t know. I guess. But Justin and his family are the closest thing to family Nathan really has. I think Justin is worrying about Nathan’s mindset after something like this. He won’t tell me much, just that Nathan has had a lot of problems with panic attacks and nightmares. I think a lot of his grief is coming from not knowing anything past what Petra is telling him.”

Brian sighs, “I came over to see him.”

“...You think that’s a good idea?”

“I don’t know. We’ve been talking a lot. We’re friends. Friends with an intense, passionate, and tumultuous past but friends. Friends check on each other right?”

“...Right. But you’re not just friends. Not really.”
And damn Daphne for always being a pint sized Yoda, just waiting to give words of wisdom. But in a way, she’s wrong. Yeah, it’ll always be more complicated due to their past but they had a huge break from the end of their relationship to the start of a new one. They were doing things differently. Talking, showing the other how much they’ve grown, not fucking, being open and accepting of the other’s current love life, or recently lack thereof in Justin’s case. So, while their relationship will always be complicated, they’re trying. They’re working towards a friendship that is unique and close so he wants to be there for him and see how he’s doing.

“It’s complicated. I agree. But we are friends. I wouldn’t have lunch with him or invite him and Nathan to over to dinner or let him watch my daughter if he wasn’t.”

Daphne nods slowly, looking as if she at least wants to believe him.

“Alright, follow me. But I’m warning you, he’s not talking about it much, even when I got him drunk. He is keeping a lot of whatever is truly troubling him about all of this bottled up.”

Daphne unlocks the main door and Brian grabs some groceries to help her out as they go upstairs to Justin’s apartment. When Daphne lets him inside, he doesn’t see him. He sees a sketchpad on the couch when he makes his way to the living room but no Justin drawing out a masterpiece like he had done so many times at the loft.

“He might be in bed,” Daphne says quietly, “He went to his studio late last night and got up early to work the new displays at the gallery. He’s probably tired.”

Brian nods before heading to Justin’s bedroom and opening the door.

“...Brian-” Daphne starts hesitantly.

“I’m just going to talk to him for a few minutes. If he’s that tired then he can always kick me out.”

With that he shuts the door quietly behind him and stares at Justin’s form.

As convincing of an actor Justin can be, Brian almost always could tell if the boy was really asleep or not. He knows him too well. And he can tell that if he had been asleep before Brian came in, he
wasn’t now. His eyes were closed but his breathing wasn’t quite right so Brian felt no guilt collapsing on the bed next to him.

“What are you doing here, Brian?” Justin mutters under the covers.

“You knew it was me without even peeking? I’m touched,” Brian says, sarcastically but with tenderness lacing it.

Justin sniffs a little before throwing the blankets off of his head. He rubs his tired eyes, takes a deep breath, and bulls***.

“How was the honeymoon?”

“Gorgeous. Relaxing. Filled with sexcapades.”

Justin nods absentmindedly and turns over.

“What happened?” Brian asks softly.

“You obviously already know or you wouldn’t be here,” Justin snaps.

“I know what Emmett mentioned. But he also said he felt like you were blindsided by all this. Why did Nathan call it quits?”

“Because I wanted kids and he didn’t. Because I fell in love with someone who was treated like the scum of the earth his whole life and can’t see that I loved him more than an idea of a child. Because he won’t even fucking talk to me. Because I am blind and ignored the signs he was sending out. Because I am worried out of my mind over him and scared he might relapse with all the progress he’s made. Because he has a tendency to not talk to anyone about his demons but me and now he’s cutting me out and I’m afraid he’ll do something stupid.”

Justin breaks off at that point and sniffs and Brian can’t help but rub him between his shoulder blades a little bit to try to calm him down.
“What happened to Nathan that has you so freaked out?”

“I promised I wouldn’t say anything. Just because we broke up doesn’t mean I’m going to break that.”

“Alright.”

“Did you enjoy the Caribbean?”

“Eric told you?”

“At the reception. I asked where you were planning to go when I was dancing with him and he told me. It sounded really pretty.”

“It was. It was absolutely beautiful.”

Justin turns over to get a look at Brian.


“You...don’t.”

Justin snorts, “You sure do know how to make a guy feel special, Brian Kinney.”

The corner’s of Brian’s mouth turn up ever so slightly before checking his phone.

“I can’t stay too much longer. I need to get back home. Eric’s making dinner and I should help him out. He had an early day today.”
Justin nods and turns back over, “Tell Eric I said hello. Also, let him know I found that book I was telling him about. It was at the studio in the broom closet. Don’t ask me why. He can borrow it if he wants.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Brian starts to walk away but glances back at Justin and sees him just staring off into space. Brian lets out a sigh before walking back over to run a hand through Justin’s hair.

“Go spend time with your friend. She won’t be here much longer. She came because she was worried about you, right? Try to get her to worry a little less.”

“Believe it or not, I’m not the worst host in the world. We went a few places on Saturday and a play on Sunday.”

“See any of your other friends? Liam, Carmen-”

“No. Liam and Carmen called to invite me and Nathan out for dinner but I said no. I didn’t tell them about what happened and I don’t think Nathan has either.”

Brian nods, “Just...try to distract yourself from it. Get out a little and maybe things will cool off enough for both of you and you can talk again.”

Justin raises an eyebrow, “Really? You’re trying to give me advice on how to speak to exes when you didn’t even attempt to get ahold of me for seven years?”

Brian flinches at the accurate accusation and he can tell that Justin immediately feels guilty.

“Sorry. Shit, Brian. I’m sorry. Look, I’m feeling upset and stressed out right now, alright? Thanks for the advice. I’ll get dressed and spend some time with her.”

Brian stares at him for a few seconds before giving him a nod and backing away. He turns around only to hear Justin speak.
“The wedding was beautiful, by the way. I couldn’t remember if I told you that.”

Brian smirks before he turns around again, “You didn’t have to. Eric and I planned it and Emmett is a great interpreter. We already knew it was beautiful.”

The laugh in return is the first positive noise he’s heard out of Justin since he got here. The sob that comes out after is the most heartbreaking.

“Shit,” Brian mutters, coming forward and squatting down next to the bed, “Justin-”

“I’ll never have that,” he croaks out, “A husband, a baby. It isn’t in the cards for me.”

“Don’t say that, come on,” Brian comforts helplessly, rubbing the man’s shoulder, “Look, fuck him, alright? Fuck Nathan. You’ll find someone better than him and me and all your other ex-boyfriends combined.”

“Don’t say that!” Justin in between cries, “You don’t know how strong and amazing Nathan is. He’s a wonderful person. I love him and he deserves so much and I was fucking selfish-”

“Jesus, Justin. You weren’t selfish. Okay, so you wanted different things. It happens. You should already know that first-hand. You’ll find someone else alright? And if for some reason that takes a while then so what? Go get a baby on your own and the right guy will come in time.”

“God, that sounds so bizarre coming out of your mouth,” Justin mumbles before sitting up, “Alright, I’m up. Now go on so I can spend time with my friend.”

Justin pulls on a shirt before ushering him out of the bedroom. Brian accepts a hug from Daphne and tells her that he’ll consider messaging her one day before going out the door and heading downstairs.

He gets home and barely gets a response out of Lily when he comes in since she is too engrossed in 101 Dalmations. Brian ruffles her hair as he passes, only getting his hand lightly pushed away in return, before heading into the kitchen to find Eric putting the tilapia into the oven.
“Hey,” he greets quietly, putting his arms around the man as he kisses his neck.

“Hey. I’m surprised you didn’t stay later.”

“Malia went above and beyond when it came to running things smoothly. She seems to have the entry-level 20 somethings as intimidated by her as they are of me. How was the meeting with Steinwell?”

“It went well. It’s pretty much a go. I’m passing the project to Anna. Building will go into next year and I don’t know what my schedule it going to be like.”

“Really? And why not?”

Eric stares at him and Brian stares back innocently before getting tickled in the sides.

“You know what I have been waiting all day to hear about! Come on, spill!”

Brian tries to dodge the man’s tickling fingers before throwing in the towel.

“Alright, alright!”

Eric stops immediately and waits for the answer.

“I talked to a couple of agencies just to see the prices, packaging, best benefits for the surrogates, and how soon one could be available. I threw in our stellar accomplishments and our ability to pay the full amount all at once. They made a list of available surrogates in the city and confirmed interviews with two of them for next week.”

“Next week? You got them to set interviews up for next week.”

“Impressive, aren’t I?”
Eric lets out a joyful laugh before taking Brian’s face into his hands and kissing him on the lips.

“You’re incredible,” Eric tells him softly before putting his arms around him.

As Brian returns the hug, he feels the excitement radiating off of Eric affecting him as well. He welcomes the excitement. It momentarily distracts him from the guilt he feels over Justin having a harder time achieving the same thing.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please review!
Chapter Summary

With five days left until their Broadway show goes into previews, Nathan wonders how many friends he has left.

Chapter Notes

Some of you may like this chapter and some of you may not, considering it strongly focuses on the original characters of Intersect. Regardless, I would appreciate it if you kept your criticism constructive, relatively unbiased, and helpful. But let me know what you think and what you like and dislike. I do love to hear from all of you.

WARNING: Brief mention of previous self-harm.

“Five more days,” Petra says as she takes off her makeup while Nathan scrubs harder at his own, “I wonder how much the show will change during them.”

Nathan shrugs, “Jeff is pretty enthused with everything and has kept almost everything the same for about a month now. I guess it depends on how he wants the audience to react to scenes versus how they actually end up reacting.”

“Isn’t Brian dragging along some retired New York Times critic to judge that the first weekend?”

“That’s what Jeff told Rebecca.”

“My parents and my older brothers are coming the first night. I hope we don’t fuck it up. The last thing I need is my dad judging me.”

“I think Nadia’s worried about the same thing. But Seb’s parents will probably make t-shirts.”

Petra laughs, “I don’t get why he’s so embarrassed by them...Okay, I get that they’re a little embarrassing but they are so proud of like everything he does. He’s lucky to have them being as supportive as they are.”
“He is.”

When Nathan says nothing else, Petra turns to look at him.

“Is Justin coming still? Jennifer, Tucker, Molly, and his dad?”

“...I don’t know.”

“Emmett and Drew?”

“They’re Justin’s friends, Petra.”

“I just-” Petra starts out helplessly, “I want you to have people there for you too.”

Nathan sighs, “I’ll have people there for me. Liam, Carmen, and Lola are coming later in the week. I know I met them through Justin but they’re still my friends too, so far at least. And I met Remy and Cormick on my own and I got them comp tickets for a matinee a few days after the show officially opens. Believe it or not, I didn’t meet all my friends through Justin.”

“I know that, since I’m one of them,” Petra says as she raises a brow, “Don’t mind me. I know you are strong. I just know that you were close to Molly and visited with Justin’s mom for some of the holiday stuff and started talking to Justin’s dad-”

“Petra,” Nathan interrupts, looking down as he gets his things together, annoyed and a little emotional over the conversation.

Petra pauses before collecting herself to speak again.

“I’m sorry,” she says to him, coming a little closer, “I put my foot in my mouth. I didn’t mean to upset you. I’ve just been worried.”
Nathan lets out a breath, “I know you have been. And I know I haven’t given you much of a reason not to be.”

“Maybe if you would talk to me. About how you’re feeling. Talk to me about...about these nightmares-”

“They’re nothing,” Nathan tells her, trying to get her to drop the subject.

“They’re obviously something. You’ve been having them for weeks and they can be terrifying. It’s been upsetting me and it made me remember how you had a couple when we slept over at each other’s apartments before you got with Justin-”

Nathan sighs and walks over to her, “It’s probably just stress, alright? I’m sorry that I’ve woken you up. I really hate that and I am working on getting a place so you don’t have to deal with me.”

“Don’t say that. I’m not dealing with you.”

She isn’t saying it in a way that sounds like a lie but he knows it has to be anyway. Regardless, he leans down to kiss Petra’s cheek and she puts an arm around the back of his neck to offer him some comfort in return.

“Are you guys ready to go yet?” Nadia asks through the door, “Seb and I want to head out.”

Petra turns her head, “Just a minute!”

“You got everything?” he asks her, leaning back a little.

“Yeah, are you sure-”

“Petra, you aren’t my mother, remember?”

“Oh, yes. That must have slipped my mind,” she glares.
“Coming in!” Nadia says, bursting into the room before staring at them, bewildered. “Well, you two are standing awfully close. Nathan, I didn’t know you swung that way.”

As much as he and Nadia can clash, he does feel grateful that she hasn’t tried to get him to express his feelings or stopped being herself by tiptoeing around him. She had sent him a heartfelt text (or at least as heartfelt texts from Nadia can get) and brought him breakfast a couple of times the first few days post-breakup. She was done with that now. And, in a way, he was relieved about that. He knew it was unhealthy and sounded awful but there were so many times where he just wanted everyone to forget about him and move on with their lives so he could just be alone. It would be better for everyone and he wouldn’t feel so inconvenient.

“Ready to go?” Petra asks, rubbing his biceps and checking his expression one more time to see if he is okay.

“Yeah. We can go.”

They get their things and follow Nadia out the door to meet Sebastian. Nadia insists that they go out to eat for happy hour and a slightly early dinner at this place she found in Astoria, a neighborhood that he is often terrified to go into and only does when he has to for a rare show there or, on one instance, an event with Justin. But he knows it’ll worry Petra, Seb, and possibly Nadia if he decides to ditch after they get on the train. He’ll have to deal. It may make his hands shake and being here may make the nightmares worse tonight but it’s not like he hasn’t come back before, even though he avoids the streets and businesses he used to frequent as a teenager whenever he has to.

There is a moment when they are heading to the Bohemian Hall & Beer Garden when he thinks it might be close to his old house but Nadia points the place out right before crossing the street and Nathan breathes a sigh of relief because the place that he associates with pain, misery, terror, and nightmares isn’t for another couple of blocks.

He sits down with them. Listens to them talk but rarely speaks himself. Sebastian and Petra just have a couple of beers. Nathan and Nadia have a few more. Nadia aiming for a good heavy buzz isn’t surprising but, going by Petra’s and Sebastian’s glances of concern and Nadia’s look of surprised approval, he knows that his bandmates have caught onto the fact he isn’t feeling okay. He knows they assume it is because of Justin and it partly is but it’s also because he is in fucking Astoria and every time he is here he is terrified of running into someone who he used to know. Someone well-meaning who will call him by his old name. Someone who asks him how he is doing with too much concern in their voice. Some asshole who points out who he is to their friends. Someone had done that once when he was 18 and decided to face his fears by coming back to the area to walk around. It had been a jock he went to school with. One who had called him faggot and
tried to push him around. Amös Moratis had been on break with his work buddies, told them who he was, and then called him a freak and a monster. They hadn’t even known what he had done. What crime he had committed. They had just known that a monster was what his father was and pegged him as the same.

He had gone back to his apartment in the Bronx and sobbed for hours. He burned himself on his wrist with a lighter to get himself to snap out of it. His roommates hadn’t been there, thank god, but at the same time he had felt so alone. He had been so fucked up back then. He’s sure his foster family had been happy over his departure. They had strongly encouraged him to pack his things the day after his eighteenth birthday and gave him some money for a bus ticket and his first three months of rent but they hadn’t stayed until the bus arrived, just dropped him off at the corner and never reached out to him again. He hadn’t felt close with them but it would have been nice to have someone to talk to when he had been dropped off in Times Square with nowhere to go-

“Nathan!” Nadia says, a little annoyed.

Nathan shakes himself out of his thoughts and looks at his friends in confusion.

“Ready to go?” Petra asks more softly, more concerned than ever.

“Yeah, sure. Here, let me get the bill,” Nathan insists as he takes the small leather folder.

“You sure?” Nadia asks, starting to put her wallet back in her purse.

“It’s fine. I have to use the bathroom before we go anyway so I’ll just pay up front.”

“We’ll give you cash to cover our portion of the tip,” Sebastian tells him as the girls nod.

Nathan stands up, heads back inside, and waits behind one other customer to pay. When it’s his turn, he gives the waitress a smile, gets out his wallet to pull out his debit card, and hands it over for her to scan.

“Was everything good for you today?” she asks with a chipper voice as she slides the card through the scanner.
“It was great,” is all he says in return, waiting for the receipt to print.

“Hey, Nicole?” another waitress asks, coming up to the register, “Can you cash me out when you’re done?”

“Yeah, Paige. Just hold on and wait until I’m finished with our guest,” Nicole tells her, slightly annoyed as though Paige has interrupted before.

Paige nods before turning to glance at Nathan, tilting her head as she does so.

“Hey, have we met before?” she asks, studying his features as she tries to place him.

Nathan gulps nervously and tries to not panic. She could have come to one of their sets and might know him that way but, after studying the girl a little himself, he knows that’s not it. Paige...Paige Jenkins. The blonde, petite, and slightly ditzy cheerleader at William Cullen Bryant High School. She was the freshman who dated a senior when Nathan was a junior. He never knew her, just had seen her at the games he didn’t give a shit about but went to anyway to have a reason to not be in his home. He usually read books or did his homework during them. She had been notorious solely because she had dated the golden boy in high school. He had only gone to school with her for a couple of months before everything happened but that was one piece of gossip that sticks out in his brain. He might not have recognized her otherwise. He wishes he hadn’t. He feels sick now.

“I don’t think so,” he lies, quickly writing the tip amount and scribbling his signature.

“Are you sure?” she asks him, squinting, “I could have sworn-”

“I better get my friends from my table,” Nathan interrupts quickly, handing Nicole the merchant copy and giving them both a fake smile before heading back outside to the garden.

“You ready?” he asks them, biting his lip to keep himself from breathing heavily.

“Yep, we’re good to go!” Nadia tells him, bouncing up on her feet and taking Sebastian’s hand to lead him to the door.
“Is something wrong?” Petra asks him, looking a little suspicious over his demeanor.

“Fine,” he waves her off before letting a shaky breath out from his nose.

He’s not fine. He was just terrified by a well-meaning waitress who is barely five feet tall and he didn’t even get to take a piss because he decided to practically run away. But he won’t tell her that.

She nods and lets the moment pass as they go out the doors to follow Nadia’s lead.

“Want to walk around?” Nadia asks them, turning around to face them and walk backwards, “It’s a nice area. My friend back in high school lived here and we used to walk around all the time. Go shopping, out to eat, to the museums. Sometimes we would shoplift Four Lokos. Never got caught once.”

“How honest of you!” Sebastian says sarcastically to his girlfriend.

Nadia pouts before coming over to tuck herself under Seb’s arm, “It was either that or show our tits to a 50 year old clerk a few streets over. We stole from a Duane Reade, so they were barely losing anything. And besides, we were 16! We went with the more honorable option!”

“She may have a point,” Petra admits.

“Yeah, I’m glad you didn’t flash your tits at some pervy old man,” Sebastian agrees.

“So where do you want to go? Nathan, any preferences?”

He could suggest a few places for them. Let them know that Astoria Park is beautiful and had been somewhere he had gone on a nice day. He used to spend his summers there as a kid, from sunrise to sunset, writing music, performing for some extra cash, walking around, and sometimes swimming at the pool. He could tell them that the Museum of Moving Image was always interesting. He used to go at least one Friday a month after school for something to do. It has always been free on Fridays so he hadn’t gone through the terrifying prospect of asking his father for some money. Maybe he could suggest they go to Artpolis Bakery, a place he went to when he did make a little extra from performing or at his job so that he could buy himself a Greek pastry as a treat to himself. Or he could ask if they wanted to see if the music store he worked at for six months was still open and maybe see his old boss, Mr. Santos, the one person who had shown him kindness and had
called him, worried and upset, when the news broke and kept in touch with him up until Nathan left New York and cut every tie he had in his life.

But he can’t suggest any of those things. They think he grew up in Jamaica Hills.

“I don’t really know the area,” Nathan lies, scratching the back of his head, “I’m sort of tired though. I think I’ll head back. See you all later?”

“Sure,” Sebastian answers, “You feeling alright?”

Nathan shrugs, “Headache. I’ll be fine though.”

“I’ll come with you,” Petra insists.

“Petra, you don’t-”

“You drank a good bit so I don’t want you heading back by yourself. Besides, I don’t want to be the third wheel to these doofuses anyway.”

“But Petra,” Nadia cuts in, “It would be so hot.”

“See? You’d be doing me a favor if you let me tag along.”

Nathan sighs, “It’s your apartment. I can’t stop you.”

“I know,” Petra quips before turning to the other half of their band, “See you later, guys!”

He stays mostly silent on the walk back to the train. He’s too on guard and sick to his stomach to talk to Petra as she chatters along. Besides seeing Paige, the visit to Astoria wasn’t horrifying. Some people who aren’t in his shoes may call it nice. But until they get on the train and he sees no one in his car who he recognizes, he will stay on edge.
Petra must sense something is wrong because, once they sit down next to each other on the train, she reaches over and grabs his hand in comfort and he finds himself squeezing it with practically all of his strength. But if her circulation has been cut off, she doesn’t flinch or complain and just lets him hold onto her. An older Greek woman sitting next to him tells them what a beautiful couple they are and they just go along with it. She tells them they will make beautiful babies one day and Nathan has to bark out a laugh at that because that whole dilemma is part of what has him in such a mess anyway and, if he can’t even get himself to say yes to kids with Justin, then he wouldn’t be able to have them with Petra either, even if she probably would be his second choice.

They get back to the apartment without incident and he’s finally able to pee in peace. When he asks Petra if it is okay if he lies down on the couch for a little bit, she tells him to go ahead and take a nap in her room so he’ll be more comfortable. For someone who claims she doesn’t want to be a mother, she has been mothering him a lot. She brings him a glass water, takes off his shoes, and gets him to lie down under the covers. He’s emotionally exhausted and he knows she can tell, even if she doesn’t fully know why.

“You want me to sit or lie down with you?” she asks, fretting over whatever negative feelings he’s giving off. There had been times where he had come into her room, not wanting to be alone late at night when his depression and negative thoughts hit full force. It wasn’t quite as nice as having Justin there, someone who knew everything and could deduce what was going through his head, but it was nice to have someone who seemed to truly care and would hold him if he needed it. It’s not what he wants right now though. If he does end up falling asleep, there’s a better chance that she won’t hear him freaking out when he wakes up if she’s somewhere else.

“It’s okay,” he croaks out, “I just want to shut my eyes for an hour or so. I’m just tired.”

“...Okay. Just yell if you need something. I’ll be in the other room working on that song.”

“I’m sure it’ll be great. I can’t wait to rehearse it,” he tells her sincerely.

She nods then briefly runs her fingers through his hair before turning off the overhead light and softly shutting the door behind her.

As soon as it shuts, he lets out a shuddering gasp and feels a tear roll down his face. He’s such a fucking pussy. He can’t even make it an hour and a half in a fucking neighborhood without coming home and crying about it.

Taking a few steadying breaths, he feels the exhaustion sweep over him. He fights it for a while, wanting to get a little sleep but also not wanting to face what his subconscious has waiting for him.
As sleep slowly wins out, he wishes with all of his heart that Justin was there next to him.

When he wakes up, realizes he slept a little later than he wanted to since it’s 8:42 in the evening. He’s guessing he wasn’t loud while he was sleeping since Petra didn’t come to wake him up as far as he can remember. He’s surprised he didn’t have a bad dream. He just had a dream about his mother taking him to the park and playfully chasing him around the playground. His face is wet but he almost feels hope, seeing her face again in some form. It simultaneously breaks his heart, knowing it’s been 15 and a half years since she died. Knowing that he will never see her again. But on the rare times she does enter his dreams, it leaves him feeling a myriad of emotions that he can barely manage to sort through.

He wipes his face before getting out of bed. He knows he must look worse than he expected when Petra does a double take from the floor and gets up to sit on the couch to pat the place next to her. Nathan sighs as he goes over to sit next to his friend and, even though he does lay his head on her shoulder when she pulls him in, he wishes he was strong enough not to.

“What’s going on with you today?” she asks him quietly, “You’ve been so quiet ever since we left practice.”

“I just have a lot of stuff on my mind,” he tells her honestly.

“Justin?”

“Yeah, he takes up a lot of my thoughts.”

“What else?”

“What do you mean?” he asks her, confused.

“What else is bothering you besides Justin?”

Nathan shrugs. He knew he should have told her everything years ago. He’s been friends with her for five years and she barely knew anything about him before that. He knew she probably wouldn’t say anything but he was so afraid she would freak and would lose her. It probably wasn’t logical
but he couldn’t help it. However, she did know both of his parents were dead. He could try to tell her some form of the truth.

“I just had a dream about my mom,” he tells her, voice cracking a little, “I forgot how pretty and sweet she was. I really miss her sometimes.”

She hugs him a little tighter, “I’m sorry, Nate. I really wish you still had her.”

“Me too. She was only 30 when she died.”

“That’s so young. Were you thinking about her today? Was that why you were so quiet?”

Nathan shrugs, “Some. Don’t worry about it. I’m okay. Part of me was happy to see her, even if it was just a dream. Did you get much composed for your song?”

“I put a bit of a dent in it. I might need your help with how I want the solo to go through,” she tells him as he lifts his head up and she puts her arm down.

“That’s fine. I’ll help you now if you want.”

“I was about to take a break,” she laughs, “Want to watch a movie? Something funny?”

“Yeah, okay. Do you want me to pop some popcorn?” he asks her, already standing up.

“Duh.”

Nathan huffs out a small laugh, goes into the kitchen, puts a bag in the microwave, standing by the counter to listen to it pop. When it’s done, he pours it all in a bowl for them to share and comes back with it to put on the coffee table.

“Oh! Before I forget,” Petra starts as she hands him his phone, “You left your phone out here and got a call. I answered it for you. Eric? Brian’s husband? He was calling to see if you wanted to come over and hang out tomorrow.”
Nathan looks at her, a bit baffled, before taking the phone from her. “Why?”

Petra shrugs, smiling a little, “Maybe he likes you?”

“Petra-”

“Not like that,” she interrupts, “I was at the wedding and saw the fucking heart eyes they were making at each other. I just mean that you guys talked a lot on the times you and Justin met up with them, right? Didn’t you even meet him for lunch and stuff when you knew you were going to be in the same area?”

“Occasionally. But that was when I was...you know, with Justin. I’m not now so he shouldn’t be calling.”

“Maybe he isn’t taking sides. Maybe he doesn’t even know. Look, I would give him a call. You need friends around you right now, Nathan. I know you think you don’t but you do. Just see what he was thinking of doing tomorrow and decide from there while it’s still pretty early.”

“Alright. I’ll call and figure out what he’s up to.”

“You make him sound so malicious,” Petra snorts.

“You know what I mean,” Nathan rolls his eyes as he finds Eric’s name in his contacts.

The phone rings three times before the older man picks up. Nathan can hear Lily in the background, along with splashing water and Eric telling her not to get water on the floor before he directs his speech to Nathan.

“Nathan!” Eric greets, sounding surprised and pleased, “I’m glad you could call back. How are you?”

“Um...Fine. How are you doing?” he asks, suddenly not sure how he was supposed to talk to Eric.
“I’m alright. Lily’s in the bath and she got my shirt all wet but other than that it’s whatever. Are you busy tomorrow?”

“Not really. We are doing run throughs every day until Wednesday but we’re doing them early so I should be done by 1 or so. Why?”

“I was just wondering if you wanted to come over tomorrow afternoon and hang out and stay for dinner. Brian went to Toronto this weekend to see Gus. I’m still pretty new and don’t know that many people yet.”

“What about all your coworkers and construction buddies?” Nathan asks, eyebrows raised. He knows Eric is new here but the guy could make a friend within a minute flat.

“I see them during the week,” Eric dismisses, “I haven’t seen you since the wedding and wanted to catch up.”

Nathan stays silent for a few seconds before admitting, “You know...you know Justin and I aren’t together anymore, don’t you?”

“I heard,” Eric says softly, “I was really sorry to hear that. But just because you aren’t with my husband’s ex-fiancè anymore doesn’t mean we can’t still be friends. In fact, some people might think our friendship would be less weird now.”

Nathan does laugh a little at that, despite the pain in his chest caused by just talking about Justin.

“Brian won’t be home until like 6:30. He’s taking a cab home so he’ll be back to have dinner with us but not until then. If you wanted to come down after you finish practice, we could walk around, watch a movie, or just talk until then. I mean, I’ll have Lily but I’m sure she’ll be good and will just play or entertain herself. She’s been known to do it at times.”

“Alright,” Nathan finally says, confused but a bit touched by the gesture.
“Great!” Eric says enthusiastically, “Just text me when you finish practice so I can make sure I’m at the house. I’m really glad you said yes.”

“I’m...I’m happy you invited me,” Nathan tells him, albeit also confused as to why Eric would in the first place.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Eric confirms.

“Yeah, tomorrow. Goodnight.”

“Night! Say goodnight, Lily.”

“GOODNIGHT, NATHAN!!! DON’T LET THE BEDBUGS BITE!!!” Lily yells loudly, causing Nathan to hold the phone an inch away from his ear as Eric shushes her.

“Sorry about that,” Eric admits, “She’s a bit of a handful tonight. Later!”

The line clicks and Eric takes the phone away from his ear to stare at it.

“ Weird,” he mutters as he goes back over to the couch.

“Wanting to be your friend and reaching out to you is not weird,” Petra tells him as she takes a piece of popcorn, “It’s just sensible. Groundhog Day sound good? It’s on Hulu.”

“Yeah, I haven’t seen it in a long time. Let’s watch it,” he tells her, settling in as the movie starts to play and trying not to worry about tomorrow.

After rehearsal, he texts Eric to let him know he’s on his way and gets a grinning Emoji in return, which causes a twinge in his heart because it reminds him of Justin but a lot of things remind him of Justin these days. He personally didn’t bother much with Emojis. He could never find what he wanted and would look through the hundreds of options just to find a simple one, always missing it in the process. He was cool with just using emoticons while Justin would occasionally send him texts just in Emojis for him to decipher. Justin always claimed it was because he’s a visionary and likes pictures over words. Nathan always called bullshit on that and knew it was because his
boyfriend was just weird.

Ex-Boyfriend. Now Justin is his weird, visionary ex-boyfriend. Sometimes Nathan forgets even though he can never forget the day he broke up with him.

It’s a straight shot on the 2 so he takes it to Clark Street and walks the two blocks to the Davisson-Kinney residence. When he rings the bell, he hears some sort of struggling going on the other side of the door before a slightly disheveled Eric answers the door with Lily sobbing right behind him.

“Bad time?” Nathan asks over Lily’s cries, trying to not stare too hard at the distraught little girl.

“Of course not!” Eric says, moving aside for Nathan to step in, “Come in, please!”

Nathan glances at Eric before glancing again at Lily then decides to bite the bullet and go inside. She’s probably crying over not having the right juice cup or something else that kids cry about and will be over it within minutes.

“Is she okay?” he has to ask as the girl starts coughing due to her hysteria.

“It’s my fault,” Eric sighs, “I’m the worst parent in the world. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Uh, water’s fine.”

Nathan goes over and sits down in the living room, thinking he will have a slight break from the noise, but NO, Lily follows him. And not only does she follow him but she collapses at his feet and cries into his shoes.

Like, what the fuck is he supposed to do? It’s not like he’s around Lily all the time but he always had the impression that she was a smart, sweet, outgoing, and very weird little girl. He thinks about nudging her face with his foot so that she’ll look up and he can ask her what’s wrong but there’s always the possibility that he’ll nudge too hard and knock out a tooth-

Lily breaks down into tears once more and what kind of question is that?

Eric comes into the living room, stops in his tracks, before rolling his eyes, handing Nathan his glass of water, and picking Lily up off the floor.

“That’s enough,” Eric tells her softly, “You’re putting on a show.”

“I. AM. NOT!!!”

Lily struggles in Eric’s grip as he sighs and sets her down. The little girl takes a couple of deep breaths, which only lead to whimpers.

“Alright,” Nathan says, “I’m kind of curious as to what’s going on. She asked me if I liked whales. Was that just a random kid question or does it have to do with all of...this?

Lily clutches her heart and lets out a cry as Eric closes his eyes and seems to ask some higher being for patience.

“Lily wanted to watch a movie a couple of hours ago,” Eric finally answers, “We had Netflix up and she was saying no to everything but yelled “Fishies!” when I landed on *Blackfish*. I explained to her that it wasn’t a kids movie and that it was real and very sad and she didn’t care. I told her she would probably find it boring because it was a documentary and documentaries are for adults. Still didn’t care. She had her heart set on it and was begging to watch it. I figured she would get bored within the first ten minutes or so then give up on it and go up to her room or ask for it to be changed to *Anastasia*. And...that ended up not being the case. I sat here the whole time and watched her become completely immersed. I’m proud because it proves how high her comprehension is but, as you can see, it’s had a strong effect on her. I’m a horrible person.”

“No!” Lily shouts as she stomps her feet, “They are bad! They are REALLY bad! They are mean to Shamu and whales and dolphins and fishies and I won’t take it!”

Lily stomps around the living room, face flushed and set on revenge, before running up to Nathan to put her hands on top of his knees in order to stare at him.
“Have you seen it?” she asks him softly with a wobbly lip.

“Uh, yeah,” Nathan admits, leaning back a little, “I watched it with Justin at IFC. He cried too, especially when they took the calf away from his mother and the mother got so upset.”

Lily lets out a whimper as two tears spill from her eyes, “Th-That part made me sad too!”

Lily tries to get control of herself before stepping away and dramatically changing her expression to grimly resolved.

“We have to stop them,” she tells both the men seriously, “We just HAVE to!”

“Lily, like I said, that movie opened a lot of eyes and they are trying to put some more regulations on SeaWorld and other aquariums with large animals in place-”

But it’s too late. Lily is already running up the stairs and he and Eric don’t talk until they hear her door slam.

“I’m really sorry about that,” Eric admits, a strange combination of embarrassed, worried, and a little amused, “If I had known that she would actually sit there and watch and understand almost the whole thing, I would not put it on in the first place, especially right before you came over.”

“She’s a really intense kid,” Nathan has to say, still surprised by the four year old’s passion.

“She can be but I have NEVER seen her like that. Ever. I’m just as shocked as you are. Brian’s in for a surprise when he gets home.”

Eric sits down next to him and they sit there for a moment, neither of them saying anything.

“How have you been?” Eric finally asks him.

“Okay. Busy with the show and writing music so we won’t get behind during the run.”
“That’s good. You’re feeling okay then?”

“...No. I’m not.”

Why he admits that, he doesn’t know. But there’s no point in saying yes, really. No one would believe that at all.

“Want to talk about it?”

“I...No, not right now.”

Eric gives him a soft look before rubbing him on the shoulder, “Alright. I get it. It was hard to break up with my boyfriend, Owen. I loved him.”

Nathan’s interest perks at that. It’s not like he thought Brian was Eric’s one and only by any means. But Eric hadn’t really talked too much about any of his exes. He would sometimes mention an ex by name when telling a story they were a part of but for Eric to say that he really loved one of them was a bit jarring when Nathan has seen how he is with Brian.

“What happened?” he has to ask, looking down at his hands, waiting for an answer.

“We wanted ended up going in separate directions. We were in love. Head over heels, I could even say. I met him when I was about 27. Owen...Owen’s hot. I was attracted to him from the get go. But he’s also kind and daring and spontaneous. For a while, I thought he was the one. We were living this ideal romance at first. The sex was incredible. He’d bring me roses. We’d take each other out on these elaborate dates, travel around the world. It was really fun for the first year, maybe a little longer. But he was so irresponsible, didn’t care about his planning for his future at all. He would spend so much of his money and would buy these things he didn’t need. New cars, go on regular four figure shopping sprees. He cared about fun over building his career and building his life. He was about five years younger than me so I get that I was ready for things that he wasn’t. We were mostly monogamous after the first six months so it wasn’t that. But he was too spontaneous, something I initially admired him for, and still do to an extent, but was annoyed by when he would cancel an appearance or say no to a job when he decided out of the blue he wanted to do something else. He is a model so his job was even spontaneous in the sense of how often he got work but he wasn’t helping himself by doing that. He would live paycheck to paycheck when there was no need for him to. I was becoming really accomplished around the country and I think he resented the fact that I was focusing on my career much more than him, especially near the end.
I ended up telling him the truth, that he was too immature and I couldn’t stand not knowing where my life was going. I wanted kids but they weren’t a necessity. I just wanted something I could foresee. When I asked him if that was something that interested him he told me it was something he never gave much thought. Not something he didn’t want or felt indifferent or open to. He literally gave it no thought. When I asked to see if he had a retirement fund or at least money saved up if he would get injured or if there was some kind of an emergency, he said that was unlikely to happen. It was so frustrating and I told him that I couldn’t do it anymore and, while I wished him the best and would be there if he needed someone to talk to, it would be best if we went our separate ways.”

Eric laughs at this point and Nathan’s surprised by it since it’s not exactly a happy story.

“He was heartbroken. It was the only time I think I saw him cry about something. I moved out of our apartment in Los Angeles and moved up to Palo Alto since that was where I was getting a lot of my work. He showed up at my new house a week later, told me how nice it was, then asked me to marry him. When I asked him if he thought about the commitment and planning and responsibility involved in a marriage, he had just shrugged and proclaimed that he was doing it for love. I would have said no anyway but that had been initiative to say no immediately. He just never thought anything out. At all. We ended up being too different.”

“Sounds like me,” Nathan mutters, putting his head in his hands, “I’m not ready for any kind of future either.”

“Bullshit,” Eric calls out, “You work so fucking hard on your music and career. You’re responsible and don’t overindulge in luxuries you can’t afford. You’re nicer than Owen. Don’t get me wrong, he’s nice too but he can be a total dick if you call him out on something. And most of all, you know what you want, or don’t want in this case. It just clashed with what Justin did want so you let him go. That’s pretty noble. Upsetting and heartbreaking, but noble.”

“...You still talk to Owen?”

Eric laughs again, “Sometimes. He’s met Brian. Came to visit in Chicago a couple of times. He and Brian judge each other so hard. I don’t understand why. They’re different but not ridiculously so. I invited him to our wedding. He initially said yes then changed his mind and said something came up. Typical Owen. But I think part of him was hurt because I’ve been over him since before I met Brian and, when I got with Brian, everything got laid out on the table relatively early. Brian’s flaws and past were incredibly real and I accepted and loved him for them because the way I felt for Brian didn’t compare to how I had ever felt for anyone else. With Owen, once the romance was over, his flaws were something I couldn’t get past and I think that’s what upsets him when he looks back. He’s gotten a little better. He’s taking more work and I think finally calming down a little. But yeah, we still talk once every month or two.”
“When I think about how Justin and I might not really talk to each other anymore, I feel like I can’t breathe.”

Eric rubs him on the back, “Then you should pick up your phone for him.”

“I’m not ready yet. I’m not strong enough. Not yet. I texted him back once but I can’t...I can’t hear his voice. The closest I got was a voicemail and this time he came over to Petra’s. I hid in her bedroom and I told Petra to lie and say I wasn’t home.”

“He seems very worried. Brian invited him over for dinner this past week and he kept bringing you up. It’s obvious how much he misses you.”

“I miss him too,” he whispers out, not trusting his voice but clearing his throat anyway, “But he deserves to have the life he wants.”

“So do you,” Eric points out.

“Not as much as he does,” Nathan mumbles, more to the floor rather than to Eric’s face.

“Yes, just as much as he does. I would love to see you both work it out and start things up again but I know that stuff like that doesn’t always happen. But don’t think you don’t deserve a good life, Nathan. And, although it may feel like it now, you will meet someone who gives you the same feelings that Justin does, probably even stronger if you are open with each other and want the same things. Just because Justin’s the first doesn’t mean he’ll be the last. I know that hurts to think about now but you should know that you are worth not only the sacrifice, but the love, acceptance, and everything that comes with it too.”

Nathan forces himself to nod, rapidly blinking any moisture away from his eyes. Before he can say anything else, small stomping feet and a suitcase bouncing against the stairs make them turn to look at the staircase.

“Lily, what are you doing?” Eric asks, already exasperated over whatever his kid has come up with.
“I’m going away, Papa!” she tells him seriously, “I’m going far FAR away.”

“Okay, that’s nice,” Eric answers, “Can I ask where you are going?”

“Florida.”

“And why Florida?”

Lily huffs and stomps her foot, already annoyed with the questions, “BECAUSE. That’s where SeaWorld is. I have to stop them. I just HAVE to!”

“Okay. And Bianca and Vernon are going too?”

Lily looks down at the travel carrier in her hand, “Yes! I told them all about it and they want to help real bad!”

“Ah, alright. I understand, it’s a good cause. How are you going to get there?”

Lily purses her lips, “By plane.”

“Plane tickets cost money. How are you going to pay for it?”

“You’ll give me some.”

Eric shakes his head, “Sorry. No can do. Daddy and I are broke after the wedding, honeymoon, and paying for your dance lessons. You’ll have to figure out another way.”

Lily growls and stomps her feet, “Then I’ll walk! I’ll walk to Florida!”

“That will take weeks for little legs like yours,” Eric points out seriously, “Your feet will start to hurt. What will you even eat along the way?”
“It doesn’t matter!” she yells tearfully, “I will eat leaves and berries and sleep on the sidewalk!”

“Alright. Call me when you get there if you get the chance.”

Lily nods and Nathan is a bit disturbed by her resolve. She goes over to the door, wiggles the knob, and can’t get it open.

“Don’t worry,” Eric whispers, “The chain’s on and so is the deadbolt. She can’t reach it. I always do that when she’s throwing a fit. She got mad at us once and told us she was going to run away when she was barely three years old. She just walked out the door and started hiking. Brian ran outside in just a pair of pajama pants to get her and was livid. It’s funny, looking back at it, but she does try to carry through on her threats.”

Nathan glances at Lily, jumping and getting pissed over not being able to get the door unlocked before Eric’s phone starts ringing.

“Shit,” Eric mutters, looking down at his phone, “That’s Anna. I should probably answer this. I’ll try to only be a few minutes, I swear.”

“It’s fine,” Nathan tells him as Eric answers the phone.

“It’s Sunday, Anna,” Eric drawls, getting up from the couch and heading in the other room, “Why are you calling me on a Sunday? What do you mean you mean the blueprints I sent you aren’t in the right format? Yes, they are. Hold on-”

As Eric’s voice trails off when he goes into his office, Nathan looks wearily at the set little girl, trying to make her escape. She jumps, stands on her suitcase, and glares at the chain like a woman obsessed with her mission. He stays out of it. If she can’t reach it then there’s no need for him to jump in or interfere in anyway. That’s Eric’s job, not his.

And Nathan stays with that decision. Until Lily goes and gets a barstool from the kitchen.

Watching her in shock, she scoots the stool into the living room and gets up to stand on it, making her just tall enough to reach the chain and-
“Lily!” Nathan calls out, rushing over to pick her up off the stool before sitting her down on the couch, “No.”

“But Nathan!” she starts, looking at him with anger.

“No buts,” he says like the fucking adult that he is, “Listen, Florida is too far. That’s just the way it is. You’ll never make it that far on foot and your parents would miss you too much. You don’t want that, right?”

“No!” Lily insists, “But I have to go and tell them they are being bad! Papa knows that. He saw the movie too and so did you and Justin!”

Nathan sighs, trying to figure out a way to get her to chill out until her dad comes back out, “You...you have to take small steps first. You can’t just go down to Florida and protest in their parking lot. You have to talk to politicians, recruit people to your cause-”

“I don’t know what that means!” Lily tells him, stressed, as she puts her hands on top of her head.

“Look, it’s a hard thing to accomplish, I get it. But you have dance lessons now, right? You can’t be missing those.”

“I know that,” she insists, “But I’ve got to do something. I’ve just GOT to.”

Nathan sighs, “Then why don’t you write a letter? I write when I need to get something off my chest or to collect my thoughts. Sometimes when I need to tell someone something that I can’t necessarily say, whether it’s because they aren’t there or I just don’t know how to form the words. So maybe that’s the best place to start. Maybe you can write one to an animal rights group or to the governor of Florida or-”

“Barack Obama!” she says excitedly, bouncing in her seat.

“Sure. Barack Obama. That’s a good idea,” he tells her.
“I’ll go get my pencil and a piece of paper,” she informs him, “You stay right here and DON’T move!”

Lily runs up the stairs and, even though Eric hasn’t been in his office for more than five minutes, he wishes he would come out now so he could-

“Got it!” she squeals as she walks quickly down the steps and hands him the notebook and pencil, both princess themed, “I got my WHOLE notebook ‘cause I’ve got lots to say!”

“Well, you better start-” he starts to say as he hands her over her supplies but is stopped by her hand pushing them back at him.

“Oh no,” she says, “You write it while I talk. You write down everything I say, ‘kay?”

Nathan stares into her big, hopeful brown eyes and he can’t force himself to say no.

So that’s how Eric finds them a few minutes later. Lily trying to be respectful to the president before letting her emotions get the best of her as she stomps around and cries about whales, checking every so often to see if Nathan got what she said. Eric watches the exchange with surprise but lets it play out.

“Do you want to sign your name?” Nathan asks, handing over the pencil and notebook.

“Um, yes!” she decides before slowly writing her first name in big messy letters.

“Hey, you’re a lefty like me,” Nathan notices.

“And like Papa,” she adds.

“I told you lefties were the best, Lily,” Eric tells her, “See? Nathan’s one.”

“Yeah! And Nathan’s the best ‘cause he helped me with my letter!” she says excitedly before she surprises Nathan with a hug, “Letters are the best, huh? Papa writes letters to Daddy sometimes in
the morning. Daddy smiles when he gets them.”

“Yeah, I think there’s still something to them,” he smiles a little.

“Do you write them to Justin?” she asks, “If you don’t then you should because you are really good at it! He would love one SO much!”

Nathan bites his lip and doesn’t answer, instead opting to awkwardly pat her on the head before Eric catches onto the discomfort and leads Lily a few steps away, mouthing the word ‘Sorry.’

Lily turns around to look at her papa confused before her eyes brighten.

“You have to mail this!” she tells him, waving around the notebook, “Papa, you just have to! Nathan and I worked really hard on it!”

“Alright,” he tells her, “I’ll mail it, don’t worry. You finally feel better?”

“Yes, much better,” she tells him seriously.

“Good. Now go put Vernon and Bianca away since they aren’t going on an impromptu trip.”

Lily nods before she runs over and takes her rats upstairs.

“Thank you,” Eric tells him with relief, “You were fantastic with her but I am so sorry I left you alone with her. I didn’t think she would go and get a barstool. I wouldn’t have let her out of my sight if you weren’t in the room but the fact that she did it right in front of you shows her nerve. But the letter idea was great and really diffused her. So thank you.”

“You should mail that,” is all Nathan says, embarrassed by the praise, “It might not help that much but if someone does read it they’ll get a good laugh. It’s quite emotional.”

“Oh, I will. I’ll let her drop it into the mailbox and everything. Are you okay with a chicken stir fry for dinner? I have to get a few things for it but I figure we can sit on a bench and let Lily play at
the park before stopping at the store. It’s a nice day so it’ll be good to get outside.”

“That’s fine. Whatever you want to do.”

Eric gives him a smile before calling Lily back downstairs to get the little girl’s shoes on. And, even though he didn’t know what to expect when he came over to Eric’s this afternoon and definitely didn’t foresee what had happened, from opening up a little about Justin to learning from Eric’s ex to helping Lily with her save the whales mission, it hadn’t been that bad at all and he and Eric continued to have a good conversation.

Even when Brian had come home, greeted with his husband and daughter with kisses, and had initially acted uncomfortable around him, things became a little more comfortable once the older man settled in and looked at Eric disapprovingly when Lily told him all about *Blackfish.*

“You showed her that movie?” he glared.

“I didn’t think she would get so into it!” Eric defends himself, “And besides, what was I supposed to do? Say no? It’s educational!”

“Oh, so you would show her *The Exorcist* to teach her about demonic possession?” Brian snaps.

Nathan can’t help but laugh at that, hard, as Eric glares back.

“That is not even comparable and you know it!”

Brian sighs, “Well, excuse me for having mixed feelings over *Blackfish.* You threatened to leave me if I took up SeaWorld’s campaign to clean up their image once you saw it. I still don’t know if you were kidding or not.”

“Of course I was...I think. I was looking out for your best interests. People would have hated Kinnetik if you had taken it up,” Eric reasons, blushing at his own previous emotional reaction.

Brian’s serious demeanor breaks as his face cracks into a smile and he lets out a laugh, “I suppose you’re right. Actually, you are. The company who they did hire kind of got fucked once they took
them on as clients.”

“See? It all worked out.”

Nathan offers to help after dinner and leaves soon after. Lily hugs his legs and tells him to come back “real soon, okay?” And Eric gives him a hug as well. Hugs are weird for him. He never got them after his mother died and didn’t really start getting them again until he made friends with Petra and built the band with her. He didn’t start to get used to them until he got with Justin. But still, it’s weird if it isn’t Justin or Petra. He returns Eric’s though, hoping he doesn’t come off as too stiff but also hoping the hug doesn’t last very long. Eric seems to take the hint and lets go quickly, eyes crinkling with a smile.

“Come back over whenever you want,” he says softly, “I’m really glad you kept me and Lily company.”

Nathan lets his lips turn upwards, “Thank you for inviting me.”

Nathan heads out at that point. Taking his time before heading to the train. He takes the long way, walking along the promenade before making it to Court Street to take the train from there.

When he gets home, Petra is working on her music and he offers a wave before asking if he can go in her room to work on something himself. She nods and seems almost happy that he’s in better spirits.

When he gets into her room, he gets his own notebook and pen out of his bag and sits down on her bed.

He’s not going to write a love letter or a letter asking for forgiveness. Nothing has changed and he knows Justin needs to do what is best for him. Nathan just needs to explain. Let him know that he still loves him, appreciates every single thing Justin has done for him, and eventually wants him in his life again. That Justin is too important to him to lose and that he wants to them to be close friends, sooner rather than later.

It’ll just take some time. But he wants that if he can’t have Justin as his partner. He wants that more than anything. And hopefully, if he words it just right, it might help Justin feel better too.
So he writes a letter, one that is several pages that recalls everything he loves about Justin and how
great of a person he thinks he is. How he wants him to have everything in the world.

Rereading it, it does sound a bit like a love letter. And maybe it kind of is. But that's because he
loves Justin more than anyone else. And he loves him enough to let him go and he tells him just
that.

When he’s done, he gets an envelope from Petra’s desk and lets her know he’s going on a walk. He
takes the train two stops to their place, to Justin’s, and he stares up at their floor. The curtains are
wide open and Justin is painting, staring straight out at the skyline. Nathan gets a little paranoid
that Justin will see him but he can tell that Justin is in his zone, not to be disturbed even if a fire
broke out right next to him.

He has a set of keys. Justin left them with Petra, telling her to tell Nathan that he could use them
whenever he wanted or needed to. That his door was open, even if they stayed broken up.

He just needs to use the first one to get into the foyer. When he gets inside, he traces his finger over
their names on the mailbox before slipping it in through the slot.

He gets back outside before he feels too tempted to go upstairs, heads back across the street, and
turns around one more time.

As he looks at Justin, so focused and passionate, Nathan feels himself smile.

He really was the luckiest man in the world to be with someone so beautiful.
Justin's family comes in for the first preview of Nathan's show.

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's taken a while. Real life and the fact that every time I sit down to write something stupid happens. Anywho, here you go!

The ride up to LaGuardia airport ends up being relatively quick, despite it being rush hour. Maybe the pedestrian traffic isn’t as bad as usual or maybe it’s because Justin can’t stop thinking about Nathan’s letter but time flies by until he is in front of the airport, heading inside to wait for his sister’s flight to arrive.

The letter. The fucking letter. He had found it in the mailbox Monday morning and ended up staying home for a few hours longer than he had planned to. He knew Nathan’s handwriting by heart. half written lyrics found in open notebooks and partially crumpled napkins throughout the two years they were together made that easy.

Part of him had felt elated. Hopeful. Nathan still loves him and had expressed that more than once. He had known that he had due to the parting words they shared before Nathan moved out. He had smiled, laughed, cried, and felt frustration and anger while he read the younger man’s words. So many emotions until the very end where he had said:

I love you. I will always love you. And I love you enough to let you move on to a better life. You’re going to be a great father and make a wonderful guy really happy someday.

So yeah. That had frustrated him. It had also upset him that Nathan had dropped it off himself and Justin hadn’t even known.

So he had asked his sister to take a flight out today, Thursday morning, rather than waiting until coming in Friday morning. He was grateful for her agreeing to take the extra day off and paid the convenience fee for her ticket before bumping her up to first class, mainly just to piss her off but also because she deserved it. He wanted to talk to her. About the letter and Nathan and how much he fucking missed him. He wanted to gauge how her relationship with Hunter was going because
god forbid she open up to him over the phone. And he knew he wouldn’t have much of a chance to talk to her alone once their parents got in.

And he wanted her there when they met with their parents. Both of them.

He thought about uninviting his father after the breakup. It wasn’t that he absolutely didn’t want to be around him, per say, but he didn’t want to be around his parents. Together. In the same room. Which hadn’t happened for god knows how long. At the time, he had wanted Nathan to have as many people there for the show as possible. His boyfriend didn’t have family and, since Nathan and his dad had strangely gotten along to the point where they talked on the phone from time to time, Justin had decided to bite the bullet by giving Nathan his okay to invite him up. Craig had immediately said yes. Whether it was because he was genuinely interested in seeing it or because he liked Nathan or he just wanted to stay on Justin’s good side and would take any opportunity to do that, Justin didn’t know. Maybe it was a combination of the three. He hadn’t been looking forward to sitting with his mother and his father but he had been willing to do that so Nathan knew he had a support system.

But then Nathan broke up with him. Justin doesn’t even know if his ex wants them there now. But he’s going anyway. He’ll put himself through the first Taylor family reunion in god knows how long. He hasn’t been in a room with both of his parents since he was twenty. It had been brief. He had stopped by his mother’s unannounced because he had been close to her condo. He let himself in and there was his father in the living room. Some conference regarding Molly’s superior academic abilities or something. Justin can’t remember. All he remembers is his father standing in the living room impatiently, waiting for Molly to get ready. It had been awkward but they were going somewhere that Justin wasn’t so escaping the situation without exchanging any words with the man had been easy. It had been a time where he felt sorry for Molly since she had to put up with that tense environment for every weekend exchange but he had been so obsessed with his own life at the time that he didn’t do much to reach out to her.

But now they were going to be here the whole weekend and he would have to experience the same tension. They were staying in different hotels so that was a plus but both of those hotels were in Williamsburg, his dad opting for The Condor Hotel and his mother and Tucker going for Pointe Plaza which was the more affordable option. Justin had wanted to put them somewhere nicer but his mother, and Tucker for that matter, always had a problem taking money from him. It might be a good thing they hadn’t agreed to it since he had been planning to put them into The Condor Hotel as well. Even though the two hotels were only a block away from each other, it was better than having them in the same building for the whole weekend.

Justin tried to clear his head as he stepped through the sliding doors and into the airport. He went to the waiting area near Molly’s gate and waited about a half hour until they announced the arrival of her flight. He stood up when he saw her, gave her a hug, and took a step back to look at her.
“Thanks for coming,” Justin tells her sincerely.

“I told Nathan I would,” she answers simply, “Even though he has only answered a few of my texts, I still consider him a good friend.”

“I know. I’m glad. And...thank you for agreeing to come early to help me deal with-”

“Mom and Dad?” Molly finishes, “Yeah, we’ll have to emotionally prepare ourselves for that. Lord give us strength.

“Molly, you’re an Atheist.”

Molly rolls her eyes, “I don’t know if I am an Atheist. I just don’t see how people are so sure that God exists. Now, come help me find my suitcase.”

Justin follows his sister to the luggage carousel and takes her suitcase when she points it out. With very little talk between them, they head outside to catch a taxi. Despite how the trips were a little faster than he expected on the way up, it still took almost an hour and a half to get up here. So he pays for the cab for the sheer convenience. They don’t talk much on the way back. Justin talks about how the gallery is doing and Molly talks about her students but they don’t talk about the real shit that they are facing. Nathan, Hunter, their parents. He know those issues will be brought up when they get back to his apartment and that’s the way he’d prefer it anyway. He’s sure that this cab driver has overheard conversations more dramatic but still. All this is personal.

When they do make it back home, they spend the first several minutes in relative silence. Molly puts her things in the guest room before coming back into the living room to sit on the couch while Justin sits on the other side of it. He feels it when she turns to look at him before he hears her sigh.

“Let’s see it,” Molly finally says.

Justin turns to look at her, “See what?”

She gives him an impatient look, “The letter, Justin. The one you told me about.”
Justin shifts in his seat, “I don’t know if he’d want me to show anyone.”

“It’s not like you are posting it online. You are showing your sister because you want someone else to dissect it since you have probably been obsessing over it since you got it in the mail.”

“He dropped it in the mailbox himself, didn’t you know?” Justin tells her more harshly than he means to.

“And you’re upset that he didn’t just knock on the door and hand it over,” Molly finishes.

“It’s just...I would like to see how he’s doing,” Justin admits as he stands up to get the letter. When he glances at it, he decides to look through it one more time to see if there is anything in there that is too personal. Okay, it alludes to their sex life once but isn’t super explicit. Besides, it’s not like Molly is a child. He knows she isn’t fucking innocent either. But then Nathan also implies he was a mostly a virgin when he got with Justin and, although Justin already knew the extent of Nathan’s sexual history, he doesn’t think Molly does. But he doesn’t think Nathan is ashamed by it, at least by the lack of experience itself. But he also talk about how broken he used to be and still is. He says that Justin had helped him so much yet doesn’t refer what had made him broken. So nothing is really revealed in the letter that Nathan would be upset by Molly knowing, at least Justin doesn’t think. He just needs to show one person and figure out where Nathan was coming from. Figure out if there was a chance for them at all.

“Don’t...Don’t ask too many questions,” is what Justin finally requests of Molly as he hands over the letter.

Molly gives him an odd look before gently taking the letter from his hands to read it. Justin doesn’t mean to stare while she reads but he needs a second opinion of some sort, no matter how juvenile that sounds. She’s right. He’s been obsessing way too much.

It’s awkward, watching his sister read the words his partner wrote to him. He knows there is some things in there she will be wondering about and probably a sentence or two that might make her uncomfortable. If he weren’t so desperate, he would be uncomfortable with her reading it.

As Molly reads the last page of the letter, Justin paces a little while he waits for any words of wisdom his little sister might have. She clears her throat after she finishes, folds the letter back up, and hands it back to Justin without saying a word. Justin stares at her, waiting for her to start talking, but she doesn’t say anything.
“Seriously?” he asks as he takes the folded papers, “You have nothing to say at all? I flew you up here for a reason.”

Molly shrugs with a sad look on her face, “I don’t know what to say, Justin. He seems like he’s in a really rough place. I’m worried about him. He doesn’t seem like he knows what he wants for himself. But he does want you to be happy because he loves you.”

“I know he does,” Justin agrees as he paces around the room aimlessly, “But he’s not making me fucking happy by cutting me out of his life.”

“I don’t think he’s thinking all that straight right now. He’s upset. He probably doesn’t see it as cutting you out of his life. He sees it as letting you go and not giving you a chance to tie yourself down to him and a life without everything you want in it.”

“I told him the kid thing wasn’t that important though!” Justin frets as he comes to sit down next to her, “I mean, I want kids. I do. But if it’s something he really doesn’t want then that’s the way it is.”

Molly shakes her head, “You say that now. And, yeah, you mean it. But what about in ten years? Twenty? When it gets to the point where kids definitely aren’t a reality and you let the opportunity pass? When there aren’t even the smallest ‘what ifs’ or ‘maybes’ and you finally have to admit to yourself there is no way in hell you will be a father?”

Justin looks aways and puts his head in his hands, his elbows propped on his knees. Molly gently takes a hold of his arm and leans in to speak softly.

“That’s what he thinks he’s saving you from, Justin. Because a desire like that isn’t really something you can easily compromise on. He doesn’t want you to resent him when you feel like you have truly made a mistake. That’s what I got from this letter. I don’t necessarily think he’s right but his heart is in the right place.”

Molly lets go of his arm and sighs, “But you could go the other way. Is Nathan worth giving those wishes up? Can you imagine not having the kids and grandkids coming to visit? You have to figure out if Nathan’s enough for you and if he’s worth fighting for.”

“He is,” Justin tells her firmly, leaving no room for argument, “He is more than worth that. He deserves to be so fucking happy.”
“And he’s worth giving up the idea of kids?”

Justin pauses, conflicted by the question. He’s always wanted kids. He remembers when he was seventeen and naive and he had fantasies about Brian proposing to him the day of his college graduation, Daphne agreeing to have a child with them, and splitting custody with her and Lindsay so Gus and his son or daughter could spend every other week together. Then he realized that a life like that with Brian was inconceivable. Well, he thought it had been.

“I...I really want a baby,” Justin admits, “But Nathan...Nathan is real. How can I choose a child who doesn’t exist over someone I really love and care about?”

Molly glances at him before patting him on the back, “You need to do what is best for you in the long run. That’s what Nathan is wanting to do for you. But whichever way you decide to go, I’m behind you. If you want to fight for Nathan, then great. If you want to have a baby then just call me Aunt Molly.”

“What am I supposed to do, raise the kid by myself?”

“If you go that route, sure. You’re strong. Stable. But that doesn’t necessarily have to be the case. You could find someone who wants a child too, maybe a friend so you can co-parent. Hell, maybe you’ll meet a man who is a great person and wants to be a dad. It’s not like you can’t find another guy. I mean, look at you. And who would expect anything less? You’re related to me.”

Justin rolls his eyes at the last comment before letting out a breath and running a hand over his face, “I don’t know what to do. I...I just really want him back, at least as a close friend. But our apartment feels fucking empty without him in it.”

Molly nods and rubs his back, “I can tell you miss him a lot and that you’re really worried. I’m worried too. Even though I thought you guys made an odd couple at times, I really care about him and think of him as a good friend so I was upset when you told me. He...he said a few things in his letter that concerned me. I always had the feeling that something happened to him. Something bad. Was it something with his parents or did something-”

“Remember how I told you not to ask too many questions?” Justin interrupts, dodging her inquiries, “Nathan’s past is something I can’t talk to you about. Or to anyone else. He told me in confidence after I begged him to know what had happened to him. No one in his personal life knows except for me. I really wish he would tell someone else.”

“What about Petra? Nathan can confide in her,” Molly insists.

Justin shakes his head, “She doesn’t know either. I asked him to tell her a few times. She’s his best friend in the world. But he won’t. He had a hard enough time telling me.”

“Shit,” Molly mutters, “Is it that bad?”

Justin nods, “It’s horrifying. I don’t even know if I could say the words to tell you if I had the permission to.”

Molly sits there in silence and Justin can tell she’s thinking of scenarios about what her friend could have gone through. He didn’t mean to say as much as he did. He knows he had been toeing the line there and he hates that it is making Molly worry about Nathan but he also wants her to have some idea of what they’re both going through.

“I’m sorry I can’t help more,” is what Molly finally says, “I tried texting Nathan once to see how he was but he just gave me a really generic answer and thanked me for thinking of him. I don’t know what else to tell you, Justin. I guess be there for him and try to talk to him in person after the show. More importantly, figure out what the bigger sacrifice for you is or just accept that Nathan has figured it out for you.”

Justin could keep the argument going but the conversation would probably keep going in circles. There’s too many what ifs, too many decisions to make, too many things he needs to do before he figures out what direction he is going in.

“How are you and Hunter?” he asks. Going by the blank look on her face, he can tell it might not be going great.

“Fine,” is all she tells him as she looks away to stare at the floor.

“Fine,” Justin echos dubiously, “But you were so upset at the airport. You both are talking still, right?”

“Yes, Justin. We’re still talking,” Molly confirms as she stands up.
“That doesn’t give me much information,” Justin mutters from the couch. He should have expected Molly to be tight-lipped though. He tended to take more after his mother in terms of communication and expressing how he felt. He was more emotional and liked to talk out problems, have heart-to-hearts. While Molly would approach someone who was having a hard time and be there for them, she wasn’t the type to talk about her own problems or, kind of like he remembers their dad being before everything went down.

“It is what it is, Justin,” Molly sighs, “We talk through Skype and on the phone at least a few times a week and text everyday. But I’m in Morgantown and he’s in Los Angeles. That’s how it will be for the foreseeable future.”

Justin can hear the bitter sadness in her voice and, even though he wasn’t a fan of his sister being with Hunter initially, he wanted both of them to be happy.

“Maybe you can go visit him? I can give you the money for a ticket if finances are an issue.”

“He’s busy with the show,” Molly answers, “He works 16 hour days and only has Sundays off. He wraps at the end of may because the season airs this summer but he’s looking for another job until filming starts back up next March and there aren’t any production jobs in fucking West Virginia.”

Justin thought about it some more, “Then what about medical school? I know you think that it’s too late but it really isn’t. Why don’t you apply for different schools in California and New York then go from there? Hunter should be able to get a job in either place-”

“Why are you pushing this all of the sudden?” Molly suddenly snaps, “You don’t even like the fact that I was fucking around with Hunter-”

“Yeah, and I still don’t want to hear about it,” Justin tells her, trying to get the message of ‘shut the fuck up and don’t say another word revolving your sex life’ through her head.

Molly shakes her head, “It’s none of your business anyway.”

Molly goes over to sit in the chair on the other side of the room and it has to make Justin wonder why the hell she decided to get up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.
“Are you guys fighting or something?” Justin asks her, trying to figure out why she’s being so
defensive.

“No. I don’t know,” Molly tells him, rubbing her eyes, “He’s upset.”

“About what?”

“I told him we should see other people. Thought it would be for the best.”

Justin’s eyes widen, “So you broke up with him? I thought you said you guys were still talking.”

“We are. Or at least we were. And I didn’t break up with him. I just thought it would be better to
keep things open in case he met someone else out there or I met someone back home. He’s upset.
But his job is unpredictable and my future is unpredictable so I think it’s for the best.”

Justin stares at her for a few seconds before clearing his throat, “I still think you should apply to
med school. I think you would be happier and would feel like you have more control over your
future.”

Molly shrugs, “Med school won’t happen for at least another year, if it happens. I need to look into
scholarships, grant money, save up-”

“I’ll loan you money for it,” Justin promises her.

“No. I’m not taking your money.”

Justin rolls his eyes. Maybe he and his sister aren’t that different after all. Hopefully she doesn’t
pull the shit he did before he saw reason.

“You could ask Dad,” he suggests finally, “He’s never been low on money.”

“He pushed for the teaching route too,” Molly says bitterly, “More appropriate for a woman who
has to start a family.”
Justin’s gaze softens a little, “Molly, I think he’s changed a lot. Realizes he can’t force goals on his kids. He’s accepted my life now, from the looks of it. I’m sure if he found out that you are unhappy he would be willing to help you out.”

Molly lets out a sigh, “I don’t know, Justin. I’ll admit that he’s changed. But he’s still not doing all that well. He’s...he’s sick. Not physically but you know what I mean. I’m not going to take advantage of him wanting to please us to get on our good sides. Besides, it might be for the best if I do stay where I’m at or even go back to Pittsburgh due to how he is right now. He doesn’t have anyone. He lives by himself, doesn’t have a girlfriend. He and Uncle Martin have never been close and the man lives in North Dakota anyway. I’m the one who has been staying there almost every weekend and driving up during the week to make sure he’s still going to his appointments and taking his meds. I’d like to think he is responsible enough to take care of himself. Usually, he is. But he backslides easily and goes into depression. He’ll act almost manic where he can’t sleep and he can’t stop moving around the house. He’s better than when you saw him last but it seems to be a long process. I’m not sure if it would be a good idea for him to be left completely alone.”

Justin feels a surge of guilt bubble up within him as he looks at his sister. He realizes things have been rough on her but he hadn’t realized how rough. Again, he had been more focused on Nathan and himself for the last few weeks and, before that, on his art and on Nathan distancing himself. He had worried and had tried to be there for his sister but she had acted like she had things under control.

“You can’t put your life on hold for him,” Justin insists, “And it shouldn’t only be on you to look after him while he gets more stable. If you end up going somewhere farther away for school then I’ll check on him a couple of times a month.”

Molly just shrugged, “We’ll talk about it later, alright? All this angst is getting annoying. I don’t want to talk about our parents, especially when we’ll be having to deal with them tomorrow. Both of them. And Tucker.”

“Don’t remind me. Are you hungry?”

When Molly confirms that she does have an appetite, they decide to go out rather than staying in. Despite the heaviness of their conversation at the apartment, the nice weather lightens them up a little they keep the conversation off of Nathan, the breakup, and the letter. They keep it off of Hunter and how up in the air things are between him and Molly. They keep it off of his father’s depression and medications and the fact that their parents would be in the same room for the first time in years. The last topic is really something they should touch upon and they will but probably not until later tonight.
“So what are we going to do if things with Mom and Dad hit the fan?” Molly asks after she takes a bite of her salad.

Or they’ll just talk about it right now.

“Ignore any tension until it becomes too much. If it becomes unbearable, then you take one parent and I’ll take the other so that we can go in separate directions for the rest of the weekend.”

“Deal,” Molly shrugs right before they high-five over the table.

“Parents coming into town?” the waiter asks as he pours them more water, “I feel you there. Mine have hated each other since I was nine. My mother wouldn’t even come to my high school graduation, can you believe that?”

“I can. It’s a pretty sucky situation, isn’t it?” Justin comments. He’s sure his dad wouldn’t have come if he hadn’t been in a coma for his high school graduation. Maybe Justin was wrong but he probably wasn’t.

“That it is. Well, if I could get you two anything else just let me know.”

“Check’s fine. You want anything else, Molly?”

Molly shakes her head, “No, I’m alright.”

“Be back in a quick sec!” the waiter exclaims as he heads back inside.

“That’s the best you can come up with though?” Molly asks once the man is gone, “Separate them if things get too rough?”

“I don’t know, Molly. We’ll play it by ear. How much have you told Mom about Dad?”

“Not that much,” Molly admits, “She knows about him contacting you upset and drunk and she knows I’m seeing him on a regular basis. I don’t want her to worry. Dad told me not to worry her
with everything and that he was fine. Complete bullshit but with grandpa the way that he is—"

“It would only stress her out more,” Justin finishes, “I haven’t told her much either. I said that he was up here for a few days and that he wanted to get to know me again. That he liked Nathan a lot. I said that he wasn’t doing that well emotionally and that he was depressed. That concerned her enough and got her into interrogation mode. I couldn’t tell her how he really was though. I did say that he was talking to a psychiatrist but I couldn’t tell her about…”

Justin trails off, remembering that it’s very possible that his sister doesn’t know about the attempt his father revealed to him but within seconds Molly looks at him with knowing eyes and nods.

“Yeah. He told me in front of Tessler that one time I had to call her to come to the house. It was one of the main reasons I was so upset that Hunter felt the need to fly across the country.”

She goes silent after she mentions Hunter, using her fork to play with the remaining pieces of lettuce in her bowl. Justin sighs and puts a gentle hand over her wrist.

“Ready to leave? We can go wherever you want. Really.”

Molly nods, dropping the fork into the bowl, and doesn’t make too much of a fuss when Justin tells her he’ll pay for the check.

Day turns into night and night slowly turns into morning. While they had browsed bookstores and visited Molly’s old internship after eating lunch before getting good buzz at Bedford Bar during happy hour, the night had been restless for the both of them. Watching movies had only done so much to take their mind off of things and Justin’s sleep was so on and off. He would dream about Nathan sad and alone, wake up, dream about Nathan when they were happy and together, wake up feeling well enough to go back to sleep with his guard down only to dream about his parents fighting after he came out. Then he woke up again only to dream about Brian, which had broken the pattern because that was apparently all the sleep he was getting.

It was only 6:30 in the morning but Molly was already up. That wasn’t much of a surprise since she had to get up early for her job every day. She seemed to surprised to see him awake but nodded, raised the mug in her hand, and said, “I made some coffee. It’s still fresh.”

Justin nodded as he rubbed a hand over his face. He took a coffee cup from the cabinet, ignored the sting in his chest when he realized it was the one Nathan always drank out of, and filled it up, not
even bothering to put the cream and sugar in like he usually does.

“What time do we need to be at the airport?” Molly asks as Justin sits down and turns the local news down on low.

“10 am. Mom and Tucker’s flight gets in at 10:45 and Dad’s gets in at 11:15.”

Molly nods, “You sleep okay?”

Justin shakes his head, “No. Not really. You?”

“No. Hunter called me. It was after we both headed to bed. I think he forgets about the time difference every once in awhile. He was drunk so that didn’t help.”

Justin winces, “Should he be drinking when he’s taking the medication that he’s on?”

“He’s allowed to drink in moderation. It helps that he’s young so his body heals more quickly from the effects of alcohol. But he shouldn’t be getting as drunk as he was. I’m sure he’ll be fine but he should know better and I told him that right up front,” Molly tells him harshly as she taps her fingertips against the mug.

Justin can’t help but smirk a little at her protective, pissed off, know-it-all attitude.

“Stop smiling. It’s not funny,” she glares.

“It’s not. Believe me, I know,” Justin agrees as he puts his coffee mug down, “But guys are dumb, Molly. Even if they barely drink, they usually will when they are completely heartbroken. I called Nathan after drinking a bunch of Vodka and left him a drunken, emotional voicemail.”

“He doesn’t need to be heartbroken though,” Molly insists, exasperated, “I just told him to keep his options open since we barely saw each other. It’s not like I said I wasn’t into him anymore or that I didn’t want to talk to him ever again. I just think things might be easier. We weren’t in an official relationship to begin with!”
“But he thought you were,” Justin points out.

“I don’t know what he thought,” Molly sighs, “He wants to be in a committed relationship with me...I’d want the same thing if it were reasonable. But how often does the long distance thing work? Barely ever. And it’s not worth it if you barely see them in person. So, while I still want to talk to him and do what we’ve been doing both in person and over Skype-”

“Molly, please,” Justin begs, barely keeping himself from reverting back to the age of seven where he would put his hands over his ears.

“I just think it might be easier in the long run if we knew we were both free to leave, especially if someone potentially important comes along in either of our lives. That’s all. It’s not like I said anything had to change. I thought he would appreciate the out.”

“Looks like he didn’t.”

“Well, how the fuck was I supposed to know?”

Justin chuckles at that and stifles a yawn, “I don’t know but how are you this talkative and loud so early in the morning?”

Molly shrugs, “How else do you think I wake up my students?”

Justin rolls his eyes and stands up, “I call dibs on the shower. I know you. You take forever to get ready.”

Molly waves him off, “Go on then. And hurry up. I have to do my hair.”

“God forbid you go out looking like you don’t belong on a magazine cover,” Justin mutters as he heads to the bathroom.

After he gets dressed and ready while Molly takes her sweet time, he lets himself doze off on the
couch and doesn’t wake up until Molly comes over to shake his shoulder. They stop and get lattes at the coffee shop down the street before they hop on the train to go meet their parents.

He’s glad they decided to get there early. His mother’s flight is arriving sooner than expected. It’s not that surprising, since the flight from Hartford usually ends up being shorter than the airlines advertise it. She usually doesn’t bother with flying to New York, opting for the train instead since it was cheaper and only a three hour ride. But it was easier for her to fly in so that they could meet her and Tucker as well as their father. All of them together. Great.

“There she is,” Molly points, causing Justin to turn to look.

The two of them stand up and walk closer, waiting for their mother to spot them. Tucker does first and directs her attention to them, resulting in a joyous expression to appear on her face as she rushes over to them.

“Justin,” his mother says softly, putting her hands on his cheeks before kissing his forehead, “Are you-”

“I’m okay,” he lied, putting his hands around her wrists to lower her arms, “Thank you for coming.”

“Of...of course,” his mom finally says, “Are you sure that he’ll want us there? Don’t get me wrong, I would like to see the show and give him my support but would it make him uncomfortable?”

Justin shrugs, “I don’t know. Maybe. But he doesn’t have any family, Mom. You know that. I want to be there for him even if I’m not with him.”

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His mother’s eyes moisten and she bites her lip, “I can’t believe I raised such a good man.”

Justin forces a smile, “If that does happen to be true then I guess it’s also true about good guys finishing last.”

“Stop,” his mother warns, “Things might not be working out right now but they will, whichever way life takes you.”
“Yeah Justin,” Molly drawls, stepping in, “Listen to our mother.”

Jennifer smiles as she looks to her youngest, “How have you been, sweetheart?”

Molly just shrugs and, while Justin is tempted to rat her out and say she’s having boy troubles of her own, he doesn’t. Molly would get pissed off and now isn’t the time anyway.

“How’s your job and your students?” their mom asks Molly as Tucker comes back over with the luggage, “Tucker just hosted the science fair for the middle school. Yours was last week, right?”

Molly purses her lips, “Yeah. Over 150 kids participated and seventy-five percent of the projects were volcanoes. Absolutely fascinating.”

Their mother shakes her head and huffs out a laugh, “They’re little kids, Molly. They like fun projects like that. Not every elementary schooler can be like how you used to be.”

“I’m just saying that I taught at least some of them better,” Molly says as she rolls her eyes while Justin becomes more convinced that she needs to move on to a better suited career.

“I’m sure you did,” Tucker tells her, “And the ones who are more like-minded will eventually break from the mold, I promise.”

“I’m sure some of them will go on to great things and it’s all because of you,” their mom adds.

Molly says nothing in return, just forcing a smile that in no way reaches her eyes.

“I’ve missed you,” their mother tells her as she wraps her arms around her daughter before lowering her voice but not low enough that Justin can’t hear, “And I know you’re not fine. I’m your mother and I can tell something is going on so don’t think I’m naive. We’ll talk later.”

Over their mother’s shoulder, he sees Molly get an annoyed and pissy look on her face before rolling her eyes and backing out of the hug.
No one says anything for a moment and Justin can tell that his mother does, in fact, want to say something. She’s never been one to stay quiet when she needs to know something. She’s thoughtful, gentle, waits to approach a topic if need be, but she asks what she needs to in order to get to the bottom of things.

“So...when does your father get here?” she asks, tension lacing her voice.

Justin gets his phone out of his pocket and looks at the screen, “His flight is supposed to arrive at 11:15 so we still have another 45 minutes.”

His mother nods, looking down at her feet, “How has he been doing?”

Justin and Molly look at each other, not sure exactly what to say. They do not need to be telling their mother everything that has been going on with her ex-husband in the middle of a crowded airport. For her own peace of mind, it would be best not to tell her much at all. She’s under enough stress with her father losing his mind and his memories and, even though she has been divorced from him for over 13 years, she was married to him for almost 20. She loved him for longer. She had two kids with him and had a great relationship with him until Justin was a teenager. He knows that if she was under the impression that he is a danger to himself or feels completely alone, it would greatly upset her, no matter what bad blood remained between them.

“Guys?” Jennifer prompts them, looking more worried and tense than before, “You’re scaring me. Is there something wrong? Is there something that you aren’t telling me? Is he sick? Is he-”

“He’s...going through a hard time, Mom,” Molly tells her, cutting her off, “He’s trying to better himself. He’s trying really hard and has come a long way on his own. It’s just...some mental health stuff. I think living alone got to him and he felt a lot of guilt over what happened with Justin. Things got bad for him for a while. He’s working on it.”

Their mother’s face stays grim and concerned as she studies both of them, “What do you mean, ‘mental health stuff?’ What has he been doing?”

“Mom, not now,” Justin tells her gently, “Don’t worry about it, alright? Let’s go sit down and wait by his gate.”

Jennifer looks hesitant but lets out a sigh. She seems comforted by Tucker, who laces her hand with
his, and it’s one of the few times Justin has been grateful that his mom found him. He’s not that close with him and probably never will be but they’ve gotten to a place where they respect each other and can have a decent conversation. Justin accepts him as part of his family. He has no idea how Tucker and his father will behave around each other and he hadn’t really focused on it. On the rare occasions that he wasn’t focusing on Nathan and how the hell they could get back to normal or work towards a good place, he had been thinking of being in the same room as both his mother and father again, but including his mother’s much younger longtime boyfriend into the mix just added to the drama.

They manage to keep their mother off the subject of their father while they wait. He talks about his art and the trip he’ll be making to Europe in the summer and Molly talks about her students but when the flight arrival from Pittsburgh is announced, all of them feel on edge as they wait to spot out Craig Taylor.

Molly spots him first since she gets up and approaches the man who has his head down. She gently takes his arm, says something to him, and he seems a little better and more himself after that but it doesn’t keep his mother from gasping.

“Why is he so thin?” his mother asks him, distressed, “Y-You said he wasn’t sick-”

“It’s not a physical illness or drugs or anything like that. Molly was telling the truth when she said he wasn’t doing well,” Justin mutters, “He looks about the same as the last time I saw him in person. Don’t say anything to him about it, alright?”

His mother manages to nod as she stares at the father of her children making his way towards them with Molly. When they are just a few feet away from each other, the three of them stayed seated while Molly and their dad stand there, none of them really knowing what to say.

“Jennifer,” his dad murmurs finally. Justin can’t tell the tone. It isn’t filled with dread or longing or hope or anger. It might be wistful. Reminiscent. Justin could be wrong. It could be a stiff greeting or Tucker’s tightening arm around his mother’s shoulder might be justified. Justin doubts it but Tucker’s rare surge of protective jealousy is the first thing to truly amuse him all day.

“Hi Craig,” His mother greets in return, curious and still slightly teary because, despite all the bad blood and years of almost no contact between them, she still cares. That’s the kind of woman his mother is.

“How’s John?”
“He has his good days and bad,” his mother replies in regards to her father, “Some days he knows who we are and doesn’t have many mishaps and others he has more trouble. The medicine he’s on is slowing down the symptoms though, so that’s good.”

His dad nods and falls quiet again. Everything is so fucking awkward so he stands up, rubs his father’s shoulder and says hello, then leads his family out of the airport.

“We need to take cabs,” Molly whispers to him as they stay a couple of feet ahead, “He seemed to take the flight okay but he was pale. I know he won’t want to get himself panicked, especially in front of Mom.

Justin nods, seeing her point, “You want to ride down with him while I-”

“Would you mind if I rode down with Mom and Tucker?” Molly asks, “I don’t get to see them often.”

Justin sighs, “Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll ride down with Dad.”

It’s easy enough to get his mother not to question it. They just lead them out to where the taxis are waiting and say they don’t want to face the train traffic like they did going up. His father looks around, as though he isn’t sure if he is supposed to catch a ride by himself or what so Justin sighs and puts his hand on his dad’s back.

“Molly wants to ride down with Mom since they haven’t seen each other for a while. You’re riding down with me.”

“Okay, Justin. That’s fine.”

Molly tells him she’ll text when she gets their mother and Tucker to their hotel so that they can meet up before they part ways for the ride. He and his dad load into the back of the taxi, Justin sitting on the left side and his father sitting on the right. Justin tells the driver where they are going and they ride behind the rest of their family.

“How was your flight?” Justin asks him, needing to break the silence.
His dad shrugs, “It was okay. Not too crowded.”

“Good. I’m glad. So you’re feeling okay?”

“Yeah, Justin. I’m okay.”

“And you’re okay with seeing Mom? When’s the last time you saw her, anyway?”

His father puts leans his forehead in his hand, “Shit, I don’t know. It’s been a few years. I guess when Molly was 18 or 19. She ended up in the hospital with pneumonia and we drove down separately to be there. That was the last time I saw her in person.”

Justin nods and feels a lump in his throat all of the sudden. It seems that losing contact with your exes is the norm, even if you share kids together. He shouldn’t be surprised. He lost contact with Brian until recently, which had fucking sucked. He didn’t talk to his other exes either, like Nick or Colin or Ethan Gold, the prized violinist with a wife and three daughters. But the thought of losing touch with Nathan...that hurt.

Despite their own separation, his father must be able to sense that Nathan has come through his mind because the man asks, “Is Nathan back at your apartment or did he have to go to the theater early to get ready for the show?”

Justin pauses at the question and wonders why the fuck he would ask that until he realizes why. He didn’t tell him. He assumed Molly would have but apparently she didn’t.

“I don’t know where he is right now,” he finally answers as he looks out the window, “We broke up several weeks ago.”

He feels his dad staring at him and it’s so fucking uncomfortable. If this were happening ten years ago, he would deduce that it was because his father was hoping that Justin was reconsidering his orientation. But now Justin has to accept that his father might actually care.

“I’m confused,” his dad tells him, “I thought things were good between the two of you. You seemed happy together when I was up here. He called last week and never said anything.”
Justin turns quickly to look at him then scoffs and looks away, “Of course. He’ll call you but god forbid that he pick up the phone for me.”

“It was a quick conversation,” his father interjects, “He called to check in and I appreciated it. He was quiet but seemed okay enough.”

“Glad he seemed okay enough,” Justin mumbles.

“What happened?”

“We wanted different things so he broke up with me.”

“What ever happened to trying to compromise?”

Justin raises his eyebrows as he looks at his dad again. It’s been awhile since he’s heard him sound judgmental.

“I’ve been trying but he seems to think it’s for the best. He thinks that what we want differently isn’t something that can be compromised.”

“I’m sure it could if you tried hard enough.”

Justin snorts, “Well if you can come up with a way to compromise on having children then I’m all ears.”

His father blinks a few times, “D-Does he want kids?”

“No. He thinks he’s too fucked up to have them. He had a horrible childhood and he’s afraid he’ll become his dad. I want kids. I told him that it didn’t matter. That I could wait and if it didn’t happen then it was fine but he didn’t believe me.”
His father nods before clearing his throat, “Was he right, not to believe you?”

Justin glares, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Is that something you could give up and not regret?”

Justin looks away and shrugs, “I don’t know. But I’m not going to talk about it anymore with you. Thanks for coming and supporting him. That’s what I want the most right now, when it comes down to it. He doesn’t have a family so I don’t want him losing anyone he cares about.”

His father lets out a sad sigh after Justin shuts down the little heart-to-heart but Justin can’t help but embrace the silence.

His father insists on paying the cab driver when get to the hotel. Justin goes ahead and follows his dad up to his room to get him settled in before leaving to meet Molly, his mother, and Tucker at his apartment. Justin makes them all lunch and tries to ignore the awkwardness of both of his parents being there. A few hours later, they ride the subway into Manhattan. They opt to have a late dinner after the show, which is good because Justin feels too nauseated by his nerves to eat now. Nothing helps. It isn’t like they can avoid the subject of Nathan. That’s the reason why they’re seeing the show. But nothing can really comfort him right now. He’s comforted by the fact that he’ll see Nathan for himself but, since everything is so up in the air, it’s hard to find himself soothed by it.

It’s also not a relief to see Brian waiting outside. It might be if Justin didn’t have Craig Taylor standing right next to him but he does. He knew Brian was going to be here but he thought he wouldn’t have to stand right next to them in line.

“Brian?” his mom calls out, coming closer to the man.

Brian turns around and his eyes glance toward Craig before focusing on Jennifer. He gives her a smile and accepts a hug from her.

“It’s good seeing you again! And you too, Eric. I saw a few pictures of the wedding that Molly was tagged in. It looked beautiful.”

“It was,” Eric tells her, smiling, “We had a great time. Oh, Justin! I read that book. I really loved it. I meant to bring it with me but I didn’t know if you’d be here and didn’t want to accidentally leave...
it somewhere. I’m in Brooklyn all week next week so we can meet for lunch and I’ll give it back then.”

“Yeah, whenever is fine,” Justin tries to smile before glancing at his father, “This is my dad, by the way.”

Eric smiles genuinely because he’s fucking perfect and isn’t put on edge by awkward and stressful moments at all whatsoever before he reaches his hand out, “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Taylor.”

“Call me, Craig.”

“Dad, Eric is Brian’s husband,” Justin tells him because fuck if he can remember if he told him Brian was a married man or not.

“That’s nice,” his father says stiffly, which makes Justin want to hit his head against a wall. His dad was right when he said he would never be a fan of Brian.

Despite his personal life going to shit in the last month, Justin counts his blessings when he realizes that Brian has matured and changed too. A younger Brian might have tried to goad the older man but this Brian does not. All he does is say that Emmett and Drew should be there in a few minutes since they managed to get a sitter for Duncan.

He tries to distract himself by talking to Emmett, as enthusiastic as ever, while he keeps an eye on his father and mother, who both are still making him nervous. He’s going through the motions until he feels his phone buzz in his pocket. He takes it out, presses the button to light up the screen, and raises his eyebrows when he reads the message.

**This is awkward as fuck so I can’t really talk to you much. Lunch Tuesday?**

Justin glances at Brian and subtly nods. Brian gives him a small wink before turning to talk to Drew about Lily and Duncan’s ballet class and Justin just keeps listening because listening to Brian and Drew talk about ballet is one of the oddest conversations he’s ever tuned into.

The doors open soon enough and they go their separate ways. Justin and his family have seats in the fifth row to the right while Brian, Eric, Emmett, and Drew have seats on the left. When the
lights dim and Nathan appears on stage, he feels his heart pound against his chest. He’s fucking fantastic. Not just with the music but in his role as Holden Clarke, a talented guitarist and singer who was blackmailed into marrying the main singer. For a while, he assumes that Nathan is too into his role to notice he’s there and he probably is. Nathan always got lost in his music and maybe he’s found a liking for acting as well. But then, in the second half of the show while Rebecca sings her song, Nathan looks in his direction and keeps looking for a few seconds before smiling, just a little bit. Even if the darkness makes it so Nathan can’t see his face that well, he smiles back and it’s filled with all the pride and love he has for him.

When Molly lightly touches his hand, he knows he hadn’t imagined the whole silent exchange that had just occurred.

After the show ends, resulting in a standing ovation, the cast goes backstage and the lights come on for the audience. He needs to have a chance to talk to him. Alone. Just for a few minutes. So he looks around for any stagehands that he might recognize, spots one, and pulls Molly back.

“I’m going to try to go talk to Nathan,” he tells her quietly, “I’ll be out in a few minutes. Can you guys wait at the stage doors for me?”

Molly nods, “Yeah, sure. But are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Justin shrugs, “I don’t know but I’m going to try anyway. See you soon.”

Justin goes in the opposite direction as his family leaves the theater. Justin remembers the girl’s name. Gretchen. So he approaches her and clears his throat.

“Hi,” he greets her, just as she’s about to hop on stage, “I don’t know if you remember me but I’m Justin-”

“Nathan’s boyfriend,” she finishes, nodding, “How did you enjoy the show?”

“It was amazing,” he tells her sincerely, “I was blown away by everything. Look, I know it’s against protocol and I should wait outside but my family is out there and they are some of the nosiest people you will ever meet. Would it be okay if I could pop backstage and talk to Nathan?”

Gretchen looks around before nodding, “Yeah, I don’t see why not. You’ve been here for
Justin thanks her, probably a little too profusely, before following her backstage and being led to Nathan’s closed dressing room door.

“That’s his dressing room,” she informs him as she turns around, “Nice seeing you again!”

As Gretchen goes back out front, Justin takes a deep breath and forces himself to knock on the door.

“Just a minute, Petra!” Nathan calls out before Justin hears him mumble, “Fucking stage makeup.”

Justin stifles a small laugh at that but his face becomes quite serious when Nathan opens the door.

“...Justin,” Nathan finally choked out, standing slightly behind the door as they stare at each other.

“Hey, Nathan.”

He had so many things he wanted to say to him and he can’t remember any of them.

“...What are you doing back here?”

Justin lets out a shaky sigh and rubs his eyes, “Because I wanted to tell you how fantastic you were? Because I miss you? Because I love you and wanted to see you?”

Nathan blinks the moisture out of his eyes and nods, “I miss you too.”

“Can I come in? Maybe we can talk for a few minutes?”

Nathan hesitates but Justin feels such relief when the younger man opens the door wider and lets him in. Justin walks inside the dressing room and Nathan softly shuts the door.
“I got your letter,” Justin tells him staring in another direction, “I saw that you didn’t send it through the mail. That you dropped it off yourself.”

Nathan nods, “I did.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me those things in person? How you were feeling and that-”

“I couldn’t,” Nathan interrupts, “I wouldn’t be able to say the words, to let you go again, if you were standing right in front of me.”

“Then don’t,” Justin tells him, stepping forward, “You told me you love me. That you always would.”

“And that I love you enough to let you go,” Nathan tells him with a rough voice.

“Everything you said was about me. Every reason you listed on why it was best if we were apart was for my benefit. But what about you? You didn’t say that our relationship was holding you back in anyway. What do you get out of us breaking up?”

Nathan lets out a tearful gasp and looks away, “Fucking heartbroken.”

Justin walks quickly towards him and puts his hands on his cheeks. Makes Nathan look at him and only him. Not at the floor or at the picture of the two of them Nathan has tucked into the corner of his mirror. At him.

“Come home,” he tells him in a low voice, “Just come home, Nathan. I promise that things will work out. I love you. That’s enough for me.”

Before either of them say another word, Nathan grabs him and pulls him in for a kiss. One filled with love and passion and yearning. One that Justin fully reciprocates as they pull at each other’s clothes and breathe into each other’s mouths. One that results in Nathan pushing him against the wall and one that is stopped when Petra walks through the door and makes a startled sound.
“Oh my god! Sorry. I’ll come back,” she says, sounding baffled and in shock before quickly shutting the door.

Nathan looks behind his shoulder as his best friend makes her hasty retreat before staring at Justin and pulling away.

“We shouldn’t do this,” Nathan tells him, “Us loving each other doesn’t change anything.”

“It does,” Justin argues, “You know that it does.”

“Not for something like this. You don’t get it, Justin. I want you to be a father. I’ve never met anyone more qualified and loving and passionate as you are. A little boy or girl would be the luckiest kid in the world to have you. I’m not just giving you up because I’m afraid you won’t get what you want out of life. I’m giving you up because it seems unfair of me to deprive a kid of having you as a dad.”

Justin scoffs, “Nathan, there’s no child in question right now.”

Nathan gives him a sad smile, “But you want there to be. I know you. You’ve envisioned a baby in your head who you can raise and love. I’m not going to get in the way of that.”

Justin blinks the tears out of his eyes, “But I want you too.”

Nathan looks away, “I wish you could have both. I wish that I was more confident and wanted what you did more than anything. If I did, I would give it to you in a heartbeat. I’m not...I’m not built for that, Justin. Maybe that will change in the distant future but right now I’m just not. I’m fucked up. I love you but I’m incapable of loving myself. I need to sort my shit out. I’m not going to hold you back while I do it.”

Justin stares at Nathan and he realizes that he isn’t going to get anywhere with the younger man. Not for a while. He misses him so fucking much but he can’t change Nathan and how he feels, as much as he wishes he could.

“I still want to keep seeing you,” Justin sniffs, “You completely shut me out and it fucking hurt. I still want to be a part of your life.”
“I want that too,” Nathan murmurs.

“So come with us for dinner,” Justin tries to persuade him, “My whole family came in. They wanted to see you for the show. They still care about you, even if we’re not together.”

“I can’t,” Nathan insists, “I’m going out with the band and some of the crew.”

“...Okay,” Justin sighs, “At least I asked. They’re outside waiting for you. They probably want your autograph. I’ll go out there and stand with them so I can get it too.”

Nathan surprisingly smirks, “I’ve already given you one.”

Justin gives him a small smile before pulling him in for a hug, “You were so fucking fantastic, babe. I’d be stupid not to get one.”

Nathan sniffles as he wraps his arms around Justin and they stand there for a minute in each other’s embrace. Finally, Justin coughs and pulls away, stepping out of the hug.

“I’ll see you outside, okay?” Justin tells him as he starts to walk away.

He gets to the door and, just as he starts to turn the door handle, he hears Nathan’s voice.

“Justin?”

Justin turns to look at the younger man expectantly.

“What about tomorrow for lunch? Will your family still be in then?”

Justin nods, “Yeah, they’ll be here until Sunday.”
“Maybe you all can meet me close to here? If they aren’t busy and since they came all this way—”

“Yes, of course,” Justin says quickly, his heart beating rapidly in his chest, “We’ll meet you here at noon, alright?”

“That’s fine.”

Justin nods, “I’ll see you outside.”

Justin heads out of the dressing room and goes back out through the theater doors. He sees Nadia and Sebastian already outside standing by a few of their friends, accepts an enthusiastic hug from Nadia, and goes to wait next his family as well as Brian, Eric, Emmett, and Drew.

“How did things go?” Molly asks, whispering into his ear.

Justin just shrugs. He isn’t exactly sure. Good in some ways and bad in others and he’s not any less confused than before except when it comes to the fact that Nathan wants him moving forward with his life.

“We’re meeting him for lunch tomorrow,” Justin tells her, “While it didn’t go the way I necessarily wanted it to, I am glad I got that much. He’s happy and surprised you all came. Grateful too. He wants to see you.”

Molly smiles, “I want to see him too.”

Emmett squeals when Nathan and Petra come out, always knowing how to make someone feel appreciated. While Petra works on the other side, Nathan comes over their side of the barricade and faces Emmett’s enthusiasm.

“Nathan, sweetie! You were so wonderful!” he gushes, handing over a marker and his playbill, “You better sign that so I can show all my friends!”

That gets a laugh out of Nathan as he honors Emmett’s request. He signs some of the copies on the other side before coming back over to come down the line. Justin takes Nathan’s sweet greeting to
his father, Mother and Tucker as it comes but is surprised when he accepts a hug from Eric. He and Molly chat for a couple of minutes as Molly gets surprisingly emotional and tells Nathan that she loves him and to call her any time. Nathan seems to be in shock over all the love he is being given but manages to give Justin a smile when he makes his way over to him.

“You have a lot of people who love you,” Justin says as he hands the bill over, “We all think you did a great job.”

Nathan bites his lip as he signs the play bill and nods before handing it back to him, “You better keep that next to your CD. I figure it could be worth something someday.”

Recalling the words he said when he chased after Nathan Ash, Justin grins and takes the playbill from Nathan’s hands. Nathan stares at him with bright, loving eyes before saying, “See you at noon.” With that, he walks away from the theater and joins Sebastian and Nadia across the street.

He still feels sick to his stomach and doesn’t know where the fuck some aspects of his life are going, but he hasn’t felt this good in weeks.
Chapter 35: 22nd and 8th

Chapter Summary

Justin eats with two of the most important people in his life and finds out some big news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s not that bad, right?
You think he looks okay?

Justin waits for Molly to check the text and suppressed a glare when she pulls out her phone and rolls her eyes.

“Molly, don’t text while you’re out to eat with someone,” their mother reminds her as she looks at the menu.

Molly scoffs, “Justin was literally doing the same thing.”

Their mother gives her a look, “All I am saying is that we are here for Nathan. Try to keep him as your focus.”

“Nathan is in the bathroom,” Molly reminds her before quickly tapping out a message and putting her phone away.

Justin’s phone vibrates a few seconds later and he checks it under the table.

Looks like less of a spaz than you do.
Like that’s hard.

Before Justin could shoot off a remark, Nathan comes back to the table.
“I haven’t had much Korean food before. Have you eaten here, Nathan?” Jennifer asks as the man sits back down next to Justin.

As Justin stifles the shiver he feels when their hands brush underneath the table, Nathan nods.

“It’s Nadia’s favorite place to come so we’ve gotten it several times during or after rehearsal. She boasts that it’s the best Korean food she’s ever had but I like that place by our...by your apartment. Dotory? That’s what it was called, right?"

Justin forces himself to nod in confirmation to Nathan’s inquiry and tries to ignore the flicker of pain in his chest at Nathan correcting his words.

“But this place is good too. It’s bigger since it is so close to Times Square. The cast and crew came here for Rebecca’s birthday dinner about a month ago. I know a lot of them liked the Galbi Medallion dish.”

His mother read the description for the dish before nodding, “That does sound good. I think I’ll go with your suggestion.”

Justin ends up going with the brisket, Molly goes with a vegetable filled rice and noodle dish, their dad goes with the scallions, and Tucker gets chicken wings. He gets chicken wings all the fucking time.

And Nathan just gets a salad which makes Justin start irrationally worrying that Nathan might not be eating enough. Nathan’s appetite had always been something that reminded him of Brian’s. He was a better cook than Brian used to be but Nathan had to be prodded at times to eat, especially when he would be in on a creative streak, busy as fuck, or in one of his dark moods.

“You eating enough?” Justin ends up mumbling when everyone else’s attention has directed itself to Molly.

Nathan gives him a strange and almost amused look, “I guess so.”

“So you won’t be hungry later if you just eat a salad now? I know you. You never eat breakfast.”
“I perform better when I’m not full. I’m nervous enough as it is.”

Justin’s eyes crinkle, “Nathan Ash? Nervous on stage? Never.”

Nathan bites his lip to hold back what might be a smile before patting Justin on the leg.

Although the small exchange had been quiet enough to not catch too much of anyone else’s attention, Justin does see the rest of their table alternate turns when it comes to glancing at them questionably. Whether they want to know how the two of them feel about all of this or they wanted to know what small things were said just moments before, Justin doesn’t know. Fuck, he doesn’t know how he feels about what’s going on besides the fact that Nathan looks gorgeous and he wants him to show up at their doorstep with his luggage in hand so that they could pick up where they left off and actually work things out.

But after they all finish their meal and his dad asks for the check and pays for all of them, he has to watch Nathan walk away once they get outside. He has to accept a hug instead of a kiss and a desire that seems to be closer to a pipe dream rather than reality.

Surprisingly it’s his father who puts his hand on his shoulder when Justin finds himself staring at Nathan’s retreating form.

“Maybe we could all do something you want to do?” his dad asks, “Maybe a movie or a museum, last minute tickets to a play you’ve been wanting to see-”

“It’s fine,” Justin interrupts as he shrugs out from underneath the man’s hand, “You all can go do something. I need to work on my paintings. I’m behind.”

And he knows it’s rude. He can feel the daggers his sister is staring at him and the helpless and confused concern rolling off of his mother and his father and even Tucker to some extent. But he really is behind. Spending over a month wallowing hasn’t let him produce as much work as he needs for his showings in June and July so it really is the responsible thing to do, even if it doesn’t make him the best host.

“Okay, sweetheart.” his mom tells him hesitantly but soothingly, “You do what you need to do. The...The four of us will find something to do for the afternoon and we’ll meet you at your apartment around 5:30. I’ll cook us dinner, alright.”
“Sounds good, mom,” Justin answers as he kisses her on the cheek, “Thanks for understanding. I’ll see you later.”

His family goes one way and he goes the other, walking the several avenue blocks to Grand Central to take the 4 so that he can transfer to the L. He decides to paint in his gallery rather than his apartment. Even though Lola is downstairs, nodding hello to him as she fills out shipping details, his studio on the top floor of his gallery feels more private than the confines of his own home, at least while his parents are visiting and his sister is staying with him. Up here, they can’t see what he paints, what emotions end up splashing onto the canvas. They won’t be able to see the Chris Hobbs painting in the utility closet or the one of himself bleeding in a parking garage. They won’t be able to see the new painting he made of Nathan, who Justin still sees as so beautiful even after they broke up. This is his space. No one ever comes up here except for him. It’s like it’s an unspoken rule, almost. Looking back, the fact that he gave Nathan a key to the door really should have been a hint that he loves him, that he has for a long time. And it’s not like he doesn’t know. He’s loved Nathan ever since the man came clean with him and trusted him with everything. He just feels like a fucking asshole over the times he looked back and compared what he feels for Nathan to what he felt for Brian. He’s mad that he wouldn’t embrace what he had without the occasional thoughts drifting into “What if?” territory.

He’s even more upset that he had to watch Nathan walk away again today.

And Justin knows Nathan had a show at 3 and literally had to leave. But he can’t stop thinking about the sight of Nathan Ash’s fucking back.

And that’s what he ends up painting, of all things. Nathan’s retreating form, grown small due to distance but still bright and clear, somehow attracting the sun to him despite the tall buildings of Manhattan. He doesn’t know why the objects closer to the painting’s surface are covered in shadows. Maybe because the farther away Nathan is, the worse he feels? Or possibly because Nathan deserves to be surrounded by light when his life was filled with such darkness.

Justin lets out a sigh. How can he not know how to interpret his own painting?

All he knows is that he needs to try to move on, or at least give Nathan space to love himself and honor his wishes by being his friend. And accept that, at least for now, for a while, or maybe even forever, that is how it is going to stay.

He and Brian plan to meet the week after his family leaves but life gets in the way. Justin takes a last minute show in Boston and is gone for two days. Brian gets swamped with an ad campaign, something that Eric had even seemed stressed out by when Justin stopped in Red Hook to have lunch with the man. Then, Brian decides to go on a spontaneous weekend trip to Provincetown with Eric, Lily, and Gus (who he flew down) for his 44th birthday, effectively vetoing Emmett’s
plans for a party. Emmett had been pretty pissed when Justin was over there to watch Duncan for a few hours. Mumbling about how it would have been the last true get together Drew could have had with the family and that Brian was their best friend so it would have only been right for Brian to let Emmett throw him a party.

“You throw parties all the time, Emmett,” Justin points out as he helps Duncan get his watercolor paints out.

“And?” Emmett presses, annoyed, while Drew rolls his eyes.

“Say goodbye to our kid and get your jacket on. It’s windy out.”

Emmett lets out a sigh and nods before going over to crouch next to Duncan’s play table.

“I love you, sweetie,” the man says softly as he kisses the boy’s cheek, “Be good for Justin, alright?”

Duncan wipes at his cheek but gives his dad a hug and says, “Love you too, Daddy.”

Emmett heads out in the hall and Drew’s eyes follow him until he turns to Justin, “Sorry about that. I think he’s more upset about me leaving than he lets on. He supports it, but you know…”

“He’ll miss you.”

“And be taking care of Duncan by himself. But he’s a good kid and won’t give his dad any trouble at all. Isn’t that right, champ?”

“Yeah!” Duncan exclaims as Drew picks him up, “And I will be good for Justin too!”

“Good,” Drew nods, “Love you. We won’t be back until after you are in bed but we will be there as soon as you get up.”

“...And if I have a scary dream?” Duncan mumbles, looking down.
“We should be back before you have any nightmares. If you do have one, Justin will be here. Okay? But you’ve been having them less and less. Maybe you won’t have one at all.”

Duncan nods, showing a brave face for his Pa before demanding to be let down so that he could go sit down and paint while Stella sat loyally by his side.

“You have our numbers,” Drew tells him after he clears his throat, “If anything goes wrong or if you have any questions, just let us know. He had his bath earlier this afternoon so he shouldn’t need one unless he gets into something and creates chaos. He has been known to do that occasionally. But he’s usually a really good kid. Try to get him in bed by 9 but it’s the weekend so you can be a little flexible. Any questions before we go?”

Justin shakes his head, “No, I think we’re good. Right, Duncan?”

Duncan nods but is too busy painting with his right hand and patting Stella on the back with his left, making his brush strokes quite jagged and interesting.

“Alright,” Drew says, “Bye, bud.”

“Bye, Pa. Bye, Daddy.” Duncan says, still looking at his picture.

Drew ruffles his hair and Emmett pokes his head back in to say goodbye to his little boy once more before the couple is out the door.

“Need help, buddy?” Justin asks him as he kneels down next to the play table, huffing out a laugh when Stella tries to kiss him on the cheek.

“No. I can do it myself,” Duncan tells him firmly, “But thank you.”

Justin raises an eyebrow at the streak of independence and realizes that this is what Emmett must be talking about when he talks about Duncan’s self-sufficiency.
“Alright,” Justin tells the little boy as he holds his hands up, “But if you have any questions about painting, I’m the guy to ask. That’s the one thing I know like the back of my hand.”

“I will let you know,” Duncan answers sympathetically, “But it’s for Lily. And my next picture is for Pa, and the picture after that is for Daddy. It has to be from me, not you and me.”

“Fair enough,” Justin nods, holding back an amused smile, “I’ll let you get to it then and make you some dinner. I’ll be in the kitchen if you need any help, okay? I’m just going to pop our dinner in the oven.

The whole night goes smoothly. Duncan becomes more rambunctious after his masterpieces are finished and food is in their bellies but it’s in a good way, one that makes Justin play Power Rangers with him. Duncan is set on being the Red Ranger and Justin takes Duncan’s advice when the little boy says that he should be the Blue Ranger. Duncan randomly gets bummed that Lily isn’t there to play the Yellow Ranger like she always does and asks if she can come over but Justin is forced to break his heart.

“But why not?” Duncan asks tearfully.

“Because she went on a trip with her parents and Gus. She’ll be back Sunday night.”

“But I want her back now,” Duncan sniffles.

“It’s just a couple of days. Now, what do the Power Rangers say when they transform?” Justin asks, trying to get Duncan to cheer up.

Duncan hops on the couch and stands up, “It’s morphin’ time!”

“It’s morphing time!” Justin agrees.

The rest of the night goes smoothly after that. And when he tucks Duncan in and gets a hug and a “Thank you for playing with me, Jus” for his efforts, the broken heart he’s been harboring for over a month feels a little lighter.
“So, how much older do you feel?” Justin gets to ask Brian the following Wednesday when they go to a Thai restaurant in Chelsea.

Brian glares but then smirks, “You know, there are some good things about having a teenage son. Like being able to get him his own room and saddling him down with Lily while I fuck my husband into oblivion. So if you are asking how flexible I still am after my many years on Earth, I would have to say ‘very.’”

Justin huffs and shakes his head but lets his eyes soften, “See? Still young and beautiful.”

Brian groans, “God, you sound like Mikey. Your successful relaunch is making his ways rub off on you.”

“Yep. That’s it.”

The conversation dies down momentarily while they get their food. Brian takes a few bites of his own before glancing up at Justin.

“I hear you are working non-stop on your paintings. Feeling the heat due to deadlines?”

“Yeah,” Justin sighs as he twirls the drunken noodles with his fork, “Two big shows within the next month and a half. I should be okay though. I’ve got a lot of pieces lined up for it that I’m proud of.”

“Good for you. Eric and I are still planning on attending the one in June.”

“That...that’s good to hear, actually. It would be nice to have the support. With…”

“Nathan not around?” Brian guesses.

“Yeah. He usually came to pretty much all of my gallery events and showings around the city. Traveled with me to the ones out of the way at least half of the time. I don’t know, things are weird without him, I guess.”
Brian nods, stares at him, then clears his throat, “I get it. Keep busy. It helps take your mind off of bad shit.”

“That’s what I have been doing,” Justin points out, “It’s worked a little. Makes life hectic though.”

“I’ve been working non-stop so I realize that.”

Justin raises his eyebrows in concern and Brian shakes his head.

“Things are great. It’s not the same situation as it is with you. Eric and I are better than ever. It’s just that the New York branch of Kinnetik is new and we took on a bunch of campaigns for the summer and fall. I’m the CEO. I need to get shit done and I’m taking off a few months in the winter and early spring. I need to put in my share of the work and keep my entry levels on their toes in fear.”

“Why are you taking a few months off?” Justin curiously asks, ignoring the last snarky comment made by the older man.

But Brian looks strange for a second, almost guilty, before he lets out a sigh.

“Eric and I...we got a surrogate the first day of May. It moved really quickly, surprisingly. It wasn’t the first time she had done this and we went through the process with Lily. We liked her and she was ready when we were. The agency set up the procedure within a few days and we found out that it took the other day. The wonders of early pregnancy detection, I guess. So, if everything goes smoothly, we have a baby coming in late January, early February. I’m trying to work hard now so that I can be at home more later.”

Justin blinks a few times before trying to get rid of the lump in his throat, “Shit.”

“That’s not the answer I was expecting to hear.”

Justin huffs, “What did you expect, Brian? I lost my boyfriend because I wanted a family. I’m not going to be the most enthusiastic person right now.”
Justin feels a stab of guilt when Brian looks away and down at his food.

“I’m sorry,” Justin says softly, “I didn’t mean to react like a dick, okay? I’m...I’m glad that you and Eric are having another baby. I’m sure he or she will be beautiful. I’m just being selfish. I guess I’m envious. Sorry.”

Brian stays silent then shrugs non-committedly, “No apologies, no regrets.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.”

Brian sighs, “I didn’t mean to blurt it out like that. We don’t even want to tell anyone until the end of July when we go in for Mel’s birthday. I guess I felt the need to explain myself after saying that I would be taking time from work. I guess maybe I felt the need to tell someone.”

Justin forces a smile, “I’m glad you told me first.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I am. Really, I am.”

Justin was telling the truth when he said that he was happy that Brian told him first. He’s happy for them. He really is.

And that’s why he waits until he gets to his studio to shed a few tears about his own life being at such a standstill.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay. Things have been constantly hectic. The next chapter takes place in Toronto at the end of July and will be much longer. Thank you for reading.
Chapter 36: Passeio Baltico and Av. Berlim

Chapter Summary

Despite the distance from New York, Justin finds it difficult to step into the gay scene while in Portugal.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was also supposed to cover Toronto but I felt it was best to stop the chapter here. So another chapter split! :P Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lisbon, Portugal - July 26th, 2015

Justin lets his hips thrust upwards as his trick sinks down on his cock.

“Good. Very good,” the trick sighs as let himself grind at the hilt.

That’s more or less all the man has said since Justin brought him back to his hotel room. The guy introduced himself as Estevo but Justin’s too drunk to remember for sure. He had asked around and found a gay club near his hotel. When he walked in, he had been set on getting laid. It’s been three months. Three fucking months. That’s the longest Justin has been without sex since he was seventeen years old. He had come close in the last month or so. He almost let an art curator blow him two weeks ago but felt too much guilt over it and pushed him way. His breakup with Nathan felt too fresh and still does half the time. Maybe it had been the distance or the fact that he hadn’t seen or spoken to his ex in a few weeks but, whenever he hadn’t been working, he’d gone out to dance with men. Estevo had been the first man he brought back to fuck. Their conversation was limited. Estevo only knows a few words in English but, when they had tried to converse, Estevo did manage to confirm that he wasn’t a prostitute and was looking for a good time.

Justin opens his eyes to remind himself what the man looks like. Estevo is maybe a year or two younger than him with light grey eyes, chestnut colored hair, pouty lips, lean but muscular. If Justin was embracing his single life, he would have drooled over him and fucked him all over the hotel room, language barrier be damned.

But that wasn’t the case. He just needed a release.
When Justin is getting close, he takes Estevo’s cock in his hand, jerks it a few times, before letting go to grab both of his hips to pull him down on his cock, hard and fast.

“Porra!” Estevo cries out as Justin pounds into his prostate.

“Want it harder?” Justin grunts out.

Estevo says nothing. Maybe he’s lost in his pleasure. Maybe he doesn’t even understand what Justin said.

He doesn’t have to wait long to find out. Soon Estevo is coming on Justin’s stomach, shouting out his release. Justin gives in soon after. There’s no need to draw this out.

“Magnífico,” Estevo sighs as he lays next to Justin’s form.

“...Yeah. Of course,” Justin sighs as he stares at the ceiling. He could really do with a fucking cigarette right now. It’s times like these he wishes that he still smoked. He had only smoked from time to time but it was enough that he realized he needed to stop for his own health. New York City selling them at 11 dollars a pack had helped him stick with his decision.

“You...food?” Estevo asks and Justin can’t be completely sure where he’s getting at.

“No, Estevo. I don’t want food,” Justin answers.


“I’m good. You can go whenever you need to though.”

Estevo pouted before kissing Justin on the cheek.

“Great time.”
“Yeah.”

“Number?”

“No. Sorry. Long Distance, you know?”

Estevo starts muttering in Portuguese as he collects his clothes and throws them back on. Justin closes his eyes and lets out a breath.

“Have a good life, Estevo,” Justin mumbles right before he hears the door slam.

Justin sits back up and turns on the television. He finds one station that’s English with Portuguese subtitles playing Buffy the Vampire Slayer so he watches that for a while. It’s one of the cheesier episodes but it gets him feeling bummed anyway because it reminds him of when he had been with Nathan for about six months and only found out then that his boyfriend never heard of the show. They marathoned it. It took forever for Nathan to even get into it but eventually he got on board.

He doesn’t feel like watching Buffy anymore.

He gets his clothes back on, deciding to walk around Lisbon. He only has two days left before he flies straight to Toronto to visit for Mel’s birthday and he feels like he’s barely seen the city at all. He did take Eric’s advice and go visit the library he talked about. The man was right. It had been fucking beautiful and Justin spent all morning in there just looking around. That had been the highlight of his trip, outside of business.

So, on his own, he just looks around sees the sights, walks the bridge to the view the whole city.

It’s beautiful. He wishes he could appreciate it more. It would be great to feel like he did when he was 22, in a whole new city that was ready to be conquered, no matter how hard it would be. But he doesn’t really need to accomplish Lisbon. He came here successful, just like he has with his other exhibitions in the past 4 years. While he is grateful for that blossoming streak of independence he formed as a New Yorker out on his own because it’s the main thing that has been keeping him afloat these past few months, he wishes that he didn’t need it. He wishes that he could come to this beautiful city with someone he truly cared about, walk the streets in the middle of the night with them, and become even closer with them as the time passed. Maybe they’d talk about having a family together and it would be one of the best conversations of Justin’s life because it
would lead to something fantastic.

God, he sounds like such a lesbian. It has to be the fucking alcohol.

Even though he should probably head back to the hotel, he ends up going back to the club. There’s a back room at this one, something that’s hard to find in the mainstream clubs of New York. So, for the sake of old times, he finds a cute guy, doesn’t get his name, and gets his dick sucked. He comes and it feels great for approximately six seconds before he feels nothing again.

No. Not nothing. He feels like Brian Kinney.

That’s what Brian used to do, didn’t he? Suck and fuck until the pain went away? Kept his loved ones mostly at an arm’s length? Jesus, he was so fucked up back then.

But now he’s a family man and Justin’s the fucked up one.

Justin quickly zips up his pants, walks away from the trick without even a goodbye, and heads back to his hotel. Because, despite the hero worshiping he may have done back when he was 17, he does not want to become a young Brian Kinney. Maybe an old Brian Kinney, but not a young one.

Going without sex though? He doesn’t think he can do that for months at a time again.

As Justin drifts off, he has drunken thoughts weighing if he should find a new fuck buddy who he’s on good terms with or if he should just call one of his old ones like Milo or Tom. Maybe repeated encounters with a friend would be more fulfilling than anonymous ones.

Before Justin can think too hard on it, he falls asleep. Probably for the best. He has the feeling that the answer for getting over whatever this is isn’t there anyway.

-----------------------------------------------

The next night is the next to his last night in Lisbon and his last night of his exhibition. He plays nice and schmoozes critics, enthusiasts, curators, and collectors. This is his least favorite part of the job but it is what gets him paid, and well at that. When he was younger, it was a lot harder for him to part with his work. For the pieces he was especially proud of, he used to want to know it would be taken care of by someone who understood it if it didn’t go to a friend or family member. Now, it is easier for him. Creating a piece he wants to display for the public but not sell didn’t happen often anymore. This show was different.
“I absolutely love this piece,” Sophia Cordeiro, the wife of a prominent art collector, says to him as she looks up at his picture of Nathan in awe, “What’s it called?”

Justin stares up at it, “Light from the Ashes.”

“How much do you want for it?”

“It’s not for sale.”

“Twenty Thousand. That’s good in your money, yes?” she presses.

“Pretty good. But it’s not for sale,” Justin tells her softly.

“Why not?” Sophia huffs.

“It’s special to me. It’s just meant for display. Everything else is something you can purchase.”

Sophia looks slightly annoyed but sighs in acceptance.

“Very well. That man...in the picture. He’s special to you?”

He stares at Nathan’s retreating form and nods, “He is.”

“Is he your lover?”

Justin clears his throat, “He was. Not anymore.”

“What happened? Did he die?”
Pulling a face, Justin gives her a strange look, “No? Why would you ask that?”

“He’s walking towards the light and away from the shadows,” Sophia shrugs, “Moving on to a happier world.”

Justin bites his lip and blinks his eyes a few times, “That...That wasn’t his reason.”

“No, it wouldn’t be. You’re a good man. Successful. I’m sure he was happy with you. Death would not treat him any better.”

Justin stays silent and turns to stare at his painting some more.

“It’s what you hope for. For him,” Sophia finally says.

He turns around, “Hope for what?”

Sophia stares at the painting and makes no move to make eye contact with Justin himself, “You’re the one in the darkness. Unsure. Heartbroken. He’s the one who chose to walk away but it was for your benefit yet you feel abandoned. Alone. He left a scar on your heart, the type that is rare and few and far between. You worry about him. Love him. Even though you want him back, you forced yourself to set him free and you can only hope that he finds happiness and peace. Is that interpretation closer?”

“Yes,” Justin chokes out, emotional and tense.

Sophia smiles a little, “Usually I would use a good interpretation to get the painting I wanted out of someone.”

“It won’t work with this one.”

“I know. It’s hard to let things go when we are hurting so.”
Justin takes a hitching breath and lets out a quiet, humorless laugh, “I guess the scar’s still too fresh.”

Sophia walks closer to him, stares in his eyes and pats him on the chest, “It will always ache. But when you grow used to it, you will realize that each scar tells a story. Including that one. And it’ll tell a beautiful story at that. I bet the man in the picture has one to match.”

After Sophia walks away and she’s out of sight, Justin finally lets himself breathe again.

“Intense, isn’t she?” a man asks from a few feet away.

“Uh...yeah,” Justin answers, rubbing the back of his neck.

The man comes closer, “From what I gather, everyone thinks Raphael knows more about art than his wife. He’s the one known in the field. He may know facts and techniques and might be better at naming the artist just by looking at the piece but it’s Sophia who actually understands the emotion of the work that went into it. I find that much more valuable. Don’t you?”

Justin stares at the man before nodding. He assumes this is a man in the industry. Whether he’s a curator, collector, critic, affiliated with the gallery, or an artist himself, he doesn’t know. He’s English, on the tall side, probably in his mid to late 40s but looks good. He has kind, wise eyes and a pleasant smile. It’s not often Justin likes to mingle during his exhibitions. Don’t get him wrong, he does so anyway and sometimes he meets great people. But there’s a part of him that will always be how he felt when he was 22 and that part makes him assume that the majority of the people, the critics and the refined collectors, as cunts.

This guy seems different.

“It’s more valuable to me too,” Justin admits, “Sometimes it takes everything in my power to not throw a fit when someone who buys one of my paintings obviously...I don’t know…”

“Doesn’t get it?” the man guesses.

“Yeah. It can get annoying. Just because you know facts or know techniques that are used doesn’t mean you understand what went into that piece. What emotion it is supposed to bring. I suppose I should be grateful that they are paying for me.”
The man grins and leans in, “If we got into art just to make money, then we wouldn’t be making a cent. It’s the passion, the love, and the integrity that make a piece of art worth something.”

Justin smiles a little and holds out a hand, “I’m Justin.”

The man raises his eyebrows, “I’m aware. You’re name is on the pamphlet.”

But the man takes Justin’s hand and shakes it.

“I’m Ewan.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Ewan. What brings you here?”

Ewan shrugs, “I heard you were good. Your name comes up a lot in certain circles but I never saw a piece of yours with my own two eyes. I’ve seen your paintings online but wanted to see them for myself. Besides, I know Francesca. I was here when she first opened the gallery. We’ve known each other for about ten years now. It’s always nice to see her and how far she’s come.”

“How did you meet her? Are you an artist or a collector?”

“A bit of both.”

“Would I know any of your work?”

“I might have done a few pieces you would recognize. I’ve run an agency for a while now but have started dabbling in painting again these last couple of years. I’m starting to find my passion for it again. It helps to see work that inspires me. Like yours, for instance.”

Justin smiles, “I’m glad to have inspired you.”

Ewan bites his lip, “Would you mind if I treated you for coffee and dessert then? There’s a place
down the road we could go to once you are done entertaining the masses.”

Justin looks around, “I have an agent already, you know.”

“I’m not trying to steal you away from your fancy New York agent, Mr. Taylor. I’m simply asking as a courtesy to an artist I admire and have had the chance to meet.”

Justin looks around before making up his mind, “I think I may have a chance to sneak out within an hour or so. Mind waiting that long?”

Ewan shrugs, “I have no other plans for the night. Just come find me when you’re ready to head off.”

Justin watches Ewan head to the other side of the room to study another painting, “Her.” Lola had posed for that one. He hadn’t been surprised when Max hinted at keeping it around the gallery. Justin almost felt obligated since he had secretly painted it through what he perceived as Max’s eyes but his employee might stare at it all day if Justin just kept it around.

Soon enough, Justin finds himself engaging in small talk and answering questions and trying not to cringe at one or two interpretations as people come up to him, mostly with praise. By the time 10 o’clock comes around, he’s more than ready to find Ewan and head out the door.

“So what desserts are good here?”

Ewan looks up from his menu and blushes slightly, “I’ve only been here twice and had their dessert once so I’m not quite sure.”

Justin laughs a little, “You talked about the place as if it were a regular spot for you.”

Ewan smirks, “Well, it’s open late and I knew that much. I didn’t want to be ushered out the door within minutes of our arrival if they were going to close up. This way there’s no rush unless we hit a bunch of awkward silences in our conversation.”

“Well, maybe we’ll have a few things in common and it will go smoothly.”
And they actually do end up having things in common. Ewan’s easy to talk to. Surprisingly easy, especially since Justin has been finding it difficult to talk to anyone.

“Your paintings...I noticed that, while they are fantastic, the more recent ones dated from the past three months or so are bleak and dark. Not a lot of color. I loved them but I was surprised. Part of what made your work appeal to me was that series you did almost two years ago, I think. There were bold colors and brush strokes, an imprint of the image almost but had the tiniest details. Your work varies greatly.”

Justin clears his throat, “My boyfriend and I had just gotten together when I was painting with that technique. It was about four months into the relationship and we were in our honeymoon phase, I guess. He revealed so much to me and started becoming a little more confident and happier. I think it rubbed off.”

“I had a partner in my late twenties who made me feel like I was on top of the world. Some of my best paintings were made then.”

“What happened there?”

Ewan shrugs, “We were together for about seven years but ended up wanting different things.”

“Is that when you stopped painting?”

“No, it was before. I was stressed and so was he and then I was depressed that he left but then after that I was busy yet having the greatest time of my life.”

Justin raises a brow, “You meet someone else?”

Ewan surprisingly grins, “Yes. My daughter.”

“...Are you bi and you just got with a woman or-?”
“No. I’m very much attracted to men. But that’s why Chad and I broke up. I started wanting a family and he didn’t. It became a decision that I couldn’t go his way on and he couldn’t give in to what I wanted. So, after three years of looking but not finding the right man, I figured the hell with it. Women become single mothers by choice so why couldn’t I become a single father? I had the finances so I did what I needed to do because I was in my 37 and not getting any younger. I had my daughter and adopted my son five years later. Alice is 10 and Archer is 6. Both of them have taken to art, especially Alice. They have helped me find my passion for my work more than any man or therapist could.”

“So you’re doing it alone?” Justin asks dubiously.

“I have friends and family who love my children and lend a helping hand. I have a nanny who is with them in London now. But yes, ultimately I am raising my children alone.”

Justin blinks, “Doesn’t it...I don’t know...doesn’t it make things harder? To work as much as you need to, to find a man that you want to be with?”

“I feel that I am setting a good example by going back to my passion and my roots: painting. While my children both need to come first, they are also old enough to entertain themselves from time to time while I’m up in our attic working. As for a man...it can be harder. I hook up with men when I have a night to myself or I'm away on business but I have to be pickier when it comes to a serious relationship. Some men might not see me as the most desirable. I’m not in my prime and I am raising my kids full time. But I don’t want to be in a relationship with a man who can’t accept and love my children. They come first for me and I’ll never regret that. And if it doesn’t happen...that’s alright. My kids make me happy and they make life more than worth it.”

Justin stays silent and plays with his food as Ewan sighs.

“I’m a chatterbox, aren’t I? You didn’t come to talk about my life or-”

“No, don’t apologize. You don’t know how much you have given me to think about,” Justin tells him sincerely.

Ewan looks a little surprised at that and Justin continues with a vague but telling statement.

“Your situation...It hits home when it comes to my relationship with the man in my painting.”
“Ah,” Ewan slowly nods, “Well, I’m glad to be of service to such a wonderful artist.”

The two of them finish their dessert, the conversation much lighter afterwards. It’s only when they are walking back towards the gallery that the man turns to look at him.

“I suppose you’re going back to the U.S. in the next couple of days,” he asks Justin.

“Canada first to visit some close friends but I’ll be back in New York in a few days. I leave Portugal tomorrow.”

Ewan gives him a small smile, “Then I’m sure you would like to go back to your hotel to get some rest.”

Justin thinks on the silent question in Ewan’s words but ends up nodding, “I really should. My plane leaves pretty early in the morning.”

Ewan clears his throat before he pulls out a card, “Well, if you are ever in London or just want to email back and forth, feel free to get a hold of me. I enjoyed talking with you.”

Justin smiles as he takes his own card out, “Likewise.”

With a pat on the shoulder, he and Ewan part ways. It’s only after he realizes that he never got Ewan’s last name. And, when he turns the card over to see what it is, he realizes that Ewan is Ewan Clemens and a more successful artist than he let on.

“Shit,” Justin mutters. He could have fucked a modern artist he looked up to when he was studying up-and-comers at PIFA. And he missed out.

If he were younger, he might have beat himself up over it. Instead, he goes back to his hotel, requests the man on Facebook, then opens a new tab all together to look up surrogacy services in New York City and their policy on potential single fathers. Pretty much all of them seem accepting and encouraging. What starts out as a quick check ends up equaling out to almost two hours online looking up everything he can on the process and reading testimonials.
He’s not committing to anything yet. He tells himself that his research is solely out of curiosity. Just to see.

But it feels like a huge step anyway, and a possibly life changing one at that. It's the first time in a while that he has felt anything close to hopeful.

Chapter End Notes

Ewan Clemens is not a real life successful modern artist. Or, if he is, he is not the Ewan Clemens of this story. Any similarities are purely coincidental.

Please review and let me know what you think! Toronto will now be in the next chapter! Thanks for reading!
Winchester St. and Broadcast Lane

Chapter Summary

Eric and Brian travel up to Toronto for Mel's birthday to make an announcement.

Chapter Notes

Sorry the chapter took a while but this one is over 13,000 words so at least it's a long one! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Stop vibrating.”

Eric turns to send a playful glare his husband’s way.

“And stop waiting at the door like a puppy waiting for its owner to come home.”

Rolling his eyes at the sarcastic comment, Eric bounds over to the couch and jumps on Brian, “How would you know? We’ve never had a dog.”

Brian looks at him with raised eyebrows but says nothing more. Eric lets himself smile.

“I’m just excited to tell her,” he admits as he lies down, head in Brian’s lap, to stare at the ceiling.

“I can tell,” Brian murmurs, amused, as he runs his fingers through Eric’s curls, “I doubt she will be able to keep it a secret until we tell everyone tomorrow though. Lily is not known for her silence. Especially when she’s excited about something. She told me everything she and Margaret were going to do this morning. Four times.”

“But she also knows when something’s important. It will make her feel grown up and responsible if we trust her with that information and tell her first.”
Eric feels Brian shift in his seat before turning his head to look up at him.

“She will be the first one to know, right?”

Brian winces ever so slightly, “Almost.”

Eric sits up and looks Brian in the eye, “Who did you tell?”

Brian looks away and lets out a sigh, “I told Justin when we met for lunch. And before you get pissy about it, I mainly told him because he’s been upset about the whole starting a family situation. Or not starting a family. Whatever. Regardless, I didn’t want him to get upset or jealous or depressed about it when we made the announcement.”

Eric thinks on it. On the one hand, he is a little pissed about it. Brian should have at least told him he was going to tell Justin. And there is a part of him that might be a little pissed at Brian because it’s Justin. Eric likes Justin. He likes him a lot. But it’s Justin. If it had been Emmett or Michael that Brian had told, he would just roll his eyes, call Brian a blabber mouth, and that would be that.

But then Eric has to roll his eyes at himself. He’s being dumb and probably a little jealous. Brian’s become close with Justin but Justin seems to respect their relationship greatly and Eric knows Brian loves him. So he forces himself to get over it.

“You know, I get it,” Eric admits, “I get that he’s having a rough time and might not deal with that kind of surprise well, even if he would most likely keep it to himself. I guess I’m just disappointed that you got to tell someone when I’ve been dying to tell Rick.”

“You can,” Brian tells him, “You can call him right now. I don’t mind.”

But Eric shakes his head, “Nope. I can contain my unbearable excitement better than you can.”

Eric winks at his husband and Brian scoffs, “Yeah, okay. I wasn’t waiting by the door practically dancing in place but I’m the one who is unbearably excited.”

“Of course you are. We’re having a baby,” Eric says simply.
Brian’s eyes unexpectedly soften as he presses a kiss against Eric’s lips, “Why did you want to tell Lily first so badly?”

“Because she’s our best friend. Our short, annoying, sassy, spoiled, strange, and adorable best friend.”

Brian laughs at that, “One Michael is enough, thanks.”

Eric thinks on the description then laughs, “She’s so much better than Michael and you know it.”

“Shhh, don’t tell him.”

“Yes, we wouldn’t want to make him jealous,” Eric agrees good-naturedly then sobers up, “I want her to know because she is the one who will be around the baby as much as we will. She deserves to know before we make a huge announcement. As cute as it would be for them to see her initial reaction, they don’t get to. That’s for us.”

“Always the selfish one, aren’t you?” Brian smirks.

Before Eric can reply, they hear the front door unlocking. Eric jumps up, standing, as they wait for Jess to open the door.

“-and Margaret got grape juice all over her so her daddy had to change her clothes,” Lily told Jess in a serious but excited voice, “It was crazy!”

“That Margaret,” Jess tsks, playing along, “Looks like someone decided to come home early to see you.

Lily turns to look in the living room and gasps with glee.

“Papa!!!” Lily calls out as she runs over into his arms, “You’re home!”
“I am home!” He confirms, putting his hands on her little shoulders in an attempt to get her to stop hopping.

“I’m home too,” Brian points out.

“Yes, you’re home but you were here this morning when I got up,” Lily explains offhandedly before directing her attention back to Eric.

“I feel so loved,” Brian sighs sadly, looking off into the distance.

“What are we gonna do today?” Lily asks as she starts to brainstorm, “Are we gonna go to the zoo or the pool or the park or the-”

“We’re both back early because we’re going to Toronto tomorrow.”

Lily gasps and jumps up and down, “We’re going to see JR?!”

“Yes,” Eric answers.

“We’re going to see Gus?! He was just here not that long ago!” Lily exclaims, as if she were shocked that they would go up and see him when he just finished up his two week stay not even a week before.

“Yes, he’ll be there too,” Eric confirms, amused, all while Brian is whispering something in Jess’s ear and seeing her out the door.

“And we’ll see-”

“Go sit down on the couch,” Brian interrupts as he reaches down to put a hand on her back, “We need to talk to you about something.”

Lily turns her head to quickly look back and forth between her fathers and gets wide-eyed.
Then she asks in a small voice, “Am I in trouble?”

Brian snorts as he pulls her over to sit down next to him, “Why? Did you do something you should be in trouble for?”

Lily looks up at him with her worried dark brown eyes.

“No! I swear! I’ve been good all day!”

Lily turns, quickly sits on her feet, and brushes her curls out of her face, quickly getting down to business, “Now...what did you need to talk to me about?”

Eric narrows his eyes at her suspiciously, “Lily…”

“What, Papa?” Lily asks innocently.

Eric studies her for a few seconds before picking her up so she’s sitting properly once more, “You’re wearing the nice shoes Daddy bought you. It was muddy this morning. You know what I’ve said about wearing your nicer shoes outside.”

“But Papa!” Lily explodes, ditching her innocent demeanor, “They are so beautiful and I had to show them to Margaret! Just look at them!”

Lily pops her feet into Eric’s lap to show him her beautiful purple dress sandals, complete with pearls lining the straps. Brian had taken Lily to work two days ago because she had been begging to come with him to help for at least a month. His husband had waited for a day with no meetings scheduled to bring her in and she had been so good that Brian felt she should be rewarded with a shopping trip at some children’s boutique where he spent way too much on her as a result. Eric told Brian he was spoiling her but Brian had just shrugged and said he wanted his daughter to be on top of the trends.

As soon as Eric finishes staring down at his daughter’s feet, he closes his eyes and shakes his head as he hears Brian stifling a laugh. Lily had to have gotten her stubborn and ornery behavior from his husband because Eric doesn’t remember being like her when he was four. Granted, he doesn’t
remember a lot from that age. Mainly he remembers George breaking his model train set and Eric had thrown a fit because, at the time, it felt like the end of the world as he knew it.

“-and that’s why I had to wear these shoes!” Lily finishes passionately as Eric catches the last half of her sentence.

“Yeah, Eric. You don’t want her to not be the most fashionable four year old on the playground,” Brian insists as Lily nods vigorously, crawling over to Brian’s arms as if she feels like it’ll be two against one that way.

“Well...they’re clean. You didn’t get them dirty so I guess it’s fine. But those are only for certain days, like when we go out to dinner or something, okay?”

Lily purses her lips and nods grimly, “...Okay.”

“But that wasn’t what we wanted to talk to you about,” Eric tells her, changing the subject.

He and Brian make eye contact over Lily’s head and Brian nudges Lily so that she’s off his lap and sitting back in between them.

“Well, I didn’t do any other things that are bad,” Lily huffs.

“It’s not about you being in any kind of trouble,” Brian asks, amused, “It’s about something more permanent.”

“Perman-en? What’s that mean?” Lily asks curiously.

“Permanent.” Brian enunciates slowly, “It means forever.”

“Oh. Okay. What’s going to be happening for forever?”

He and Eric glance at each other again and Brian nods to let Eric to take over.
“Daddy and I made some arrangements. We decided that we wanted to add to our family.”

“We’re getting a puppy?!?!” Lily squeals as she hops up to her feet and jumps up and down.

“Not quite,” Brian tells her as he shakes his head, “You’re getting a brother or sister. Congratulations.”

Brian winks at her as Lily’s eyes go wide and she stands absolutely still.

“...Lily?” Eric asks, slightly concerned at his daughter’s frozen state.

Then, in a delayed reaction, Lily makes the highest and loudest excited scream that either of them have ever heard from her.

Eric sees Brian wince at the sound as they both cover their ears until she stops.

“I’m so excited!!!! I’m-I’m-I’m-”

“Going to be a big sister,” Eric finishes with a smile.

“But is it a boy or a girl?” Lily asks eagerly as she starts to pace the floor, “I really think it should be a girl, Papa. I think Daddy thinks so too. It should be a girl ‘cause I can talk to her about stuff better and dress her up.”

“We don’t know if it is going to be a boy or a girl yet,” Brian admits, “We won’t know for another couple of weeks.”

“Actually, it’ll be longer because your Daddy is waiting to find out until I get back from New Orleans,” Eric says pointedly as he looks at Brian, “Seriously, no finding out without me.”

“And if I do?” Brian challenges good-naturedly.
“Papa, he can just send you an email,” Lily points outs, exasperated, “We have to find out as soon as we can. We just HAVE to.”

Eric chuckles and takes Lily’s hand to bring her over closer, “Maybe I’ll reschedule some things so that I can fly back for a couple of days and we can find out sooner.”

Lily nods her head vigorously, “Yes, you must do that. You just must.”

Soon enough, Lily is dancing around the room, calling it her excited big sister dance, and Brian and Eric just watch the energetic oddball move at lightening speed.

“She’s so weird,” Eric mutters to Brian as Lily does a somersault.

“I just want to know who told her that was dancing. So much for the classes.”

Eric lightly smacks his husband on the arm, “Stop it. She can dance. She’s just too excited to right now.”

Lily suddenly stops dancing and turns around. For a second, Eric’s worried that she heard the potentially insulting banter but then she exclaims, “I have to call Duncan and tell him! Daddy, you call Emmett so that I can talk to Duncan on FaceTime. I have to tell him right now.”

“No telling Duncan,” Brian tells her, “No telling anyone.”

Lily’s eyes go wide and her lip wobbles, “But...But why not?”

Eric sighs and goes over to kneel down in front of her, “Because no one else knows yet. You’re the first person we’ve told. We wanted you to know first because you are about to be a big sister and that’s a huge responsibility. So that’s why we are all going to Toronto this weekend. It’s Aunt Mel’s birthday so everyone is coming in and that will be a good time to make the announcement and maybe you and I can go see Uncle Rick and Aunt Sally in DC to tell them after I’m back home. Think you can hold out for a day or two and keep it a secret?”
Lily holds her head up high and nods with purpose, “Yes, Papa. I can keep a secret. Better than anyone.”

As Brian snickers at Lily’s solemn statement, Eric nods back, “I trust you, baby.”

“I’m not a baby,” Lily reminds him, “I’m a big sister now.”

Eric smiles and feels his eyes crinkle, “That you are.”

“And I’ll be the best big sister in the whole wide world!” Lily exclaims, “But I will keep it a secret because I’m a big girl and I know how.”

“I can’t tell you,” Lily says to Duncan with pursed lips and bright and excited eyes, “But it rhymes with schmaybe.”

“Lily,” Eric warns her quietly as they step forward in line to check in their luggage. Glancing ahead, he can see that Brian, Emmett, and Drew didn’t hear the exchange between the four year olds. Not that it would be the end of the world if they did. But he just wanted to make one announcement to everyone at the right time.

“What? I didn’t even tell him!” Lily insists as she puts her hands on her hips.

“Just zip it, alright? No hints and no talking about it. Once everyone knows you can talk about it to your heart’s content.”

Lily groans and throws herself against her papa’s leg, “But it’s so hard to zip it when I want to shout it at the whole airport!”

Eric sighs and pets her hair as she moans her disappointment into his hip.

“I guess we’ll have to put you between me and Daddy on the plane ride so you aren’t tempted then.”
Lily looks up at him in pain, “But Duncan-”

“Will be there all weekend and around when you get home.”

Lily shakes her head, looks at him with heartbroken and honest eyes, and takes a step back, “This is going to be the boringest time of my life.”

Eric stifles a laugh, “Sorry to hear that sitting next to your parents is such torture.”

Lily looks away from him and stares longingly at Duncan, who is currently unzipping his backpack to take out his stuffed bear, “Fine. But you owe me for this.”

Lily stomps back to her friend to spend the precious amount of time she has left with him as Eric stares at her in wonder. He really doesn’t know where half of the shit that comes out of her mouth comes from.

“Remember to zip your bag back up, baby!” Emmett calls out to his son after he turns his head to check on him, “Is he behaving, Eric?”

“He’s a little angel. The other one? Not so much,” Eric drawls.

“Oh honey, what did you expect? Half of the influence in her life comes from Brian Kinney,” Emmett says, as if he is softly breaking the news of something Eric didn’t know.

Brian comes back to his side to usher Duncan back to his parents when they are close to the front of the line. As a group, they step forward and get their luggage checked in.

“You sure that is enough for a month?” Brian asks sarcastically as they start to load Eric’s many bags onto the scale.

“Probably not. I may have you send me a few things.”

Brian’s annoyed expression when he realizes that Eric isn’t joking is priceless but there is a hint of
“You going to miss me?” Eric asks as they make their way through first class security.

“Don’t see why I would. We’re going to the same place,” Brian tells him, looking straight ahead.

“I mean when we part ways for a month at the end of the weekend.”

Brian says nothing before he shrugs, “Figure I’ll see you eventually.”

Eric rolls his eyes at Brian’s faked nonchalance, “Well, I am going to try to book a flight back for the sixteen week checkup. It’ll be a short visit but I think I can swing a couple of days away.”

Brian shrugs but somehow seems a little lighter as they go through the checkpoint to board the plane. Then he turns to him, as if he is remembering something.

“You are still good on the sitter for Lily while she goes down there for a week?”

“Yeah, Marcus’s daughters don’t start the new semester until September 8th and decided to take the opportunity to explore New Orleans. They’ll be watching her in the morning and afternoon. They’re 20 so they’re both old enough to take Lily around to different places to get her out of the condo until I’m finished for the day.”

Brian nods, “Sounds like you’re all set then.”

Eric suppresses a frustrated sigh. As much as Brian has opened up over the years, it was still impossible for the man to say he would miss someone, save for maybe Lily and Gus. Eric knew how to read the detached demeanor. He didn’t need to hear it. Brian’s actions were worth more than the words. But it wouldn’t be completely unwelcome to hear.

But then Brian does lace his fingers with his. Just briefly but for enough time to know that the sentimental and yearning feelings are mutual, despite knowing that there will be short visits and that a month isn’t long amount of time when they have the rest of their lives.
They board the plane and Lily wiggles in her seat with disappointment as she glances two rows up and to the left to try to catch glances at Duncan. Once they take off, Eric gives up on having a good conversation with her to take her mind off things and gets her kiddie tablet and headphones out of her bag so that she can watch one of the few movies he’s downloaded for her on it.

“Using technology as a babysitter?” Brian tsks as soon as he sees what Eric is doing.

“Shut up,” Eric shoots back as Lily plugs in and watches *Coraline*, which is one of the creepiest kids movies he’s seen but Lily loves it so who is he to judge?

The movie does the trick and Lily stays quiet for most of the flight. Brian and Eric talk over her head, staying away from the important subjects such as babies and New Orleans and focus on Eric’s plans to renovate the bathroom connected to their bedroom to put a larger shower in and Lily’s preference for Flamenco over Ballet and wondering if they should ask if she wants to quit Ballet once the season is over with in the fall so that she can take on Flamenco twice a week. Domestic shit. Talk that Brian usually likes to keep to a minimum yet seems tolerable to right now. Maybe it’s the fact that they know they need to plan while they’re mostly separated for a month or maybe it’s just the new baby coming along kicking Brian’s responsible instincts into a higher gear but Eric’s always been the type to at least like what direction different aspects of their lives are going in so he isn’t going to complain.

The pilot announces over the intercom that the plane is about to land and Eric sees Brian rolling his eyes over something.

“What?”

Brian snorts and gives him a glance, “I just realized I spent the whole flight talking about flamenco and kitchen appliances when I could have been dragging you to the bathroom to-”

Eric quickly moves to shush him by leaning over their daughter to kiss Brian on the mouth before he hears a woman pointedly clear her throat.

“You need to put your seatbelt on, sir,” the stewardess tells him with an icy tone.

Eric ignores Brian’s glare at her as he musters up the brightest smile possible, “Sorry, ma’am. Newlywed syndrome.”
The stewardess stares at him for a second before walking down the aisle to check and see if the rest of the passengers aren’t as rebellious as Eric is.

“Bitch,” Brian mutters as soon as the woman is out of earshot.

Lily takes her headphones off and perks up, “Who’s a bit-”

Eric lightly but quickly puts a hand over her mouth and shakes his head. And as he glares at Brian over Lily’s head, all Brian can do is look at him with such mischievous humor in his eyes. Brian needs to learn how to shut his mouth. The fact that Lily seems to know what a bitch is pisses him off.

“No derogatory words about women in front of our daughter,” Eric hisses, “She even knew to say who and not what. Not a good sign.”

Brian raises a brow, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. That just proves that her understanding of speech is as sharp as ever.”

As Brian keeps smirking at him and his daughter looks triumphant at the praise she may or may not understand, Eric has to wonder how he’ll survive with another troublemaker added to their household.

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The six of them are greeted with hugs from Michael and Lindsay when they arrive at the airport. Michael and Brian hold onto each other tight and share a brief kiss, one that used to make Eric do a double take the first few months he was with Brian but is now something that he takes in stride, glad that his husband has someone who loves him so much. Lily takes Lindsay’s hand and talks to her seriously about needing to sit next to Duncan on the ride to her house because her Papa kept her from doing so on the plane. All Lindsay can do is nod and listen as she sends amused glances Eric and Brian’s way.

“We’re best friends,” Lily tells her with an innocent sadness, “Best friends are supposed to sit with each other all the time and that didn’t happen today.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Lindsay tells her, “You’ll be sharing a room this weekend though. You’ll probably get sick of each other by Sunday.”
“I could NEVER get sick of Duncan,” Lily informs her, leaving no room for argument, “I just get sick of Gus.”

Lindsay bursts into laughter at that, “I understand, Sweetheart.”

“What has my sonny boy done now?” Brian drawls as he throws an arm around Lindsay’s shoulders.

“Nothing he hasn’t done before,” Lindsay mutters, “I just wish he wasn’t growing up so fast.”

Eric sees Brian’s eyes become tender as he looks away.

“Same.”

“He’s already looking up colleges,” Lindsay sighs as Brian scoffs.

“He’s only a sophomore!”

Lindsay shrugs, “He wants to know the best programs and start a few intro classes by the summer before his senior year so that he’ll be a good pick for the New York schools. He’s trying to set his path now. He’s too excited to grow up, if you ask me.”

Brian and Lindsay continue their conversation until they reach the car and Eric can’t help but feel a small pain in his chest over it. He’s sure that it isn’t nearly as close to what Brian, Lindsay, and Mel feel over Gus growing up, but he’s been a part of the kid’s life since he was about 8. He loves him so much and Gus is his stepson, now officially so. But seeing Brian deal with the inevitable trials that came with parenting a teenager always made him dread Lily growing up. Part of him couldn’t wait. He wants to see the person she becomes, what she likes and dislikes, know her favorite subjects in school, see who her friends are. But then that comes with meeting her first boyfriend or girlfriend, making sure she’s safe, finding out things he really would never want to hear about, and her eventually moving away.

And he’s going to be putting himself through that twice. So strange.
“I can take the kids and ride in your car, Linds,” Emmett tells her, “We should discuss the party plans anyway and I’m afraid Lily and Duncan are going to suffer premature heart palpitations if we keep them apart again.”

Lily nods her head vigorously, “He’s right. That’s gonna happen. Don’t let it happen, Aunt Lindsay.”

“Do you even know what a heart palpitation is?” Eric has to ask her.

Lily nods again with solemn seriousness and gives them her definition.

“A heart palpitation is when your heart hurts really bad. So bad that it rips up inside you and makes blood go everywhere.”

All of the adults stare at her in bewilderment as Duncan seems to completely accept his best friend’s definition before Brian breaks the silence.

“Close enough. We’ll see you later then.”

Emmett and Drew part ways with a ridiculously tender kiss, as if they will be separated for the weekend rather than just twenty minutes. It makes Brian yell out, “Get a room, Honeycutt!” But Eric can’t help but think it’s sweet. Emmett had immediately been lonely when Drew spent most of June and the beginning of July in Africa, even though Emmett and Duncan had joined them the last week. Emmett had been over a lot to hang out with them and Brian had even spent the night there when they both got a little too tipsy one Friday night. Eric’s sure that Emmett appreciated the company seemed so much lighter and at peace when he had his small family complete again.

Michael leads him, along with Brian and Drew, to his car and opens his trunk to let them put their bags inside as he goes around to start the ignition. Eric urges Brian to sit up front with his friend as Drew and Eric sit in the back. Immediately, Eric can tell Michael is chipper. He’s more talkative than ever and smiling as if he can’t help it.

“And you know how well the first two copies of the reboot sold. Our feedback email address is overflooded with emails from old fans and new ones. Most seem to really love the direction and embrace the new characters. There are a few that can’t get past the original storyline and I get that but I like that Justin and I took our time to really develop everyone new so that people had more
“characters to get to know and like,” Michael continues as he drives.

“It did attract a lot of new readers, didn’t it?” Brian comments, “Pretty soon you and Zen Ben will be swimming in cash.”

Michael shrugs but smiles, “It’s helped us both out a lot financially and, if Ben keeps moving up at the college, that will help us out too. We’re going to need all we can get.”

Eric tilts his head in question at that and looks to Drew to see if he caught it but he’s pretty sure Drew is texting Emmett and isn’t even listening. You wouldn’t guess it at first glance but Drew is head over heels when it comes to his partner.

“You two have any plans this weekend outside of Mel’s party?” Eric asks. Usually there was one night where Brian and Michael would go off and do their own thing.

Michael shrugs, “I’m not sure if we can fit it in. Linds and Mel are hosting dinner and everyone is going to that. I’m excited for it. Ben and I have an announcement to make.

“Ben’s finally leaving your ass and moving to Tibet to become one with the monks? About time,” Brian comments as Eric gives a light kick to his seat.

“Ha ha, very funny,” Michael says as he rolls his eyes, “No, this news is better. Much better. You’ll find out, don’t worry.”

The rest of the ride goes quickly and without incident. Michael pulls up in front of Lindsay’s and Brian calls the guest bedroom before Drew and Emmett can even think of it.

“Brian, Drewsie just got back,” Emmett sighs, “We need alone time.”

Brian snorts, “Bullshit. You two have been all over each other ever since you guys got back. And besides, Eric’s leaving for New Orleans Sunday morning and we need to fu-”

“Fine,” Emmett interrupts with a glance to the kids, “You win. Drew and I will take the couch.”
Brian smirks triumphantly at the win. Eric rolls his eyes and grabs a couple of his bags while Brian gets his own and one of Eric’s. They head inside and take their things to the guest room. Just as Eric is about to head out the door Brian stops him, turns him around, and gives him a once over. Eric studies the man’s face for a few seconds before scoffing.

“Now?”

“As good of a time as any,” Brian shrugs as he reaches down to unzip Eric’s pants.

Eric really has to think on it before sighing, “Brian...we just got-”

“Shhh…”

Brian kisses him, nips at his lower lip before going down to his knees to pull Eric’s cock out of his pants.

“I want to make you feel good. Just relax.”

If Eric thought about objecting any further, those objections die down as Brian puts his lips around his cock and starts to suck. Brian had once told him that giving oral was only something he did when he was a twink and, after that phase of his life passed, when he was either high or really into the guy. Eric felt lucky that Brian was willing to do it so often now because, fuck, the guy is good. He knew just where to trace and swirl his tongue, how fast and how slow to go.

Eric gasps as Brian starts to speed up his pace. He can’t stop his hips from moving as he runs his fingers through Brian’s hair, trying not to grip too hard.

“Fuck, Brian! I’m...fuck,” Eric moans as he tosses his head back.

Brian works him, fondling his balls, as Eric lets go and cums. Brian swallows, not even a flinch in sight, before licking him clean and standing back up, wincing and looking down at his knees.
“Your knees hurt?” Eric asks, a little concerned.

“Guess it comes with age,” Brian sighs, a little bitter.

“Or kneeling down on a hard floor to give a spectacular blowjob,” Eric purrs as presses kisses against Brian’s jaw, “Just shows how far you will go to show how much you’ll miss me.”

Brian rolls his eyes before kissing him.

Eric looks down at Brian’s groin before shaking his head and unzipping his husband’s pants to return the favor. He may want to get back downstairs but it’s also his duty to make sure his man is taken care of. Who could blame him for doing just that?

Brian stays mostly quiet while his friends and husband talk and visit in the living room, opting to mostly watch Duncan and Lily run around instead. While he would rather be fucking Eric up in the guest room, he knows that, socially, playing nice is the polite thing to do. Whatever. The main thing from keeping him getting aggravated is the fact that Gus will be home soon. Brian can’t help but want him to know before almost everyone else, besides Lily and Justin. It’s only fair his kid is let in on the little secret too.

“Lily,” Brian says quietly as soon as she is close enough.

Lily takes a few steps forward when Brian takes her hand and waits expectedly.

“You haven’t told anyone, have you?”

Lily shakes her head no enthusiastically, confirming that she has kept her promise.

“Not even Duncan?”

Lily gives him a disappointed look, “No, Daddy. I promised.”

Brian nods, smiles a little, and kisses her forehead, “Good girl.”
Lily rubs at her forehead with a scowl before running over to argue with Duncan, something that happens all too often even though they are best friends. But she is distracted from the debate she’s having when JR and Gus walk through the door. She’s the first to greet them, giving them the biggest and tightest hugs she can manage before looking at them, almost offended.

“Where were you guys?” Lily exclaims, staring up at them, “I have been here all day!”

“It was Free Friday at the pool,” Gus shrugs as he picks her up, just to piss her off, “We went to have fun all day without you.”

Lily’s eyes fill with tears and her voice cracks, “B-But...But I love the pool too!”

“Gus,” Brian warns. Lily’s complete meltdowns don’t come too terribly often but he’s not going to condone Gus getting her worked up, as fun as his son might think it is.

Gus rolls his eyes in response. Dick.

“Was Penny there?” Lily presses, using her nickname for Gus’s girlfriend, “Penny loves me and would want me there. Not you.”

Lily glares at her older brother and Gus raises his eyebrows in response before sighing and kissing her on the cheek.

“Yeah, she was there and missed you. Next time you can come, alright? And you’ll see Penny tomorrow.”

Lily finally looks somewhat satisfied and demands to be let down.

Gus comes and sits next to him, smelling of chlorine, and Brian ruffles his hair to get him a little riled up in retaliation for doing the same to Lily. Gus gives him a glare but Brian just gives him a small (fake) innocent smile in return all while Lily takes JR by the hand and drags her across the room.
“Gus?” Brian says softly once people aren’t paying direct attention to the older kids, “Eric and I need to talk to you. In private.”

Gus sighs, already seemingly dreading whatever the conversation will be about and Brian can’t help but bite back a laugh. He can’t blame the kid, really. Last time he told him he needed to talk to him in private was when he found out Gus was screwing his girlfriend. Brian feels like the conversation went mostly okay but Gus probably thinks it was one of the most embarrassing things he’s ever gone through.

But Gus nods before standing up to head for the stairs. Brian nudges Eric so that they can head up with him. Gus is in his room by the time they make it up there, sitting on his bed, nervous and waiting to hear what needs to be said.

“It’s not about anything uncomfortable. Chill out,” Brian comments as he studies his son’s uncomfortable demeanor.

Gus’s form suddenly becomes a lot less tense as he lets a breath out, “Then why do you guys need to speak to me in private?”

Eric is the one who goes over and sits next to Gus first. Gus looks at his stepfather expectantly and Eric glances over to Brian with an expression that says, “Get over here.”

Brian nods and sits on the other side of Gus and all of the sudden Gus starts to panic.

“Are one of you sick?” he asks, alarmed, “Fuck, just tell me-”


“You’re getting a divorce then?”

Eric looks taken aback and Brian barks out a laugh.

“You really think I would have gone through all that planning and heteronormativity if I planned on getting divorced three and a half months later?”
Gus flushes, “How am I supposed to know? You brought me up here to talk in private. What else could it be besides something sucky?”

Brian sighs and puts his hand on the back of his son’s neck, “It’s not something *sucky.*”

Brian looks at Eric, silently telling him that he can say the words this time. Eric puts his arm around Gus’s shoulders and pulls him in.

“We thought you and Lily deserved to know first. We told her at home so she wouldn’t make a scene here because we want to make an announcement at dinner tonight. But here it is. You’re going to be a big brother again in January.”

Both men wait for Gus’s reaction as the boy gets an odd look on his face. He looks at Eric before he looks at Brian. He then gives his father a once over and asks, “Aren’t you kind of old?”

Brian glares at his son and bites back a rude retort that no parent should probably say before Eric runs interference.

“Your dad isn’t THAT old, Gus,” Eric says with humor before sobering up, “But...how do you feel about it? About the baby?”

Gus shrugs, “What’s done is done, right? Better get used to it.”

Brian can’t help but scoff a little at Gus’s forced nonchalance. If anything, he would expect the jealousy in Lily. She’s the one who wanted a sibling in the first place but she’s still a four year old with two parents who bow down to more of her wants and desires than necessary. But Gus...Gus has always been a loving and doting older brother. Sure, he teased Lily and JR a little but it was pretty much always good natured and that was normal anyway. It wasn’t like the girls were all that innocent either. Just over the summer, Lily got whipped cream out of the refrigerator and sprayed it up Gus’s nose while he slept. Where in the hell she had gotten the idea from, Brian doesn’t know. But he had almost been too proud of that moment of creativity to sit her in time out.

“It does up the chances of you getting whipped cream sprayed up your nose again,” Brian comments, “I can see why you might not be all that excited about it.”
Gus rolls his eyes, “You better make sure Lily doesn’t pull that with the new baby. She could suffocate it.”

Brian almost laughs when Eric gets a worried and paranoid look on his face at the images of Lily climbing into a crib with a Reddi Whip bottle undoubtedly flooding through his mind.

The two older men remain quiet and wait for Gus to say something. When Gus realizes that, he lets out a sigh.

“I guess...I guess another baby will be okay,” Gus shrugs, “If you keep it up, you won’t have room for me to visit though.”

Brian’s brows furrow as he studies Gus’s guarded expression.

“Of course we will. Why would you say that?”

“Forget it.”

“No, Gus. I’m not going to ‘forget it.’ Is this upsetting you?”

“No. Not...not really.”

“Then what is it?” Eric asks him quietly.

Gus swallows, “You guys have your own family in New York. Sometimes it’s hard to feel like I’m a part of it when I’m here and you’re there.”

Brian feels a pain in his chest at that, “Of course you are part of our family. Don’t...don’t say that, Gus.”

Gus shrugs, “It’s just how I feel sometimes.”
Brian sighs. It isn’t the first time Gus has brought something like this up. There were times where Gus wanted to spend more time with Brian. The kid never outright asked to live with him, although he had hinted on occasion when Linds and Mel were fighting. Brian couldn’t help but feel grateful for that. He’d take his son in a heartbeat but he knows it might strain his relationship with women he shares him with. But, as much as Gus might complain about his moms, Brian also knew the kid loved them.

“We have a six bedroom house,” is all Brian tells him, “You were there to decorate your room and I promise that you will always have your own space there and that it will never be filled by another kid.”

“Exactly,” Eric reiterates, “And would we even have another kid after this one? Gus is right. You are getting kind of old, Brian.”

Brian would feel like his age is under attack, but Gus laughs and seems more secure again.

“Okay. I’m...I’m excited for you,” Gus admits.

“For us,” Eric reminds him, “You’re going to have a new family member too.”

“Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl yet?” Gus asks.

“Not for another few weeks,” Brian answers, “But when we find out, you’ll be the first person we call.”

Gus smiles then asks, “So, who does it belong to?”

Brian and Eric look at each other before Eric says, “Both of us.”

Gus rolls his eyes, “I know. I meant biologically.”

“We don’t know,” Brian admits before smirking, “We decided to let the best sperm win.”
Gus gets a grossed out look on his face and Brian brings Gus closer to kiss him on top of his head.

“So you’re okay with it?” Brian asks softly.

“Yeah,” Gus answers, “I think it’ll be great.”

“And you’ll keep your mouth shut until dinner?”

“Yeah, but I can’t believe you got Lily to agree to that,” Gus tells him, surprised, “She never shuts up.”

“We’ve had a few close calls but she seems to want to witness the excitement of one big announcement too,” Eric says, “Speaking of which, we better get downstairs to make sure she hasn’t changed her mind on that.”

Gus agrees and Brian follows the two out the door and down the stairs. He’s on his way to the living room when the doorbell rings.

“I’ll get it,” Brian calls out as he takes the few steps needed to reach the door.

When he opens it, he finds himself face to face with Justin.

“Hey,” Brian greets, standing there to take the appearance of Justin in. Last he saw him was almost a month ago and his ex-lover had looked tired and sad and just fucking down. He looks a lot better than he did before. His skin is a bit more tanned, so he must have gotten out and walked around in Portugal at least one day. His eyes are a little brighter. They’re still tired but he hopes it means that Justin has been coming to terms with things and is doing a little better.

“Hey, Brian,” Justin smiles. And it’s a good smile. It isn’t forced or polite. It’s genuine and it makes the worry that Brian has felt over the kid lift a little and surprisingly makes him stop Justin by taking hold of his wrist and drawing him into a hug. Justin lets out a surprised chuckle and pats Brian on the back.

“Sorry, that was unexpected,” Justin admits but keeps his hands on Brian’s shoulders.
“How have you been?” Brian asks him.

“I’ve been…” Justin hesitates, “I’ve been getting there. Things are looking up.”

“You have a good time in Portugal?”

Justin thought about it before nodding, “It was...enlightening, I guess.”

Whatever the fuck that means. But then Brian smirks.

“What, did you get laid?”

Justin laughs a little, “Of course. I was about to explode if I didn’t. That wasn’t what made things better though.”

Before Brian can interrogate any further Ben and Michael come up behind Justin, carrying a few wrapped gifts.

“Isn’t the party tomorrow?” Brian points out as he looks down at the gifts.

Michael shrugs, “Yeah, but the party is here and the cat kept knocking them off the table.”

“I told you that you needed to kick her out, Mikey,” Brian sighs.

“She means well.” Michael says to his friend, playfully offended, before lowering his voice, “And besides, that would break JR’s heart. Lindsay didn’t know how allergic to cats she really was when she agreed to let JR get a kitten.”

“Sometimes you just have to be tough,” Brian shrugs.
“Says the man who has two pet rats in his house,” Michael smirks.

“That wasn’t my decision,” Brian scoffs, “That was Eric’s.”

“So he’s the decision maker,” Michael replies.

Brian rolls his eyes. Why Michael had to leave his hero worshipping behind, he’ll never know.

They go into the living room as Lindsay goes to start dinner while Eric offers to help. Brian’s not sure why. Besides the fact that Eric likes to cook and generally be a helpful person, he also knows Lindsay sort of overstepped pretty early and it kind of rubbed Eric the wrong way. While things have been patched up for years and Eric respected Lindsay as Gus’s mother, you could even call them friends, he also never made a move to become as close with her as he now is with the rest of the gang. But hell, if Eric is going out of his way to spend quality time with Lindsay by cooking a meal with her then fine by him.

“What time are Ted and Blake getting here?” Brian asks, directing the question to Mel.

“Ted texted me a few minutes ago,” Mel answers, “He and Blake will be here by 5 and dinner should be around 6. We offered to go pick them up but Ted said he got a rental car and was staying until Wednesday.”

Brian nods, “I’m sending him to meet with CARGO Cosmetics. I couldn’t be bothered.”

Mel snorts, “God forbid you work on a campaign aimed at women.”

“Fuck you, I did Tampax,” Brian retorts.

“Kids,” Justin reminds him quietly as he nods over to Lily, Duncan, and JR.

“I have to tell Teddy to send me some samples!” Emmett exclaims as he claps his hands before sighing dramatically, “It’s been ages since I’ve done drag or makeup.”
“Finally going butch then?” Brian asks lightly with a smirk.

Emmett, the mature man that he is, sticks his tongue out at him before turning to Justin.

“Baby, how are you doing? Just as I was coming back, you were leaving. I haven’t seen you in weeks! What did you do in Portugal?”

Justin shrugs, “Mostly work related stuff. I spent a lot of time at the gallery but got a little sightseeing in.”

“That’s great. Did you have a good time? Were there a lot of cute guys there?”

Emmett leans in for the gossip and Justin rolls his eyes.

“Sure, Em. Plenty of cute guys.”

Emmett sighs longingly, “You know that I love my Drewsie and he’s it for me through and through. But sometimes I just like to look when we’re out, you know? And sometimes...god, there are some cute ones out there.”

“I’m still in the room, Emmett,” Drew says from across the room, yet doesn’t stop playing with the kids.

Emmett purses his lips and waves his partner off before turning back to Justin.

“You look better. I mean, you look a little happier. You always look scrumptious but I’ve been worried.”

Justin shrugs and looks away, “I’m doing okay. Better, I guess.”

Emmett smiles, almost hesitant to be relieved, “That’s great, baby. I really mean that.”
It’s Michael, of all people, who changes the subject to a safer topic.

“Justin’s staying at our place until Sunday. He just got in last night but we’ve done a lot of work on the new issue already and brainstormed so much. His work looks better than ever.”

“Oh, I can’t wait!” Emmett replies, “The last issue was left on a cliffhanger.”

Ah yes. That had been the Nathan issue. Or the Phoenix issue. Whichever. Even though Brian had moments where he would roll his eyes at the storylines in Rage, he does think the last issue had a compelling storyline. And, knowing Justin and Michael’s tendency to borrow heavily from real life, it does make him wonder what Nathan had gone through outside of the Rage universe.

“But Decimus,” Emmett swoons, “He’s beautiful. Those green eyes, black curls, and tan skin. He looks like he would be so good with his hands-”

“Oh, he is,” Brian interrupts pointedly, “Too bad you’ll never know for sure.”

“Possessiveness doesn’t suit you, Brian,” Emmett tells him with a humorous smile.

Brian is about to retort but Eric comes into the living room with Ted and Blake in tow then glances around to figure out what is going on.

“We are just talking about Decimus, the new hot character in Rage,” Emmett explains after hugging Ted in a death grip, “He’s my new crush.”

Eric holds back a laugh, “He is hot, isn’t he? Justin and Michael outdid themselves.”

“So full of yourself,” Brian tsks, “Dinner ready?”

Eric nods and everyone starts getting up to head into the dining room. Brian has to snap his fingers a couple of times in front of Gus’s face to get him to look up from his phone.

“I don’t get you,” Brian tells him once he looks at Gus’s annoyed expression, “I don’t care how
good Eric looks. I can’t even talk to him 24/7.”

“Penelope must be better,” Gus shrugs as he gets up. Little shit.

They all sit down for dinner and start to dig in. Some Mediterranean style dish. It’s pretty good and a little spicier than what Lindsay usually makes. He probably has Eric to thank for that. His man knows him so well.

Eric excuses himself for a few minutes before coming back to sit back down beside him and nudge him about halfway through dinner. It doesn’t take more than a second to realize what Eric wants to do. Excited twat. Brian smirks and then shrugs before silently making a gesture to let Eric know he can take over the conversation whenever he wants.

“So Brian and I have an announcement to make,” Eric states as soon as there’s a moment to cut in, “Emmett, I sort of stole an idea from you. It’s not as tasteful as gold envelopes on top of fine china but it will have to do.”

Brian doesn’t know how Eric kept them hidden from him, but his husband passes the small stack of envelopes to Emmett, who is already buzzing because the fucker has probably already guessed what this is about, and tells him to pass them down. Everyone stares at their envelopes like they’ve never seen one in their lives before Eric rolls his eyes.

“You can open them now,” Eric says good-naturedly.

Brian doesn’t know why he suddenly feels nervous. But he can’t help but put his hand over his eyes while he waits. He feels Lily tapping him on the arm, almost bursting at the seams with excitement, as she whispers a ecstatic, “Daddy!”

Brian shifts his fingers to peak at her then puts his hand down and smiles, running his fingers through her curls as Debbie lets out the first shriek.

“Oh my god! OH MY GOD!”

Debbie stands up so quickly that Carl has to save her from knocking her plate on the floor. She doesn’t seem to care. Dashing to the other side of the table, Brian soon finds himself with his head pressed in her chest.
“A new baby?!” she asks, happy tears coming down her face, “Oh, sweetheart. I’m so excited for you!”

“Congratulations, you guys!” Ted tells them sincerely, “I would have never guessed it but I think it’s great.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Brian mumbles, “Hey, Theodore. Maybe you and Blake will be next.”

Both Ted and Blake shake their heads immediately.

“Absolutely not,” Blake answers.

“No kids,” Ted adds, “We’re focused on taking care of each other.”

“Aw,” Blake grins before pulling Ted in for a kiss.

Disgusting.

“I’m gonna be a big sister, Grandma Debbie!” Lily squeals as she gets up from her seat to bounce in front of Debbie.

“That’s so exciting, honey. You are going to be a great big sister,” Debbie tells her enthusiastically.

“I’ve been wanting to tell everyone for at least one trillion years,” Lily explains, talking so quickly that it’s hard to keep up, “But Daddy and Papa made me PROMISE not to tell. It’s been inside me this whole time and I couldn’t tell anyone. It was the worst thing ever but now it’s the best thing ever!”

Debbie nods and Brian guesses that she caught about half of what Lily said. Living with Lily did have its advantages. If anyone could understand her fast speech, he could.
“Baby, you’ve only known about it for one day,” Eric laughs.

Lily purses her lips, “But it feels like I’ve known for one trillion years!”

“This is...this is a huge surprise, Brian!” Lindsay exclaims, looking down at the ultrasound photo, “I never expected...”

Brian waits for her to finish her sentence, which doesn’t happen, so of course he sighs, “I have a convincing husband, what can I say?”

“You’re the one who brought it up again on our honeymoon,” Eric taddles.

“Are you kidding me?”

The whole table turns to look at Michael in shock. The aggravation filling the man’s voice is obvious and it makes a pit form in Brian’s stomach. Biting his lip, he holds back a dickish remark and tries to stay rational.

“Care to share with the class what the big deal is, Mikey?” Brian asks as he grits his teeth.

Brian glances at the professor to see if he is going to make a move to keep his husband in check. He usually is the peacekeeper, after all. But no. Ben’s sitting there laughing. Fucking laughing.

“I told you that I had a damn announcement to make,” Michael growls, “And you didn’t say one word about having one yourself. I would have made mine first.”

Brian gestures to the table, “The floor is yours then. Go on.”

Michael scoffs, “Okay, fine. As you know, Ben and I have been saving up as much as we could for some time now. Since we aren’t millionaires and Ben has HIV, this didn’t come as easily for us. But with Rage, we have come more financially comfortable and we made it work.”

Ben huffs out a laugh and holds a picture up, “We should have made copies too. You have us beat
there, Eric. Excuse Michael’s hissy fit.”

Everyone in the room stares at the picture in confusion. Except for Brian. God, it makes so much sense now that he can’t help but burst into uncontrollable laughter as Michael glares at him. What a fucking princess. It doesn’t take long for Debbie to snap out of it as she clears her throat.

“Well, I’m confused.”

“We’re having a baby too, Ma,” Michael tells her, annoyed, “Ben and I are having a baby. Brian and Eric are having a baby. This was a big deal for us but it turns out everyone is having a baby.”

“I was excited when you told me, Dad,” JR tells her father sweetly, which gets him to melt a little as he puts his arm around her and presses a kiss to her head.

Debbie blinks a few times before letting out another screech.

“Oh my god! Oh, honey! You’re making me a grandma again?!”

“And Michael was mad at us for taking away his spotlight,” Eric whispers into Brian’s ear.

Brian chuckles and watches Michael and Ben get smothered in kisses. In all honesty, he’s not that torn up about it.

He risks a glance at Justin across the table and, shit, the kid looks kind of bummed. Brian won’t draw attention to it now but, when he gets the chance, he’ll talk to him later about it. He can’t help but feel a little guilty over Justin being here for, not one, but two baby announcements.

But Justin does manage to put on a convincing enough smile and congratulate Michael and Ben. They are both so happy and Brian’s happy for them too. Fuck, he knows they’ve wanted this for at least a few years. So he goes over, puts his arms around his best friend’s neck, and kisses him on the cheek.

“Sorry for ruining your announcement, Mikey,” Brian tells him.
Michael turns his head and gives him a smile, “It couldn’t be helped. Your announcement had to be said too.”

Brian shrugs, “Not necessarily. We could have waited and then had you all over during the kids’ spring break. Answered the door with a fussy two month old baby and acted like it wasn’t a big deal.”

“Maybe next time,” Michael laughs.

“Gus told me I was too old to have anymore kids,” Brian informs him, reaching over to swat the back of his son’s head on impulse.

“I didn’t mean it,” Gus sighs, “I said I was excited too.”

“I’m really excited too, Gussy,” Lily dives in, “I think Daddy and Papa should have lots and lots of babies so that I can be a big sister to lots and lots of-”

“Lily, go help Justin take the dishes into the kitchen,” Brian interrupts, using Justin gathering plates as an excuse to get her to shut up.

Lily huffs at the obvious dismissal and takes Duncan’s hand to get him to hop down from his chair, “Come on, Duncan. Daddy doesn’t want me here.”

Such a drama princess.

Despite not helping with dinner, he gets out of cleaning up after too. It had been an eventful hour. He has accepted that there is a baby coming along, but telling his family made it more real. So he goes and sits out on the deck for a while. It’s a decent view and there’s a nice yard. It’s a quiet, more suburban section of the city so it’s relatively peaceful. It’d be the perfect time for a cigarette if he hadn’t given up the damn things.

He needs to do something. Just to get some energy out of his system. Glancing around, he looks for something that might distract him. He’s not going to grill anything. That’s more of an Eric thing to do and he just fucking ate. He’s not going to read Linds’s chick lit she left lying on the patio table.
Then he spots Gus’s soccer ball.

Brian shakes his head at himself. Fuck, it’s been awhile since he kicked a ball around. He had with Gus from time to time but Gus wanted instruction. His kid had tried out for the high school soccer team and made it. Brian came up for a few matches last fall to cheer him on and he planned to do the same this year whenever he got the chance. He’s proud that Gus took up the same sport he played. Soccer had been an escape for him. He got the aggression, worries, and stress he felt about his home and his life out on the field. His freshman year almost took his love for playing the game out of it. It was awkward at best to be coached by the man who took your virginity over the desk in the boys’ locker room office. Luckily Coach Roanes quit and Coach Levy had taken over the football team instead.

Walking down the steps and out into the back yard, Brian approaches the soccer ball, positions his foot, and kicks the ball right into the net. Then he retrieves it to bounce on top of his foot and his knee before kicking it around the yard and making another unguarded goal.

“Having fun?”

Brian turns at the sound of Justin’s voice. Sitting there for god knows how long, the man is perched up on the railing and dangling his feet in mid-air.

“How long have you been sitting there?”

Justin shrugs, “Long enough to see that you play a pretty good game. By yourself.”

Brian flushes a little at that but keeps it cool, “I played in high school and college. You know that.”

“I do recall.”

The two men stare at each other for a few seconds, in the dim light of the sunset, each wanting to say something but neither know what that something is. Well, Brian knows he’s at a loss right now. Justin could just want to watch him kick a fucking ball around.

“Come down here,” Brian tells him, gesturing his head in invitation.
Justin scoffs a little, “I can’t play, Brian.”

“I’ll teach you.”

Justin gives him a weird look before jumping off the porch onto the grass flawlessly, no stumble in sight.

“Alright, Master,” Justin says sarcastically, “Teach me your ways.”

“Haven’t I always?” Brian smirks.

And Brian does. He teaches a grown man how to kick around a soccer ball while running, how to angle his foot for a powerful kick, how to manipulate the ball with his feet, knees, and head. It’s not how he planned on spending almost an hour but that’s what they do, no more than suggestions and questions between them.

“So is it a baby frenzy in there?” Brian asks as he blocks Justin’s attempted goal.

“Pretty much,” Justin confirms as he kicks his leg back to try again.

Brian nods then clears his throat, “How are you taking it?”

Justin kicks harder than the time before, “As well as I can, I guess. I expected your announcement but not Michael and Ben’s.”

“I know. But they’ve been wanting this for a few years.”

Justin’s eyes soften, “I know. And I’m really happy for them. And for you and Eric. It’s just difficult. I’m coping. I’m thinking about my options and know that I can make things happen. I just wish that I had...you know, a partner to share that kind of stuff with.”
Brian feels a pang in his chest as he bites his lip.

“...You will, Justin. I don’t know anyone who deserves it more.”

Justin looks away, “Right.”

Before Brian can say anything else, the sliding door opens yet Brian can’t see anyone come out. It isn’t until he sees Lily and Duncan come into view when they go down the stairs that he realizes why.

“Daddy, what are you doing out here?” Lily asks as she crosses the yard.

“Playing.” Brian answers simply as he steals the ball from Justin.

“What are you playin’?” Lily asks as she watches him score a goal.

“Soccer.”

Lily nods her head in understanding, “I wanna play too!”

Duncan nods enthusiastically in agreement and Brian sighs dramatically.

“It takes a lot of willpower to play soccer,” he tells her with mock seriousness, “A lot of sweat and tears and blood go into the game.”

Lily shrugs, “I have all that. I wanna play.”

Brian nods before pulling her over, “If you have all that then you’re on my team. Duncan needs to help Justin.”

Lily nods and glances at Justin sympathetically, “Yes, Justin needs help.”
Brian holds back a laugh and sees that Justin does the same.

Even though Brian keeps having to remind Lily that she can’t pick up the ball with her hands and run onto the porch with it or get offended when Duncan kicks the ball away from her feet, they have a pretty great time. And by the time the four of them head into the house, Justin looks a lot more carefree.

Even after all these years, his method of stress relief still works.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Mel’s birthday party plays out without any issues. A few of Mel and Lindsay’s friends from work and the neighborhood come over. JR has one of her friends from school over while Gus has Penelope over. You’d never guess that Penelope was seducing his son. She comes in, all polite and sweet and a little shy. Calls him ‘Mr. Kinney’ and holds out her hand for a handshake. He’s sure it’s genuine. She’s a nice girl and she’s good for Gus. Lindsay gave him the assignment of keeping them from sneaking upstairs. He stopped them about three times, which caused Gus to scowl and Penelope to blush beet red, before letting the issue go.

“Just don’t hang out up there too long. And don’t let your mothers catch you. And be careful,” Brian tells his son quietly before letting go of his arm.

“We’re...we’re not-,” Penelope stammers before Gus ushers her up the stairs, effectively stopping her denials.

Brian goes back to Eric, who asks where Gus is and all Brian can do is shrug and say he doesn’t know. Because he technically doesn’t. They didn’t necessarily go to Gus’s bedroom. They could have gone to the bathroom or the attic or the roof for all he knows.

Time passes and he tries to mingle. Eric and Justin talk about some library in Portugal. Brian briefly talks business with Ted and tries to get him nervous for fun but running the Pittsburgh branch of Kinnetik really gave his friend a lot of confidence, unfortunately. He tracks down Lily, who he finds eating leftover icing with Duncan, hands and face messy with yellow stickiness.

“Thanks a lot,” Brian mutters as he glares at Emmett.

“They asked so sweetly though,” Emmett explains before he starts writing ‘Happy 25th Birthday, Melanie!’ on the cake.
Brian looks down at the cake, “Just because you write it doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“The 5 is right,” Emmett reasons, “I just split the first number in half. Sometimes we all need a little pick me up.”

“It’s really good icing, Daddy!” Duncan compliments.

“So SO good!” Lily confirms enthusiastically.

“Both of you, over there,” Brian orders, pointing near the sink.

Lily huffs, “I don’t see why you are so mad! The icing is the same color as my dress!”

“It’ll still stain. Now stand still.”

Brian wipes both of the kids clean with wet paper towels and checks them both over to make sure their clothes don’t need to be changed.

“You both look dashing,” Brian says with a nod, “Go tell Lindsay the cake is about ready.”

Lily and Duncan dash out of the kitchen and Brian bites back a groan.

“What is it?” Emmett asks, concerned.

“I need to go upstairs and get Gus and Penelope down here without anyone noticing.”

Emmett widens his eyes, “You let them go upstairs?”

“I tried to stop them three times. But, unlike his mothers, I just don’t care that much.”
“You let them go upstairs *alone*?”

Brian sighs, “Gus was a man on a mission. He would have snuck past me eventually.”

“...Brian…” Emmett admonishes, holding back a laugh and shaking his head.

Brian growls and heads upstairs, preparing himself to humiliate his son. But hey, Gus should have known the risks by coming up here. He knew there would be cake and ice cream. His lack of presence would be noticed. So really, the kid deserves it.

But Brian can’t help but be a little relieved when the two lovebirds come out into the hall right when he reaches the top of the steps.

“You’re lucky I’m not someone else,” Brian points out as he takes in their deer in the headlights stares, “Emmett’s about to bring the cake out.”

“Yeah, that’s why we were about to come downstairs,” Gus shrugs before Brian stops him.

“You both might want to fix your bed hair first.”

Brian rolls his eyes and heads down the steps as they start patting down their hair frantically to hide the evidence.

Kids.

“I’m going to miss you,” Eric admits as he traces patterns onto Brian’s pecs.

Brian looks down and kisses Eric on top of his head.

“We’ll see each other in a couple of weeks. You arranged a flight to New York for the 18 week check up and you can’t back out of it.”
“Because you want to find out as badly as I do?” Eric guesses.

Brian shrugs, “I don’t mind waiting to find out...but I’m not a fan of the idea of waiting a month to see you.”

Eric sits up to look down at him and grins, his eyes crinkling, “Then you will miss me.”

Brian holds back the extent of his smile but gives in, “Of course.”

Eric bends down and kisses him on the lips, sweet and soft, before moving his leg to straddle him.

“I want to ride you,” Eric whispers into his ear, grinding his hardening dick against his.

Brian thrusts his hips upwards for more friction.

“This will be the third time in a little over an hour,” Brian smirks.

“But it will only be the second time that you’ve fucked me tonight.”

True.

Eric lifts his hips and strokes Brian’s cock to make it fully erect. Then with a sigh, he lets himself sink down on it.

And it only stays slow for a minute or two before it becomes fast and dirty, quiet but filled with whispered words of filth. Eric marks Brian’s chest with his cum and Brian takes a hold of Eric’s hips to force him down to the hilt as he comes deeply inside him. It’s fucking, through and through, and Brian loves it.

And, later on, when Eric lifts Brian’s legs on his shoulders and presses kisses against his face as he bites back moans of pleasure...well, Brian loves that too.
Eric’s flight leaves two hours before his. The goodbye ends up being harder than Brian expected. He doesn’t cry over it. It’s a fucking month and he’s not a woman. But Lily does and he’s always found it hard to watch Lily cry with heartbreak. Eric obviously finds it hard as well as he sniffs to hold back tears and holds her close.

“It’s only going to be a couple of weeks until I come for a visit and then Daddy’s going to bring you down to spend the last week with me. It will go by faster than you’re thinking,” Eric tells her with a strained voice.

“I don’t want you to leave me and D-Daddy,” Lily cries, sobs wracking her body and her face wet with tears.

“Honey…” Eric sighs as he rubs her back, “I’ll be back. Remember that. Whenever I have to leave, I will always come back to you and Daddy.”

“And my new b-baby sister,” Lily hiccups.

Eric smiles and presses his forehead against hers, “And your new baby sister. Or new baby brother.”

Lily nods and lets out another sob before reaching out to Brian for him to hold her. Brian takes the little girl and hugs her close, trying to will her to calm down.

“Let me know you get to the hotel okay,” Brian tells him softly right before he kisses Eric on the lips, “Love you.”

“Love you too,” Eric sniffs.

Brian gives him a look, “Don’t start.”

“I can’t help it. She’s contagious.”
Brian smiles and Eric pulls Brian in for a more powerful kiss, or as powerful as a kiss can get with Brian holding their crying daughter.

“See you later,” Eric says softly as his flight is called for boarding.

“Later.”

Brian rubs his daughter’s back until Eric is through the passage and out of sight.

“Want to see Papa’s plane take off?” he asks her, trying to think of a way to calm her down.

“I d-don’t wanna see Papa leave,” Lily tells him, distressed, “T-That’s why I couldn’t l-look when he said goodbye!”

That sends Lily into a fresh round of tears and Brian just holds her tighter.

“I’ll miss him a lot too,” Brian tells her sadly, “But he’ll be back soon.”

Brian carries her back over to where Drew, Emmett, Duncan, and Justin are sitting and sits down back in his seat, Lily in his lap with her face glued to his neck.

“Oh, sweetie,” Emmett sighs, reaching over to rub the girl’s back.

“Lily?” Duncan asks, coming over slowly to sit down next to Brian in order hold her hand, “Don’t cry. It’s okay.”

Lily lets out a heartbreaking whine and puts her arms around Brian’s neck again.

“She’s just tired and upset,” he tells the group as he rocks her slowly, “It’s early and watching Eric leave set her off.”
“You think something to eat or drink might distract her?” Justin asks him.

Brian shrugs, “Maybe. She didn’t really eat her breakfast this morning. She was too tired.”

I’ll go get her something,” Justin says and waves his hand in refusal when Brian starts to reach for his wallet, “Don’t worry about it.”

Justin heads in the next room where the food court is located while Brian tries to keep Lily calm by making shushing noises and rocking her in place.

“Duncan was heartbroken to see Drew leave for Africa,” Emmett tells Brian softly, “God, Drew and I both felt so guilty. We met up with him for the last week he was there but it’s harder for kids to judge time.”

Emmett turns to Lily and strokes her hair.

“I know you’ll miss your Papa. But the happiness and excitement you feel when you see him again in a couple of weeks will be more than worth it. And it will make your Papa the happiest man in the world.”

Lily lets out a whimper but her little heart beating against Brian’s chest seems to calm at Emmett’s statement.

“Thank you,” Brian mouths to him before Emmett smiles graciously.

Justin comes back with breakfast sandwiches and coffee for all of the adults, hands Emmett a bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit, hash brown bites, and cup of orange juice for Duncan, then squats down next to Lily.

“I got some breakfast for you,” he tells her softly, “You might feel a little better if you eat something.”

Lily hiccups but turns around in Brian’s lap to display her splotchy face to Justin.
“I-It won’t,” she tells him, a few more tears falling, “My Papa went away a-and I won’t see him f-for a long time. It makes me hurt here and h-here.”

Lily points to her stomach and her chest then sniffs. Justin bites his lip and gives her a sad smile.

“Food doesn’t fix everything, I know. But I remember this one time I went to lunch with your papa and your daddy. They took me to that really yummy place down the street from your house. Park Plaza? My sister loves it too.”

“It’s really yummy,” Lily confirms in a wobbly voice as she wipes her eyes, “M-my Papa takes me there a lot. Rocko is really nice. He runs the place and s-says I’m his favorite cust-mer.”

“Who can blame him? Just look at you.”

Justin grins at Lily’s tearful giggle before getting something out of the breakfast bag.

“Your papa boasted your breakfast habits to me when we went there. He told me that your taste in bagel toppings was fancy and refined and that, twice a week, he will take you to get a whole grain toasted bagel with cream cheese, tomato, and spinach and cranberry and orange juice, mixed.”

Brian bites his lip to hold back a laugh at his daughter’s breakfast tastes. Lunch and dinner were all about Lunchables and spaghetti whenever she could get those meals out of them but, twice a week for breakfast, she becomes a pod person.

“I know it’s probably not nearly as good as Park Plaza’s, but I have my comfort foods that make me feel better,” Justin continues, “Maybe taking a few bites will help you feel better too.”

Lily nods and wipes at her face, “I am kind of hungry.”

“I got your juice too,” Justin reminds her, handing it to Brian for him to hold, "About two-thirds cranberry and the rest orange. I hope I got the measurements right.”
Lily leans over to take a sip from the straw then gives Justin a thumbs up.

“It’s how I like it,” Lily confirms.

Justin smiles, relieved, “Good. Now chow down.”

Lily smiles and lets out another giggle and Brian sits her in his seat so that she can eat her food without spilling it. Brian takes the seat next to her and Justin takes the seat next to Brian and takes out his own meal.

“How did you remember that?” Brian has to ask glancing at Lily’s breakfast.

Justin shrugs, “It’s just a fact that got stuck in my head, I guess. I remember how surprised I was by it and how funny Eric thought it was. When I thought about what she would want, I had to think really hard on what she had eaten in front of me before but then that conversation popped up in my head.”

Brian nods, surprised, then glances back at Lily who is taking small bites from her bagel sandwich.

“Thanks,” he tells him, “It’s...It’s hard to see her so upset.”

Justin nods, “It really is. She’ll be okay with you there though.”

Brian smiles at his ex gratefully and pats his hand. Even though Brian logically knows that to be true, sometimes it’s nice to hear.

It’s by coincidence that Justin gets the aisle seat across from theirs in first class. Even though Lily calmed down after getting some food in her, the kid’s exhausted. So Brian lets her take the window seat and he talks to Justin pretty much the whole way back. It’s the first time he’s gotten to say more than a few friendly words to him since they played soccer at sunset with two four year olds.

And it’s nice. It’s really nice. It makes him wish that he had tried harder to be Justin’s friend back when they were together. It makes him wish that he would have tried harder to mend bridges and form a friendship sooner.
But, even though it took over seven years to say hello again, Brian’s glad that Justin is his friend now. He’s a pretty great one.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! :) Please review to tell me what you thought.
Chapter Summary

Brian would never refer to this as a Daddy/Daughter day, but that's basically what today is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Daddy.”

Brian groaned and put a pillow over his head. Fuck, why couldn’t Lily sleep in just a little bit longer? Maybe if he ignored her she would give up and go back to destructing her room rather than his sleep.

“Daddy. Daddy Daddy Daddy Daddy!”

Lily must have anticipated his plans to deny her presence. The kid has always been pretty smart. And stubborn. And sadistic. She’d have to be to straddle his chest, lift the pillow off his head, and pry open his eyelids.

“Daddy, are you awake?” she asks curiously, “I want you to play with me!”

“I’m still asleep,” Brian tells her as his eyelids fight her small but strong fingers to close.

“No, you’re not,” Lily argues calmly as she shakes her head, “You’re talkin’ so that means you’re not asleep and if you’re not asleep then that means you HAVE to play with me.”

Brian barely suppresses his growl as he turns his head to look at the alarm clock.

“Sweetheart, it is 5:45 in the morning.”
“I know,” Lily shrugs, “I can read it. I don’t care. I want you to play with me all the time.”

Okay, that softens Brian a little.

But not that much.

“Go. Back. To. Bed,” he commands softly as he puts his hands on her hips in an attempt to lift her. But she outsmarts him by linking her arms under his own and locking herself to him.

Jesus Christ.

“Daddy, I really want to stay. I want to pla-”

“Lily, I really need the rest. I worked longer hours this week and we had trouble getting back from Emmett’s last night. I’m tired. You should be tired too.”

“But I’m not,” Lily insists as she lies on top of him, digging her elbows into his chest as she props her head up to stare at him, “I’m awake. I’ve never been this awake in my whole entire life.”

Brian can’t hide the growl this time.

“You need to either go back to bed for at least two more hours or sit here silently and wait for me to wake up. One or the other. Pick.”

Lily stares at him with contempt, biting her lip as she goes over her options.

“I want you to play with me,” Lily finally tells him in a small but defiant voice.

Brian shrugs, “Off to your bedroom it is then. Bye.”

“No no no!” Lily panics as she quickly sits up on her knees between Brian’s legs, “I’ll stay here
and be quiet, okay?! Does that make you happy, Daddy? Does it?!”

Brian huffs out a laugh, “Just ecstatic. Now shhh…”

Brian lets out a breath and lets his eyes close. He does feel Lily shuffle a little and he really hopes that means she’s just getting herself comfortable so that she can fall asleep as well. God knows she needs to rest too. Changes to her day to day routine have been known to cause insomnia with that kid. With Eric away, she’s been waking up at least once every night or early in the morning, asking him lie down next to her as she falls back asleep or for a drink of water or wanting to stay in his bed due to a nightmare. He was sympathetic but it was so exhausting. So he’s hoping she’ll stay by his word. She seems to be so far. She stays quiet long enough for him to drift off, almost into a regular sleep again.

Until she puts her cold feet under his shirt to touch his stomach.

“Lily!” Brian wakes up with a start, swatting at the cloth covered feet instinctively, “What are you doing?”

“I’m getting my feet all nice and toasty,” Lily informs him seriously, “Your tummy is so warm and so SO soft. Like a bear’s.”

Brian freezes and lifts his shirt up to examine his abs. Lily is so full of shit. There’s still not a bit of hair and, while he might not be as toned and skinny as he was when he was 29, he still looks pretty fucking good.

“Will you play with me now?” Lily asks, pursing her lips with impatience.

“No,” Brian reiterates.

“But I have no one to play with,” Lily whimpers, eyes becoming moist with forced tears, “My little sister won’t be here for a long time and my papa won’t be here for almost as long. I have no one. Except for you.”

“Oh, are Vernon and Bianca nothing to you?” Brian scowls, put off by the guilt trip.
But Lily wins the guilt contest with her hurt brown eyes gazing down at him. God damn it.

“I’m not getting up,” Brian warns her as he flips her off him and onto the bed before standing up to slide open the doors to the entertainment center, “I’m letting you watch a movie. When it’s over, then you can wake me up and we’ll go down and have breakfast.”

Lily sits cross-legged on the bed and eventually nods her head, “That sounds like a plan.”

“Does it?” Brian mumbles as he flips through Netflix, “Did you see this one?”

Lily stares at the picture on the screen before standing on her feet to jump up and down on the bed.

“Nuh uh!” Lily tells him excitedly, “We didn’t get to see that one, remember? I wanted to SO bad because she has curly dark hair and I have the same so I wanted to watch it and I never did-”

“Home it is,” Brian quickly interrupts as he presses play, “Now settle down and shut up.”

“That’s not nice to say,” Lily says with a glare as she bounces down on her butt, “If Papa was here, he would be mad at you.”

“But he’s not,” Brian shrugs, “So *shush.*”

Brian goes to lie back down and reaches in the bedside drawer to put his sleep mask on, just for effect. It seems to send the message well enough because Lily leaves him alone. Sure, she giggles a few times, even hysterically so. But it doesn’t annoy Brian. All it does is make him smile as he falls back to sleep.

------------------------------------------------------------------------

“Daddyyyy. Daddy, the movie is over now.”

Brian is startled awake when a wet tongue licks his cheek, warm, small, and honestly unwanted.

He throws the mask off his eyes and looks at his daughter in disgust, who just looks up at him with innocence and love. Sighing, he forces himself to diffuse.
“What was that for?”

“I was pretending to be a puppy,” Lily tells him before she starts to pant.

Brian rolls his eyes and brings her to his chest, “It’s too early to play that. You’ll end up making me chase you around the house.”

“Arf arf!” the human puppy exclaims before she starts to crawl around the bed. Brian closes his eyes, thinking that he may be able to get a few more minutes of sleep in, before Lily comes back over to him.

“You’re really tired, huh?” she guesses.

“Mm hmm,” Brian hums with exhaustion.

“I could tell that,” Lily insists, “You were snoring so loud. So loud that I could barely hear my movie!”

Brian’s eyes pop open and he turns to glare at the little girl, “I was not.”

Lily looks at him with pity and nods her head, “You were too. It was very loud, Daddy. I tried to put my fingers up your nose and you kept on sleepin’ and snorin’.”

Brian stares at her, bewildered, and she pats him on the cheek.

“It’s okay, Daddy. I still love you. Now, come on! Let’s go play!”

Standing up to jump on the bed once more, Lily stays consistent in her ability to annoy people into doing what she wants. With a groan, Brian sits up and plants his feet on the floor, finally accepting he won’t get back to sleep any time soon.
“Alright,” he gives in as he stands up, “Go brush your teeth. I’m going to get a shower and shave.”

Lily nods vigorously, “Good idea. You are very scratchy today.”

Before Brian can reply, Lily is dashing out the door and into her room.

Maybe she’ll settle down, but Brian has a gut feeling that she’ll be wearing him down all day.

He would take his time in the shower, jerk off and just stand under the hot stream of water. But knowing there’s a hyper four year old that could be trying to make herself breakfast unsupervised keeps time to a minimum so he pleasures himself quickly before washing his hair and body. Lily is waiting outside his bathroom door impatiently by the time he gets the shaving cream on his face so he slips a clean pair of boxer briefs and a pair of jeans on and lets her sit on the closed toilet seat to wait for him.

“Why do you have to put the white stuff on your face?” she asks curiously.

“It keeps me from cutting myself,” he answers as he swipes the razor up his jaw.

“Why would it cut you?”

“Because it’s sharp.”

“Why is it sharp?”

“So it can cut the hair off?”

“But sharp things can hurt you!”

“Not if you’re really careful.”
Lily nods, finally understanding, “Will I have to do that with my face when I’m old?”

Brian snorts, “I hope not.”

“How come?”

“Women tend to not grow as much body hair. Most of them shave other places on their body.”

“How come?”

Brian closes his eyes as Lily waits there patiently for her answer. Brian finally turns to her and gestures down to her swinging legs.

“Mainly their legs. Under their arms...and another place but I’m not going to get into it right now. Aunt Cynthia can talk to you about it,” Brian answers. And he’s NOT getting into that right now. It’ll just bring up a whole slew of more questions.

“But I want YOU to talk to me about it,” Lily insists.

Brian groans but ignores the request as he takes the last bit of stubble off his chin and and washes his razor and face off.

“Legs. Under arms. And someplace else. One, two, three,” Lily counts out on her fingers before glaring up at her father, “Hey! That’s not fair!”

Brian looks at her, baffled, “What’s not fair?”

“You only got to shave one place but girls have to shave three. That’ll take all day!”

Brian barks out a surprised laugh, “I guess it’s not fair. But they don’t have to do it, I suppose. But most women shave at least two body parts. Some get rid of the hair on the third if they want to.”
“Still unfair,” Lily shrugs, knowing that she’s right.

“Okay,” Brian gives in, letting his daughter’s point be the last, before quickly changing the subject, “What do you want for breakfast?”

“Hmm...eggs!” Lily answers as she hops back up to her feet, “I want them like Papa makes them though.”

“What, you don’t like how I make them?” Brian asks, pretending to be slightly offended.

“Not as much as I like how Papa makes them,” Lily admits, “But you can make your eggs for yourself. I won’t mind.”

“How courteous of you,” Brian murmurs.

The two of them head downstairs and Brian makes them eggs like she wants them, fluffy, scrambled, and slightly browned with shredded cheddar cheese, pepper, and sea salt for taste, along with some toast and a mandarin orange. Lily eats it all without complaint, which is rare for her. She’s not that picky of an eater but she usually has one thing on her plate that she doesn’t want or only takes a couple of bites of.

“All done, Daddy!” Lily tells him as she surprisingly takes her plate and fork as well as his and stands up on her step stool to rinse them off.

“Good job, Lily,” Brian commends her, surprised, “What do you do after that?”

Lily puts the plates on the counter and opens the dishwasher, “I put them in here and wash them!”

Brian nods, “You’re right. We’ll wait until we fill it up a little more though to turn it on. It’s pretty much empty now. So just stack them in.”

Lily nods her head as she puts the dishes in the washer and shuts the door, “Good idea. We’ll have more time to play that way too. Come on!”
Lily grabs his hand and pulls at it until he stands up before leading him to the living room.

“We’re gonna play Monsters and Fairies,” Lily informs him, “I’m gonna be the monster and you have to be the fairy.”

Brian stares at her and waits for her to tell him she’s joking but that never comes. She just waits there patiently until he answers.

“...How do you play?” Brian finally asks.

Lily tsks in disappointment and Brian raises a brow.

“What? Am I supposed to know?”

Lily groans, “I made it up this morning while you were sleeping. But I don’t see why you can’t just get it.”

The little girl takes a few calming breaths before explaining the rules to her father.

“You are the fairy and you have to protect your castle. I’m the monster and I want to eat you so I can have your castle. And you have to grant wishes and fly around. And I have to stop you because I’m bad.”

Brian nods, barely following, “Okay. Why can’t I just be the monster?”

Lily groans again, “Because I am the monster!”

“But what if I don’t want to be the fairy?”

Lily glares, “Why don’t you want to be a fairy? Fairies are the bestest things ever. You can even be a fairy princess! Everyone wants to be a fairy princess!”
“I don’t.”

Lily lets out a sad and aggravated sigh before collapsing on the floor.

“Why won’t you listen?” Lily mumbles into the hardwood as Brian stares down at her, “All I want us to do is have fun.”

Brian shakes his head and squats down next to her, “I just don’t think I would be very good at it. Maybe if it were the other way around it would be easier for me.”

“But I want you to be the fairy princess,” Lily tells him in a sad voice.

Brian rolls his eyes and stands her up, “Come on. Upstairs.”

Lily pulls away, “I’m not taking a nap!”

“I never said you were,” Brian points out as he leads her to the second floor, “I want you to get dressed.”

“But why?” Lily asks, “I’m comfy just the way I am.”

“Because I don’t want you getting wet in your pajamas.”

“Wet?” Lily asks, confused, “Why would I get wet?”

Brian just shrugs, “Get your bathing suit on and we’ll find out.”

Lily gasps and runs up the stairs, giggling maniacally along the way. Brian takes the steps a bit more slowly and sanely and follows Lily to her room.
“I don’t know which one to wear!” Lily laments she tilts her chin over her dresser drawer, “All of them are just so pretty!”

Brian peaks over before reaching in and tossing it to the side, “That one is from last summer so it won’t even fit you anymore. That narrows it down a little.”

“But I love that one,” Lily pouts before brightening up, “We can save it for my baby sister.”

Brian smiles, “If you end up having a baby sister then that’s fine with me.”

Lily nods her head, “I will have a baby sister, Daddy. You’ll see.”

“If you say so,” is all Brian says before reaching in the drawer to pick out a yellow bathing suit, “What about this one? You are one of the few people I know who look great in yellow.”

“I really do,” Lily admits as she takes the swimsuit to hold it in front of her torso, “I love LOVE the white polka dots and yellow is my favorite color. It’s so pretty, huh?”

“Sure,” Brian tells her as he takes a hold of one of the thick tie back straps, “Now off with the PJs and on with the suit.”

Lily quickly gets undressed so that Brian can help her step into the one piece.

“Lift up your hair,” Brian orders as he pulls the straps back, ready to tie them.

After Brian makes sure all of Lily’s curls are out of the way before tying the straps back into a bow, an action that has to be repeated four times in order to achieve Lily’s desired tightness (“But not too tight, Daddy,”) she is barely containing her excitement and keeps bouncing as he puts sunscreen on every visible patch of skin. Believe it or not, that’s less annoying than her whining outside of his bedroom door as he gets changed into his trunks.

“Daddy, you gotta hurry!” Lily exclaims as she pats the door with her hands, “Please!”
“Would you calm down?” Brian calls out before heading to the door to see Lily holding two beach towels.

“Here you go, Daddy,” she tells him sweetly as she hands him the bigger towel, “Now let’s go to the pool!”

“No pool today,” Brian tells her as they head down the stairs and she stops in place.

“What?” Lily asks in a flat and unamused voice.

“It’s hot, it’s Saturday, and the pool will be crowded with a bunch of people,” Brian reasons.

“But I like the pool,” Lily whispers, “I like people. I like Saturdays.”

“Don’t get all upset,” Brian warns, “I’ll take you tomorrow if you are good today. I’ll even talk to Emmett and Drew about Duncan spending the night tonight or picking him up in the morning so that the three of us can go. We can even go to that big pool we saw in Astoria if we get an early enough start.”

Lily takes a deep breath and Brian is able to interrupt her before she starts squealing.

“But you have to be good,” he reminds her.

“Oh, Daddy,” Lily says, “I’m always good.”

“Are you?” Brian smirks, “I guess I have hallucinated a few times and it made me think otherwise.”

“I guess so!” Lily agrees, despite not completely understanding, as she skips down the last five steps, “So if we aren’t going to the pool, where are we going to go? We can’t go to the store like this!”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Brian replies, biting his lip in amusement, “We’re just going to the
“To swim in my kiddie pool,” Lily guesses.

“Sure. I have a few other things in mind too.”

With that, Brian walks to the back of the house as Lily yells, “Daddy, wait for me!” The sounds of quick small footsteps get louder as the little girl catches up. Brian slides open the back door and walks down the steps leading from the sunroom to their yard. Underneath the sunroom, he attaches the hose to the house before he judges the pool and how heavy it might be. It’s about half full due to the splashing Lily and Duncan have done for the past month. It would be nice to have someone give him a hand because, even with it being half filled, the pool is pretty heavy. But their small Brooklyn yard is actually doing him a favor since he only needs to drag it about four feet to get it underneath the slide.

“No going on the slide until I say,” he orders.

Lily gives him a look before shrugging and running over to her swings. Brian drops the hose in the pool and lets the water fill it up some more. Looking over, he sees that Lily is concentrating more on pumping her legs than what he is doing. Brian smirks at her unassuming ways as he goes over to the sliding door underneath the sunroom, gets the bag of shit he bought a few days ago, and takes it to the spigot on the side of the house, right out of Lily’s line of view.

He fills up a couple of water guns, ones he bought on a whim from the small toy store a couple blocks up. The weather is warm and sunny for the foreseeable future and he had figured that Lily deserved a fun surprise when he saw that they were on sale.

But he is still Brian Kinney. He’s going to make it fun for himself too. And that’s why he invested in the Nerf Super Soakers.

“Lily!” He calls out, peeking out from behind the corner of the house, “Get off the swing and come over here!”

Lily looks over in confusion before slowing the swing down a little to jump off of it. She walks at a normal pace as she says with a smile, “What is it, Daddy?”
And he really should feel bad about it. But he just can’t stop himself. He brings the water gun out from behind his back, fully pumped and ready to spray, then pulls the trigger and lets the stream hit her from the chest down. Lily screams with shock and something akin to terror before letting out a cry and running up the ladder to her tower.

“Lily…” Brian urges, exasperated, as he sees her angry and heartbroken face peek out through the glass free window, “I was just messing with you. Come back down.”

“No!” she wails, crocodile tears falling down her face, “You’re a meanie head! A meanie POOPY head!”

“My heart is broken,” Brian sighs sadly, dramatically hanging his head in shame.

“I’m glad!” Lily yells, “I’m glad it’s broken!”

Brian stares at Lily, surprised by the words, before holding his hands up and setting the water gun down in the grass.

“I put it down,” he informs her calmly, “I won’t spray you if you don’t want me to. I thought you would think it was funny and you didn’t. I’m sorry.”

Lily sniffs a couple of times, “Humph!”

Brian holds back a groan. So that’s how it’s going to be.

“I bought a few water guns,” Brian tells her, gesturing to the side of the house, “I got one for me. I got one for Papa for when he comes next weekend since it will still be hot. I even got one for Duncan. But the best one is the one I got for you. It’s purple and yellow. I filled it up already. If you want to spray me with it, then I will just have to accept that. A meanie poopy head like me probably deserves it.”

Lily takes a few deep breaths, “You do. You do deserve it!”

Lily’s anger towards him shockingly doesn’t keep her from listening to him. She keeps his word by
not going down the slide and instead climbs back down the latter and runs over to the side of the house. Coming back around, she holds her water gun in her hands, expression filled with grim obligation and purpose.

After a few seconds of standing there, Brian realizes that she doesn’t really know how it works.

“Pump the stick by moving it in and out, then aim and put your fingers on the trigger,” Brian instructs, motioning with an invisible water gun of his own.

Lily mimics his movements and her eyes fill with pure joy when she hits Brian right in the stomach with a jet of water.

“Oh! I’ve been hit,” Brian groans as he starts to collapse to the ground.

Lily giggles hysterically and runs over to spray him over and over and over again.

“Wat...Watch the face,” Brian says faintly as Lily laughs louder and louder, “You...don’t want...to wake...the creature from the Black Lagoon!”

Lily screams with glee as Brian takes a hold of her and sits back up, pretending to chow down on the side of her neck as she laughs so ridiculously hard.

Mercifully, he lets her go and she stumbles away, still laughing and trying to catch her breath.

“D-Daddy, you’re really silly!” Lily laughs, putting her hands on her knees.

“I like to think of myself as quite dignified,” Brian answers disinterestedly as he brushes the stray pieces of grass off his legs.

Lily takes a few steps back and looks at Brian’s water gun with excitement.

Brian follows her line of vision down to it and raises an eyebrow.
“Are you challenging me, little girl?” he asks, reaching slowly for the water gun.

Lily lets out a high pitched squeal as she runs to the other side of the swing set, squirt gun in hand.

“You can’t get me!” Lily sings out, “Daddy, you can’t get me!”

Lily squeals again when Brian purposely shoots the spray a foot away from her arm before she starts running again. Lily gets a few shots in, hitting him in the leg, pec, and waist and he sprays her back and shoulder blades in return. She doesn’t cry about it this time, thank god.

They’re so absorbed in chasing each other around the yard, yelling and laughing and probably making their neighbors wonder what the fuck is going on, that Brian doesn’t realize the pool is full until the surface of the water is maybe two inches from the top of the wall. Brian walks over, takes the running hose out of the pool, and lets out a yelp when Lily comes up from behind him and sprays the rest of her water into the small of his back.

“You win, you win,” Brian surrenders, putting his gun down and taking a hand to lower his daughter’s toy.

Lily, still high on adrenalin, takes heaving breaths and looks wildly around the yard, “What are we going to do now?”

Brian walks over, turns off the spigot attached to the hose, and bends down to dig Lily’s life jacket out of the bin. He motions for her to come over and Lily skips over to her father and holds her arms out so that Brian can slip the device on. He buckles up the straps and makes sure the vest is tight and secure. Usually she’d be okay without it. They usually drain the water to about rib level for Lily and Duncan and they keep a close eye on them anyway. She has been doing well with swimming in deeper water as well so he really shouldn’t worry about it.

But if she actually acts on what he has planned, then he’d rather be safe than sorry.

“I want you to come in the pool with me, Daddy!” Lily tells him has she takes his hand and leads him over to the pool.
“I’ll sit in there for a while,” Brian gives in as he steps over the wall and sits in there with her, tipping out a bit of the water in the process.

“Can you show me how you do the freestyle stroke?”

Lily nods and swims to him across the pool. The vest makes the movements awkward but her determination and ability to keep her face in the water except for when she needs a breath is admirable.

“Good job!” Brian smiles as she swims into his arms and hugs him as she sputters water at his chest, “You deserve a kiss for that.”

Brian gives her a loud kiss on her cheek before releasing her so that she can swim back to the other side of the pool and turn around.

“I’m gonna swim to you again, okay?” Lily gasps out.

“Okay. I’ll be right here.”

Lily swims back to him once more and this time gives him a kiss on the cheek, one that is wet but so sweet that Brian can’t help but melt a little even though he may not admit that out loud.

“Let’s play a game,” Lily says as she sits on Brian’s knees, facing him as she ponders, “Let’s play the color game!”

Brian sighs, “I suppose you won’t be it first?”

Lily shakes her head enthusiastically, causing the excess water to drip off her curls.

“You gotta go underwater first, Daddy!” she tells him as she points at him, “You just got to!”

Brian rolls his eyes and sighs before letting his body sink so that he’s underwater. A few seconds later he comes back up from the surface, takes gulping breaths just to make the kid laugh, and
guesses a color.

“Uh...Red?”

“Nope!” Lily shakes her head as she pushes on Brian’s head.

Brian goes back under the water for a second and comes back up with a new color.

“Brown?”

“Daddy!” Lily giggles, as if that’s preposterous, “No.”

Lily dunks him again and Brian comes up once more.

“This is a hard one. But is it...yellow?”

Lily nods her head vigorously, “Yes, that’s it! You got it right. Good job!”

Brian bites back a grin. Most of the time it is yellow.

“Now we should-”

“I have an idea,” Brian tells her as he stands her on her feet and steps out of the pool before turning around, “You can stand, right?”

Lily nods, just her head and neck above the water.

“And you won’t drown on me if I have my back turned for 10 seconds?” Brian presses.
Lily shakes her head, “No, Daddy. I am a good swimmer.”

“Alright then. Wait here.”

Brian crosses the yard and goes back under the patio to turn the spigot back on. The hose comes to life in the yard, water pouring in the grass.

“Daddy, what are you doin’?” Lily asks from the pool as he comes over to pick up the hose.

Brian says nothing and climbs up the ladder of her tower. Despite all of the times Lily had asked him to come up here, this was the first venture he made. He’s actually disappointed in himself. Lily is way too short to notice, at least without Eric’s help, but she actually has a pretty great view of lower Manhattan from up here. He’s glad Eric didn’t put a roof on it like he originally thought about doing.

“Daddy, you are getting my tower all wet!” Lily warns him as she watches the water seep through with worry.

“It’ll be fine.”

Brian bends down and lets the hose sit on the slide so that the water runs down into the pool. Lily looks up in confusion and Brian just smiles a little and comes back down. Lily stares at him and he stares back before gesturing towards the slide.

“Well? Go on.”

Lily looks at the slide. Then looks at him. Before looking back at the slide and looking back at him.

“Is that,” Lily starts, “Did you make a water slide? Like at Sandcastle?”

Brian shrugs, “It’s not as fancy but it’ll have to do.”
Lily starts to jump up and down in the pool as she cheers before losing footing and finding herself on her back, kept afloat by her life jacket.

Brian lets out a laugh and picks her up to set her feet on the ground. Lily runs up to the ladder, climbs up, and peeks out in front of the slide as she looks down at the pool.

“Daddy…” Lily trails off as she turns to stare at him with pleading eyes, “Daddy, I’m scared!”

Brian raises an eyebrow, “You? Scared? The Lily I know will slide down any bannister, climb up to stand on the highest chairs, and ride any roller coaster she’s tall enough to go on. She doesn’t get scared.”

“But I am!” Lily insists as she looks down at the water with fear, “It’s really high and I’ll go really fast!”

Brian looks at her, “You want me to catch you?”

Lily thinks on it for a few seconds before nodding her head, “Yes. Yes, I would like that.”

“Alright,” Brian tells her as he steps back in the pool. He stands on his knees, high enough to catch his daughter without any problem and low enough to let her land in the water. Lily looks down at his outstretched arms, takes a deep breath, and nods her head.

“You ready?” Brian asks, trying to get her pumped.

“I think so,” Lily answers uncertainly.

“On the count of three. One. Two. Thr-”

Lily whooshes down the slide and if she were much heavier, she would probably have Brian stumbling backwards. Lily looks in every direction as soon as she figures out that she made it into her father’s arms and starts laughing joyfully.
“I did it! Daddy, I did it!” Lily exclaims, holding onto the man’s arms.

“You did. You were pretty impressive, I’ll admit.”

“Again, again! I want to do it again!”

Brian picks her up and stands her right outside the pool. Lily runs back up to the top of the slide and smiles so widely as she looks down.

“Catch me again, okay?” Lily requests as she prepares herself for her launch.

“Alright.”

The four year old slides back down and lands in Brian’s arms once more. Lily puts her own arms around Brian’s neck, kisses his nose, and lays her head on his shoulder.

“I love you, Daddy,” she tells him softly.

Brian feels his grin widen he wraps his arms around his little girl and holds her close, “So does that mean I’m not a, and I quote, meanie poopy head?”

Lily leans back a little and stares at him with such tenderness and love, “You’re not right now.”

Brian bites his lip and puts his forehead against Lily’s, “I love you too, sweet girl.”

“I know,” Lily tells him before slapping at his shoulders to tell him she wants to go on the slide again.

And it only takes a couple more tries before Lily is landing in the water on her own. Soon, she doesn’t even want Brian to stand in the pool, although he can’t help but hover close by.
He’s not like Eric, who gets reminiscent when Lily takes a huge step in independence or growing up. Brian knows it’s a fact of life that kids grow up and don’t need their parents for every little thing. Maybe it’s because it’s only the two of them in the yard, but for some reason he can’t help but feel a little reminiscent this time around.

That feeling stops as soon as Lily grabs the hose and sprays him with it but it was nice while it lasted.

Lily swims and slides for over two hours but, since they got an early start, it’s not quite when they get back inside. He’s glad she didn’t put up much of a fight. It had been past time to reapply sunscreen and the sun started shining more in their yard around 10 or so. She looks fine and usually tans anyway so he thinks his relatively minor negligence will go unnoticed. She usually doesn’t swim that early so Brian thinks it must be Pavlov’s theory in effect when she goes over and waits by the freezer door, expecting something out of it, as if it is 2 or 3 o’clock in the afternoon and not an hour before lunch.

“You should probably wait until after lunch to have a popsicle,” Brian comments from the other side of the kitchen.

Lily shakes her head and stares at the freezer once more, “I’m hot, Daddy. I gotta cool off. I just got to.”

Brian rolls his eyes and leads her away, “Lunch first.”

Lily purses her lips but doesn’t fight him, “I’m hungry now though. Swimming makes me so SO hungry.”

Before Brian can answer, Lily looks at him with her big brown eyes and holds his right hand with both of hers.

“Will you go out with me? We should go out for lunch.”

Brian smirks, “You’re asking me out? Me?”

Lily nods, “Yes! I want us to eat lunch outside.”
Brian shrugs, “Okay, I’ll make us a couple of tuna sandwiches and we’ll sit out on the stoop.”

Lily gives him a look of horror, “Ew! I don’t want tuna sandwiches. I don’t want to sit on stoops. I want to go out with you!”

“Fine,” Brian sighs, “Where do you plan on taking me?”

Lily taps her chin, “Hmmm...Manhattan!”

“Manhattan? How will we get all the way over there?”

“The subway!” Lily exclaims with a jump, “We’ve just got to brunch, Daddy. We’ve just got to.”

Brian looks at her bewildered, not sure where she got the idea of brunching, but goes along with it.

“Alright. We can do that if you really want to. We need to rinse out your hair and put some leave in conditioner in it before you go anywhere.”

“Why?” Lily asks, “I just got water in it. I think it looks pretty.”

“Your papa knows more about caring for it than I do. He says the chlorine in the pool will dry your hair out. The floating duck filter you love so much is your worst enemy, I guess.”

“No, the pool makes my hair wet!” Lily insists.

Brian closes his eyes, realizing Lily’s not going to get it, before taking her hand.

“Come on,” he tells her as he leads her up to the bathroom, “It won’t take that long.”
Lily groans and drags her feet upstairs. He doesn’t bother washing the rest of her off. He figures she can get a quick bath tonight if anything.

Lily stands in her shower, bathing suit and all, and leans her head back so that Brian can spray her hair with warm water to rinse it out. He lets his fingers run through her curls a few times, making sure she is still tangle free since yesterday, before letting her step out of the tub. He squeezes some of the excess water out of her hair but leaves it wet like Eric has told him to do if Lily wants to wear it down. Putting a bath towel on her shoulders and sliding her bathing suit off, he wraps her up and follows her back into her room.

“I want to wear a beautiful dress,” Lily informs him as she walks over to her closet, “We are going to a nice place so I just got to.”

“Where are we going?” Brian asks her as he watches in amusement.

Lily groans, “Some place nice! In Manhattan! I told you.”

The little girl suddenly turns around and looks at Brian.

“You gotta look handsomer, Daddy. You look handsome now but you gotta wear nice clothes and look even handsomer.”

“More handsome, you mean?” Brian tries to correct.

“That’s what I said. Now, go on,” Lily dismisses, “I got to get dressed. I’ll shout if I need help and you shout if you need help too, okay?”

“...Okay,” Brian finally agrees as he can’t help but think about how fucking weird she is.

Brian leaves Lily alone and heads to his bedroom, hoping she doesn’t look like a complete clown by the time she’s dressed and ready. The few times he and Eric let her dress herself without any assistance whatsoever she’s actually done a decent job. It helps that they both tend to keep her outfits together so that she knows what goes with what but she does like to insist on mixing and matching and that doesn’t always look the greatest.
Focusing more on himself, he chooses a nice pair of jeans and a black t-shirt because he’s not going to pull fucking tux just to look *handsomer*. Lily will have to suck it up if his choices aren’t acceptable.

After he puts his clothes on, Brian goes back down the hall and softly knocks on Lily’s door, receiving a, “Just a second, Daddy!” from the little girl in return. Thirty seconds later, she lets him know that he can come in so he slowly opens the door.

“How I look pretty, Daddy?” she asks hopefully as she laces her fingers together.

Brian gives her a once over and he has to admit he’s impressed. The whole outfit matches, for one thing. From the yellow pleated, 20s inspired sundress with its rhinestone embroidered neckline matching the silver rhinestones that line her black flip flops. And okay, the chic black floppy sun hat that Emmett bought her because it was so ‘classic and tasteful’ is a little dramatic, especially for a four year old, but it does work with her outfit and it will keep the sun out of her eyes so he can’t complain.

“You look absolutely gorgeous,” Brian tells her as Lily beams with pride, “And you picked that out all by yourself?”

Lily nods, “Yes, I did. And Bianca and Vernon didn’t help me at all.”

“Well, I’m sure they couldn’t have done a better job,” Brian smirks, “You’ll have to take the hat off so I can spray your hair though.”

“Okay, but I have to put it back on after,” Lily tells him seriously.

Brian has her sit between his legs on the bed as he starts to spray and shape her curls. He gives her his phone to keep her occupied, which leads her to FaceTiming Emmett which then leads to her talking to Duncan, both of them giggling over the strangest things for the duration of the conversation. Brian does get Emmett’s permission to take Duncan for the night, mainly because Lily asks him herself.

“We’re going to Scott’s tonight for dinner. He has a daughter who is just a year younger and she’s crazy about Duncan. But I can drop Duncan off around 8, if that’s alright?”
“Yes, that’s perfect!” Lily interjects before Brian can answer first.

“That’s fine,” Brian confirms after he shoots a warning look at Lily, “We’ll be here.”

“Well, he’s jumping up and down so I think he’s pretty excited about it,” Emmett laughs as he looks over his shoulder before turning back around, “Brian, did you just get out of the shower?”

“No, he took a shower this morning,” Lily tells him, “He’s all wet from me spraying him with the hose.”

Emmett laughs loudly at that, “Getting slow in your mature age, are you?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Brian retorts.

“Brian!” Emmett scolds, “Language!”

“Daddy told me to shut up this morning,” Lily taddles, “And then he started snoring really loud.”

“Bye Emmett,” Brian says pointedly before hanging up and looking down at Lily, “Remember my warning? You have to be good if you want to go to the pool.”

“I am being good!” Lily exclaims, jumping up to her feet.

“Uh huh,” is all Brian says as he gives her a once over.

Lily purses her lips and just looks off to the side, “Can I put my hat back on now?”

“Fine. Ready to go?”

“Yep!” Lily tells him as she skips to the door, “I’ve never been this ready ever in my whole life.”
“Lead the way then.”

Lily dashes down the stairs and Brian follows her at a slower pace as he watches her hop from the second to the last step to the floor. And really? Thank god that he did. Because at the speed she’s going, her dress flies up just enough for him to see her bare ass.

“Stop,” Brian warns, “No going outside.”

Lily turns around and pouts, “But we need to-”

“Did you forget something?” Brian interrupts.

Lily looks around, genuinely confused, before shaking her head, “No, Daddy. I got everything I need to start my day.”

Brian snorts, “What about something that goes under your clothes.”

Lily just keeps staring at him and tilts her head.

“Your underwear, Lily.”

Lily’s eyes widen as she runs back upstairs and takes his hand.

“I almost forgot! Come on! Help me get them on extra fast!”

Brian tries to not judge her too much but he can’t help but smirk a little when she frets over what underwear she should wear. She ends up going with a yellow pair to match her dress because apparently she’s a fashionista.

But once she gets them on, they’re on their way. And he doesn’t know why he is letting her make the majority of the decisions today. Usually he is more balanced or even on the authoritative side.
But, after the books Eric has been pressing him to read now that they have another kid on the way, he figured there should be an occasional day here or there where he should let Lily and eventually the new kid lead the way. So he just goes with it and follows her wherever she wants to go. They take the long way, walking along the promenade as Lily oohs and ahhs over the sights and asks why they can’t swim over.

“No idea,” Brian comments, staring over at the Statue of Liberty, “What train are we taking?”

Lily thinks on it, “The green one!”

“That’s on Court Street. You ready to walk over?”

“Yes, Daddy. So ready.”

When they get to the train station, Lily asks which trains go where and Brian explains the notion of uptown and downtown and that, since she wants to go to Manhattan, she’ll want to head uptown from Brooklyn. So they get on the next uptown train that comes on the greenline and Lily seems pretty satisfied.

“Which stop are we getting off at, Daddy?” Lily asks as soon as the doors close.

Brian shrugs noncommittally, “I don’t know. You tell me.”

Lily stares at him, “I just pick any?”

“Yep.”

Lily claps her hands and waits for a few stops and smiles at the women who coo over her and that damn hat.

“Oh, how adorable,” one woman around Brian’s age comments, “I love that hat!”

Lily smiles sweetly, “Thank you!”
The train doors open to with the sound of a ding, live instrumentals playing on the other side.

“My daddy and I gotta go now,” Lily tells the woman, standing up as she does so, “Bye!”

“Bye!” the woman replies, surprised at Lily’s initiative.

“Yes, this is perfect,” Lily says as she looks around the station as Brian takes her hand, “There’s an escalator here!”

Brian glances around, “Oh. An escalator.”

“That’s what I said,” Lily insists, “Come on!”

Brian and Lily walk to the escalator and take it up to the street. Brian has to admit that he’s surprised how far Lily walks them around. It’s at least a few avenue blocks and they’re not even in Union Square by the time Lily really starts considering places. It’s when they’re on Saint Mark’s Place that Lily spots a restaurant and walks towards it.

“This is perfect!” Lily exclaims, startling a couple of people at the nearest table, “We can sit outside here. Can we eat here, Daddy?”

Brian glances down at the glass protected menu to make sure they have a couple things that Lily at least might like. Turns out they do and their selection sounds pretty good so Brian nods.

“Cafe Orlin it is,” he agrees before taking her to the entrance to ask for a table for two outside.

The two of them sit there in relative silence for a minute, Brian reading the menu and Lily reading the words she can pronounce and pretending to read the rest. Brian reads a few choices out for her and she picks one with relative ease and tells him she’ll order it once the waitress comes.

“Hi, I’m Hillary. I’ll be your server today,” the waitress greets as she approaches their table.
“Hi, Hillary! I’m Lily and this is my daddy,” Lily answers, “Do you like my hat?”

The waitress lets out a laugh, “I absolutely love it. And your dress! You look very pretty.”

“Thank you,” Lily states shyly, looking quite pleased.

“Do you know what you’d like to drink, sweetie?” Hillary asks her as she gets out her pad and pen.

“Hmm, let’s see…” Lily ponders, tapping her chin as she often does, “I would like...chocolate milk!”

“I think we can make that,” Hillary nods before turning to face Brian, “And what would you like, sir?”

“Water’s fine,” Brian answers.

“And I want spaghetti and chicken,” Lily tells her, “But no mushrooms because we’re brunching.”

Brian just shrugs at the amused look the waitress throws him and goes ahead and picks the sesame salmon. After the woman leaves their table, he’s tempted to comment to Lily that neither of them ordered brunch but he doesn’t want to burst her bubble.

“Daddy, let’s talk like we’re grown-ups,” Lily suggests as she sits up straight and puts her napkin in her lap, “You go first.”

Brian manages to hold back the laughter and gazes at Lily quite seriously, “How was work today, Lily?”

Lily lets out a dramatic sigh and shakes her head, “Evan got the colors wrong and Daniel came up with a stupid ad. AND I had to make them do everything all over again! And then I had to build the tallest building in the world. And then I watched Netflix. What about you, Daddy?”

Brian just says the truth.
“I was woken up by a little girl at 5:45 in the morning and eventually got up to make her breakfast. We swam all morning and we’re going out to lunch now. I’m having a wonderful day.”

Lily’s shoulders slump, “Daddy, you’re supposed to make something up.”

“A chocolate milk for you,” Hillary interjects as she puts down a cup with a lid, “And a glass of water for you. Your food should be out in about 10 minutes. Do either of you need anything beforehand?”

“We’re good, thanks,” Brian tells her.

“Yes, thanks,” Lily copies as she looks up and tries to make eye contact through the floppy rim of her hat.

“Alright,” Hillary smiles, “I’ll be back soon with your meals.”

The two of them chat about a variety of things both before and after they get their meals. Lily has always been one to ask a lot of questions so the topics range from trains to books to My Little Pony to Donald fucking Trump. Both of them agree that they don’t like him much. Brian’s met the man a couple of times in the past and even he didn’t expect how batshit the fucker was. Lily just hates him for his hair.

“It’s so ugly!” Lily fumes as she pounds her fist on the table to drive her point home, “It looks so bad and he doesn’t fix it so that means he won’t fix other stuff too!”

Brian has a hard time composing himself after the resulting fit of laughter.

“Why are you laughing at me?” Lily pouts as her lip wobbles.

Brian wipes his eyes, and manages to keep a straight face, “I’m just really deliriously happy we have similar political views.”
Lily nods then says, “What are we doing for dinner, Daddy?”

Brian scoffs, “You’re worried about dinner? You haven’t even finished your brunch yet.”

Lily shrugs, “Yes, but I have plans, you know.”

“Do you?” Brian asks with an eyebrow raised.

“Uh huh! Daddy, I really want to play Sous Chef later.”

Brian groans. That fucking game. Eric took to letting Lily cook this summer, meaning she got to pick out all of the ingredients for her meals, meals that tended to turn out interesting at best and disturbing at worst. She also operated the kitchen tools to make the meals, and Eric only took over when something needed cut up with a sharp knife or fire was involved. Their friends and family thought it was fucking adorable. They only knew about it because Eric made Brian film them so he could edit it later. But it wasn’t even the cooing and the domestic jabs Brian received that made him hate the game. It was the fucking mess it left afterwards.

“Please, Daddy. I love playing Sous Chef. I’m so good at it,” Lily informs him with pleading eyes.

“Hmm,” is all Brian replies with.

“Let’s go to Whole Foods!” Lily gasps, “Papa LOVES Whole Foods! And you can’t say that it’s far far away because I saw it and it’s close close away.”

“Papa needs to stop being a hipster,” Brian mutters.

“I don’t know what that is,” Lily says, shaking her head.

“You don’t know what a Sous Chef is either yet you keep saying it,” Brian points out.

Lily glares, “I do know what it means! It’s the name of my game.”
“Eat the rest of the meal you already have,” Brian orders, “If you do that, we can go to Whole Foods and you can pick some stuff out. But only if you finish.”

Lily stares at her plate, determined and ready to conquer.

And Brian can’t even say he’s surprised when she finishes the very last strand of pasta. The little shit always has been stubborn.

“All done, Daddy!” Lily tells him with pride as she jumps down from her seat, “Let’s go to Whole Foods now!”

“We have to pay first, remember?” Brian reminds her.

“Oh yes,” Lily recalls as she leans into his leg and looks at him hopefully, “Daddy?”

Brian sighs, “Yes?”

“I want to sit in your lap,” Lily requests, “I want you to take a picture of how pretty we look and send it to Papa.”

Brian softens a little and lets the little girl climb up onto his lap and sit down.

“Say cheese,” he teases her as he takes a picture of the two of them.

“It’s so beautiful,” Lily states, “You should post it on Facebook for likes and comments.”

Brian snorts, “That’s okay. I don’t need to post a bunch of pictures just to get some praise. I know I’m hot.”

“But Daddy,” Lily argues, “They don’t know how pretty I am!”
“Believe me, your papa posts pictures of you almost every day.”

“But why don’t you?” Lily asks sadly.

Brian stares into her eyes and finds himself tapping on his Facebook app soon after. She’s so manipulative. If she didn’t get it from him, he’d complain more about it.

Lily beams as she watches him upload the picture and tag Eric in it before slipping the phone back in his pocket. He ignores the almost immediate vibrating notifications as he pays for the bill in cash, leaves his tip, and picks Lily up as she waves goodbye to Hillary and assures the woman they’ll be back soon.

“So soon!” Lily adds with her promise.

Brian puts her down when they are about a block away from Whole Foods. Unfortunately, she hasn’t forgotten about that.

“There it is, Daddy!” Lily exclaims as she points across the street, “It’s right over there!”

Lily stares at the store as if she is about to go to a fucking Disney World attraction.

“I see,” Brian murmurs, “And you’re sure you want to go in?”

Lily nods her head vigorously, “Yes. I got to go get my ingredients. I’ve just got to.”

“You usually do ‘just got to,’” Brian teases, but subtly enough so that Lily doesn’t catch it.

Brian starts second guessing the relatively passive parenting day when he sees that the place is fucking packed. He grabs a large pop out basket and lets Lily hold a smaller one then grips onto her hand as they force their way further into the store. They are okay for a while. Lily picks out everything from chocolate to tomatoes to rice to beef in a damn can and who knew you could find that at Whole Foods. It’s when they hit the specialty goods that things get really hectic. It’s loud
and consuming and people are pushing others out of the way. It’s like Times Square on New Year’s Eve. Pretty much every part of his body it being touched and he’s just focused on getting the two of them to an aisle away from the commotion.

So it’s no excuse at all that he doesn’t know how long he hasn’t been holding Lily’s hand.

As soon as he realizes that she’s not next to him, that his little girl can’t even be seen in the swarm of people, he feels ice flood through his veins and panic grip at his heart.

“Lily?” he chokes out, looking wildly for a black floppy hat or a yellow sundress.

“Lily?!” he shouts, staggering back over to the swarm of people, barely heard over the voices of hundreds of others.

“LILY!”

Chapter End Notes

My chapters got split up again because this was supposed to cover so much more. Oh well! I thought this was the best spot to stop because it was going to be 20,000 words if I kept going. I would like to thank Dustedoffanoldie for giving me a couple ideas for this and for helping me sort out my thoughts. Thank you all for reading! Let me know what you think by leaving a review!
S. 4th and Bedford

Chapter Summary

Justin didn't expect that a mediocre date would eventually lead to this.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“-And I just think that *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* is one of the imaginative films of all time. Have you seen it?”

Justin stares at his date for a second before shaking his head, “No. Sorry.”

Bernard smiles, “We should watch it together someday.”

Justin forces a small smile as Bernard pushes his glasses up on his nose and starts speaking about the making of Donnie Darko. Justin tries to listen, he really does. But he can’t see what Carmen was thinking when she said, “Oh, I’m working with this guy and I think you two would be a good match. Can I set you up? Please?”

To get her to lay off, he said yes and met Bernard in Union Square for lunch. They went to The Coffee Shop, a diner across the street that Justin has had mixed feelings about for years because it wasn’t a fucking coffee shop. It was a diner. With expensive fries.

“...And that’s why the whole point of Donnie Darko is that tangent universes do exist,” Bernard finishes passionately.

“Right, of course,” Justin answers right before the waitress approaches their table, “Oh, there’s our food.”

A southwestern burger with fries for you,” she says to Justin as she puts his meal down in front of him, “And a chicken salad for you!”

Bernard smells his meal and smiles, “Mmm...heavenly.”
The waitress handles the weirdness a lot better than Justin does, who covers his eyes with his hand, and says, “Well, we aim to please! Let me know if there’s anything else I can get for you two!”

She leaves Justin alone with Bernard after that, which he does think is kind of neglectful. But Justin knows he has to suck it up. Maybe he should look towards his own faults. He knows he can be a judgmental bitch sometimes. Take here, for instance. Bernard has shown nothing but kindness towards him since they met in Union Square 45 minutes ago. The man is passionate about film, which is good since he is a film editor who is moving up in his career and actually getting decent work. Carmen says Bernard wants kids. He’s only a year older than Justin so their wants in life might be very similar. If Justin gave him a chance, he’d probably really like the guy.

But he smells his food. Like, inhales it. Maybe if Justin were 19 years old, he’d think Bernard just really appreciates life and all that comes with it. But Justin is 32 years old and all he can think when the man savors the scent of his chicken salad and tells his waitress how heavenly it smells is that Bernard’s fucking weird.

But Justin’s not a complete asshole. He stays through dinner and gives away the minimum amount of information about himself to keep things from getting completely awkward. By the time they are finished and walking back into the square, Bernard turns to look at him and grins.

“Still up for that dessert spot in the West Village I told you about?” he asks Justin, “I’m telling you their crepes are delicious and huge. We can get one to share.”

Justin rubs the back of his neck, “Actually, that burger filled me up. And I have some errands to run. Grocery shopping and whatnot.”

Bernard bites his lip and nods, “Alright. I could give you a hand if you want.”

“I’m good. But thanks.”

Bernard huffs out a laugh, “You know, if you’re just not that into me, then you can say so.”

Justin sighs. It’s the first moment throughout the date he’s felt actual guilt.
“Sorry.”

Bernard shrugs, “It’s fine, Justin. Good...Good luck to you, yeah? Maybe we’ll see each other at one of Carmen and Liam’s get togethers.”

“Yeah, of course,” Justin answers before meeting Bernard’s eyes, “...And good luck to you too.”

Bernard gives him a sad smile before waving and heading back to the train.

Feeling a mixture of relief, guilt, and the ever present numbness he’s felt for months, Justin walks across the street. Despite wanting to get out of his date, he really was telling the truth when he said he needs to go grocery shopping. The summer had brought the gallery a lot of visitors and business and he had been several places in and occasionally out of the country to display his own work. He had often been too tired to cook, opting for takeout or microwaveable meals instead. While he would be painting new pieces, he doesn’t have another show outside of New York City until the middle of October. He also hired Lola full-time since she was only taking one class at NYU spring semester to finish her degree. So with two people assisting him run the gallery, along with a security guard on each of the three floors and a new intern coming in the fall, his presence isn’t as integral.

In a way, it is sort of bittersweet. He had renovated it and opened it pretty much on his own a little over a year ago. He had a couple of investors, mainly collectors who had taken a keen interest in his work. However, he was the sole showrunner and still is. But Max has proven himself wise and worthy when it came to running the books and organizing the artist information. Lola is a good saleswoman and has brought him some great artists on her scouting adventures. If they were still with him for another couple of years, he’d probably offer them partial ownership. They deserved it.

So, with a lot more free time under his belt, he would like to start eating healthier again, start cooking more. His apartment has a fantastic kitchen but the shelves have been more or less empty for months. He always loved to cook. It makes him feel better. But with the funk he has been in, it has been hard to find the initiative to fill up his fridge only to cook for just one person. The whole bachelor situation doesn’t seem like it is going to change any time soon though. He may as well try to become more responsible and healthy in the process so that he can try to feel better about it.

He would usually never go to Whole Foods on a Saturday afternoon. The idea of the crowds and the lines should be enough to scare off any sane person but he wants to buy quality food, the kind of stuff that entices him to cook something in the first place. He’s also in the mood to browse and that’s pretty easy to do at a place that has three huge levels.
It still doesn’t stop him from feeling like he needs to take a breath before going in. The place is pretty packed. Some areas are better than others but this is not something that he faces at the store he usually goes to in Williamsburg. He feels for the employees. He can’t imagine working this crowd. But maybe he’s one of the lucky ones or maybe the manager can tell he’s not a regular on the weekends. She approaches him with a smile and asks him what’s on his list so that maybe she can give him a little guidance when it comes to the best way to go about getting what he needs. Relieved, he tells her the major things he is looking for as well as some specialty items. He feels sympathy for her when an employee comes up to her to say that a four year old girl wandered off and her father is absolutely frantic.

“Will you excuse me?” the manager says sweetly as she gets her radio out, “Tom, Susan. Go over to the Loss Prevention room to help Chuck man the security cameras. A little girl wandered off and should be somewhere in the store. Dad’s on the east side of the second floor. If we can’t spot her in ten, we’ll have to do a shut down.”

“Roger that,” a female voice answers over the walkie.

“Roger,” a male voice says soon after.

“Josh, go downstairs and give the description the dad gave you. I’ll go talk to the father. What is his name?”

“Brian. Brian Kinney.” Josh informs her as Justin feels his heart start to pound in his chest.

Shit.

By the time he snaps out of it, the manager is out of sight. He wants to follow her, check up on Brian, to be there and maybe help in some way. But, with two sets of escalators and worrying like hell over Lily, he doesn’t know where to start.

More or less blindly, he goes over to the set of escalators on the right side of the building. If he can’t spot Brian from there once he gets upstairs then he’ll know that he’s either on the other side of the second floor or has followed the manager somewhere else.

And it’s just by pure sheer luck that, out of all the noise in this fucking place, he hears someone crying.
Looking around, he sees no one, so he goes beside the escalators, realizes it’s getting louder and finds a little girl in a yellow sundress and black hat crying loudly against the wall. Even before he sees the black curls touching her shoulders, he immediately knows it’s Lily.

“Lily?” Justin asks, concerned and so fucking relieved.

Lily lets out a terrified and defensive cry, turning to face him and taking a step back. Shit, she’s so freaked out.

Justin crouches down to Lily’s level and holds a hand out, “It’s okay. You know me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Lily blinks a couple of times before wailing and rushing into Justin’s arms. She clings to his neck and sobs into his shirt, wetting it in the process. Justin wraps his arms around her and picks her up as he stands at full height.

“Shhh…” Justin comforts, “It’s alright. You’re okay.”

“I c-can’t find m-my Da-Da-DADDY!” Lily sobs hysterically, “He...He’s gone!”

“He’s not gone, sweetie,” Justin whispers into her ear, shifting his arm under her bottom to pull out his phone.

He finds Brian in his contact list, presses the call button and lets it ring but it goes to voicemail. Sighing, he tries again and it only rings once before Brian undoubtedly declines his call and it goes to voicemail once more, all while Lily keeps howling.

So he texts him. His explanation is a little lengthy, but he types the message quickly and hopes Brian will get it before he puts his phone away.

I’m at Whole Foods and think
I found something of yours.
Know you have to be freaking
but I found Lily on the first floor,
crying behind the escalator.
Meet you in front of them?
They’re the ones by the bread

Going around to the front of the escalators with a small child in tow, he waits several feet in front of them for a few seconds, staring at his phone while he rubs Lily’s back in an attempt to calm her down. If anything, he’ll just go over to customer service with her and they can get a hold of the manager.

But before he can weigh the options too much, his phone buzzes in his hand and lights up.

Brian:
Be right there.

And soon enough, he sees Brian running down the escalator, pushing people out of his way. The employee was right when he said that Brian was frantic. From the looks of his current hairstyle, he’s been gripping his hair in most likely fear. He’s pale with worry and looks almost sick. Justin feels awful for him and tries to put Lily down so that she can see him but she’s clinging too hard for him to even budge her.

“Lily,” he prompts her gently, “Your daddy is almost here. Look.”

Lily sobs and turns her head when Brian is about six feet away. Justin is able to put Lily down at that point and, with her arms outstretched, she runs over to her father crying and he immediately picks her up and holds her tight, breathing heavily and biting his lip before an angry expression forms and he makes her face him.

“What have I told you about wandering off?” he snaps harshly as his frown lines deepen, “Never EVER do that again, do you hear me?”

“I-I didn’t mean t-to!” Lily sobs out, “A bunch of p-people were ev-everywhere and I ac-accidentally let go of your h-hand! I was trying t-to find y-you and I could-couldn’t! I’m sorry! I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry, Daddy!”

Lily is more hysterical than ever as she collapses onto her father’s shoulder and sobs deeply. Brian lets out a shaky sigh and turns away from Justin for a few seconds, as if he’s trying to collect himself a little as well, before turning back around.
“Shhh...you’re alright now. It’s okay,” he tells his daughter gently as he rubs her back and clears his throat as he turns to look at Justin.

“Thank you,” Brian tells him gratefully, “God, Justin. I don’t know what else to say. She was barely missing for 10 minutes but…”

“I know,” Justin answers after Brian trails off, “I’m sure I would be freaking out too. I was scared for her when I heard the manager say that you were looking for her.”

Justin stands there silently as Brian tries to get Lily to calm down once more.

“I-d-don’t like it when you use your s-scary voice, Daddy,” Lily cries, “I l-like your daddy v-voice.”

Guilt washes over Brian’s face, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I sounded harsh, Lily. I didn’t mean to. You just scared me. A lot.”

Lily hiccups and straightens up to look at her father, hands on his chest, “I-I was scared too. I th-thought I was nev-never going to see you again...”

Lily lets out another cry, hanging her head, and Brian pulls her back in and lets her rest on his shoulder once more.

“Shhh…” Brian comforts again before turning to Justin, “I’m going to take her outside. Maybe across the street to sit down for a bit-”

“I need to g-get my in-ingredients!” Lily chokes out, taking gasping breaths with her words, “I need them to pl-play Sou-Sous Chef!”

Brian sighs as Justin looks at them bewildered.

“It...It’s this game Eric made with her,” Brian throws out as an explanation, “It’s messy and she
loves it.”

“I-I’m a good chef,” Lily whimpers, tears still falling but not as quickly, “I n-need my ingredients.”

“Do you remember where you left them?” Brian asks.

Lily points at the escalators, “Behind the es-escalters.”

“Alright. We’ll go look and see if they’re still there,” Brian tells her calmly.

Lily sniffs then gestures to Justin, “Justin has to come too. I don’t want him getting l-lost.”

Brian looks a little surprised but nods, “Yeah, that’s fine.”

Justin hesitates but follows the two behind the escalators. Luckily, the small basket is still there, waiting by the wall. Brian bends down to pick it up, still keeping Lily on his hip. Justin suspects Brian won’t be putting her down for a while.

Lily takes the basket from Brian’s grip, staring down at it as she holds it in front of her. She then looks at Justin and extends the basket to give him a better view.

“These are some of my in-ingredients, Jus,” Lily hiccups, “I’m gonna make a n-nice dinner for my daddy.”

Justin smiles and succeeds in not laughing when he looks down at the canned ground beef, granola bar, red onion, fruit snacks, and chapstick, “That’s really impressive, Lily. I didn’t cook until I was 11 and that was usually just to help my mom or dad.”

Lily sniffs and looks down at her basket, “I do it all by myself. Papa is my assistant most of the time but he’s not h-here. So Daddy has to be my assistant. He’s the cameraman most of the time.”

“The cameraman?” Justin asks, glancing at Brian.
Brian surprisingly blushes before shrugging, “It’s something Eric wanted me to do when he started this with her over the summer. For memories, I guess. Then he wanted me to edit it into this short because she wanted a ‘cooking show like they do on YouTube.’ I’m better at that kind of stuff than he is. But then he posted it and a bunch of people liked it.”

“Awww,” Justin can’t help but coo, “I wish I had seen it. I must have missed it on my newsfeed or something.”

“He just posts them in a group,” Brian admits, “He mentioned to me that I should add you but I’m not on there much and forgot about it...I’ll add you when I get home.”

Justin shrugs but can’t help but smile and Lily nods her head vigorously.

“You have to say yes, Justin,” Lily tells him, tears almost gone, “Papa calls it Lily-isms. It’s because it’s about all the funny and smart things I say and do.”

“It sounds like a wonderful group,” Justin says to her as Brian rolls his eyes, “I will be sure to accept an invitation when it comes.”

Lily nods her head seriously before turning to her father.

“Daddy?” Lily asks softly as she stares into his eyes, “I want to invite Justin for my dinner. He saved my life and can film us play Sous Chef.”

Brian looks at Justin apologetically, “It’s up to Justin. But he probably has a lot of important stuff to do and wants to get his groceries home. He might want to make his own dinner.”

“But fun’s more important than all of that stuff,” Lily argues, “And I make good food! He has to come. He just has to!”

Justin sees Brian cringe before he says, “Justin is a picky eater, Lily. His palette might not be sophisticated enough for your meals.”
“I don’t know what that means,” Lily states seriously, “But he has to come. He saved my life.”

“I can come,” Justin interrupts before Lily lets out a cheer, “I’m looking forward to it actually.”

“What about your groceries?” Brian asks, looking down at Justin’s basket.

Justin shrugs, “If you have room, I can store them at your place and bag them back up when I leave. Or I can just get them later at a place closer to my apartment.”

“See, Daddy? Justin wants me to cook for him. I’m a good cook!” Lily informs him, yet again.

“Alright. If he wants to risk it,” Brian comments vaguely, “Have anything else you want to poison us with?”

Lily glares and kicks her feet to be let down, offended that her father would say such a thing but Brian doesn’t budge. With a put-upon sigh, Lily nods her head.

“Yes, six more things.”

Brian raises his eyebrows, “Six? That’s specific.”

“Well, it’s what I need!” Lily insists, “And you need to go that way for them. Come on, Justin!”

The three of them end up standing in front of the rice and grains. Brian finally puts Lily down, even though Justin can see that it almost pains the man to do so. The little girl paces back and forth, humming as she considers what to get. Finally, she picks out a whole wheat quinoa and grins.

“This is just what I need for my recipe!” Lily exclaims as she tosses it into her father’s basket, “Now, come on! Let’s go over there!”

Brian reaches over a grips onto her hand as they make their way to the cheeses. Lily gasps when she sees a HUGE wheel of cheese and starts jumping up and down.
“That’s what I need, Daddy! That’s what I need for my recipe!” Lily squeals as she points.

“No,” Brian tells her pointedly, leaving no room for argument, before pulling a small block off the refrigerated shelf, “Here. You can get this. It’s the same type with the same pretentious brand.”

“But I need more than that,” Lily argues.

“No you don’t. This will go a long way. Trust me on that, okay?”

“But it’s my recipe,” Lily whimpers.

“But it’s my money,” Brian taunts.

Lily hangs her head and sighs before perking up, “Okay, that’s fine. I just need to get whipped cream and chocolate and then we’ll be good to go.”

“You’re making dessert for us too?” Justin asks her.

Lily shakes her head, “No. I’m putting them in my soup too.”

Justin gulps as Brian smirks before the man picks her up to pick out a bottle of Reddi Whip. As she is picking out the right bottle to have with her meal, Brian leans over to whisper into Justin’s ear.

“I gave you an out, Sunshine. You should have taken it. Prepared to have a gag inducing meal.”

Justin smacks him on the arm and has a grin in place as Lily explains that she will spray at LEAST half the can into the soup.

After Lily gets some chocolate and a few extra things along the way, they stand in line for what seems like ages before checking out.
“Justin, did you know that my daddy snores?” Lily asks as Brian looks horrified, “It sounds like this.”

Lily starts to make wheezing snorty sounds as Brian glares down at her.

“Did you know that, Justin?” she asks again once she finishes her interpretation.

“I did. He’s been like that for years,” Justin tells her without thinking.

Lily gives him a strange look, “How do you know?”

Justin sends an apologetic and somewhat panicked look towards Brian and the man luckily distracts her.

“Lily, help me put your groceries on the counter,” Brian interrupts.

The task succeeds in taking Lily’s mind off of what Justin said as she talks all about cooking and what she likes to cook with to the cashier as Brian swipes his card. The young man nods along, not seeming sure what to say other than, “Oh. That’s nice.” But that seems to be enough for Lily since she nods enthusiastically and says, “Yes! Yes, it is! You should come by sometime!”

“Stop inviting everyone over for dinner,” Brian murmurs as he takes a hold of her hand and lifts the purchased fabric bags packed with their groceries.

“I can’t help it!” Lily insists, “I’m just really nice!”

Brian laughs at that as he waits for Justin and the three of them head out together.

“You taking the 4/5 or the R?” Justin asks as soon as they arrive at the station.

“The 4 and 5 come more quickly,” Brian answers while he gives his card to Lily to swipe. It takes
her a few tries, but the gate eventually clicks and they go through the turnstile together.

“Hurry up, Justin!” Lily exclaims as she gestures with her hand, “I don’t want you getting lost!”

Justin laughs as he goes through, “I’ll try not to.”

Lily waits and surprisingly holds out her hand for him. Justin glances at Brian right then to see that he has a soft look on his face. Guarding it once he must realize Justin’s caught him, he clears his throat.

“Ready?” Brian asks, looking at the two of them.

“Ready,” Lily confirms, grabbing Justin’s hand in the process, “Don’t let go of my hand, okay? You’re short too and you’ll get lost.”

Justin tries not to feel offended at that, reminding himself that Lily is four years old.

All Brian does is laugh all the way to the train.

“Ice Cream!!!” Lily squeals as she sees a Mr. Softee parked outside the house.

“It’s like he knew we were coming back,” Brian mutters but puts the groceries on the stoop and gets his wallet out.

“What do you guys want?” Brian asks them both.

“I want,” Lily starts, getting down to business, “A choco taco. AND a twirly ice cream with chocolate sauce all over it.

“One or the other, Lily,” Brian sighs, as if this is a regular occurrence.
Lily pouts but nods sadly, “I would like the Choco Taco, Daddy.”

“Good choice,” Brian mutters before turning to Justin, “And you?”

“I don’t need anything, Brian,” Justin snorts.

Brian looks at him pointedly, “Believe me, Justin. You do.”

Justin tilts his head, confused but orders something off the special menu, just to amuse Brian and Lily really. He’s lucky the guy knows what he is talking about and makes him The Carlos. A cone that is filled with chocolate ice cream and dipped in oreo crumbles, before being topped off with vanilla ice cream which is then dipped in chocolate sauce. Lily seems incredibly impressed with his cone before chattering away about her cousin Carlos and how much he gets on her nerves with his crying since he’s literally an infant.

“But I love him. SO MUCH,” Lily insists, still staring at the cone, “And that’s why we should share.”

Brian raises his eyebrows and looks at her pointedly, “You got your treat. You love choco tacos. You can eat that and get what Justin has next time.”

Lily’s lower lip wobbles as she sniffs and sneaks glances at Justin’s cone, “But...But...It looks so good! I don’t want a Choco Taco now!”

“Lily,” Brian warns.

“She can have some of my cone, if that’s okay,” Justin tells him, “I really don’t mind.”

“I do. She needs to learn that she can’t have everything. I was soft on her today but apparently she thinks she’s entitled,” Brian explains as Lily glares at him, not so subtly.

But then, it’s as if a lightbulb goes off in Lily’s head.
“I know!” Lily exclaims, “I will give Justin some of my choco taco and he can give me licks of his cone! Then we would share together!”

Lily runs over and hugs Justin’s waist, staring up at his cone in need, “That’s a good idea. Don’t you think, Justin?”

Justin laughs and ruffles her hair, before glancing at Brian for approval.

“Whatever,” Brian sighs, giving up, as he takes a sip of his chocolate milkshake, “As long as both of you rowdy kids share.”

Lily jumps up and cheers, giving Justin a secret triumphant look, as if they pulled one over on Brian together.

Since Brian’s treat is less likely to spill, he’s the one who puts the groceries away as Lily reaches over and keeps licking Justin’s cone. He can’t help but melt a little when the little girl asks him to cut her Choco Taco in half so that Justin can have some. Of course, this does give Lily the gull to help herself to his cone more than ever but he honestly doesn’t mind.

Lily steers the conversation and talks about her dance classes and also drawing, which is one of her favorite things to do with her Daddy and Papa.

“Papa is really REALLY good,” Lily tells him after swallowing a bite of Choco Taco, “That’s his job. To draw stuff and build them. But Daddy is a really good draw-er too.”

“He is?” Justin asks, surprised. He knows that Brian took an interest in art and had an eye but he had never seen the man work on something like that. Turning to look at Brian in confirmation, the man shrugs and looks away.

“I’m okay,” he tells Justin, “Not as good as you or Eric obviously but I did get an internship in the art department before taking my senior advertising internship with Ryder for a reason. I took art classes in high school too. It’s not a big deal.”

“Of course it is,” Justin argues, suddenly intrigued by all of this, “I...I wish I would have known.”
Brian snorts, “There are people who just doodle with their kids, Justin. I’m one of them.”

“My daddy takes really good pictures too,” Lily reveals to Justin, “We went far far away just so he could take pictures!”

Justin turns to look at Brian again, eyebrows raised. This time Brian’s cheeks turn a little pink.

“Had to find a different hobby than the one I displayed in Babylon, didn’t I?” is all Brian says on the matter.

Thinking back on it, Justin should have known about Brian’s interest in photography. The man had a few cameras, nice ones actually, back when Justin lived at the loft. He assumed Brian bought them because he could. Just a tool to have in case he needed it. But most people who just wanted a camera to use casually didn’t buy a Canon and an Olympus, like Brian had owned, just because they might need one for casual use.

Maybe if Justin had been older, less distracted (even rightfully so) by the bashing and Brian’s tendencies to fuck anything that moved, he would have noticed that. Maybe encouraged it in some way.

“I would love to see pictures you’ve taken. And any other type of artwork,” Justin tells him softly as he maintains eye contact, “I really really would.”

Brian bites his lip and almost looks nervous.

“Maybe,” he murmurs then clears his throat, “We’ll see.”

Before Justin can answer, Brian’s phone starts ringing and he picks it up before excusing himself as he goes in the other room. Lily and Justin are left alone with their half melted, half eaten ice cream in their hands.

“Justin,” Lily prompts, “Guess what?”

Justin turns, “What?”
“Duncan’s coming over today!” Lily exclaims, bouncing in her seat, “AND he’s spending the night so that me and Daddy can take him to the pool tomorrow.”

“Wow!” Justin exclaims, “I bet you three will have a lot of fun.”

Lily nods, wide eyed and excited, before looking around the room and leaning in.

“I have a secret to tell you,” Lily whispers, gesturing for Justin to lean in as well.

Justin leans in and Lily cups his ear with her hand and whispers directly in.

“I kissed Duncan on the cheek and he kissed me back so we’re boyfriend and girlfriend now,” Lily tells him seriously before sitting back up straight, “Don’t tell my daddy or papa, okay? They don’t know.”

Justin holds back a shocked laugh, “Why don’t you want them to know?”

Lily sighs, as if she has been weighed down with these concerns for a while, “Becauuussssee. Daddy said I can’t have a boyfriend until I’m grown up! But these things happen! All the time! My friend, Viola? Her boyfriend is named Dylan. They met at Beansprouts. And they love each other, like me and Duncan!”

“...Okay,” Justin says, “Congratulations?”

“Thank you,” Lily answers, sounding relieved that he’s happy for her.

A few minutes later, Brian comes back in the room with an annoyed look on his face.

“Ted,” Brian grumbles, “Basically calling to say one of the new junior ad executives is being a complete shit. Sounds like drugs. I told our dear friend that I made him in charge of the Pittsburgh branch for a reason and to fire his ass if he couldn’t function.”
“Daddy, don’t say bad words!” Lily scolds as she shakes her finger up and down, “It’s rude!”

Brian rolls his eyes, “And it’s rude to scold. I didn’t scold you when you said the f-word a few days ago, did I?”

Lily shrinks into her seat in shame.

“So, anything exciting happen while I was gone?” Brian asks as he sits across from them.

Lily gives Justin a warning glance and whispers, “You promised, remember?”

Brian gives Justin a confused look and Justin clears his throat, “Everything was calm on our end.”

“So SO calm,” Lily confirms before looking down at the remnants of her Choco Taco, “I think I’ll save this. For my recipe.”

With that, Lily wraps hers up and Justin lets her take his half as well. After she puts it in the freezer, she goes in the other room for a minute.

“What did she make you promise?” Brian asks him.

Justin winces, “I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone what she told me.”

“She’s my daughter, Justin. Come on.”

Before Brian can interrogate him further, Lily comes back with her drawing pad and art supplies and takes them into the sunroom.

“Daddy, Justin!” Lily calls out. “Come on!”

Brian sighs as they get up and follow her into the other room. They find Lily sitting on the floor,
doodling away, before she looks up at them.

“Let’s draw,” she tells them before tearing out a couple of pieces of paper, “I’m making a drawing for Daddy. Daddy, you have to make one for Justin and Justin has to make one for me. That way, we all get one!”

“Great idea, Lily!” Justin commends, sitting down next to her.

“You just want me to draw you something,” Brian mutters, but sits down as well.

Justin just smiles. Brian’s caught him there.

Brian gives him a quick glance, “I’m not that good, you know. So don’t go comparing this to the stuff you see day in and day out.”

Justin holds up his hands, “Every artist is unique and there is no need for comparison.”

“Shut up, Sunshine,” Brian snorts.

“Daddy?” Lily asks as she grabs a colored pencil, “Why do you call Justin ‘Sunshine?’ Is that his middle name?”

“Um…” Brian says, actually looking embarrassed, “It’s a nickname. Grandma Debbie started it.”

“Oh,” Lily answers, understanding, “Like you and Papa call me Silly Lily.”

“Yes,” Brian tells her, sounding relieved, “Just like that.”

“Well, I don’t to be called Silly Lily anymore,” Lily states seriously, “I want you to call me by my middle name from now on.”
“Lily-”

Lily clears her throat pointedly and gives him a look.

“Fine. What are you drawing for me, Piper?”

Lily flips her curls behind her shoulders, “I’m drawing an octopus and a lamb. They’re friends.”

“That sounds like a beautiful friendship,” Brian smirks before looking down at his own piece.

“What are you making for Justin, Daddy?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Lily huffs in disapproval, “Well, you better figure it out soon! We have to cook here in a bit!”

“You can’t rush perfection, Piper!” Brian tells her dramatically before getting up to go draw in the corner.

Lily watches her father go draw by himself and turns to look at Justin.

“My daddy is really crazy sometimes,” she says to him softly, as if in explanation.

“I know,” Justin tells her, understanding that all too well.

For the next half hour, they just sit there and draw. Brian actually works hard on his sketch and Justin can’t help but be surprised at the concentration Brian is putting into it. Lily is thrilled with the dragon Justin makes for her, calling it scary but beautiful. Lily walks over to Brian to give him her picture. Brian smiles at it and Lily gives an explanation.

“That’s Lenny the Lamb and Ornery the Octopus. They’re going shopping and are on an escalter,
I do see that,” Brian tells her before giving her a kiss on the forehead, “I love it. Thank you.”

Lily looks at him with pride before looking down at his picture and gasping.

“That looks just like them, Daddy! That-”

“Shhh,” Brian shushes her as he puts the final touches of color onto his paper, “I want Justin to be surprised.”

“Okay,” Lily whispers before giggling and sneaking a glance at Justin.

Finally, Brian stands up and Justin stands up as well. Without a word, Brian stands up and hands over the piece of paper before turning to Lily.

“Are you going to make us dinner or not?”

Lily nods, “Oh, yes! I’ll go get the stuff I need out.”

Lily runs in the kitchen and Brian is on her heels, most likely to make sure she doesn’t make a complete mess. Justin smiles as he watches them leave and turns over the paper. As soon as he does, he can’t help but laugh.

But Lily is right. Brian did a fantastic job in his depiction of Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup.

“Justin! You get ready to film us, okay?” Lily bosses as Brian ties her apron on and her hair up, “I gotta do my intro.”

Justin laughs but Lily keeps looking at him quite seriously so he sobers up and nods.
“Right, got it,” Justin confirms.

“Ready?” Lily asks, standing up straight on the chair.

“Ready,” Justin tells her.

“Ready, Daddy?” Lily asks, turning to Brian.

“I guess,” Brian grumbles.

“And...Action!” Lily exclaims, “Hi, I’m Lil-I mean, Piper! And I’m going to show you how to make soup today!”

Lily turns to Brian and whispers, “Ask me what it has in it, Daddy. And remember to call me Piper.”

Brian purses his lips, “What does it have in it, Piper?”

“Well, it has lots of things!” Lily says as she starts bending down to pick up her ingredients, “It has onions and chocolate and...what’s this stuff, Daddy?”

“Quinoa,” Brian informs her.

“Yes, and that too. It also has salsa and cheese and whipped cream and apple juice. And beef in a can. There’s so much stuff in this soup!”

“Okay, cut!” Lily calls out before beaming, “That was perfect! Next scene.”

Lily starts pulling out cooking utensils, bowls, and measuring cups, narrating her process even though Justin isn’t recording.
“Does Eric use film terms around her much?” Justin has to ask.

“No,” Lily answers before Brian gets a chance, “Daddy does. He always says ‘Action!’ and ‘Cut!’ when we play this. That’s your job today but I did it for you to show you how. It’s okay that you didn’t get it the first time, but learn. Okay?”

“...Okay,” Justin agrees before whispering to Brian, “Kind of bossy, isn’t she?”

Brian shrugs, “Yeah. But Eric and I just say she has good leadership skills.”

“Okay, guys. I’m ready for my next scene. Are you guys ready too?”

“Of course,” Justin tells her, getting his phone out in the process.

“Ready whenever you are,” Brian drawls.

And then Lily is working non-stop. She cries a little when she helps cut the onions with her kiddie knife but cheers up when she gets to break up a couple of bars of chocolate to throw in the pot. She makes Brian fetch some broth from the pantry for a soupier texture. The beef in a can and whipped cream end up going in last and Justin makes sure he gets a closeup of Brian’s green complexion.

“And now it just has to cook for a while! Be back soon!” Lily exclaims to the camera.

“And cut!” Justin calls out, something Lily says he has now gotten the hang of, “Good job, Lily!”

Lily accepts his high five and takes her apron off, “I gotta relax after working that hard. I’m gonna watch Home!”

“You watched that this morning,” Brian points out.

“But I want to watch it again,” Lily explains, “So will you put it on the TV?”
“I guess,” Brian tells her, “But we’re reading later. I want you to take a break from the TV.”

Lily shrugs, “Okay. But Duncan and me can sleep while a movie is on, right?”

“Sure,” Brian gives in, “But after this, no more until then.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Brian leaves the kitchen to put the movie on for Lily in the living room before coming back and looking at the pot of soup with hesitance.

“You sure you don’t want to escape while you can?” Brian asks as he comes to sit on a barstool, “I wouldn’t blame you, you know.”

Justin huffs out a laugh, “While the offer is tempting, I think Lily would be extremely disappointed if I wasn’t here to film the final scene of you two trying the soup.”

“Oh god,” Brian moans, “I have to fucking taste that.”

Justin bites his lip and nods, “Pretty terrifying, isn’t it?”

The two of them laugh at that before looking around the kitchen.

“Shit,” Brian sighs, “She really made a mess.”

“That’s what four year olds tend to do, don’t they?” Justin asks.

“The mess that this game brings is a whole other level though,” Brian says tiredly before throwing some of the scraps away and wiping the counter down, “Oh, look. There’s some quinoa on the wall.”
“Okay, I’ll admit that it’s pretty bad,” Justin laughs before getting up to help Brian, “Here. Let me wash a few things.”

“You can just throw them in the dishwasher,” Brian tells him once Justin starts washing them by hand.

“You’ll waste a little less water this way,” Justin points out as he washes a few utensils.

“Don’t worry about too much of it now,” Brian says, “I’m sure Eric will want to see the damage anyway.”

“It would add to her video,” Justin agrees, “I’ll just do these, put them away, and leave the rest for after.”

Justin finishes washing what he has and glances at Brian only to see the man sitting at the kitchen table with his eyes closed.

“Brian?” Justin calls out, “Where do the forks and spoons go?”

“Over there,” Brian sighs, “In the shelf next to the dishwasher.”

There’s more than one shelf next to the dishwasher, a column of them on each side. As Justin opens the first one, he realizes that it’s the wrong drawer. It’s a drawer not unlike one he has at home, one filled with menus and pamphlets handed out on the street. However, he doesn’t have a pamphlet on a Surrogacy Agency in his. Picking it up, Justin looks through the pamphlet in curiosity. He’s always curious about this kind of stuff these days. He’s just too afraid to make a move.

“It’s the drawer to the left of the washer,” Brian says softly from right behind him.

Justin jumps a little and turns around to look at Brian then looks down bashfully.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, turning around to put the pamphlet back, “I didn’t mean to be a snoop.”
“It’s fine,” Brian shrugs, “You can have it, you know.”

Justin glances at the older man, “I don’t know-”

“It’s just a little bit of information,” Brian comments, “We don’t really want to save it. Eric probably just put it in there after he picked it up in the waiting room. As soon as you get an approved, you get a thick packet of information. Including that. So go ahead and take it. If you are interested in going that route.”

Justin stares at it a few seconds before nodding, “Thanks.”

Brian smiles a little, “No problem. Hope it helps you out when it comes to making a decision.”

Justin is silent for a moment, “I’ve been...you know...heading in that direction.”

“I figured,” Brian murmurs, “If it means anything, I think you’ll be great at it.”

And that really does make Justin smile. Slipping the pamphlet into his pocket, he turns back around and puts the silverware in the correct drawer this time and nothing else on the subject is said.

The two of them sit in the living room with Lily and Justin catches Brian taking opportunities to shut his eyes every once in awhile. He thinks about offering to take Lily outside or up to her room, give Brian some time to take a short nap or something, but, in the final scene of the movie, Lily decides that the soup is officially ready.

“It’s ready, Daddy!” Lily exclaims as she pounces on Brian, “Our soup is ready now! Are you excited!”

“...I don’t know if excited is the right word,” Brian cringes but Lily doesn’t catch it.

“Come on! We need to go eat now! Justin, you get your phone out to film me and my Daddy. You
Lily runs into the kitchen and Brian forces himself up. Justin gets his phone out and ready.

“This looks amazing!” Lily exclaims, hamming it up for the camera, “I am so excited to eat this and share it with my Daddy and Justin. Let’s eat!”

Justin films Brian pour them three bowls of the concoction and put them on the kitchen table. They all settle into their seats and Justin can swear Brian’s hand is shaking as he brings the spoon to his mouth.

“...Mmm,” Brian forces out as he takes a rough swallow.

“So SO good!” Lily exclaims before she even takes a bite. Justin can’t help but stifle a giggle when she spits some of her soup back in the bowl as soon as she does.

“Well, I don’t think I can eat anymore,” Brian announces after the third bite as he puts his spoon down while Justin films.

“Why not?” Lily pouts, “It’s tasty!”

“I’m going on a diet,” Brian lies.

Lily gives her father a once over and nods her head, “Good idea.”

Before Brian can get too outraged, Justin jumps in.

“Well, I’m going to eat all of my soup,” he forces himself to say.

Lily beams, “It really is tasty, isn’t it?”
“Yep!”

And Justin really does try. After a while, he thinks that he can convince himself to like it. But the amount of relief he feels when Brian suddenly distracts her by spontaneously dancing her around the room just so Justin can pour his soup in the trash is almost comical.

Lily drags them in the other room right after dinner, set on playing. Justin may not have children yet, but even he can tell she is running on empty and at a high right before she crashes. Running around the room as if she can convince herself and everyone around her that she’s not tired.

“Hey, Lily?” Brian calls out as Lily jumps up and down, “I think it’s time for a nap, don’t you?”

Lily shakes her head so hard that it must rattle her brain before yelling, “No! No nap! I want to do fun things!”

Running around in circles a few more times, she runs over to get a pink case.

“Daddy, I want to to paint your nails,” she tells him as she sits in front of him, “You want yellow or blue?”

“Neither,” Brian refuses, pulling his hand away, “I want you to take a nap. You’re tired and ready to crash. I can tell.”

“I am not!” Lily shouts as she pounds on the floor.

“Yes, you are. I think you could even get a good two hours in.”

“No!!!!” Lily sobs, toppling over to press her face against the floor, chest and back heaving with shaky breaths, “No no no no no!!!”

“It’s been awhile since I’ve seen one of these,” Brian grumbles before picking her up, “Come on. I’ll rock you upstairs until you settle down.”
“I...DON’T...WANT…THAT!!!!” Lily screams, bending backward in Brian’s grasp, “Justin! Justin! Make him st-stop!!!!!”

Justin looks at Brian helplessly, “Sorry, Lily. You have to listen to your daddy.”

“NO!!!!! NO!!!!!” Lily wails, crying hysterically, as Brian carries her up the stairs, leaving Justin alone in the process.

Well, shit. He hadn’t seen that bad of a meltdown from her before.

Brian’s up there for a good fifteen minutes before he comes back down, looking exhausted himself.

“She alright?” Justin asks cautiously.

Brian lets out a breath, “As alright as she can be. She misses Eric and her schedule gets fucked up when either of us are away. She hasn’t been sleeping like she needs to and is more on edge. She woke me up at 5:45 in the morning today. I had to put a movie on in my room just to get a little more sleep. I decided to wear her out today so that she could crash this afternoon but I think all the fun made her want to fight more, resulting in that epic meltdown. You sure you want kids?”

Justin laughs at that but smiles tenderly, “I’m aware that it isn’t all perfect but...I don’t know, I want it all. Tantrums included.”

“Freak,” Brian mutters but smiles in return.

Justin rolls his eyes before zeroing in on him, “So, those pictures Lily told me about…”

Brian groans, “Justin, they aren’t a big deal.”

“I’d really like to see them and judge that for myself.”

Brian sighs, “I’ll have to get out some albums. Some of them are from my film camera that I
developed myself and haven’t transferred to my laptop yet.”

“Really?” Justin asks, intrigued, “Where do you develop them at?”

“There’s a place in the Flatiron District you can go to, play around in their dark rooms. I’ve been doing more digital this summer. We’ve been busy so it’s easier to just do it that way. But I like to go up there and work with the pictures I’ve taken on my Hasselblad.”

Justin blinks, “Shit, those can be several thousand dollars, can’t they? My friend Stanley would be so jealous.”

“He a photographer too?”

Justin nods, “Yeah, he moved to London though. He comes to visit from time to time. He’s really good. I should show you his stuff. As soon as you show me yours.”

Brian smirks, “Sunshine, that sounds like a bit of a euphemism. I’m shocked.”

Justin rolls his eyes and gets up, “I’m going to go take a piss. Go get your albums and laptop, I want to see.”

It doesn’t take more than five minutes for Justin to head to the restroom, relieve himself, wash his hands, and come back but within that time Brian has fallen asleep. Justin might think that he’s faking, considering the man seems hesitant to show him the photos in the first place, but Lily’s interpretation of Brian’s snores were pretty spot-on it seems and Justin immediately knows Brian needs the rest.

Taking a blanket that’s over a chair across the room, he drapes it over Brian’s body and heads into the kitchen, deciding to clean. It’s a big project to take on but he’d like to think that Brian might give him a hand if Justin becomes a single father, even if Brian’s single parenting is just temporary.

He wipes and disinfects the counters, rinses the dishes and puts them in the dishwasher, saves some of the soup in a container but throws the rest down the garbage disposal. He doesn’t think anyone will be going out of their way to eat it.
About half an hour later, Brian comes into the kitchen rubbing his eyes.

“Shit, why’d you let me fall asleep?” Brian mumbles tiredly as he looks around the kitchen, “And why did you clean my kitchen? You’re not my maid, Justin.”

Justin smiles, “You looked like you really needed the rest. And this will be one less thing you have to do. It was the least I could do.”

Brian stares at him for a few moments, “Cleaning my kitchen, letting me take a nap, finding my kid...what do you want?”

“Just to see your photography skills,” Justin answers innocently.

Brian scoffs but gives in, “Alright, come on. I’ll show them to you.”

Brian leads him back into the living room and goes to get a few albums and his laptop. And FUCK. Lily was right. Brian is good. Really good. The subjects of his photos vary. There are a lot of Lily and Eric, of course. Ones of Lily dressed up and looking adorable and candid ones of Eric that show Justin just why Brian would fall in love with him. There are some really great ones of Lily and Duncan first meeting that actually make Justin feel teary and ones of Gus and JR as well Emmett, Drew, Lindsay, Mel, Ben, Michael, Debbie, and Carl. But Brian doesn’t just stick with family. He has landscapes, objects and sights seen in various parts of New York, Chicago, St. Barts, and other cities he has traveled to; strangers, some of them posed and some of them candid. They are incredible. They’re photos that Justin would buy if he saw them on a street corner before he begged the photographer in question to take his card and talk to him about having a show at his gallery.

“Brian,” Justin says with wonder as he flips through the pages, “These are fantastic.”

“Okay,” Brian snorts as he looks away.

“I’m being completely serious. You have a really great eye and you’re so talented. Honestly, I really want to ask you to do a show at the gallery. I really do. I’m seconds away from asking, actually-”

“The answer is no,” Brian interrupts pointedly, “They're not at that high of a caliber anyway.”
“Believe me, Brian. They are,” Justin tells him honestly, “And if you ever change your mind about displaying them, you’ll have a spot in Williamsburg.”

Brian just hums, almost embarrassed by the praise, as Justin keeps looking at the pictures in wonder.

“I can’t believe I didn’t know that you were this good.”

Brian shrugs and glances at the picture Justin is looking at, “I didn’t really do much photography after college. I got into my career and found other hobbies, ones that were arguably more destructive. I didn’t really like to show people the photos I had taken anyway. It felt too revealing. Still does.”

Justin’s surprised by that admission, but does realize that it makes sense.

“What made you get back into it?” he asks softly.

Brian hesitates but answers, “I needed to find an outlet. I don’t really have one with my job like you and Eric do. You know how destructive I was. I needed to change. For myself. I remember how much I liked it so I started back up again. I was pretty private about it but finally let Eric look at what I had taken. My therapist. Gus. Lily. Eventually Emmett and Drew. They were all very encouraging. I think everyone else might know it’s a thing but they haven’t asked about my expensive ass cameras when I bring them up to Toronto.”

Justin smiles at that before clearing his throat.

“I wish…” Justin starts, “I don’t know, I wish I had known. When we were together. I know you weren’t really taking photos then but I...I guess I wish you would have felt free enough to know you could share that with me. Hell, maybe if you had showed me some of your work, I could have seen through your eyes a little better.”

Brian bites his lip, “I was fucked up back then, Justin. You of all people should know that.”

“You were still a good person. Deep down. You took me in, paid for my school, loved me, even if
it took you forever to say it.”

Justin takes a breath at this point. It’s something that he feels like should have been said a while ago and has hovered over him as a reminder that it hasn’t been.

“Why did you never cash the check that I sent you?” Justin asks him.

Brian stiffens at the inquiry and avoids eye contact. Justin immediately regrets the question and knows it wasn’t the right time to bring it up. But he doesn’t know how he is supposed to bring up Brian paying for his time in art school without remembering that he still owes him thousands of dollars, without remembering that he actually gave Emmett a letter and a check to give to Brian yet he never heard back, never even saw the withdrawal from his bank account made.

“Let’s not talk about it, Justin,” Brian mutters as he closes his albums.

“I just...I just want to know,” Justin tells him helplessly, “I told you I would pay you back. That I would give you the money. We stopped talking but I figured you would appreciate having the amount in full-”

“Well, I guess I didn’t,” Brian snaps as he stands up, “Fuck, just let it go. Alright?”

It’s in that moment that Justin realizes there’s more to the issue than Brian’s letting on.

“...I’m sorry I brought it up. I just...I hope we can talk about it someday.”

The grim line that’s Brian’s mouth doesn’t completely disappear but the air in the room feels a little less dense as Brian sits back down.

“So, what were you doing in Whole Foods this afternoon?” Brian asks, making a point by completely changing the subject and probably doesn’t care about the subsequent answer, “Why go out of your way to shop in Union Square?

Justin sighs sadly before forcing himself to get over the tense one-sided conversation they had and move on.
“...I had just been on a date. We went to the Coffee Shop. And then I needed groceries so I stopped there,” Justin reveals.

Brian raises his eyebrows, “A date? Was he hot?”

“Not really.”

Brian makes a disgusted face, “Then why did you go out with him?”

“He’s a new friend of Carmen’s. She said he was nice. Wanted similar things. And that was true, I guess. But he was…weird.”

Brian snorts, “So are you.”

Justin turns to him and glares, “He smelled his food and called it heavenly. It was a fucking salad.”

And even though Brian laughs at that, the mood isn’t the same as it was before Justin brought up the dreaded question. Brian’s more closed off. On edge. Possibly angry at him for asking in the first place. Things get easier when Lily wakes back up and Brian brings her downstairs since she provides a bit of a distraction.

“I’m sorry for crying,” Lily tells Justin softly, leaning in as if she wants a hug, “I was just really tired.”

Justin chuckles and puts his arms around her, “It’s alright, sweetie. I understand.”

Even though things between him and Brian are still tense, he sticks around for Emmett and Drew and greets Duncan with a hug. The four of them have a couple of beers in the sunroom as the kids go upstairs and it seems to make Brian loosen up a little.

“So what secret did Lily tell you earlier, Sunshine?” Brian suddenly asks him after taking a swig of his beer.
Justin sighs and looks at the three men, “...I don’t know if I should say. If she finds out I told you, she’ll probably hate me.”

“Oh baby,” Emmett laughs, “Lily could never hate everyone.”


“Oh, right. She does hate Joseph,” Emmett agrees, “But he seems like a real prick.”

“Joseph’s four, Emmett,” Drew points out.

“They start young these days, what can I say?” Emmett shrugs, “Now, come on. Let’s hear some gossip.”

Justin laughs at that, “I hope you realize how low you have all sunk if you are this set on hearing the latest scoop from a four year old girl.”

“Hey, no one is arguing with you,” Brian drawls, “But I have a reason to butt in. These two idiots have nothing better to do.”

“Well, it is about Duncan too,” Justin admits.

Emmett gasps and claps his hands, “It’s about Duncan too? My baby boy?”

“How many other Duncans do you know, Honeycutt?” Brian teases.

Emmett sends Brian a glare before turning back to Justin eagerly, “Well, go on! Tell us!”

Justin finally groans in defeat and lets them in on the secret.
“Lily told me she had a secret to tell me when Brian left the room. She then whispered into my ear that she and Duncan had kissed each other on the cheek and that they were boyfriend and girlfriend now. I was a bit shocked that she told me but she said that these things just happen.”

Emmett squeals in delight as Drew shakes his head amusedly. But Brian pales and looks as shocked as could be.

“Oh, Brian,” Emmett laughs, “Don’t tell me you didn’t know.”

“Well, this is the first I’m hearing about it,” Brian says with a strained voice, “I better go check on them.”

Emmett leans over and murmurs into Justin’s ear, “Duncan told me the day it happened. He was on Cloud 9 and completely in love. I gave him a little lecture about just keeping it on the cheek for years to come but it’s so cute, don’t you think?”

Justin huffs out a laugh and claps Emmett on the back as Brian makes his way down the stairs.

“Maybe it’s not a good idea that he spend the night,” Brian tells Emmett stiffly.

Emmett glares, “Don’t go breaking my kid’s heart, Kinney. He loves staying here with you and Lily. And besides, they’re four. We don’t have to be too worried for a while.”

“Why did you have to adopt such a lothario?” Brian groans, “Now I have to give Lily the talk years before I planned to.”

“Oh well!” Emmett quips before standing up, “Drewsie and I better be off. I have some things planned for the two of us.”

“Don’t rub it in,” Brian glares but accepts a hug from the man before sending the two off.

And then he and Brian are alone. Again.
“I better get going too,” Justin finally says after an awkward silence, “I’ll go get the groceries that I bought and be out of your way. Thanks for having me over.”

“No problem,” Brian mumbles as Justin heads to the kitchen and gets the few things he managed to buy on his list before heading back out.

Justin heads to the front door with Brian trailing behind before turning around.

“And thank you for showing me your work,” Justin tells him, “I meant it when I said I think you should have your own exhibition at the gallery. So give me a call and we can set one up-”

“Justin,” Brian interrupts, giving him a look.

Justin sighs, “Alright, fine. But if you change your mind…”

“…If I change my mind, which will be never, I will call you,” Brian finishes.

“Good. I think.”

They keep standing there for a few more seconds and Justin clears his throat.

“Look, I’m sorry if I upset you with asking about the check. It’s just something that has been on my mind for a long time and I would like to pay you-”

“It’s not a big deal,” Brian replies, intercepting the explanation, “Let’s just sweep it under the rug, alright? I’ll text later this week. Maybe you, me, and Emmett can go out for lunch.”

Justin studies Brian’s guarded expression for a few seconds before nodding his head, “Okay, Brian. Have a good night.”

“Night, Justin,” Brian says off-handedly before shutting the door in his face.
When Justin gets home, he makes himself a small meal from the food he has and reminds himself to go to the store tomorrow. But, even with the bare minimum, Justin does have to admit that his fried chicken breast and green beans is better than Lily’s soup.

The video is up and edited by the next morning, to Justin’s surprise. He figures Brian must have stayed up to put it together for Eric. And now that Justin’s in the group, he sees the other videos Brian but mainly Eric have posted of Lily. He sees that Eric is a goofier assistant than Brian is but that Brian is a better cinematographer than Justin is. After seeing Brian’s extensive collection of photos, Justin can’t say that he’s surprised.

He goes and arranges some displays at the gallery, despite probably not being needed, before getting groceries on the way home a few hours later. He cooks himself a more time consuming meal this time, a macaroni and cheese casserole with a salad and breadsticks. Even though the meal tastes great, he wishes he had someone to share it with or that he just would have gone down to Bedford Bar to ask Liam to make him Shepard’s Pie or something.

As he faces a lonely afternoon and evening, his mind wanders to Brian, who probably still has his hands full. It’s hard to imagine Brian chasing after his four year old daughter and her little boyfriend at the pool but Brian has done a lot of things in the last 8 months that Justin would have never expected out of him years before. And good for him. Justin can’t help but feel happy over Brian becoming the man he is now. Every time Justin sees him, he looks up to him and wants something similar to what his ex-fiancé has more and more. The kind of Sunday afternoon Brian is probably having is something that Justin wants more than anything.

And that’s why, on Monday morning at 9 am sharp, he calls Tiny Treasures National and schedules an appointment later in the week for a surrogacy search consultation.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I haven't answered your reviews yet! I swear I will tomorrow! I have appreciated each and every one of them and love to hear what you have to say. I hope you enjoyed this chapter and stay tuned for the next one. ;)


Brian and Lily welcome Eric home for the weekend and go to a special appointment.

“So will your squad be alright without you for a few days?” Brian drawls once he gets back downstairs from putting Lily to bed.

“I think they’ll manage,” Eric answers over the phone, “It’s only for the weekend.”

“Shhh,” Brian shushes as he lies down on the couch, eyes closed, “Don’t remind me how short it’ll be.”

“Oh, so you do miss me,” Eric chuckles.

“Sure. And that ass. Celibacy is not my thing. You know that.”

Eric lets out a laugh, “I can’t wait to break your sentence tomorrow night.”

Brian shakes his head, “You’re sucking me off at the very least before we go to the appointment. We’ll dodge Lily if we have to. Maybe send her to do some errands or lock her in a closet.”

“I want to spend time with her though,” Eric sighs, “I miss her so much. How is she?”

“For the ten-thousandth time, she is fine,” Brian confirms, yet again, “She’s driven me up the wall with her sleeping schedule and pulling that disappearing act at Whole Foods but other than that we’ve been having an okay time.”

“I saw your daddy/daughter day pictures,” Eric teases, “And the video of Sous Chef. You’re
“having a blast with her and you know it.”

“Still doesn’t mean she isn’t driving me insane from time to time,” Brian mutters.

“But she wouldn’t be our Lily if she wasn’t,” Eric says softly, “I called Justin yesterday to thank him for finding her.”

“Again?” Brian asks, eyebrows raised.

“It deserves to be said more than once.”

“Guess his shitty date was good for something,” Brian yawns.

“It’s good that he’s starting to put himself out there again though,” Eric comments, “If he’s ready, then I think that’s great. I chatted with Nathan about a week ago. I think it’ll take him a lot longer. But he’s so busy that I don’t know if he’d have the time anyway.”

“I walked by the theater yesterday. I had that meeting with the developer I was telling you about. The line wrapped around the block. I guess it’s sold out for the next two weeks,” he tells Eric.

“That’s fantastic, especially when they have been on Broadway for a few months. When is their contract up?” Eric asks.

“November. They’ll probably be asked to extend. Not sure if that will be the best move for The Accidental Natives’ career. It depends on what their prospects are by September.”

“Well, whatever the case is, I think they’ll go far,” Eric says kindly, “He’s coming over for dinner on Sunday, by the way.”

Brian groans, “That’s your last night in.”

“I just want to see how he’s doing,” Eric tells him defensively.
'Whatever,’ Brian sighs, ‘Just make sure he leaves by 8. I need my time with you. Alone. With my dick in your ass.’

‘Stop,’ Eric warns, ‘I have to go to bed soon. I need to be at the airport at 4:30 am. I can’t get horny now.’

‘But don’t you want to imagine me trailing my hand down your chest, toying with you waistband of your jeans, reaching inside and-’

‘No phone sex,’ Eric interrupts.

‘It might help you fall asleep,’ Brian reasons.

‘Yeah, it relaxes me a lot when one of us is away. But it takes us hours to stop.’

‘It’s not my fault you’re addicted to coming.’

‘Yes, and you just barely put up with it,’ Eric snorts.

They’re silent for a few moments, listening to each other breathe as they wait for one of them to take the plunge by saying goodbye.

‘Goodnight, Brian,’ Eric tells him softly, ‘I love you. See you in the morning?’

‘Yeah,’ Brian answers, clearing his throat, ‘See you then...and you too.’

With one last goodbye, Brian hears the line click and he takes a deep breath. He knows he should get to bed as well. Eric should be at the airport a little before 9 and Brian would like to get there at least half an hour before to stay safe. He’s driving for the first time in almost a month so at least he’ll avoid worrying about a taxi or the crowds the subway will undoubtedly have in the morning. It would save them a little time as well. Eric could come back home, relax (or fuck) for a few hours.
And then, they would go to the ultrasound clinic and find out if they were having a boy or a girl. If everything went to plan. Lily had been stubborn in the womb and it took a couple of tries before they found out what she was. Since Eric is making a trip back specifically to find out, Brian can’t help but hope that the kid decides to spread its legs, even if he doesn’t care what the baby turns out to be.

He ends up closing his eyes for a while and, before he knows it, it’s nearing 2 am. Dragging himself off the couch, groggy from his unexpected nap, he goes upstairs, brushes his teeth, and lets himself fall back on the bed.

Looking over at Eric’s empty place beside him, he can’t help but feel anxious for him to be home. It isn’t the same without him.

“PAPA!!!!!”

Brian is on Lily’s heels as she runs over to her father. Losing her may have him a little paranoid and, yeah, he kind of wants to hug Eric as much as he does.

But unlike their daughter, who is clinging onto the man and kissing him all over his face, Brian can reign it in a little better.

“I missed you too, Lily,” Eric laughs as he takes the little girl’s kisses.

“I missed you so much, Papa,” Lily tells him, “I just gotta let you know how much!”

“I bet I missed you more,” Eric teases.

Lily shakes her head, “No. I missed YOU more.”

“Alright, if you say so,” Eric surrenders, before trying to put her down.
“Papa, I want you to hold me!” Lily insists, clinging onto Eric’s thighs.

“I just want to give your daddy a proper hello,” Eric answers, smirking at Brian.

Lily hesitantly lets go and Brian and Eric walk over to each other with purpose. There is no hesitation when they wrap their arms around each other and kiss passionately, as if they have gone two years without seeing each other rather than two weeks. There are a few whistles from the travelers passing by and an exasperated, “Daddy! Papa! Stop.” from Lily but it’s only when they need to come up for a breath that they finally part.

“Hey,” Eric says first, breathing heavily and grinning from ear to ear.

“Hey, yourself,” Brian answers, tilting his head forward to press it against Eric’s.

“Daddy, Papa!” Lily huffs, putting her hands on her hips, “You’re wasting my time!”

Brian looks down at her and raises an eyebrow, “Really? How so?”

“You just keep kissing and kissing and there’s important stuff we gotta do!” Lily reminds him, “Like play!”

“I know I want to play with your Papa,” Brian smirks right before Eric pinches his side.

“Alright,” Eric sighs, straightening up, “You’re right. We better take off.”

Lily nods her head seriously before taking Brian and Eric’s hands to lead them out of the airport. Well, she tries. Brian ends up having to pull on her arm to get her to go in the right direction.

Lily keeps them occupied on the drive back, chattering away and asking questions both about Eric’s time in New Orleans and about life in general.

“Why do kitties go ‘Meow! Meow!’ all the time but rats go ‘Squeak! Squeak! Squeak!’ only sometimes?” Lily asks curiously.
“Ask Vernon and Bianca,” Brian suggests, getting tired of the constant questions, “They might know.”

Eric snorts at that and takes Brian’s free hand into his own. Brian bites his lip to hold back a smile but laces his fingers with his husband’s hand, liking the feeling of Eric’s wedding ring touching his skin more than he would ever admit.

They get lucky and don’t run into any traffic on the way back home. Eric looks to be at peace once he steps through the front door. The man makes his way over to the couch and Lily perches next to him, on her knees with her arms around him. Brian sits on the other side of Eric and just watches the two of them interact. It’s so damn heartwarming to see Eric in person after two weeks and to see Lily so happy and excited that her papa is home. He knows Eric is trying to stay enthusiastic and interactive with their little girl, but he can also tell that Eric could use a nap and even offers to keep Lily occupied so the man can do so.

“I’m not using this free weekend to sleep,” Eric informs him as he shakes his head, “I want to spend as much time with you as I can.”

“Just don’t get like Lily does when she doesn’t get her rest in.”

“Naps are for babies,” Lily reasons, “Papa isn’t a baby and neither am I! No naps!”

“Chill,” Brian reminds her before looking at his phone, “It’s 9:30 and Lily and I haven’t eaten breakfast. You want to go down the street to eat?”

Lily gasps, squeals, and claps her hands. Sometimes Brian wonders what it is like to be her. Overly excited over the simplest things. It seems exhausting.

“Park Plaza, Papa! We could go to Park Plaza!” she says breathlessly, as if they were about to go to Disney World.

“Well, I guess I can’t turn down an offer like that,” Eric admits, standing up, “Let me just take my things upstairs and change into different clothes.
“Papa, you look fine,” Lily insists, rolling her eyes at her father’s vainness, “You can always change later.”

“Lily, shush,” Eric tells her, “How about you put away your toys? They’re scattered all over the living room.”

“But we have to leave-”

“Just put them away,” Brian interrupts, “I let you get away with not doing it yesterday since Duncan and Emmett left later than planned but you can do it now.”

Lily pouts and grumbles as she gets up before turning around.

“Papa, you should wear shorts. That way, we can be twins,” Lily requests.

“I don’t think I have white shorts with black polka dots on them,” Eric points out to her.

But Lily has already tuned them out, picking up her toys to put in the box in the corner. That’s when Brian and Eric make their escape for upstairs.

They know they can’t do much, settling for hot kisses and mutual handjobs to tide them over until Lily takes a nap later. But it’s better than nothing and Brian would be embarrassed over how quickly he comes if it wasn’t what he is aiming for. Besides, Eric isn’t showing off his stamina either. Brian finds himself cumming into Eric’s hand and letting his forehead rest on the man’s shoulder before Eric does the same thing.

“We need to wash our hands. I need to get changed,” Eric says with a deep breath, “If we aren’t downstairs in a few minutes, you know she’ll be knocking on our door.”

“Such a pest, our child is,” Brian sighs, finally standing up straight, “Go get changed. God forbid you go out in your sweatpants.”

“Like you would,” Eric shoots back before sliding the pants and boxer briefs in question completely off right after taking off his shirt, giving Brian a fantastic view in the process.
“You’re a fucking tease, you know that?” Brian glares yet can’t help but lick his lips at Eric’s naked form.

“So you have told me multiple times before,” Eric smirks before searching through the drawers, “Did I leave my blue shirt here? The light blue one.”

Brian peeks over his shoulder, “Check in the laundry room. There’s a basket with some of your stuff down there that you left in the dryer.”

Eric gives him a look, “Thank you so much for putting those clothes away for me, darling.”

“You know I’d never make you lift a finger,” Brian teases before sighing with a touch of guilt, “Would you like me to get your shirt?”

“No,” is all Eric says, “I guess I’ll just have to wear this shirt. I’ll get my clothes myself when we get back.”

Eric pulls a pair of briefs on before putting on his shorts and his shirt and steps past Brian.

“Oh, so you’re wearing shorts?” Brian comments, slightly disapprovingly.

“Just because you are too insecure to wear shorts when you aren’t swimming doesn’t mean I am,” Eric shrugs, “And these were in the July edition of GQ. They’re in.”

“Well, if anyone looks good in delta shorts, then I guess it’s you,” Brian sighs.

But Eric leaves the room with a slightly bitchy demeanor anyway, one that is most likely caused by a lack of sleep and probably their bickering. But his experience with Eric is that, if it is over something stupid, then to just let the subject go and he’ll be fine within three and a half minutes.

And he’s proven right when they’re walking down the street and Eric holds Lily’s hand with his left hand and put his arm around Brian’s waist with his right. Lily is pretty chipper, with her father
being back and they fact that they are twins now. In what way, Brian doesn’t know, since their outfits are completely different. With Eric’s black t-shirt and dark gray delta shorts and Lily’s polka dot short shorts and light pink tank top with the picture of a weird big black mustache on it and the words, ‘la moustache,’ Brian is really concerned that their daughter may be blind.

They make it to the restaurant in less than 10 minutes and Rocko is there and he greets Lily with enthusiasm as usual.

“Hey, Josè!” Rocko exclaims, accepting her hug in the process.

“Rocko!” Lily groans, “That’s not my name! I’ve TOLD you that! Josè is a boy’s name. My name’s Lily!”

“Oh, I forgot. I’m awfully sorry,” Rocko answers with a gleam in his eyes, holding back a laugh.

“Well, try to remember for next time, okay? You’re always getting it wrong,” Lily sighs before perking up, “My papa’s back home for the weekend!”

“I see that,” Rocko answers, nodding to Eric kindly, “That’s exciting, huh?”

Lily nods her head vigorously before jumping up and down.

“Can we sit by the window?” she asks him hopefully.

“Only the best for my favorite customer,” Rocko bows before leading them to a booth of Lily’s choosing.

“This is perfect!” she exclaims as she often does, bouncing down in the seat before pulling on Eric’s hand to get him to sit next to her. Brian sits across from them and it’s really fucking hard to keep himself from smiling at the sight of them together.

The three of them look at their menus with small talk here and there. He’ll have to mention how small the fucking font is on the new menus to Rocko. Why have so many choices if you can’t read what they are?
“You need to get your eyes checked,” Eric says out of nowhere, studying him, “I think you need glasses. I’ve been thinking that most of the summer.”

“No, I don’t.” Brian growls, forcing himself not to squint and trying to not be as obvious when he adjusts the distance of the menu from his face.

Lily pouts and looks at Brian before focusing on Eric, “I need glasses too!”

Brian scoffs, “Why are you even jealous over something like that?”

Before Lily can deny that she’s jealous and claim that her need for glasses is absolutely genuine, the waitress comes by to take their orders.

“Hi, I’m Vanessa. I’ll be your server this morning,” a girl, around 17, says sweetly.

“You’re new,” Lily accuses, studying her suspiciously.

“You’re new,” Lily accuses, studying her suspiciously.

“Lily,” Eric softly reprimands before sending the waitress a wink, “Sorry about that. She’s here a lot and is cautious when it comes to change.”

Vanessa stays friendly, nodding along as Lily says her order slowly.


“She means whole wheat,” Brian clarifies.

“And juice!” Lily remembers, “Cranberry and orange. Mixed together. More cranberry than orange. Are you writing this down?”

“Uh...Yes?” Vanessa answered, looking a little offended as Eric goes beet red.
“I’m sorry,” he apologizes as Brian chokes back laughs at Eric’s embarrassment, “She...She’s a character.”

“I can tell,” Vanessa nods, finally looking slightly amused at the trying four-year-old.

“Since Lily already ordered her food, I guess I’m ready too,” Eric chuckles, “I’ll have a coffee with cream and sugar to drink along with a glass of water and an omelet with sausage, peppers, onions, American cheese, and hot sauce. And hash browns.”

“Pig,” Brian mutters before clearing his throat for his own order, “I’ll have the Primavera Omelet and guava juice.”

“Health freak,” Eric shoots back after hearing his choice.

“I’ll...I’ll take your orders back to the kitchen,” Vanessa finally says before she leaves the table.

“She thinks we’re weird,” Eric mentions as his eyes follow the waitress’s form.

“Yeah, but that’s pretty normal for you two, isn’t it?” Brian smirks.

“I am not weird,” Lily insists, “I am smart and nice and beautiful.”

“You are,” Eric agrees, “But you weren’t very polite to her.”

Lily tilts her head, “What do you mean?”

“You acted like she was dumb,” Brian re-words.

Lily rolls her eyes, “Nuh uh! I was telling her how to do her job. She’s new! She needs to know how to do that!”
“Try not to do that though,” Eric argues, “You should assume the best in people.”

“But expect the worst,” Brian drawls.

“Brian,” Eric warns.

The bickering dies down after a minute or so and they’re laughing at the shit Lily says once the food arrives at the table. Lily’s eyes her bagel with glee and looks at the waitress with relief.

“You did it!” Lily gasps, clapping her hands, “You got it right!”

“I’m filled with surprises,” Vanessa laughs as she puts all the plates down, “Need anything else?”

“We’re good,” Eric smiles, “Thanks.”

“Thank you so SO much,” Lily adds, chowing down on her bagel sandwich, before leaning over once Vanessa leaves, “You have to give her a big tip, Daddy. She got it right the first time! You just HAVE to.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Brian waves off, “She’ll get a good tip. Now eat your breakfast.”

They eat their breakfasts without incident, except for some tomato dripping onto Lily’s shirt, before heading up front to pay. Brian leaves Vanessa a twenty dollar tip on his card because Lily reminds him to leave her the ‘hugest tip that there ever was’ before taking the little girl’s hand and following Eric out the door.

They relax on the couch for a couple of hours, biding their time until the appointment. He gets Lily to settle down by watching a movie, Lily on one side of Eric and Brian on the other. Eric dozes off half an hour in, head resting on Brian’s shoulder. Lily surprisingly, doesn’t wake him up. She just glances over and sees that her papa is asleep before nestling into his side to watch the rest of Finding Nemo.
Lily knows nothing of the appointment. He and Eric questioned taking her just in case something may be wrong. But, with some words exchanged in a call Eric made to the clinic a few days ago, it had been decided that Rachel, their surrogate, would go in first with Brian while Eric and Lily waited outside. That way, they could be sure nothing upsetting was going on and could bring Lily in without worrying.

“Eric,” Brian says softly into his ear once the credits rolled, “Babe? Time to wake up now.”

Eric’s eyes flutter open before he rubs them tiredly. Lifting his head to look around, he seems to realize that he fell asleep for an hour.

“You should have woken me up,” Eric sighs, “I didn’t want to sleep through today.”

“You weren’t asleep long,” Brian argues before getting a gleam in his eyes, “I need you awake for tonight anyway.”

“And don’t worry, Papa,” Lily comforts, “You didn’t snore at all. If Daddy had fallen asleep, THEN we would have been in trouble!”

Eric chokes on his laughter and falsely assures Lily that Brian is just kidding when he tells her to go to time out for 3 hours.

“Let’s go change your shirt,” Eric tells her, “You have tomato and cream cheese stains on it.”

Lily looks down at her shirt sadly, “I really like this shirt. I try to eat without spilling stuff but I always do it wrong.”

The little girl looks down at the floor, dejected, and Eric picks her up.

“You didn’t mean to, calm down,” Eric chuckles, “You’ll get better at it.”

With that, Eric takes her upstairs and Brian walks over and grabs his Nikon camera bag. He knows Eric will want quality pictures of Lily finding out and, to be honest, he would like to have memories of the moment too.
“Where are we going?” Lily asks, now donning a teal top with the words ‘I don’t wanna taco bout it! It’s nacho problem.’ that Debbie gave to her on their last trip to Toronto.

“We’re going to the doctor’s office,” Brian tells her as he ushers her out the door.

Lily lets out a cry before turning around to hug Brian’s legs, “D-Daddy, I don’t w-want to go to the doctor!”

“Why not?” Brian asks, looking down at her.

“Be-Because! I don’t want a sh-shot!” Lily hiccups, two tears falling down her face.

“You’ll only have 6 or 7 of them and then it will be all over,” Brian teases, just to be an asshole.

He does feel guilty about it when Lily screams and tries to rush back to the front door.

“Lily, he’s teasing you!” Eric calls out, rushing over to pick up their daughter and glaring at Brian through the process.

“Pa-Papa! I don’t want even one shot!” Lily cries.

“You aren’t getting any shots, Lily,” Brian sighs, taking her from Eric, “I was teasing you.”

Lily sniffs and wipes her eyes, “That’s n-not nice, Daddy. You’re not nice.”

“Way to guilt me, kid,” Brian mumbles.

Lily gathers herself and calms herself down, “Where are we really going?”
“To a clinic. It’s not for you though,” Brian is quick to tell her, “It’s about something else. You’ll have fun, I promise.”

Lily hesitates to believe him, breathing harshly and whining at the thoughts racing through her head the whole way to the train.

“I’ll have fun,” Lily whispers to herself, rocking slightly back and forth, “No shots. I won’t get shots.”

“Look what you did to her,” Eric scolds over Lily’s head, “She’s traumatized.”

“Think we should tell her why we’re really going?” Brian tries not to fret.

Eric thinks on it then shakes his head, “She’s smart. She’ll figure it out.”

“Wanting to keep something a surprise over our child’s emotional welfare?” Brian tsk, “Eric. I’m disappointed.”

“Don’t reflect your guilt back onto me,” Eric retorts before putting his arm around Lily, “It’s okay, baby. I promise this is going to be a great day. Daddy wouldn’t have brought his camera if you were getting shots, would he?”

“...No,” Lily answers uncertainly, “I don’t think so.”

“Of course I wouldn’t,” Brian sighs, bending his head down to kiss Lily’s curls, “I was just being...”

“A buttface?” Lily finishes.

“Sure,” Brian snorts, “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t say that word but that’s what I was being. I was teasing you.”

Lily nods, finally taking her parents’ words as truth, “Okay. So we’re going to go play at the doctor’s?”
“I wouldn’t say *play,*” Eric smiles, “But it’s about something good, don’t worry.”

The three of them get off at 34th Street in Manhattan and walk down 5th Avenue to 31st to Goldenview Ultrasound, a chic alternative to a hospital that offers packages, some of them including a stuffed bear with your child’s heartbeat. Of course, Eric got the second most expensive package that included the bear, a DVD and digital download of the whole appointment as well as *livestreaming* so that friends and family can tune in. God knows who Eric gave their link to. It also included multiple 2D, 3D, and 4D ultrasounds throughout the pregnancy and printouts. That part is kind of cool, even though Brian knows the kid will probably look kind of gross in 4D at 18 weeks. But hell, it will be a learning experience for Lily and, going by the look in Eric’s eyes, he can see that his husband is excited about it.

They sign into the building and take the elevator upstairs to the fourth floor and see that Rachel is already there, standing outside the door. He has kept up the habit he and Eric started by continuing to visit her once a week and go to her appointments. She’s showing more and it’s undeniable that she’s pregnant. Whenever Brian sees her, it makes him realize that this is real. He’s having another kid.

But Lily hasn’t met her yet. The timing hadn’t been good up until this point and they knew introducing Lily to her would bring on so many questions, ones that Brian still isn’t ready to answer. Their situation is more complicated than what most straight couples face. He knows that she will probably know that he isn’t her biological father within the next year or so. He just hopes it doesn’t make her see him differently.

“Lily, we want to introduce you to someone,” Eric says softly, taking her hand and leading her to Rachel, “Lily, this is Rachel. You know how Daddy and I explained that when we wanted you we had to grow you in a lady’s tummy?”

Lily nods her head, eyes wide, as she stares at the woman’s abdomen.

“Well, Rachel is growing your little brother or sister,” Eric reveals, “We’re going to wait in the waiting room while she has a check-up to check on the baby.”

“Is my little sister okay?” Lily asks softly, looking at her fathers.

“Your sister or brother should be fine,” Eric tells her, “But sometimes things can happen and we have to be cautious. But as soon as we get the okay, we’ll go in with her.”
Lily nods, understanding, before looking up at Rachel.

“Did you grow me too?” Lily asks.

Rachel glances at the men before shaking her head, “No, sweetie. Your fathers just asked me to grow this one.”

“How come?” Lily asks.

“I just met them a few months ago. I didn’t know them when they wanted you,” Rachel smiles.

“Who grew me?” Lily asks, looking at Eric then at Brian.

“A nice woman in Pittsburgh,” Brian tells her, “Maybe you can meet her sometime.”

Lily gets excited at the idea but surprisingly reigns it in, “I would like that.”

Eric smiles at her and Brian puts a hand on Lily’s back to lead her into the lobby. It’s very serene, painted with comforting colors and furnished with plush sofas and armchairs while soft and soothing instrumental music plays faintly throughout the room. It kind of makes Brian want to crack a joke but he’s able to contain himself as he takes Rachel to the front desk to sign her in and briefly fill in the secretary on what they plan on doing.

It doesn’t take long until Rachel’s name is called. Brian helps her up and he swears that he heard Lily whisper ‘Good Luck!’ to Rachel’s tummy. With one last look at Eric’s happy but anxious expression he gives the two a casual wave before heading back to the room.

They wait there for a few moments, pretty silent. Brian has trouble talking to pregnant women, especially ones he doesn’t know that well. He’s been getting to know Rachel. He knows she’s 32 years old and has three sons, one who is 8 and a set of twins who are 5. She was a surrogate for another gay couple 2 and a half years ago and decided to go through the process again. She claimed she always had easy and uneventful pregnancies and thought it would be nice to provide for the children she has a little better as well as give another couple a child.
“Mrs. Blackwell?” the sonographer asks, peeking at the clipboard as she comes into the room, “I’m Vera, I’ll be doing your ultrasound this afternoon.

“Call me Rachel, please,” Rachel insists as she shakes the woman’s hand.

“And you’re the father?” Vera asks.

“One of them,” Brian confirms, “Rachel agreed to be a surrogate for me and my husband. He’s waiting outside with our daughter. We wanted to make sure everything was alright with the baby before bringing her in.”

“Of course, that’s not a problem,” Vera smiles, “I bet your little girl is excited.”

“Oh, she is,” Brian smirks, “Won’t shut up about it.”

“We shouldn’t keep her waiting any longer than we have to then,” Vera laughs, “Rachel, if you would lift up your shirt for me, we can get started and check to see if everything is in order.”

Rachel lifts her shirt up, exposes her belly, and hisses a little once the cool gel touches her skin. The monitor comes to life and Brian can immediately hear the heartbeat from the machine.

“Heartbeat’s good. 148 beats per minute,” Vera comments as she slowly rolls the stick on Rachel’s abdomen, “That sounds high but it is in the normal range for a child in the 18 week development stage. Size and positioning look normal. There are no abnormalities that I can see. The baby is active as well. Everything looks great.”

“...Good,” Brian answers, letting out a relieved breath, “I’m glad everything is okay.”

“You want to go and get Eric and Lily now, Brian?” Rachel asks softly.

Brian nods and stands up from his chair, glancing at the baby in the 2D monitor before heading back to the waiting room. It may be stupid, but the sight of the kid makes him feel...happy.
He spots Eric and Lily outside, Lily in her father’s lap as he reads her a book that he put in her backpack. Lily spots Brian first, gasping and tapping Eric on the shoulder to alert him. Eric looks up and Brian nods to relay the message.

“Everything’s fine,” Brian says to him. That immediately puts a wide grin on Eric’s face as Lily jumps up and lets out a cheer.

“My little sister is doing great, you guys!” she exclaims to everyone else in the waiting room, “She’s perfect!”

“Or your little brother,” Eric reminds her as he stands up to lead her over to Brian.

Lily rolls her eyes at the idea of the baby being a boy but just follows her parents to the back.

“Hello, you must be Lily!” Vera calls out as soon as they enter the room.

Lily nods her head, “Yes, yes that’s me! It’s nice to meet you!”

Lily holds out her hand for the woman and Vera holds back a laugh as she offers Lily her gloved hand.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” she says kindly, “Ready to get started?”

“So SO ready,” Lily confirms as she sits in the chair next to Rachel before pointing at Rachel’s tummy, “That’s my baby sister in there, you know.”

Eric sighs, “Or your baby brother.”

“We don’t know,” Lily explains, gesturing with her hands, “But I think it’s a baby sister.”

“Would you like to find out?” Vera asks them, “I actually am getting a clear view.
Lily’s eyes go wide and she nods her head, “Yes. I would like to know right now.”

Vera glances at Brian and Eric and Brian shrugs while Eric nods his head as well.

“I’m working in New Orleans for a month. It’s one of the main reasons I came back for the weekend,” Eric elaborates, “I didn’t want these two finding out without me either.”

Vera chuckles, “Alright. I will just explain what I already told Brian, show the positioning on the 2D monitor, and, if you’d like, switch it to 4D so we can all get a better look.”

Brian rolls his eyes as Eric seems to hold back a squeal before nodding his head.

“That would be great. I can’t wait to see the 4D scan,” Eric says excitedly.

“Just a bit of a warning, at 18 weeks the babies still look a bit scrawny and underdeveloped,” Vera tells them, “When you do another at around 25 weeks or so, the baby will look a lot plumper and more like...well, a baby.”

“I’m still excited to see the stage though,” Eric smiles, eyes bright, “Brian is too. He likes the scientific parts of the baby books.”

Brian rolls his eyes and flicks Eric in the ear, “Would you quit channeling your daughter by yacking so much and let the woman do her job?”

Eric sends Brian a playful glare but listens intently as Vera goes over the information she told Brian just a few minutes before. Lily is also quite tuned in, asking questions in response to practically everything Vera says.

“How big is the baby?” Lily asks in awe.

“Around five and a half inches long from the head to the bottom, about the size of a bell pepper,” Vera answers.
To Brian’s shock, Lily’s eyes fill with tears and she lets out a cry.

“I don’t w-want a pepper for a sister!” Lily cries, putting her face in her hands.

“Lily,” Brian interjects quickly, crouching down next to her, “She was just comparing it for size to give you an idea. The baby is not a bell pepper.”

Lily sniffles and nods her head, finally understanding, “Good. Because I can’t play with a pepper, Daddy.”

The whole room tries not to laugh at the little girl’s words and Vera clears her throat.

“I’ll get the 4D scan up now,” Vera finally manages to say.

Brian is expecting it to pop up on the monitor but it doesn’t. Instead, it gets displayed on an overhead projector. He finds himself watching in awe, along with Eric and Lily, as the baby comes into view. Fuck, technology is incredible. The fact that he thinks he just saw the baby yawn is blowing his mind. He doesn’t fully focus on Vera’s words as she explains what is going on in the womb but three words do filter through and go straight to his brain and his heart.

“It’s a girl,” she tells them softly, a smile playing on her lips.

The next sound Brian hears is a loud and excited squeal from Lily.

“I told you, Papa!” she exclaims, jumping up and down, “I TOLD you I was going to have a baby sister!”

“You did,” Eric answers distractedly, yet doesn’t take his eyes off of the unborn baby.

“I can’t believe it!” Lily says with wonder, “I can tell the future!”
“I’m sure that’s it,” Brian can’t help but laugh.

The rest of the appointment goes smoothly. Lily talks to Rachel’s belly about all of the fun stuff they are going to do once the baby comes out.

“And I’ll share some of my toys, okay?” Lily confides, “But not my Elsa doll or my stuffed Nala that purrs. You have to get your own.”

“You better share with her,” Eric teases, “You want to be the best big sister in the world, don’t you?”

Lily looks conflicted, “Yes, but I can do that without letting her play with Elsa and Nala.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible,” Eric answers with a dramatically grave tone, “Sharing Elsa and Nala is the quality all of the best older sisters have.”

“But I need some toys for myself. And I don’t want her using my iPad,” Lily frets.

“You mean my iPad that you took over and claimed as your own,” Brian reminds her.

Lily nods but says nothing else, then gets a worried look on her face.

“What’s up with you?” Brian asks her.

Lily looks at the still picture from the 3D scan a few times before wincing, “She’ll...she’ll get prettier, right?”

A stifled laugh can be heard from Vera and Eric rolls his eyes.

“Yes, Lily. She’ll get prettier,” the man confirms, “She’ll be just as pretty as you.”
Lily grins, “So she’ll be so SO pretty then.”

“That’s right,” Brian drawls while he gets his camera ready to take another picture, “So SO pretty. Now say cheese.”

And, once they have all had any questions they could ask answered, they’re on their way. They are handed a small album with a few pictures from the scan and Eric is told he should be able to get the personalized DVD of the baby moving by the next appointment as well as the stuffed bear.

“I’m not sure why a grown man has such a strong need for a stuffed bear,” Brian huffs but puts his arm around Eric’s shoulders anyway.

“It sounds so cute and adorable,” Eric defends himself, “I have to have it.”

“It can go in my room!” Lily exclaims, “That way my baby sister can be with me even when she’s not yet.”

Eric’s eyes fill with hearts as he coos and picks Lily up, “Oh, sweetie. That’s so beautiful.”

With two saps at his side, they make their way back to the train.

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After finally managing to put Lily down for a nap, something that took over an hour to do due to her excitement, Brian and Eric fall into bed together. Fuck, he missed fucking Eric’s tight ass. They can’t keep their hands off each other for an hour before finally settling down enough to lay side by side.

“We’ll have to decorate a nursery soon. Buy baby clothes and toys,” Eric says out of the blue.

Brian smirks, “It’s another girl. We can just give her hand-me-downs of Lily’s and call it a day.”

Eric sits up quickly and stares down at Brian, “Hand-me-downs? Hand-me-downs? If this is your way to try to talk me out of a major shopping spree, then it’s not going to work.”
“I didn’t expect it to,” Brian laughs, “I remember how much you bought for Lily. And Julian. And Carlos. And Duncan-”

“And now Pippi Piper Davisson-Kinney,” Eric can’t help but laugh.

“Lily isn’t allowed to name our child,” Brian interjects harshly, “And if she has kids when she’s older, I don’t think we should let her name them either.”

“She can’t even let the baby have her own middle name,” Eric tsks, “Although ‘Ashley Madison’ was a contender.”

“I don’t know how I kept a straight face through that one,” Brian sighs, putting a hand over his eyes, before peeking through, “What do you want to name her?”

Eric looks at him for a second, then slowly lies back down, “I don’t know. I didn’t really think of girl names as much as boy names.”

Brian raises an eyebrow, “Really? How come?”

Eric blushes a little and Brian lets out a laugh.

“You wanted a boy, didn’t you?” Brian concludes.

“I did but now I feel awful since we’ve found out it’s a girl!” Eric groans, “What if she finds out and doubts the love I have for her?”

Brian shakes his head, “You’re ridiculous, I hope you know that.”

“I’m aware,” Eric says with a put-upon sigh, “I don’t know...I’ve always liked Nina.”

“Nina,” Brian says slowly, testing it, “It’s alright.”
Eric gives him a light slap on the shoulder, “Alright, what are your ideas then?”

Brian thinks on it and just begins listing names that aren’t terrible.

“Lenora?”

Eric shakes his head, “People will think we want to name all of our daughters with L names.”

“Good point,” Brian agrees, “Rosalie?”

“Which can be shortened to Rose and that’s a flower just like-”

“Lily,” they both finish.

Brian lets out a sigh, “Julia?”

Eric shakes his head, “I don’t feel it.”

“Ava?”

“Eh,” Eric shrugs.

“Well, aren’t you enthusiastic about my choices?” Brian grumbles, “Alice?”

“I actually like Alice,” Eric starts, “But it’s gotten really popular.”

“Irene?” Brian sighs, deciding to just say the names of random characters from books now.
“Irene,” Eric tests, “Irene. I like that. You don’t meet a lot of Irenes.”

Brian is actually surprised as Eric considers the name but then the man shrugs.

“That can be her middle name,” Eric decides before standing up, “I need to get dinner started. Emmett and Drew will be here around 6, right?”

“So they say,” Brian waves off before rising into sitting position to pull his clothes back on, “What do you plan on making?”

“What do we have?” Eric asks.

“There’s chicken in the freezer. Vegetables in the fridge.”

“I’ll go look,” Eric tells him, fixing his hair in the mirror as he does so, “If I can’t find anything, I’ll run down the street and get a few extra things. Maybe I can grill something and we can eat in the sunroom or outside. I should go to the fish market on Court Street and get swordfish, grill the vegetables, and make sweet potato fries. Ooh, and I could make pico de gallo with mango to top the fish with-”

“Fucking still works up an appetite for you, I see,” Brian smirks, “But how you can be hungry after eating the breakfast you ate, I’m not sure.”

“It’s a gift,” Eric jokes, before turning around. “I’ll be gone 45 minutes tops. If I time everything right, I can have dinner done by 6:30. Can you double check with Emmett and Drew on what time they’ll be here and wake Lily up?”

“I can do that,” Brian tells him as he makes sure he looks presentable, “Grab some beer while you’re out.”

“I planned on making Sangria,” Eric informs him, “But if you and Drew are going to bitch about ‘girly’ drinks, then I guess I can get you Boston Lager.”

“Yeah, he’s going to want domestic,” Brian sighs, “I’ve tried to teach him the magic of European
craft beers but it has yet to sink in with him.”

“He’s butch, what do you expect?” Eric shrugs before kissing his cheek and brushing his shoulder against his, “Be back soon.”

Eric leaves the house and Brian texts Emmett to make sure they’re still on for tonight. He gets a prompt text back from his friend, telling him that they’ll be leaving in 20 minutes and that Emmett can’t wait to buy dresses for the new baby. That gives him one person off the list of who tuned in for the appointment. The congratulations texts from Lindsay, Michael, Ben, Ted, and even Mel also tell him that word has gotten around. A facebook message from Debbie, just consisting of the word ‘EEEEEEEEK!!!!’ is also telling.

It’s Cynthia’s text that makes him feel a little guilty for not checking his texts until now.

Cynthia:
A girl?

He owes her a call. He should have called as soon as they left the appointment. She had wanted to be here for it and he knows that to be the case. But Eric is only going to be in for the weekend and there are a few big accounts they just landed in Chicago. It just isn’t the greatest time. So he’s not going to put off calling her. This wouldn’t be happening if it weren’t for her.

It takes two rings for Cynthia to pick up but when she does, Brian can tell she’s been anticipating his call.

“It’s a girl,” he confirms, “Another one.”

Cynthia, in a manner that’s out of character for her, lets out a sound. Brian can’t tell if it’s a laugh or a sob.

“Cynthia?” Brian prompts cautiously, “You alright?”

“...I’m fine,” Cynthia tells him, shaking it off, “I’m great. I...I’m really happy for you guys.”
“Hey,” Brian tells her softly, “You’re a part of this too. You know that, right?”

“I do,” Cynthia says hesitantly.

“And you know if you want to have a bigger role, to tell Lily that you’re her mom...that’s an option on the table.”

Brian’s telling the truth. Yet the conflicting feelings that it brings does make him relate to Mel more, see where she used to come from in her possessiveness of Gus after he was born. He knows he would be a cunt if Cynthia tried to disregard his place in Lily’s life. He never tried to do that to Mel but there were times where he had been a dick and said things to her that weren’t true. Cynthia chose to take a step back, become Aunt Cynthia instead of Mommy or Momma. But Brian isn’t dumb. He can see the times where the fact that she isn’t just that bothers her.

“Maybe...maybe when Lily starts asking questions we can sit her down and tell her,” Cynthia decides, “Because those questions will probably come soon, especially with another baby coming along.”

“I know,” Brian answers, “And she deserves to know.”

Cynthia is silent for a few moments before clearing her throat, “Do you think...do you think that if Lily knows who I really am to her by the time the baby is starting to talk...maybe…”

Brian waits for Cynthia to finish her sentence but she doesn’t.

“Maybe what?” Brian asks softly.

Cynthia sighs, “Forget it.”

“Cynthia, come on.”

“...Do you think that maybe our second daughter could call me mom? I know I told you that I wanted Lily to call me Aunt Cynthia. That was the truth at the time and I promise you that. I just...I didn’t know what it was going to feel like. I didn’t know how much I was going to love her.”
There is silence between them once more. Brian has worried about this. Why? He doesn’t know. He loves Cynthia. The relationship she has with Lily seems to work for them but, even more so, it works for him. But he gets why she would want this, he really does.

Brian purses his lips, “I get it. You know that I understand that. You’re in the same position that I’m in with Gus more or less.”

Brian searches for his words and tries to figure out what he exactly wants to say.

“So if you want the new baby to call you Mom or any variation thereof, then I think that’s fair. And if Lily wants to follow suit, then that’s okay with me too.”

“Good,” Cynthia answers, a little choked, “I’m...I’m glad you are okay with it. Thank you, Brian.”

“Mm hmm,” Brian hums, not one to dwell on sentimental moments.

“So another girl,” Cynthia comments, finally sounding more like herself, “You’re going to have your hands full if she’s anything like Lily.”

“If she’s not initially, I’m sure Lily will taint her soon enough,” Brian laughs.

“I don’t think you’ll have too much to worry about, whether she’s like Lily or the complete opposite,” Cynthia drawls, “With my genes, she’ll be perfect.”

“Oh, is that it?” Brian murmurs.

“Well,” Cynthia gives in, “The people raising her will probably make her pretty great too.”

“...You really think that?” Brian asks.

“Yeah, Brian. I really do.”
And, until that moment, Brian hadn’t realized how important it was to hear that from the mother of his daughters.

Eric proves to be a total liar and is gone for an hour rather than 45 minutes.

“I got more than I planned on getting!” his husband defends himself.

But other than that, everything goes smoothly. Lily helps them get the food outside and gets excited over the idea of swimming with Duncan at night rather than the early afternoon.

“But you have to eat first,” Brian reminds her, taking some of the vegetables from her grasp.

Lily opens her mouth, probably to start a debate, but gets excited and wide-eyed.

“Duncan!” she squeals, running over to hug her boyfriend, “How did you get back here?!”

“Yeah, Honeycutt,” Brian barks, “How did you get back here?”

“Pulled a Michael and used my emergency key,” Emmett shrugs, dangling the key Brian had given him months before, “What? We rang the doorbell nine times and didn’t get an answer.”

“We didn’t hear you!” Lily frets, slapping her hand against her forehead, “I would’ve got the door!”

“You would have gotten it?” Eric asks her with a raised brow before going over to give Emmett and Drew a hug, “I missed you guys! Thanks for coming over.”

“Oh, we just had to come to see you and celebrate the great news!” Emmett exclaims, “We’re so excited for you! I even made chocolate cupcakes with raspberry icing. I would have done blueberry if it were for a boy, but I do have to admit that when I heard you were having a baby girl, I had a squee moment because raspberry is my fave.”
Brian stares at his friend in bewilderment before glancing at Drew.

“Don’t look at me, I know he’s strange,” Drew sighs.

“Well, I think it’s sweet,” Eric beams, “I’m guessing you put them in the kitchen?”

“Yep! On top of the refrigerator and OUT of reach from our little ones until after supper.”

“We can find a way,” Duncan points out, “We always do.”

Lily nods in agreement and Emmett sends them a glare.

“You better not. Or no swimming,” Emmett warns.

The kids seem to take the threat to heart as they gasp at the words in horror. But they seem to get over the risk, as they go in and out of the house and play ‘Explorer’ as Eric starts to grill their fish and deep fry the sweet potato fries. It’s not until Brian goes in the kitchen to get the Sangria out of the fridge that he sees Lily standing on Duncan’s shoulders, trying in vain to get to the cupcakes.

“Boo!” he snaps behind the kids, snickering as their tower starts to collapse.

He’s not a complete dick. He keeps Lily from falling on Duncan’s face as he quickly puts an arm around her middle and keeps Duncan from falling to the ground by steadying him with his left arm.

“You were both told to wait on the cupcakes until after supper,” he reminds them.

“I’m really sorry,” Duncan mumbles, looking down at his feet in shame.

Lily must take after Brian when it comes to ‘no apologies, no regrets’ because she just shrugs her shoulders.
“We just wanted a cupcake,” Lily explains, “Just one.”

“After dinner,” Brian reminds them, before ushering them away from the fridge. Why don’t you take a couple of plates out to the table and pretend like you are good children for a few minutes?”

“We are good!” Lily argues, offended.

“We are!” Duncan confirms.

“Then show me.”

With a sigh Lily takes the three plates he gives her and Duncan takes the other three and they go outside. Eric commends the four year olds on setting the table and Lily and Duncan beam with pride. If he only knew.

The food turns out great, as it usually does. Brian realizes that he’s a lucky man. Eric’s a good cook and, if Eric is away, Emmett usually comes over and makes something or invites him over. The fish is thick, meaty, and filling and they end up splitting a single fillet in half for the kids. Duncan eats pretty much everything on his plate while Lily has to be prodded a few times to try the fish, yet does eat a little over half of what she is given once she doesn’t fight trying it anymore. Despite claiming she is full, she does jump at the word ‘cupcake’ and eats one before trying to sneak a second one.

The adults watch the kids play and splash around in the pool as they sit around the patio table, sipping on their drinks. Emmett and Eric with their sangrias and Drew and Brian on their beers. They don’t overdo it, even though Brian sometimes misses the days when he could drink as much as he wanted, whenever he wanted. It wasn’t healthy when he had done it but the freedom to do so had been nice.

But sitting here, with his husband and two people he really cares about as they watch their kids laugh with happiness in a kiddie pool at sunset…

That might be even nicer.

“So how do you think Lily will be with a little sister?” Drew asks them, grabbing another beer from the ice bucket.
“Well, she’s excited now,” Eric smiles, “But I can almost guarantee that she’ll be jealous after a while. But I think she’ll take the responsibility well once the baby is older and can interact more.”

“What about names?” Emmett leans in, “Have you thought about those?”

“We talked about them for a bit today,” Eric informs him, glancing at Brian, “We’re clashing. I’m hoping for one name and he likes old lady names.”

Brian rolls his eyes and takes a swig of his beer, “We’ll have it figured out...eventually.”

“Well, I for one can’t wait,” Emmett sighs, “She’s going to be gorgeous. I can’t wait to hold her and see Lily with her.”

Brian bites back a small smile over Emmett’s enthusiasm and happiness before clearing his throat.

“You ever going to give Duncan a sibling?”

Emmett and Drew glance at each other.

“We’ve been thinking about it,” Drew admits, “Not now. Duncan has only been living with us for not even 8 months. We want him to settle in more. Pay attention to his needs and figure out if that would be a good step for him.”

“We would adopt again if it does happen,” Emmett tells him, “It would have been domestic but after visiting Africa and only seeing a fraction of what was going on in a few places...it was eye opening. There were beautiful areas and stable villages, developed neighborhoods. It’s diverse. But some areas are very run down. There are toddlers accused of witchcraft and abandoned on the streets. The thing that upset me the most is what is happening to the people with Albinism, especially the kids. There are a lot more people there who have it than here. There are babies that are kidnapped from their homes. They’re taken to places in Tanzania to have their limbs chopped off. Witchdoctors use their arms and legs because they think it can create spells for good luck. It’s heartbreaking. Drewsie...Drew donated a lot to try to help out. The ones that escape or make it out of the situation alive often go and stay in these safe houses. They’re heavily guarded, pretty much living in prisons. It’s for the best. They are in a lot of danger. Infants to adults live there. The buildings are just so...cold. Drew is doing what he can financially to build a larger and more welcoming place, with recreational things to do as well as sources for the kids and adults to seek an
education. So if we do adopt, with Drew’s connections there and the crisis going on in some of the countries, we’ll probably take in a child from down there.”

There are a few moments of silence due to the heaviness of the subject before Brian lets out a sigh.

“Thanks for being a Debbie Downer, Honeycutt.”

Eric glares and slaps his husband’s shoulder, “Brian! Shut. Up.”

“It’s a sad situation,” Drew agrees, “And it’s hard to talk about it. For the week Emmett was down there, he really seemed to be affected by that issue the most. He’s extremely passionate about it.”

“Really?” Brian asks, confused, “You haven’t said much on it.”

“If you got on Facebook more, you would know that he’s shared several articles on it,” Eric points out.

“I don’t talk about it a lot,” Emmett explains, “I didn’t think you’d be interested anyway.”

Brian feels kind of offended by that. Not that he’d admit it, but he and Emmett are pretty fucking close now. It’s also annoying that Emmett still thinks he’s heartless about certain things, whether it be about other people’s interests or about some crisis.

“Who do I write the check out to?” Brian asks, “I’ll pay for artificial limbs or something.”

“Brian-”

“You think I’m not serious?” Brian challenges, “Watch me.”

“I’ll give you the information before we leave,” Drew interjects, “If you’re that set on it all of the sudden.”
Brian shrugs and looks off into the distance, “I am. That’s just the kind of guy I’ve always been.”

Emmett bursts into laughter, “Yeah, right.”

“Pa!” Duncan shouts, bursting out of the water like The Little Mermaid, “Watch this!”

Duncan does a flip as Lily applauds, enthusiastic over her friend’s accomplishment.

“Wow, buddy!” Drew calls out, getting up to walk over to the pool, “That was great!”

“I know!” Duncan answers, grinning from ear to ear, before splashing his father.

“Thanks,” Drew mutters as the two four-year-olds laugh hysterically, taking his wet shirt off before sitting back down at the table.

Brian gives Drew a once over, licking his lips appreciatively. Emmett gives him a pointed look and Eric leans in to whisper into his ear.

“You trying to make me jealous?”

Brian turns his head to smirk at his husband before kissing him on the cheek, “You know you’re my one and only, sweetheart.”

“Gross,” Eric gags.

Emmett and Drew leave with Duncan around 10. Poor kid is exhausted, half asleep in Drew’s arms, as they take him to their SUV to strap him up into his car seat before taking off for the night. Lily isn’t much better. They opt to give her a bath in the morning instead, since she can barely keep her eyes open as she brushes her teeth.

And, once Lily is asleep and Brian and Eric make it to the bedroom, they can’t keep their hands off of each other for hours.
They end up having a good weekend, even though it goes by a little too quickly for Brian’s liking. They ride out to Coney Island on Saturday with Lily and get lunch at Nathan’s Hot Dogs while they spend a few hours at the beach, going into the ocean and riding on rides with Lily. They go to the Sideshow, which makes Lily decide she wants to be sword swallower when she grows up.

“Your papa has a lot of expertise in that area,” Brian comments.

“OH MY GOD,” Eric bellows once the words are out of Brian’s mouth as Lily shakes her head.

“Papa’s never swallowed swords. I bet he’d make lots and lots of money if he did!” Lily quips.

“Yeah, Eric,” Brian drawls, “World renowned architect just isn’t cutting it.”

Sunday is slightly more relaxed. They sleep in, Lily longer than either of them for once. They take advantage of the time to the best of their abilities before quickly making sure they are dressed when Lily comes knocking on their door. She puts on a show later in the afternoon, showing them her routine from Flamenco at least three times, before they take her out to Prospect Park. They go out and find a few of the hidden waterfalls of the park, which excites Lily greatly. She takes out a tourist map and makes them gather around to stake out their approach to finding them, often pointing to the wrong place completely. But Brian gets some pictures in and a few great ones of Eric smiling at their daughter.

Nathan comes over that evening. Brian can still tell the kid isn’t in the best of shape emotionally but is trying his best. His eyes do become brighter when he talks about the show and the opportunities popping up left and right.

“You think you guys will stick with the show for the extension or branch off?”

Nathan shrugs, “We’re not sure. We might do a three month extension. Make sure they get a good band to replace our parts and have steady work until after the new year. But it doesn’t really seem like it would be the best move to do more than that.”

“I agree,” Brian tells him, “The show was a stepping stone in your career. It’s time for the four of you to move on. None of you are aiming to become Broadway stars. Broadway was just a means to get you coverage.”
“But I doubt they’ll find as great of a band as The Accidental Natives,” Eric adds, “Or as good of an actor as you are.”

Nathan scoffs, “Stop.”

“The New York Times was impressed with you,” Eric points out, “They said you outshined Rebecca.”

“And that didn’t add tension backstage at all,” Nathan says, sarcasm lacing his voice, “Jesus, that was an awkward couple of weeks.”

“Time Out only mentioned your name when they talked about shoo-ins for the Tony’s,” Brian throws in, “Too bad the show opened after the cut-off date for 2015. Hopefully, they’ll still remember you next year.”

“I don’t really care about that. Even if I did, Rebecca has been nominated three times so I doubt she’ll get looked over,” Nathan laughs, finally loosening up a bit.

Eric lets him feel like a third wheel for a while. Brian’s prepared to kick Nathan out if he tries to stay past 8 o’clock but the kid leaves by 7:45, accepting a hug from Eric and Lily before walking out the door. They let Lily stay up a little later than normal, just so she can spend time with Eric before he leaves tomorrow.

It’s hard to not let Lily sleep in their room. She knows Eric’s time home is limited and sniffs a bit when they tuck her in.

“Daddy’s taking you to come see me next week,” Eric reminds her, pulling the blanket up to her chin. You’ll get to see all that I’m working on and explore New Orleans. It won’t be much longer.”

“Y-Yes, but Daddy is coming back h-here,” Lily whimpers.

Eric sighs, “He’s staying with us for a couple of days. He has to come back up here to work. We’ll just be down there for a week and then we’ll all be home. Together.”
Lily nods, wiping her face. “Because we’re a family.”

Eric’s eyes go soft as he kisses her forehead, “Yes, baby. Because we’re a family.”

And, even though the words get Lily’s tears to stop, they surprisingly make Brian’s eyes become moist. Because, for as long as he can remember, that’s what he always wanted. Even if for a good 15 years he would have lied through his teeth to say he wanted no such thing, that was always a silent truth. Although he always had a mother in Debbie, brothers in Michael, Emmett, and Ted, a sister in Lindsay, and, most importantly, a son in Gus, he used to force himself to hold them all at an arm’s length for so long. The lack of blood relation had made him hesitant to believe the feeling was mutual and, with Gus, the lack of legal relationship had sometimes made him feel worthless as a father. He had some rights now that a few laws have changed and that really helped him stay close with his son.

And then there was Justin. Brian had found a family in him and, at one point, he thought that was going to be forever. Sometimes he wonders what would have been if things had worked out. But even though his relationship with him didn’t last as long as he hoped for it to, he is grateful that Justin is back in his life again and is becoming a close friend and confidante.

But this? What he has with Eric and Lily? It feels permanent. And until he experienced it first hand, he never realized how great it would feel.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay! A big thank you to Dustedoffanoldie for helping me gather my thoughts for this chapter! I want to especially thank her for answering my questions about Albinism in Africa. Also, thank you to Alois for providing the correct article for the french version of mustache! ;) Thank you all for reading! Let me know what you think!
In a deceptively calm and sterile room, Justin Taylor sits in a chair and stares down at his plastic cup.

He’s never had trouble getting it up before, with the exception of the few months after he was bashed. He could get hard at will for the most part. Hell, his high sex drive has caused boners that he didn’t want.

But now? Now, it’s just strange. Checking out the viability of his sperm isn’t the most erotic thing he’s done in his life by far.

Turning the specimen cup around in his right hand, he lets out a sigh and forces himself to take a magazine off the shelf. Tits. Just what he needed to get himself turned on.

Growling out his frustration at his shrinking cock, he takes a look around the room. If he were still in a relationship with Nathan, he would imagine the two of them fucking in the room. Nathan fucking him against the counter, Nathan sinking onto his cock as he straddles Justin’s lap. But going through with those fantasies just to come would get him fucking depressed.

He had toyed with the idea of digging up a hot memory with Brian. Even though they’ve been over for years, there are still memories that get him turned on. But Brian is his friend and so is Eric. Using Brian to get off seems would probably be crossing a line, even if it is in Justin’s head.

So, what? Just close his eyes and start to stroke? Maybe if he works himself long enough, the physical reaction will eventually come.
Before he gets to ponder that idea, he spots something out of the corner of his eye. Turning his head, his eyes widen in curiosity when he sees a drawer with a clear and professional label, the words Male/Male in black font against the white paper surface.

Standing up, Justin walks across the room to pull on the drawer’s handle. Inside lay at least ten DVDs of men in various positions, some hotter than others. Some more hilarious than others.

Analgeddon

Brothaload: Volume 7

Spread ‘Em

Bareback Mountain

Male Stampede

Cum Hungry Guys

Ass Candy 2

Anal Creampie Maniacs

Justin really doesn’t know what it says about him, but the first thing he is tempted to do is take a picture of the drawer and send it to Daphne.

But he doesn’t do that. he promised himself that he’d keep this quiet, at least until he got a surrogate and a pregnancy was confirmed. He knows that some of his friends would be supportive. Fuck, Brian’s the one who gave him a nudge by letting him take home that pamphlet. But he also knows some of his friends and family would be concerned. Concerned that he would get overwhelmed as a single dad, concerned that it might lower his chances when it comes to finding the right guy.
But those concerns are ones that Justin already has. However, he has considered it carefully and knows the good will outweigh the stress.

Coming to a silent resolve, he blindly picks out a DVD and ends up with *Bareback Mountain*.

He enjoyed the original movie. He remembers hoping for more explicit sex scenes but also remembers crying near the end and thinking the movie was beautiful while Brian scoffed next to him at IFC over the tragic dick softening bullshit. That had been his ex’s first visit up to New York and Justin recalls feeling almost relieved at Brian’s assessment of the movie. It had been so him and so not the fiance he had planned an almost wedding with. Justin had thought Brian was back to normal.

Then he turned out to be wrong.

Although, he had also watched the movie with Nathan last year. Nathan had only been 14 when the movie came out and never got around to seeing it. Not surprising, considering his fucking terror of a life as a teenager. But Justin remembers being surprised that Nathan’s reaction had almost mirrored Brian’s.

He puts *Bareback Mountain* back down and makes a grab for *Anal Creampie Maniacs* instead. The title is absolutely obscene and the porno itself is pretty messy and, at times, gross. However, Justin manages to get turned on by it and starts stroking his cock until he spills over into the cup. Breathing heavily, he seals up the cup, pulls up his jeans, leaves it on the counter, and washes his hands before heading out the door and bumping into the nurse.

“Oh!” She exclaims, before putting a bright smile on, “I was just about to check on you! You were taking a while.”

“Couldn’t decide on a movie,” Justin smirks, “Sample’s on the counter. How long do the results take?”

“It’s 9 am and we don’t have a lot of appointments filled for the day,” she tells him, “We’ll fax the results to your doctor in the next couple of hours and you could probably call and see if he’ll meet you as soon as later this afternoon.”

“That soon?” Justin asks, surprised.
“If he doesn’t make you wait, sure,” she shrugs.

“...Alright. Great. Have a nice day.”

Justin takes the elevator down to lobby and thrusts himself onto the busy Manhattan sidewalk. People are rushing to work, dressed in suits and skirts with their briefcases at their sides. Probably worrying over their morning conferences or the raise they asked their bosses for all while Justin wonders how his sperm is doing. He’s sure it’s fine. He is healthy and still relatively young. And it would be good to find out before he started looking through egg donor databases next week and meeting surrogates the week after that. This way, he can be sure that this kind of attempt will be effective and not take several months.

He knows that he’s dwelling. Hyperfocusing like he often does with his paintings and obsessing to the point where he can’t get his mind to think about anything else. Trying to find a way to clear his head and focus on something else, he decides to head to the gallery to put in some hours there.

The trains are about as packed as the streets are, something that isn’t pleasant in the middle of August. With the extreme heat of the underground stations and the lack of deodorant on some of the passengers, it is hard being in a confined train car packed in like a sardine, even with the air conditioner blowing at full blast. He’s tempted to take an exaggerated gulp of air once the Bedford Avenue stop is called but reigns it in and heads on over to Bagelsmith Bedford to grab some bagels to take back to the gallery. Which is something he should be thanked for, due to being such a considerate employer, but that isn’t the case.

“I’m not eating gluten,” Lola says in a flat tone, not taking her eyes off her copy of *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain from Vienna 1900 to the Present* by Eric R. Kandel.

“I hope you know how pompous you are being right now,” is all Justin can say before throwing a bagel over her book, “I got you a gluten-free one because I am a wonderful boss.”

“Mmhmm,” Lola hums, “Do we have any of that apple butter Molly sent you?”

“In the fridge,” Justin informs her, “But don’t use it all. I want some too.”

“Stingy,” Lola mutters, rolling her eyes as she hops down off her stool and following Justin to the
kitchen in the back, “Kinroy picked up those paintings he bought last week while you were gone. And bought another one.”

“Which one?” Justin asks as he puts his bagel in the toaster.

“The Highest Point by an artist named Justin Taylor,” Lola smiles, “I can’t believe you climbed Todt Hill. With that giant canvas and your supplies. You’re nuts, you know that? Staten Island. Pfft.”

Justin stifles a laugh, “It was not that bad. Strenuous to climb down after dark though.”

“I can’t believe you stayed in Staten Island for four days just to get the bones of it. You have dedication, I’ll admit that,” Lola tells him, putting her bagel in the toaster once Justin’s pops up then clears her throat uncomfortably, “So...are you going to Cormick’s birthday party tonight?”

Justin sighs at the question. When he and Nathan met, they had a few mutual friends already. Despite the fact that there were eight million people in New York City, you could often find out that someone was a friend of a friend of yours when you ran in certain crowds. After Justin moved away from Pittsburgh, got over his homesickness and, in turn, the brunt of his Brian-sickness, he nestled in quite nicely with the creative crowd. Networking is important and he has a slew of friends who are artists, dancers, musicians, comedians, photographers, actors, set designers, writers, independent filmmakers, the list goes on. He had met Nathan through Stanley and Cormick through Nathan. Cormick is an animator and had designed a couple of The Accidental Native’s music videos after forming a friendship with Nathan. Justin likes him. He respects him as an artist and even more so as a person so he would really feel like shit missing the guy’s 28th birthday party, especially when he hadn’t talked to him much the past several months. Cormick had been working on a short animated film in San Diego since January and didn’t get back until May, a little less than a month after he and Nathan broke up. He had reached out to Justin a few times but Justin had been busy himself. And when he wasn’t, he had tended to put off meeting anyway.

“I don’t know,” Justin admits, “Are you going? Max?”

Lola rolls her eyes, “Max? At a bar? I can’t really imagine that. But Remy invited him too, so who knows? He may decide to surprise us all. I’m going though.”

“Hmmm,” Justin hums, turning away. He has always prided himself in being a friendly employer. He likes working with people who have become friends, to an extent. But he knows it has to be awkward for Lola and Max to be friends with both him and Nathan now that they’re not together anymore.
“Well, I think it would be good for you,” Lola declares after she takes a bite of her bagel, “You need to have fun and not be an introvert. Like someone we know.”

“Be nice,” Justin warns.

“I am being nice,” Lola insists, “I just think Max needs to come out of his shell. Meet a girl. Get laid. Same goes for you.”

“Like hell I’m fucking a girl,” Justin scoffs in disgust.

“Yeah, that would be pretty terrifying,” Lola laughs before turning her head at the sound of the bell on the door ringing.

“Time to go do your job,” Justin comments, biting his cheek, “I’ll toast Max’s bagel and go give it to him.”

Lola, in a somewhat out of character fashion, stuffs the last half of her bagel in her mouth.

“What?” She asks, her words muffled by the food in her mouth, “I didn’t want it to get cold.”

While Lola works her charm on their customer, Justin fixes Max a breakfast and heads through the back hallway to the inventory room. They got a shipment of artwork this morning they had bid on for the third floor, most of it from the 60s and 70s but a couple of pieces dating back to the 1800s. He was completely immersed in paperwork, with art history books stacked around him, probably trying to double fact check the stories they had been given on the pieces and know everything he can before he schools Lola and goes on the floor himself. Pushing his glasses up on his nose, Max turns a page and begins reading it too, all while not noticing or just flat out ignoring Justin.

“Max,” Justin says, “Max. MAX.”

Max gets startled by his voice, knocking a book over in the process before looking up at Justin.
“Yeah?” He asks, after getting a grip.

“I got you breakfast,” Justin points out, holding up the plate before setting it down in front of the younger man, “Why don’t you take a break and have a couple of bites? You’ve been here since early this morning and haven’t taken a day off in a week.”

Max seems almost hesitant to get out of his groove but slowly takes the plate and nibbles on the bagel.

“Learn anything new?” Justin asks him, taking a seat.

“Well, I’ve dated this Burri painting to 1946, while the auctioneer said it was from 1958,” Max informs him, showing him a digital photo of the piece, “Which means that it was one of his earlier paintings that he did right after moving to Rome. I’m guessing the historian who researched it isn’t familiar with his work. We can probably make the fact that it is a lesser known and early piece work in our favor and put a higher price tag on it.”

Justin smiles and pats him on the shoulder, “See? This is why you’re the best art historian in the city.”

Max rolls his eyes before looking back down at his notes. Justin studies him for a moment before clearing his throat.

“Why don’t you take an easy night tonight?” He suggests to his employee, “You’ve been working so hard and, don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful that you practically run the place. But it makes me feel guilty to have you doing so much. Why don’t you come out with me and Lola to Cormick’s party? He invited you too.”

Max shrugs, “I don’t know. It’s not really my scene.”

“I know,” Justin admits, “But it might be fun. It might be good for you to take an edge off. Hell, maybe stay out late and come in late tomorrow.”

“You shouldn’t encourage tardiness in the people you pay to help run your gallery.”
“When I say late, I mean come in when the gallery opens at 9. Not at 6 o’clock in the morning,” Justin smiles before sobering, “And besides, with everyone who will be there, I don’t know if I can keep track of Lola tonight. You know how she gets. She’s either completely sober or stumbling out the door. And after what almost happened a couple weeks ago…”

Max goes frigid at that. Justin’s given him a low blow and he knows that. But seeing Lola almost get roofied when she was drunk as fuck had not been a good experience. God knows if any drugs were put in her drinks before Justin caught a guy reach over to pour some powder in as she drunkenly dismissed his friend’s advances. Justin hadn’t punched him but it was a close call. Instead, he had poured the drink over the man’s head and knocked him off his barstool before Liam kicked the two men out. Then Justin had walked her to the gallery, which was closer than either of their apartments. Max had been working late again. And Max, having the obvious feelings he has for Lola, had not taken what had happened well at all.

“Alright. I’ll come,” Max gives in, “What time do I need to be there?”

“Not until like 10:30,” Justin tells him, “It’s at The Back Room on the Lower East Side. It’s really cool. Secret entrance, alcohol served in tea cups and paper bags. It’s one of the places left from the Prohibition Era. Remember to dress up.”

Max looks panicked for a second, “Justin, I don’t have stuff like that to wear.”

Justin just shrugs, “We’ll go shopping then. Around 5 or so. Get you a suit or something.”

“Justin-”

But Justin just brushes off his protests and heads back into the main room to work the floor for a couple hours as more people come in. When noon hits, he excuses himself for lunch. And he really does go back home and eat lunch. But he also wants to call his doctor and check to see if he’s reviewed his results yet.

So he sits down on his couch, finds the number in his contacts, and presses call.

“Dr. Abdullah’s Office, this is Mary.”

“Um, hi. This is Justin Taylor. I had an appointment this morning at Maze Laboratories and and
they said something about having the results sent to Dr. Abdullah by noon? I was just wondering if he had gotten them yet and if I could schedule an appointment with him tomorrow or sometime next week to go over the results.”

“Taylor, Taylor,” the RN mutters, assumingly looking through the files, “Yes, we did get paperwork sent on you from Maze around 11. Dr. Abdullah is in an appointment but we did send the paperwork back to his office on his break. I will let him know you called but make an appointment for you if he doesn’t get back to you today. Can you be available at 2 pm tomorrow?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Justin tells her.

“Alright, Mr. Taylor. 2 o’clock. Have a great day!”

“Thanks, you too.”

Justin is relieved that he doesn’t have to wait long. Just a little over 24 hours. He had been prepared to wait almost a week so he’s surprised he won’t have to.

But he’s even more surprised when Dr. Abdullah calls him as he’s about to step out of his apartment door.

“No need for you in for appointment tomorrow,” Dr. Abdullah jumps right in with his thick accent, “I don’t have time for you.”

Justin huffs out a laugh, “Honest as always, Doc. I take it that my counts are good?”

“Very good. Volume’s 2.7 milliliters, sperm count is 180 million per milliliter, 80% swimming, 4 on the quality scale. Shape’s good. You can get any able girl pregnant. No need for worry and no need for appointment. I’ll send you the results to the email on we have on file.”

“Can you fax them to Tiny Treasures National too?” Justin asks him, “They wanted to have them since I’m planning on getting a surrogate.”

“Ah,” Dr. Abdullah answers, “For you and your partner?”
“...No,” Justin answers, “I’m doing it on my own.”

“I’ll recommend a good psychiatrist when I have the time,” Dr. Abdullah jokes. At least Justin thinks he’s joking.

“You’re a funny guy, Dr. Abdullah,” Justin says with a forced chuckle.

“Hmmm,” the man hums, “Good luck with the baby, Mr. Taylor. Don’t forget your checkup in October.”

With that, the doctor hangs up the phone and Justin stares at it.

Well, nothing’s holding him back now. His sperm was the one worry in the way and it turns out it’s pretty much perfect. Money isn’t a problem. If Brian and the surrogacy agency are telling the truth about the process being relatively speedy if everything goes to plan then he should be good to go.

He’s at a point where he thought he might want to back out. Wait until Nathan changes his mind about kids and comes back or, more realistically, wait until he establishes a relationship with another great guy who wants the same things he does.

But he doesn’t. He’s ready.

So with that resolve, he heads back to the gallery in a good mood, sells a few paintings at lucrative prices and gets asked by both Lola and Max why he’s so chipper. He just shrugs. Things aren’t perfect but he feels good about this. Independent. Capable. With the way his mood has been about everything, that could change in a few hours but he's feeling good now. He's going to embrace it.

----------------------------------------------------------------

Justin drags Max out of the store at 5 and makes Lola stay the last two hours to close up. He takes him to Soho and pays for Max’s black three piece suit despite his employee’s protests. It’s higher end and makes the guy look fucking hot.

“If Benedict Cumberbatch had a baby with Andrew Garfield, you would be the child in question,” Justin decides as he studies him. He can’t believe he didn’t see it before.
“I’m not British.”

But Justin ignores the claim as he hands over the garment bag and they take a cab back to Williamsburg. It probably would have been better if they would have just stayed in the city, got dinner there and waited out the extra time until it was acceptable to show up at the bar for the celebration. But he has a suit that would be okay to wear at home and Max looks a little worn down, probably from the extra time he has been putting in. So Justin lets the man nap on his couch while he makes the two of them a light, late dinner. They eat around 9 and meet Lola at the train around 10. Justin doesn’t miss the jaw drop as she takes in Max’s appearance and he doesn’t miss Max’s stammering at hers. Justin’s surprised by it as well, to be honest. Her hair is a different color from this afternoon. A rich chestnut rather than what she called ‘mermaid green.’ The marcel waves compliment her bob and the sequined, tasseled flapper dress compliments her thin frame.

“You look...you look,” Max stumbles for the words as he stares down at the ground.

“Fabulous?” Lola guesses, spinning around and letting the tassels fly out from the movement.

Max nods and clears his throat as Lola smiles.

“You look fabulous too, Maxy,” she grins, punching the man lightly in the arm, “You clean up real nice.”

Despite the commute, the three of them are the first ones there and Lola lets out a sigh.

“We’re early,” she mumbles, “We’re officially the losers of the celebration.”

“Didn’t Cormick say 10:30?” Max asks curiously, unbuttoning his suit jacket as he sits down before giving into the effects of the summer heat and taking it off altogether.

“10:30 means at least 11 and with Cormick it means at least 11:30,” Justin chuckles, sitting down across the two in the private room.

But it isn’t just the three of them for too long. At 11:02, Carmen and Liam come in. Justin’s frankly surprised that Carmen came out. Eight months pregnant, she is waddling and needing help from
Liam sitting down.

“I came to keep track of him,” she informs them, “Look how nice he looks. The girls would throw themselves at him if his pregnant fiance wasn’t here to remind them he’s off-limits.”

Justin just smiles at that before coming over to bend down and hug her. Then, he looks at the bump and Carmen rolls her eyes.

“Go ahead,” Carmen tells him, “Despite the late hour, he is moving around and giving me a hard time.”

Justin grins and crouches down a little before putting a tentative hand to her stomach.

“Hi, Milo,” he coos softly, “Can’t wait to meet you...shit, he is moving around.”

“He’s just excited to see Uncle Justin,” she laughs, “The man who helped his daddy paint an impressive Under the Sea nursery mural.”

“It was the least I could do. You couldn’t help him, after all. I’m not sure you’ll even be able to get up and out of that chair.”

Carmen lets out a shocked laugh and swats at him, “You shut your mouth! It’s never a good idea to piss off a pregnant woman, Taylor!”

“She’s right,” Liam interjects, “Just let her live in denial, Justin. It’s better for everyone.”

Carmen mutters something under her breath in Spanish before sighing, “You both are awful.”

Several more friends and acquaintances through Cormick come in, greeting them in the process, a couple of them already a bit drunk, as if they had started the party before coming by or had a few drinks before coming back. It isn’t until 11:30 that Cormick and Remy burst through the door. Cormick has a three piece striped suit and a fedora hat on but the fedora isn’t all that out of place for him.
He greets everyone individually, asking about how they’ve been, before getting a big smile on his face when he gets to Justin.

“Really glad you came, man,” Cormick tells him, patting his back, “I’ve missed you.”

“Yeah, same here. But I wanted to wish you a happy birthday,” Justin says, a little sheepishly.

“Thanks, Justin,” Cormick smiles before clearing his throat and lowering his voice, “You know that Nathan will be here in about 20 minutes, right? Petra texted me. They had to go to some after party in midtown so they’re just running late.”

“I expected he would come,” Justin tells him, “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Cormick nods, “Okay. I hope things are getting better between you two.”

“We aren’t bitter. It’s just sad,” is all Justin can say.

And even though he harbors no bitter feelings towards Nathan, he can’t help but feel his pulse quicken as he waits for him to come. He tries to distract himself by talking to other people in the room, getting more drinks than he should, and eyeing Max as he’s hit on by Luna.

“God, you look so hot,” the woman sighs, giving him a thrice over, “I never realized how...how...has anyone ever told you that you look like a cross between Benedict Cumberbatch and Andrew Garfield?”

“Not until today,” Max deadpans, taking a nervous swig from his beer.

“It must be the suit,” Luna decides, “You look good in suits. It gives you this sort of intellectual and posh but sweet and nerdy aura. Hey, you wanna-”

“Max!” Lola interrupts pointedly, butting into the conversation, “Why don’t you come to the bar with me?”
Justin’s surprised what just might be jealousy on Lola’s behalf but minds his own business and mingle with the other guests.

He’s not even facing the entrance to the room when it happens. It’s as if the air suddenly changes when Nathan walks in. Maybe it’s because they had been together for over two years but he just knows.

The attention returns to the group of four for a few minutes. He looks good. Tired, but good. It isn’t as if Justin hasn’t seen him. He just hasn’t seen him much. Texts that touched base and the very occasional group outing where they both had been invited have been the extent of their communication since the premiere of Nathan’s show. He’s missed him.

Glancing over, he can see Nathan glancing back. And it’s hard. It’s been four months and he still wants to kiss him when he sees him. He’s getting over the breakup. Moving on by starting the process to become a dad. He just still feels that hole.

So he may drink more than he should. He does it to let himself unwind a bit though, not because his ex is in the room. That would never be the reason. Besides, he deserves a bit of drunkenness. If things keep going forward, then who knows how many more opportunities he’ll have to drink with abandon? He can’t do that when he has a baby, nor would he want to. And he doesn’t want to be the type of dad who leaves the kid a few times a week with a nanny so that he can meet hot guys or get drunk. He wants to be as present as possible. Maybe he can have an occasional night off when family comes in but they live in different states so that won’t happen often. He’ll be raising an infant and he’ll be alone. Well and truly alone.

Taking another teacup from the drinks brought in, he tries not to go into a drunken panic and instead wonders how ridiculous he looks.

“Hey.”

Justin turns his head and looks up when he realizes the greeting was directed towards him. There Nathan is, standing there in a white t-shirt and blue jeans, not dressed for the occasion at all. Justin isn’t surprised by that. Nathan never really did Halloween either. Once he did James Dean, only because it didn’t take much effort. Some hair gel and a leather jacket was all it took for Justin to get him looking somewhat like the man.

“Justin?” Nathan prompts.
“Yeah?” Justin answers, his voice lazy and slightly slurred.

“You alright?”

Justin nods, suppressing a hiccup, before looking back down in his teacup.

“Hey, put that down before you spill it on yourself.”

Nathan gently takes the teacup from Justin’s hands and sets it in on the table before glancing down at the empty spot beside him.

“This seat taken?” Nathan asks.

“...No,” Justin answers, concentrating on Nathan’s gesturing hand.

Nathan slides in next to him and studies him for a moment. Justin meets his eyes. Or tries to. The room is spinning just a little and it’s hard to direct his line of vision in one place for more than a couple of seconds at a time.

“How was the show?” Justin asks, trying not to slur too much.

Nathan takes a second but answers, “It went really well. How was your exhibition last week?”

“You knew about that?” Justin wonders.

He can swear that Nathan flushes a little before shrugging, “I saw it on the gallery facebook page.”

“Hmm,” Justin hums, curious because Nathan doesn’t even have a Facebook, “It went well. So how’s life outside of the show?”
“What life?” Nathan asks, biting back a smile, “Seriously, the show takes up most of my time.”

“...No guys?” Justin asks him. He doesn’t really mean to but his mouth is sort of thinking for itself.

“...No, Justin,” Nathan answers softly, “No guys. I...You know why.”

Justin nods, feeling like shit for even unintentionally bringing up the trepidation Nathan has on sex and relationships.

“Although I’m making out with Rebecca every night,” Nathan says offhandedly, “A month ago she decided to improvise and rip my shirt off onstage. Jeff liked it so much that it stuck. I think she just did it to be edgy and get noticed.”

“Is she jealous over the attention you’ve been getting in the reviews?” Justin smirks.

Nathan looks surprised that he even knows and Justin shakes his head.

“Don’t think I haven’t been checking up on you too.”

Nathan smiles a little, “I guess. She’s sort of lukewarm when it comes to me. I don’t get the big deal. It’s all pretend.”

“Nice way to talk about your long-term gig,” Justin answers, amused.

Nathan shrugs, “Well, I wouldn’t say it out loud to anyone but you.”

It’s a sentence that Justin shouldn’t look too deeply into but he does so anyway.

“So any guys in your life?” Nathan seems to force himself to ask.

Justin looks around, “Well, I didn’t bring anyone with me tonight.”
“Ha ha,” Nathan drawls sarcastically before sobering up, “So...so you haven’t...you know, been with anyone?”

Justin stays silent as taps his fingers on the table. He doesn’t want to lie. He has hooked up with a few guys. First in Portugal, then back in New York. Nothing substantial, just sex. No dates unless he counts the dud from last week. But he doesn’t want to hurt Nathan with the anonymous sex or even the semi-blind date. He really doesn’t.

“It was all pretend. Just brief shallow shit,” Justin mutters, starting to sway in his seat.

“Alright,” Nathan soothes, “I think we need to get you home.”

“Fuck,” Justin sighs, “I’ve become...that guy. That drunk guy who has to go home because he can’t hold his liquor.”

“Believe me, you aren’t the only one. Liam and Carmen took Jasmine and her girlfriend home. Vince threw up in the bathroom. Charlotte fell asleep in a booth. You haven’t singled yourself out at all. You feel sick?”

Justin thinks on it before shaking his head.

“I’ll be fine,” Justin waves off, stumbling as he stands up, “I just need...need to go outside and walk to a train or somethin’.

Nathan holds onto his arm and watches him with concern as Justin walks in an erratic line, aiming for the main lounge but only questionably making it there himself.

“Sit down for a second,” Nathan commands as he pushes him into a chair against the wall, “I’ll be right back.”

Justin waits there in a daze, watching people in costume think they’re fancy as shit for drinking at a speakeasy. Speakeasy. Speakeasy. That’s fun to say. Why is it called that though? He can’t remember. He should look it up.
Fumbling for his phone, Justin attempted to type the word into the search bar. Easier said than done, in god’s honest opinion.

“Hey, buddy!” Cormick greets with a friendly voice, “Nathan tells me he’s getting you home. Just wanted to say thanks for coming. I’ll text you tomorrow. You, me, and Remy can get lunch. Sound good?”

“Yeah, third wheel’s just fan...fantastic,” Justin hiccups, “Where’s my phone?”

“In your hand,” Nathan reminds him.

“Where’s my jacket? It’s ex...expensive.”

“In my hand,” Nathan answers again, holding up the grey suit jacket.

“Aw, Nate,” Justin slurs with a goofy grin, “You’re so resourceful.”

“Yeah, that’s it,” Nathan sighs, “You want to wear your jacket or do you want me to carry it for you?”

“It’s hot,” Justin absolutely does not whine.

Nathan glances at Cormick, purses his lips, and looks almost amused.

“See you later, Cor. Happy birthday.”

“Later, guys!” The birthday boy waves as Nathan drags a drunk and curious Justin out the door.

“So...taxi?” Nathan asks as soon as they’re outside.
Justin shakes his head with force because fuck that, “Too quick. Train.”

“Yes, because ‘too quick’ is a bad thing,” Nathan snorts.

Justin nods solemnly. He’s glad Nathan understands what he’s saying.

“A driver probably wouldn’t want to pick your drunk ass up anyway,” Nathan comments, keeping a steadying hand on Justin’s back as they start to walk.

“You’re probably right,” Justin agrees, “Remember that asshole?”

Nathan looks confused for a second before a moment of recognition, “I remember you telling me about that asshole. I still don’t remember any of that night.”

Justin lets out a giggle and slurs out the story, “You were so drunk. I wasn’t that much better but you were so out of it and I was so fucking worried. We couldn’t find our way to the fucking train and you had no excuse for that because you grew up here but that was the case. I flagged a taxi down and you started to feel sick just a block in so I made him pull over, paid him, and he drove off. You threw up then unzipped your pants to pee on the sidewalk. We walked around for at least a mile trying to find our train. No one would pick us up because you could barely walk and they were all afraid you would puke in their car. Some sailor that was visiting the city hit on us and bought us water but I don’t remember that much about it. I told him to leave. Then a little bit later, I told the asshole cab driver who stopped then refused to let us in that he was a heartless bastard and to go fuck himself. Then someone nicer picked us up. And we got back to my place. And you ate two bags of Pop-Tarts.”

“Beautifully told story. The buildup of the plot and the infliction of your drunken voice really drove it home,” Nathan can’t help but laugh, “Jesus, I have never been that drunk before or after that night. That was awful.”

“We’re all allowed at least one night of bad choices,” Justin yawns as he starts walking to the side.

“We’re almost to the train,” Nathan tells him softly, steadying Justin once more, “Just another block or so.”

“And then a transfer,” Justin groans.
“Justin, I really think a cab would be better. You don’t need to be waiting for two trains. It’s past 2 am. Williamsburg Bridge is right there. A cab ride would take less than ten minutes.”

Justin bites his lip, “I just wanted to walk with you.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I’ll...I’ll ride in the cab with you. If you want me to.”

“I want you to.”

He leaves it to Nathan to lead him off the side streets and closer to Delancey Street. They wait at the corner for a few minutes, Nathan searching for a cab and Justin staring down at a pigeon on the sidewalk. He doesn’t even notice the yellow car come over until Nathan urges him to get in.

“I’m tired,” Justin sighs, closing his eyes, “I’ve been up since…”

Justin counts off on his fingers, squinting down at them before coming to an answer.

“6 AM.”

Nathan raises his eyebrows, “6 AM? Shit. You’ve been up for 20 hours.”

“I had to go get my sperm tested,” Justin yawns, not computing the jolt of surprise that goes through Nathan, “It’s good sperm. Dr. Abbadabbadulah said so.”

He sort of hears Nathan correct the name. Nathan would know, being fluent in Arabic and all. He’s so smart. But Justin can’t focus on that when he finds his cheek resting against Nathan’s shoulder and even more so when Nathan doesn’t stiffen from the contact or try to push him off.
Nathan just lets Justin rest and, even in his drunken and slightly delirious state, Justin not only can feel the fingers that run through his hair but he can feel the cheek that presses into his scalp right after as well. It feels nice.

“You’re home,” Nathan says softly, all too soon.

Justin’s eyes flutter open and he slowly begins searching for his wallet.

“In your back pocket,” Nathan reminds him, yet again, “And I paid for it anyway.”

“You...You didn’t have to do that,” Justin answers, still feeling slightly depressed that he is sitting up straight again.

“It’s fine,” Nathan insists, “…Shit. Can you even make it up the stairs without falling?”

Justin brushes off the concern until he trips over his feet a few steps out of the cab. And he’s fine. He catches himself. But Nathan, sweet Nathan, just jumps out and has his hands on him. And it’s disappointing to hear Nathan ask the driver to keep the meter running but then a selfish relief washes over him when the sounds of a car on asphalt reach Justin’s ears.

“Dick,” Nathan sighs as he looks at the departing taxi, “Come on, Justin. Inside.”

Nathan reaches into Justin’s pocket to grab the keys and opens the front door to the apartment building. He leads Justin upstairs, slowly. Probably to make sure Justin doesn’t fall. Justin can’t blame Nathan really. Even he knows he’s a drunken mess tonight.

Nathan makes him sit on the couch when they make it through the apartment door. Steadying him, his ex goes into the kitchen and digs around in the fridge and comes back five minutes later with a microwave meal and a large glass of water.

“Come on,” Nathan urges, sitting Justin up, even though Justin just let himself lie down, “You need
to eat something to soak up the alcohol and get this water down so that you’re not completely throwing your guts up in the morning.”

Justin groans and feels his head spin as his balance is thrown off once more.

“I don’t wan’ the food,” Justin slurs.

“Too bad. Open up.”

Nathan makes a space shuttle noise as he brings the fork to Justin’s mouth, urging the older man to open up.

“Open the pod bay doors, Justin,” Nathan commands in a calm voice.

Justin scoffs, “You’re drunk.”

Nathan takes the chance to put the bite of microwave lasagna in Justin’s mouth before putting the fork back in the container, “But not nearly as drunk as you are. Now eat.”

Justin logically does know that it would be for the best if he does what Nathan says. He knows he’ll be fucked tomorrow either way but at least the hangover might not last as long if he eats a bunch of carbs and drinks probably a gallon of water. So he tries to fight the need to pass out and focuses on nourishing himself. Nathan even turns on the television and puts *Friends* on to keep Justin awake long enough to do so.

“Which episode is this?” Justin asks between bites.

“‘The One With the Embryos’” Nathan reads as he clicks on the guide.

“Hmm,” Justin hums.

Nathan looks down at the hardwood floor for a moment before opening his mouth to speak.
“Uh...speaking of embryos...”

Nathan gestures with his hand, trying to search for the words, all while Justin just watches him in curiosity.

When Nathan realizes that Justin is too drunk to know where he’s going with this, he lets out a sigh.

“So you got your sperm tested?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Nathan looks briefly concerned, “Did Dr. Abdullah think there was something wrong?”

“No. I wasn’t...” Justin starts, thinking over his words, “I wasn’t sent there by him.”

“Oh?”

“Nah.”

Nathan waits for a little give and gets nothing.

“Who were you sent by then?” He asks.

“My con...consultant,” Justin tells him, “At the agency.”

“Agency?”

Justin doesn’t think he could ever be drunk enough to be completely oblivious of Nathan’s desire
to know what’s going on.

“I...I decided to do it alone. The baby thing. That was the first step. I look at...I look at egg donors next week. Surrogates after that.”

Nathan blinks, “Oh.”

“I...I haven’t told anyone. Not really,” Justin admits.

“I won’t say anything,” Nathan murmurs.

“I was going to tell you first,” Justin blurts out.

Nathan looks at him in confusion, “Really? Why?”

“Because...Because I didn’t want you to find out from...from anyone else. Because you wanted me to go after this. Because I l-love you…”

And yeah, he’s fucking drunk. Tears can basically be a given when he is sitting next to a man he was lucky enough to be with but unlucky enough to break up with. On top of being sad about that situation, he’s already been on an emotional roller coaster for months. And to have Nathan here, caring for him like he used to from time to time back when they were together, that fucks him up just as much as the liquor does.

“...I appreciate that,” Nathan sniffles, wiping at his eyes as he smooths back Justin’s hair.

Justin collects himself relatively quickly, taking in steadying breaths and finding comfort in Nathan’s touch.

“I’m not...” Nathan starts helplessly once Justin’s quiet sobs die down, “I didn’t push you into anything, right? You aren’t rushing yourself into this because I wanted you to go and have a kid?”

“...No,” Justin tells him truthfully, “I want this. I really do. I wish I could do it with you. But I
understand why that isn’t happening. Even so...I’m excited about it.”

“I’m glad,” Nathan chokes out but offers a small smile when Justin glances at him.

They sit there in silence once more, or would be if it weren’t for the studio audience laughing at Chandler and Joey’s antics. Justin can barely keep his eyes open. He’s feels his head jerk every so often when he starts to nod off and he knows he can’t stay awake much longer.

“Come on,” Nathan requests softly, standing up and taking Justin’s hand, “You need to get to bed.”

Justin lets himself be led to the bathroom, catches Nathan eyeing his old toothbrush in the holder with surprise, before brushing his teeth and rinsing his mouth. He relieves himself and Nathan turns his back. Justin has no idea why since it’s nothing Nathan hasn’t seen before but it is what it is.

“Wash your hands,” Nathan reminds him and Justin rolls his eyes. Like he would forget.

He stumbles into his bedroom, fumbling with the buttons on his dress shirt and pulling down his pants as he goes. It’s a warm night so he opts to just sleep in his briefs with only a sheet covering him. He feels he will be comfortable that way. With the fan on and the window open, it’s warm but creates a nice breeze that’s comforting.

“Sleep on your side,” Nathan tells him, helping Justin straighten out on the bed, tucking the sheet up over his shoulders in the process.

Nathan leaves briefly and Justin lets his eyes wander in the dark room, the only light source coming from the alarm clock on the bedside table. 3:21 AM it says. He doesn’t know why but it makes him feel alone.

But then the door creaks back open. Nathan comes back in with a bottle of water and a bottle of aspirin and puts it next to his alarm clock.

“In case you wake up and start to feel like shit,” Nathan informs him needlessly, “Are you going to be alright?”
Justin shrugs in the dark and Nathan traces his finger over his bicep.

“I should go,” Nathan whispers, “I have a show tomorrow evening.”

“You should stay here,” Justin mutters, without thinking.

The finger on Justin’s bicep tenses and Nathan’s breath hitches.

“Justin...” Nathan trails off.

Justin turns his head and looks up at Nathan in the darkness, “It’s hard to catch a cab in the middle of the night in Brooklyn. It’ll take hours to get just to yours and Petra’s by train. Don’t be stupid.”

“I can do Uber,” Nathan protests.

“At this time of night? You’ll be waiting for at least half an hour,” Justin slurs but he’s being reasonable. He knows he is.

Nathan looks around the room, “I guess I could sleep on the couch-”

“You need to sleep in a bed. You have a show tomorrow.”

Nathan huffs but the fight seems to leave him.

“...I...I suppose I’ll go brush my teeth then.”

Justin nods and watches Nathan leave the room. He really thinks his drunken state is helping here. It’s keeping him calm in a situation that would otherwise have his heart racing.

Nathan’s back in a few minutes and stands on the other side of the bed. With Justin watching closely, he slowly takes off his shirt, revealing his toned abs, before lowering his jeans to reveal his
white boxer briefs. Carefully slipping under the sheet, he lays his head on the pillow and stares into Justin’s eyes, their faces inches away from each other.

Justin’s body is acting on autopilot when he slowly reaches over and strokes Nathan’s chest, right over his heart. He doesn’t know why he does it. Fuck, yes he does. He hasn’t had him in his bed for months, the bed they bought together before moving into the apartment they picked out together. Both places just feel less lonely with him in them.

Hesitantly, Nathan places his hand over Justin’s and holds it there before pressing his forehead against the older man’s. They kiss. It’s inevitable and Justin really has never been one to hold back when it comes to physical affection. It’s soft and chaste and loving and comforting but above all else bittersweet because they both know the deal.

“We can’t,” Nathan whispers, pain lacing his voice.

“I know,” Justin murmurs, because that’s obvious already.

“It’s not that I don’t want to-”

“I know.”

“It’s just that we’re not-”

“Nathan. It’s okay. I know.”

The exchange doesn’t stop them from kissing once more. It doesn’t stop them from embracing each other as they fall asleep. It doesn’t keep them from having the best slumber they’ve had since they fell apart.

And it doesn’t keep Justin from waking up that morning alone, nor does it keep him from having a hangover. He’s sick until the middle of the afternoon and nurses himself back to health with the combination of Gatorade and Saltines he found in a sack on his kitchen table this morning. He can’t deny that it made him feel a little loved.
Even though he knows that Nathan loves him and he maybe, just maybe, could keep trying to convince him that they could work again, he doesn’t let it keep him from going through the donor database one week later. He picks someone with blonde hair and blue eyes so the baby will have a greater chance of looking like him and there will be no question that he is their dad. He decides to be kind with his choice too. According to the profile, the woman is 5’10’’ so his son or daughter might have the height that he never had. She also is an Open ID, meaning they can meet her one day should they choose to.

Despite the huge step he has just made and the irreversible effect that step will have on his life, he feels like he is going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think! If you have constructive criticism, let me know. Thanks for reading! :}
Chapter Summary

Brian spends the weekend in New Orleans before heading back to New York to spend the week alone.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Brian glances at Lily’s passed out form and looks at the clock. It isn’t even 4 o'clock but he wouldn’t be that surprised if she stayed asleep, since she’s been up since 3:30 this morning and had them up with her. He and Eric got her to lie down for a little bit, nestled in between them. She drifted off for maybe an hour and a half before waking them up once more.

“She’s not good with new places,” Brian mentions to Eric. His husband looks almost offended.

“You think I don’t know that?” Eric asks, raising a brow.

Brian shrugs, “Three weeks with one weekend visit is a lot of time away. You may have forgotten her middle name for all I know.”

Eric walks over to give a playful shove to his shoulder, “Don’t tell me I don’t know our daughter.”

Brian just gives him a blank stare before sighing dramatically.

“Oh, shut up,” Eric huffs.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“She’s gonna miss me,” Brian points out, “Our home. Duncan. Probably mostly Duncan. Anything more than a weekend somewhere other than our house, Emmett's, or Mel and Lindsay’s and she’s~”
“An insomniac?” Eric finishes, “I know. But I’ve missed her and she has missed me. You even told me she had trouble sleeping some nights after I came down here.”

“True. But just think of how she will be once I leave tomorrow,” Brian groans, sneaking a glance at Eric, “You won’t be able to stand her. And you will be leaving her with two college girls for hours at a time so that she can run them into the ground?”

“I think you’ll be missing her more than the other way around,” Eric smirks right before Brian shoots him a glare.

“Whatever,” Brian scoffs, “You guys ditching me just gives me more time to be single and free.”

Eric chuckles as Brian walks over to carefully pick Lily up. He cradles her against his chest and smooths her curls from her face. She looks so innocent and sweet when she’s sleeping. He doesn’t know if there is anyone more precious. Well, Gus. But he is a dick when he wakes up.

“How long do you want to let her stay asleep?” Eric asks him.

Brian doesn’t take his eyes off her and shrugs, “She barely got any last night. Might be best to let her sleep for a while.”

Eric shakes his head, “She’ll be upset if she spends your last night passed out. We can go to dinner around 6:30 and that’ll give her a decent nap.”

Brian nods and starts to carry her to the furnished single bedroom. Slowly laying her down, he presses a kiss against her forehead and pulls the sheet to her chest.

And, while he is almost tempted to watch her sleep longer, he has something he needs to do. Someone he needs to do.

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It’s not long after Brian pulls out for the third time and they get cleaned off that they hear Lily’s frightened cries from the spare bedroom.

“I’ll get her,” Brian tells Eric, pulling on his jeans before making his way to the room.
He can tell that Lily isn’t completely awake. He sits down on the bed, winces at her screams, and tries to bring her out of it.

“Lily. Lily, honey. It’s Daddy,” he shushes, bringing her closer to him.

“I don’t want to wear a bowl! I don’t want it! Ugly!” Lily gasps, the awareness in her eyes clouded over.

Brian sighs and snaps his fingers in front of Lily’s face.

“Lily. Lily! It’s alright. It’s just a dream.”

Lily’s eyes slowly gain awareness and she looks around the room before glaring at Brian through her tears.

“...What’s up?” Brian asks her hesitantly.

Lily lets out a cry before yelling, “PAPA!”

Brian turns as he hears Eric’s quick footsteps to the bedroom, before the door swings open.

At the sight of her father, Lily stretches out her arms and starts crying openly, ignoring Brian completely.

“Aw, honey,” Eric pouts as he comes over and puts his arms around their daughter. Lily’s cries go higher in pitch as she wets the side of his shirt. Situating her, Eric sits down on the bed and holds the little girl in his lap.

“What’s the matter, huh? Did you have a bad dream?” Eric asks as he brushes the tears from her face.
Lily’s breath shudders as she nods her head, “I d-did!”

“Talk to me. Tell me what it was about.”

Lily takes a deep breath, “Me and you was planting a garden and we were having a really good t-time but Daddy s-said I had to stop and I didn’t w-want to! He s-said I had to get dressed and w-wear a bowl on my head! The bowl had trucks on it! Why did he do that? I don’t want to wear that!”

Lily dissolved into sobs again and Eric bites back laughter as he holds the girl against his chest and rocks her.

“It was just a dream. Daddy wouldn’t make you wear a bowl on your head, especially if that was something you didn’t want to do.”

“He’s right, Lily,” Brian tells her, laughing just a little, “My fashion sense is much better than that.

And then Lily growls at him.

“It was a dream, kid,” Brian huffs, “When have I ever made you wear a bowl on your head?”

“You just did!” Lily shouts, “And it was ugly! UGLY!”

“Okay. You’re wrong, but okay,” Brian nods.

“I don’t want to look at you,” Lily mumbles, pressing her face into Eric’s shoulder.

“Well, you won’t see much of me past tomorrow,” Brian shrugs, “Kind of rude, if you ask me.”

Lily just blows a raspberry at him in return.
“Alright, that’s enough,” he warns her.

“He’s right, Lily,” Eric agrees, “It was just a dream. Calm down. Maybe we can plant a garden when we get back home? It’s kind of late but maybe some cabbage and purple basil? That would be fun!”

Lily nods her head and sniffles, “But Daddy can’t help. Just me and you, okay?”

Brian tries not to glare at that.

Lily stays mad at him for another few minutes. Brian would never admit it, but having her pissed at him and clinging on Eric, even over something stupid and made up, sort of hurts.

She gets over it quickly though and Brian has to wonder if she even remembers the ordeal at all. She gets excited about going out to eat, jumps up and down, hugs him around the waist, giggling with happiness. She’s so odd.

They drive to the French Quarter. Eric’s at the wheel while Brian sits in the passenger seat, tickling Lily’s foot underneath her flip-flop.

“St-Stop!” Lily laughs out, kicking her feet until Brian ceases with his actions, only to stick her foot out again once he stops.

“Papa, Daddy keeps tickling me!” Lily exclaims from her car seat.

“He is?” Eric asks, glancing at her through the rearview mirror, “That’s ornery of him.”

“It is!” Lily exclaims, before reaching her foot to kick the side of Brian’s seat, urging the man to tickle her once more.

Eric pulls up to Muriel’s, a historical Cajun restaurant that Brian had looked up the night before he and Lily boarded their plane. The menu looked delicious and, when he had seen that the place was supposedly so haunted that it had a seance room, it hadn’t excited him, really. But it had excited Lily.
I have so many questions that I can ask them!” Lily had exclaimed that night, all while she had jumped up and down on the bed next to him. Brian will always give her props for her bravery.

“We are not going in the seance room,” Eric suddenly says, turning to him as if he had been reading Brian’s mind, “That stuff freaks me out. I don’t want something following us back.”

“I do!” Lily pipes up, “They could stay in my room!”

Eric turns around to look at her, glares, then mutters, “Put your flip-flop back on.”

“I can’t reach it,” Lily shrugs, pulling at the belt on her car seat, “I’m all strapped up.”

Brian rolls his eyes then gets out of the passenger seat to open the back door. He unbuckles the belt, lifts it off of Lily’s shoulders, puts her shoe back on, then helps her out of the car.

“Thank you,” Lily tells him properly as she smooths down her dress, “Where to next?”

“Out to eat?” Brian reminds her slowly.

“Oh, yes!” Lily exclaims, clapping her hands together, “I must get shrimp as an appetizer.”

“Appetizer,” Brian corrects, biting his lip as he realizes that Lily has decided to play ‘Grown-Up’, a delusional game where she pretends they are all on the same level.

“That’s what I said! Can’t you hear?” Lily says with exasperation, “Come on!”

Lily grabs onto Brian’s hand, only to lead him over to Eric so that she can take his hand too.

“Does this place have a playground?” Lily asks them, “Burger King does. It’s my favorite because of that.”
“No, Lily. It doesn’t have a playground.” Brian sighs.

Lily hangs her head in disappointment.

“It has ghosts though,” Eric reminds her.

She perks up after that. Fucking weirdo.

“Like Casper!” Lily jumps, swinging her legs as her fathers hold her in the air.

“Sure,” Eric hums, pushing open the door to the restaurant.

Lily gets her grilled shrimp, along with a side of asparagus. They are both side items, actually. Neither he nor Eric think she needs a full meal, especially considering the prices. Brian doesn’t mind ordering a Thirty-Nine Dollar meal for himself though, picking out the Blackened Redfish, while Eric gets the Slow Roasted Duck. It’s all delicious and it makes Brian wish that he could spend a few more days here. But he already prioritized his upcoming week, filling it with work meetings and presentations. They had made the most out of the weekend though. He and Eric went out to Chris Owens Night Club for a date on Friday. He usually wouldn’t use that word but, when it comes down to it, that’s what it was. Latin big band music, dancing, walking around Bourbon Street, buzzed, on a hot summer night. Saturday was spent doing touristy things, from walking around parks and old cemeteries to ghost and vampire tours which, again, Lily was way more enthusiastic about than any four year old should be. But, when the tour guide gave them strange looks every time Lily asked a detailed and odd question, Brian silently dared her to try to question their parenting methods. It’s not his fault his daughter took to liking creepy shit after watching Coraline.

Today had been a little quieter. They went on a swamp ride, tried to shush Lily when they saw alligators, went to lunch, then let Lily play on a playground before heading back to the apartment to let her sleep. Now they were here. On his last night before having to be away from Eric for a week again.

But it was just one more week. They had a nice time together and he wanted to make the most of the night before heading back. He could distract himself in an empty house. He could work more. Have Emmett and Drew over. Have Justin over...
Fuck, he is pathetic. He remembers a time, eons ago, where he LIKED living by himself.

“Want dessert?” Eric asks him, pulling Brian out of his thoughts.

Brian’s default answer to that question was on his lips but then he just decided to shrug.

“We can share something, if you want,” he offers, trying to ignore the surprised look on his husband’s face.

“How romantic,” Eric sighs sarcastically, pressing a hand to his heart, before sobering up, “What do you want?”

“I don’t care,” Brian tells him indifferently, “You pick.”

“Pecan pie? Smothered in caramel sauce and gelato?” Eric hints.

“A diabetic coma,” Brian proclaims, “That’s exactly how I want to go out.”

“Well, unless you have been diagnosed with something you are not telling me about, I seriously doubt that is going to happen,” Eric laughs before waving the waiter over.

“Papa, Daddy, I want a cookie!” Lily exclaims as the waiter comes closer.

“Alright,” Eric says quickly before turning to their server.

“My husband and I would like to share a slice of your pecan pie and our daughter will have-”

“A cookie,” Lily finishes.

“We have this really wonderful dessert called a Peanut Butter Dome. It’s a shortbread cookie covered in peanut butter, placed under a chocolate dome that has raspberry and chocolate sauces
drizzled on top. Would that be something she would be interested in?”

Eric looks to Lily for an answer but Lily bows her head and sighs.

“I really like chocolate chip cookies,” Lily whispers.

“I didn’t get that-” the waiter starts.

“She’ll take it,” Eric grins.

The waiter goes off with their order and Lily stares at her papa with a glare.

“But Papa, I like choco-”

“I know, Lily. But it isn’t that kind of restaurant,” Eric sighs.

“What kind of restaurant doesn’t sell chocolate chip cookies? A stupid one?” Lily sasses, crossing her arms.

“Don’t start,” Eric warns, “I will make him take your dessert back and you can just watch me and Daddy enjoy dessert while you get nothing.”

Lily looks over to him at that point, hoping her other father will be less harsh.

Brian bites his lip as he stares down at her.

“Better listen to him,” is all he says, “I think he’s taking it pretty easy on you.”

Lily learns the meaning of picking her battles that fateful night. She also learns how to eat her words when she is brought the-
“Bestest, most bestest, prettiest, MOST BESTESTEST dessert in the whole wide world!” Lily tells them, mouth full.

They leave a large tip. The bill is over ninety dollars so that is sort of inevitable anyway. They don’t head straight for the exit, opting to walk around and explore the historic building a little. Brian rolls his eyes as he watches Eric geek out of the the arches and carvings as they go up to the second floor. But watching his husband so enthusiastic brings a smile to his face.

“Daddy, what are they doing in there?” Lily asks, pointing in a room partially veiled by a hanging cloth.

Brian feels Eric go stiff beside him and he can’t help but stifle a laugh at it.

“They are talking to spirits of the underworld,” he teases her with a spooky voice.

“Oh?” Lily asks for clarity.

“Ghosts.”

Lily’s eyes widen, “Oh! Oh, okay! Let’s go!”

“No,” Eric tells her, holding onto her shoulder, “It’s past your bedtime. Let’s go back to the apartment.”

Lily stomps her feet, clenches her fists, and pouts at the floor, “You’re no fun!”

“I know,” Eric agrees, leading her away with one hand and grabbing Brian’s hand with the other.

They get stopped in the foyer for a moment. One of Eric’s clients recognizes him and they get to talking. After introductions, the most Brian really does is explain what he does for a living before nodding along as Eric talks business. It isn’t until the man and his wife head into the dining area that they realize Lily has walked near the coat racks.
“But I don’t have a coat!” Lily insists to no one, waving her arms around, “It’s hot! Aren’t you hot in all of that?...Well, I think that’s silly!...I came over here because it was cooler and you are just standing around-”

“Lily?” Eric asks sharply, walking over to turn her around, “Who are you talking to?”

“Pierre,” Lily answers simply before turning back around, “Pierre, this is my...Hey, where did he go?!”

Brian watches Eric usher her to the exit with amusement. He hasn’t seen his husband this tense in a while.

“I am sure she was pulling your leg,” Brian groans, stretching and suppressing a yawn as he gets into bed, “She saw you were unsettled and knew how to play you.”

Eric turns and shakes his head, “She’s four. She’s smart but not that smart.”

“I think she is,” Brian shrugs, “She manages to play me from time to time too.”

Eric ignores that and scoots his Macbook over, “Look at this. Here is a write up on Muriel’s website about its history and the ghosts that reside there. Read it.”

Brian gives him a look before grumbling exasperation under his breath and taking the Macbook to get a closer look.

“Start reading under March 21, 1788,” Eric advises.

Brian glances at the man, gives him a glare when he realizes Eric is going to watch him read and make sure that he reads the whole thing, before giving in and reading out loud.

“On March 21, 1788, the Great New Orleans Fire started on Good Friday and burned 856 of the 1,100 structures in the French Quarter, including the city’s main church, original Cabildo, the
municipal building, the army barracks, armory, and jail. During the tragedy, a portion of Pierre Phillipe de Marigny’s mansion was burnt.

During the next decade, the city of New Orleans was in a rebuilding process, trying to recover from the fire that swept the French Quarter. The Spanish replaced what was left of the wooden buildings with thick brick walled structures that included courtyards, arcades, and wrought iron balconies. Among the new buildings in Jackson Square were the St. Louis Cathedral, the Cabildo the Presbytere, and a piece of property Mr. Pierre Antoine Lepardi Jourdan purchased from Marigny.

Pierre Antoine Lepardi Jourdan built his dream home restoring it to the original grandeur, for his family and himself. Although Jourdan dearly adored his beautiful home, he was a man that could never quench his thirst for the thrill and excitement of gambling. In 1814 he wagered his beloved home in a poker game and crushingly lost the one thing he treasured most in life. The shock of the loss was so intense, before having to vacate the premises and hand over his beloved treasure, he tragically committed suicide on the second floor in the area that served as the slave quarters-the same area where Muriel’s Seance Lounges are situated today.

Pierre Antoine Lepardi Jourdan is still with us today in spiritual form on the same piece of property that is now Muriel’s. His ghost doesn’t appear in human form, but instead as a glimmer of sparkly light wandering around the lounge. Our Seance Lounges on the second floor are named as such because it is believed that this is where Jourdan spends the majority of his time. Patrons and employees of Muriel’s have also witnessed objects being moved around throughout the restaurant. We believe Mr. Pierre Antoine Lepardi Jourdan never left his true love and home in New Orleans, he continues to reside here to this day.

Although Jordan is considered to be our main resident, he’s not the only spirit amongst us. We also have a slightly mischievous ghost in our Courtyard Bar that roams the property. Three times since March of 2001, glasses have flown from behind the bar 12 feet across to the brick wall and shattered. Perhaps some servants stayed behind to take care of him and go downstairs to throw glasses to release some angst. Other possibilities include previous patrons and owners of the property during the late 1800’s and early 1900’s; or that it’s Jourdan trying to get across to the other side or desperately trying to communicate with mortals he considers to be his family.”

“Pierre!” Eric almost shouts, pointing at the screen unnecessarily, “How would she know the name Pierre if-”

“She has always come up with strange names,” Brian argues, “She named her plant Florencia.”

“Because Florencia means blooming flower in Spanish and she speaks Spanish,” Eric argues back, “She has never spoken French. Where would she get the name Pierre, unless it was from a ghost?”
“It says here that Pierre ‘doesn’t appear in human form, but instead as a glimmer of sparkly light wandering around the lounge.’ So I am not sure how she would be able to speak to a sparkly light.”

“She is a small child though,” Eric points out, reaching over to click on another tab, “Look, here’s an article about small children and their sensitivity to the paranormal.”

Brian shakes his head and hands the laptop back to Eric, “You’re weird, go to sleep.”

“I don’t want her seeing freaky shit like that,” Eric mumbles, but still looks at his laptop.

“I doubt you’ll be able to find some cure if she does have some sort of sixth sense,” Brian snorts, “Why are you so freaked out about it anyway? I never pegged you as the type to be afraid of ghosts.”

“I’m not. I just don’t want her getting involved in any of that type of stuff.”

“What else could she get involved in?” Brian inquires.

Eric sends him a harsh look before sighing, “You know...demonic stuff. Cults. Witchcraft.”

Brian stares at the man, absolutely bewildered, before dissolving into almost hysterical laughter.

“It’s not funny,” Eric bites out, “Stop laughing, Brian.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Brian keeps laughing, wiping his eyes, “I just think it is truly bizarre you would think that a little girl who thinks a bad dream consists of me making her wear a bowl on her head would summon demons.”

Brian keeps laughing and even Eric reaching over and smacking him with the paperback book he had been reading doesn’t stop him.
“It runs in the family!” Eric finally says, “There, are you happy?”

Brian sober up at that and stares at his husband strangely.

“...What?”

“My bisabuela!” Eric insists, waving his arms around, “Abuelo’s mom! My whole family would all go back to Catemaco, usually once to twice a year. We would mainly visit my cousins, you know Violeta, Arturo, and Juan but also all of the other cousins whom I now just talk to maybe a couple of times a year on Facebook, if that. Catemaco was always a nice time. There’s a big lake, it’s close to the Gulf. I always loved it there and, as a kid, I used to beg my parents to move there. The only part of it I didn’t like was seeing my bisabuela. She always came off as terrifying. She even made my abuelo nervous and he was her son! She’s part of the reason why he decided to leave Mexico!”

“What did this old bat do that made her so terrifying?” Brian asks, “Spit needles at people as she sewed? Walk around the house in all of her wrinkled naked glory? I heard my mom’s grandmother did that before she kicked the bucket. Alzheimer’s.”

“No,” Eric breathes, as if he is gathering patience, “She didn’t walk around the house naked. I wouldn’t be surprised if she went nude for some ritual though. She was a witch. A legitimate, animal sacrificing, evil witch.”

Brian has to bite his lower lip to stop the laughter at Eric’s seriousness. If he wants to get anything else out of him, he knows he has to try to take him at least somewhat seriously, even if he has gone insane. After being with the same man for over seven years, sometimes there are gaps of time where they don’t learn anything new about each other. It is nice for the most part. They know each other’s bodies, making it so pleasure is almost instantaneous. They know each other’s mannerisms, ways of thinking, what makes the other tick, how to go about comforting each other when needed. But one thing both of their knowledge was limited on was each other’s families. Being more or less disowned by their parents, childhood memories regarding their families often were often left unsaid. And at times like these, whether it was Brian talking about the time that his father had broken his arm when he was 5 and Claire had rolled him to the nearest emergency room in a wagon or Eric spoke of the time that his sister sat on his rabbit and killed it, resulting in his mother taking him out the next day to get a dog despite his father being against it, there tended to be something new to learn.

Even if that something new dealt with witches and animal sacrifice.
“Forget it. You aren’t going to believe me.”

“Oh, shut up,” Brian huffs, “I’m listening, aren’t I?”

Eric mumbles something under his breath and Brian sighs before rolling over, partially on top of Eric’s chest.

“Come on. You have me intrigued. Tell me about the Wicked Witch of Catemaco.”

Eric glances at him, “Well, if you insist.”

“I insist,” Brian confirms, rolling his eyes.

“Catemaco is known for its beauty but also known for its witch community. There are dozens of brujos and brujas there. Some of them are into crystals and white magic, just harmless stuff really. They are more about providing for the Earth and using its energy as a source for good. There are some who dabble on both sides, and then there are the truly dark ones. My bisabuela was apparently known for being a black witch. She was suspected of deaths and disappearances by her village, people were afraid of her, but there was absolutely no proof to even get her arrested or questioned. The police tend to stay away from that community anyway.”

Eric takes a deep breath and goes on.

“Once, when I was about 11, I spent the night at her house. I had on a couple of visits. We found some strange things and she freaked me out but this time was different. She had this big old house that was pretty secluded, up on a hill that overlooked the lake. It had been passed down through the generations. Her sister inherited it but her sister died under mysterious circumstances so my bisabuela got it. My whole family was so tense. Amanda was too little to understand but even George kept his distance and just spent the day swimming and surfing before locking himself up in the bedroom he was sharing with me and Amanda. My father thought it was all bullshit but you could tell she made him nervous. She just had that aura about her. My mom and abuelo made us promise to keep our distance. But I was a curious kid. And even then, I was into architecture and wanted to explore the house. Anyway, it was late one night and I couldn’t sleep. It seemed like everyone else in the house was asleep so I decided to go downstairs, get a drink of water, and explore a little. As I looked around, I heard something people whispering down in the basement. Because I was stupid, I went down there. And that’s when I saw it. She and a couple of other like-minded people beheading a goat and chanting to Satan. They had masks on but I knew it was her when she looked at me. Then, faster than any older woman should walk, she was in front of me and tilted her head and I ran for my parents room. My mom woke up my abuelo and abuela and
they went downstairs and couldn’t find anything or anyone but the headless goat. We left that night, got a hotel to stay at until our flight a couple of days later, and avoided her house on every visit after that. A few years later, she was found dead with five other people in a field. The cause is still unknown.”

Brian stares at him and tilts his head, “So did you just make that up as you went along or have you been planning on pranking me for a while?”

Eric glares, “I am telling the truth. Call my mother if you don’t believe me.”

Brian huffs out a laugh, “Yes, because she would LOVE to hear from me.”

“Fine. My brother then. It’s earlier in California anyway.”

Brian sighs and shakes his head as we watches Eric presses George’s name on his phone, “Eric...you are so fucking weird.”

“Shhh,” Eric warns as the phone rings.

“Hola, mi hermano menor,” George drawls in his slight southern accent.

“My Spanish still sounds so atrocious,” Eric mutters, shaking his head, before getting down to business, “George, I was telling Brian about bisabuela and how she is an evil witch who beheaded a goat in her basement. Tell him I’m not lying.”

There’s a pause on the line before George clears his throat.

“Well, I didn’t witness it,” George answers, “But yeah. Good ole’ Zenaida was pretty freaky. You tell him about the time we found a bunch of human teeth stuffed into a voodoo doll?”

“No, I put more focus on the goat sacrifice and the fact that she was found dead with five other people in a circle formation.”
George laughs, “Good riddance, right? Abuelo hated her. Can’t blame him. Who would want to grow up with her as a mother? Mama lived in Catemaco until she was 14 but Abuelo made sure they saw each other as little as possible. Can’t blame him there either. But as interesting as this conversation has been, Clover here is wanting me to head on to the bedroom to-”

“Alright, bye,” Eric says quickly before hanging up on his brother. Right after he gets over his disgust, he turns to Brian and looks at him pointedly, “See?”

Brian shakes his head and sighs dramatically, “I can’t believe you would let me marry into a family of Satanists.”

Eric growls, “It was just the one family member that I know of and she has been dead since I was a teenager.”

Brian lets out an almost hysterical giggle. It may be the general lack of sleep or just the ridiculous conversation Eric is insisting on having, but part of him, just a small part, feels concern over what Eric had witnessed roughly 28 years before.

“I am sorry you had to see something like that,” Brian tells him, much to Eric’s disbelief, “You should have told me sooner. As much as I don’t believe in witchcraft and ghosts and demons, at least literal ones, that’s pretty heavy, especially for an 11 year old.”

“It was frightening,” Eric mutters, as almost as if he feels justified now.

Brian sighs, sits behind Eric, and rubs the man’s back, “I still have no idea what this has to do with Lily though. She was talking to a coat rack.”

“Bisabuela apparently saw ghosts when she was a kid too. Talked to them all the time. That’s what my abuelo said his grandfather told him. He only saw his grandparents a couple of times. Bisabuela got pregnant at 15 and lived on her own. They told him they had been relieved when she cut almost all contact because they were afraid of her.”

Okay, so she was probably schizophrenic and maybe a sociopath,” Brian concludes, “Lily is neither of those things. And this is one POSSIBLE instance where she has spoken to a ghost. She hasn’t seemed to be prone to anything like this before. If she has seen anything, then she isn’t telling us.”
“I know I am being superstitious and paranoid. I am usually not a hardcore believer in those types of things either. But it just freaked me out, considering the history.”

“I understand,” Brian murmurs before putting his lips against Eric’s shoulder.

“You do?” Eric asks, almost hopefully.

“No. I still think you’re nuts. But at least I understand why you are nuts.”

That’s when Eric hits him with a pillow.

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It’s difficult to feel Lily’s tears against his neck as she sobs out her grief over his departure. Eric watches them, expression tight.

“Hey…” Brian soothes, rubbing her back to try to will her to calm down, “I thought you’d be sick of me by now.”

“Nev-Never,” Lily chokes out, shaking her head, “I want y-you around all the t-time.”

Brian kisses her forehead and holds her close once more as she dissolves into tears.

“You’re going to have a great time,” he whispers, “You’ll get to spend time with Papa, explore New Orleans, see the sights, become cultured and sophisticated-”

“But I want you to become sophismated too!” Lily wails.

“Lily, I have to work,” Brian tells her, “I will call every night, talk to you on FaceTime. We’ll see each other again in a week and the three of us will be together for good, you know that.”

Lily nods her head, sniffs, and wipes at her face, “You pr-promise?”
“Yes,” Brian answers honestly, “Cross my heart.”

“Four of us counting my baby sister, Daddy,” Lily chokes out, “You can’t forget about her. It might hurt her feelings.”

“We would never want that,” Brian smiles softly, “Give me one last hug before I board the plane?”

Lily’s face scrunches up as she holds back a sob and throws her arms around his neck once more.

“Love you,” he whispers into her hair.

“Y-You too,” Lily tries to get out.

Sighing, Brian manages to put her down next to Eric and tries to block out the sounds of his daughter crying into her hands.

“Call me once you land,” Eric says to him, entering each other’s embrace in the process, “One more week, right? We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” Brian breathes out, biting his lip, tightening his arms around Eric’s shoulders, “We can do it. It’s a week. We’re not lesbians.”

“I’m still not sure why that’s an insult,” Eric chuckles, “All the lesbians I’ve met are pretty tough.”

Brian rolls his eyes, before stepping back to give Eric a kiss. It’s not obscene or even overly passionate. It’s sweet, almost chaste but not quite, and hints at a promise that the time apart is nothing.

Eric smiles, eyes bright, and cradles Brian’s face, “I love you.”

Brian presses his forehead against Eric’s, “Yeah, same.”
“Oh, fuck off and get on your plane,” Eric laughs.

Brian gives him a smirk, lets his fingers run through Lily’s curls, and picks up his laptop bag before walking over to board his flight.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Diana meets him at the airport and already has a taxi waiting for them. He likes his new assistant. She thinks ahead, for one thing. Like today, she let him know there is a suit waiting for him at the office and that she will take his luggage home. She is smart, trustworthy, and kind. She isn’t quite as tough as nails as Cynthia and Malia are, but maybe that will come with time. It would work towards her benefit if she was. Malia’s first promotion led her straight to becoming a senior ad exec while Cynthia was the head of Kinnetik’s Chicago branch, after all.

After talking to Eric briefly, he realized how filled his Monday really was - three presentations, four phone conferences, and a lunch meeting dinner meeting. He feels like he is all over the place, from his office to the board room to the art department to the studio. His lunch is at Cucina Liberta in Battery Park and his dinner is at Riverside Cafe in Dumbo. While he doesn’t have to head back to the office after dinner and Dumbo is technically within walking distance from his house, he ends up getting an Uber for both his new client and himself. He lets Ms. Caperton take the first one that comes within 10 minutes and he waits another 15 for his, sitting on a bench, just watching the water and skyline every so often until he gets a notification that his ride is here.

When he heads home, he is slightly ashamed to say that he falls asleep on the couch watching Stranger by the Lake on Netflix. He wakes up at around 9 o’clock, menu screen displayed on the flat screen, and calls Eric before he forgets. Lily’s perked up since this morning, something he is grateful for. He listens to her prattle on about her day before she gets distracted and puts the phone down. He says his goodbyes to his husband once Eric picks up the phone, then finds himself sitting in silence.

He’s not so great at being alone anymore. He should appreciate the silence and solitude, it comes so infrequently with a four year old in the house, but for some reason he can’t.

Getting his iPhone out once more, he types in a few words and presses send.

Any developments on Operation Baby yet?

It only takes a few minutes for Justin to reply.
Yes, actually.
How was New Orleans?

Hot. Want to come over
tomorrow or sometime this week?
I should be back around 6 or so
tomorrow and Wednesday.

Brian waits a minute and Justin replies.

I am working on a mural in
Williamsburg tomorrow and
have some appointments in the
afternoon. Wednesday’s better.
We could get takeout for dinner.

Sounds good. We’ll decide from
where when you get here.

Okay, see you then.

Later

Brian puts down the phone then chooses something more cheerful to watch in order to make things less quiet.

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He texts Justin on Wednesday when he’s getting ready to leave for work. He checks on a few departments before he leaves. Shouts some orders at the people in the art department. Goes down to accounting and finds out how they are doing on a few budgets before saying goodbye to Malia, who is picking up Tiana from the daycare downstairs, a new addition to the company, added at the beginning of summer due to the increasing amount of employee requests.

He opts for the train, which he fucking regrets during the August heat wave. He feels sticky and gross by the time he gets off the train and back home, opting to run upstairs for a quick shower, but not one that is quick enough, since he hears the doorbell ring once he turns the water off.
“Coming!” he shouts, trying to dry himself off, before slipping a clean pair of boxer briefs and jeans on and heading downstairs.

Opening the door, he sees Justin standing there on the stoop, skin tanned from working out in the sun, form fitting t-shirt clinging to his pecs and biceps. Fuck, he is muscular. Not like Ben but definitely more muscular than him now. If Brian had less confidence about his body, he may feel self-conscious standing in front of his ex shirtless.

“Hey,” Brian greets, turning to the side to let Justin in.

“Hey, Brian,” Justin answers, stepping into the house, “Fuck, it’s hot outside. I’m guessing you took the train too?”

“Yeah. I felt disgusting by the time I got home,” Brian snorts before plopping himself down on the couch, “Excuse my indecency.”

“I can’t blame you,” Justin laughs, “I don’t want to even sit on your furniture with the state I’m in right now.”

Brian smirks, “Take your shirt off.”

Justin’s eyes widen before he sends Brian a playful glare, “Oh, I’m sure Eric would so love that.”

“I mean, he likes you and considers you a friend,” Brian points out.

Justin shakes his head, “Not to the point where I can sit around half-naked with his shirtless husband without anyone else in the house.”

Brian lets out a laugh, “Go wash up. You can wear one of my shirts. I just washed some clothes last night. There are some t-shirts of mine in the laundry room on top of the dryer.”

“I don’t think Eric would like me wearing your clothes either,” Justin hesitates.
“Unless you plan on leaving a cum stain on one, he is not going to give a shit,” Brian scoffs.

Justin rolls his eyes, “Okay, Monica.”

Brian puts his hand to his chest as Justin walks away, “You remember my middle name. Sunshine, I’m touched.”

“Shut up!” Justin calls out from the next room.

Brian waits, picking up the book he left by the couch this morning. He started it last night, Eric read it a month or two ago and cried and vocally reacted to more than once, which Brian poked fun at him for at the time but now he gets it because the book is fucking intense. He had to force himself to put it down last night before bed and got up early to read some more this morning, which is completely unlike him, usually opting to read a book in a sitting during a trip or just a chapter or so a day when he isn’t busy. But he read over one hundred pages last night and it’s hard to take in at times, with the main character not being even a year old than Lily in these horrible circumstances beyond his comprehension.

“What are you reading?” Justin asks him, coming back into the room with one of Brian’s white t-shirts on, looking a little bit more refreshed than before.

“Room,” Brian answers, turning the book over in his hand, before forcing himself to put it down.

“Well, you were squinting,” Justin points out, sitting down next to him, “Maybe you need glasses.”

“You sound like Eric,” Brian grumbles, wrinkling his nose.

“Is it any good?” Justin asks.

“My eyesight?”

Justin shakes his head, “The book.”
“It’s very good,” Brian admits, “Eric bought it at The Strand a few weeks before he left for New Orleans. He read it in a few days and, I swear, he cried at least three times and got so anxious over it. He doesn’t usually react strongly to books or movies but this one got to him.

“Must be intense,” Justin nods, “Does it have you all emotional yet?”

Brian straightens up, “Of course not. I don’t feel emotion.”

Justin barks out a surprised laugh at that before reaching over to look at the back of the book.

“This sounds fucking depressing. A mother held captive in a room for seven years with her five year old son?”

“It’s uplifting too,” Brian protests, “And upsetting and heartbreaking but also funny once in awhile.”

“I thought you didn’t have emotions,” Justin smirks.

“I don’t,” Brian scoffs, taking the book from Justin’s hands and putting it back on the end table, “Where do you want to order from?”

“There’s an Asian place that sells Japanese and Thai food that’s pretty good,” Brian tells him, getting his laptop off the coffee table to bring up Grubhub, “I want something healthy. I feel like my diet is complete shit right now.”

“That’s fine with me. I’m sure there’s something filling I can order.”

Brian orders the green papaya salad and the tuna avocado sushi roll to share with Justin while Justin gets the Curry Chicken Pot with the Miso Soup. Brian motions for Justin to follow him after putting the order in and leads him to the kitchen, hands him a beer from the fridge, then leads him up the spiral staircase to go into the sunroom. The air is on full blast so, despite all the windows of the room letting the leftover light in, it feels nice. It’s probably Brian’s favorite room in the house, just tall enough to see over the buildings of the next to blocks and view lower Manhattan. Looking back, despite Eric’s and Lily’s enthusiasm over the house, it is what sold him in the first place.
“You might want to put a shirt on,” Justin mentions, looking towards the sunset, “You might get a sunburn from being in here.”

“Clothes are overrated,” Brian dismisses before taking a swig from his bottle.

“They always were with you. Unless you were on a shopping spree, that is,” Justin answers, amused, “So how was your trip? Besides hot.”

“Short,” Brian admits, “We packed some tourist shit in, made sure Lily was kept occupied. But, even though it’s short term, seeing your partner just on the weekends sucks. I’ve known that for ten years though.”

Justin shifts in his seat and clears his throat, “...Yeah. I know it sucks. At least you only have a week left though. Less than.”

“That’s true,” Brian comments, “It’s still aggravating though. Won’t be the last time either. Both our jobs demand long distance travel. At least my trips tend to not last more than a couple of days. His can last for months. He usually doesn’t take the really long term projects anymore, or just sees those projects through until the bones of the places are built, before stopping back in a few months later to make sure his designs are being properly executed.”

“Nathan and I used to have to work on accepting each other’s schedules,” Justin admits, “Most of the time it worked out, he could come with me out of state or out of the country to my showings and I could travel with him to music festivals or go with him on regional or coastal tours. But sometimes they conflicted and we wouldn’t be living in the same city for a month or two.”

“Guess you don’t have to worry about that now,” Brian drawls, probably insensitively. He gouges Justin for a reaction. A pissy one, a hurt one. But Justin just looks conflicted and distracted.

“What’s up with you?” Brian grunts out, “Did something happen?”

Justin lets out a sigh and shrugs his shoulders, “I told Nathan last week. About the whole surrogacy thing. I had my sperm tested and the tests said everything was good to go. I picked out my egg donor yesterday and started meeting with surrogates today, even though that was supposed to start next week. I like the second woman I met. She seemed really nice and knowledgable about everything.”
“...That’s great, Justin,” Brian tells him honestly, “How did he take it?”

Justin shakes his head, “Some of it is kind of blurry. We went to our friend’s birthday party. Separately, but we both knew the other would be there. I drank too much. A lot of us did. Nathan only had a few drinks so he helped me home. Made sure I ate and talked to me. I told him sometime then. He seemed little emotional but happy for me.”

Brian nods, “That’s good, right?”

“I guess,” Justin sighs, “He even stayed over when I asked him too. He slept right next to me. We kissed and held each other. What if-”

“I’m not really good at giving relationship advice,” Brian interrupts, wincing at the mere thought, “I only talk to Gus about his girlfriend because I’m obligated as his dad.”

“You are happily married with 2.5 kids,” Justin glares, “You obviously have some tricks up your sleeve.”

“Eric and I are usually in similar places when it comes to shit like that,” Brian tells him, “Nathan isn’t ready for kids, probably doesn’t want them at all. Fuck if I know how to help you there.”

Justin looks away, “I’m not asking for your help or advice. Not really. It’s just...It’s just been a rough year. My parents are badgering me. My mom tried to hook me up with a teacher at the school Tucker teaches at, which was weird. My dad...shit, my dad keeps talking about compromise and is urging me to win Nathan back because he thinks I should get back with him. He likes him. How fucked up is that?”

Brian lets out a humorless laugh, “Well, I know he didn’t like me.”

Justin looks apologetic for a second, “He didn’t like me for a while either, if it makes you feel any better.”

“I wasn’t dwelling on it but it doesn’t.”
It gets quiet for a few moments. It always manages to when they touch upon their past together in any way. Brian clears his throat, searching for a topic that isn’t obvious small talk but takes the attention off of them.

“So how did you choose an egg donor?” Brian asks, swirling the last of his beer around in his bottle, “Eric and I used Cynthia’s eggs for both Lily and the baby. We got to skip that step.”

“I literally just sat there and looked through a computer database,” Justin answers, “I was there for a couple hours searching through different races, ethnicities, hair colors, eye colors. I thought about going with someone of a different race. Biracial babies are adorable and, from what I’ve heard, tend to be a little healthier.”

Justin lets out a breath.

“But, I don’t know, I didn’t want anyone questioning if the kid was mine or not,” Justin admits, “So I went with this really pretty blonde hair, blue eyed woman. She’s Swedish, German, and Russian. Tall, 5’10’. So the kid might fare better than I did but, other than that, we will probably have the same hair color and similar eye color. Maybe I won’t have to explain myself as often.”

“What would you have to explain about yourself? Lily doesn’t look like me and, when people ask, I just fuck with them.”

Justin shrugs, “I don’t know. That I am single. Gay. That I couldn’t get anyone to have a kid with me.”

Brian glares, “Justin, you only asked Nathan.”

“He’s the only person I wanted,” Justin insists before pausing, “I’m coming off as morose. I don’t mean to be. I really am happy about it. Fuck, I have so much baby stuff saved and bookmarked from different stores. I bought this panda romper. It’s black and white with a hood that has eyes, a nose, and ears-”

“God, you sound like Eric,” Brian groans, “He’s been buying so much stuff ever since we found out our surrogate was pregnant. And after we found out it was a girl? You should see the room next to Lily’s. It’s filled with so much stuff. The thing is, he hasn’t even been here and I’m getting packages at the house. Clothes and decor items he’s bought down there and sends back to me,”
different toys he has sent to the house from online boutiques. Most of it will probably end up being donated anyway. He’s like you in that sense. He gets excited and starts planning.”

“That’s literally all I am doing when I am on my computer,” Justin laughs, “Buying baby books, studying up on development, adding toys and clothes to carts. At least you and Eric have a kid on the way and know it’s a girl. Mine hasn’t even been conceived yet.”

“Only a matter of time, I suppose,” Brian drawls, “You are growing up so fast-”

Before Justin can banter back, the doorbell rings. Brian gets up and picks up both of their beer bottles.

“I’ll get it. You want to come down and put a movie on or something?”

“Sure,” Justin agrees, standing up as well.

Brian drops the bottles into the recycle bin when they hit the kitchen before going to the foyer as Justin sits down on the couch in the living room and searches through Roku. Brian counts the money in his hands as he opens the door to get his order, but sees someone unexpected.

“Sorry,” Emmett frets, situating Duncan on his hip, “I don’t mean to arrive unannounced, “I tried calling your cell and you didn’t answer. I thought you were probably busy so I called Justin but then he didn’t answer and then I called you and you still weren’t answering and I was closer to Brooklyn Heights since I took Duncan to that BIANCO Circus event down at Brooklyn Bridge Park so I decided to stop by and see if there was a chance you were home-”

“Emmett-” Brian interrupts, “What do you need?”

“Hi, Brian!” Duncan exclaims, waving his hand enthusiastically.

Brian leans over to plant a kiss on the boy’s forehead, “Hey, kiddo.”

“I got a call from Drew,” Emmett continues, rambling slightly less, “His grandfather is in the hospital, minor heart attack. He’s going to be okay but Drew’s grandmother isn’t in the greatest
shape. She doesn’t get around as well, not to mention distraught over her husband being ill. They live right outside of Allentown so it’s not even two hours away. Drew...he wants to be there for her, at least for the night. Can we come in? It’s hot.”

Brian steps aside and he doesn’t even think of how answering the door shirtless might clash with who is in the next room.

Emmett tenses when he runs into Justin. Justin, who had probably gotten up to see what had been taking Brian so long, can sense it just as well as Brian can and, even though they are both innocent, Brian imagines that Justin feels as much unnecessary guilt as he does.

“Jus!” Duncan shouts, “Whataya doin’ here?”

“Yeah, Justin,” Emmett smiles, a little too brightly to be completely genuine, “What are you doing here?”

“I was just visiting Brian. I thought you were the delivery man,” Justin answers, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Nope, just little old me,” Emmett tries to say off-handedly before turning to Brian, “Brian, do you stay shirtless in front of all of your guests?”

“I do have a history of it,” Brian points out, “You never told me what you wanted me to do after arriving unannounced.”

“I tried to be courteous but you AND Justin both had your phones off,” Emmett accuses. Jesus Christ.

“I must have left mine in the bathroom,” Justin answers quickly, “I’m sorry, Emmett. What’s going on?”

Emmett sighs, “Drew’s grandfather is in the hospital. He’s close with his grandparents so I want to go with him to Allentown to stay with his grandmother. I would bring Duncan, I know he would be good. But his grandma gets confused sometimes and adding a little boy into the mix may stress her out. We only plan on staying there until Drew’s dad gets there anyway. He’s leaving first thing in the morning and should be there in the early afternoon, so we should be able to leave right after he
gets there and thank god for that.”

Emmett takes a breath and continues, “I came here since I was close when Drew called but if either of you could watch Duncan for the night, I would be very grateful.”

“I can watch him,” Brian offers, “That way, you and Justin don’t have to worry about getting an overnight bag together. He already has clothes and a toothbrush here.”

“Thank you,” Emmett says gratefully, “I really mean that, Brian. I know this is short notice and I’m...interrupting your evening.”

Before Brian can make a rebuttal, Emmett squats down to get Duncan’s attention.

“Pa and I are going out of town tonight,” Emmett tells him softly, “We’ll be back tomorrow though. You’re going to stay with Brian. That okay?”

“Yeah!” Duncan bounces before looking around, “Where’s Lily?”

“She’s with her papa, Baby. She won’t be back for a few more days.”

That statement brings on the crossed arms and quivering lip.

“Duncan,” Brian says dramatically, putting a hand to his heart, “You mean to tell me you only come here because of Lily?”

“Yes,” Duncan chokes out, “Daddy, I want to come with you!”

“Hey,” Emmett warns, “Don’t cry. I wish you could but you’ll have a good time with Brian. You always talk about how cool he is. You’ll have a good time, I promise.”

Duncan wipes a hand across his face then turns away from Emmett, “Bye forever then.”
“Baby, I really don’t know where you are getting this sass,” Emmett sighs before standing up, “You going to give me a hug before I go?”

Duncan shakes his head, still refusing to look at his father. It sort of surprises Brian, considering Duncan is probably one of the sweetest and most compliant kids he’s ever met.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into him,” Emmett worries.

“He’s actually behaving like a normal four-year-old brat,” Brian snickers, “It was only a matter of time.”

“I’m not a brat!” Duncan shouts, before stomping across the room to pout in the corner.

“Feel free to put him in time out when I leave!” Emmett says loud enough for Duncan to hear before whispering to the two adults, “I think he is just tired. I had him in the city for the last few hours and it was hot and muggy. He’ll need a bath. I don’t have his bear with me. I made him leave it at home today and now I am kicking myself for that because he will have a hard time falling asleep and will give you a hard time-”

“Emmett, it’s fine,” Brian interrupts, “I have one of the most stubborn children in the world as my daughter. I can handle Duncan.”

“Has he eaten?” Justin asks.

“He had a hotdog a few hours ago but if he gets hungry again, you can go ahead and feed him,” Emmett informs them, “You know how he is. He’ll eat almost anything and has a huge appetite. But he didn’t have much today. I can see it catching up with him.”

Emmett takes a look around the room and lets out a big sigh.

“Well, I better be off!” Emmett exclaims pointedly, “I sure wish a certain little boy would come over and give me a hug goodbye!”

All three of the men can hear the ‘Hmpf!’ from the other side of the room.
Emmett looks pretty dejected over it and Brian can’t help but think it is a little humorous.

“Alright then,” Emmett mutters before heading towards the door. Brian follows him to walk him out and Emmett turns to him once he steps on the stoop.

“...Nothing is going on here, right?” Emmett asks worriedly, “Brian, I understand the long distance spurts suck but you don’t-”

“What do you think I am even doing?” Brian demands, expression going hard.

“You tell me,” Emmett retorts.

Brian glares, “Having a friend over for dinner. Drinking a beer with him. Talking. Not what you are thinking.”

Emmett bites his lip, “Fine. But just be aware how it does look. I don’t think of myself as the jealous type, but if Drew had a man over whom he had truly loved in the past and he didn’t have a shirt on and they were at the house alone? I don’t think I would be happy.”

Brian waits a beat, “Well, good thing you are the only man Drew has ever loved.”

That manages to get Emmett off his back. For now. He’s so easy.

Despite the tense moment, Emmett does pat him on the shoulder and tells him to come by the house tomorrow evening with Duncan, that he will cook Brian dinner and they can hang out. As he watches his friend step off the stoop, Brian feels a short person push past his legs and run down to hold onto Emmett’s thighs.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” Duncan mumbles, “I miss you. Please come back.”

Emmett makes a sad sound before squatting down, “I’ll be back tomorrow, Baby. You’ve been at here for just as long before. It’ll be okay. Brian will take care of you. It’ll pass by quicker than you
Duncan nods, “‘Kay.”

Emmett kisses his cheek, waits until Duncan is up the steps and holding Brian’s hand, then starts to walk towards Court Street to catch a cab.

Brian hears a whine beside him and he looks down at Duncan. Scrubbing at his eyes, Duncan is trying to hold back his sadness and Brian can’t help but feel bad for him.

“Hey, it’s alright,” Brian tells him softly, picking him up, “It’s just for a day. You like hanging out with me and Justin, right?”

Duncan nods with hesitation, “I d-do, but I like hangin’ with Daddy and Pa more. And Lily and Stella.”

“Even the dog beats me,” Brian tsks.

Justin approaches him then, clearing his throat as he does so.

“He alright?” Justin asks, rubbing Duncan’s back.

“He’s fine,” Brian answers, “We’re not good enough for him, apparently.”

Justin forces a smile and looks down the sidewalk, “I think that’s probably our food. Maybe you should go upstairs and get a shirt on.”

Going by Justin’s expression, Brian is pretty sure he heard what Emmett had said moments before he left.

“Probably a good idea,” Brian admits, putting the little boy down next to Justin, “Here’s the cash-”
“I can get it,” Justin dismisses.

Brian goes upstairs and throws on a shirt, probably something he should have done earlier. When he goes downstairs, Duncan has perked up, due to being able to pay the delivery man. They don’t watch the darker movie Justin picked out, instead opting for one of Duncan’s choosing, *Despicable Me*, film Brian has watched at least 5 times with both Lily and Duncan, but Justin has yet seen.

“I haven’t had anyone in my life who made me watch children’s movies,” Justin defends himself as Brian expresses shock.

“But you wanted to be an animator,” Brian insists, “I figure you’d watch this shit out of your own free will.”

The look he gets from Duncan when he says a curse word, about one of the boy’s favorite movies nonetheless, is lethal.

Duncan ends up gravitating towards Justin’s meal, rather than Brian’s salad. He isn’t surprised there, but he can tell that Justin is a little put out when he realized how much that kid can eat.

Despite the fact that the rest of the evening is uneventful, Emmett’s tone and words filled with insinuation stayed on his mind. The fact that Justin is so quiet gives Brian a hunch that he might be bothered by it too. But Brian knows his husband. He knows him to be fair, welcoming, and understanding.

But, just in case, Brian will probably try to convince Emmett that nothing went on tomorrow. He doesn’t think Emmett would rat him out, even if there had been something going on, but he needs to make sure the air is clear by the time Eric gets home.

Justin leaves around 9:30. The goodbyes are a bit stiff now that the atmosphere of the evening changed. They don’t hug. They don’t make plans for another day. They just let it be. Even though Brian knows the reason why, he can’t help but feel his stomach turn into a sinking pit.

He gives Duncan a quick bath as soon as Justin is out the door, letting the kid stay in there for only fifteen minutes, despite the protests. He manages to lure the little boy out with promises to let him talk to Lily on FaceTime, something that makes both of the kids happy, especially when they get hysterical over Brian’s distaste when it comes to taking the rats out to show Lily. When he talks to Eric after both Lily and Duncan are in bed, he feels a strange combination of safe and guilty. And,
even though when they say goodnight and Brian actually is able to take his mind off everything and read, he is happy to get a call from Gus, despite knowing his son has school in the morning.

He is grateful for everything he has. He’s grateful for his family. His friendships with Emmett, Drew, Michael, Justin...everyone. And he is grateful that he is loved, even though he rarely admits it out loud.

With that thought on his mind, he is able to go to bed peacefully and stay asleep until 2 am when Duncan gets scared and crawls into his bed. But hell, despite Duncan not being his kid, he’s grateful for him and the fact that he feels safe around him too.

Duncan stays in the daycare downstairs while Brian looks through contract drafts, leads presentations, and generally gets on with his workday. He gets no calls upstairs about him. He even opts to call down once to see how the boy is doing.

“Oh, he’s so precious,” Miranda gushes, “Honestly one of the sweetest boys I have ever watched.”

When Brian goes down to get him at 5 o’clock, Duncan is immersed into a story that Miranda is reading to the group. Some of the older kids aren’t interested, from Tiana, who is coloring in the corner to Jacob who is playing with Legos. But the 2 to 5 age group stays still and only makes a sound when they react to what is being read to them. Brian waits until the story is over before making sure his presence is known to Duncan. The boy runs up to give him a hug before grabbing the blue lunch box that Brian had packed for him, one that Eric had bought when Lily said they needed to get Duncan a lunchbox too, “just in case.”

He walks Duncan to the parking garage down the street, where he had to pay forty dollars just for the day, before facing traffic out of the city and into Hoboken. The drive, which takes half an hour longer than it should, is less aggravating than it might be with Lily, who would be asking every two minutes when are they going to get there. Duncan is content singing and humming softly along to the radio.

Emmett greets his son even more enthusiastically than Duncan greets him. Apron on, Emmett leads them into the kitchen to sit down and chatters away, as if they hadn’t gotten a bit cold with each other the night before. Drew comes downstairs a few minutes after they settle in, looking tired and a bit worried but Duncan instantly cheers him up with demanding to be picked up and hugged. For the most part, Drew just sticks to spending time with his son and stays relatively quiet, which makes Brian believe that seeing his father, even momentarily, hadn’t been the best experience. He can understand that feeling.
“I am making salmon with a lemon garlic sauce, along with steamed broccoli and brown rice,” Emmett describes, “All healthy and hopefully won’t add another notch to your belt. Brian, will you get the broccoli out of the fridge? Drewsie, go put on a show or read with Duncan. I want you to relax.”

“But not me?” Brian inquires, raising a brow.

“Nope!” Emmett answers cheerfully, “You are my assistant for the day!”

As soon as Drew and Duncan are out of the room, Emmett’s demeanor changes. It’s subtle but, in the last six months, Brian has become very in tune with Emmett.

“Last night,” Brian starts, “...It wasn’t what you think, alright? I went up and took a shower, took a little too long, and got out just as he was knocking on the door. I had pants on the whole time. We didn’t touch. Nothing happened.”

Emmett is quiet for a moment as he chops some more garlic. Mincing it until it is in tiny little pieces, he sprinkles it onto the salmon in the cast iron skillet and lets out a sigh, “Okay.”

“Okay,” Brian repeats cautiously.

“Yeah, Brian. I believe you. It just...it just took me off guard. With you not answering your phones, only to arrive and find you shirtless and Justin in the next room? I don’t know...I was worried, I guess.”

“You don’t need to be,” Brian mutters, “I love Eric, Emmett. You have to know that by now.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Emmett answers, a little surprised by the open confession, “I know that you do. I know you love him so much. I am so incredibly happy for you. But can you honestly tell me you absolutely feel nothing for Justin as well, considering...you know, your history.”

Brian stays silent for a few moments, chopping up the broccoli all while trying to will the question away.
“He’s my friend,” Brian finally answers, “We’re just friends. That’s all it’s ever going to be. I love my life, my husband and my kids, too much to fuck it up. If I did...Fuck, I don’t know what I would do.”

Emmett nods, “I think you would kick yourself for all eternity. You have a pretty great life, Sweetie.”

“I know I do,” Brian answers, without any hesitation at all, “Now what else do you need done?”

They eat dinner outside on the patio. After raining the night before, the weather has cooled down just enough to make it so it’s not miserable.

Drew takes a hint that Emmett wants to spend time with him. He takes Duncan back inside while Brian nurses his third or fourth beer and Emmett drinks some girly shit that’s pink. If they hadn’t gone under last year, Brian would expect that it might be Pool Boy. Too bad they went heterosexual. It really killed the sex appeal.

For some reason, they end up tangled in the large hammock in the backyard, resting against each other as the sky turns purple. Brian glances over at Emmett’s serene look before letting out a small laugh.

“If there’s anything Eric should be jealous of, it should be me, lying around with another man,” Brian comments, looking up at the sky.

I don’t think I am a threat to him,” Emmett answers.

Brian shrugs, “I remember fucking you, way back when.”

“Good times,” Emmett admits, clinking their bottles together as he does so.

Before he can get another word out, his phone starts to vibrate in his pocket.

Brian struggles for a moment to try to get it out, before managing to press ‘Accept’ right before it goes to his voicemail.
“Hello, my love!” Brian slurs out, much to Emmett’s amusement, “How are you doing on this fine evening?

He expects a laugh or a scoff from Eric, a jab or something, but Eric says nothing in return.

“Eric?” Brian asks, a little concerned now, “Everything okay?”

“Uh...yeah,” Eric breathes out, “I...I just called to tell you something.”

“...What is it?” Brian inquires, waiting.

“Work ended a little early. I have everything I need to do with the project. I guess my workaholic ways paid off.”

“That’s good,” Brian answers, feeling the knot loosen a little in his chest, “You sound off though. What’s the matter?”

Eric breathes for a moment, as if he is a little confused himself. It makes the knot in Brian’s chest tighten right back up.

“I...I needed to visit my parents,” Eric answers, “I don’t know if it was talking about them last weekend or just a conversation I had with Lily. But I drove to North Carolina. Lily and I are staying here overnight. Fuck, Brian. I don’t know what I expected. I just know that I needed to hear your voice.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait. I took on a second job and have been feeling ill but I was happy to finally get this chapter out. The bit where Brian is reading about the ghost of Muriel's Restaurant can be found on their website. Thank you for reading! Let me know what you think!
River and Cape Fear Drive: Part 1

Chapter Summary

After a conversation with Lily gets him to reminisce, Eric packs up their luggage to drive to his childhood home in Southport, North Carolina.

Chapter Notes

Wow, over two months. This chapter was supposed to be even longer but I wanted to treat you all sooner rather than later. If you could call this sooner...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eric has always been known to throw himself into his work. Despite coming from an upper middle class family with a nice coastal home on the edge of Southport, a family who would have been seen as “ideal” had it not been for the way some of the lesser-minded (asshole) locals viewed his mother’s mostly indigenous Mexican roots, Eric has never been afraid to take on a job and give it his all. His first job had been only at 15, where he did office work after school at a construction company. Then, when he turned 16, he had worked at that same company as a construction worker, laying out floors, fixing roofs, applying siding to houses, and renovating kitchens and bathrooms in the summers and on the weekends, along with the office work during the week. He would often get shit over being a powerful lawyer’s son but he always was able to prove himself.

Now he doesn’t need to prove himself. He has already done that in multiple countries. So, since he put more hours in than he needed to and the designs and initial groundwork were finished on the future homes, he is done. Part of him wishes that he would have foregone sleeping, worked even more, so that he could have just left when Brian did. But then he’ll go and feel guilty because other members of his team aren’t done with their part, or are just starting.

“We’ve got it,” Marcus had told him, a little annoyed after Eric had asked again if he would everything under control, “You’ve worked your ass off, seven days a week, except for two weekends. And even for the one when Brian was here, you kept coming in. So go away, Boss. Explore the city with your kid. Plan a surprise and catch a flight to Disney World. Go home. Seriously. You have been on site, leading and doing a lot of the labor. You’ve left more than enough blueprints and directives. We’re fine.”

So, after he rescheduled his return to New York for Friday instead of Sunday, something he decided to stay mum about to Brian in order to surprise him, the conversation led Eric to here, taking his daughter to City Park on a hot Tuesday afternoon, feeling a sense of confused accomplishment. Maybe he should take on something even more challenging next time. He will
technically have the time. Brian is going to take the mostly stay-at-home dad role once their daughter is born until she is roughly six months old. Brian had grudgingly admitted that he didn’t want the baby raised by a nanny either and that one of them should be there during those first few formative months. And, since Eric had taken off for the first year of Lily’s life, it really is Brian’s turn this time around. Eric doesn’t regret being there for Lily, he loves that he was there for all of those milestones and special moments, but he does remember feeling restless with his career on hold.

But as Eric watches his daughter’s eyes light up in wonder when she enters Storyland, only one part of the huge park, he knows what his most important accomplishment is. Building a skyscraper or a castle or a fucking city couldn’t ever compare.

“Oh my gosh!” Lily gasps, looking around the park, “OH MY GOSH!!!!!!”

“I thought you would like it,” Eric laughs, ready and on her heels as she runs for Cinderella’s pumpkin coach. Eric takes her hands and pulls her up to help her inside.

“This is the most beautiful thing I ever saw,” Lily declares seriously, sitting down in the orange statue, “Will you take a picture for Daddy? He’s just GOT to see this. He’s just got to!”

Eric bites his lip to stifle a laugh as he pulls his phone out of his pocket.

“Say cheese,” Eric tells her, focusing the camera on her face.

“No,” Lily refuses, “I want to take a grown-up picture, okay?”

The little girl then proceeds to turn slightly on her seat towards him, cross her legs in a ladylike manner, tilt her head, and pout her lips, just slightly, to give her pose the desired effect.

Eric gives her a glare, “Seriously?”

“Take the picture, Papa,” Lily answers, barely moving her lips in the process.

Eric shakes his head and snaps a couple of photos, before choosing the one with the best lighting
to send to Brian.

Brian must be at lunch, or at least has a little downtime, because his husband sees the sent photo within a few seconds and the typing ellipsis comes up.

**Adorable. Where are you?**
**And why is she sitting like that?**

Eric smirks and types out a message.

**Storyland in City Park. She**
**wanted to sit like a grown-up**

The ellipsis pops up again as Brian types a reply.

**Aren’t you supposed to be**
**getting some work done?**

Eric hesitates for a second, thinking about just fessing up to the fact that he is coming home a couple days sooner than planned, but ultimately decides to fib.

**Decided to take the afternoon**
**off. Spend time with the spawn.**

All Brian has to say to that is: **Have fun.**

“Papa, come sit down!” Lily demands, patting the seat beside her, “You’re the king and I’m the princess and I am gonna rule the kingdom ‘cause you are gonna go to retilemen. So I am talkin’ about how I am gonna change stuff once you are in a home.”

Eric is almost offended by that and, when he starts to wonder if that’s how it is going to be when Lily is an adult with her own family, putting him and Brian in a home, out of sight and out of mind, Lily starts her skit.
“Now, King Papa. I know you don’t wanna stop being King. But I have to be Queen now and you gotta go to a home. But don’t worry. There’s stuff like Bingo and cards and other stuff like that. You’ll like it. I have to have balls and wear nice clothes, you don’t want to do that anymore. It’s for the best.”

“Where did you even find out about nursing homes?” Eric has to ask, breaking the scene.

Lily glares at him for his lack of commitment to her skit but answers, “Daddy told me his mommy was in a home now. I asked and he said and he told me what it is. I am smart and find out things I don’t know. You should try it sometime. Now...let’s play!”

Eric is surprised by her answer. He had figured Lily thought that Brian just dropped from the sky as is and became Gus’s dad before he became hers.

“When did you ask this?” Eric presses, “I don’t remember him telling you about his mom.”

Lily gets frustrated, since Brian’s mother is not supposed to be in her skit, “It was a really long time ago! When me and Daddy went to the park and sailed boats.”

Eric thinks on what both Brian and Lily had told him of their New York activities while he has been in New Orleans, “Lily, that was just last week, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, see? A long LONG time ago,” Lily confirms, nodding her head before letting out an exasperated sigh. Before Eric knows it, she’s hopping down from the statue.

“Where are you going?” Eric asks, stepping down as well, “I thought you were wanting to play on here more.”

Lily stares at her father and shakes her head, “I don’t feel it anymore. You kept on talking and messed it up. Now, come on! Let’s go over there!”

Lily is on a high as she goes into the Old Woman that Lives in a Shoe statue, gasps at the sight of the fire breathing dragon, oohs and aahs at the mermaid in the middle of the pond, and gets frustrated at the site of the Snow White and Sleeping Beauty statues snoozing away.
“Hello!” Lily yells into Aurora’s ear, “You can wake up now!”

“She’s so lazy,” he comments as Lily gives up on her efforts.

He splurges on the kiddie coaster that’s in the park, where she sits next to a girl who is maybe two years older than her but is ten times more freaked out than Lily is, who is just screaming with delight, rather than debilitating fear. When she gets off the coaster, Eric offers to stand next to her on the Merry Go Round but Lily shakes her head.

“I am too old for that,” she insists, before turning around to continue standing in line.

She may be too old for him to stand next to her as she rides the horse up and down, around and around, but she isn’t too old to say, “Hi, Papa!” every time she passes him on the turn while he waves back and snaps a few pictures for Brian.

She wouldn’t let me go on with her. *sniffle* She’s so grown up.

Brian only reads that text and doesn’t answer. He may be busy. Or he thinks Eric is being pathetic. Either/or.

It’s around 3 pm, a little over an hour since they arrived, when they decide to get a late lunch. According to the twins, Lily had some cereal for a late breakfast so he knows she is hungry. Eric had a smoothie at 6 am and that’s it, so he definitely is too. They find a food truck donning the words, ‘Crêpe à la Carte’ in a quieter and more peaceful section of the park, set up along the narrow winding street. The menu lists over fifty ingredients that you can put on your crepe so, instead of reading them all to Lily, he decides to go with a peanut butter and jelly crepe with bananas while he gets smoked pulled pork, grilled onions and mushrooms, and a gouda cheese sauce in his. They sit next to some old oak trees, on a round, stone platform beneath a sculpture of a man sitting on a chair right in the center. The meal is messier than anticipated. Eric has a hard time keeping the contents of his crepe off his hands and shirt himself, so it’s not surprising at all when Lily gets it all over her hand a few bites in. It probably doesn’t help that she keeps getting up and down to go talk to the sculpture about, ‘important things’ as she leans in close to it and whispers, sneaking glances to Eric throughout the process.

“Finish your crepe,” Eric orders, looking over his shoulder at his kid and wincing over the thought
of her getting her sticky hands on the statue.

“In a second,” Lily insists, “I’m talking to Harvey. He’s telling me a secret.”

Lily listens to the imaginary words closely as she nods her head.

“Shehuh...uh huh...yeah! Yeah, that’s a good idea. I DO deserve it!”

With that, Lily comes back and sits down next to her father.

“So what were you and Harvey talking about?” Eric asks her if she takes another messy bite out of her crepe.

Lily shrugs, “He was telling me how you should get me ice cream later.”

“Uh huh,” Eric acknowledges, “Maybe tomorrow. That has enough sugar in it as it is.”

Lily sticks out her lower lip and pouts, “I was just telling you what he said.”

Eric rolls his eyes, “Come on. Finish up, then I can take you to a bathroom to wash you up and get more sunscreen on you.”

Lily takes another bite of her crepe before looking around thoughtfully.

“You are a really fun papa,” she tells him unexpectedly, “I like you lots. You do fun things with me.”

Eric feels his eyes soften as he reaches up to run his fingers through her curls.

“I like you lots too,” he tells her happily, “And I love doing fun things with you.”
Lily nods, looking at her crepe thoughtfully, “Did you do fun things when you was little?”

“Sure,” Eric replies, “I used to go swimming a lot...Abuela, Grandpa, and Uncle George taught me when I was really young. The bay that goes out into the ocean? It’s right in Abuela and Grandpa’s backyard. Do you remember what their house looks like from when we went down for a weekend in January after Carlos was born?”

Lily thinks for a second, then shrugs, “A little. We stayed by Aunt Amanda’s though. How come?”

“Because she lives a couple hours away,” he replies, leaving out the fact that part of him is nervous about going home nowadays, “It was easier to see Carlos and Julian if we stayed near her. We drove down for a few hours that Saturday though.”

Lily stays quiet for a second before turning her body a little more to face him, “Tell me more about when you were little like me.”

“I thought you weren’t little,” Eric teases.

Lily rolls her eyes and moves her shoulders up and down, “I’m littler than you!”

“That’s true,” Eric has to admit.

Lily doesn’t answer that. She just waits there patiently, wanting to hear more about his life. Something that is odd and out of place for his daughter but incredibly endearing. So, despite his efforts to not think about his past, because the many good moments were almost as painful as the bad when he now looks back, he puts an arm around her, pulls her into his side, and begins to speak.

“My dad...your grandpa. He used to take me out in his sailboat. He bought it when I was about four years old, same age as you. But I remember pretty vividly how excited he was to show me and George. We had a long dock, they still have it. It went way out into the bay. He had it parked near the end. I remember George making me hold his hand so I wouldn’t fall in and I was mad because I knew how to swim so what was the worst that could happen? But George, despite being laid back and a bit flaky, despite teasing me when I was little and the two of us being completely different once we were older...he was protective of me. He still is. He probably would never admit it because our dad always told him to watch after me and he never really liked to listen to him. But he
Eric knows he is getting off track and he’s expecting Lily to lose interest. He would understand. Most four year olds aren’t known for their attention spans. But she proves him wrong as she sits there, silently, waiting for him to continue.

“He took us to the end of the dock. I remember getting so excited, jumping up and down, wanting to get in the boat. My dad had laughed and ruffled my hair, telling me he would after he showed the boat to mom. He had her name printed on the side, Luisa. Named the boat after her. He loved her so much. He still does. His parents, my grandparents, didn’t like that he was with her but he fell in love with her in high school and married her right after they graduated. They eloped. His family more or less kept their distance after that,” he admits to her.

“How come?” Lily asks, tilting her head, “Is it because she’s mean?”

Eric snorts, “No. No, it’s not because she’s mean. My dad’s family is old south, old money. I don’t expect you to understand that. And I don’t expect you to understand that they only wanted him to be with someone who looked a certain way.”

Lily gives him a strange look, “That’s silly. Abuela is old but she is pretty.”

“Oh, she was beautiful,” Eric agrees, “I bet I had the prettiest mom in the whole state. And, when I was younger...she was the most loving.”

Eric is really thankful for Lily not catching onto the knot in his throat, causing him to go silent. Instead, she keeps the topic on point.

“Did you go sailboating when Abuela came home?” Lily presses.

“And we did,” Eric answers, recalling the memory and letting out a sad laugh, “My mom was always a penny pincher. She didn’t grow up with the money she had after she and my dad got their careers in order. She was upset that he bought it because there were more important things to put that money towards. But when he took us all out and he showed her the boat and she saw her name, her eyes lit up and you could tell she was so touched. My dad had made sandwiches and filled up the cooler with soda, water, and juice. My mom checked my lifejacket at least three times and held me in her lap as we took off from the dock and we watched the sunset as we ate our dinner. Then I went fishing for the first time after. The biggest fish took a hold of my line and my dad had to help...
me get it onto the boat. I was so happy and proud. My mom took a picture of us. My dad used to have it in his office.”

“Does he still have it?” Lily asks, “You and Daddy have pictures of me at your jobs.”

“We do,” Eric confirms, “I don’t know if your grandpa has that picture still.”

“Is he in retailmen?” Lily questions.

Eric chuckles at that, “Nah. The old man is in great shape and a handsome devil still. He still has the judges wrapped around his finger. He’s about 66 now. I wouldn’t be surprised if he kept going for another 10 years.”

“Then he’ll be really REALLY old!” Lily exclaims, nodding her head with each ‘really,’ “Tell me more stuff.”

“More stuff?” Eric asks, giving her an odd look, “Why do you want to know so bad?”

“I just do,” Lily shrugs, “I ask questions when I don’t know stuff. You should-”

“Try it sometime,” Eric finishes with her with a scoff, “Alright. When I was 5, my mom and dad took me and Uncle George to Nashville on vacation. We were maybe two hours into a ten hour drive when I asked where my stuffed elephant was. It was an ugly thing, but I loved it and carried it around a lot. I kept asking and my dad ended up pulling over so my mom could try to see if she packed it in a suitcase. It wasn’t there and I cried for nonstop and I am pretty sure George hated the fact he wasn’t an only child anymore. My dad was trying to get me to man up but, an hour in, he and my mom decided to turn around the car and drive back to the house to get it before heading back out again. My dad and brother were both so angry.”

“Duncan cries sometimes when he forgets his bear,” Lily tells him, something Eric already knows from personal experience, “He likes it a lot and never wants to lose it, ever ever ever. Do you still have your elephant?”

“Ellie?” Eric asks, “No...No, she ended up in a box in the attic by the time I was older.”
“Our attic?” Lily asks, “I want her right when we get back!”

“No, Abuela and Grandpa’s attic.”

“Oh,” Lily sighs, disappointed, before perking up, “You should go get her!”

Eric gives her a sad smile, “I don’t even know if she is still there, baby.”

“I’m not a baby,” Lily insists, standing up on the stone proudly, “You should get her for me and my baby sister. She should be with us. She’ll be happier if she has kids to play with, especially girls. Because you were a boy so me and my baby sister will take good care of her.”

Eric stares at Lily’s serious expression for a moment before standing up and pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” he says softly into her hair.

“Okay,” Lily answers, holding out her sticky hands, waiting for them to be wiped.

Eric does the best he can with the small pack of wipes he has in his pocket but decides it isn’t enough. He puts a hand on her back and looks around for a bathroom but can’t find one, even though they walk a bit in the process.

“You don’t have to go, do you?” Eric asks her.

“Nope,” Lily confirms.

Eric looks around one more time, making sure no one is close by, before taking her over to a fountain out in the center of the field.

“Quick, bend over the ledge,” Eric whispers, groaning inwardly about what he’s doing.
Lily gasps as she jumps up and down, “Can I swim? Papa. PAPA. Can I swim?”

“No,” he tells her, “We can go swim at the hotel later. I am just rinsing your hands and face off in here. This is not something you should do.”

“Then why are we doing it?” Lily asks, confused.

“Because you are all sticky and need to cool off a little anyway. Now, come on, quick!”

Lily stays still as he cups water in his hands and pours it on her chin, scrubbing the mess off her face, before taking her hands in the water and rubbing them together, effectively getting rid of the jam and peanut butter sticking to her fingers. When she’s done, he gets another wipe, rubs her hands and face with it, before feeling finally satisfied and reapplying her sunscreen.

“Don’t worry, Papa,” she tells him after, “I won’t tell that you broke the law.”

“Thanks,” he sighs, taking her hand once more, “Anywhere else you want to go to? We can go to the playground. Or the botanical garden. It’s pretty.”

“What is it?” Lily asks curiously.

“It has a lot of pretty flowers, sculptures, fountains, and bridges.”

Lily nods and surprisingly says, “Okay, let’s go there.”

“Really?” Eric questions, baffled that she wouldn’t want to go the playground, “How come you want to go there?”

“Beeeccccauuusssee…” Lily drawls out, “We gotta talk some more! I got more questions to ask you. This is ‘portant. Playgrounds get really loud because of babies and stuff. I am not a baby. We can talk like grown-ups in the garden. Did you ever make a garden when you were little? You said we will when we get back home.”
Eric pauses for a second, wondering why she is on his case about his childhood. Does she wonder why his parents don’t come around much? Does she want to know them? Maybe he hasn’t shared enough about himself with her and she is feeling like she wants to know him better.

Whatever it is, it gets him talking. He tells her about helping his mom grow vegetables, fruits, and flowers, only to go on and tell her about going hiking with his dad. He tells her about what it was like after Amanda was born and how his mom made sure to spend time with her boys. He tells her about his parents renewing their vows when he was 11 and how he and George were both his dad’s best men while Amanda was his mom’s flower girl.

And fuck, talking about all the good times, because the bad hadn’t come until he was an adult...it makes him miss them so much.

And that isn’t out of the norm. While he’s grateful for what he has, a fantastic husband who is a great lay, a spunky and intelligent daughter, another little girl on the way...he can’t help but think back to when he had played a different part of this other perfect family. A loving family. A fun family. One that was religious but not overly so.

Unless when it came to their son being gay, that is.

Usually he can push the thoughts out of his head. Just shove them under some mental rug and go about his day. But there are some days where he gets so down about it. Where he dwells on the fact that they wouldn’t come to his wedding. It had been harder to accept that from his mom. At least with his dad, they had trouble seeing eye to eye once he hit his teens. It is still hard to believe that the mother who sang him Spanish lullabies, taught him how to cook, encouraged his passion for architecture, and stood up, cried, and cheered after his valedictorian speech had said such harsh words to him about the fact he was parenting with Brian as well as marrying him.

About his new life all together.

He wants both. At times like this, he wants it desperately. He wants to bring his husband, his daughters, and his stepson to their home on Christmas morning. He wants help his mom cook while his dad talks with Brian and Gus, joking with them like would with any of the family. He wants to exchange gifts and watch his father’s eyes light up at the new golf clubs, instead of just receiving a cordial five minute thank you call with the inquiry of whether Lily and Eric liked their gifts too.

And doesn’t only want Christmas. If things were different, he would take Brian down there for the 4th of July, watch the fireworks over the bay on the dock, kiss under the smoky sky. He wants his
parents to show Brian the good family and upbringing Eric had growing up, something Brian has yet to witness any corresponding evidence to. He wants them to show Brian the love and acceptance they eventually showed Amanda’s husband.

He tries to push it out of his mind and enjoy the day with his daughter but, even when she stops asking questions about his childhood and she is focusing on being a rambunctious child herself, he can’t manage to bring himself out of it. Even when he takes her back to the suite, swims with her in the pool, and bathes her before getting ready for an 8 o’clock dinner, he is still reminded about the things his parents did with him. He does get distracted from the angst, albeit briefly, once they walk a block towards the planned vegetarian restaurant that Eric thought may make up for the crepes. But that's due to Lily starting to cry because her feet hurt and she’s fucking exhausted. He picks her up and carries her back to the suite after that, opting to get room service and tuck her in next to him so that she can pick out a pay-per-view movie on the kid’s channel. She opts for some dubbed Japanese movie from 1989, something called Kiki’s Delivery Service. Eric hadn’t been sure she would like it but she keeps her eyes on the screen and seems to be enjoying it enough, even though she is too tired to strongly react to any surprising or upsetting scenes. When the food comes, she focuses on the easy to eat finger foods like Eric expected, slowly sitting up to eat them. Grapes, raw carrots and celery, and a couple of fish sticks before she announces that she’s full and wants to brush her teeth and use the bathroom now. Eric pauses the movie, makes sure she’s ready to settle down for the evening, and relents when she asks him sweetly if she can stay in his bed for the night instead of the one in the adjacent room.

As she cuddles into his side and falls asleep during the credits, his mind wanders back to his parents. Despite flipping through a book and through channels, he can’t stop thinking about the past. When he finally does sleep, he even dreams something jarring, where they are the parents he loved and grew up with, only to become hateful, then only to fill him with hope that everything might be okay.

When he wakes up Wednesday morning, he makes sure Lily sees the Saint Louis Cathedral in Jackson Square, due to its grand beauty. He thinks about lighting a candle but just lets her light one instead with close supervision. He takes her on the trolley, where she waves hello to all different types of people. He lets a street artist paint a portrait of her, takes her to the children’s museum, and they eat great food in between.

And, at midnight, a couple of hours after he’s talked to Brian, putting a performance on to convince him everything is alright, he knows that the thoughts are staying in his head until he does something about it.

So, after he packs his and Lily’s bags and calls the 24/7 car rental service to extend the number of days on his rarely used temporary vehicle, he packs up the car, gently maneuvers his sleeping daughter from the bed into his arms, checks out of the hotel, gets Lily into her car seat without disturbing her, and starts driving towards Southport, North Carolina.
Eric realizes that he may have not been completely sane when he decided to drive over over 12 hours to his hometown. Adrenaline and nerves are probably the only things that are keeping him from getting too tired to drive. Lily has only woken up once so far, about five hours in, right when they went over the Alabama state line into Georgia. She had been tired, confused, cranky, and, when she asked where he was driving to, all he had said was, “We’re going to go get Ellie.”

That had strangely placated her and lulled her back into the deep sleep she needed after an eventful few days.

He feels guilty knowing that he’s dragging his daughter along with him on such a long trip. She doesn’t deserve to put up with his temporary mental break. He is reminded how shitty he is being when he gets a text from Brian a little after 8 am, one that he waits to read until he pulls off the interstate to stop at a rest area.

**Have a good day. I love you.**

They are simple words but, even though Brian has said them a little more frequently now that they are married, the last three words come just rarely enough to bring a smile to his face.

Most of the time. This time, he just feels another surge of guilt.

Typing a quick, ‘You too. <3’ he presses the lock screen button and turns around to look at his daughter.

“Lily,” he calls to her softly, rubbing her leg, “Want to get some breakfast?”

Lily’s soft, adorable snores eventually stop and her eyes slowly open, squinting at him in bewilderment in the process.

“Starbuck’s sound okay?” he suggests, “You can get a cup of oatmeal and some fruit and orange juice?”

Lily rubs her face with the back of her hand, letting out a muted whine.
“We can also change you out of your pajamas,” Eric continues, getting out of the SUV to get into the trunk, “A nice outfit but something comfortable for the rest of the ride.”

Eric grabs a pair of maroon mandala print shorts, a white tank top, and gold sandals to throw into her handmade backpack with owls stitched into the fabric that she got from Chinatown one day in June, insisting she needed it for school once she went back in the fall. It ended up becoming an overnight bag.

“Come on,” he tells her, coming around to the rear passenger door to help her out of her car seat, “You can go back to sleep once you get a little food in you.”

Lily just glares at the parking lot asphalt as her hair sticks up in every which way. Eric makes a mental note to wet it a bit and tie it up once he gets her changed in the bathroom, which he ends up doing first since the line to order is longer than the line for the bathroom. He can’t help but feel grateful when he sees that it is just a private unisex bathroom. Usually he faces no trouble taking Lily into the men’s room but, about a year ago, Brian had come home, pissed and with Lily propped up on his hip, because some guy using the urinal had some choice words for him just because Lily had used the men’s room. The incident always ends up in the back of his mind.

Lily wakes up a little once they are in the bathroom. She uses the toilet, wipes, flushes, and washes her hands as Eric holds her up to the sink. He quickly gets her out of her pajamas and slippers to get the outfit he picked out for her on, getting her hair slightly damp, he does the best work he can on any tangles with his fingers before putting her thick curly hair into a messy high bun on the top of her head.

“Why didn’t you spray my hair?” Lily asks, feeling the bun on her head.

“I forgot the spray in the car,” he admits, “Next time we stop, I’ll get the spray out to make it less frizzy. It looks good now though, don’t worry.”

Lily looks at him suspiciously, as if she doesn’t quite believe him, before taking his hand and following him back out to the sitting area, where they wait in line to make their orders. He orders her oatmeal, juice, and a side of fruit while he get the spinach, tomato, and feta wrap with a venti iced coffee for himself. They sit down by the window, even though Eric wants to get on the road to get the drive over with. Lily seems content enough as she swings her legs while she takes bites of her fruit and oatmeal in rotation. For a few moments, nothing is said. They just concentrate on their food and let everyone else in the coffee shop chatter to fill the silence. But then, Lily decides to speak.
“So we are going to go get Ellie?” Lily asks suddenly, meeting his eyes, “You said that, right?”

Eric clears his throat, “I did. I’m surprised you remember. You were only half awake.”

Lily shrugs and gets an eager grin on her face, “I am really smart and remember lots of stuff. It’s who I am. I am happy Ellie is coming to stay with us. She should be with me ‘cause she was yours. But she’s gonna be mine now, okay? My little sister can play with her but I want her to be mine.”

“Of course,” Eric answers, semi-distractedly, “If we can find her while we are there, she can be yours.”

Lily nods her head happily and bounces in her seat a little. By the time they’ve consumed their meals and Eric gets another coffee plus two water bottles for the road, it’s about 9:15. If they don’t hit traffic, they can get to Southport in about four and a half hours, maybe just four if he’s lucky. Past the travel time, he doesn’t have much of a plan. He guesses he’ll just take Lily’s hand, walk up to the wrap around porch, and ring the doorbell-

“I think,” Lily starts, putting her hands on the table, “That me and you should go out in the sailboat. It’s a good idea, Papa! Then, we can go swimming! In the ocean!”

“Maybe,” Eric answers before getting up and picking up their trash, “You need to go to the bathroom one more time?”

Lily shakes her head, “Nuh uh! I already went!”

“You’re sure you don’t need to go one more time? You won’t bug me a mile down the road, saying you have to go, will you?”

“I won’t have to go for at least nine billion, six hundred trillion miles!” Lily informs him.

“Well, in that case, I guess we better head off,” Eric sighs.

He gets her outside, throws her bag with her pajamas in the trunk, and straps into her car seat once more before giving her the iPad to play with or watch her shows on, whichever she prefers. Eric
doesn’t really have to worry about getting her to where she wants to be on it anymore. He swears
she can operate that thing better than he and Brian can.

He can tell from the sounds coming from it and from her that she is playing Word Wizard in
Spanish, which makes him so ridiculously proud. Her pronunciation as she talks back to the app is
perfect. She is even talking to herself in the language. Part of him has been wanting to see if he can
get her into a gifted language course to let her learn more languages as well. He has spoken to
Brian about it but they haven’t had the chance to look into it yet.

“Hey, Lily?” he asks, glancing at her through the rearview mirror, “Would you want to take an
after school class to learn a third language once school starts up?”

Lily looks up with bright eyes, “Yes! Papa, I really REALLY want to know how to talk in
Australian.”

Eric can’t help but bark out a laugh at that.

“Why are you laughing at me?” Lily pouts as she kicks the back of the front passenger chair.

“I’m sorry. It was mean of me to laugh. But people in Australia speak English,” he explains, trying
to sober up from his laughing fit quickly.

“Oh,” Lily answers, “So I already know how to speak Australian!”

“Uh...sure.”

“I am really, really smart,” Lily whispers to herself, as if she herself can’t quite believe how smart
she is.

“I’ll do some research,” he tells her, “I know there are private lessons we can get and they can
come to the house. But there is also a place called Mandarin Seeds. You could do an after school
program there until 5 o’clock. It’s close to Daddy’s work so he could pick you up. You would learn
Mandarin there, that’s Chinese, and get to play with other kids.”
“Oooh oooh! I want to do that!” she insists, bouncing in her seat, “I can meet a lotta kids there too and make lots of friends!”

Eric smiles, “You definitely could.”

“Can Duncan go with me? Me and him have always ALWAYS wanted to learn Chinese.” she continues, gesturing with her hands.

“Really? This is something you two have discussed?” Eric asks, holding back laughter.

“No, but we’ve always wanted to do it,” she informs him.

“That’s up to Emmett and Drew plus Duncan lives in New Jersey and the commute might be a little hard. But even if he can’t go, would you want to do it still?”

Lily thinks for a second, tapping her chin, “Yes. But I gotta save time for my dancing. ‘Cause I am going to be a dancer when I grow up, you know. I am going to dance Flamenco for the rest of my life.”

“I thought you wanted to be a sword swallower,” Eric recalls.

Lily shrugs, “I’m gonna do both. I can do that, you know. And I am gonna be a magician AND a princess.”

“Sounds like you’ll be one busy woman when you are older,” Eric smiles before getting back on topic, “But you’ll have time for Flamenco. After your recital in the fall, Ms. Garcia said she would keep working with you twice a week until the session starts up in the spring.”

“Good,” Lily sighs with relief, “Because I just got to keep practicing. I got a solo for the recital ‘cause I am so good but I gotta get even better. And I wanna learn how to play the gee-tar. The one Nathan got for me. So I can play Flamenco and dance it. At the same time! I know! Nathan can come over and teach me how to play! I like Nathan, Papa. So SO much-”

When Lily chatters away like this, listing all of her goals and dreams, Eric feels less guilt about
getting her involved with so many activities at such a young age. He feels like it would probably bore his daughter to death if he just made her take it easy.

Sometimes he wishes she would take it easy when it comes to talking up a storm though. After almost two hours of almost non-stop conversation, Eric almost wants to tell her to shut the hell up. But he knows that she is keeping him awake with it all and it would probably make her cry if he snapped that at her, especially when she is being cheerful and sweet.

“-And my baby sister, she can do Chinese and Flamenco with me too. And we can go swimming and read books and do tumbling-”

“Maybe when she is older,” Eric interrupts, “Remember that she won’t even be able to walk for almost a year. You have to be easy with her.”

Lily looks a little crestfallen before nodding in disappointment, “Maybe you can adopt a sister for me that’s four too. That way-”

“No,” Eric laughs out, “No more girls.”

Lily lets out a sound of outrage, “Girls are the bestest!”

“I’m not saying they’re not,” Eric placates her, “But your daddy and I will most likely call it a day once your sister is born.”

Lily tries to debate with him, which is sort of ridiculous since her newest sibling is still a few months away from being born, but eventually she gives up on the task once he puts a playlist on for her that has her favorite songs. She sings along, dances in her seat, and eventually passes out.

And, even though he is grateful for the quiet, it does make his thoughts wander to his parents.

Only a couple more hours until he sees them and he doesn’t even have a plan.

Eric’s heart is beating in his chest quickly as he approaches drives up the winding road to his childhood home. He rolls down the window, hoping for the smell of sea in the air to calm him
down. The breeze stirs Lily. She yawns, opens her eyes, then looks around, confused.

“Look down the hill,” he says to her, stopping the car.

“The ocean!” Lily gasps and claps her hands.

“Close,” Eric tells her, “It’s a big bay that leads to the ocean. The beach is only a few miles away. Maybe we can go there tomorrow.”

“Yes, and we can swim in the bay today!” Lily suggests.

“They also have a pool out back,” Eric says distractedly, feeling relief when he just sees his parents’ housekeeper’s car in the garage.

“They have everything!” Lily exclaims, throwing her hands up in the air, “Next time we come down, we just have to bring Daddy.”

“...Hmmm,” is all Eric can say to that while he parks across the street.

He lets himself sit there for a second, lets himself stare at the house he has lived in since he was two years old. One that started out nice but of a more modest size then expanded with upgrades as he grew a little older. His father had done a lot of the work. He vaguely remembers watching him add the sunroom right by the pool and helping with small things, only to be held back by his mother a year later when his dad decided they needed a balcony as well. Another floor was added and the house was expanded on both sides. And, unless you really knew what to look for, you would couldn’t tell the expansions were expansions at all. Architecture and designing has never been his dad’s field but, with some advice, the man had been good at it. Eric thinks that witnessing the additions to the home helped influence his aspirations for his career.

“Papa?” Lily asks, “Why are we waiting here?”

Eric shakes himself out of his thoughts, then sighs.

“...I guess we should go ahead and let Delphina know we are here.”
“Delphina?” Lily asks, confused.

“You’ve met her,” Eric reminds her, “A few times. She’s been coming to clean Abuela and Grandpa’s house and help out with things ever since I was 7 or so. She’s nice.”

Eric decides to let their things stay in the car for now, only grabbing a few necessities for Lily to keep her entertained and content. He takes a big breath as he stares at the home from across the street. As if she can sense his nerves, Lily takes his hand and holds onto it tight.

“Thanks,” he murmurs.

Lily nods then takes the lead, “Come on, Papa.”

They walk alongside each other, hand in hand, across the road, up the steps to the large porch, and to the front door. Eric holds his finger over the doorbell for just a second before pressing it.

He hears Delphina walking to the door. She sounds a little slower than he remembers. She had been in her mid-thirties when his parents hired her. She had only known a couple of words in English then and he can remember practicing his Spanish with her while she would practice her English in return.

When she opens the door, she looks surprised to see him. At least she doesn’t look repulsed by the sight of him.

“Hola, Delphina,” he greets first.

“No sabía hice que venías,” Delphina answers, staring at him as if she’s seen a ghost, “¿Cómo estás?”

Eric shrugs, “Estoy bien. Fue decisión de último minuto. ¿Recuerdas Lily?”

“Me recuerdo Lily,” she smiles before bending down a little, “Hola, Lily. Usted es más alta que la última vez que te vi.”
“Gracias,” Lily answers shyly, “Tengo cuatro años de edad ahora.”

“¡Guau!” Delphina exclaims.

“Me gusta tus pendientes, son muy bonitos,” Lily compliments as she starts to find her outgoing spirit again, “Quiero…”

Lily looks up at her father in question and pulls at her ears.

“What does ‘pierce’ mean, Papa?” she asks him.

“You would say perforar in that case,” he informs her.

Lily nods and restarts her sentence, “Quiero perforar mis orejas!”

Then she bows her head and pouts, “Mi papá no me deja.”

Delphina holds back a laugh at that, “Tal vez un día.”

Delphina’s guard is down now that the ice has broken. She lets the two of them inside and leads them to the parlor and offers to get them something to drink. With hesitation, she lets them know that his mother will be back around 5:30 and his father will be back about an hour after, due to the longer commute he has from Wilmington. There isn’t much he can say to that. He’s kind of grateful when Lily tells her that she would love some juice. The request sends Delphina off to the kitchen to get her some. Knowing Delphina, she probably went to make Lily a snack as well. As they wait, Lily sits right against his side, her arms linked around his, as she turns her head to look around the room.

“Papa,” she whispers, “We should go swim.”

“Let’s wait, Lily,” he tells her, “We just got here.”

“It’s as best of a time as ever,” she tells him seriously before standing up to look out the big
windows on the side of the house, “I can see the ocean from here.”

“That’s the bay, sweetheart,” he reminds her, “Let’s wait until Delphina comes back. You can get your juice and maybe some lunch and then we can get the bags and I will take you down.”

“That sounds like a fantastic plan,” Lily agrees before her eyes go wide at the sight of the piano, “Oh my gosh!”

Lily runs over to the bench and climbs on top of it.

“Lily, please don’t run,” Eric scolds her, exasperated, “It isn’t our house.”

“It’s your house,” she tells him.

“No,” he sighs, “Our house is in Brooklyn. Remember?”

“Yes,” Lily answers, “But I’m gonna get a big house with Duncan when we’re grown ups. But my house will always be my house but so will my new house. That’s just how it is, okay?”

Before Eric can respond, Lily pounds on the piano.

“Softly!” he calls over her noise.

Lily plays the clashing notes more quietly and lets out a frustrated groan, “It sounds better when I do it loud!”

“Too bad.”

“Papa, please-” Lily tries to reason.

“No. I haven’t had any sleep and I have a headache. Play the notes softly and nicely or don’t play
them at all.”

Lily glares at him but obeys the ultimatum by playing the notes one by one.

“Want to learn a scale?” he asks her, reaching over her shoulder, “C, D, E, F, G, F, E, D, C C C C C. C, D, E, F, G G G G, C, G, C.”

Lily looks at the keys, wide-eyed, “That was beautiful. Let me try!”

Eric takes her dominant left hand, shapes her fingers so that only her pointer finger is sticking out, and plays it over each note, again and again, until she memorizes it and plays the notes by herself.

“I did an amazing job!” Lily squeals, proud of her flawless interpretation of the basic C scale.

“You did,” Eric agrees, beaming, “I’m proud of you for learning that so quickly.”

“We just got to get a piano, Papa,” she tells him seriously, “We just got to!”

“They’re nice, but hard to get to places. Maybe we can get a keyboard if you really want to learn though, set it up in your room.”

“Right now?” Lily asks, excited.

“Sometime after we get back,” Eric answers pointedly, “Maybe.”

“Okay, but definitely,” Lily argues. She’s so fucking spoiled sometimes. It kind of makes him want to take the offer off the table all together.

When he hears Delphina’s footsteps, he picks Lily up off the piano bench and sits her back down on the couch. As expected, Delphina did make them something to eat, Pastelitos, which is something that he misses from her and his mother. He had made them a couple of times and they turned out fine but they must season the meat a certain way he can’t master. And, like today’s, Delphina’s tasted as good leftover as they did fresh. The conversation stays at a relative minimum,
mainly just polite catching up and avoiding the topic of his parents. He always liked Delphina and he really doesn’t want to find out if she thinks his parents have been in the right.

Lily keeps getting up to show off her dancing, complete with the “¡Ole!” and “¡Toma!” to encourage herself. Delphina seems to enjoy it and joins in with the vocal encouragements but Eric has seen it so many times that he feels a little annoyed. That makes him feel guilty. He should be happy that Lily is so enthusiastic over her extracurriculars, at least one of them. Ballet is something she likes fine but doesn’t seem to embrace like she does Flamenco.

“Y ese es mi solo,” Lily finishes right before bowing.

“Solitario,” he informs her of the word for solo, “¿Estás lista para ir a nadar?”

“Sí,” Lily confirms, “En el bay.”

“En la bahía,” he corrects, “Vamos a ir al coche.”

Lily follows him as he tells Delphina that they’ll be back to change before heading down to the dock. They go back across the street to get the duffle bag with their swim clothes and beach towels and head back over to the house to go change in the bathroom. He makes Lily wait outside the door while he changes into his trunks, which may not be the best idea since she bangs on the door, nervous about being by herself, even just for a few moments. However, he’d rather not be naked in front of his daughter so he doesn’t let the guilt of leaving her out in the hall nor her promise of, “But I’ll turn around and close my eyes!” get to him. As soon as he is changed though, he lets her in the bathroom in order to help her into her suit, a task she has still not completely mastered. It’s a teal one-piece with white paisley pattern and, although it isn’t her absolute favorite, she has stopped pouting about her yellow one at home. She even stays patient as he lathers her up with sunscreen.

“Let me get my dress on,” she insists after he’s finished, grabbing her cover-up from the bag, “It is just so pretty.”

Lily slips on the white cotton and lace cover-up and looks at herself in the body length mirror in the corner of the large bathroom.

“I look great!” she exclaims, turning to the side to get a view of her profile, “And you look great too. Come on!”
Lily takes his hand and he manages to their towels before being dragged out the bathroom door by a four year old. He managed to take the lead though, taking her towards the back of the house, through the kitchen, and into the sunroom that provides the spectacular view he grew up with.

“Wow,” Lily says in awe.

“Yeah,” Eric murmurs before coming out of his daze, “Come on. Let’s head outside.”

They go out back and Lily gets distracted by the pool. He lets her take off her cover-up to jump off the diving board and feels a sense of pride that she can swim in the deep end without a floatie. Regardless, he takes her to the shed once he gets her to come out of the pool and finds it unlocked. Past the fishing poles, canoe paddles, swimming noodles, and equipment for the sailboat, he finds stacks of storage containers with various family members’ names on them. His mom and dad have box together, most likely containing just a couple of lifejackets for trips out onto the sea. He sees his sister’s box, which is less dusty than his brother’s and his own. He sees a shared box for Julian and Carlos as well as his aunt’s box, then finds the one he is looking for.

“There,” he announces, pulling the container marked, ‘Xiomara, Laila’ out of place, “My cousin lives less than an hour away from here. She is a few years younger than me and has a daughter who is your age. She basically lived here in the summer.”

“Is she my cousin too?” Lily asks, eyes excited.

Eric nods, “Yep. Xiomara is my first cousin. Laila is your second cousin.”

“I want to meet her,” Lily decides, “But I don’t want to use her stuff. I want to use my stuff out of my box.”

Eric purses his lips, “We don’t really come here much, sweetie. I don’t think Abuela and Grandpa made a box for you to keep your swim stuff in.”

“Yes huh,” Lily insists, “It’s over there! It says, ‘L-I-L-Y.’ Lily! That’s my name, you know.”

Eric feels his heart beat a little harder as he makes his way to the other side of the shed. Sure enough, Lily is right. In the corner, on its own, is a box that dons his daughter’s name.
Opening it, he finds a couple of lifejackets still in bags, some swim fins sealed in their packets, a kick board, and a couple of swimsuits. And Eric could tell himself that his parents bought them years ago, before the blow up over the wedding, but they are all the size that a four year old girl would wear.

“See? That’s my box,” Lily points out.

“I see that,” Eric answers in a shaky voice, “...Come on then. I’ll take off the tag for this lifejacket and bring it down if you need it. Can you get the kick board?”

“Yes, and you can grab us some noodles,” Lily tells him, “Those are fun. We can ride them like horsies!”

Eric can’t help but chuckle at the image of himself riding a noodle, but grabs two to make her happy, even though he has no plans on actually using one.

They walk down the wooden steps that lead to the doc, grabbing onto Lily’s hand once they step onto it so she doesn’t wander off the side.

“A sailboat!” Lily gasps, “Can we go on it now?”

“I don’t want to take it out without getting your grandpa’s permission,” Eric sighs, “I think it would be alright to take you in the pedalboat though, if you still want to after you swim.”

“That’s a great idea,” Lily agrees.

When they reach the edge of the dock, Eric puts their supplies on the bench, straps Lily up in a lifejacket despite her protests, before looking down at her.

“Well?” he prompts, “Go on. Jump.”

Lily looks down at the water with trepidation before grabbing onto his waist, “I don’t want to!”
“Lily,” he chuckles, “It’s like swimming in a pool.”

“I can’t see the bottom!” Lily informs him.

“That’s because it’s a bay. The bottom is dark, not white like a pool’s.”

That doesn’t help Lily’s confidence at all. It only makes her let out a cry and hold on to him tighter.

“Lily,” he sighs, stroking her hair, “We don’t have to go in. It’s alright.”

Lily doesn’t answer for a few seconds, but then whimpers, “You jump in first.”

“Okay,” he agrees, before trying to step forward with Lily’s arms still around him, “Are you jumping in with me?”

“No!” Lily yells, as if that’s preposterous.

“Alright. Then you need to let go of me so that I can jump in on my own,” Eric laughs, gently pushing her hands away.

Lily takes a step back and nod, wringing her hands together nervously.

“1,” Eric starts the count, “2...3!”

Eric jumps in the water, cannonball style, plunging into the deep water. He’s happy to know that the water feels as great as he remembers it.

When he comes up to the surface, he finds Lily looking at him, annoyed.
“You splashed me!” she exclaims, sputtering dramatically.

“Ooops,” Eric responds as he floats, not sorry, “Your turn.”

“Scare away the fishies first!” she demands, stomping her foot.

“I thought you liked fishies.”

“I do! But I don’t want anything surprising me. Now, go on!”

Eric lets out a laugh at her demanding behavior before splashing and kicking around the dock to make sure nothing is around it.

“They swam away,” he informs her.

Lily takes a deep breath and attempts to jump three times before finally gaining the courage to go through with the action.

“Good job!” he praises her as she bounces back up to the surface.

Lily laughs joyously, “I did it! I did it, Papa!”

“You did!” he answers just as happily, “I am very proud of you!”

Lily swims over to the ladder and climbs back up to the dock, “I’m gonna jump in again!”

Lily repeats the action without any hesitation this time and does it twice more before settling into swimming for a while. Eventually, he does let her take the jacket off so that she can use the noodle instead. She rides it like a horse, yells ‘Giddy up!’ and fills up the hollow section in between so that she can blow water from one end out the other.
“I...LOVE...THIS!” She yells out as she swims around.

“I’m glad,” he answers, amused.

Eventually, she remembers the pedalboat and gets back on the dock to wait to board. Eric wipes her up with a towel and applies more sunscreen to the both of them before getting on the boat. After he sits down, she holds out her arms and he lifts her off the dock and snuggles her for a moment before sitting her down in the seat next to him. He unties the boat from the post, puts his hand on the gear, and pedals them away from the dock. If Lily sits on the edge of her seat, her legs are just long enough for her to reach the pedals. So she is thrilled to help and keeps talking about how she’s a great driver. They go pretty far out and Lily is amazed over how small the dock looks. They sit there for a bit and talk about whatever random questions she comes up with before pedaling back towards the dock. For a while, he forgot about the pit in his stomach and the nerves keeping him awake for over 24 hours now. It isn’t until his mother comes to view on the dock that it comes back to him.

“Eric,” she greets him, pretty much emotionlessly, once he is a foot away from the dock, “It’s a...It’s a surprise to see you here.”

She still looks good for her age. Maybe a couple of more grey hairs. Her accent seems a little thicker than it was when he was in his teens and twenties, which makes him come to the conclusion that she is spending more time with the family, rather than other women in the area.

“It’s a surprise to be here,” he mutters, tying the boat up as Lily scoots over and hides her face into his elbow. Eric holds back a groan at the uncharacteristic action and turns around to pull her into his lap.

“Will you go say hi to Abuela?” he asks her, “Give her a hug?”

Lily doesn’t answer but doesn’t resist when he stands her on the dock.

“Hi, Abuela,” she says softly, “Thank you for the box.”

Although Lily is still wet, his mother doesn’t seem to mind when she hugs her. In fact, to Eric’s surprise, his mother holds onto her tightly and bites her lip.
“It’s no problem at all, bonita,” his mother responds, “...You are always welcome here.”

Although he would appreciate the sentiment under other circumstances, he isn’t sure that the offer extends to him.

Eric climbs up onto the dock and stands in front of them.

Dear Louisa looks him up and down and tsks, “You need to put a little weight on. Is your… partner not feeding you? He’s thin as well.”

Eric looks down at his toned body and scoffs, “Gay men don’t want the extra weight, mom. I think we both look pretty fantastic.”

“Mouthy as always,” his mom mutters, “Delphina told me you were down here. Are you finished? If you’re staying then you can help me with dinner.”

Before being able to answer, his mother starts to walk back down the dock and up the stairs to the house. He probably doesn’t have much choice but to follow her.

“Come on,” he mutters to his kid, grabbing her hand, “Let’s head on up.”

He takes a while to get the two of them changed. Lily refuses to go and wait downstairs while he showers so he lets her wait in his old room across the hall while he keeps it quick. When he opens the door, she practically falls into the bathroom head first.

“I thought you were waiting in the bedroom,” he asks her, helping her up.

“I didn’t want to!” she insists, looking around, “Am I getting in the bath now?”

“I’ll hose you down and wash out your hair while you wash yourself with the washcloth. Here, let’s get your suit off.”

Lily scrubs her body as Eric reminds her of the places that need washed before he washes and
conditions her hair. When she is rinsed off, he rings out her hair, dries her off, and gets her dressed in a green sundress. Then he just has to find the courage to go downstairs and converse with his mother.

They walk down the steps and he can hear his mother walking around the kitchen by the time they are down the hall. He pushes open the swinging door and quietly gets Lily settled at the small table by the window before turning to his mom.

“Chop those up,” she tells him, pointing at the onions on the table.

Eric glances at his daughter before walking over to the other side of the kitchen to do what his mother says. He peels the onion, throws the outer layer in the trash, and cuts the vegetable up into fine strips.

“That’s a lot of food for just a couple of people,” He comments, “Anyone coming that you are expecting?”

“Clara and Jacob. Their daughter Isobel. We haven’t seen them for a couple of months,” his mother answers before perking up, “You remember Isobel, don’t you? You took her to prom. She just got divorced, you know.”

Eric winces at the remark. He should have known it would only be a matter of time.

“That’s unfortunate,” is all he can say.

“Maybe you two can catch up. It might cheer her up,” his mother says, glancing at him in the process.

And maybe the comment doesn’t justify him stabbing the knife into the wooden cutting board, but he does it anyway.

“Watch it,” his mother warns, “That’s from Crate & Barrel.”

“Papa, what’s divorce?” Lily asks from the table.
Eric sighs and sends a glare to his mother. She’s too busy focusing on food preparation that she doesn’t even catch it.

“Divorce,” he starts, turning around, “Is when two people who are married aren’t happy being married anymore.”

“You mean they don’t love each other anymore?” she asks in a small voice.

“Some of the time,” he admits, “But sometimes they still care about the other person but just can’t work things out. They work better apart and as friends.”

“But you and Daddy would never get divorced, huh?” Lily presses.

“I could never see myself divorcing your Daddy,” he answers, eyes going soft, “I love him, along with you, Gus, and your new baby sister, more than anything in this world.”

He doesn’t miss the way his mother chops the cilantro more forcefully at that.

“Abuela,” Lily prompts, facing her grandmother, “Are you Gussy’s Abuela too?”

“Of course she is,” Eric cuts in, before his mother can make any denials about it, “He’s your big brother, isn’t he?”

Lily nods, “He is! I love him but I don’t like him sometimes. He doesn’t like playing as much anymore.”

“Necesito aire fresco,” his mother mutters under her breath, before storming out of the kitchen.

The kitchen is silent for a moment as he and Lily both stare at the back door.

“What’s her problem?” his daughter asks.
Eric turns to look at her and shrugs.

“I’ve been trying to figure that out for years now.”

His father’s Mercedes comes up the driveway at 5:30. Early for him, even when there are guests for dinner. Maybe his dad is mellowing out when it comes to work or maybe his mother called him to tell him his long lost son is here. Either way, it does make him nervous. Even when he was a teenager and seen as the high achiever and not even a question was brought up by his heterosexual front, he and his dad had a knack for bickering and being at odds. He always loved him and he knows that the feeling at least had been mutual. But now, that’s all up in the air. Out of the two of them, his mother had taken his coming out the hardest, which had surprised Eric even though it shouldn’t have, since his mom has always been more religious than his dad. While his father had not been thrilled at all whatsoever, Eric is sure that his mother’s devastation about the news had been what caused James Davisson to really be upset with him.

He hears his father’s footsteps in the steps leading from the garage to the hall before hearing hushed whispers between his parents. Eric tries to not listen for what is being said and focuses on the interactive book Lily is reading on her iPad.

“And Jack went up higher and higher and higher and higher,” Lily reads with the book as the animated boy crawls up the beanstalk.

“How’s my granddaughter?” his father greets jovially, squatting down to open his arms.

Lily quickly puts down the iPad, surprised, lets out a nervous giggle, puts her feet up on the seat, scoots back, and shrugs.

“Alright, huh?” his father guesses, glancing up at Eric while doing so.

Lily nods before sitting on her knees to stare up at Eric.

“You want to give your grandpa a hug?” he asks her.

Lily is compliant to the idea and wraps her arms around her grandfather’s neck. The older man
stands up straight, still as tall and fit as he was when he was young, and holds her tight. She isn’t as openly enthusiastic about the hug as she is when she hugs other family members or close friends and Eric hopes that she doesn’t feel forced to show affection.

After his dad lets her down, he is very attentive to Lily as she explains the book she is reading and how it works.

“And if I want him to go over there, I press here,” she explains, pressing the screen, “You can get lots of endings that way.”

“That’s pretty neat!” his father exclaims, holding the device out a bit to read it.

“Put on your glasses, James,” his mother sighs.

“My eyes are fine,” his father dismisses.

“You’ve had reading glasses for fifteen years, don’t tell me that they’re fine,” his mom retorts.

“Brian does the same thing,” Eric mentions, “But I’m pretty sure he might have some near-sighted issues that are getting worse as well. I think he’s starting to realize it too, so that might get him to schedule an appointment for September.”

Not surprisingly, his parents clam up at the mere mention of Brian. They don’t look in his direction and focusing on anything else seems to be preferable to them.

“I need glasses too!” Lily pouts, crossing her arms, “When Daddy goes and gets glasses, I need to go get glasses too!”

“You got your eyes checked last November,” Eric reminds her, “Perfect vision. You are very lucky.”

“But I need glasses,” Lily insists, not really getting it.
“Here are some glasses,” his father drawls, taking the aviator sunglasses off his shirt and putting them on Lily’s face. The action even makes Eric crack a smile.

Lily lets out a surprised laugh and holds her hands to the sunglasses, “These are too big!”

Lily takes them off, looks at them, then hands them back over, “Besides, I got sunglasses. Really pretty ones, not boy ones like that. I’m talkin’ about real glasses. Those ones are the ones I need.”

Lily surprisingly warms up to his father rather quickly and there’s a part of Eric that’s proud of his dad because his focus is solely on her. He’s silly with her. He listens to her intently as she tells stories, some that are true and others that are obvious fibs. And it’s not as if he’s surprised by it, per say. He has never doubted that his parents loved Lily. He knows they do and, before the blow-up he had with his mother regarding the wedding, the times that they did call, they always mentioned they wanted him to bring her down. They had even swallowed their pride to come and see her in Pittsburgh and Chicago a few times, despite the fact that meant they had to be around Brian. And not every single visit devolved into harsh words. Some of them were just stiff and uncomfortable. But when Brian wasn’t around, his parents tended to loosen up and act more like themselves, or at least the versions of themselves that Eric has known.

But, even though his parents, or at least his father, seems kinder this visit, he can’t get rid of the pit in his stomach because the man has yet to say a direct word to him.

He doesn’t try to get his father’s attention. He just goes back to what he’s doing and figures something will be said eventually. Eventually turns out to be an hour, when the doorbell rings. His mother is busy with the table arrangements in the dining room and his father is busy getting Lily hyped up. It’s a stark contrast from her quiet and distrusting demeanor whenever her grandparents and her daddy are in the same room but, with that particular tension not currently present, she seems to be comfortable in her grandpa’s company. His dad seems to enjoy the time with her even more. So much that, when the guests ring the bell, the man says, “Son, get that, will you?” as he holds Lily upside down while she belly laughs.

And, since it is the first time the older man has spoken to him directly this evening, he doesn’t even question the request.

“Yeah, sure,” Eric remarks, turning around to go to the foyer.

When he opens the door, he opens it to find the parents of his old high school sweetheart. There was Jacob Newsom, an entrepreneur and investor, broad shouldered and a bit pudgy, and friends with his father since Eric was in middle school. Standing next to him is his wife Clara, a
homemaker and a daughter of the Confederacy yet supposedly not the least bit racist, despite her occasional past snooty remarks on minority neighborhoods and undocumented workers. When those less than favorable remarks came out of her mouth, it used to bring out his mother’s passive aggressiveness in full force. The only reason she associated with the woman in the past was because his father became good friends with Jacob who, Eric can admit, is a pretty good man from what he can remember. He wonders if his mother has grown more tolerable of Clara or if Clara has grown more tolerable of people who are different than herself.

He doesn’t think it is that last one though. When Clara sees him, her nostrils flare on her sharp, pointed nose as brushes her salon styled frosted hair off of her shoulder.

“Oh. I wasn’t aware you’d be here,” she says in a frigid tone.

“I could say the same,” he shrugs.

And, as she stares at him with her cold, judgy icy blue eyes, Eric can’t help but wonder if she maybe comforted his mother when he came out as gay and they reveled in their shared disgust instead. That has to be the only reason his mother hadn’t been bitching all throughout preparing dinner.

“Eric, my boy!” Mr. Newsom greets, once he’s over his surprise, “How have you been? Still a major success?”

“Pretty major,” Eric nods, before holding out his hand a couple of seconds later, “How have you been, Mr. Newsom?”

“Call me Jake, please,” Jake dismisses as he shakes Eric’s hand in his memorable death grip, “I only had you call me that when were courting my daughter. But hell, if you’re interested, I wouldn’t mind having a son-in-law like you, especially now that she’s divorced that schmuck—

“Dad,” Eric hears a feminine voice behind the couple. As Jake turns, Isobel Newsom comes into view. Despite the non-conventional beauty of her parents, Isobel was always stunning. Blonde and tall like her mother, but with an hourglass figure and not all bones. Bright green eyes like her father, with an outgoing and cheerful personality that matched his. After things had dissolved with Cynthia near the end of the summer before his sophomore year, he had asked out Isobel as soon as junior year started up. He was with her until they went their separate ways for college, but during those two years, they had been seen as the picture perfect teenage pair by their classmates. It hadn’t been as if he wasn’t attracted to her. He could recognize and appreciate a beautiful woman when he saw one. It had been a reason it had taken him a while to decide to come out in the first place. He
had fucked her more times than he can count and he was able to convince himself from time to time that he had enjoyed it alright. And, even when he felt disconnected from the experience of being her boyfriend, he could appreciate her warm demeanor and sweet personality.

However, he could tell that she isn’t the girl he used to be with. Although still beautiful, her eyes are dull and her face lacks the glow she used to have. Her expression is lifeless and, even though he hasn’t given more than a few thoughts towards Isobel Newsom in at least fifteen years, it does hurt to see her unhappy.

“Isobel,” he greets holding out a hand to the woman, “It’s good to see you again.”

Instead of rolling her eyes at the offer of a handshake and pulling him into a hug like she might have done to anyone else at an earlier time in her life, she stares down at the hand, offers him her limp one in return.

“Eric,” is all she mumbles and leaves it at that.

And, as they all go in and settle around the table, he doesn’t focus on his parents like he expected to, at least not at first. He mainly focuses on Isobel’s silence and how distracted she is. He doesn’t focus on whether or not his parents and their guests stiffen when he speaks of his life with Brian or about the Gay and Lesbian Youth Center. He doesn’t even focus on his mother’s clenched grip on her fork as Clara speaks fondly about Donald Trump until her voice raises.

“He’s a stupid man,” his mother practically spits out, “He’s a stupid man who has no experience and is completely delusional-”

“Yes, he doesn’t mince his words but, as they say, he’ll make America great again,” Clara dismisses, “I know you two are for Rand Paul though. Not surprising out of you, Louisa, since you have always been relatively moderate. But my god, Jake here is for Clinton. The trials of being married to a democrat, I swear-”

“And the exasperations to being married to a republican,” Jake retorts, oddly more fondly, before turning to Eric, “Who are you for, kid?”

“Oh,” Eric starts, “I don’t know. I like Bernie Sanders. I think he is genuine and passionate. Clinton is really qualified so I wouldn’t mind if she got the nomination either but I like his ideas, stances, and personality more. Plus, Lily does a good impression of him. Lily, show them your
Bernie Sanders impression.”

Lily shakes her head and ducks her face under his arm. Damn. Usually, she loves to get a chance to put on a show.

So Eric just shrugs and says, “She usually isn’t this shy. She might warm up after dinner.”

“Well…it’s not a surprise that you’re so far to the left,” Clara comments in a fake tone, “I mean, you are a homosexual now, aren’t you?”

The table goes silent at that but Eric doesn’t miss a beat.

“That I am,” Eric responds proudly, “You don’t have a problem with that. Do you, Mrs. Newsom?”

Clara’s face forms a pinched expression, “It’s your life, I suppose. Although, I cannot wrap my head around the idea of gay marriage. And the fact that you went through with it even though it upset your mother so-”

“That’s enough!” his father barks, slamming his butter knife down on the table before taking a deep breath and calming down, “It isn’t appropriate talk for the table. And, like you said, it’s Eric’s life. Leave it at that.”

Clara stares at his dad, judgment clear in her eyes, “From what I gather, you weren’t so happy about it either, James. And here you are defending him?”

“It doesn’t concern you. Whatever I feel or my wife feels deals with our family. Last I checked, you weren’t a Davisson or a Castillo.”

The tension is thicker than it has been all night and he figures this is how Lily must feel when Brian and his parents have argued in the past in front of her. But, looking over towards Lily to see how she is handling it, she doesn’t seem scared by what is going on at all.

“I was the flower girl at my daddy and papa’s wedding,” she informs them, brushing her hair back,
“I was the bestest flower girl ever and threw flowers all over the floor. Then they kissed a lot and danced and stuff because that’s what you do at weddings.”

The disgusted look that forms on Clara’s face makes him want to laugh. He manages to hold back, but just barely. His mother stays silent and looks at her plate, Isobel and Jake look embarrassed by everything, and his father...well, Eric doesn’t even know how to read his father right now.

“I think it is time for a subject change,” Jake announces, forcing a well-meaning tone, “James is right, honey. It is Eric’s business.”

The rest of dinner goes smoothly, but that’s mainly because Eric keeps to himself except when it comes to Lily. He does help his mother clean up. He can tell she has no desire to sit in the same room as Clara so it is up to his father to entertain the guests in the living room. He can hear Lily ‘playing’ the piano. If the situation were different, he would be embarrassed and lead her out of the room. But, since that bitch is in there and, at one point, she comes into the kitchen to “get away from that noise” he lets his daughter explore her creative side.

Not that spending time with his mother in the kitchen is preferable to a large extent. She barely speaks a word to him and the conversation from the dinner table lingers over their heads. It takes him a bit, but he eventually has to ask.

“So...um, was it just me or did Dad defend me at the dinner table?” he asks her. She’s the wrong person because of her stance but at the same time she is the most ideal. No one knows James Davisson better than his wife.

“It was just you,” she answers coldly.

Eric’s lips go into a grim line as he shakes his head, “I think you’re lying.”

His mother stops at that, her hands gripping the kitchen counter as her knuckles whiten.

“He misses you. He wants to see his granddaughter, whom you’ve kept from us, more or less. Just because he wants you both in his life, in our lives, doesn’t mean he has suddenly convinced himself to approve of your relationship with Brian.”

“I have never kept her from you!” he grits out accusingly, standing at full height to stare her down,
“You have always been welcome to see her! You could have seen her at the wedding but you couldn’t stand to see her in such an ‘awful living situation!’”

“I don’t want to talk about it!” she snaps, “I’m tired of talking in English, go away!”

“¡Vamos a hablar en español a continuación!” he retorts, a bit too loudly before noticing his mother’s tears.

“¡Déjame en paz!” she choke out, dabbing her eyes with her apron, before calming herself down enough to finish putting the plates away, all while Eric stares at her, stunned.

“Mama...” he murmurs, reaching out.

“Vete,” his mom answers in a raspy voice, looking away as she catches his hand in her own, putting a halt to any potential comfort.

And he knows that he won’t get anywhere with her, not now at least. So he steps away and, only letting himself look back once to check on her, he walks out of the kitchen and onto the front porch. Instead of punching the pillar or yelling curse words until a neighbor calls the police, he is distracted by the smell of marijuana instead.

“Sick of the bullshit?” Isobel asks, lighting a fucking bowl on his parents’ front porch.

Eric studies her for a second before looking away, “You could say that.”

Isobel nods before extending the bowl out, “You want a hit?”

Eric lets a scoff out at the offer, “Please. And give my mom more ammunition regarding me as a parent?”

“Your dad signed a petition to legalize medicinal marijuana a couple months ago. It even made the local paper.”
Eric shakes his head and goes over to sit next to her on the porch swing, “Is that what you’re doing? Medicating yourself?”

“Are you judging me?” she questions, eyebrow raised.

Eric shakes his head, “Considering my husband smokes it a few times a week and I join him occasionally, I think it would be hypocritical for me to judge. Although, he isn’t medicating himself. He just enjoys getting high.”

Isobel doesn’t say anything back, just lets the smoke escape through her lips as she exhales. After she takes another hit and breathes out again, she turns to look at him.

“He’d have no reason though, would he? Gossip is that you and him are some kind of power couple, madly in love and taking charge of the world.”

“Gossip with whom?” he asks, genuinely curious.

“People we went to school with who see me on the street. You were one of the most popular topics at the twenty year class reunion too.”

“I don’t think I want to know,” Eric mutters.

“Seventy-five percent of them weren’t homophobic,” she brushes off, “Sure, you had a few of the old jocks that threw out insults at the mere sound of your name but, for the most part, people just wanted to know how if I was still in contact with you. They were impressed by your accomplishments. They also wanted to know how I felt about my high school sweetheart being with a man now.”

Eric nods and looks down at the space between them, “So what did you say?”

Isobel shrugs, “Not much. I was too concerned about my husband fucking another woman behind my back and hitting on Brenda Showalter every time he got up to get drinks.”

Eric bites his lip at that, “Damn...I remember Brenda. She sat in front of me in Calculus. Really
smart. Unfortunate headgear braces.”

“She’s pretty hot now,” Isobel informs him, “For someone our age.”

“She had potential,” Eric recalls.

Isobel stares at him for a second and huffs out a laugh, “I still can’t believe you’re gay.”

“Why is it so unbelievable?” he asks her.

She shrugs, “I just never got that vibe from you. You dated girls. You brought home your girlfriend from college for spring break freshman year and I was so jealous. You had no problem getting it up. How does that work, anyway?”

Eric lets out a laugh, “A high sex drive. And it isn’t as if you are that hard to look at.”

“Gee, thanks,” Isobel snorts.

“Besides,” Eric continues, “Whenever I was having a tough time, I would just close my eyes and imagine your brother.”

Isobel recoils at that, “That’s kind of fucked up.”

Eric smirks, “It’s the truth. How is he doing, anyway?”

“Married,” she answers pointedly, “To a woman. They just had their fifth kid.”

“Fifth?” he mouths disbelievingly.

“Fifth,” she confirms, “And they’re happy. He’s a fucking nut for having so many. But hell, who am I to judge? He is managing while I can’t even get my boys to stay with me. They are living
with their dad and his bimbo fiance. CJ had no desire to live with me at all. He’s always been close to Clark. But Will, he’s my baby. And he wanted to live with me but he and CJ are so close and I had to let him go—"

And, with that, she drops the pipe on the floor and cries into her hands.

“Shit,” he mutters under his breath as he forces himself to put a hand on her back. And he doesn’t know what to do after that.

He is usually less awkward around people who are crying. It is a given that Lily will cry a few times a week so he’s mastered the art of comforting her. Then there are his more sensitive friends like Emmett and Emmett is so approachable to begin with. He has Rick, who is the complete opposite of Emmett, but they are so close and he has seen Rick at his worst. Eric knows how to get him out of his dark periods when his own wife often has a tougher time. And Brian? It’s rare, but he’s seen it happen. And, since he usually knows Brian like the back of his own hand, he knows when to comfort him and when to step back and leave him alone.

He may have been with this woman for two years when she was a girl, but he doesn’t know the first thing about the person Isobel Newsom grew into.

“I wish I would have never met him,” she gasps out, wiping her eyes.

“Then you wouldn’t have your boys,” he reminds her.

“It’s not like I get to see them much anyway,” she mutters.

“You will,” he answers, not knowing whether that is truth or not, “You will and you’ll realize that, even if Clark is a fucking cunt, doesn’t mean he didn’t play an important part in your life.”

She doesn’t answer that, she just looks away as he awkwardly removes his hand from her back and waits before bending down to chuck the bowl out into the yard right as her parents come outside. Isobel stands up when she sees them, smoothing down her skirt as she composes herself. Clara looks at them suspiciously as she sniffs the air.

“You may want to tend to your child,” Clara says, distaste clear, “I, for one, taught my children to be seen but not heard.”
“Just another lesson I can learn from you, Mrs. Newsom,” Eric winks before standing up, giving a nod to Isobel, and leaving them on the porch without so much as a goodbye.

When he heads back into the house, it’s relatively quiet. The only sound heard is the C scale on repetition. His mother is nowhere to be found in the kitchen. He ends up finding his father in the sunroom, reading some Vietnam book, which does surprise Eric since his father tended to avoid talking about the war when he was growing up. He can see why. Leaving your wife and firstborn to ship off to a war you don’t even know whether or not you agree with would upset Eric too.

“Find any discrepancies?” he asks him, standing in the doorway.

His dad looks confused for a second before looking down at the book, “A few. It romanticizes a few aspects that shouldn’t be romanticized.”

Eric nods, “You never told me about your time there.”

His dad stares at him, then shakes his head, “And I don’t plan to. The past is in the past. Leave it at that.”

Eric lets out a sigh and suddenly doesn’t know what to do with his hands or legs. He just stands there, waiting for some kind of prompt.

“What, Eric?” his dad finally asks, annoyed.

“Did you...Were you…” Eric starts, only to back up then give up, “...Nevermind. Goodnight.”

The other man studies him for a second before looking away, “Goodnight.”

Eric starts to back out of the sunroom before he is stopped.

“Eric?”
Eric steps back in, “Yeah?”

“I don’t want to see your mother upset for the rest of your visit, do you hear me?” his dad warns. And that’s what it is. A warning.

“She-,” Eric starts, emotions starting to run high.

“Is your mother,” his dad barks out, “And she’s my wife.”

“Then she needs to get over the fact that I’m with Brian!” he explodes, “I’m sorry that I made her cry, I really am, but she did the same fucking thing to me when she told me she wasn’t coming to my wedding! So you can sit there, knowing the things she said to me, but just because she got upset by me trying to talk to her about it, I get scolded for it?”

“Let it go!” his father snarls, “I’ll deal with your mother if a rough patch comes up but don’t purposely go out of your way to stir things up.”

Eric stays silent for a few moments, willing himself to calm down.

“...I always wanted to make her happy,” he finally responds, “...I didn’t turn gay to upset her or to upset you. I’ve...I’ve always been like this. It just took me a little longer to say it. I wanted to make you both proud but I couldn’t hide it any longer. Sneaking around was killing me.”

He closes his eyes as he waits for his father’s response and only opens them when he realizes he isn’t going to get one. When his father comes into, he can see the man blinking, as if he’s blinking moisture out of his eyes. That’s what he would interpret if anyone else looked like his father does in this moment. But it’s his dad. His dad isn’t like that.

“I’m sorry she’s upset,” he rasps out, “Let her know that didn’t mean to lose my temper with her. Goodnight.”

When he goes to the living room, he finds Lily curled up, asleep, on the piano bench. Letting out a watery chuckle, he picks the little girl up and holds her close as she comes to.
“Papa?” she asks, rubbing her eyes, “Where did you go?”

“Outside for a little bit,” he shrugs, “Did you put on a nice concert?”

Lily nods before putting her head on his shoulder, “I did, Papa. The best.”

“Sorry I missed it,” he tells her, kissing her hair, “Ready for bed?”

He takes Lily’s lack of answer as a yes then carries her upstairs to help her get ready to get tucked in. He thinks about putting her in Amanda’s old room but worries she may wake up confused, afraid, and alone. So he tucks her in next to him and, as he holds her next to him, he knows he really didn’t want to be alone either.

Even though it is only 8:30, he needs to sleep desperately. But he also knows Brian will be worried if he doesn’t give him a call. Besides, the man needs to know where they are at. He knows he did wrong by not discussing it with him in the first place.

Also, he could really do with hearing his husband’s voice.

Taking a deep breath, he dials Brian’s cell and waits for him to pick up. He worries that he won’t, that he’s busy with something or has his phone on silent. But, after four rings, Brian’s drunken voice over the phone.

“Hello, my love!” Brian slurs out, “How are you doing on this fine evening?

He feels a lump in his throat form and can’t even bring himself to answer.

“Eric?” Brian asks, a little concerned now, “Everything okay?”

“Uh...yeah,” Eric breathes out, “I...I just called to tell you something.”

“...What is it?” Brian inquires, waiting.
Eric inhales and tries to be casual.

“Work ended a little early. I have everything I need to do with this project done, at least for a while. I guess my workaholic ways paid off.”

“That’s good,” Brian answers, “You sound off though. What’s the matter?”

Eric breathes for a moment, trying to think of the best approach to admit what he had done, before just letting himself say it.

“I...I needed to visit my parents,” Eric finally answers, “I don’t know if it was talking about them last weekend or just a conversation I had with Lily. But I drove to North Carolina. Lily and I are staying here overnight. Fuck, Brian. I don’t know what I expected. I just know that I needed to hear your voice.”

Brian is silent over the line, except for his breathing. Then, he isn’t.

“Have they said anything to you?” Brian asks him, “Are they upsetting you?”

“No...I don’t know,” he cracks, face crumpling.

“Shhhhh,” Brian tries to soothe over the line, “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

Eric wipes his eyes and sniffs, “I’m just really tired.”

“I bet,” Brian murmurs, “Lie down. I’ll stay on the phone with you. Just close your eyes. We’ll talk more once you get some sleep.”

“I heard Emmett,” Eric yawns out, “Are you bein’ a sap in front of him?”

Brian scoffs, “Yeah, right. And give Mr. Romantic that kind of satisfaction? I made him go inside.”
I am too buzzed to get out of his hammock.”

Eric hums out an amused sound as his eyes fight to stay opened, “Keep talkin’.”

And he does. Eric doesn’t hear all of it, just catches random words like, “drama princess” and “Lily” and “I promise” and “love.” He can’t string any of it together to make sense of it. But that’s okay because the last thing he hears before he falls asleep is Brian’s voice and that’s good enough for him.

Chapter End Notes

For a Spanish to English translation, a document has been provided:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1esgJrHtF5Yi5Q_IuRVDVUOiVOiWRgFXrlmewsAiJfk/edit?usp=sharing
As Eric wakes up to an empty house, he can tell that it is going to be a challenging day.

Yeah, I know. It has been forever. I have not abandoned this story, I promise you. I've been working 70 hour work weeks for months and I just didn't have the energy to write. I am now proud to say that I will be moving out of state to work only 40 hours a week at one job instead of two. So hopefully I will have more time now. I hope you enjoy this chapter I have split chapters again since I wanted to get this out there, but this was originally going to cover a lot more. It would mean a lot if you would review and be honest but respectful. Thank you for sticking around.

It takes Eric a while to even open his eyes. It’s as if his eyelids were weights and just lifting them was a strain. Groaning, he rolls onto his side and sticks an arm out, skin brushing the vacant side of the bed.

Once he realizes that something isn’t quite right, his eyes open pretty quickly.

Looking around, memories from yesterday rapidly flood his mind and he quickly comes to the conclusion that he’s not in New York or New Orleans or even Chicago, Pittsburgh, or Saint Bart’s, three places his dreams like to take him on occasion. He is here. In Southport, North Carolina.

“Lily?” he calls out, confused over the lack of curly haired four year olds in the room, “Lily, where are you?”

He gets out of bed and finds his phone on the floor. Picking it up, the only thing he finds is a message from Brian.
Get some rest, you dick. I love you so much, okay? Fucking jerk.

Feeling a little exasperated and guilty over Brian’s message (and over the fact that it is almost 11 am,) he walks out of the room and looks down the hall.

“Lily?” he says again, a little louder.

He checks the two bathrooms on the floor as well as his sister’s and brother’s old rooms before heading downstairs. The hopes that his mother had just made Lily breakfast are dashed when he finds the kitchen empty, as well as the dining room. He peeks into the living room, the parlor, the entertainment room, his dad’s study. Nothing. He goes out into the sunroom and goes outside, goes to the other side of the pool and, as he looks down the cliff, he sees that the boats are still anchored to the port and there’s no one on the dock.

That’s when he starts to panic.

Biting his lip, he briskly walks back inside and yells, “Mom? Dad?!”

Nothing.

“Fuck,” he mutters, gripping his hair with his left hand. He probably doesn’t have a reason to panic. Maybe they took her to Main Street or for a drive but why wouldn’t they have asked him? They should have fucking asked him. There’s no excuse for that.
He pulls out his phone and calls his mother, but hears her cell in the other room, charging on the
desk. She’s been bad about taking her phone places ever since his parents got Nokias in the late
90s. Despite having the newest model of the iphone, she still had barely any use for it.

He tries his father’s number after and it rings a few times before going to voicemail. He tries not to
panic. He knows he will chew them out regardless whenever they are back, even if they just took
her out for a couple hours to spend some time with her. But the words his mom said several months
back keep ringing in his ears. About feeling sorry for Lily. About deserving a mother and a father.
It makes him wonder…

No. They wouldn’t just take her.

After calling his dad several times over the next 45 minutes, he starts to think he could be wrong
on that point after all. Maybe he should call the police. Fuck, he doesn’t want to have to do that.
He’ll call Brian. He doesn’t want to have to do that either but he deserves to know and if Eric kept
any potential issues regarding Lily from him, especially after not telling him about the whim to
drive to Southport, Brian would probably make Eric sleep on the couch for a year. Or until he got
too horny to function. Whichever came first.

He’s halfway through dialing Brian’s number when the word “Dad” comes up on the screen.

“Dad,” he answers urgently.

“Eric?” his father answers, confused and a little concerned, “What’s wrong? What made you call
seven times in the last-”
“I called because I don’t know where the fuck Lily is!” he interrupts, louder than he means to, “Why would you think you had the right to just take her wherever you did-”

“Calm down!” his father barks out before taking on a more soothing tone, “Eric, really. Just slow down. What are you talking about?”

“You know what I am talking about!” Eric laughs disbelievingly, “Why are you-”

“Son, I spent the morning at a meeting before hitting the golf course with a few colleagues. I haven’t seen Lily since this morning. She was doing somersaults and playing pretend in the upstairs hallway at around 6:30 and seemed nervous to come downstairs. I got her to come down with me. Your mom was in the pool with her when I left at 8.”

“What?” Eric chokes out, gripping his hair again, “You don’t know where she is?”

“Why?” his dad asks, growing more urgent, “Is your mother there with you? Why are you so-”

“No, she isn’t here with me,” Eric groans out, holding the bridge of his nose, “And, wherever she is, she didn’t bring her damn phone.”

“She always leaves her phone, alright? I get on her about that too. Now, calm down. Her not being there is a good thing. Actually, she mentioned thinking about taking Lily out for breakfast. She most likely took Lily out and let you sleep. Mystery solved.”
“The mystery of ‘Why wasn’t her father informed?’ sure isn’t fucking solved!”

His dad lets out a sigh, “I’ll be home soon. I was about to have lunch at the resort but I will just tell them that there’s an issue back at the house.”

“Don’t bother,” Eric scowls.

“Er-”

It may be a dick move, but Eric hangs up before the man can get his name out.

After about twenty minutes of pacing, he realizes there isn’t much he can do. He can’t stand to be alone with his thoughts right now. He doesn’t want to stress Brian out more than he probably did last night so he calls his sister to vent and she provides a sympathetic ear before telling him she’ll drive the two hours with the boys to crash dinner. He thinks about calling Rick or his brother but, surprisingly, his dad decided to bother, despite Eric’s advice, and comes through the front door.

“I told you not to bother,” Eric mutters before stalking away.

“Yeah, I know. But when have we ever seen eye to eye?” his dad asks him.

Eric turns to glare at him, all while his dad just raises an eyebrow in return.
“Look, Eric-”

“Don’t,” Eric warns.

“I get why you are upset,” the man keeps going, “But I don’t think Louisa meant any harm by taking her out. She...She thinks about Lily all the time. She loves Julian and Carlos but Lily’s her first grandchild and the only girl-”

“For now,” Eric reminds him, “Brian and I are having another daughter. But I suppose if the kid ends up biologically being Brian’s, you both won’t see her as part of the family.”

His dad stares at him for a moment before shaking his head.

“You’re wrong. She’ll still be Lily’s half-sister in that case, right? You’ll adopt her? She’ll be family.”

Eric looks away before sitting down on the couch, “You’ve barely even spoken to Gus.”

“He’s...older. He doesn’t live with the both of you. He’s never really been connected to us.”

“He’s connected to me,” Eric hisses, putting a palm to his chest, “He’s the closest to a son I will probably ever have and you don’t care about him. So why should I believe you care about Lily?”
“God damn it, Eric!” his dad yells out, throwing his hands up in the air, “I didn’t come back home to be accused and insulted. I came home to try to placate you and maybe offer you some company and you’re just twisting everything into another argument!”

The thing is, Eric knows his dad is right, at least partially so. He knows he’s being unfair to an extent and letting everything that has built up pour out sporadically. He’s acting fucking crazy. The distance has made his relationships with them foreign and toxic and the bitterness he holds over it is spilling over before he can even stop it. He can’t even recognize himself.

“I need a few minutes,” Eric whispers, rubbing a palm over his face, “I’m...I’m sorry, alright? I’m not usually like this.”

His father looks at him strangely before nodding his head, “I know.”

Eric diverts his eyes in another direction as he walks out of the room and up the stairs. Even though he’s pissed about his mother taking Lily, he should try to be at least a little productive to get his mind off things.

He ends up going to the attic to dig around in boxes. Even though finding Ellie was barely a reason for coming here, Lily thinks that it was one of the sole reasons. It takes him a while, partly because he will stop and reminisce when he finds a book, a picture, one of his grandfather’s bowties that he ends up slipping in his pocket, games he used to play with his brother and sister. But eventually, he finds her, tucked in a box labeled “Ellie” and that doesn’t make him sniffle at all. She’s wrapped carefully in a bag, protected from dust and dirt and Eric feels grateful and confused as hell about that.

The garbage bag hasn’t completely protected her. She looks a bit worn, but she could have looked like that when she was taken up to the attic over two decades ago. She smells musty and old and he
should probably do something about that before giving her to Lily. Taking her down to the first floor, he walks through the living room where his dad’s still sitting tensely and stands in front of him.

“How should I wash this?” he asks, holding the stuffed animal out, “Delicate cycle?”

His dad forces out a chuckle, “Your mother or Delphina would be better people to ask but I washed that damn thing enough times to tell you the answer is yes. And cool water. Warm and hot messes with the glue underneath the eyes.”

Eric gives him a nod, then gives him a quick thanks, before taking Ellie down to the basement and into the washroom to throw her into the machine.

He just needs to figure out what to do until Lily gets back.

Turns out, he doesn’t have much time to ponder because his dad intercepts him in the hall.

“Come on,” he says, now in a pair of khaki swim trunks and a white button down shirt, “Get dressed. We can go out on the boat.”

“What-”

“Just humor me,” his dad interrupts, waving him off, “It’s a nice day and I’m sure as hell not going to spend it in here as you grumble around the house.”
Eric actually forces back a laugh at that, “So you’re going to spend it with me grumbling out in the middle of the ocean?”

“I can always take my chances and jump in if you get to be too much or put me on the spot. I’m a great swimmer. Would have tried for the Olympics. Started training and everything. But then your brother came and then the draft and...that was that.”

“Wait, seriously?” Eric asks, shocked by the reveal.

“Seriously,” his father answers, “I taught you, didn’t I? Now go get dressed.”

Eric doesn’t see himself getting out of it. In all honesty, he doesn’t feel an urgent need to figure out a way to.

The sound of the waves as they leave the bay drown out the silence between them. His father takes his default role of captain as Eric sits on a seat farther down on the deck, trying to get his mind off his daughter. His dad doesn’t take the boat out as far as he has done in the past. Maybe he knows Eric doesn’t want this to be an all day thing, that he wants to be back in an hour or two at most. But if the older man does catch onto that, he doesn’t say anything. He just puts the boat in autosteer and lets it drift as he steps away from the wheel, before going inside the cabin.

“You better make sure that we don’t drift too far out,” Eric calls out, warning him, “I’m not staying out here all day.”
“Oh, I’ve only gotten us lost a couple of times,” his dad waves off as he comes back with two beers, “Like the new wheel? I made the cabin bigger too. Did that myself.”

“I saw,” Eric nods, studying the cabin, “It looks really nice.”

Without another word, his dad reaches over to hand him a beer. Eric stares at it, waiting for some kind of catch. What kind? He really isn’t sure. But the amount of times he has sat down and had a beer with his dad is in the single digits.

“Come on, take it. It’s not like you’ll get drunk and even if you did, I’ve already seen that. Remember whose car you puked in when you were in high school? Besides, I get it delivered special from Vermont and I am the only person they are shipping it to at the moment. A guy there owes me his life and that always gives me perks.”

Eric has to snort at that and takes the beer.

“...I know this one,” Eric comments, studying the label, “Heady Topper. Out of Waterbury, right?”

“How’d you know?”

“I went up there and designed some park structures and a small resort. A more low-key project than I usually take but the people who asked were nice and open-minded. I only went there for the measurements and layout then checked in from time to time through construction but Brian went up with me and discovered it up there. For the record, we did get drunk off of it. But it only took four until I got to that point.”
“Jesus, I don’t know if you’re even mine,” his father looks at him in mock disgust before taking a swig. “We didn’t really drink around you kids but when we went out, your mother could almost drink me under the table when she wanted to. So there’s no reason for you to be such a lightweight.”

“Brian can hold it a lot better than me,” Eric admits, laughing a little, “He loves this brand too. He’ll be pissed if he finds out that they are shipping to someone. I think he asked if they did and they said no.”

“Should have used his advertising executive abilities,” his father surprisingly answers, “Offered them a plan to expand.”

Eric studies his dad for a moment before his lips form a small smile, “Maybe he should have. I’ll let him know you said that.”

His father says nothing to that and just stares out towards the water, almost looking peaceful.

“I think…” Eric starts, taking a chance on the subject, “I think that you would really like him if you got to know him.”

“Hmmm,” his dad hums, so Eric just continues.

“He’s really smart. And a great businessman. Driven, successful. So ambitious that it can be a bit daunting. He’s also a really great dad to Lily and Gus. A great husband, even though he thought he
would never be.”

His dad takes a second then nods, “I’m glad he’s a good dad. I’m glad Lily has great parents. She deserves them...Gus too.”

Eric swallows and his dad continues.

“And I know he’s a good businessman and advertising exec. I’ll admit that I can admire him for that.”

“You can?” Eric asks, trying to find a catch again.

But all his dad says is, “Yeah.”

And nothing else.

But he has to know.

“Maybe...maybe we could...fuck, I don’t know...start over,” Eric manages to get out, “Maybe you could come up and stay with us for a couple of days or Brian could come down here. Mama too, if she is open to it. I just...I just really want us to be a family. I always have. I think that’s why I came here on a whim. With Lily asking more questions about when I was a kid and with a new baby on the way...I don’t know. I just...I miss you guys so much. I was so lucky to grow up with you two as my parents. I want Brian to see why that’s true and get to know those people as well.”
His dad sits still for what feels like an eternity, as Eric just waits for an answer. Then, the older man downs his drink, stands up, takes off his shirt, and dives overboard, all while Eric gapes at him.

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” Eric yells, darting out of his seat and storming towards the edge of the boat, “Fuck you, Dad! I was trying to talk to you and you let me think I was fucking getting somewhere and THAT was too much for you?”

“Oh, shut up,” his dad groans as he does the backstroke, “I was open to a heart to heart but you kept on going. It was getting awkward.”

“I can’t believe I thought things would go anywhere!” Eric yells down at him, practically spitting, “I can’t believe-”

“I didn’t say no,” his dad points out.

“What?!” Eric exclaims, “You jumped overboard to get away from a serious conversation. You’re lucky if I don’t leave you here to swim back to shore!”

“Quit being dramatic!”

“I’m the dramatic one?” Eric scoffs, “Let me repeat: You jumped OVERBOARD to get away from your son.”
“I needed to clear my head,” his dad sighs, swimming to the metal ladder to hold onto, “But like I said, I didn’t say no.”

Eric swallows down the lump in his throat before glaring.

“You know, for a smooth and highly rated lawyer, you have some horrific social skills.”

His dad cracks a grin at that and shakes his head, “You and that sarcasm, Eric. You never parted, did you?”

“I’m not being sarcastic.”

His father struggles to give him a straight face but finally manages, at least for a moment.

“I’m sorry. It was bad timing to take a swim.”

“No shit,” Eric grumbles, as he slowly deflates.

His father lets out a sigh as he climbs up the ladder, dripping wet. He approaches Eric slowly, and puts his hands on his son’s shoulders.
“You’re getting me wet—"

“I’ll think about it. I...Damn it, I miss you too, alright? I don’t know if I can fully support you being...”

“Gay?” Eric finishes.

“Yeah. But I want to try to understand. For whatever that’s worth.”

Eric looks away and bites his lip, “It’s worth a lot. I just wish it would have happened a lot sooner.”

His dad breathes out and sits down before crossing his arms over his chest.

“I’m starting to...I’m starting to realize that I didn’t...that I didn’t do shit to try to meet you part way, even the times I was tempted to. I love your mother and seeing her so upset and heartbroken...I don’t know, I can’t see her like that. I blamed you. I think I was more upset about that than you being gay. I chose a side and that was a fucked up thing for me to do, when neither of you asked me to do that. If I had maybe tried to become neutral sooner, maybe she would have tried to come around too. When you...when you marry someone and that person is the love of your life...sometimes you don’t think rationally when they are hurting. I can’t explain it but—”

“You don’t have to,” Eric reminds him, flashing his left hand, the sunlight hitting his wedding ring, “When it comes to all of the things that have happened in the last...God, sixteen, seventeen years? Not thinking straight when the love of your life is in pain is one thing that you don’t have to explain to me.”
His dad looks at him silently for a moment before clearing his throat.

“Sucks, doesn’t it?”

Eric lets out a choked laugh, “Yeah, it really does.”

His dad surprisingly looks away to wipe at his eyes and lets out a loud sigh.

“Don’t you dare jump off the boat again,” Eric warns, this time with a small, amused smile.

“I wasn’t going to,” his dad scoffs, then stands back up, “I’m going to try, alright? And I will try to talk to your mom about it. Just...try not to fight with her or rile her up. If I take it slow with her, I think maybe I can convince her to try things out too.”

“And if you can’t?” Eric asks slowly.

His father bites his cheek and looks towards the water again.

“If I can’t, I’ll still love her and accept her decision, even if I am disappointed by it. And I’ll hope that she can accept my decision too and we can make that work.”
His dad turns back to meet his eyes once more. Despite not wanting them to, Eric’s eyes well up and he nods his head.

“Okay,” he chokes out.

The older man’s eyes crinkle as he gives his son a small smile.

“Okay.”

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When they get back onto the dock and up to the house, Eric only has to wait thirty minutes for his mom to pull into the garage.

He waits by the door and crosses his arms as he watches Lily get unbuckled from some car seat that he’s never even seen-

“It’s Laila’s,” his father answers, as if he’s reading his mind, “She watched her a lot over the summer on weekends.”

And they’re unloading god knows what from the trunk, like Lily needed spoiled more.

“Take it easy on her,” his dad warns him, “Express your grievances but don’t act all pissed.”
Eric is about to glare at him, but then forces himself not to. They came a long way in the last couple hours. He knows it took a lot for his dad to swallow his pride like that and admit that he was wrong. That he was sorry. Eric had to at least try not to flip out at the man’s wife.

“Papa!” Lily squealed as she came through the door, “You’re up! I thought you were gonna sleep forever and ever.”

“You could have done with a few more hours,” he smiles, looking down at her, “I heard you were up at 6:30.”

Lily shrugs and starts to speak at a rapid pace, “I was bored and wanted to play. I asked you to play with me but you just went like this.”

Lily falls to the floor and makes mumbling noises, rolling around as she does so, then jumps back up.

“So I played without you,” she finishes.

Eric bites back a laugh at Lily’s words before forcing himself to smile at his mother.

“Did you give her sugar?”

Before his mom can answer, Lily nods enthusiastically.
“I had lots and lots of sugar! I like sugar because it makes me happy and that means it’s good for me. I got peanut butter and chocolate pancakes at Jimbo’s, then Abuela and I had to do some shoppin’. I got to try on lots of dresses and stuff because I need more, you know? Then we went to the bookstore and me and Abuela picked out books and then we went to the toy store and I got Toymail! I can have one and so can you and we can talk into it and hear our voices and it saves it. That’s cool, huh?”

“Wow, that is cool,” Eric agrees, gritting his teeth, “That’s almost like a real phone.”

Eric then looks towards his mother, “Funny you would buy something like that for her when you don’t even keep your own phone on you yourself.”

His father clears his throat pointedly as his mother waves off the question.

“I don’t use it, so I forget it,” she excuses herself.

Eric lets out a humorless laugh and plasters on a grin, “What books did you get, Lily?”

“Here,” she starts urgently, “I’ll show you. I picked out two and Abuela picked out two. That’s fair, huh?”

Lily runs over to a bag and pulls out four books.
“These are the ones I picked out,” she says, handing him two, “They look great so I just had to get them.”

Eric turns over *The Last Stop on Market Street* and *The Paper Bag Princess* then nods, “These look really good. What are the other two?”

Lily takes her choices back and hands the other two over. The first one is *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, which is one he enjoyed when he was young. After he hands that one back, he looks at the second one. The second, although a classic that would be an innocent choice in any other scenario, makes him clench his fist.

“*Are You My Mother?*” Eric hums, sending a hard look towards his own mother, “Wonder why you picked that?”

“She may identify with it someday soon,” is all his mother says in response.

And Eric tries to let it go. He really does. But he can’t.

“I need to get out of this room,” he tells her, “Excuse me.”

Lily looks around, “Papa, where are you going?”

“Just downstairs,” he calls out, “I have a surprise for you.”
“Okay!” Lily answers, excited, “I’ll wait here and you come back!”

“Okay!” he tries to respond cheerfully before going to the basement.

When he gets there, although it is petty, throwing the book in the trash is a little satisfying. If Lily asks about it, he’ll buy her another one. But he won’t give his mother the satisfaction, not in this case.

He opens the dryer and pulls Ellie out, squeezing her a few times to make sure she’s completely dry. Holding her behind his back, he takes her upstairs and back into the living room. Lily is standing there, buzzing with a sugar high and excitement, as she waits for her surprise.

“I found something for you,” Eric smiles as he reveals the stuffed animal.

Lily gasps and jumps up and down, “Ellie!!!!”

Eric stifles a laugh as Lily take the elephant’s arms and dances with it, side to side before going around in circles.

“I LOVE her,” Lily announces, “I will keep her forever and carry her always.”
Eric feels his eyes crinkle at that as Lily calms down.

“What did you do today?” she asks him, suppressing a jump.

“Well, after I found out you ditched me, your grandpa and I went out on the sailboat. We had a good time. Grandpa jumped off the boat into the middle of the ocean.”

Lily’s lip wobbles, “Y-You went on the s-sailboat? But I w-wanted to go on the sailboat with you.”

Lily sniffs and tears build up in her eyes and his father must sense a breakdown coming as well because he quickly comes over.

“Your papa and I were just warming it up for you,” his father insists, ruffling Lily’s hair, “We will sail again this evening, just as the sun is about to set.”

Lily wipes her nose with her hand and stares up at him, “You promise?”

“Of course. And you have to help me prepare when it’s time. You are my co-captain, after all, right?”

Lily nods her head vigorously, “Yes, Yes I am!”
“Uh, Amanda’s coming in with the boys,” Eric mentions, “I...told her I was in. She wanted to come see me and Lily.”

“I’m still co-captain. NOT Julian,” Lily interjects firmly, “He’s still a baby and I am not!”

His dad smirks at that and turns to Eric, “The more the merrier. Amanda can sit with Carlos in the cabin so that he doesn’t fly overboard.”

“James, Carlos is still seven months old,” his mother frets.

“And you, my dear, will be there to make sure all precautions are set and in place,” his dad tells his wife teasingly before sobering up and glancing at the clock. “You’ll all have to excuse me for maybe twenty minutes or so. I have a phone conference starting at 2 so I’ll be in the office. It shouldn’t take long.”

Eric nods and watches his father go towards his study before turning to Lily.

“Lily, why don’t you take some of your things up to my room so we don’t forget them?”

“Okay,” Lily agrees, tucking Ellie against her side as she picks up one of the bags.

Eric waits for her to disappear up the stairs before turning to his mother.
“Don’t you ever take my daughter without my permission again.”

His mother glares, “Hijo, you were fast asleep. You needed the rest and she was restless.”

“I understand that. My point still stands. If you plan on taking her anywhere and I don’t know about it? You do everything to make sure I know. If you think there’s a chance that I am still half asleep or won’t remember then you don’t get to take her. And if there’s no way to reach you while you have her, then you won’t even have the privilege of spending time one-on-one with her.”

His mom stares at him, hard and challenging, as if she won’t back down and submit to the rules put in place. But Eric won’t step down either. They’re more alike than she realizes.

“Do you understand?” Eric asks her after a beat.

The woman purses her lips and gives a slight nod once, “Si.”

“Eso es bueno,” Eric answers, faking a little bit of kindness, “Has Lily had lunch?”

“Of course she’s had lunch,” his mother answers, offended, “I took her to an El Cerro Grande. She got fish tacos. Our leftovers are in this bag.”

“I was just wondering if I should make something for her,” Eric defends himself, holding his hands up, “I guess I can just make something for me and Dad.”
Louisa waves him off, “Lily and I got you both salads and some chips and guac to share. It’s not as
good as my food but it’s okay.”

Eric has to let out a laugh at that. Louisa Davisson has never been one to be modest when it comes
to her cooking. She had no reason to be.

“I’m sure I can stomach it, at least for today,” he winks, unconsciously putting a hand on her
shoulder, which only gives him an uncomfortable look in return, as if his own mother wants to
flinch away.

He puts his hand down pretty quickly after that and swallows his bitterness about it.

“Everything out of the car?” he asks her, voice straining.

“There are a couple of bags of Lily’s,” she answers, “Dresses, shoes. She’s very feminine, isn’t
she?”

“For the most part,” he agrees, “Her best friend is a boy, so she sometimes will force herself to be a
tomboy when it’s his turn to choose what they’ll play. The only things I can think of that she really
likes that aren’t considered, I don’t know, girly, I guess, are building blocks and legos.”

“Does she like to build things like you did? As you still do, I suppose,” His mother asks, genuinely
wanting to know.
Eric feels a sense of pride when he nods his head, “She does. And she has an eye for it too. She has a lot of other interests. Flamenco classes are a big thing with her right now. She likes to help with cooking and baking. She likes being in front of the camera and ‘making shows’ as she calls it and is interested in Brian’s film cameras. But you never know. She may follow in my footsteps.”

“Hopefully only in some ways,” his mother answers, not so subtly.

Eric has to force himself to take a breath in order to not say something he will regret and bites the inside of his cheek.

“I’ll get the bags,” he mutters before walking out to the front of the garage. He takes his time going back into the house and, by the time he’s back in the living room, his mother can be heard walking around in the kitchen.

His stomach rumbles but his stubbornness wins out. Maybe he can bring himself to be around her by the time dinner is on the table.

He finds Lily upstairs, sitting on the bed in a circle with Ellie, her Toymail, a Selena Gomez Barbie doll he had gotten her for her birthday, and a fucking Voodoo doll that the twins had gotten her at a museum gift shop while they were watching her on one of his busier days in New Orleans.

“Daddy, come sit down,” she insists, moving Selena aside so that she can pat the place next to her, “We’re all talkin’ about our problems.”

Eric studies her incredulously and tilts his head, “What...huh? Where did you see that?”
Lily gives him a look, “TV! With Emmett and Duncan. It was bunches of people and they sat around and cried and stuff then one of them yelled a lot and-”

“I have got to get Emmett to stop watching Celebrity Rehab in front of you,” Eric sighs as he sits down, “Well? Who’s going to go first?”

Lily straightens her posture, “It’s time for our group talk. Ellie, you go first. What’s wrong today, Ellie?”

Lily donned a wobbly voice as she picked Ellie up to act as a puppeteer.

“No one bleeping cares!” Lily had her toymail jump in, “You’re a bleeping baby and it’s bleeping sad that you can’t-”

“Let her talk!” Selena Gomez had jumped in, “You are mean!”

“Bleep Bleep Bleepedy Bleep! I’m gonna throw a bleeping chair! Blereeeeeeeeeeep-”

“Okay, let’s not play this game anymore,” Eric interrupts, taking the toymail from her grasp and
setting down on the end table.

Lily crosses her arms and pouts, “You’re no fun.”

Eric just shakes his head as he pulls out his phone.

Celebrity Rehab? With Lily? Really, Emmett?

It only takes thirty seconds for a response.

She and Duncan had come downstairs early!
It was a weekend marathon! She only saw a few minutes!!!!!!! It was like a month ago! Why?
What’s she doing? Have you heard from Brian yet?

Eric squints at his phone and types back

She’s having a colorful session of group therapy with her toys. I heard from him this morning. Why?

Eric watches the ellipsis bubble pop up on the screen for over a minute before receiving a simple response.
Just checking! I have a meeting in Manhattan and need to tell Duncan to get his trunks on. Drew is taking him to the Aquatics center for swim class. Ttyl?

Yeah, ttyl. Give Duncan a hug from me

Will do! Byeeeeeekkkkkkk

“Papa!”

Eric turns to look at his daughter and sees her waiting impatiently.

“Since you said I can’t play my game, what am I ‘posed to do now?”

Eric rolls his eyes and stands up.

“I need to eat. Want to come with me to the kitchen to get my meal?”
Lily gives him a look, “So that I can watch you eat? That’s not fun. That’s boring.”

“We’ll think of something fun to do, I promise,” Eric tells her, holding out his hand.

Lily purses her lips and takes his hand grudgingly.

“Fine. But you better be promisin’ for real. Because fun’s important, Papa.”

“Of course.”

Lily follows him down the stairs and Eric manages not to converse much with his mom as he gets his meal out. It’s good that Lily is a talker because she keeps her grandmother occupied to the point where it really isn’t awkward for Eric to stay silent as he transfers his meal into a bowl.

He and Lily sit in loungers by the pool as he eats his meal. He gives in and lets Lily play around on the steps leading into the shallow water so that she can splash and cool off. He ends up getting her into her swimsuit and sundress after finishing off his salad and smothering her skin with sunscreen so that they can drive to the beach. He finds a blanket in the pool shed and a couple of towels as well as a sandcastle kit and a bodyboard. He decides to take her to Caswell Beach since it is closer and has easier access, even though he has always preferred the beaches on the other side of Oak Island more. Maybe he can take her tomorrow and show her a few places he used to love to go to.

Lily takes more quickly to the ocean than she did last year. It takes several steps back but soon enough, she is having a blast, holding onto his hand as he guides her on the body board to ride on the waves washing up near the shore. They spend a couple of hours there before he takes her back to their setup and sees that a text from Amanda waiting for him on his phone.
Where are you?? I came for moral support, dick.

Eric shakes his head and types out, “Leaving now.”

When they make it back to the house, he is greeted to the sight of his mother smiling fondly at his sister as she holds Carlos and cuddles him close. Julian is running around, giggling infectiously, before spotting Lily.

“Illy!!!!” he squeals, running over to his cousin to topple her over with a hug, “Missed you!”

Lily tsks as she stands back up and brushes herself off, obviously much more mature than the younger boy, “Hi, Julian. You can’t knock people down when you hug them, okay?”

“‘Kay,” Julian nods as he holds her close and looks up at Lily in awe.

Lily pats him on the head awkwardly before walking past the toddler to greet her Aunt Amanda.

“Hi, Aunt Amanda!” she greets in a much more excited voice, “You came to see us?”

Amanda grins and nods as she puts her arms around the girl to set her in her lap, “I did! I couldn’t wait. I missed you, sweetie!”
“I missed you too,” Lily answers, “I missed you more than Uncle George. I miss him too but just not as much.”

Amanda stifles a laugh at that before donning a serious expression, “I’m honored and touched.”

It’s then that Amanda turns to Eric and gives him a smile before standing up, “Want to leave the kids to these geezers for a few minutes?”

“Who are you calling old?” their father snaps without malice as he picks up Julian to hold him by his ankles.

“Dad, be careful!” Amanda frets before letting the matter go as she watches Julian’s face go red with laughter.

“Come on,” she gestures towards the porch, “Let’s go sit out on the swing.”

Eric follows her outside and watches her sit down on the porch swing. The energy built up from today still has him buzzing so he elects to stand.

“How have they been today?” she asks him.
Eric lets out a breath, “I don’t know. Dad’s been...Dad and I actually had a breakthrough, I think. It’s too soon to tell, but he promised me that he was going to try harder and was open to getting know Brian. That’s good, right?”

Amanda looks surprised but nods, “That’s...that’s great, Eric. Who would have thought it would have been him first?”

“Who would have thought that our mom would just turn on me though?” Eric laughs bitterly.

Amanda looks down, “Yeah...I haven’t been able to look at her quite the same since. It’s disappointing and upsetting, because I thought she was above that. I can’t imagine how you feel.”

“She practically flinched when I touched her shoulder a few hours ago. I felt a little bit of affection and she just didn’t...fuck. I don’t know.”

Amanda gives him a sad look, “I wish I could tell you that she’d come around. I know George used to tell you that and I did too when I was older. I don’t know. But maybe if Dad is coming around then maybe he can get her too as well.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Eric mutters, “It hasn’t been all terrible. Lily’s enjoying herself. She loves Dad and went shopping with Mom and, even though I didn’t permit that at all, it seems like she had a nice time with her. That fucking book though-”

“What book?”
Eric laughs bitterly, “Lily picked two books of her choice to buy and Mom picked out two for her as well. One of them was ‘Are you my Mother?’ Can you believe that?”

Amanda lets out a groan but scrambles for an excuse, “Maybe it was just a coincidence. That’s a classic Dr. Suess book, right?”

Eric stares at her incredulously until Amanda puts up her hands in surrender.

“Allright, alright. That’s pretty bad, I’ll admit it. Ignorant, homophobic, bitch move on Mom’s part.”

“No shit. I threw it away.”

Amanda raises an eyebrow at that and stands back up.

“Well, at least know that I’m on your side. I don’t know if being here will change much but hopefully it might make you feel a little better.”

Eric gives her a sad smile and pulls her in to kiss her forehead.

“It does. Thank you.”
It’s not until he is setting the table for dinner that he feels like he’s about to lose it.

“I bet it’s nice to cook and spend time with other ladies, isn’t it, sweetheart?” he overhears his mother say from the kitchen.

He stays partially hidden as he watches his daughter shrug innocently but nod, “Yeah, girl time. Like you said!”

“Mom,” Amanda interrupts in a calm, but warning, tone.

“Do you ever want to have other girls in the house, Lily?” his mom continues, “With it just being your papa and Brian, I’m sure there are times where you would like to talk to a girl.”

Lily shrugs again, steps back, and looks at the floor. Eric can tell she is getting a little confused and uncomfortable.

“...I got Jess. She watches me when Papa and Daddy are at work and I’m home and she’s really nice. And I got Aunt Cynthia and Aunt Amanda and Aunt Lindsay and Aunt Mel and Grandma Debbie. I’m gonna have my baby sister too, really soon. And I got you too, right?”

His mother’s face actually flashes with affection and guilt at that point, “Of course you do, sweetheart. But you don’t have any women who live with you. A girl should have that and I’m sorry that you are getting cheated of it.”
“Mom, that’s enough!” Amanda snaps.

“I’m speaking the truth,” is all that his mother says in return.

“It’s not right-”

“Her not having a mother figure is not right-”

“Mom doesn’t care about what other people feel, Amanda,” Eric sighs, stepping in, “She only cares about her own values.”

Amanda looks helpless as his mother stares at him coldly.

“Just so you know, Mom…” Eric says sadly, “You aren’t the only one who is concerned about that. I think about it from time to time too. But so many people love her. She isn’t lacking for anything and will have so many opportunities that so many other kids can’t even dream of as she gets older. Her life is great. I wish you would see that.”

Eric turns to walk away but feels a little hand slip into his.

“Papa, I want to come with you,” Lily insists, squeezing his fingers as she does so.
Eric squeezes her hand slightly in return, “Honey, I’m only going upstairs for a few minutes-”

“I want to go with you.”

Eric bites his lip and nods, “Okay.”

Lily stays by his side dutifully as they go up the stairs together to take a quick breather. She’s unnaturally quiet and Eric has to wonder if she is mulling over her grandmother’s words. It’s possible that she’s been suspicious before this even. It has been easy to put off telling her the ins and outs of how she came to be. She has known that a woman carried her but hasn’t questioned anything past that. Brian’s whole family was basically made up of gay couples and in both Chicago and New York the assortment of families were so varied and mixed that Lily never found someone else’s family dynamic odd or out of the norm. So, while she had so many questions about everything else, she never really questioned why she had two dads and no mom.

Before either of them could say anything to each other, Eric’s phone starts ringing and Brian’s name comes up on the screen.

“It’s your daddy,” he tells her, “I’m going to talk to him for a couple of minutes and you two can talk right after, okay?”

“Okay,” Lily agrees, surprisingly not holding a debate over it.

“Hey,” Eric answers, a little more wobbly than he means to.
“Things any better today?” Brian asks him.

“I thought they were going to be,” Eric sighs, stepping into the bathroom for a little privacy, “They were for a little bit. But no. Not now.”

Brian waits a beat then clears his throat, “What are you doing now?”

“Hiding out in the bathroom, biding my time until dinner. Lily showed some camaraderie. She’s in my room waiting too, despite Julian and Carlos being downstairs.

Brian hums in response, “What caused you to hide in the bathroom?”

Eric sighs, “...It’s a long story. I don’t feel like talking about it. Fuck, I just need to clear my head and I think I might be okay for a while.”

“Why don’t you step out on the porch? You told me you used to sit on the swing to think and read and shit when you were young, right? Maybe that will help.”

“That would require me to go back downstairs.”

“Don’t be a pussy. You’ll have to go down anyway. Just get some fresh air.”
Eric scoffs at the delivery of his husband’s advice and heads back into his room to retrieve Lily, phone cradled in the crook of his neck.

“Want to go outside for a few minutes?” He asks her, “You can facetime with Daddy on the swing and show him the view of the bay.”

Lily jumps up and nods, “That’s a good idea. Come on!”

The two of them start to make their way down the stairs as Brian says, “See? Our daughter knows I come up with good ideas.”

“From time to time, I suppose,” Eric agrees, opening the front door, “But I doubt fresh air is going to do much other than-“

“DADDY!!!!!!!!”

Eric glances down at Lily in confusion as she takes off running, as his eyes follow her, he sees Brian standing there, donning a pair of aviators, and leaning against a black Porsche.

He doesn’t even notice his phone dropping from his grasp until it hits the ground.
In a daze, he approaches his husband, who is now holding their daughter tight as she smothered the man’s face in kisses.

“You...You are-”

“Never took you as the type to be at a loss for words,” Brian smirks, putting Lily down, “I am what? Incredible? Dashing? Handsome? Sex-”

Brian doesn’t get to finish his guessing as Eric surges forward to cut him off with an all-consuming kiss.

“All of the above,” Eric finishes before feeling slightly emotional, “I can’t believe you came down here.”

Brian’s expression grows more serious, “Of course I did. I booked the tickets and arranged for a rental car as soon as you fell asleep last night.

Eric lifts the sunglasses off of Brian’s face and puts his hands on his husband’s cheeks to look him directly in the eye.

“I love you. God, I love you so much, Brian”

Brian bites his lip, “You know I love you too. I’m fucking pissed at you but I still love you.”
With that, Brian straightens up and stares at the house.

“What do you say we go inside? I’m sure your parents will be thrilled to see me.”
W Bay and S Howe Streets

Chapter Summary

Brian settles in at his in-laws.

Chapter Notes

I know, I'm three months late. I suck. Moving, new jobs, volunteer training, and social life obstacles are a pain.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eric feels a surge of pride, of fear, of smugness, of fierce protectiveness as he goes back in the house with Lily and Brian. He knows as soon as he goes in the living room, it will be awkward at the absolute best. He doesn’t think his mom will lash out, at least not immediately. But the inevitable coldness that she would emit would be worse. It’s in stark contrast to the loving and passionate demeanor he had grown up with. It sucks.

He barely has the chance to ponder whether or not to talk to Brian about being subtle and polite when Brian drops his bag on the floor and calls out, loudly, “Home sweet home!”

Jesus Christ. And the look of satisfaction on Brian’s face when the conversation in the other room comes to a complete halt...Eric can’t tell if Brian is satisfied for making the in-laws uncomfortable or if he’s satisfied with making Eric cringe.

“Daddy, this is not home,” Lily informs her father, taking his hand, “But it’s really great. They got an ocean and a pool! A real pool, not like the pool you got me. And there’s a water slide too! I’ll show you!”

Lily tries to pull Brian towards the back of the house but Brian doesn’t budge as Eric puts a hand on Lily’s shoulder.

“We’re gonna visit with your grandparents, aunt, and cousins, okay? If it’s not too late after the boat trip, maybe we can come back and swim,” Eric tells her.
“Oh, I would like that! Love it, actually,” Lily corrects herself, “My most favoritest thing ever is when you and Daddy and Emmett and Drew sit outside after we eat dinner and Duncan and I swim when the sky gets pink and purple then black and stuff. It’s Duncan’s favorite thing too. We just gotta bring him down her next time. Everyone’s gotta meet him. They just got to.”

“Right,” Eric nods, a little distracted, “Let’s go in the living room.”

When his family comes into sight, their reactions are definitely mixed. His sister looks amused, but she would be, he supposes. His father is distracting himself with bouncing Carlos on his knee. However, he does offer Brian an awkward, small nod, which is better than nothing. His mother is frigid, just staring at Brian with no emotion showing in her expression.

And Brian just stares right back with her and tilts his head, like they’re in some type of staring contest.

Which Brian loses when Julian runs up and slams into Brian’s legs.

“Hi!” the little boy shouts, looking up at him in awe.

“Hi,” Brian returns, touching the boy’s hair briefly.

“I missed you, Unca Bwian!” Julian informs him, reaching his chubby hands up, demanding to be picked up.

Brian looks both bewildered yet touched by the sentiment and picks the toddler up.

“Still as extroverted and curly haired has your uncle, I see,” Brian mentions as Julian leans his elbow on Brian’s shoulder.

“Et’s sit!” Julian suggests, still draping himself on his uncle.

Eric personally thinks Brian’s surprise by the affection radiating off the little boy and Julian’s love and acceptance are absolutely precious, but Lily seems to feel differently when she starts growling and stomping her feet.
“UGH, Julian!” Lily can’t help but explode, “That’s MY Daddy! He’s mine, not yours!”

“Lily!” Eric scolds, but he’s kind of amused by the jealousy, “He just missed his uncle. That’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” Lily corrects him, crossing her arms, “He’s mine and I want to sit with him!”

Eric squats down and pulls her in so that he can speak to her softly.

“I get it. You missed him. Just remember that Julian hasn’t seen us since he visited in June with Aunt Amanda and Uncle Diego. You’ll have plenty of time with him.”

“But I want to sit with him now,” Lily stresses, logic escaping her.

“Why don’t you sit with me or your abuela?” Eric suggests, glancing at his mother.

Lily looks at her, smiles politely, then whispers to him, “She looks mad. I will sit with you.”

Eric turns around to lead Lily to the couch and realizes that Brian has taken the seat closest to his mother. Of course he fucking has. Because, besides the fact that Brian came here to support him, he also came to piss off his mother-in-law.

“I hope I’m not intruding,” Brian starts off, with a polite tone but a small smirk in place (and a toddler crawling all over him.)

“I hope I’m not intruding,” Brian starts off, with a polite tone but a small smirk in place (and a toddler crawling all over him.)

“Hm,” is all his mother answers with.

“I just got a call from Eric last night and...well, I missed him. Never can spend too much time away from my love,” Brian tells her with a fake sincerity.

Jesus Christ, Eric thought, looking towards the ceiling and shaking his head. He married such a
Of course his sister stifles a laugh at that, before saying, “How have you been, Brian?”

Brian shrugged, “I’ve been better. I found a grey hair in the airport bathroom this morning. Plucked it out.”

“You already have a little grey hair. Don’t act like it is your first one,” Eric points out.

“Yes, well, I didn’t have any grey hair until I met you,” Brian shoots back, “What does that tell you?”

“Afraid of eating, afraid of aging,” Eric’s mother mutters suddenly, “What is it with you gay men?”

“Okay!” Amanda interrupts with a nervous laugh, “Mom, we should be checking on dinner. Both of us. Together. And don’t worry, Brian. We made plenty.”

“Haven’t you heard? I’m afraid of eating,” Brian smirks.

Amanda gives Eric a look, as if she is trying to convey the message: Control him. Try to keep your husband on a leash.

And Amanda might be Brian’s sister-in-law now, but she really needs to get to know Brian better if she thinks Eric is going to be able to reel him in.

Things do get a little calmer once Amanda is able to get their mother into the kitchen. His dad and Brian actually have a conversation. Nothing more than business and Lily related, but still, it’s a start. His dad isn’t as open, friendly, inviting, and charismatic as he has been known to be in the past but it seems like he is trying.

Dinner is anything but a big and boisterous family get together. It’s riddled with small talk, with silences only Lily can fill due to her impressive ability to ignore awkward situations. And usually Eric can do that too. But this situation directly affects him. It’s different.
“-And Duncan,” Lily continues, throwing a hand over her heart, “Duncan’s the greatest bestest friend ever.”

“Just your greatest bestest friend?” Amanda asks, eyebrows raised, “When I visited, you took me to your room, told me that he was the ‘most handsomest boy’ ever, talked about your wedding-”

Lily’s face flushes with embarrassment, “Aunt Amanda!”

Lily crosses her arms and pouts at the table, feeling hurt over her aunt’s betrayal, before hopping down from her chair.

“I’m not hungry,” Lily mumbles, head down, ashamed, “I’m just not.”

“Sit back down,” Eric sighs, lifting her up to sit her back in her seat.

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” Amanda tries to say seriously, “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“Well, you did,” Lily tells her, still hurt, “I told you that in pronfidants.”

“Pronfi-what?” Brian questions, tilting his head.

“Pronfidants,” Lily repeats, “Are you having problems hearing, Daddy? Like you got problems seeing sometimes?”

Brian glares at her and Eric shakes his head in amusement as his father starts to question Lily.

“So you have a boyfriend, huh?” the older man asks her, “Aren’t you a little young for all of that?”

“No,” Lily tells him, suddenly confident and proud of her relationship, “Love can happen to anybody, anywhere, anytime. Me and Duncan just got really, really lucky. We’re going to go on dates and give each other flowers, and hold hands and he’s gonna get me a ring and we will get
married and live in a big house with a pool together and have lots and lots of babies—"

“Allright, that’s enough,” Brian interrupts, putting his fork down, “You are getting way too serious.”

“That’s ’cause I am serious,” Lily confirms, nodding her head once, “Seriously in love.”

“No, you’re not,” Brian growls.

“Yes, I am!” Lily quips.

“No.”

“Yes!”

“N-”

“Brian, you’re getting into a power struggle with a four year old,” Eric mutters to him.

“I’m almost five,” Lily insists, flipping back her hair, “I turn five next Wednesday.”

“You literally just turned four less than five months ago,” Eric sighs, “And why is it always next Wednesday?”

“’Cause, that’s the way it works,” Lily informs him.

And there is no way any of them can argue that logic. Brian is still too annoyed to take on a rational conversation, Eric’s father is still too focused on the fact that Lily has a boyfriend, Amanda is too distracted by Carlos’s sudden need to be fed, Julian is shoving food in his mouth with his hands, after trying so hard with a fork and failing, and Eric’s mother…
Eric’s mother is actually laughing. It’s the first time on this trip that Eric’s seen her do that.

Maybe things will be okay after all.

Brian feels his stomach churn at the jerk the sailboat makes as James steers it to the left. He puts his head in his hands and tries to focus on anything but the movements of the water. Not that he’ll admit it, but it makes him feel embarrassed, considering no one else is feeling the effects of this fucked up form of travel. He had been on boats in college during spring break. So why, just why, did this stuff have to happen when he was 44 years old?

“Daddy, Daddy!” Lily exclaims, running over from the front of the boat to lean on his knees, "I see another shark! It's swimming around the boat! It's so big and scary and wants to eat us! Let’s go look! Come on!"

Lily tries to pull at his hand with both of her own, insistent on making sure he would be the one who would be playing with her. But all he could do is groan and shoo her away.

“You’re the captain now, right?” he asks her, opening one eye, “So go and make sure you do a better job steering. You’re making my head hurt.”

“Feeling like you’re gonna hurl, Brian?” James laughs, as if it is funny, “Must have a weak stomach. Even Carlos is loving this sail!”

Brian turns his head in his hands and glares at his gurgling and happy nephew next to him in his rigid mother-in-law’s lap.

“Sweetheart, come look at the view!” James calls out to his wife.

“I have the baby,” she shouts back, instinctively holding the baby tighter.

“I can take him, Mom,” Amanda offers, ducking into the cabin.

“No,” is all Louisa answers with, “The boat could rock and one of us could drop him.”
Amanda rolls her eyes, before looking at Brian with concern, “Are you feeling any better, Brian?”

“He has weak sea legs,” Louisa smirks, sort of evilly if you ask Brian.

“I am doing fantastic,” Brian answers, gulping down the mild need to vomit.

“Daddy, Daddy!” Lily calls out, running back in the cabin with Julian in tow, “There’s three sharks out there now, and they all wanna eat us! A mermaid is out there too! She says she’s gonna help us and then she’s gonna get me and make me a mermaid too! She’s really pretty and has curly hair like me!”

“That’s great,” Brian winces, still not budging at Lily’s pulls, “I’ll miss you but I understand that an ocean life is what you were meant for. You weren’t meant to be human. In fact, I don’t think you are if you can run around this rocking boat of misery like it’s nothing-”

“But, Daddy!” Lily interrupts, “You have to come look! All the way up front! In the water!”

“Lily, I honestly can’t,” Brian breaks the news to her.

“Why not?” Lily asks sadly, her excited demeanor starting to deflate. Shit.

“Come on, honey,” Amanda interjects, putting a hand on her lifejacket, “Your daddy isn’t feeling well, okay?”

“But why?”

“He’s seasick,” Amanda explains, “The movement of the water and the boat are making his head and tummy hurt.”

“But why?” Lily asks fearfully, glancing at her father with worry.
Brian could see that Amanda is biting back impatience as she sighs, “Sometimes only certain parts of your body recognize you are moving at a certain speed. If his ears or his eyes can’t correctly tell his brain where and how he is moving, it throws everything off and makes him sick.”

Lily stares at Amanda, hard, before finally looking at Brian.

“That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard! Sounds like a ‘scuse, if you ask me!”

Lily began to stomp away before turning around dramatically.

“If you want to come see me one last time before I join my kingland, then I shest that you play with me soon! Before I go live with my new parents.”

“Oh my god, Lily,” Brian groans, waving her off, “Go away! I will hang out with you later, Jesus Christ.”

“Fine! My new parents will be more funner anyway!” Lily huffs, “Come on, Julian! Let’s go and look at the sharks and try to find the mermaid again! She told us to meet her over there, remember?”

“Yeah!” Julian agrees excitedly, “‘et’s go!”

“Yes, go…” Brian mumbled, “Please, just leave me alone.”

Brian leans his head against the cabin wall and breathes out through his nose slowly. The only sounds now are the muffled sounds of his father-in-law calling out to Amanda and Eric, the sounds of two small children squealing about mermaids and sharks, a baby gurgling and yelling out nonsense happily, and his mother-in-law silently judging him from no farther than two feet away.

It’s no wonder he couldn’t focus.

“Need something, Louisa?” Brian asks her, opening an eye.
“Are you one of those men who cry when they get a cold?” Louisa asks, looking him up and down, “You stay under covers all day and groan about how horrible you feel?”

Brian stares straight ahead and shakes his head, trying to will the woman to shut up, “Louisa, with all due respect, I can’t engage in a conversation right now. If I do, I may throw up on you.”

Louisa rolls her eyes and mutters under her breath, “El coño.”

Brian actually has to laugh at that. The woman thinks she’s so fucking slick.

“Did you just call me a pussy?” Brian gasps in mock disbelief, before he tsks, “Louisa, I couldn’t be the only one who didn’t know a lick of Spanish in the family. And come on, you have to know me just well enough to realize which words I sought out to learn first.”

Louisa huffs and turns away from him. Carlos glances at Brian, then breaks out in a big toothless grin as he pulls his hand out of his mouth to reach for him.

“Hey, buddy,” Brian mumbles, one hand supporting his head as the other reaches out for the small fist, letting the baby grip onto his finger. The fingers are sort of gross and spit covered but not as gross as Brian feels now so he doesn’t find himself giving two shits about the germ infested hand.

Letting the baby play with his fingers takes his mind off the brunt of his seasickness, but then Carlos suddenly yanks his hand, making Brian lightly hit Louisa in the shoulder.

“Oops,” Brian shrugs, not really apologetic, as he extracts his hand. Louisa doesn’t get a chance to do anything more than glare at him before Eric comes into the cabin.

“How are you feeling?” Eric asks him, concerned, as he comes over to stand next to him, bringing Brian’s head closer to let it rest against the upper part of his stomach.

Brian leans against the toned muscle and rubs his cheek into the warm, dark olive skin.

“My poor baby,” Eric murmurs, in a sweet, teasing tone, running his hands through Brian’s hair.
Brian tilts his head up, silently asking for a kiss. Eric surprisingly takes the hint and leans down to meet Brian’s lips, right in front of Louisa. They don’t get hot and heavy. As much as he would love to make his mother-in-law uncomfortable, he knows it isn’t the right time for that. Eric came here to try to fix things...or whatever. And Brian still isn’t sure if he can keep his dinner down.

Louisa makes her discomfort known by clearing her throat and Brian has to force himself not to let out a sound of disappointment as Eric pulls away.

“And how’s my baby nephew doing?” Eric asks, squatting down in front of his mother, brushing the baby’s cheek, “Did he inherit our sea legs, Mom?”

Louisa purses her lips, probably getting over the horrific sight she just witnessed, but manages to speak, “I suppose. He’s not sick and groaning like your partner.”

Eric bites his lip, “Be easy on him, come on. Brian and I will just have to come down more often. We’ll make him into a sailor before you know it!”

And even Brian finds it to be a little offensive when Louisa mutters out something in Spanish and does a Sign of the Cross at that.

That offense turns into anger when the light in Eric’s expression starts to dim as his smile falters. Before Brian can say anything, probably something that would start out as a respectful punch to the gut only to turn into, ‘Fuck you, bitch,’ Eric clears his throat and stands back up to turn back towards him.

“Do you want me to get Dad to swing around and drop us off at the dock? He wants to fish with Lily and Julian, but I don’t want you feeling sick when you don’t have to. He can take them out and we’ll just head back to the house-”

“I’ll be fine,” Brian decides, cutting his husband off, “Have to get used to it, don’t I? Lily is already trying to disown me and get new parents because she’s mad that I’m in here. I should mend fences, I guess.”

“You’re sure?” Eric asks cautiously.
Brian stands up and tries not to wobble, “Yeah. I’ll be good.”

And then, just because he can, he kisses Eric with all the love he can muster, winks at Louisa, and walks out of the cabin towards the front of the boat.

“I’m catching one! I’M CATCHING ONE!!!!” Lily squeals as she reels in the fish, “It’s a big one too!”

“Shhhh, you’re going to scare it if you squeal any louder,” James tells her softly as he helps his granddaughter reel it in. “Christ, it is a big one.”

Lily squeals again, in whisper form this time, then jumps up and down, “It’s a shark! I just know it!”

Brian raises his eyebrows as Lily’s pole starts to bend into a U and James struggles to get the line to reel in much more.

“One of you,” James directs to both Brian and Eric, “Take a hold of Lily. This thing weighs more than she does and it could pull her over if it keeps trying to swim off, “Then someone else needs to help me with the net and pulling it up onto the boat.”

Brian is on Lily in an instant and fuck, when the fish pulls, he has to keep a good grip on her and the pole to keep them in place.

“Daddy, I’m a really good fisher,” Lily says, eyes still on the pole, “I’m an actural. Grandpa said.”

“You mean natural. Just don’t let it get to your head,” Brian tells her.

“But if I’m the best, I’m just the best,” Lily shrugs before gasping as the fish pulls her across the dock a couple inches, causing Brian to bring her into his chest and hold her even tighter.

“Holy shit!” Eric yells out, looking over the side of the boat, “Lily, what kind of bait did you use?”
“I put some Mullet TwitchBait and a nightcrawler on her line,” James informs them, “On the count of three, pull. One, Two -”

Eric and James pull on the net and the line starts to loosen a bit as the fish comes closer to the deck. And, once the fish comes into view, Brian can’t blame Eric for yelling out before.

“Oh. My. GOD,” Lily states, dropping her pole and her jaw as she comes over to study the flopping four foot long fish on the floor, “I am a master at this.”

“You sure are!” James laughs, lifting the little girl up in the air with joy, “You may have broken a world record, sweet girl! Brian, you take pictures, right? Got your camera? We’re going to hang this guy on the weight when we get back to the dock and see if she is going to win a prize!”

Brian rolls his eyes and goes to get his camera from the cabin, where Louisa is sticking her head out of, and she also looks shocked by the size of Lily’s catch. Coming back towards the front, he catches the tail end of the conversation.

“-And then we can chop him up, pick out the bones, and have a feast tomorrow-”

“NOOOOOO!!!!!!!”

Lily begins to sob as she throws herself over the fish, protecting the flopping monstrosity from the dangers of the world.

“I won’t let anyone hurt you, Huey. I won’t!”

Lily lifted her head up, glaring at her grandfather through her tears, “I won’t let you touch him! I can’t keep him in your pool ‘cause that’s stuff that SeaWorld does and they’re evil and Huey has a family and he needs to go back with them.”

James looks conflicted as he sighs, “Lily, I don’t think you know how satisfying it feels to catch your own fish and fry it up fresh-”

“And I don’t CARE to know!” Lily cries, hugging her fish once more, “I won’t let any of you
Brian is grossed out as he tries to pick up. But when he tries to pull his daughter off the fish, the fish begins to flop horribly and he automatically lets go to allow Lily to fend for herself.

“How about this,” Eric decides, “We’ll pour water on him until we get to the dock so that he’ll stay alive. Grandpa can do his thing, weigh him and everything. Then we can turn around, sail out, and let him go.”

Lily sniffs and wipes at some of the fish grime on her face, “You promise?”

“I promise,” Eric tells her seriously.

Lily gets up and launches herself at her Papa, hugging him tight as they both stink up the dock with the stench of Red Drum Fish.

When they get back to the dock, Brian’s nausea is in full force when he is prodded to help get the fish onto the scale. James makes a few jibes at him and Brian can’t even bring himself to feel pissed about it because the feel of fish slime on his hands and chest is so disgusting.

“98 pounds,” James states before cheering, “98 pounds! Louisa, you looked it up right? The biggest was 95, didn’t you say?”

“That’s what it said on the IGFA website,” she told him, eyes wide.

“Four years old and you’re already going to be rich, kid,” James tells her, playfully messing up her hair.

“Wait, what do you mean, rich?” Brian asks, squinting.

“If it really is the biggest in its class, the state could give her $100,000.” James shrugs.

Brian gapes at that and the idea of his fucking four year old making that much money.
“IGFA is more strict. Might give us some trouble since she doesn’t have a fishing license and we got him in a net once we got him above the water and on the side of the boat. They could give her a few hundred thousand. Occasionally they will give out a million, but that’s usually for breeds of fish that can be several hundred pounds. But she broke the world record, Brian. I keep my gear certified in case something like this happens.”

“Just in case you catch a world record fish,” Amanda chuckles, rolling her eyes.

“You never know, kid. I may not fish much anymore, but shit happens.”

“Grandpa, that is a bad word!” Lily scolded, before brushing back her hair, “Now, let’s get these pictures done with and get Huey back to his family!”

Lily took a picture next to her fish, hugging him proudly before helping her grandmother pour water on him continuously as James gets all of the information needed to secure Lily’s world record money. Huey is still flopping around, thank god. Brian doesn’t know what Lily would do if he kicked the bucket. He thinks about staying behind in order to let his stomach settle, but he knows James and Eric would struggle with getting the fish back into the water safely and, although he knows Louisa was a fucking ice cold badass, she’d probably hurt herself or something and he doesn’t need that forced on his conscience by her.

So Brian forces himself back onto the boat and they sail off into the dusk to dump the ridiculously large fish, trying not to sigh at Lily’s chattering about how she can take care of things, now that she’s rich and all.

All of them need showers by the time they get back home. They hose each other off before going inside and take care of the kids first. Eric helps his sister with the boys and Brian focuses on Lily, as she is still chattering away about her possible prize money.

“I should give some to Julian. And Carlos,” she sighs, as if she pities them, “They didn’t catch anything and Julian cried when I did such a great job and he didn’t.”

“It’s up to you, kid,” Brian tells her, scrubbing her slimy hair with shampoo as hard as he can without hurting her. Usually he would use a conditioner concoction Eric made in order to not mess up her curls, but Brian was set on getting her hair as clean as possible, “But don’t get your hopes up yet. Organizations that give out prizes like that will find anything to discredit you.”
“I don’t know what that means,” Lily answers him seriously, “But I gotta think of what I’m gonna do with my money. How many Barbie dolls do you think I can buy?”

Brian shakes his head in disbelief, “Close your eyes and lean back your head.”

Lily and Julian stay downstairs with their grandparents and Brian and Eric take the chance to get into the shower. Together. Thank god. Eric’s on him immediately, capturing his lips and running his hands over his chest, before Brian pulls away.

“You smell like a radioactive fish,” Brian grimaces, stepping away.

“So do you,” Eric shrugs, “It shouldn’t matter.”

Brian groans, “Stop being kinky at inappropriate times and let me wash the slime off of you.”

They wash each other under the hot stream of water, standing in the shower with their arms around each other, filling the time with wet kisses. Brian starts to wash Eric in between his cheeks and rubs against his hole, before Eric breaks off the kiss and moves towards Brian’s neck.

“I actually thought I could fuck you,” Eric suggests in between kisses.

“Yeah?” Brian murmurs, eyebrows raised, “You know that I am fucking pissed at you, right?”

“Mmmhmmm,” Eric confirms, reaching for Brian’s cock.

“And I get why you want to top. Parents downstairs, in their house and all. You want to be seen as the man of our relationship in case they happen to walk in. Fuck, if the circumstances were different, I wouldn’t mind being seen by them as the perverted bottom bitch who permanently corrupted their son. Sounds like a laugh out loud riot, actually. But, like I said, I’m pissed. And I would be completely within my rights as a husband to withdraw my ass, or sex in general, for at least a week after your little unannounced road trip.”
“Sure, whatever,” Eric hums, grabbing their lube off the shower caddy to coat his fingers.

Brian stares at him, hard, then Eric groans.

“I’m sorry, okay? I really am. And, after Lily is in bed, you can yell at me all you want. But don’t you want to get off? It’s been so long. You need it as much as I do.”

Brian closes his eyes and exhales as Eric’s hand slides over his waist and back to play with his ass. Eric’s index finger circles Brian’s hole, which causes Brian to let out a gasp when the man’s finger probes through. Brian holds onto him, giving his husband wet, open mouth kisses as Eric adds a second finger, before turning his head and laying it on Eric’s shoulder, solely focusing on the feeling fingers brushing against his prostate.

“That’s it,” Eric sighs when Brian lets out a moan and tightens his arms around Eric’s body, “Gonna add a third finger, alright? You’re tight.”

Brian shudders and nods against Eric’s shoulder, perking his ass out a little for better access. He digs his fingers into Eric’s back when the third finger makes it past the rim. Eric starts to thrust his fingers at a steady pace, pouring a little more lube onto them with his other hand.

“Harder,” Brian unexpectedly gasped against Eric’s shoulder, “Fuck me harder.”

Brian senses Eric’s smile as the man huffs, “Don’t come before I actually get to fuck you. We’ll have more time once everyone is in bed, but I need to be inside you before we get out of this shower.”

But Eric obliges and starts jerking his fingers in and out, hard and fast, causing Brian to let out muffled cries against Eric’s neck. Eric strokes Brian’s hair and shushes him but doesn’t let up on the speed or force of the thrusts until Brian feels like he is practically weeping in ecstasy. Only then, Eric yanks out his fingers and spins Brian around to face the shower wall.

“Put your hands out,” Eric quietly orders, kicking Brian’s feet apart, “Brace yourself against the wall.”

Brian obeys the demand, bending a little and steadying his position. He feels another squirt of lube drip between his cheeks, before Eric kneads his ass and spreads his left cheek with one hand. Brian
takes a breath, bites his lip, and brings one hand back to spread his right. Instinctively, Brian tenses a little when Eric’s head pops past his sphincter, but, when Eric is halfway in, he soothes Brian by rubbing his back and murmuring in his ear. Brian feels his breathing get heavy and he grips at his cheek harder, while pressing his forehead against the shower wall and rocking onto Eric’s thrusting cock. Gradually, Eric increases his speed and wraps his arms around Brian’s middle, forcing Brian’s body back to meet his thrusts. Brian finally lets go of his cheek and lays his right arm over Eric’s linked ones. Both of them start to quietly moan in sync, in the pattern of their movements. As pissed as Brian still is at Eric, he fucking needs this more than he could ever express to anyone.

“Come on, Brian,” Eric moans, thrusting with enough force that the man’s wet balls are slapping against Brian’s ass. “Come on my cock. Don’t touch yourself. Just come from my cock.”

Brian starts to cry out and, he must be getting a little loud, because Eric puts his hand over his mouth and interlaces his fingers with the hand Brian has pressed to the wall. Brian thrusts back against Eric’s cock four, five more times, then comes against the wall with a moan, twitching and shuddering with the aftermath of his orgasm. It takes Eric another thirty seconds or so, but he eventually comes into Brian’s ass and collapses on Brian’s spent body that is only being propped up by the white tile.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck,” Brian breathes out, eyes drooping shut.

“Did I render you speechless?” Eric laughs breathlessly. Brian can’t even answer the question, so the answer is probably yes.

He squirms a little as Eric pulls out, but lets Eric squat down and spread open his cheeks.

“Push it out,” Eric orders, nipping his ass.

Brian lets out a laugh at that, still breathing heavily, “You always said that was gross.”

“For some reason, I see the appeal of it tonight,” Eric smirks, “Must be your dominant and kinky ways rubbing off on me. Although you were the opposite of dominant tonight. My little su-”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” Brian warns, but biting his lip because, fuck, Eric is right. The man had taken over completely and Brian had enjoyed every single second of it. Even though he is still pissed at him.
“Come on, push it out,” Eric insists, lightly slapping Brian’s ass.

Brian rolls his eyes but then gets an idea perks his ass out more.

“Okay,” Brian agrees, smirking, “I’ll do it. On one condition.”

“Oh?” Eric prompts, before blowing on Brian’s hole, “And what’s that?”

“You have to lick. me. clean,” Brian enunciates, then waits for Eric’s reaction.

There’s a beat of silence, before Eric starts groaning.

“Brian, that’s fucking gross. It’s my come and it’s in your ass,” Eric grimaces.

Brian lets out a scoff of disbelief, “You have given me how many rimjobs?”

“That’s different. My come is way up in your rectum and it isn’t like you did an enema right before, other things can come out, you have to know this-”

“Ugh, don’t be gross,” Brian answers with disgust, opening the shower door, “Never mind. A man asks for one thing-”

“Oh my god, wait,” Eric sighs, still on his knees as he pulls on Brian’s hand, “Bend over. Spread your cheeks.”

“No,” Brian shrugs off, “Not if it grosses you out. I won’t make you do it.”

“I said,” Eric grits out, grabbing onto Brian by the dick, “Bend over. And spread your cheeks.”

“Well, if you say so,” Brian sighs, before giving Eric a wink and bending over.
“Alright,” Eric murmurs, giving Brian’s hole a lick, “Do your worst.”

“That was a really long shower!” Lily is the first to point out as they come down the stairs.

Looking around, Eric sees that his father is pointedly looking away. Okay, so he probably knows what he and Brian had been up to. His mother is scowling, probably horrified over the mere idea of Eric having sex with a man in her home. And Amanda...well, she just has her eyebrows raised in amusement.

Fuck them. They don’t know shit. For all they know, he and Brian had just taken two, long showers separately.

“Well, we each took a shower. That takes time, Lily. We were all covered in Huey’s fish slime.”

Lily lets out a sad sigh, then crawls over into Brian’s lap as soon as he sits down, “I miss Huey. So much. My heart hurts. We can go see him again, right?”

“Maybe,” Eric answers as he sits next to his husband, already knowing the answer to most likely be no, even if they went to the exact spot they dropped him in.

Lily lets out a sad sigh, before perking up, “Grandpa and Abuela said I could watch a movie until I get tired. They have Netflix, like us!”

Eric glances at the clock and sees that it is already past 9, “It’s a little late. You really need to get to bed-”

“Please please please please,” Lily begs, giving him the wobbly lower lip and the puppy dog eyes, “Papa, I did good today. I did a world record. I’m important.”

“Only you, I swear,” Eric mutters, before sighing, “Alright. We can stay up and watch a movie. One. But as soon as you start falling asleep, you’re going upstairs to...where should you sleep?”
“Diego set up yours and George’s bunkbed back in June and put it in the spare room on the third floor for Layla and Julian when they visit and we have a full house,” Amanda informs him, “I figured Julian could take the bottom bunk and Lily could take the top.”

“Why does she have to be the one to take the top?” Brian blurts out, glaring a little.

“Because Julian is two and would fall in a heartbeat if he tried to go down the ladder,” Amanda answers reasonably, although Brian doesn’t seem to think it is all that reasonable.

“Yeah!” Lily agrees, bouncing once in Brian’s lap, “And besides, I want the top. It’s more fun up there anyways. Now, I think we should watch Home!”

Brian groans at that, “You had that movie on everyday while your Papa was down in New Orleans.”

“Because it is the best movie ever,” Lily exclaims, “And I didn’t watch it while I was down there. It’s been too long.”

Lily settles down into the couch and claps her hands, before letting out a gasp.

“Who has my rats?!” Lily yells out, looking around the room frantically, as if she would find them, “Daddy, you were supposed to take care of them!”

Brian rolls his eyes, “I left them with Emmett and Drew. I’m sure they are in great hands.”

Lily nods with a serious expression on her face, “FaceTime them then. I got to see my rats. I just got to!”

Eric can’t help but let out a laugh when Brian glares at her but gets out his phone, then warns, “Duncan might be in bed. So don’t be begging to talk to him. And if you still want to watch your movie, you better make your conversation quick.”

Brian presses his screen, only to hand it off to Lily. Lily waits with wide eyes, looking a little bit insane if Eric had to be completely honest. Eric’s thoughts on that end up being verified when
Emmett lets out a startled yelp upon picking up, before covering it up by cooing, “Lily! What a surprise! How are you, sweetie? Did your daddy call for you or did you take his phone again?”

“He called for me,” Lily confirms, “I need to see how Vernon and Bianca are. I just got to!”

“Okay, okay,” Eric hears before the pattering of Emmett’s steps, “How was New Orleans? Did you soak in the culture and make yourself known to the city?”

Eric shakes his head as Lily lets out a scoff, “Of course I did! That’s what I do! Guess what else?”

“Hmmm...you saw the ghost of Marie Laveau!” Emmett guesses.

Lily gives him a strange look, “Noooo! I saw a boy ghost but that’s a whole nuffer story! Try again.”

Emmett makes a humming noise, “You met up with a bunch of voodoo priestesses and cast a spell on your daddy to make him short.”

“A little closer,” Lily advises, much to Brian’s confusion, “But try again. It’s something that happened here. At my Grandpa’s and Abuela’s.”

“Hmmm...I give up!” Emmett declares.

“I did a world record!” Lily squeals, “I caught one of the biggest fish in the world!”

“Did you?” Emmett gasps, laughing a little. Obviously believing Lily is exaggerating greatly.

“Yep!” Lily confirms, nodding her head, “It was so big! Taller than me, actually. And I named him Huey! We put him back though. After we took pictures so I can get all my money.”

“She’s telling the truth, Emmett,” Eric calls out, “She caught a red drum fish that was 98 pounds. Apparently the biggest was 95.”
“Wh…” Emmett starts, “I’m sorry, wha-”

“Emmett!” Lily prompts the man, “Where are my rats?”

“…Right. Of course. Here they are.”

Lily began to talk to her rats and tell them all about her day. It goes on for several minutes and Eric has to look at the clock to see how much time has passed. Tapping her shoulder, he lets her know it is time to wrap it up. By the look on Emmett’s face, he seems pretty relieved by Eric’s gesture.

“Bye, Emmett!” Lily calls out, waving, “Take care of my boys, okay?”

Eric has to snort at that, “Thanks, Emmett. Sorry for bothering you. Duncan in bed?”

“Yep, all tucked in, poor thing. He wore himself out at the pool today. But I can’t say that he caught a fish over twice his weight. I’m shocked that Lily is still so perky.”

“Same, especially since she got up at 6 am and never took a nap,” Eric lets him know, “She’s still hyped up. I’m guessing she’ll crash sooner than she thinks.”

“I will not!” Lily contradicts, crossing her arms, “I gotta watch my movie!”

“Talk to you later,” Eric tells Emmett, ignoring his daughter, “Say bye, Brian.”

“Later,” Brian drawls, starting to close his eyes and lean his head back against the couch.

Eric ends the call and tosses the phone next to Brian on the couch.

“Please, go upstairs if you are going to do that,” his mother says to Brian suddenly, almost scolding him.
Brian opens an eye, “What, close my eyes for a second?”

“You need to sleep upstairs, you came unexpected anyway. No need for you to take over the living room!” his mom scowls, which has Eric scowling at her.

“Louisa,” his father chides her softly, stepping in, an attempt to calm things down, “He was just resting his eyes. He is probably tired from the flight. I’m sure Brian will go upstairs if he feels like he might fall asleep.”

The room goes silent for a moment and Eric is the one who clears his throat.

“Well, if no one else wants to unfairly scold my husband, then I guess we should watch Lily’s movie.”

The atmosphere is awkward at best, even after the movie has started. Lily is the first one to ignore it, in order to focus on her movie. But somehow, god willing, she falls asleep fifteen minutes in and Eric jumps out of his seat.

“Well, that’s enough for tonight,” Eric jumps up, faking a yawn and a stretch, “Want to carry Lily, Brian, or should I?”

Brian looks down at Lily for a moment, appearing more exhausted than he did just 20 minutes before, but gathers the little girl up in his arms and stands up. Lily barely even budges at the movement, face pressed against her father’s neck and her little hands gripping his grey t-shirt. Eric lets himself take in the sight for a second, then walks over to his sister.

“Night, Sis,” he says, giving her a peck on the cheek, “See you in the morning.”

“See you in the morning, jerkface,” Amanda yawns, using her childhood nickname for him.

“Night, Dad,” he tells his father as he gives the man brief rub on the shoulder, who pats his hand in return.
Eric sighs and turns to his mother, “Duermas bien, Mama.”

Eric does get a stiff nod in return, which is better than nothing, he supposes.

Eric follows Brian up the first set of stairs, then the second, before realizing they will have to wake Lily up in order to get her in the top bunk.

“No, not doing it,” Brian says suddenly, as if he is reading Eric’s mind, “I'm not having her wake up suddenly, not knowing where she is, then getting scared and trying to find us only to fall off. She can sleep next to Julian. There's enough room. Move him over a little.”

Eric bites back a smile at Brian’s surge of protectiveness before gently situating his nephew closer to the wall. Eric freezes when Julian sniffs and turns his head, but the little boy stays asleep and Eric gives Brian the okay with a nod.

Brian puts Lily down and suddenly seems captivated by her, studying her very closely. Eric feels his heart twinge when Brian brushes her hair out of her eyes, blinks a few times, and kisses her forehead.

Brian looks exhausted by the time they are walking towards his old bedroom. Part of it probably is from worrying and the travel, but Eric thinks a good bit of it was the fact Eric fucked him pretty intensely in the shower. The fact he can wear Brian Kinney out makes him want to be all smug. But on the other hand, Brian’s exhaustion may keep him from confronting Eric about what had happened. It's probably best to just be grateful and not poke a sleeping bear.

But apparently Brian doesn't need to be poked. They get to his room, brush their teeth side by side, and Eric turns over the covers, ready to get into bed. It's then that he realizes Brian hasn’t gone over to the other side of the bed yet. Eric turns his head and sees Brian standing there with his arms crossed and a hard glare in his eyes.

“What is it?” Eric asks, looking away from him, because he’s not dumb. He knows what it is.

“Fuck. You.”

Great.
“Brian…”

And fuck if Eric knows where Brian’s head’s at right now. He has an idea what it is about, he’s not an idiot. But Brian had been fine in the shower, despite telling Eric he was pissed at him; Fine downstairs, even if a bit annoyed. Eric has no doubt that dealing with his mother all day without blowing her head off has been a challenge, to be honest. It is understandable for him to be on edge at best. And, yeah, this...whatever this is. It would be understandable too if it had happened a few hours ago. If Brian had arrived and greeted Eric with a cold shoulder or had shown up raising hell, that would have made sense. But to get pissed after dinner, sailing, fucking in the shower...

But when has Brian ever made sense?

Eric has always known that Brian could be a time bomb when he was angry. He’s gotten better, but it has never been completely uncommon for Brian to bottle everything up until exploding, taking out the pride of anyone within a five mile radius.

Eric knows he should start apologizing profusely, calm him down, explain things from his end. But all he can do is watch Brian pace a fucking hole in the floor, fists clenched so tight that his husband’s knuckles are white.

“You took our daughter into a different state without telling me.” Brian finally began. “You took off in the middle of the night without sleep and drove for god knows how long to get here, didn’t even ask if I was okay with it. You brought her here, where her grandmother drops constant hints to her that I'm not her dad!”

“Brian, I'm sorry! I said I was-”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me? Why did you think I didn’t deserve to be fucking notified?”

“You did! You did deserve to know! I wasn’t thinking, I was stupid! I just-”

“You weren’t thinking? That’s your excuse? Well, that’s fucking lame, Eric. But hey, your mom’s technically right though, isn't she? I'm not Lily’s dad, not really, so what the fuck does it matter whether or not I know where she is or if she's safe?”
Eric feels his heart drop into his stomach as Brian’s angry words become more laced with pain.

“What are you saying? You are as much of her dad as I am! Don't talk like that, please!”

Brian lets out an angry growl and storms over to the bed to take a pillow off of it. Eric lets out a groan.

“Jesus Christ, Brian! Where are you going?”

“I'll sleep in the fucking pool house. Tell me where the key is and I should be good from there.”

“Stop it!” Eric hisses, pleading, “Don't you dare fucking leave without at least trying to talk with me! I meant it when I said you could tear me a new one, and you just did a great job at it, but I can't fucking sleep, or even try to forgive myself, knowing that I hurt you this badly!”

“Great, now you'll know how exhausted I feel,” Brian grumbles, but then goes and sits down on the bed, back turned to him.

“Brian,” Eric breathes out, his thumb and index finger briefly holding the bridge of his nose, “I am such an asshole. I was only thinking of myself. I...I was impulsive and inconsiderate and stupid and all around a horrible husband. I...I love you. You do so much for me and Lily. You're the best dad a kid can ask for, the best partner a guy can ask for. What I did was so shitty. I didn't do it to hurt you in any way but the fact I didn't call you and talk to you about it is bad enough. I'm so sorry.”

The deflation of anger isn't as sudden in its visibility as the surge of it had been, but Eric can see Brian’s shoulders grow less tense as he lets out a slow exhale.

“You good?” Eric risks asking.

“No,” Brian answers, but his voice isn't as angry.

“You still want to sleep in the pool house?”
“...No. I overreacted.”

Eric slowly comes over to Brian’s side and sits a few feet away from him. He keeps his movements calm and cautious, set on not getting Brian worked up again.

“No, you didn't,” Eric can admit, “You just delayed your reaction and let your anger build up quietly. And then sort of blew up.”

Brian doesn't respond to that, running a hand down his face, “I'm tired.”

Eric knows he should still be hesitant, but already finds himself scooting closer to the man. With one hand on Brian’s left cheek and the other running through his hair, Eric presses his forehead against Brian’s shoulder and lets out a breath.

“I'm sorry, Brian. I'm so sorry.”

Brian’s posture remains rigid and, for a good minute, Eric thinks he might have to grovel more.

But then, with a sound of shock escaping his lips, Eric finds himself flipped on the mattress, lying on his back. Brian...Brian’s straddling him, rubbing their boxer brief covered crotches together. Eric reaches up to touch Brian, his face, his chest, anything. But Brian pins Eric’s hands over his head, leans down, and whispers into his ear.

“I’m in charge this time. Do you understand me?”

Eric lifts his hips a little and tries to lift his head up, “Brian-”

“Do. You. Understand me?” Brian enunciates, before bending down to fucking nip his right nipple.

“Okay, okay! Yes, I understand.” Eric squirms, before letting out a soft moan when Brian traces the nipple with his tongue before moving on to the side of his neck. Fuck, he wants it. Brian inside of him, thrusting into him hard and fast. But, god, the idea of his parents hearing them fucking, putting two and two together on who was doing what. It was stupid. They had to know that Eric got fucked-
“I’m going to suck you,” Brian murmurs, “And then I’m going to sit on your cock, ride you, and make you come inside of me so hard that you’ll forget your last name.”

“Which one?” Eric rasps out with a laugh, growing harder by the second.

Eric tries to stay quiet. He really does. He manages to when Brian practically rips off their underwear and he manages to bite back his moans while Brian sucks him off. But when Brian fingers himself with one hand and still manages to keep Eric’s hands pinned with the other, when he sinks down on Eric’s cock and gradually works his way up to a hard, fast, forceful pace? When Brian looks completely uninhibited, throwing his head back in ecstasy? Fuck, it makes Eric spew out a litany of filth, moan a little too loud, and whimper because Brian is relentless.

“You like it when I bounce on your cock? Bottom from the top? Make you take it?” Brian whispers into his ear, soft grunts trailing off his words.

“God!” Eric moans, thrusting his hips up as Brian sinks down once more, “Brian, fuck-”

“Shhh,” Brian interrupts against his lips, “No talking.”

And he doesn’t know why that gives him an adrenaline rush. But a second later, his hands are out from under Brian’s grip, and he’s up in sitting position, quickly and roughly wrapping his arms around Brian’s waist, pulling the man down on his cock. Brian’s eyes go wide, revealing how blown his pupils really are, and he lets out a sharp gasp. Instead of fighting for control once more, Brian wraps his arms around Eric’s neck, meets him for a filthy kiss, and roughly swivels his hips before moaning into Eric’s mouth. Eric begins to lift Brian up and down, the toned muscles in his arms flexing as he does so. Brian presses his forehead against Eric’s and thrusts down, more than complying with Eric’s movements.

“You’re so hot,” Eric breathes out, nipping at Brian’s lip.

“I know,” Brian sighs, recovering from a particularly hard thrust.

Eric huffs out a sound of amusement before giving Brian a light slap on the ass, then lets out a moan when his husband unexpectedly jerks at the movement.
Eric runs his hands down Brian’s ribs, “Jesus Christ, Brian. You’re going to be...fuck! Sore tomorrow. Your ass definitely, but we might be able to save your knees. Want me to fuck you on your back?”

It takes Brian a few minutes to answer, too aroused and set on making this last for an eternity. But he eventually relents, nodding slightly without stopping his movements. Eric changes their positions like a pro, not even pulling out all of the way as he quickly rolls and flips Brian so that he is in a more comfortable position, staring up at Eric, before closing his eyes as he wraps his legs around him.

“Maybe I should go a little slower, take it easy since I was a little rough with you in the shower,” Eric suddenly suggests, a little more mindful of how Brian might feel in the morning.

“Don’t you dare,” Brian moans out, completely out of it with desire.

And, although Brian’s levels of arousal, emotional adrenaline, and exhaustion are probably high enough to fuck up his rational thinking, Eric complies regardless and drills into the man, pounding into him hard and fast. Brian’s jerking his cock rapidly between them and Eric takes over, managing to bring them both over the edge in the process.

“You’re…” Eric breathes out, after he pulls out and falls next to Brian on the bed, “You were incredible this evening.”

Brian laughs, still trying to catch his breath, “And I’m not usually?”

Eric turns to his side to run his hand down Brian’s chest, “Of course you are. But...shit, I don’t know how to word this...You’re a fucking amazing bottom. I always love it when you let me top you, but tonight? You haven’t held back at all. You were open and passionate and giving and assertive and beautiful-”

“Go to Pittsburgh and announce that declaration to Liberty Avenue. See what they have to say,” Brian huffs, wincing when he shifts his body closer to Eric’s. Eric brings Brian in closer to hold him and Brian surprisingly lets him.

“Seriously,” Eric starts, not letting the issue go, “What got into you tonight?”
Brian rolls his eyes, “I was just playing the role of seductive and evil power bottom in case your mom walked in. You know this.”

“No,” Eric shakes his head, “Not even you are that convincing. Wait, you don’t think they heard us just now, do you?”

“Wouldn’t be surprised,” Brian shrugs, “You were pretty loud.”

Eric tickles Brian’s spot on his side, making the man let out a laugh, “So were you. You were practically out of it and told me to fuck you harder!”

“Shush,” Brian denies, closing his eyes.

“Seriously-” Eric begins.

“Oh my god,” Brian groans, “How are you so talkative after mindblowing sex?”

“Were you craving it? I didn’t want to say anything, but now that I feel we are at a new level in our relationship, I am going to come clean and say that I have noticed that, in the past three years or so, you’ll have like two week stints a few times a year where I top you roughly 90 percent of the time. Is this it? I thought that was going to be due next month.”

Brian sits up and takes a hold of his pillow, “I’m literally about to smother you.”

“But I like talking to you.”

Brian doesn’t smother him with the pillow, but he does hit him with it, twice.

He must not anger him too much though because, once Eric finishes laughing, Brian puts his head on his chest and traces Eric’s belly button, before moving back down to Eric’s dick to stroke it.

“While you have been gone,” Brian starts, “More times than not...The way I have been getting off is fucking myself with that red dildo we have. I started out just using it occasionally. Sort of just to
switch things up. But, with you gone for so long, I have been fucking myself with it as soon as I have some free time to myself. Every night, not even needing to jack off every time to get off. So yeah. Guess I have been craving it a lot more than usual lately. And even when I could only jerk off in the shower, the last few days, all I could think about is you topping me over and over and over again.”

Eric finds himself breathing heavily once more, ready for round three. But then Brian pulls his hand away.

“Well, I’m beat,” Brian yawns, before snuggling into Eric’s shoulder, “Night.”

His husband is softly snoring against his neck within minutes, all while Eric’s erection is still close to throbbing. But hell, he probably deserves that.

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The next day is more quiet and peaceful. It’s a Saturday and Eric can already tell it will be a nice one, judging by the sun peeking through the windows and the sounds of seagulls flapping and calling out to each other outside. Eric looks over, still seeing that Brian is fast asleep. As much as he’d love to wake the man up, after the night they had, the least Eric can do is let him sleep a little longer.

After seeing it is just a little after 7 am, Eric quietly gets up and goes to check on Lily since, more often than not, the little girl wakes up earlier than necessary. But just this once, he goes up to the third floor and finds her fast asleep next to Julian and, by the looks of it, they haven’t moved all night. He decides to make the most of the quiet by going downstairs to make some coffee. He decides to put some effort into it, using his mother’s Nespresso machine he had sent her two years ago for her birthday. He’s glad she uses it, despite it being from him. It had been almost five hundred dollars, so the thought of it sitting in the attic or handed off to his aunt or one of her friends hadn’t been a pleasant one. He makes the cappuccino strong, froths some milk to put on the top, then heads outside and sits by the other end of the pool to get a full view of the bay.

“Morning,” he tells his sister, leaning down to kiss Carlos on the crown of his head, “Up long?”

“Maybe a little over a half hour,” Amanda shrugs, looking down at her baby, “Carlos needed fed and Mom and Dad were up already. I just stayed up too.”

“Where are they?” he asks her, “I didn’t see them when I woke up. I assumed they had slept in.”
“They both do this couples’ spin class from 7 to 8, then Mom goes to one side of the gym to do Zumba and Dad goes to the other to lift weights, and then they meet at the pool to swim laps for a half hour before showering and picking up Abuela to bring her back here for a while after they get brunch with her.”

“How romantic,” Eric murmurs, taking a sip of his cappuccino, “Even though it’s weird that you know every part of their day.”

Amanda rolls her eyes, “Well, Diego and I do bring the kids every other weekend to visit. We come down Saturday morning and Diego will stay for a few hours, then head back to the restaurant for the dinner rush, then come back down late that night or in the morning. It’s running up the milage on his car. It will be even worse if we end up moving to Charleston.”

“It’s only half an hour more in the other direction,” Eric points out, “And it’s a great city. Lots of history and art and great food-”

“That Diego will have to compete with,” Amanda interrupts, “And what about me? My store does well and I get that I’m still only going in part time so I guess I can stay home with the boys for a while. But what about when I have to work full-time? Add that to expanding to a bigger city? It’s too much at once and too expensive.”

“You have clients in Charleston who have gone out of their way, to you, in order to get decor for their houses and hire you as an interior designer. And if money is a problem, you know I will give you guys some to tide you over.”

Amanda’s face twists with annoyance at that before she punches him in the arm, baby be damned, “We’re not a charity case, Eric!”

“Jesus,” Eric winces, rubbing his bicep. Good thing his cup had been on the table.

Amanda settles back into her chair and looks conflicted once more, “Besides, I love Beaufort.”

Eric lets out an aggravated sound, “I’m just going to let you work this out with your husband.”

“Well, he’s set on it,” Amanda sighs, “He thinks compromising consists of finding a border beach town down there.”
“I’m sure it will all work out,” Eric tries to console, even if he’s only doing it to end the conversation.

Eric finishes up his cup then gets up, “I’m going to go check on Brian and the kids, see if they have even budged.”

“Wouldn’t be surprised if Brian slept the entire day, considering how much much he...exerted himself last night,” Amanda mutters, then just casually pulls her boob out right in front of him to feed Carlos.

Eric doesn’t really care about the boob. He’s all for women’s rights and the feeding of small children, so whatever. What makes him glare at her are the words coming out of her mouth.

“What are you talking about?”

Amanda studies him for a moment, before donning an innocent expression and shrugging.

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit. Okay, fine. I don’t care if you heard me fucking Brian. Did our parents hear? Did Mom hear?”

“I don’t know!” Amanda groans, “I didn’t exactly bring it up with them when Mom was cooking their pre-workout Avocado toast or whatever she found on Pinterest.”

Eric thinks about interrogating his younger sister more, asking her to look back and judge their mother’s mannerisms and comments and level of energy, but he doesn’t. What’s done is done and, if his parents did hear, then he would just have to move past it.

“I’m going to go check on Brian,” he reiterates, picking up his empty mug, “Need anything while I am inside?”
“I’m fine,” Amanda dismisses, before looking at the video monitor, “They kids haven’t budged. I can get them up at 9 or so to get them dressed and fed. If you and Brian…need time to yourselves…or you just want to take him out to breakfast or something, I can watch Lily for a while. Abuela should be in close to 11.”

Eric nods his head in thanks, then goes back into the house and up to the bedroom, only to find Brian asleep still. Eric sits on the bed next to him and begins tracing the man’s ribs.

“Brian,” he calls out softly, “Wake up, sleepy head.”

Brian lets out an exhausted moan and turns his face into the pillow, “Fuck me…”

“I could do that for you again, I suppose,” Eric chuckles, playfully pulling down the sheet.

“Absolutely not,” Brian grunts out, pulling the sheet back up, “My ass is out of commission. Probably forever.”

“Yeah, right. You loved it,” Eric smirks, before growing serious, “Are you feeling really sore though? Maybe I should check it. Here, roll over so I can-”

Brian growls and sits up to push Eric’s concerned hands away before looking around the room, “I’m fine. What time is it?”

“About 7:45,” Eric informs him, “I was thinking that we could get a quick shower and maybe go out for a couple of hours. Get breakfast, walk around Main Street. If you can walk, that is.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Brian scoffs, but winces when he goes to get up, “If I can’t fuck you while we’re here, I don’t think we’ll be doing more than exchanging blowjobs and handjobs.”

“I’ll return the favor in the shower,” Eric rolls his eyes, “My parents are at the gym. You can fuck me to your heart’s content.”

Brian does take him up on that, but they do make quick work of it, considering they still want to get ready and have some time to themselves. But god, Brian’s cock feels so good. He’s missed it
and it’s nice to not have to worry about his parents walking in, as if he’s a teenager getting lucky and fooling around instead of doing homework.

After they are washed up, they get dressed and let Amanda know that they’re leaving. Eric drives, since Eric’s argument of knowing the area a lot better than Brian does is more convincing than Brian’s argument on his rental car being a lot cooler. They take the scenic route, driving along the roads closest to the shore on Cape Fear, taking in the view of the beautiful beach houses and the families just arriving at the beach. He ends up taking Brian to Oliver’s. It has a beautiful view and great food, with enough healthy options to pique Brian’s interests.

“This is actually where I took Cynthia on our first date,” Eric tells Brian, suddenly remembering, “I wanted to impress her and I think it intimidated her a little. My mom gave me the money to make sure I could buy Cynthia anything she wanted to eat. Dad didn’t really want me dating her, since her mom had a few charges against her for public intoxication while we were in high school. I think Mom felt sorry for her. She even drove us out here and dropped us off.”

“Isn’t it a rule not to talk about exes while you’re on a date?” Brian asks, biting his cheek.

Eric grins, “Shut up.”

“Now, if it had been one of your hot exes, you could talk about it in detail all you wanted,” Brian fibs, “But a woman? That makes my dick soft.”

“Oh, so do you want to hear about the time me and Owen-”

“No,” Brian interrupts abruptly, leaving room for no argument.

Eric grins and shakes his head. Brian’s uncalled for jealousy regarding Owen will never cease to confuse and amuse him.

Once they get inside, they are seated near the front windows and give their waiter their orders within a few minutes. Fresh squeezed orange juice, Quiche du Jour for Brian, and Crab Cake Benedict for himself. And things are good. A sense of calmness washes over him, and that’s something Eric hasn’t had since New Orleans.

Probably since before he left for his trip, actually. While Brian has the ability to get him worked
It’s a wonderful ten minutes, filled with his great husband, good food, and beautiful scenery. And then he hears someone call out his name.

“Eric? Eric Davisson?” a southern accent calls out from a few tables over.

Eric looks over and tries to look pleasant enough when he spots the table of six. He recognizes three of them, but only remembers Barry’s full name. And he’s easy to spot. He hasn’t changed that much from high school, still bloated and broad shouldered, tall and dressed like a lumberjack. Only more drunk, despite it being only 8:30 in the morning.

“Hi,” Eric answers, a little subdued, raising his hand once to wave, “Barry Hughes, right?”

“The one and only,” Barry answers, spreading his arms wide.

Eric nods and tries to smile, “Well, it’s good to see you are doing well.”

And, it might be rude, but he tries to go back to his meal after that. He feels Brian studying him, trying to figure out what exactly is going on, but Brian probably won’t get far. None of those guys had really caused him much trouble. He hadn’t been out in high school and he had been a good enough actor to not raise many suspicions, except when it came to showing maybe too much acceptance for the gay and lesbian community whenever the subject was rarely brought up back then. Barry had poked fun at that, possibly tried to push him around a little for being too nice and popular with the girls. Popular with Clara, who had turned Barry down. That had really pissed off Barry back then.

Huh. He had forgotten all about that too.

“So I hear you are a big, fat success now,” Barry mentions, holding on to the conversation.

Eric turns to him a little, “I’m doing well for myself. Good job, great family.”

Barry smirks at that, elbowing the man on his right, “Family? I heard you were a fucking faggot.”
Eric grips onto his fork until his knuckles turn white, then forces himself to put it down.

“Well, you heard right,” Eric answers, a little loudly, “This is my husband, actually. And, to be a little blunt, you’re interrupting us.”

Barry’s mouth twitches at that and he cracks his knuckles, “Oh, yeah? What, are you two pansies too good to get in a conversation with real men? You better watch your back, you fucking pussy faggot snob. Get bashed like all you fuckers deserve.”

Who the fuck instigates and tries to start a homophobic attack during fucking brunch at a semi-upscale seaside restaurant? That is literally all Eric can think at first.

And then he feels rage, white hot and unnecessary rage that he isn’t accustomed to. Without any warning, to Brian or himself, he’s standing up and storming over to the table. He has no idea what is plan would have been once he got there, so it’s probably for the best that Brian intercepts him and holds him back.

“They aren’t worth it, let it go,” Brian warns him softly, trying to make Eric meet his eyes, “Look at me, Eric.”

“Let the fucker come at me!” Barry yells out, all while some poor waitress tries to calm the jeering table down, before threatening to throw them out.

“Brian, let me go,” Eric seethes.

“If you were thinking straight, no pun intended, you would be hitting yourself right now. Your emotions are on the fritz due to where you are and what you have been going through for the last couple of days and it’s impairing your judgment. So we need to go. Now.”

Eric takes a couple of deep breaths through his nostrils, then nods his head. He throws two twenties on the table, before storming out of the restaurant.

When they get to the car, he’s hitting the steering wheel for a couple of minutes. Brian doesn’t say a word, just turns his head to check on him so often, then eventually clears his throat.
“Maybe I should drive.”

“I’m fine,” Eric mutters.

“Yeah, right. You let yourself get worked up by a few losers who probably work some graveyard road construction shift and just drink most of the night away. They’re pathetic.”

“You shouldn’t diss them for their careers,” Eric scolds him.

Brian cracks a rueful smile at that, “Now, there’s the Eric I know and love.”

Eric snorts and looks away, “I can’t believe I almost got into a fight.”

“Me either. It sort of turned me on.”

Eric gives his husband a strange look, “You were the one who stopped me from suckerpunching him.”

“Well, I couldn’t have you getting arrested,” Brian sighs dramatically, “With all the backwards laws coming into effect here, you’d probably get the maximum sentence, lawyer father be damned, and I would be left a single father to three kids for up to a year. Do you want Gus, Lily, and whatever the fuck her name will be visiting you in a prison on weekends?”

Eric lets out a laugh at that, “I seriously doubt I would face more than a few hours in a holding cell.”

“Let’s get out of here, just to be safe. Cops are here,” Brian murmurs, looking out the back window to view the approaching blue and red lights.

Eric can’t argue with that.
He feels the adrenaline coming off of him, even after they get back to his parents’ house. Brian announces to Amanda what had happened, but she obviously doesn’t believe a word coming out of Brian’s mouth.

“You’re great at telling stories, Brian,” Amanda huffs out a laugh, before ruffling Lily’s hair, “I see where your daughter gets it from.”

As Amanda predicted, their parents arrive at 11 with Abuela in tow. He’s glad to see her. He’s come down twice to visit since his grandfather died, both times just being him and Lily. While she hasn’t been enthusiastic about him being gay, she never disowned him or showed a strong disapproval. His grandfather had been more warm and open when he had come out, and had liked both Owen and Brian. While his grandmother hadn’t really liked Owen, she seems okay with Brian, after coming to terms with the fact Eric would always be with a man. It always warmed his heart to see Brian actually try with her, even if the language barrier often got in the way. But when Brian struggled with speaking with her in Spanish, Lily tended to make it her duty to translate for them.

And it’s no different this time. Eric greets her with a kiss, asks about the independent living community she’s now in. It had been hard for her to leave her home after his grandfather had passed but, with his Abuela growing more frail, his parents had managed to get her to agree to a compromise of sorts. She still got to live alone but nurses were assigned to check on her and the other members of the community every couple of hours.

Lily is so careful with her, something his Abuela probably wouldn’t stand for if it were anyone else

“¿Eso está mejor?” Lily asks, sticking a pointless pillow at her bisabuela’s side.

“Si, si,” his abuela says warmly, patting the little girl’s hand, “¿Quiere sentarse a mi lado?”

“¡Definitivamente!” Lily exclaims, sitting down next to the old woman, “Daddy, tomas una foto de nosotros.”

“Uh…” Brian tries to think, obviously going over every word Lily just said in his brain, “Oh, right.”

Brian takes a few pictures of their little girl with her great-grandmother and everything is okay. His father is friendly enough, even if he seems preoccupied. Lily and the boys are being adorable and
he can tell his abuela is in heaven when they come up to cuddle with her. Brian is sitting next to him, his right hand lightly entwined with Eric’s left. It’s nice and it’s something Eric thought he may never be able to comfortably do while visiting home.

It also helps that his mother is in the kitchen and has mostly stayed there, insisting she had to cook.

That should have been the hint. The past couple of days should have been, really. The way the tension just kept building up between his mother and him, with only sparse moments of affection at most.

The blow up happens at such an inappropriate time though. But he and Brian had gotten too comfortable. The family had been eating, enjoying the kids, laughing. Brian had flirted innocently and kissed him on the cheek after. A peck. That had been it. His grandmother had been fine with it. His father had been fine with it.

But his mother wasn’t. She ends up slamming her fork down because of it.

“I can’t stand for this anymore,” his mother mutters, looking down at her plate, “This...This isn’t normal!”

“Louisa,” his father warns, “Just settle down, alright?”

“Mom, please,” Amanda hissis.

“No!” his mother cries, standing up to stare at him, “You...You were supposed to be the good one! My baby boy! You were supposed to go far and do great things!”

“He did do great things, sweetheart,” his dad butts in, “He’s doing very well for himself and became a good man.”

“But he didn’t!” his mother yells out, “He disrespected us, our home, he…fucked that man in our home! You heard them!”

“Louisa!” his abuela scolds, shocked, “Cuidado con lo que dices!”
“Louisa, that’s enough!” his father orders.

“I don’t want them here!” his mother practically wails.

Eric lets out a shaky breath and throws the cloth napkin on his plate, “We’ll leave. It’s fine. Let me gather our things.”

“Eric, don’t. Mom’s just upset,” Amanda tells him quietly, “She’ll regret this tantrum as soon as you all drive off.”

“I know where I’m not wanted,” Eric mutters, standing up quickly, “Brian, if you want to get on the road with Lily, I’ll meet you at the rental drop-off at the airport. I can get our things. You don’t need to stay here.”

“I’m not leaving without you,” Brian tells him, fucking stubborn twat.

“I’ll meet you there. I don’t want Lily around this. I should have never brought her here. Not with the way my mother thinks about us. Please, just take her and go.”

Brian stares at him for a few moments, then gets up and picks Lily up.

“Daddy, I want to visit with my family some more!” Lily cries out, reaching out for them, “Bisabuela! Aunt Amanda! Julian! Grandpa!-”

“Shhh…” Brian comforts her, rubbing her back a little, “You can...You can call them, alright? After we land.”

“No ll ores, Cariño,” Eric hears his abuela murmur, holding out her hand to hold his little girl’s, “Hablaremos pronto.”

And Eric knows it is most likely the yelling and the stress that has pushed Lily to cry like this, but it still breaks Eric’s heart to hear her heaving sobs as she wails, “I WANT ELLIE! I WANT
ELLIE!

Yeah, that almost breaks him. So he goes up and grabs her so that Lily will have her before Brian pulls out of the driveway.

He hates the look that Brian is giving him from the driver’s seat, the hesitance and the suspicion, as if he senses Eric wants to break down and cry himself right now.

“I’ll be fine,” Eric chokes out, “It shouldn’t take me more than 20 minutes to get all of our stuff together.”

“You look like you are about to start blubbering harder than Lily is right now,” Brian responds, which only solicits another wail from the little girl.

“I won’t, I promise,” Eric sniffs, looking away, “That’d be a bit over the top for a grown man to do.”

“Eric-”

“Son.”

Both Eric and Brian look over and see the older man coming down the porch steps.

“Son, I’m...I’m so sorry about what your mother said. She didn’t mean it. You know how she is. Once she gets worked up, she-”

“You can’t make excuses for her every time she does things like this,” Eric interrupts, turning around, “Look, I’m glad that you are wanting to be apart of my life. I’m glad you are accepting who I am and are trying to get to know Brian. But I can’t come around here if she is going to treat me like this! Not anymore. I’m tired of trying to make her accept me.”

“Eric, please-”
Eric lets out a sigh, “You...You and Abuela are welcome to come up any time you want. I don’t want to keep Lily from you. Hell, I don’t want to keep Lily from Mom. I know she loves her. But until she starts to reevaluate her priorities? Until she starts trying to meet me part way? I can’t see her. I love her and it breaks my heart to say that, but I just can’t do it anymore.”

Eric sees the moisture in his father’s eyes again, the mythical moisture that can’t exist because it’s his dad.

“Can I...Can I give Lily a hug goodbye?” His dad asks, voice wobbling.

Eric has to cover his eyes at the sound before being able to nod his head, his mouth twisted in a grimace. He can’t bring himself to watch the farewell, but he can hear it. He can hear his father don a more cheerful and paternal voice, trying to bring Lily out of her woeful state. It sounds like it helps a little. His dad was always good at that.

He kisses Brian goodbye and watches the car pull out of the driveway and make its way down the street before going back inside to load everything into his own rental car. No one really bothers him, and it’s probably the best call on their part. There’s no changing his mind on this and they seem to know that.

He’s still not heartless though. He tells his abuela that he loves her and will see her soon, makes sure his sister is coming up for Thanksgiving, and hugs and kisses the boys before receiving a long, tight hug from his father.

His mother is nowhere to be found.

And then he’s able to drive away, watching the home he grew up in disappear in his rearview mirror.

And Brian is proven right when Eric starts crying almost as hard as Lily had been. Not that he’ll ever tell his husband that.

He’s calmed down once he arrives at the Wilmington International Airport. Forty minutes had been more than enough time to pull himself together. He checks the mirror and his eyes are a little red but other than that, he doesn’t look too terrible.
He gets out of the car to open the trunk and sighs. He’ll need Brian’s help with this if they want to make any progress. He has a month’s worth of shit in the back. They’ll need to rent a cart.

Fuck, they don’t even have plane tickets. What are they supposed to do from here? Yeah, they need to turn at least one vehicle in anyway. Eric should probably look up some hotels in case they can’t get tickets for New York tonight.

He makes his way into the rental office to meet Brian and doesn’t even see him there. Fuck, is there more than one now? He doesn’t remember there being-

“Hey,” Brian says, coming up right behind him.

Eric jumps, a little startled, then turns around. Brian puts a hand on his cheek and looks at him for several moments, as if he’s trying to find signs of emotional trauma or something. It’s cute, but it’s also unnerving, so Eric gently pulls away.

“Where were you?” Eric asks, glancing down to check on Lily, who seems much better.

“Getting tickets. Figured we should have a destination in mind if we were going to come here.”

Eric lets a humorless chuckle out, “Yeah, I didn’t think that through either. So, what flight are we catching to New York? The next one or are we going to have to wait a while?”

Eric looks around the crowded airport and shrugs, “We’re not going to New York.”

Eric raises his eyebrows, “Oh yeah? Do we have a transfer?”

“Nope,” is all Brian answers with.

“Okay...so where are we going?”

Brian smiles, a little wistfully, “It’s Gus’s birthday on Monday. Fifteen...Anyway, I thought maybe we could surprise him. I know you got him a bunch of stuff in New Orleans. You have all of it on
you, so...yeah. I got us three tickets to Toronto.”

Eric lets out a small, wet laugh and smiles, genuinely, “I think that sounds like a great idea. Fifteen’s an important birthday.”

“Fifteen,” Brian groans, throwing his head back, “Makes me feel sick.”

“And old,” Eric is sure to add.

Brian playfully glares at him, before patting him on the arm, “I’ll be okay though. We’ll be surrounded by good people.”

“We will be,” Eric answers.

“Who love us, both of us, and will accept us no matter what,” Brian surprisingly continues, maintaining eye contact.

Eric feels his heart swell a little at that, then puts his arms around Brian’s neck.

“Of course they will,” Eric whispers, leaning in closer for a kiss, “They’re family.”

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think. I am fully expecting hate for this chapter so, if you loved it, prove me wrong and show me said love. And, if you hated it, prove me right and make me believe I have a future career as a hotline psychic, sort of like Miss Cleo. Next chapter will take place at the end of October from Justin's POV. :)
3rd Street and Sinatra Drive

Chapter Summary

Justin takes his sister and a new friend to Emmett's Halloween party.

Chapter Notes

I'm surprised that I got this chapter out quickly, considering it is almost 17,000 words. I tried to make this chapter a bit more fun and wacky to contrast from the last three serious chapters. Let me know what you think, but try to be somewhat respectful if you don't!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

October 31st, 2015, 1:30 am

Molly lags up the stairs in front of Justin, tripping over her feet as she sways from side to side with each step.

“Watch it,” Justin warns, taking a hold of her arm as she minorly stumbles. What would she do without him?

“It’s been a very l...long t-time since I drank that much,” Molly hiccups as she waits for Justin to unlock his apartment door.

“Really?” Justin asks, raising his brow in amusement as he lets her in, “I couldn’t tell you were even buzzed.”

“It’s probably because of my impeccable makeup job,” she answers.

“I still don’t know what you are supposed to be,” Justin admits. God. He sucks. He had like two cranberry vodkas and his memory is already wiped, obviously.
“I’m a Sexy Steampunk Mad Scientist. God, can’t you tell?” Molly groans as she flops down onto the couch.

“Right, the weird goggles. Should have remembered,” Justin murmurs, sitting on the arm of the couch next to her head, “Just don’t get any of that impeccable makeup on my furniture.”

Molly opens one eye to convey her annoyance, before trying to reach for the remote, “What’s to watch? What’s to eat?”

Justin reaches over with grace and hands her the whole remote caddy, giving her complete control over every electronic form of entertainment he has, “I have Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime. You probably could just entertain yourself for hours with browsing alone. What do you want to eat? I have a lot of fruit and vegetables, some of that Skinny Pop stuff, Lean Cuisines-”

“What the fuck?” Molly blurts out, lifting up the regular dull ass shirt covering Justin’s stomach, “Are you gaining weight or something? You look the same-”

“Can’t a guy just eat healthy to maintain a better lifestyle?” Justin laughs, pulling the shirt down.

“No.”

Justin rolls his eyes like that, “I think there may be a frozen pizza in the back of the fridge.”

“Now you’re talking,” Molly smiles sweetly, before clicking on Netflix, “Oooh, Sherlock. If only John and Sherlock would realize their love for each other...hey, do you have weed?”

Justin scoffs, “Like you need it! And no, I don’t.”

Molly gives him a look, “But you usually have some, even if it is sitting in a drawer for several weeks at times. Who are you?”

Justin shakes his head and runs his fingers through her hair, “Do you want a pizza or not?”
“Fine. Go, peasant,” Molly dismisses as she presses a button to start the first episode.

That gives her a swat. Whatever.

She tries to focus on Benedict Cumberbatch’s voice and face. At first, she thought his face was a bit odd looking, but the charisma, intellect, and rich baritone made her embrace it. With her drunken thoughts and her focus on some random actor across a damn ocean, she could almost get her thoughts off of Hunter.

Almost being the key word.

Things are...up in the air at best. She has been answering his calls less, found excuses to be too busy for him to visit or to visit him. Fuck, he had even told her he’d buy her way to come to Los Angeles. And she had said no. Then they fought. She pushed him away, admitted to him she didn’t think she could do what they had been doing anymore.

She wishes that she could. But they were lucky to see each other one weekend every six weeks or so. Sometimes she went there, and sometimes he came to her. She actually enjoys meeting halfway the most. Spending a couple of days in a random city in the midwest, as though they were both taking a brief vacation from reality. The last time they’d done that, he surprised her with a resort in Arkansas, right before the school year started. He had a little time off before starting work on the new season. He had surprised her last second. Called her, told her to check her email and pack enough clothes for a week. Make sure she brought a bathing suit and some decent walking shoes.

She remembers trying not to scoff at Arkansas. But she went, despite the elephant in the room when it came to her asking to have an open relationship, despite the fact that neither of them had even attempted a go at the perks of an open relationship.

And when she got there. When he had picked her up and looked gorgeous, driven her from Fayetteville to Eureka Springs, and had booked them a luxury treehouse for a week, alit with lanterns and a winding path up to the cottage nestled in the oak. They spent that week having mindblowing sex, hiking, exploring the town, going on ghost tours, finding the more secluded natural hot springs, swimming in those springs, kissing in those springs, fucking right next to those springs…

There were probably plenty of couples who have spent less on a honeymoon, have felt less blissful than they had. That week...it had actually gotten her mind off the elephant in the room. It had gotten her mind off a lot of other things too. The shaky mental health of her dad, the fact she is afraid as hell to leave a reliable job and go into debt for grad school, the fact that she is too afraid to
even apply. Too worried that she’ll be out of a job while she goes to school and too poor to make anything work. Too nervous to apply to places far away from her dad, since he will have pretty much no one after she leaves.

All that stress had disappeared. Just because she had the time of her life with him, because he had chosen a fucking oasis to take her to, as though he had known how stressed she was by everything.

The euphoria of the trip had lasted a few days after she returned to Morgantown. But the stress and worry had started to seep back in after that. The doubt. And even though they had met up once more after that, the doubt still clawed at her brain, making her wonder if it might even be the last time they saw each other as a couple, or whatever they were...are.

Sometimes she just wonders if she would have been better off staying in that hotel room the day after Christmas, listening to Tucker’s snores.

Nothing seems to fix the stress anymore. The aching she feels in her chest. She knows Justin can tell something is wrong, the way he’s been practically coddling her since she arrived at 7. The way he had made sure not to drink, watched her carefully at Liam’s bar, let her go a bit wild by letting her get too drunk and make out with a guy. Making sure to pull her away the moment he knew she would probably go further and do something she’d regret.

She feels the regret seeping in over the kissing and fondling already, even though she’s in an open relationship, even though she’s not sure the relationship is still in effect at all.

She feels herself let out a sob and tears pool inside of the goggles she has still failed to take off.

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Justin takes his time with trying to find things to feed his sister. She could be a fucking garbage disposal at times, they both could be. But ever since he decided to go on a health binge last month, his fridge has been lacking.

He finds some frozen organic sweet potato fries in the back. They would do.

He preheats the oven and sits at the small table by the window once he has the food ready to put in once the oven is hot enough. He finds himself browsing on his phone, same stuff over and over but he can’t help it. Then he puts the food in the oven, prepares himself to deal with his drunk and most likely depressed sister who he is worrying more and more about, then hears a sob from the other room.
Damn it.

Making his way back into the living room, he finds her still on the couch, every bit of her costume still in place, as she cries on her side.

“Fuck, are you starting out with season 3 or something?” Justin asks, kneeling down next to her.

He had been thinking that comment might get a laugh out of her, but all she does whimper and sob out, “N-No. It’s the f-first ep...episode!”

Molly gets more inconsolable at that point, only crying like a drunk person can cry. Or a heartbroken person. Or both.

“Molly,” he murmurs, lifting her head up so that he can sit down, “Shhh...shhh. It’s going to be alright. It might not feel like it now, but everything’s going to be okay.”

“It won’t!” she exclaims, taking her goggles off and throwing them across the room, leaving subtle circular marks on the skin around her eyes, “My life is f-fucked! I am barely holding it t-together! I hate ev...everything! I always worry about Dad even though he’s doing better than he was, I worry about M-Mom, Tucker, and Grandma getting overwhelmed with Gr-Grandpa, I h-hate my job, I fucking hate it. I love the k-kids but I’m so bored and wh-when I’m not, it’s because s-some boy in my class is obviously getting abused and I am tr-trying to childline his mother. And that shit’s taking forever since no one else at the sch-school is d-doing it so I did and I have to w-watch him come in ev-everyday, knowing that he’s st-still with his mom until the investigation is over because god forbid CPS do shit. And I’m just going out and getting wasted like a fucking idiot and making out with some guy I don’t know while all that is happening, when there’s someone who really loves me out there who I can’t fucking be with-!”

Molly breaks off of her rant and sobs into his lap. Justin wraps an arm around her shoulders and pets her hair, murmuring what are probably pointless reassurances in her ear as he worries over her even more.

She calms down after a while and robotically eats pizza and sweet potato fries as she watches his flat screen silently with glassy eyes and takes big gulps of water. Every time he tries to speak to her, check where her head is at, he gets the shortest answers possible.
It’s definitely not the right time to tell her about the baby.

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Justin wakes up the next morning, yawning and stretching, only to almost hit Molly in the face with his wrist.

When he sits up though, she’s still asleep, which is weird since she is always up before him. He just hopes she doesn’t wake up vomiting and sick all day, considering they are supposed to go to another Halloween party tonight.

Maybe she should be sick then. It could get them out of it.

Alright, that’s a shitty thought. She had a rough enough night. Became weepy again and internally clingy but wouldn’t say a word, just looked at him with big eyes when he told her he was heading to bed. He ended up letting her sleep in Nathan’s space right next to him. It seemed to make her feel less alone and Justin had wanted to keep an eye on her anyway. It was the first time anyone else slept in that space. He has had some tricks over here and there, has even been hooking up with this guy a few times a week for almost two months now. Malcolm Jones. He’s 34 years old, smart, a lawyer and a human rights activist, tall, athletic, and gorgeous with his dark skin, six pack, and, on top of everything else that’s perfect about him, ten inch cock.

Ten. Inch. Cock. And Malcolm is primarily a top. Despite Justin’s vast amount of experience, he had been nervous as hell to take that on at first. But it’s...fuck, it’s good.

But Malcolm is starting to drop hints. Just a little bit. Hints that he wants to stay over, that he wants Justin to meet his friends and his twin brother. He has always said it in a super casual way, as if he knows not to push. They’re already doing things outside of their apartments, things that aren’t sex related. Like going on jogs, visiting galleries, going out to eat, to a bar or a club for drinks, or to the movies. It has only happened a handful of times, but it is becoming more frequent.

Fuck.

If the circumstances were different, he would probably try this, more than he has been already, at least. He actually really likes this guy. His smile lights up a room, the way he kisses him...it puts his mind at ease. If it weren’t for his mind wandering back to Nathan, if it weren’t for the fact that it hadn’t even initially occurred to him things might go further than just a few random fucks with Malcolm, that no one, especially Malcolm, even knows about-
“Unghh…”

Justin looks over again and sees Molly rub her face and turn to face him.

“What time is it?” Molly mumbles, only one eye open.

“Nine.”

Molly nods, “Fuck, I should get up.”

Justin snorts at that, “It’s really not that late.”

“Yeah, but if I go back to sleep, it will suddenly be noon. My head hurts,” she groans, placing a hand on her forehead.

“Then sleep it off,” Justin stressed, tucking her back in a little, “It’s a cold, cloudy Saturday morning and you’re hungover. It’s what any normal person would do.”

“I can’t. My sleep schedule will be fucked for days. I may be a mess, but I know myself well enough to predict that.”

Molly sits up and stays still for a moment, cradling her head.

“Want breakfast?” Justin offers, circling around the bed.

“…Yeah. Just make me whatever you’re having,” Molly ends up answering as he starts to leave the room, “Hey, what are you having?”

“Kale, yogurt, and pineapple smoothie,” he calls out before going to the kitchen.

He doesn’t know how quickly Molly recovers from hangovers, but she’s only 24 so maybe it is just...
her youth. Justin still can’t help but feel jealousy bubble up within him when his sister is suddenly in front of him in the kitchen, blocking his path.

“What the hell is going on with you?” she demands to know, stepping to the left to block his path once more.

“Come on, fuck off,” Justin snorts, putting his hand on her shoulder to try to usher her off to the side.

“No,” Molly mutters, studying him as if he’s a specimen under one of her favorite microscopes, “Justin...Justin.”

Justin lets out a groan, “Jesus Christ, what?”

“You aren’t...You aren’t sick are you? You’re not...fuck, you’re not pos-”

“Molly, Molly,” Justin interrupts her quickly, holding up his hand and taking the opportunity to step past her to get what he needs out of the fridge, “Don’t go there. I’m not positive, I’m not sick, and I don’t have any abnormal growths or autoimmune deficiencies. I went to my doctor just last week and I am perfectly healthy.”

Molly nods, letting out a shaky, relieved breath. And he connects the dots on why she was so worried. He knows how meticulous Ben is with his diet, how Hunter has become more health conscious in the last several years as well. It would be a rash conclusion for most other people to make, but for her? She is in love with someone affected by it. Of course it’s in the forefront of her mind.

“Okay, so what...what is all of this?”

Justin has to laugh, “You’re acting like there’s something seriously wrong with me.”

Molly rolls her eyes, “I mean, it’s good you’re eating so well, I guess. But it’s not you. What, are you seeing some hot fitness trainer, drooling over his perfect rock hard abs and it’s your dream to become chest twins?”
Molly is smirking now and Justin is just looking at her like she has grown a second head.

But she’s technically onto something. Not really, but sort of. If he tells her the real reason for his sudden clean eating habits, she would ask question after question, get excited, get worried, be demanding more and more information.

9 am may be late in Molly’s world. It isn’t really in his though, especially not on weekends. And, as sentimental as it sounds, he wants it to be just right when he tells her.

“He’s not a fitness trainer...but I have been seeing someone. Sort of. I guess.”

He really has to keep himself from growling at his sister when she lifts herself onto his counter, then slams her hand over his when he tries to lift the lid on his blender.

“Tell me everything,” Molly orders urgently, eyes excited, “No, wait. Pull him up on Facebook, then tell me what I can’t guess.”

Justin shrugs off the order at first, but Molly is insistent, holding down his hand so hard that he is forced to take his phone off the charger on the counter and look Malcolm up.

“Malcolm Jones,” Molly announces, as she steals his phone away, “Oooh, he’s cute, Justin. Okay, so he was born in 1980 and turns 35 on December 16th. Not far off, hope you’re thinking of presents.”

“Molly, give me back my phone,” Justin demands, exasperated.

“He’s a lawyer, look at you!” Molly exclaims, holding the phone out of his grasp, “And a brother? Damn, are they twins? Is he single?”

“Yes, they’re twins. No, he’s married with kids. Now, give me my phone,” Justin tells her slowly.

Rolling her eyes, Molly tosses the phone back to him after a minute of research, before smiling mischievously.
“Does he have a big dick? He really looks like he would have a BBC-”

“That’s a racial stereotype...and a porn tag,” he scolds her.

Molly just keeps the smile on her face and waits.

“Allright, it’s ten inches. Are you happy? And he’s girthy. Do you want to know the details on how much he has to prep me before-”

“Oh my god, stop,” Molly shudders, leaping off the counter in disgust.

“Thought so,” Justin mutters smugly, before throwing the kale and chopped pineapple into the blender and scooping out the yogurt, “Do you want some honey in it? It will make it sweeter.”

“Anything to mask the taste of kale.”

“It’s really not that bad,” Justin assures her, squirting some honey in the blender too.

Justin blends the ingredients until the are a smooth, green, consistent liquid and pours it into two large glasses before setting them both on the bistro table by the large window in the back of the kitchen. Molly takes the seat on the right while he takes a seat on the left, and both of them watch the pigeons sitting on the sill until Molly turns to him.

“So how long have you been seeing him? Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

Justin rubs the space in between his eyebrows, “We’re not...nothing is official or anything. We haven’t really talked about it. We started hooking up at the beginning of September and didn’t start doing anything other than that until about a month ago.”

“Hmmm,” Molly acknowledges, “How did you meet him?”
Justin laughs and shakes his head, “Tinder.”

“You did not,” Molly gasps mockingly.

“I wanted sex,” Justin deadpans, “And it was a slow night at the bar. They were either older bears or barely legal twinks. Neither really appealed to me. As for him, he had been working late on a client’s case several nights in a row and needed release. I went over to his place.”

“That’s okay, I used to hook up with guys on Tinder once in awhile too,” Molly shrugs, then takes a sip of her smoothie, “Hey, this isn’t so bad.”

“Told you.”

Molly just takes another swig before looking at him with purpose.

“You should invite him to Emmett’s Halloween party tonight,” Molly suggests. Justin can tell by her eyes she’s already set on it.

“No,” Justin answers, in an attempt to shut her down, “I haven’t even agreed to meet his friends and brother yet. And his circle is probably sane and normal, filled with those who don’t fly in from a different country for Halloween, and with no trace of an ex-fiancé in the mix.”

“Nathan and Brian met at one of Emmett’s parties. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

Justin shakes his head, amused, “Yeah, they met at Emmett’s Christmas party. Great first meeting that was. And Nathan and I had been together almost two years at that point. What, I’m supposed to invite a guy I’ve been fucking and getting coffee with sometimes?”

“Okay, yeah, Christmas was awkward,” Molly agrees, “But things were still very hesitant and shaky between you and Brian then. You’re becoming good friends now, even if there is still a hint of unresolved sexual tension coming off of both of you now and then.”

“I really don’t think that’s true-” Justin starts to object but is cut off.
“Plus, Nathan’s like twenty years younger than Brian. Brian was probably secretly jealous and felt old or something,” Molly continues, “As for your relationship with Malcolm being new and undefined so far, who cares? Brian and Eric started secretly dating like three weeks after meeting, isn’t that what you told me?”

“Hmmm, yeah,” Justin answers with annoyed and mocking agreement.

“And you and Nathan took about the same amount of time to start dating as well, if not less,” Molly points out, “So? You should-”

Molly is cut off by the sound of his phone ringing on the table, lighting up with Malcolm’s name listed on the screen.

“Oh my god, what a coincidence-”

“You texted him and told him to call while you were on my phone, didn’t you?” Justin glares.

Molly stares at him innocently, “It would be really rude if you didn’t answer, since you asked him to call and all.”

Justin has to take a deep breath to stifle the anger before he picks up his cell.

“Hey, Malcolm. Glad you called.”

“What do you think he will wear?”

Justin turns to glare at his sister as she puts on her costume makeup in the mirror.

“I don’t know, didn’t really get to plan couple’s costumes,” Justin answers with bitter sarcasm.

Molly looks at him likes he’s stupid, “You said you like him.”
“I do!” Justin answers, frustrated.

“Then why are you hesitating right now?” Molly inquires, “I know you still love Nathan, but you can’t keep yourself from moving on.”

“It’s not just Nathan!” Justin blurts out, “It’s-”

His doorbell buzzes, effectively cutting him off.

“That’s probably him,” Molly murmurs, a bit less sure of herself, before sighing, “Look, I’m sorry if I overstepped. I just want to see you happy. Especially when I’m not.”

“Yeah, I know,” Justin answers quietly, “And you’re right. I do like him. Just...reign yourself in. You are way too chipper. It makes it seem like you are overcompensating.”

“Well, you saw me last night,” Molly tells him with a smirk that doesn’t meet her eyes, “I probably am.”

Justin takes a brief moment to judge his sister’s emotional state, but she seems okay. So he presses the button on the intercom, sees that it is Malcolm, and says, “Hey, come on up.”

It doesn’t take long for Malcolm to make it up the two flights of stairs. Justin opens the door on the second knock and Malcolm greets him with a smile.

“Hey,” Malcolm murmurs warmly, setting down a bag before pulling him in gently by the waist to give him a kiss. Once the kiss ends, their faces are still only a few inches apart. Malcolm rubs the back of his neck and lets out a nervous laugh, “Uh, I’m surprised you invited me.”

Justin bites back a smile and runs his hands down Malcolm’s ridiculously toned biceps, “Figured you should meet my ridiculously nosy, weird, protective older friends.”

“Oh, is it a test?” Malcolm laughs, arms still wrapped around Justin’s waist.
Justin dons a serious expression, “Oh, yes. A test that requires great strength, endurance, and an extreme amount of patience.”

“Sounds daunting,” Malcolm answers, biting his cheek, “You know, we could have just met my friends.”

“Yeah,” Justin agrees, “But it’s best to get the hard stuff out of the way first.”

“Of course,” Malcolm smiles before meeting him for another kiss.

“Ahem.”

Justin breaks the kiss off and steps away from the man. He doesn’t know how Malcolm does it. Completely puts him at ease, with his charisma and beauty, when just minutes before Justin had been wondering on how he could keep this up considering, in a little over half a year, his life would change forever.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” Molly asks, steaming curling iron in her hand.

“...Put down the iron first,” Justin balks at her.

Molly glances at the potential hazard, sets it down on the styling mat that’s lying on the end table, then comes over.

“I’m Molly,” she greets, holding out her hand, “Justin’s sister.”

“Hi, I’m Malcolm,” Malcolm smiles, shaking her hand.

“Oh yes, I know all about you.”

Malcolm raises his eyebrows and glances at Justin, “Do you?”
“She made me pull up your Facebook,” Justin mutters, heat rising to his face, “Here, come in. Take your coat off.”

Malcolm steps inside, hangs up his coat, and makes his way to the living room to sit down on the couch. Justin sits next to him as Molly goes back to focus on her hair.

“So Malcolm,” Molly starts, as she forms a perfect curl, “I saw you had a bag. Did you bring a costume?”

“I did. I had a Han Solo costume from a couple of years ago. I just brought that.”

“Outfit repeater,” Molly tsks, “But Justin did the same thing. He’s going as Paul McCartney in The Yellow Submarine, same thing he wore last year. He didn’t even wear a costume last night when we went to Liam’s party. Although Liam is less likely to throw a fit than Emmett would if Justin just passed on dressing up.”

Justin barely contains shuddering at the sheer disappointment that would roll off of Emmett if he arrived only in his regular clothing.

“He’s that enthusiastic, huh?” Malcolm guessed.

“He can be a bit…” Justin starts, thinking of the right word, “Okay, some people go the extra mile but Emmett does a triathlon to make sure everything is extravagant and exciting. For any holiday or special event.”

“Has he done anything for Arbor Day yet?” Molly asks.

“2012,” Justin mentions, before turning back to Malcolm, “But he also will do anything for his friends, does a lot for charities, is passionate about adoption since he adopted his son almost a year ago. I think Drew as well as age sort of mellowed him out a little. And he’s a lot more grounded than he used to be.”

“He sounds like an interesting guy,” Malcolm smiles.
“And lucky,” Molly adds, plopping down on the couch next to them, “Adorable kid, sweet dog, gorgeous house next to the river, and Drew Boyd as a husband.”

Malcolm raises his eyebrows, “Drew Boyd? The Drew Boyd?”

“You a fan?” Justin smirks, nudging his shoulder, “They aren't married but might as well be. He will be there too.”

“I respect him,” Malcolm answers, “He didn't play for my team until the last couple of years of his career, but he was the first active professional football player to come out. And the way he did it? Bold and all out on live television? That took balls.”

“The guy he kissed on there was Emmett,” Justin informs him, “Emmett lost his job because of it. Luckily he just did that gig for fun, if you can call it that.”

“Okay, enough talking about Justin’s friends,” Molly says, looking at the clock, “You both need to get dressed if we want to be somewhat on time.”

He and Malcolm shouldn't have gotten dressed in the same room because, despite Justin’s dilemma on putting the relationship on pause or ending it...the man is just so hot.

So yeah, he ends up on his knees to suck the other guy’s cock before they can get anything on and Malcolm pushes him on the bed, captures Justin’s lips in a bruising, searing kiss, then travels down his body to return the favor.

His sister is kind enough to wait until he comes before knocking on the door to tell them to hurry up.

He still thinks she is a cock block though.

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“Jesus, you weren't lying about him going all out,” Malcolm mutters once they arrive in front of Emmett’s gate.
“Probably the most decked out house in all of Hoboken,” Molly agrees.

“Probably in the whole damn state,” Justin corrects, stepping over a very realistic looking severed hand, illuminated by the green lights.

“Oh my god, do these headstones have our names on them?” Molly asks, running to the yard, “Molly Taylor, September 23rd, 1991 to October 31st, 2015. Cause of death: Impaled in the pantry. Okay, that's dark.”


In place of Emmett and Drew’s more traditional door knocker, is one shaped like a deformed, skeletal rabbit. Justin takes a hold of the torso of it and knocks five times.

There's a rustling on the other side of the door, before it starts to creak open. Justin squints and starts to peek through, only for a Monster’s Bride version of Emmett to swing the door open and greet them with a theatrical voice.

“Welcome, to the Honeycutt-Boyd Manor! Where horrors from the deepest corners of your mind await you, demons lurk amongst the shadows, and-unf! Four year olds attack with little to no regard. To find out what's in store for you in the fiery depths of hell, all you have to do...is come inside...”

“Hi, Emmett,” Justin responds, trying not to laugh at the deep voiced introduction.

Emmett drops the demeanor, squeals a little, and does a little dance before fluffing his stiff, tall wig.

“Hi, baby!” Emmett exclaims, urging Justin to meet him for a bone crushing hug, “I'm so glad you came! You look so nice, even though you could have dressed up in something different this year, but I will let bygones be bygones. Oooh, who is this hunk of a man?”

Emmett scoots over to Malcolm and obviously checks him out, before holding out his hand
“Emmett Honeycutt,” the older man introduces himself dramatically, “Charmed to make your acquaintance.”

Malcolm smiles, amused, before playing along and taking Emmett’s hand to press a quick kiss against the back of it.

“Malcolm Jones. It's nice to meet you.”

“Malcolm, what a gorgeous name! Almost as gorgeous as those biceps, which your costume compliments so well, by the way. Now are you a friend of Molly’s or a friend of Justin’s?”

“He’s a friend of my brother’s,” Molly interrupts, “A special friend.”

Emmett gasps at Molly’s words and claps his hands, “Oh my god oh my god oh my god! Come in, come in! Any special friend of Justin’s is a sp...well, friend of mine. Can't stray from the path, love my Drewsie too much, but honey, you would tempt anyone. And Molly, you look gorgeous. The Sexy Steampunk Mad Scientist look is perfect for you!”

The three of them follow the host into the house and Justin really shouldn’t be be surprised when they have to force their way through a tight passage, inflated airbags lining the walls creating an atmosphere not unlike a bizarre birth canal. But, of course, the mystique of it has to be all part of Emmett’s plan, considering the big reveal of the large parlor on the other side. Grand isn’t the right word for it. Spooky isn’t strong enough. Ominous? Spine tingling? Maybe, with the blood red lights and candles casting shadows in all of the right places and illuminating the more intense decorations of jared body parts, a grand coffin, shadowy humanoid figures. Justin still can't tell how Emmett is creating those. Then there’s a fountain pouring blood red-

“Punch?” Emmett asks, walking over to the fountain, “I made it myself! Pinterest is a lifesaver.”

Emmett hands them each a goblet, filled with red liquid, “It's not spiked. With the kids here, especially with Gus and some of my clients’ teens, I made sure to keep the alcohol secure with the bartenders.

There are more people than Justin anticipated. He's kind of shocked that Emmett heard him knock
“You know, you are lucky you knocked when you did. The doorman went on a bathroom break and I am so glad I answered the door for you, considering this new guy at your side,” Emmett winks.

“How many people did you invite?” Justin asks, looking around, “I thought it was supposed to be a small get together.”

Emmett shrugs, “Just 50 or so. Nothing too overwhelming. And yes, it was supposed to be small, but then some of Drew’s old teammates and their families wanted to come, plus I am trying to impress a several potentially huge clients. So I just added a few extra decorations, gave each room a theme, spent a teensy bit outside of the original budget, and voila! Thanks for the bleeding portraits, by the way. They really add to this room and the dungeon.”

“Yeah...no problem,” Justin answers, shaking his head, “Who is all here that I would know?”

“Teddy and Blake surprised me and came up!” Emmett squeals, clapping his hands, “Gus, Lindsay, Michael, and Ben came in. JR is sick, poor thing, so Mel stayed back with her and Debbie and Carl are staying over there to give out candy with them, but those four are staying with Eric and Brian. Brian, Eric, and Lily are already here. The little kids were supposed to stay in the kid friendly room. Brian brought Jess to help watch and I have Duncan’s regular sitter, both are getting paid quite handsomely for this. Most of the younger kids have stayed put, but Lily and Duncan keep escaping and exploring, they just think all of this is the greatest.”

“Couldn't this give them nightmares?” Justin asks, picking up a pickled fetus prop. This one probably disturbs him the most.

Emmett shrugs, “That's what I thought, but they think this whole place is adventureland now. Obviously, if you catch them, try to take them back to Duncan’s play room and give them a stern talking to. But as long as they aren't badgering guests, going down in the dungeon, following a stranger, or sneaking underneath the bartender’s legs to snatch a bottle of vodka, then let them have fun, I say!”

“Hi!”

Justin looks down to smile at Duncan, who is dressed up as a wolf, but the only person Duncan has
“Han Solo,” Duncan whispers in awe, before walking closer to Malcolm in a trance, arms out.

“Oh…” Malcolm laughs a little surprised, before patting the little boy on the head when Duncan clings onto his shirt, “Hey, little man! I'm Malcolm, Justin’s friend. You having a good time?”

“You’re Han Solo,” Duncan repeats, staring at him with wide eyes, “You’re Han Solo and you look like me!”

And, call Justin white as fuck, but he doesn't get it at first, what Duncan means, but it does click when he sees Malcolm’s knowing expression and understanding and Emmett’s look of almost self-consciousness and concern, as if his thoughts are going a mile a minute.

“Hey, I do think I see a resemblance,” Malcolm winks, before glancing at Emmett then back at the little boy, “We have the same haircut!”

“Yeah, but we’re the same color too!” Duncan points out, holding his arm up, “Look, we’re both black! My daddy and pa are white and my girlfriend Lily is neither. I dunno what she is. Brown, maybe. Tan.”

“Lily’s a quarter Mexican, baby,” Emmett interrupts a little bashfully, but tries to educate him, “That part of her is sort of a mix of a few races, but her papa told me they have mostly Indigenous Mexican roots and some Afro-Mexican on that side. That means-”

“And she speaks a whole ‘nother language. Yeah, I like it when she does that,” Duncan interrupts, not concerned with Lily’s possible racial identity, with a dreamy look in his eyes, before shaking himself out of it, “Come on! I got lots to show you, Malcolm!”

Justin knows from firsthand experience that Duncan is a lot stronger than he looks. So he can't help but laugh a little by the surprise on Malcolm’s face when the little boy starts to pull his arm.

“Here, baby. I’ll come with you too,” Emmett calls out, trying to be chipper.
“No, I gotta show Malcolm stuff,” Duncan answers his father consolingly, “I will see you later, Daddy. Okay?”

Emmett purses his lips and tries to smile, “…Um, alright. You better just be taking him to your playroom though, mister, because that’s where you need to be!”

Justin and Molly are quiet as they watch Emmett battle with processing of Duncan’s interactions with Malcolm, before the older man clears his throat.

“Well…okay,” Emmett says uncertainly, “I’m just…I’m just going to find Drewsie.”

“You alright, Emmett?” Justin asks him.

“I’m fine!” Emmett answers unconvincingly, “Why wouldn't I be fine?”

“I don't know, you just look like-”

“ARRRGGHHHH!”

Molly and Justin jump before quickly turning around to find a zombie behind them, complete with realistic prosthetics.

“Are you...are you anyone we know?” Justin asks, trying to see behind the drooping flesh.

“Oh, he's an actor. There's plenty of them hiding around here. If the kids ever stay in their room, we have plans to have someone come out with a chainsaw.”

Emmett doesn't seem to register their looks of unease as he walks away.

“Does he seem okay to you?” Molly asks.
“He's second guessing himself as Duncan’s dad,” Justin answers.

“Just because Duncan took to Malcolm? He shouldn't take it personally. He has to understand-”

“He does. That's why he's doubting himself,” Justin interrupts.

Molly looks like she may say something else, but as they are walking throughout the parlor to find someone they recognize, they get startled by another actor, a ghoul this time. He ends up losing Molly to the bar when she sees a couple dancing and looking completely in love, leaving Justin alone. But, despite the chaos, he finally sees Gus standing near the wall by himself.

“Gus!” Justin calls out, walking towards the teen, “I’m so happy to see you!”

Even though Gus is probably too cool for hugs, his styled hair and leather jacket a good indicator of that, he accepts one from Justin anyway.

“Who are you supposed to be?” Gus asks, wrinkling his nose in confusion.

Justin feels personally offended by the ignorance, as well as ashamed. He knew he should have watched The Yellow Submarine with Gus more when he used to babysit him.

“Paul McCartney. The Yellow Submarine. We used to watch it together,” Justin absolutely does not pout.

Gus looks at him as if he has grown six heads before seeming to remember the film, “That was the weird cartoon. I remember it. I think.”

Okay, Justin had done something right. Possibly.

“Why are you hanging out over here by yourself?” Justin asks.

“Because my parents are dicks,” Gus glares, obviously pissed at the world, “Lindsay, Mel, Brian, Eric? They’re all fucking prudes, total hypocrites-”
“I don't think James Dean cursed that much in his movies, but good job with the brooding. Right on point,” Justin heard Brian say from behind him.

Brian comes into view, gives his son a wink and a pat on the shoulder. All Gus does is scowl and walk off towards the punch fountain, rejecting his father’s sudden appearance completely.

“What's his problem?” Justin asks, keeping an eye on Gus.

“He's pissed that we all vetoed his girlfriend coming to stay for the weekend,” Brian smirks, “That I agreed with his mothers for once, especially after what happened.”

“Oh no,” Justin winces, “What happened?”

“Gus snuck his girlfriend into the house and into the shower, Mel had to piss and walked in-”

“God stop, he's a baby,” Justin grits out. Gus would probably consider him to be a prude and hypocrite as well.

“Not really,” Brian murmurs, before looking a bit proud, “He is going to NYU next summer for their pre-college program. He just got the letter last week. Early admission and everything. He COULD just stay with us for the summer. But he wants to stay in the dorms.”

“Can you blame him?” Justin asks, “He’s probably gearing up to have the time of his life.”

“As long as he’s careful and doesn’t get caught by anyone in the program,” Brian shrugs, then laughs, “He doesn’t have a good track record of not getting caught so far. First it was the condoms, then it was me catching him at Mel’s birthday party. Eric went outside to look for him when we were up there a couple of months ago and caught Penelope on her knees unzipping Gus’s pants. Mel caught them in the shower the other day. It’s no wonder he hates us all, really, especially after not allowing the Gus and Penelope weekend of love. He’s barely spoken to me since he got in last night.”

Justin snorts, “He’ll get over it. He’s just betrayed since he thought you were the cool one.”
“Well, he’d be right,” Brian smirks, before giving him a once over, “Yellow Submarine? You’re such a loser, Sunshine.”

Justin scoffs, “And what are you? You literally look the same as you always look for a business meeting.”

“Eric is telling people I am James Bond,” Brian shrugs.

“Probably so people don’t think he married such a spoilsport loser,” Justin taunts playfully, pinching Brian’s side.

“Like hell I was going to dress up as the grandma to his lumberjack or whatever the fuck,” Brian laughs, squirming away, “Thinking it’d be cute to dress up along with Lily’s red riding hood costume and Duncan’s wolf costume.”

“Eric dressed up as the huntsman and Lily’s Little Red Riding Hood?” Justin asks, “I haven’t seen them around.”

“Lily’s idea. God forbid she and Duncan didn’t match. Eric was just collateral.”

Justin’s about to respond, but he sees a mildly surprised look sweep across Brian’s face just as Justin feels an arm sneak around his waist.

“Hey!” Justin exclaims, turning to look at Malcolm, “You get away from Duncan?”

“For now,” Malcolm smiles, “He had to show me every single one of his Star Wars toys and I stayed in his doorway so that I could try to get him to go back to his playroom. Drew stopped by and convinced him. Their place is huge. I would have killed to have had a whole attic to myself as a kid.”

“He’s a great kid, especially considering how much Emmett and Drew spoil him,” Justin snickers.
It’s only then when Justin turns back, he sees Brian still standing there, waiting with curious and interpretive glances, studying the arm around Justin’s waist to the once overs he has been giving Malcolm probably since the man arrived at Justin’s side.

“Malcolm,” Justin speaks up, clearing his throat, “This is Brian. Brian, Malcolm. Brian’s an…”

“I’m an old friend of Justin’s,” Brian smirks, holding out his hand, “And what’s your relationship with him?”

He and Malcolm had never discussed titles. But it’s never been socially acceptable to introduce someone as a fuck buddy or booty call or a guy you’re sort of seeing and are definitely into but you haven’t-

“We’ve been seeing each other. For a couple of months now,” Malcolm answers, accepting Brian’s handshake with a strong grip, “How did you and Justin meet?”

Brian shrugs, “Outside of a club in Pittsburgh, back when he was a horny twink. How did you meet Justin?”

Malcolm bites his cheek, “Oh, he came over one night so that I could fuck his brains out. Things just grew from there.”

Jesus Christ, he did not need a pissing contest surrounding him right now.

Brian dons a pleasant smile and tilts his head, “Sunshine, you certainly have a habit of doing that, don’t you?”

Justin rolls his eyes, “Shouldn’t you be finding your husband and sneaky and ornery children?”

Brian shrugs, “Probably. Shouldn’t you be making sure your sister doesn’t make any stupid decisions, especially with Michael and Ben here to potentially witness it all?”

Justin quickly turns around and sees an older man, probably in his 50s, blatantly hitting on his sister as she is sipping on a drink. She doesn’t seem interested. She actually seems oblivious to the
way the man is putting a hand on her waist and starting to sneak it around to the small of her back, all while she pays attention to him with glassy, sad, relatively uninterested eyes.

Although he knows there’s a lot of stressful things going on in her life right now, things she had been bottling up and had weeped out the night before, he’s never seen her this broken up about a boy. Ever.

“I’ll keep an eye on her,” Justin sighs, “And get that guy to back off. Who does he think he is?”

“The highest paid anesthesiologist in the tri-state area,” Brian informs him, “One of Emmett’s potential clients. Make sure not to scare him off too effectively.”

Justin can’t help but not really care over the fact the guy might be a client of Emmett’s. He can only think that a guy rubbing up against his sister is a professional at drugging people.

“I can go over and pull her away,” Malcolm offers, “Pretend to be her boyfriend for a second or something.”

“Yeah, I look like her. It will be less suspicious if you do it,” Justin agrees, still keeping an eye on the anesthesiologist.

Justin watches as Malcolm walks over to throw an arm around Molly. He can’t hear a word that’s being said, but he can tell that Malcolm is managing to stay charming while getting the message across.

“So how is he?” Brian asks, watching him as well.

“What do you mean, how is he?” Justin responds.

Brian rolls his eyes, “Is he a good lay, is he successful, is he a complete prick, how big is his prick-”

“He’s a lawyer, great in bed, a good person, smart as hell, and yes, Brian, he has a big dick,” Justin sighs.
Brian opens his mouth to respond but a flash of red runs by and Brian moves quickly to make a grab for it.

“Daddy!” Lily pouts, hood partially covering her curls as she starts to kick her feet, “I’m in a hurry and you’re wastin’ my time!”

Justin lets out an involuntary laugh at that and tries to sober up when Brian shoots him a warning glare.

“What are you doing?” Brian asks her, turning her around to hold onto her better.

Lily shrugs, “Explorin’. You wouldn’t understand fun stuff like that. But I got places to be.”

“Yeah, you do,” Brian agrees, “Up in Duncan’s playroom. That Emmett worked his ass off on to make it both spooky and age appropriate.”

“Daddy, ass is a bad word!” Lily scolds before adjusting her hood, “And besides, down here’s more funner anyways. I’m gonna go in all the rooms. Did you know that there’s a ghost in the bathroom? I talked to it and everything. And I can’t miss the treasure hunt! Emmett said there was gonna be one and I gotta be the one to find it!”

“It’s for the adults, Lily,” Eric says as he suddenly approaches them, “You get your own treasure hunt upstairs. You know that.”

Lily bows her head and whimpers, “But I wanna stay with you…”

“Then why are you running around the whole house and bypassing us every time you see us?” Eric laughs, calling her out, “Hey, Justin. How have you been?”

“I’ve been pretty well,” he tells him, smiling a little.

“Justin!” Lily gasps, “You tell them! Tell them I should be down here. We were gonna hang out,
Justin looks at the little girl in confusion and rolls his eyes when she winks.

“Sorry, Lily. Maybe I can stop by and see you and Duncan upstairs later though. That sound good?”

“No, that does not ‘sound good’,” Lily mumbles, looking towards the floor.

“Yeah, you can go upstairs. I’m not going to reward you with your attitude,” Brian tells her as he makes his way to the stairs, “See you later, Justin.”

Justin waves him off and realizes Eric hasn’t followed.

“Hey, I like your costume,” Justin says to him, “Brian made it sound like a lumberjack, but it’s a lot more medieval.”

“Yeah,” Eric answers, glancing down, “It’s more Snow White and the Huntsmen but I liked it better. Yellow Submarine, right?”

Justin nods, “Paul McCartney.”

“Thought so,” Eric smiles.

Justin introduces Malcolm to Eric once the man comes back with Molly, who still looks distracted and disinterested in everything. They find Lindsay later on, along with Michael and Ben. Lindsay is dressed like Van Gogh and Michael and Ben, of course, are dressed up as Zephyr and Ken Kirschner, thankfully as hot Ken Kirschner and not as Juice Pig Ken Kirschner. With Ben and Michael dressing as Rage characters leads to business discussions and brainstorming and, according to Michael,

“The issue we have planned for April will be the most groundbreaking issue we’ve ever had and I think it will be the one that really blows the critics’ minds!” Michael geeks out, “What if we get an Eisner Award?”
“You are getting ahead of yourself,” Justin laughs, holding onto Michael’s arms in an attempt to contain the man’s excitement, “But I agree, it will be awesome.”

“If only we could get out an issue every week like our readers wanted,” Michael sighs.

Justin shakes his head, “That’s unrealistic for a two person team. We both have other commitments. Hell, you’re about to be a dad, again. And I’m—”

“Oh, Ben and I have been arguing about names,” Michael interrupts, eyes bright with even more excitement, if that’s possible, “I like Felix but Ben likes Gideon. We decided that we could use both and have one used as the middle name, but we can’t decide which one. What do you think?”

Justin freezes and winces at Michael and Ben’s expressions, patient yet fully expecting an answer.

“We’ve been asking everyone,” Ben offers, “All different answers. Yours would probably end up being the tiebreaker.”

“Well, I like Gideon,” Molly speaks up, sipping on a drink, “It sounds smart and sophisticated.”

“What about you?” Michael suddenly asks Malcolm.

“Um…” Malcolm starts, a little flustered from being put on the spot, “I think I like Felix as a first name better. Felix Gideon flows better than Gideon Felix.”

“Justin,” Ben hints, “You’re the tiebreaker. Just know that no matter what—”

“We’ll still love you,” Michael continues.

“Regardless of your answer,” Ben adds.

“You both make parties so much less fun. Finishing each other’s sentences. Talking about babies.
Look at what you’ve both become,” Justin grumbles.

“To be fair, we’ve been like this for years,” Michael shrugs. Ben just nods in agreement.

Justin lets out a groan, “Okay, fine. Sorry, Ben. Gideon is a really nice name but is more defining when it comes to what type of person people will expect your kid is, while Felix allows more room for interpretation. I don’t know why, but it just does. Like Malcolm said, Felix Gideon flows a little better, and Hunter, JR, and Felix sounds better than Hunter, JR, and Gideon.”

“That last one shouldn’t even matter,” Molly objects, “Each kid is over a decade apart.”

“But you are so right about everything you just said,” Michael grins, “See, Ben? All we needed was Justin’s input.”

“It was also almost identical to Brian’s answer. Except a little more polite,” Ben forces a smile.

Before the conversation can continue further, Emmett’s haunting voice comes on over some hidden speakers installed throughout the house.

“Jesus Christ, how much did he spend on this party?” Michael sighs, shaking his head, “I know he is doing it to raise money from sponsors and rich clients for Drew’s foundation but come on.”

“Good evening to all of you witches and ghouls and superheroes and rockstars in the crowd! Whether you are alive or undead, good or evil, gay or straight, baby you were born to come to The Honeycutt-Boyd Halloween Extravaganza of 2016! And honey, the party's just getting started.”

Justin rolls his eyes at the sounds of intrigued murmuring and clapping scattering throughout the parlor and living room. Then Emmett continues.

“Above your heads are balloons that will bless some and curse the rest, but no matter your infliction, you must work together to try your best. In teams of four or of teams of five, you must look for the treasure as you try to stay alive. Potions and clues will line your path, but nightmares from the shadows will try to get you to stray so that you can feel their wrath. The first team to find the treasure will be the grand winners of this quest, and only then will the terrors of this house sigh in defeat and lay down to rest.”
Just as Emmett finishes his rhyme, balloons break free from the ceiling and start to float down towards the crowd. Justin catches a black balloon with gold stars that falls in front of his face, puts it on the ground to pop it, picks up the small flashlight inside, and reads the card attached to it.

**Curse Card!**

*Every word from your mouth*

*is not spoken, but sung.*

*The curse of Broadway*

*has landed on your tongue!*

Justin closes his eyes and shakes his head, but starts laughing and feels relief for himself when he hears Brian complain, loudly, from across the room.

“I’m NOT clucking around like a chicken, Eric! That’s bullshit!”

“But it’s part of the game!” Eric chokes out, laughing,

“Then *you* do it and I’ll take the clue that you got,” Brian growls.

“You three want to form a team of five with us?” Ben asks, “Lindsay went to join Brian, Eric, and Gus. Ted and Blake have been talking an Opera singer and his husband all evening so I am guessing they’ll join them. I’m not very well off, I’m afraid. I’ve been cursed to walk with my knees locked like a zombie and have only been given a spray bottle as a tool. But Michael got a blacklight and a clue saying, “It’s Halloween Night, it’s time for a treat. Go look for another clue where we sit down to eat.”

“I have a vial of...baking soda?” Molly guesses, before nodding after taste testing it, “And I am ordered to sing...I mean, *sing every word from my mouth!*”

“Me too, what a coincidence,” Justin sings back, “But I have a flashlight.”

“You two are the next Donnie and Marie!” they hear someone cackle. Turning around, they see a witch making their way towards them, before rushing over to get up in Justin’s face.
“You both look even tastier than they were,” the witch murmurs in a sinister tone, “Donnie was a bit gamey. He made a good meal last night though. You both can join Marie in the freezer. I have a big feast planned for Yule.”

“If water is near, you should never fear. Along with revealing a clue, it can also scare away witches trying to say, ‘Boo!’” Malcolm reads from his card.

“Oh,” Ben says, before shrugging and spraying the witch.

“How dare you!” she screeches, her outfit starting to smoke, “I’m melting! I’M MELTING!!!!”

The witch starts to fall to the floor as the fog starts to become stronger. She crumples into a ball and stays motionless.

“That was fun,” Molly sings, “Malcolm, what’s your prop?”

“A map,” he tells them, “Looks like it is of a basement?”

“Okay, great!” Michael exclaims, “Let’s look for the clue in dining room then head down to the basement.”

The five head towards the dining room, slowing down a little for Ben who is playing along with his curse. They start to look around the dimly lit room, shine the blacklight on the walls and black table cloth, and jump at the sound of an actor rushing in to put a severed head on the dining room table.

“Dinner for five?” The maniacal man asks with wide eyes, wiping blood on his apron, “Oh, I’ve been waiting for you. Sit, sit! I insist.”

The man ushers a nervous looking Michael to one of the chairs and pushes on his shoulders to sit. Once he ushers Ben as well, Molly, Justin, and Malcolm take a hint and sit down in the remaining places.

“Please, please, help yourselves!” the man insists eagerly, “The tongue is the best part…”
The man begins to laugh hysterically, licks his lips, then heads back for the kitchen. Once the swinging door swings shut, Malcolm bends down to look under the table.

“Another clue,” Malcolm grunts, tearing the clue off from the bottom of the table. “If dessert is what you crave the absolute most, you must fight your way past the terrifying little ones to get to the child of the host.”

“I wonder if Duncan will even still have the clue when we get there,” Ben chuckles.

“Maybe we should split up, a couple of us go upstairs and the rest head down to the basement,” Michael suggests.

“Malcolm and I can go up,” Justin offers by singing, “I told Lily I would go up to say hi anyway, even if she wasn’t that enthusiastic about the idea since it meant she had to stay upstairs. Emmett’s basement is even bigger than his attic so it’ll need more people. Malcolm can give you his map.”

“Sounds good to me,” Michael answers, “We can meet up in the parlor after. This is actually really fun.”

“Emmett does know how to throw a party,” Ben agrees, standing up.

“Wait a second,” Molly mutters, not even singing like she’s supposed to.

The other four freeze and Molly reaches over to pry open the silicone lips of the severed head. Justin grimaces as she detaches the severed tongue and begins to cut it open with her knife.

“A key!” Molly belts out, returning to her curse’s restrictions.

“You’re disgusting,” Justin sings to her.

“And smart,” she singsongs back.
“Let’s hold onto that,” Ben suggests, “Malcolm, Justin, if either of you see anything in the attic that might work with that key, just text us. If we find anything downstairs that works with it, we’ll let you know.”

“I see you’ve tried the tongue,” the cook says with a deep voice as he re-enters the dining room, “Of course, the eyes and cheeks are also a yummy treat, but the tongue? It’s always been my favorite. A great last meal for you all, should you not make it. Oh, who am I kidding? Billy! Fetch me some heads for the next guests!”

A large, masked man runs into the dining room, revving a chainsaw. Goddamnit, he thought Emmett had been joking about that.

“Run!” Michael yells as he dashes out, seeming to forget this is all just a game set up by their friend.

But it is pretty convincing. Even Ben seems to forego the zombie legs in order to get out of the room. As Justin makes his way out on Molly’s heels, he takes one last glance into the room to see the cook carrying the head back into the kitchen.

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“At least this room is probably a little less intense,” Malcolm offers while Justin is still recovering from the shock of having dead looking hands grab at his ankles as he had tried to go up the stairs.

“I mean, there are small children in the room,” Justin agrees, then gulps when the attic door creaks open.

The sound of children laughing starts to echo from the doorway and a bright white light begins to flash and flicker, making the attic look more ominous.

“Or he’s using the fact that there are creepy kids upstairs to make things even more terrifying,” Malcolm offers, before shrugging and making his way up the steps.

When they make their way in the attic, they see no one at first, just the flickering light illuminating toys in disarray. But then, a spotlight lands on a girl with a red hood.

“I died,” Lily whispers from underneath the hood, “It was a long, LONG time ago. But I did. The shadow monster took me. She took all of us. All on Halloween night. It was crazy.”
Justin forces him not to laugh at Lily’s improv line and nods solemnly instead.

“She wants to be a kid, just like me. So she took my face. SHE TOOK MY FACE!”

Lily screeches as the hood falls back, her face covered in blood and torn flesh. A strobe light starts to flash before Justin jumps back and runs into a group of small kids, all with torn faces dressed in all different types of outfits. The children begin to claw at their arms and sides, screaming and jumping up and down as they do so.

“Lily, where’s Duncan?” Justin calls out.

Lily smirks and lets out the evil laugh, “You want to talk to the king?”

“Oh...sure.”

“He belongs to the wolves now,” Lily gulps, looking away since she is obviously affected by the situation, before donning a more neutral expression and jumping down from her spot to stroll towards them, “He fighted back so he had to go away. But YOU belong to us! Tie them up! They are the next scarifices!”

Justin groans as the kids start to wrap jump rope around his legs before being forced to sit down. The kids begin to chant as they circle them, “One of us! One of us! We will make you one of us!”

“Oh my god,” Justin laughs, catching the reference, “Emmett and his old movies.”

“This is NOT a movie!” Lily bellows, pointing a barbie at him, touching his nose with the head, “This is real life. The realerest life you’ll ever see!”

“Quick!” Malia’s daughter, Tiana, Justin thinks her name is, whispers, “She’s coming! I think I hear her coming!”

Lily gasps as she turns to glance at the attic door, “Quick! Everybody hide! If we’re lucky, the
shadow monster will eat them and leave us alone for now on!”

Justin watches the kids run off to hide in the corners of the room, only the sounds of excited whispering giving away that they’re actually enjoying the game they are playing. The whispers go silent when the attic door starts to slowly open once more. Justin starts to feel himself squirm when he sees a woman, dressed in a dirty raggy dress, start to contort her way into the room. She moves her body in a way that isn’t normal, crawling on all fours closer and closer to them. Justin closes his eyes and winces away as she starts to sniff his face and Malcolm just looks at the ceiling as she moves onto him. However, both of them jump when she suddenly stands to full height and begins chanting in Latin.

“She’s going to get you,” Lily whispers out from her corner, smiling menacingly, “You’ll belong to the shadows now. Just like us.”

As the shadow monster’s chant begins to grow louder and stronger, the strobe light begins to flicker more quickly. Like, Justin knows they aren’t goners, but it sort of feels like it may be the end for them in the game.

But then he hears a holler from the small clubhouse tucked into the the corner of the attic.

“Hey, shadow monster!” Duncan calls out from the window, “Over here!”

The shadow monster gasps in fear as Duncan slides down the slide that leads away from the clubhouse’s exit, Stella sliding down right after with a bark. Still dressed as a wolf, Duncan is now swinging around a lightsaber, making his own sound effects along with the toy’s.

“Woosh, woosh!” Duncan blows out, coming closer to the shadow monster as he methodically swings the saber around, “I’m gonna get you, shadow monster! Once and for all!”

The shadow monster lets out a wail once Duncan makes contact with the saber, stumbling backwards before running out of the attic.

“And stay out!” Duncan yells, Stella agreeing with another bark.

With purpose, Duncan approaches them and stands in front of them regally, fist on his hip.
“King Duncan!” Lily cries, running out to collide with the boy, “You saved us! You’re our king now too!”

“And you’re my queen!” Duncan says excitedly, jumping up and down with his one true love as they have obviously hijacked the skit for their own agenda.

Lily giggles and looks at the floor bashfully at that, before growing serious.

“But the shadow monster is not gone forever. She still has my face, you know.”

“But I got your heart,” Duncan smiles, with way too much game than a four year old should have.

“Oh, Duncan!” Lily sighs, palm on her chest, before throwing her arms around Duncan’s shoulders.

“Uh, Duncan?” Justin asks, clearing his throat, “Do you have a clue for us?”

“Huh?” Duncan asks, clueless.

Justin tries to simplify it a little, “Do you have something your daddy or pa might have given you to give to us or anyone that came into the attic?”

Duncan becomes shy, “Yeah. But I was hungry.”

Duncan reaches into the pockets of his outfit and pulls out a golden, wadded up, candy wrapper. Justin laughs at the sight and does his best to straighten it out. He does a good enough job, since he can make out the message typed out on the wrapper.

“Now that you’ve eaten, you should go to the loo. But the toilet won’t flush! So what should you do?”
Justin leans in, “Do you know what bathroom this clue is in? You guys have like seven of them.”

Duncan looks at him with a serious expression, “That’s cheating.”

“We don’t HELP cheaters!” Lily agrees, linking arms with Duncan, as the rest of the kids nod silently.

“Right, of course,” Justin sighs, “I better start singing again. You guys scared all of the musical ability out of me.”

“We’ve got lots of practice at that,” Lily shrugs, “We’ve done this like three times now. You gotta go so we can scare even more people!”

“Sorry, sorry,” Justin smiles, untying himself to stand up next to Malcolm, “Have fun guys. Lily, make sure you’re extra scary for your Daddy.”

Lily puts her sinister smile back on at those words.

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The bathroom clue just happens to be in the first bathroom they check, the one in the third floor hallway. It’s a simple enough clue to find, hidden in a plastic bag inside the toilet tank. Inside is another blacklight flashlight and a different key, this one looking like it belongs to a locked journal rather than a book. Justin takes the flashlight and shines it in the dark bathroom, finding a riddle.

“Some may say that when she married him, she made her bed. But it was a bit much that she was so young the year she lost her head,” Justin reads, “Who do you think it is? Anne Boleyn?”

“Or Catherine Howard,” Malcolm suggests.

“We can just google both years and it’ll probably be a code for something-”

Justin is cut off when Malcolm presses him against the door and kisses him, passionate and insistent. Justin kisses him back, nipping at Malcolm’s lip and gripping at the collar of his outfit, before breaking off with a laugh.
“We’re supposed to meet back up with Michael, Ben, and Molly—”

“They can wait,” Malcolm murmurs, moving to Justin’s neck.

“And we have to continue with the game,” Justin adds.

“It can wait,” Malcolm smirks, unzipping Justin’s pants to pull them down, along with his briefs.

“Someone may need to find the message in here,” Justin sighs, spreading his legs a little as Malcolm starts to jerk him.

“Then they’ll just have to wait too.”

“Fuck, do you have a condom? Lube? You better have fucking lube.”

Malcolm grins and their mouths meet, their kisses so rough and needy that their teeth clack and their lips are seconds away from bruising. Justin turns around and lets Malcolm prep him, moaning as the man touches his prostate, then breathes out, preparing himself for Malcolm’s cock.

But then Malcolm turns him around, picks him up, and holds him as he pulls Justin down.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck!” Justin chants out once Malcolm’s halfway in. He can only gasp once Malcolm pulls him down the rest of the way. Justin hugs Malcolm’s shoulders in a vice grip and breathes out through his nose.

“I’m not going to drop you,” Malcolm tells him softly, “Just relax.”

Justin lets out an almost hysterical giggle, but that turns into moaning as well once Malcolm starts moving him, up and down.

He’s fully expecting for Malcolm to put him down at one point, fuck him against the wall or the
sink to finish off. But he doesn’t. The WHOLE fucking time, he seamlessly bounces Justin on his cock, building in speed. Once Justin comes, Malcolm presses him flush against the door, holding him just at the right level, and thrusts up into him until he spills into the condom. Malcolm holds onto Justin as he pulls out, before tying off the condom to throw into the trash. Malcolm kisses him one more time then winks.

“Now we can go meet up with our group.”

They end up not having to go all the way to the parlor before running into Molly. She had decided to take off on her own to check out a clue in one of the guest rooms.

“Did you find what that first key goes to?” Justin asks, walking into the room with her.

“It was like this large box on a table in the back room of the basement,” Molly tells them, “We unlocked it and there was another head inside, but it was obviously someone sitting underneath the table. He was being a creep, talking in riddles we had to answer. We figured them out and now Michael and Ben are looking at the graves out front for some message decoder. I still don’t know what to do with my fucking baking soda. The only reason I am in here is because I found an extra balloon and popped it.”

“Cheater,” Justin scolds her.

“It was right there,” Molly shrugs, “And it led us to right here.”

The three of them look around the room, lights shining to look for any hidden messages or clues to help them later on.

“Here’s a mini bottle of Grey Goose to cure someone of singing,” Justin calls out, pulling it out from a drawer.

“Dibs!” Molly yells, grabbing it from him, “And stop looking worried. My buzz has worn off.”

Justin sighs as he lets go of the bottle to give to his sister. She’s NOT an alcoholic, he has to tell himself, she’s just going through a rough time. She’s young and heartbroken and healthy so she’s allowed to indulge.
Molly swallows the shot sized bottle, grimaces at the taste, then throws her arms out.

“Look at that, all cured. Justin, you better remember that you have to sing once we’re back with Michael and Ben. Ben hasn’t taken a break from being Mr. Zombie Legs once.”

“That can’t be the only thing in here though, can it?” Malcolm asks, looking under the bed.

Molly shrugs, then goes to explore the closet.

“FINALLY,” she exclaims, dropping down to her knees.

Justin and Malcolm go to join her and see what looks like a chemistry set.

“Oh, so I’m guessing that, since they are all different colors, the one that fizzes up with the baking soda will be a hint,” Molly tells them, “But take note of all the colors. Figure out which number corresponds with each letter of the word-”

“Or just listen to this tape recording,” Justin points out, reaching back for it.

Molly glares at him but then rolls her eyes, “Or that.”

Justin stifles the satisfaction of outsmarting his sister, even if she ends up being right, and presses play.

“I’m so close...close to the cure. Finally, my creations can live normal lives. Great lives even. I won’t be so alone. After all this time, chased by the town, threatened outside of my own home. I’ll show them...I’ll show them all. Pink, Blue, Gray. Pink, Blue, Gray. It’s so simple. I just need one more ingredient and things will become so clear…”

“...Was that Drew?” Molly asks, raising an eyebrow.

Molly nods and starts to tap the baking soda in each of the named vials. The vials begin to smoke and bubble over, before one of the shelves in the closet pop open.

“Okay, Emmett has to have the place rigged with cameras,” Justin mutters, before peering into the drawer, “He has this drawer rigged too.”

“Thanks, Emmett!” Molly calls out, sounding buzzed once more, “Okay, what’s inside?”

“A lock box,” Justin answers, reaching over to pick it up to read the message on the top, “‘You have many numbers but need to narrow it down to four, add them all up until you can’t anymore.’ You were probably onto something when you were talking about a letter to numbers code, Molly. Look up a key and I will type it into my phone to figure it out.”

Justin writes each letter of each color out and writes the number that corresponds with each letter right next to them.

\[
\begin{align*}
P &= 16 \\
I &= 9 \\
N &= 14 \\
K &= 11 \\
B &= 2 \\
L &= 12 \\
U &= 21 \\
E &= 5 \\
G &= 7 \\
R &= 18 \\
A &= 1 \\
Y &= 25
\end{align*}
\]

They add the first letters together, then the second, third, and fourth, before getting double digit numbers for each in order to add the double digit numbers together.

\[
7 \\
3 \\
9 \\
5
\]

“Why is there so much math in this?” Justin sighs, “I have known Emmett for years and never once has he come across as a math enthusiast.”

“Learn something new every day!” Molly chirps, before taking the box to type the numbers in. The light turns green and they open the handle.

“Another riddle,” Molly sighs.
Good work, your smarts are tested and true!
Now come to the kitchen for a well earned break
and drink with Emmett and Drew. <3

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Molly growls.

“They’ll probably give us another clue,” Justin tells her, “Come on.”

The three of them walk back down the stairs, dodge the creepier actors and more startled groups, and make their way for the kitchen. Drew and Emmett are sitting at the island, Emmett sipping at a cosmo and Drew taking a swig of beer. Neither of them seem to be aware that they are standing there.

“I don’t know, Drewsie. You should have seen his face. What if we’re not giving him enough? Like, I know we’re friends with Scott, Isaac, and Kirk. He’s friends with Lydia and a couple of boys from school. But what if he feels like he’s missing out? What if he feels displaced? What if we’re not watching enough shows with little boys who look like him or-”

“He’s four, Emmett,” Drew interrupts gently, “Look, I get why you’re concerned. I am to an extent too. And we can definitely look into more resources when it comes to his heritage and check into different organizations to connect with in order to make sure he isn’t confused about anything. But I do think you are looking into this a little too much and it’s making you doubt yourself.”

“And I should be if I’m not looking at the best interests for our son!” Emmett exclaims, gripping his hair.

“Should we come back?” Justin asks softly, taking a couple of steps closer.

Both Emmett and Drew turn, before Emmett shakes his head and waves the question off.

“No, baby. It’s okay. So you found one of the kitchen clues? Which one?”

“The chemistry set one,” Molly informs him.
Emmett smiles at that, “And the drawer worked, right? I have a few guys in the garage watching the cameras, waiting for cues.”

“Without a hitch,” Malcolm confirms, but then walks over, “Look, I know you just met me, but I couldn’t help but overhear your conversation.”

Emmett flushes a little, “Yeah, sorry about that. I...It’s not your fault. I’m not upset or jealous. If anything, I am just upset with myself.”

Justin watches Malcolm sit down next to Emmett as he glances at both men.

“Look...my brother and I were adopted,” Malcolm tells him in a soft voice, “My mom passed and her cousin and her husband took us in when we were six. They’re both biracial, they were lighter skinned, so I guess it’s different than Duncan being with you but, even though I noticed sometimes, even though people asked questions about the difference...it didn’t matter. They still loved us and everything they did for us was appreciated. Even when we were brats about it, insisting they weren’t our parents. I can’t imagine not having them in my life. They influenced us so much that my brother and his wife just adopted two girls two years ago. They’re seven now. One of them is black and the other is her best friend and has been since foster care. She’s a pale redhead. My brother and my sister-in-law worried about it, wondered what people might think, especially when there are so many kids of color in the foster system at the moment. But it didn’t matter. They fell in love with both of them and they try their best to keep Meredith’s Irish heritage in mind when events come up or when Saint Patrick’s Day comes around. And there are times when she feels out of place, especially after my sister-in-law gave birth to a biological daughter almost a year ago, but she knows that she’s loved. They talk to her about her heritage and what it means. They answer every question they can and make sure she knows she’s just as much a part of the family as Hannah and Sasha are. For the most part, the kid couldn’t be happier.”

Malcolm takes a breath and looks Emmett in the eye.

“And man? I saw that playhouse up in the attic and his ridiculously cool room. I witnessed firsthand how enthusiastic he was to take part in this party. The fact that you are sitting here with your husband, talking about how you want to be able to do even more for him because you’re afraid you aren’t doing enough should tell you that you’re a pretty amazing dad. There’s no doubt that both of you love your son. Hell, I don’t think I have ever seen a dog as loyal as your dog is to that kid. Honestly, I think he just got excited over Han Solo. It probably was just a plus that this particular Han Solo looked sort of like him. There might be instances when he’s older where it’s deeper than that, but it seems like you are planning for that. It’ll be okay.”
Emmett sniffs and wipes at his eyes, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m a crier, ask anyone! Ask Drewsie, ask Justin!”

“It’s true, he is,” Drew shrugs, smirking.

“It really is true,” Justin adds, but more tenderly.

“But thank you,” Emmett chokes out, holding onto Malcolm’s arm, “And know that you are invited to come by whenever you want. With or without Justin, Han Solo or sans Solo. Now, who wants a drink and a clue?”

Emmett gives them all festive Halloween cocktails and, since Emmett is the most sentimental man that Justin knows, he toasts to,

“Old friends, new friends, family, my beautiful son, and whatever the upcoming years may bring!”

Emmett hands Justin a map after they finish their drinks off, and then they go back to the parlor to finally meet with Michael and Ben.

“Okay, so you got the clues we sent you?” Michael asks, pulling out his phone, “We got yours on the year of the beheaded wife and used it on a lockbox we found hidden across the street. It was Catherine Howard’s death year, by the way. We also found a bottle of Louis Roederer Champagne after figuring out one of the harder clues. So, after we beat this thing, I say we split this.”

“We got a map from Emmett,” Justin tells him, “It looks like it is of the backyard.”

Suddenly, every light goes out and gasps and shrieks are heard from the other guests. People are yelling out for their teammates and grunting out expletives, before the actors make an announcement.

“It’s 10 pm and it’s the hour of prizes! Whoever can get to the fuse box first will be quite pleased with their findings!”

“You guys go downstairs!” Justin calls out as he starts to get separated from the group, “I’ll go
Justin fights his way through the crowd and manages to make his way to the sunroom and the backdoor of the house. It’s chilly, to the point where he is rubbing his arms from the goosebumps that pop up. He doesn’t even want to get out the map. He just wants to go back inside, curl up under the covers in one of the less creepy guest rooms, and-

“Cold, Sunshine?"

Justin glances behind his shoulder to see Brian laying in the hammock, staring up at the stars.

“I see you’re being a real team player,” Justin scoffs, coming a little closer.

Brian shrugs his shoulders, “They knew what they were getting into when they made me play Emmett’s game.”

“Come on,” Justin reasons, “It’s really well done, creepy as hell, and complex. Your daughter is a phenomenal actress, by the way.”

“Yeah, I played along through her part. I wasn’t expecting that, I will admit that,” Brian answers, eyes twinkling, “What’s going on in there now?”

“Emmett cut the power.”

Brian snorts, “Of course he did. He wouldn’t be Emmett if he didn’t go all out for every party he threw.”

“That’s true,” Justin agrees, playing with the edge of the netting.

There’s a silence between them, nothing but the sound of muffled music from nearby parties and occasional screams from Emmett’s house.

“I should be looking for-”
“Lay down with me.”

Justin freezes at the request, “Brian…”

Brian sighs, “Chill out. I’m not asking for a fuck in the hammock. Hell, I lay in this thing with Emmett all the time. It’s huge. So take a break, lie back, and shut up.”

Justin hesitates before laying on the edge of the hammock, “If Eric comes outside and sees this, I am fully blaming you for everything without shame.”

“He wouldn’t think we were doing anything,” Brian scoffs, “…Probably. Actually, he’d most likely stop speaking to you.”

Justin sits up quickly and starts to get up, but Brian pulls him back down.

“I’m kidding. Believe it or not, Eric actually values his friendship with you.”

“Yeah, and I value my friendship with him,” Justin replies, “Which is why I should get up.”

“There’s literally three feet between us,” Brian reasons, “I just wanted you to see one of the only places near the city where you can see the stars.”

Justin studies Brian for several moments, but Brian is only staring up at the sky. Justin gives in and turns his head to look as well, and…Brian’s right. They’re up there, twinkling and clear, despite the fact it was cloudy earlier in the day.

He can’t remember the last time he took the time to stare at the stars.

No, that’s wrong. He remembers. It was at Britin. Back when their engagement was still a secret and they were completely in love, back when Justin was able to dismiss Brian’s off-the-wall PTSD symptoms as romance. He and Brian made love on a blanket, in the fucking cold, then wrapped themselves up in a cocoon of blankets, clinging onto each other as they watched the same stars as
Justin and Brian are watching right now.

That was such a long time ago. They were such different people.

“I’m going to be a dad,” Justin whispers out, breaking the silence.

He hears Brian let out a breath at the words, feels him inch his hand closer to Justin’s, until his fingers are lightly touching Justin’s hand.

“Yeah?” Brian asks softly, “Since when?”

“I guess it took on September 1st. Found out a few weeks later. The surrogate missed her period, took a test, and called me up to tell me. Doctor confirmed it.”

Justin feels Brian looking at him, waiting for him to continue. But Justin doesn’t know what to say. After bottling it up for what felt like ages, after going through days upon days of wanting to call his friends to tell them...he didn’t have much else to say.

Brian takes a hint and nods, “Good for you. You’ll be a great dad. They’ll be one lucky kid.”

Justin breathes in shakily, “I’m excited, I am. But now I am going to have to cut things off with Malcolm. He doesn’t know. When I got with him, he was just a fuck buddy, one that I was hooking up with from time to time. I didn’t even think there was a need to tell him that I was waiting for my surrogate to get pregnant. And now-”

“You care about him and actually see things going somewhere,” Brian finishes, “Why can’t they go somewhere?”

Justin lets out a humorless laugh, “You know why.”

“It’s not like single parents never date, Justin.”

“Yeah,” Justin agrees, “But the people they date tend to know what they are getting into. I’ve been
seeing him for two months. I can’t expect him to suddenly start planning my unborn child’s future with me. We don’t know each other well enough. Plus I still...I still keep thinking about Nathan....And I planned to do this on my own.”

Brian opens his mouth to speak but the lights come back on in the house.

“Wonder which team turned the power back on?” Justin asks, getting back up to stretch.

“Probably yours,” Brian answers, “As much as I hate to say it, Michael is on his game with this shit.”

“Yeah, he is,” Justin laughs, “I need to find whatever I’m supposed to find from this map.”

Brian holds up a small box and waves it in the air, “I was going to hide it somewhere else to cause chaos, but I guess I can just give it to you.”

Justin raises a brow, “And you don’t want to save it for your team?”

Brian huffs out a laugh as he gets up, “I don’t give two shits. I agreed to match the donations regardless. Whatever Emmett and Drew decided on when it comes to the grand prize, I’m sure I can afford.”

“So can I,” Justin reasons.

“Just take it, Sunshine.”

Justin sighs and takes a hold of the box, unlocks it with the tiny key in his pocket, and finds five round-trip tickets to Bermuda.

“Maybe you should wait to break up with Malcolm until after your Bermuda trip,” Brian suggests, feigning innocence.

“Shut up,” Justin mutters.
After Justin and Brian come back inside, Justin finds his group to let him know that they’ve won, which causes Michael to let out a cheer, letting the rest of the guests know that they found the treasure out in the backyard. After the announcements have been made and there’s a bit of downtime, Justin turns to Michael and Ben and holds out the box.

“You should take them,” he offers.

“There’s five tickets though!” Ben exclaims, “We could all go.”

“You have a couple of months left until your son is born,” Justin points out, “Seriously, take anyone you want.”

“...We could take Hunter and JR,” Michael says, warming up to the idea.

“Let Hunter take someone he really cares about,” Ben adds, glancing at Molly.

Molly purses her lips and looks away, “I’m not sure if-”

“If I can have your attention, please!”

The crowd turns towards the speaker as Michael starts to squint.

“Is that-”

“Speak of the devil,” Ben nods.

“Oh my god,” Molly mutters, jaw dropped.

“While you all were partying it up, drinking Emmett’s fruity alcoholic beverages, and getting the wits scared out of you on each and every turn, I was landing at LaGuardia and forcing my cab driver to go over the speed limit just to get here. He threatened to kick me out of the cab after
trying to get him to go even faster. So I stopped. But what matters is that I could get here just in time to sing this song. Molly Taylor, this is for you.

“Oh my god, Justin make him stop. Michael, Ben, make your son stop, please.”

“No,” Michael grins almost maniacally as the intro music starts.

“Absolutely not,” Ben reiterates.

“No, you can get through to him-” Molly starts, but is cut off by the sound of Hunter’s voice.

And I'd give up forever to touch you
'Cause I know that you feel me somehow
You’re the closest to heaven that I'll ever be
And I don't want to go home right now

And, although Justin would probably feel a little embarrassed and put on the spot if he were in Molly’s position, it could be a lot worse. Hunter's voice is actually good and, although Molly is hiding her eyes in what looks like embarrassment, he can see her mouth twisting, the wetness starting to form on her cheeks. His sister, his no romance, ‘let’s avoid talking about my feelings and just focus on your feelings’ sister, is affected by this. He bumps her shoulder a little in solidarity, shakes his head with a smile, and listens to Hunter continue.

And all I can taste is this moment
And all I can breathe is your life
And sooner or later it's over
I just don't wanna miss you tonight

Justin has to give Hunter props on this set up. The younger man had to have set some of this up with Emmett and Drew. The timing of Hunter appearing at the top of the center stairs right in the parlor, dressed as Mr. Darcy nonetheless, before sliding down the bannister to sing the damn chorus. The way Molly’s eyes widen at the site and the crowd parts for Hunter, just so he has a direct path to Molly, all while Emmett's red spotlights shine on both of them.

It’s incredible. And hilarious. Basically an embodiment of whom Hunter basically is.
And I don't want the world to see me
'Cause I don’t think that they’d understand
When everything's meant to be broken
I just want you to know who I am

Hunter makes his way to Molly and stops inches in front of her.

“Okay, okay!” Molly wails, laughing and crying at the same time as the music fades to the background, “Stop it, you’re so embarrassing!”

“I know,” Hunter smirks, before wrapping his arms around her, earning points for gladly letting Molly’s tears get all over his costume.

It is probably the way that Hunter’s expression grows serious, the way his eyes start to look wet as well as he holds Molly tighter and strokes her hair that makes Justin listen intently in order to try to catch any whisper that may pass between them.

He’s a nosy big brother, but he shouldn’t be faulted for that. Molly has sort of been a mess.

“I’m moving to New York in January,” Hunter rasps out, “I got a job, a job as a cinematographer on a television show filming over here. I want you to move in with me. I want you to go to a great grad school. I want you, I want us, to be happy. I want you to stop being so stressed. Because you don’t have to be. I’ll take care of you. I’ll make enough for the both of us until you’re curing cancer or Alzheimer’s or even curing me. We’ll go down and check on your dad every month, have him come up to stay with us a weekend here and there. I want to make this work. I love you.”

Hunter holds her out so he can see her, his hands cradling her face. Two tears spill from Molly’s eyes as she bites her lip and nods, before throwing her arms around Hunter’s neck to meet him for a passionate kiss. Even if the words Hunter said were probably not heard by the majority of the crowd, the whole room erupts in an applause.

Justin can’t help but wonder if some of ones farther away possibly thought Hunter just proposed to her without a ring. It was definitely a grand enough gesture to be mistaken as such.

“Michael, stop crying,” Justin sighs, not even having to turn around to check.
“I can’t help it!” Michael whimpers, “And Ben is crying too!”

Justin has to turn around to check whether or not that allegation is true.

Ben wipes his eyes quickly and straightens out his previously emotional expression, “I am just aware that Hunter has been having a difficult time with being in a long distance relationship. I’ve been very worried about him.”

“I have been too,” Michael cries, “It’s been very stressful.”

“Oh my god, both of you are such bitches,” Hunter yells out, holding Molly close they make their way over.

“Your girlfriend is crying, you definitely were trying not to, why can’t we?” Michael asks.

“One, because she’s my girl. I was actively trying to make her cry because she bottles too much shit up. I was looking out for her best interests. That’s my job,” Hunter shrugs, “And two, I wasn’t crying. My contacts were just bothering me. Didn’t I tell you? I’m going blind and can’t go without them. I would take them out to show you, but I don’t feel the need to prove myself.”

“You are such a strange man,” Molly breathes out, shaking her head.

“Whatever you say, son,” Ben smiles, “Did Molly tell you we won five tickets to Bermuda? We figured we’d take JR and you and Molly could go too, get a room to yourselves.”

“Far away from our room,” Michael stresses.

“Hells yeah!” Hunter exclaims, holding up his hand to get a high five from both of his dads.

Then, he literally sweeps Molly off her feet.

“What are you doing?” Molly squeals, gripping onto Hunter’s suit jacket as she is lifted off the ground.
“Honey, I’m taking you to the best hotel in...well, Hoboken. I knew I wasn’t going to be able to wait,” Hunter announces dramatically.

Without another word, Hunter carries Molly out of the house, which only starts up the drunken cheering again.

“Lucky her,” Malcolm murmurs, putting his arms around Justin’s waist, “Maybe I can go over to your place tonight? I don’t think she is coming back.”

Justin has to let out a chuckle at that, “I’ll probably just have to send her stuff back to her. But yeah...you can come over.”

They take part in a couple of more party games, have a couple of drinks. Justin writes a check for $15,000 because he has the money to do shit like that, all of the proceeds are going to something important, and Brian is matching every dollar donated. He sees a few zeros on Malcolm’s check as well, knowing the man has donated at least a few thousand towards both foster kids in New York and New Jersey and children with Albinism in Tanzania. Malcolm doesn’t really even know them, but trusts they’ll do the right thing with the donations. As if Justin knowing them and trusting them is good enough for him.

It makes Justin feel pretty shitty.

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When they get back to Justin’s apartment, they are kissing and grabbing at each other’s costumes, already wanting more despite the quickie they had earlier in Emmett’s bathroom. And Justin really does want more. His cock is hard, straining against his pants.

But Malcolm seems to know that he’s distracted, that Justin’s mind is wandering. Pressing a few more kisses against Justin’s jaw, he moves to his ear and, whispers, “What’s wrong?”

Justin rubs Malcolm’s sides and lets out a sigh, before stepping away to walk to the living room. Malcolm trails behind him and scratches the back of his head, “Shit, I thought I was just being paranoid.”

Justin sits on the couch, trying to come up with the words to say, trying to figure out how to announce this upcoming monumental change.
“I…” Justin starts, then takes a breath, “I’m not sure we can do this anymore.”

Malcolm bites his cheek, nods, then turns away, “How come?”

“I...I really, really like you, Malcolm,” Justin begins, wringing his hands.

“But not enough?” Malcolm rasps out.

“Actually, I’m telling you this because I like you too much,” Justin counters, letting out a wet laugh.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Malcolm asks him, squinting in the dark room.

“I’m, fuck, I’m having a kid,” Justin blurts out, deciding to just say it, “I decided to have a kid on my own, got a surrogate and an egg donor, and my surrogate...I found out a month ago that she’s pregnant. It was a few weeks after I met you. I didn’t think...I didn’t think we would do more than fuck around. But then we started spending time together and my feelings for you snuck up on me and before I knew it, I saw our relationship going somewhere, even though it really can’t. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I haven’t really told anyone.”

Justin exhales and closes his eyes, waiting for an answer. For a minute or so, there’s silence. Not that he can blame Malcolm for not knowing to say. But he wishes he would say something-

“Why...Why can’t it go anywhere?” Malcolm asks. When Justin opens his eyes at the question, he sees Malcolm looking away. It’s pretty easy to see Malcolm already knows the answer.

“We’ve known each other for two months,” Justin shrugs, “Have only started getting to actually know each other for a little over one. If we keep this going? Keep falling harder and entwining our lives more than they already are? You’ll end up making a huge commitment to a guy you’ve basically just met. You’ll be a dad, completely unplanned, when there’s no need for you to put yourself in that situation. And if things don’t work out, it will be messier.”

Malcolm huffs out a breath, “It would have been easier if I had just met you after the kid was born.”
“It would have.”

Malcolm looks at the floor, “I don’t...I don’t want to end this. To give up on this already.”

“I don’t either,” Justin sighs, “But I think I need to do this alone. Or at least start out that way. My kid? They have to come first, even when they aren’t here yet.”

Malcolm walks over to Justin and leans down to catch the blonde’s eyes. Tilting Justin’s chin up, he meets his lips for a kiss and softly says to him, “I’ll see you around, Justin.”

With that, Malcolm lets himself out and Justin sits alone in the dark.

He’ll be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Credit to The Goo Goo Dolls for Hunter’s song choice! Also, while most of the rhymes were creations of my own, a couple were found on Google Images for Halloween Treasure Hunts.
Wythe and N 7th

Chapter Summary

Justin goes to the first ultrasound.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“There will literally be barely anything on the screen. He or she will be the size of a grape or something.”

“Actually, it’s a lime,” Justin answers as he lifts his shoulder to prop his iPhone against his ear to flip through some contract papers, secretly proud to know something his surrogate doesn't.

He could practically see Arianna roll her eyes at that, “You know, you’d think that I would understand the way the doctors count weeks but it's ridiculous that the first two weeks are before conception.”

“I’d figure you would know it was more than a grape, considering how uh… round-”

“Don't insult the woman who is carrying your kid as a favor, Taylor,” Arianna warns with a teasing tone, “But for real, your kid is aiming to become a big baby, I swear. Who would guess, looking at you?”

“Guess we’ll find out tomorrow. Finally, Jesus Christ,” Justin groans.

“9 weeks, or 11 whatever, is a perfectly respectable time to have a first ultrasound,” Arianna points out.

Justin is about to make a most likely pointless rebuttal, only to realize Lola is standing in the doorway to his office.

“Hey, Arianna. I will call you back later. And I’ll see you tomorrow,” Justin tells her, eyeing Lola suspiciously.
“Alright, see you in the morning.”

Justin ends the call and studies Lola carefully.

“Talking about produce?” Lola asks, before setting a Manila folder down on his desk.

“That’s exactly what I was talking out,” he answers, before taking the folder to look through it, “These from Alfinez?”

“Yeah. And I can already tell he’s going to be the type who fusses over the display and arrangement, drama queen. Good luck with him,” Lola sighs, before turning around.

“As long as he’s bringing in collectors, then we can try to keep him happy,” Justin calls out.

“Need the money for the upcoming arrival?” Lola asks, turning around to put a hand on her hip.

Justin freezes, before shaking off Lola’s revelation, “What makes you say that?”

Lola lets out a laugh, “Come on, no one has a conversation about the size of fruit and mean just that. Especially someone who had a surrogacy agency pamphlet on his desk a few months ago. And before you get all indignant, it was in plain sight.”

Justin groans, “Who all have you told?”

“No one. Well, Max,” Lola shrugs, “But you know Max. He’s not going to tell anyone. He literally couldn’t give two shits about kids. It’s probably why I like him so much.”

Justin perks up at that a little, “So you do like him? Is there actual progress now or is this still the slowest courtship ever?”

Lola glares at him, then sighs, “Could you throw a few hints his way? He’s dense.”
“Lola, I threw hints at you for a damn year about his feelings for you,” Justin stresses.

“You were both being subtle,” Lola accuses, “I need to get back to work. See ya, Dad.”

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Justin wakes up earlier than need be, even after sleeping on and off throughout the night. He’s too nervous to eat more than half a piece of toast, before getting dressed to jog off a little of the excess energy he has. It makes his heart hurt, just a little. Last time he had jogged had been not only a week before, but that had been with Malcolm, as had the several times before that.

It does the trick though, whether it be the burning of calories or the memories of recent, but ultimately fleeting moments. By the time he walks back to his apartment from the park, takes a shower, shaves, and makes sure he looks presentable, it's time to leave so that he can meet Arianna in Bed-Stuy at the OBGYN.

“About time you got here,” he winks as she steps into the waiting room, finding himself instinctively glancing at her belly as she approaches him.

Even though it had been in a teasing manner when he mentioned the size of her belly the night before, he hadn't been lying. It isn't huge by any means, but it's bigger than the books say it should be and it does make him wonder if his kid is going to be a 10 pounder like Molly had been, versus his mere 6 pounds he had been when he was born. Better big than too small but, as they wait to be called back, Arianna still has to put a hand on his bouncing leg to get him to snap out of thoughts regarding disorders and disfigurements and miscarriages, the things that you don't think about until it could potentially affect someone you haven't met, but already care about.

“Arianna Romano?”

Justin jumps up before Arianna does, then holds a hand out to help her up.

“I'm not that much of an invalid yet,” Arianna smirked, before standing up flawlessly.

After the PRN takes her weight and vitals, Justin turns around to let Arianna put on the paper gown.
“Why can’t they just have you pull up your shirt?” He asks, genuinely confused, as she lies down on the examination table.

“Um,” Arianna chuckles, a blush rising to her cheeks, “They tend to take an alternate route when it comes to first trimester ultrasounds.”

“...Oh,” Justin winces, immediately walking over to stand at her head.

Before much else can be said, Dr. Tran opens the door, an ultrasound technician trailing close behind, to greet them.

“Hello, Ms. Romano,” she greets, as the tech starts to turn on the ultrasound machine, “First ultrasound with this one, yes? Are you excited?”

“Not as much as this one,” Arianna responds, nodding towards Justin, “I’ve been down this road before, with another surrogate and my own, you know that. This one is nervous as hell.”

“Oh, that's alright,” Doctor Tran smiles, “New fathers usually are, and you’re single on top of all that. That's commendable.”

“Yeah, don’t remind me,” Justin forces a smile.

After everything is prepped and Justin finds himself looking away at the sight of a stick making its way into his surrogate, but manages to push the mild embarrassment to the back of his mind when he hears a rapid thump thump thump thump.

The sound alone makes a lump form in his throat and he lets out a breath, then opens his eyes to look at the monitor.

And then, despite all the books and websites he’s studied, he has to force himself to remember that he’s not a doctor, because this? Whatever he's seeing…it has to be giving him the wrong idea. He’s getting something mixed up and that would be understandable, since all the information was bound to blur together at some point. He’s never even been to an ultrasound so he doesn’t know what they actually look like live-
“It looks like you're having twins,” Doctor Tran smiles, eyes lighting up.

He can't form a response to that, his mouth moving in silent gulps, but Arianna can.

“I had a feeling, but I didn't want scare you,” She sighs, “Although now I can officially blame you for ruining my body.”

“...This,” Justin chokes out, “This has to be a mistake.”

“...Nope!” Doctor Tran confirms, double checking, “Definitely monochromatic twins. Diamniotic, which is good. We will keep a close eye on them still.”

“But I used one egg to avoid multiples!” Justin stresses.

“Monochromatic means identical, Justin,” Arianna informs him, biting her lip as if she's holding back a laugh.

“Identical twins occur when a single egg splits, creating two same sex fetuses, often with the same or almost the same features-”

“I know how it happens,” Justin interrupts, fighting the urge to grip his hair and, to be honest, cry.

The room is silent for a moment and, fuck, Justin can tell that he's off to a rough start as a dad already. He is such a shit.

“Sorry. I'm sorry,” Justin mutters, before breathing in through his nose, “I didn't mean to react like that. I just…”

“Didn't expect it?” Doctor Tran guesses, “Don't worry. It's always interesting to tell single parents, parents in general really, that they are having multiples. I had one mother cry until she hyperventilated. Your reaction was actually quite mild in comparison. Ready to get their heart rates and some stats?”
Justin has to force himself to concentrate throughout the rest of the examination. Baby A has a heart rate of 162 while Baby B has one of 164. When Justin looks at the monitor closely enough, he can see the sources of the sound, fluttering away in black and white, settled right in the developing chests of his babies.

Babies. Babies.

After pictures get printed off and the next appointment is scheduled, one of many upcoming ones since there are two babies to keep track of now, he feels a surge of guilt go through him. He should have been more supportive to Arianna. She was sacrificing hopefully close to 9 months of her life in order to carry his twins and would have to face physical repercussions because of that and he’s only worrying about himself.

But, when he starts apologizing, she holds up a hand and smiles.

“I may be the one carrying them, but you’ll be the one loving them and raising them on your own, at least until you meet someone who is willing to take all three of you on.”

Justin isn’t sure if he is supposed to feel better by that or not.

He treats Arianna to a late breakfast, barely touching his small order, before riding the train back with her to her apartment. He comes in for a few minutes and can’t help but smile when her three year old son keeps bringing him his toys. After he leaves, he tries to go back home, to breathe and settle down, but he can’t. He feels antsy, anxious, a little elated deep down, but mostly terrified. Being alone makes it ten times worse. Probably because it reminds him of what he’s in for once he officially becomes a parent.

It’s nice when he goes outside. Warm for November, a perfect day to get his mind off of the stress he’s suddenly feeling just by getting fresh air, spending time doing things he likes to do, or going to places in the city he’s been wanting to see.

Instead, he just goes to the Bedford Bar.

Sitting down on a barstool, it doesn’t take long to get his friend’s attention, even with the lunchtime rush.
“Hey, what are you doing here? Figured you’d be at the gallery,” Liam comments, throwing a cloth over his shoulder as he automatically reaches down to get him a beer.

“I don’t need a beer,” Justin sighs, propping his chin on his hand.

Liam nods, “Right, right. I keep forgetting you’re not really drinking anymore. Although you won’t say why-”

“I need something stronger.”

Liam raises an eyebrow and looks suspicious, “What’s going on? Look, even though you were never an alcoholic to begin with, I’m not one to throw someone off the wagon if I know they are refraining from something-”

“I’m going to be a dad. A single dad,” Justin interrupts again. He’s not sure why he says it. Besides telling Brian a couple of days ago and Lola and Max figuring it out for themselves, he’s told no one. He planned on presenting the announcement to his friends and family in a more sentimental way.

Maybe it is because he’s pretty close to Liam, even if the man has been busy with Carmen and their newborn son. Maybe it’s because he’s fucking hot, in an adorable, sweet, truly decent human being type of way. Justin remembers telling his friend a few years ago that if Liam weren’t straight, he would try to make him his for good right then and there.

They had both been drunk. Liam had been heartbroken over a breakup and Justin had been trying to cheer him up. It hadn’t been a lie though. If Liam were gay? He would have tried like hell to get him to be with him.

Instead, Justin had happily introduced him to Carmen and became Milo’s godfather.

“Wha...How...Oh my god, that’s great, man!” Liam ends up exclaiming, reaching down to get a shot glass for each of them to pour some tequila into, “What is it, surrogacy? Adoption? You know Carmen and I will help with whatever we can-”

“I have a surrogate,” Justin tells him, holding back a shudder after swallowing the liquor, “And I really appreciate you offering to help. I’ll need it.”
Liam smiles kindly, “When Carmen found out she was pregnant and told me, I was scared shitless, even though I was happy. But now that he’s here? The crying and the diapers are nothing compared to the...fuck, the joy he makes me feel. I don’t care how sappy I sound. He’s the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

“I’m having identical twins,” Justin tells him, almost morosely, but manages to maintain eye contact with his friend.

Liam’s smile stays on his face, but goes from being kind to forced. Bending down, he gets five shot glasses from underneath the bar and pours the tequila in all of them with one swift movement.

“Those are on the house,” Liam informs him, pick up the fifth shot for himself, “Mazel Tov.”

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He doesn’t have too much of a hangover later that evening, so he does take Liam’s offer to walk back down for dinner. As expected, Liam does make hints at dinner about Justin becoming a dad, probably so he won’t have to keep a secret from Carmen. He isn’t really ready to spread the news around but Liam had given him free tequila and didn’t tell his soon to be wife himself, so Justin goes ahead and announces it, all while his heart hammers his chest before rising up to get lodged in his throat.

“Oh!” Carmen coos, “So Milo will have two friends to play with. Justin, this is fantastic! And, just in case you want to get even more practice in before you have two of your own, you are more than welcome to come watch Milo whenever you want.”

“Yeah...Despite your true motives in asking, I may take you up on that,” Justin has to chuckle.

As if on cue, a wail is heard from the other room, causing Liam to stand up and put his fork down.

“I’ll get him-” the man starts to say before he is shushed.

“Let Justin get him. He should get used to this,” Carmen orders, glancing over at Justin to gauge his reaction.

Justin hesitates for a moment. He doesn’t understand why. He’s babysat Milo a few times already,
taken care of the baby’s tears, dirty diapers, and feedings before. It just feels different now. He feels different. Shell-shocked.

But, as Liam and Carmen wait for his reaction, he knows he needs to get the fuck over it.

“Be right back,” Justin ends up saying, as he stands up from his seat and heads to the nursery.

When he goes inside, he sees Milo in his crib, kicking his onesie covered feet and fussing underneath the soft blue and purple projector lights.

“Hey,” Justin comforts softly, “Shhhh...what’s got you all worked up, sweetheart?”

Justin picks the two month old baby up gently, one hand propping his head and the other beneath his bottom as he brings him forward to let him rest his chin on Justin’s shoulder. Justin can’t help but smile when he feels Milo fist at his sweater, and it makes him look forward to when he can pick up his own, to have that moment with his flesh and blood. To have that connection.

Which would probably be broken once the other baby cried and he would have to figure out a way to pick them up as well. And then he would probably drop one and he’d be known as the failure of a father who gave at least one of his babies a concussion.

When it’s determined that all Milo seems to have wanted was to be held, he takes him to the kitchen so that Carmen can breastfeed him, something he has been over thinking when it came to his own kid...kids. Whatever. He has been thinking about paying Arianna to pump and save the milk. It’s supposed to be better for them, right? And they might need that extra boost, especially if they are a little premature like many twins tend to be.

“Why are you looking at my fiancé’s tits?” Liam mutters to him, looking slightly amused.

Justin shakes himself out of his thoughts, “I’m a boob man, Liam. You know that.”

Liam bites back a laugh and nods, “Sorry. Don’t know how I ever forgot.”

He leaves Liam’s around 9, going downstairs and leaving through the bar, which is picking up in
business again. The walk’s short, only five minutes max, but in that time he gets two text messages. One is from a guy he had hooked up with a few times before he and Malcolm became a regular thing, telling Justin he’s bored and asking him if he wants to hook up tonight. The other is from Eric, telling him he would be in Williamsburg on a project tomorrow and asking if he wants to meet for lunch. He knows he’s not in a place to focus on other people, since he’s so distracted by the monumental thing he learned today, but he could also use these type of distractions to distract himself from what’s making him so distracted in the first place.

If that makes sense.

He says yes to both.

He wakes up the next morning to crinkled sheets but an empty bed, which he had made sure of the night before after his second round with Ronan, then gets up and ready to go over to the gallery, opting to paint up in his studio on the fourth floor before coming down check on Lola and Max, helping them until Eric is walking in at noon.

“Hey,” Eric greets, giving him a pat on the shoulder, saying hi to Max and Lola soon after, before turning back to Justin, “I’m starving. What’s a good place around here?”

They sit down at a Moroccan restaurant on Wythe Avenue, opting for a small, round table by one of the large windows. Despite seeing each other only three days before, they spend the time catching up, especially since their conversation at the party had been limited. Most of the conversation ends up revolving around Lily and Brian, as well as Hunter and Molly since Eric still seems impressed with Hunter’s efforts at Emmett’s.

“Do they know what neighborhood they want to move to yet?” Eric asks, taking a sip of water, “I know it’s only been a few days, but I didn’t know if Hunter’s new show was filming in a specific area or not.”

Justin shrugs, “Molly mentioned that it was sort of all over, but mostly in Chelsea, Midtown, Chinatown, Jersey, and Coney Island, I think? But Hunter texted me, asking about rent prices and how safe a few different neighborhoods are in Brooklyn, Upper Manhattan, and the Bronx. I think he’s going by places with lines running close to NYU and Columbia, since those are the schools Molly is applying to. But if they can find a place that works for them until summer, I can get them a place for a lot cheaper after that.”

Eric raises a brow, “Really? You have real estate connections around here?”
“A couple, acquaintances of my mom’s actually, but the owner of my building is doing some renovations on it, then aiming to sell it by May. He came to me first since I just rented the top floor to use as a studio, even though I don’t have it set up yet, and I’m thinking of switching to the apartment beneath it since it has more space and will be ready in two months. I’m pretty sure that, since I’m paying multiple rents, it’s why he offered to sell the whole place to me. I was thinking, if they wanted it, Hunter and Molly could take the apartment I have now and not worry so much about a rent that would be a lot higher elsewhere. I actually mentioned what was going on to them on Monday. Hunter seems more for it than Molly is. Typical.”

“She comes off as pretty proud,” Eric agrees.

“She is. I also think she doesn’t want me all up in her business.”

Eric lets out a laugh at that, “My sister would probably feel the same way.”

The conversation moves along without any type of hesitance or awkward silences. Justin talks about a couple of showings his gallery is going to have, along with one he has for his own work out in Los Angeles in December. Eric informs him of a couple of big accounts Brian landed for Kinnetik.

“I think he’s trying to work himself to death before becoming a stay-at-home dad once the baby’s born,” Eric smirks.

“That…” Justin starts, then thinks on it, “Yeah, that actually really sounds like him. To be honest, I’m shocked that he is willing to stay home for as long as he is agreeing to do it.”

“I did it for a year with Lily. Did some consulting work from home to keep myself from going stir-crazy. He’s only doing it for six months and will probably be in his home office a lot as well. He should survive. Hopefully.”

“I think he’ll do well,” Justin tells him, “He’s such a great dad. He adores Gus and Lily. He’ll feel the same about your new baby too.”

Eric smiles at that, sweetly and genuinely so, “Yeah, he’s amazing with them.”
A moment of silence passes, but it’s a comfortable one. Then Eric clears his throat.

“So, even though I would have reached out to meet with you regardless since I’m in your area, I did want to run something by you to see if you’re up for it.”

Justin gestures to him, wiping his mouth with the cloth napkin before putting it on his plate.

“Our daughter should be here by the end of January, so it’s probably super short notice. If she comes before you can get around to it, should you say yes, that’s completely fine. We have spare rooms and a bassinet that we’re putting in our room. But I wanted to see if you would paint a mural for the nursery. I saw you were tagged in a picture your friend posted, I guess with his son? It was beautiful. I would pay you, of course, and if you can’t do it, that’s fine. I understand that you’re busy. But I just wanted to ask.”

Justin thinks on it for a moment. He is pretty busy, even though he’s purposely made sure his agent didn’t have him traveling past February. And he still is set on making a mural in his own nursery, once he figures out if he’s taking the bigger place upstairs or not. But, due to the way Eric is looking at him with big, hopeful eyes, and the fact that Justin knows he may not have taken the initiative to go and become a single parent if it weren’t for Brian giving him a pamphlet from the place he and Eric planned this baby with, he finds himself nodding his head.

“I can’t promise it will be done by the end of January, but I’ll try my best,” Justin tells him, “What theme are you wanting?”

Eric grins at his answer, “I was thinking of a peaceful, storybook forest theme. Something that adds light and has soft tones but is intricate and has a few characters here and there. And that sounds like I am asking for a lot. So take your time with it, really. I’ll pay whatever you want.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Justin rolls his eyes.

Eric narrows his eyes, “You need to stop offering your talents for free so much.”

“You sound like Brian.”

Eric lets out a put upon sigh, “I have to pay you something. I’m asking for a lot.”
Justin thinks on it, “You can pay for the supplies. Happy?”

“I’ll pay for that. And your time. I guess I’ll come up with the rate myself,” Eric shrugs, “You’ll be doing a lot for me. You’ll give the room character and a sense of tranquility. I’ve added some things but it just isn’t cutting it. The only thing I really like are the framed photos of the sonograms throughout the pregnancy hanging on the wall. I want those to make her realize that we’ve loved her from the beginning.”

And, he doesn’t know why that sentence makes his lip quiver the way it does, or why it makes his heart twinge, but it does.

Eric’s expression becomes concerned, “Hey, are you okay?”

Justin lets out a cough and lets himself smile a little, “Yeah...Yeah, I’m good. What you said just sounds really nice.”

After he and Eric part ways, Justin runs a few errands and finds himself walking into a baby boutique where, for the first time since finding out the day before, he tells someone he’s expecting twins without hesitation. When he gets home, he puts two identical newborn outfits away in the closet, then gets a photo of the sonogram, puts it into the first slot of a collage frame, and hangs it on the wall of the spare room.

He may have to hang it upstairs once he moves, but it looks good here for now. It makes this all feel more real but, instead of the reality causing him to feel a weight in his chest, all he feels is love.

And he wants to make sure his kids know that.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, hope you enjoyed this shorter chapter.
Chapter Summary

Brian and Eric go to Lily's Flamenco recital, connecting with friends and family along the way.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Okay. Arm up, step one two three four. I got this. I got this.”

Brian raises his eyebrows as Lily coaches herself in the mirror once more, this time in Spanish, before methodically going through her movements.

“I hope you aren’t going to do your dance like that onstage,” Brian drawls, before sitting down on the little girl’s bed, “It’s boring and lacks all feeling.”

Lily turns around with a vicious glare, “I am just trying to make sure I got my steps right! I got all that stuff you just said and you know it! Now shoo and go away! I’m practicing.”

Brian scoffs at his daughter’s blunt rudeness. Where she learned it from, he’ll never know.

But he does know that Lily is nervous and can remember the times when he was a child and had been nervous over a test, a soccer game, or a play and his parents hadn’t been there at all. So he kneels down next to her, takes her hand, and gently turns her around.

“You are going to do an amazing job,” he tells her, looking her straight in the eye, “You have practiced everyday for months, love dancing more than almost anything else, and whenever you perform, we can see the energy and love you have for the music and movements go through you. You’ll wow everyone.”

Lily bites her lip and nods her head, before taking his hand in both of her own and whispering with such seriousness, “Thank you, Daddy.”
Then, she turns around to work on her facial expressions with each move.

She’s the most intense four year old he’s ever met.

He has to take pictures of the intensity to taunt her with once she’s older and realizes how ridiculous she used to be.

It’s when he’s doing just that when Eric walks in and gives him *that* look. The one that makes Brian roll his eyes, since his husband can’t stop looking so tender and awestruck over simple interactions.

“Ready to get dressed, honey?” Eric asks, bringing the first dress she has to wear in the show into the room.

Lily takes a deep breath, “Yes, yes I am. Do you have my shawl? I need it for my solo.”

“Everything’s packed,” Eric confirms.

“The pinny things to hold it too? I need it to stay on until I am ready to dance with it!”

“Yes, I wouldn’t forget anything. We made a list, remember?”

“I do,” Lily nods, breathing out heavily, only to look down at her feet, “Okay...Let’s do this.”

The recital is in Sunnyside, Queens at a relatively small, but popular Spanish theater. They arrive early to get Lily backstage and to get good seats. For the first 15 minutes, they are the only ones in the lobby, which honestly makes Brian wonder how much of a loser he actually is.

“We have the youngest soloist in the whole company as our kid. She needs a little more time to prepare,” Eric tries to reason, but it doesn’t really work on either of them.

“Well, I’ll be damned! Brian Kinney first in line for a dance recital! I never thought I would see the day.”
Debbie’s voice takes him by surprise when he looks up from the program he had been barely looking at to begin with, especially when he sees she has Gus in tow.

“Hey!” Eric grins, jumping up to his feet to give both of them hugs, “I didn’t know you both were coming! Brian, why didn’t you tell me?”

“That might be because I didn’t know either,” Brian says as he bites back a smile as he walks over to Gus to put the boy’s head under his arm, then looks at Debbie, “You didn’t pull him out of school for this, did you?”

Debbie glares and points a finger at him, “He had the day off due to a faculty meeting. I’ll have you know that I am a good grandmother and I would never compromise that boy’s education. He’s headed for great things, so I won’t have you accusing me of keeping him from learning as much as he can.”

Brian rolls his eyes and looks down at his son, “She’s so serious. Weren’t you just here? Hating me because I kept you away from your one true love?”

Gus lets out a huff, “Grandma came over at 4:30 in the morning and told me we were going on a road trip and to pack my things.”

“She’s controlling like that,” Brian answers, ignoring Debbie’s swat, “I’m surprised she even was able to get you up.”

“She promised to let me drive part way,” Gus answers innocently.

“Uh, Debbie?” Eric asks nervously, “He can’t even get a permit, here or in Ontario, until he’s 16.”

Debbie looks nervous for a moment, before brushing the statement off, “He’s in Driver’s Ed. And I only let him drive on some back roads for a few miles—”

“40 miles,” Gus adds.
“And he did a very good job,” Debbie finishes confidently, “Minus one or two mishaps. But hey, you know what that tells you, Kinney? That private school you’re paying for up there pays off.”

“Right,” Brian murmurs, but is more amused by this than anything.

“I did a better job than she did going through the tunnels and driving through the city,” Gus smirks.

“When you’re living up here, going to your big fancy college, I’d like to see you try it,” Debbie shoots back at the teen, before brightening up, “Is Lily backstage already? I was hoping to see her before the show.”

“She went back to go over some things with her instructor,” Eric tells them as more people start to filter in, “She’s very excited but also nervous. She’s been practicing obsessively almost all day.”

“Oh, bless her,” Debbie sighs lovingly, putting a hand to her heart.

As a little more time passes, Brian realizes how large Lily’s party actually is. Cynthia comes in about ten minutes after Debbie and Gus do, which he knows will make Lily ecstatic. They hadn’t told her, just in case one of Cynthia’s meetings ran late, but it had been the plan for her to come this weekend. With the baby’s due date coming closer, there are some things they need to discuss, to plan, since Cynthia wants to have a larger role with the girls’. It’s a sensitive topic, for all of them, so it would be for the best if they figured out how to go about it before sitting Lily down.

Justin comes in a few minutes after Cynthia with Carmen.

“I hope you don’t mind I brought her,” Justin mentions to him, nodding to the woman, “She’s in the house way too much with a baby and her specialty is musical theater and dance-”

“I’ve actually been in a couple of shows in this theater,” Carmen adds, “I got a little excited when Justin mentioned he was coming here.”

“We’re glad you were able to come,” Eric tells her, “Lily’s only met you a couple times but she loves that you can speak Spanish with her and are on stage. She’ll be thrilled that you’re here.”
Drew, Emmett, and Duncan squeeze their way in through the doors with what looks like one dancer’s large extended family. Brian snorts when someone’s leg brushes against the huge bouquet of flowers Duncan is holding, which causes Duncan to glare at them with every fiber of hatred he can muster.

And then, just a few minutes before the show, Nathan comes in.

Brian hadn’t been expecting that.

“I’m so glad you could come,” Eric smiles, taking his jacket off of a couple of chairs that Brian hadn’t realized his husband had been hogging until just now.

“Lily did invite me,” Nathan answers softly, “And what else was I going to do with my first week off?”

“Sleep?” Justin suggests from behind them, “Since you probably haven’t in god knows how long.”

Nathan turns around in his seat to give Justin an almost ornery look, “That probably would have been the healthier option.”

“Did everyone actually make it?” Eric asks looking around to count.

“Petra came. She’s just in the bathroom,” Nathan mentions.

“You all are pathetic,” Brian has to tell them all as Petra sits down next to Nathan, “The fact that none of you have anything better to do on a Friday night is so depressing-”

“Brian, shhh. It’s starting,” Eric whispers as the lights start to dim.

“...”

“It was one of the best shows I’ve ever been to,” Debbie tells them tearfully, “Our Lily has so much passion and charisma and drive and talent. She deserved the standing ovation she got. That little girl is going to be a star!”
“She was incredible!” Carmen gushes, “I wish I had that kind of talent when I was that young! I couldn’t even tell she was nervous!”

“Oh my god, I thought she wasn’t even going to go out,” Eric tells them, “When they came to get me so that I could talk to her backstage? They had her breathing in a paper bag. Are anxiety attacks normal for a four year old? Brian, maybe we should take her to a doctor.”

Before Brian can answer, Debbie vetoes the idea.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about it. She got over it completely and outshined every single dancer up there, even the high school group.”

The dancers start to come out in a line through the lobby, oldest to youngest, and are greeted with flowers, hugs, and praise. Lily is at the tail end of the line, beaming as people she doesn’t even know come up and tell her how great she was in her solo, before she spots them.

“Aunt Cynthia!!!!” Lily squeals, running up and jumping into her mother’s arms. And, maybe it’s because he’s been actively trying to refer to Cynthia as Lily’s mother in his head, or maybe it’s because they plan on revealing that fact to her in the next couple of months, but seeing Lily hold onto Cynthia tight as she lays her head against her shoulder, eyes closed and a content smile on her face, makes him choke up a bit.

No one notices. He doesn’t think. It’s fucking stupid. It’s probably due to age or another baby on the way or some shit.

And it completely passes within seconds. After Cynthia puts Lily down and Lily comes to preen under Eric’s praise and to make sure Brian wore his new horrific glasses during the show, she goes over to accept her flowers from Duncan with gratitude, giving the little boy a kiss on the cheek in the process, which has Brian shaking his head and Duncan grinning like a fool.

What wipes Duncan’s grin off his face is the absolute awe Lily seems to still have for Nathan.

“You came,” Lily gasps, smoothing down her dress as she looks up at the man.

“I had to come see the greatest Flamenco dancer in New York City,” Nathan winks.
That wink alone causes Lily to blush furiously and giggle, before she runs to hide her face into Eric’s hip.

It’s ridiculous, but Brian almost can’t blame her. Even he can admit (in his head) that Nathan has the sexy wink down pat.

They take her out for a celebratory dinner afterwards, Park Plaza per her request. Since Lily is so convincing, she manages to make everyone tag along and they get the room near the back to sit in. It’s nice, despite Duncan quietly challenging Nathan for Lily’s heart, much to what seems like Nathan’s amusement.

“I told them that you did a great job and needed all the cake in the whole wide world,” Duncan insists as Lily blows out the candle. Why they put a candle on the piece of cake in the first place, Brian couldn’t tell you.

“It’s true,” Emmett mutters to them as Lily takes her first bite, “He told the owner that he loves Lily and that he’s her boyfriend and that he’s a better boyfriend than some old man.”

“You hear that, old man?” Brian smirks, “You don’t stand a chance.”

“I don’t think I ever did,” Nathan laughs as he puts an arm on the back of Petra’s chair, “But if I’m old, what does that make you?”

Fucker.

They part ways after that. Cynthia, Gus, and Debbie come with them, while most of the others head for Court Street to head for their respective trains. When Brian takes one last glance, he sees Justin pulling Nathan to the side to tell him something. Brian is only guessing, but he assumes it’s the same thing Justin told him on Halloween. He doesn’t know how Nathan will take it, but he seems better. Calmer. More relaxed and confident, even. Maybe the success of the show helped with that. Maybe getting a nicer apartment with Petra helped as well. But, if the baby is what Justin is bringing up, then Brian feels like Nathan may take it okay after all.

The rest of the weekend remains busy. Lily has afternoon recitals on Saturday and Sunday, which makes it tough to spend time with Gus, Debbie, and Cynthia, but they do try to get as much in as possible. He does make it a little easier on them by having Debbie return the rental car in New
York, before he buys two plane tickets that head out to Toronto Sunday evening.

As for the talk he, Eric, and Cynthia have? It goes as well as expect. Almost. Sort of. If anything, Brian’s the awkward one, as Cynthia tries to explain she knows Brian is Lily’s parent and that she doesn’t want to replace him in any way, but just wants to play a larger role in Lily’s life and for her to know who she is to her.

“And the same goes with this new little girl,” Cynthia tells them, “Whether she’s biologically yours or Brian’s, it doesn’t matter. She’s still going to belong to the both of you. I just...I don’t know.”

“With the new baby, we would start with her knowing who you are to begin with,” Eric answers slowing, glancing at Brian every so often, “With Lily, it’s more complicated due to the fact we’ll have to sit her down and explain everything and how it works. And she has a right to know, I agree. She deserves to know you’re her mother and that you didn’t expect to love her as much as you did when you first agreed to donate your eggs. After she is capable of really understanding, is taking it well, and is open to it, we could maybe arrange a week or so a couple of times a year where she could spend time with you in Chicago-”

“I need some time,” Brian interrupts, getting up.

“Brian-” Eric starts, but if he says anything after, Brian doesn’t hear it after he closes the back door.

He knows he should probably just stand on the stoop and not leave his property during an important conversation, but he needs to clear his head so he walks down to the promenade, which is only a block away regardless. He walks down the boardwalk and passes the mansions that line it, the only brownstones in Brooklyn probably larger than his own. He really wants a cigarette. Quitting was a shitty idea, yet he hates the fact that he wants one just over a simple conversation to begin with.

He’s a fucking hypocrite. If anyone should understand where Cynthia is coming from, it should be him. He was pretty much in her situation not too terribly long ago with Gus. Sometimes he still finds himself in it. And Cynthia is handling it much more gracefully and compassionately than he ever did.

He could call Mel. Because, if Cynthia is him in this situation, then that makes him Melanie fucking Marcus. But, even though they are on better terms than they ever were before, distance must make the heart grow fonder, he wouldn’t be able to stand it if she became all high and mighty
over it.

“If you don’t want to tell her...or if you don’t want me to have a larger role in her life...just tell me, Brian. I know what the agreement was and I know that it makes it so I am technically overstepping here, but just tell me.”

Brian lets out a breath and glances at Cynthia, his cold ex-assistant turned co-CEO who looks anything but unfeeling right now.

“It’s not that,” Brian sighs, “Forget it. We can tell her tonight, if you want to.”

“We’re not going to tell her tonight,” she huffs out, “And I’m not going to ‘forget it’.”

But there’s nothing else Brian can say without coming off as jealous or selfish or hateful, so he doesn’t say anything at all.

“Brian, I don’t want to replace either of you,” Cynthia tries to explain helplessly, slightly shivering from the cold as she does so, “You and Eric - you’re both her parents. You know that. When she needs safety and comfort, she’ll come to you. When she is excited about something big that happens in her life, she’ll still tell you first. When she needs money, I bet she’ll ask you first. And hell, since you’re both gay, she may even come to you about boys.”

Brian has to snort at that, “You can handle those last two.”

Cynthia smirks a little as she puts a hand on his shoulder, “I thought I would just handle bras and periods.”

Brian shakes his head, “Eric can handle the periods. I caught him looking at articles online on how to explain puberty to your daughter, even though Lily’s four and we don’t have to worry about shit yet. I think it’s because Michael and Gus were with JR when she got hers a couple of weeks ago. You can imagine how that went. Eric suffered secondhand trauma to the point where I bet he’ll make sure he’s an expert by the time Lily gets hers.”

Cynthia lets out a laugh, “We need to help him figure out a way to occupy his time better. And here I thought you would have his time covered. Your old age keeping you down?”
Brian puts a finger under the front of his waistband of his jeans and boxer briefs, “Nope. I’m still up.”

“You liar,” Cynthia scoffs, practically leaning over to get a peek, “It’s 35 degrees outside.”

“What can I say?” Brian shrugs, putting an arm around her shoulders as they start to walk back to the house, “Identity crises and worrying my husband and baby mama get me going.”

“Never refer to me as baby mama EVER again,” Cynthia enforces, “Ever.”

Brian doesn’t learn about the mural until he comes home from work to find Justin and Eric sitting at the dining room table, large sketches scattered all around.

“I know how to emulate Kinkade’s method when it comes to painting light,” he overhears Justin say to Eric, “I could do that for the stars, moon, and lights in the trees. Since you were wanting a storybook theme, I was thinking I could paint an oak tree or something and give that a fairy theme and possibly have a younger character, like Little Red Riding Hood or Alice walking towards the forest. If it’s Red Riding Hood, we could have a wolf alongside her, and if it is Alice, we could have a rabbit or a cat. They could hold a lantern and I could have the light illuminating from it show different animals or fairies or whatever you’re wanting, really. There is something we could do that my friend could help me with. He does a lot of mixed media and art that has electricity and batteries involved, he is actually the one who did the piece you got Lily on New Year’s. This idea would basically consist of shaping out the interiors of her lantern and turning it into an actual light source that would be battery operated and touch activated. As for sticking it on the wall, it would be as easy as just putting it on with velcro.”

“Oh my god, I love that idea!” Brian hears his husband practically squeal, “I like Red Riding Hood, and I like the idea of the wolf beside her, as if she’s tamed and befriended him because that would take a lot of courage, strength, and character. And the lantern idea would be so interactive and fun for her, especially when she’s a toddler and becomes obsessed with lights going on and off. You’re literally going to make her room into a work of art. I’m going to pay you so much-”

“What’s this?” Brian asks, making himself known as he walks over to the table to look at the sketches.

Eric looks up at him and points at the most developed sketch, “I met with Justin for lunch last week and we talked about a mural he did for Carmen and Liam’s son’s nursery. I had seen pictures
and asked if I could pay him to do something for the baby’s.”

Brian nods, before forcing himself to get his glasses out of his pocket to look at Justin’s designs.

“I think this is the first time I have actually been face to face with him wearing them,” Justin murmurs to Eric, amused.

“He needed a prescription and everything. The ophthalmologist told him that he should be wearing them all the time because Brian has managed to become both nearsighted and farsighted, although the ladder is worse.”

Brian pointedly ignores his husband and tries not to feel embarrassed as Justin studies him.

“They look really nice on you,” Justin offers genuinely, “It’s a great fit and the frames are very stylish and sophisticated.”

“Right?” Eric agrees, “I helped him pick them out and everything, made sure they didn’t have the visible bifocals. He looks fucking sexy and can’t see it. Probably because he doesn’t wear the damn glasses-”

“Alright,” Brian interrupts, changing the subject, “Your sketches look nice. Eric, what’s for dinner?”

Eric raises his eyebrows in surprise at the assumption and suppresses a laugh, “What makes you think I’m making anything? Maybe I was waiting for you to get home and treat me.”

Brian gives him a look, “Maybe because I can smell food.”

“Italian Wedding soup, garlic toast, and salad,” Eric informs him, “Justin’s going to stay to eat, then get some measurements in the nursery after. Jess took Lily to the library for an arts and crafts event her daughter volunteers at but they should be back any minute now.”

And Eric’s right on that. Lily and Jess come through the door within two minutes, both of them carrying several of Lily’s recent creations.
“I dunno where you’re gonna put all these,” Lily sighs, standing up on her tiptoes to dump what she carried in on the table, “I was on a roll today.”

“It’s true,” Jess confirms as she puts down the rest of Lily’s things in a more organized manner, “She made it through all the stations and didn’t want to leave until she made every craft.”

“Lily, did you give Jess a hard time?” Brian frowns.

“Noooo,” Lily answers, giving Brian a look as if he’s both annoying and stupid, “I just participated. They said they wished there was more kids like me, because I’m so good at this stuff and I’m smart too.”

“They did say something of that nature,” Jess chuckles.

“But I can’t keep everything, so here, Jess,” Lily insists, handing her an owl and what looked like a stress ball, “These ones are for you. The owl will make you think of me when you’re not here and you can squeeze that other thing when you are feeling frustrated with me when I’m taking too long.”

“Maybe you should make a couple of those for your papa and me,” Brian laughs as Lily shoots him a glare.

“And Justin!” Lily exclaims, running up to give the man a hug, “I didn’t know you was going to be here but I will give you stuff too. Here’s a caterpillar, it’s just a colored cotton ball with some googly eyes glued on the edge of a paper plate, as you can see, if you wanna make one at home. And here’s a maraca! Only one though, because I wanna give the other to my papa. You understand, right?”

Justin chokes back a laugh and nods seriously, “Of course I understand. Thank you, Lily.

Lily presents Eric and himself with a higher quantity of gifts. Eric receives a single maraca, three finger puppets (“They HAVE to stay together because they’re friends,”) an elephant made out of toilet paper rolls, and an origami mermaid.

Brian receives a giraffe finger puppet, something Lily seems particularly impressed by because, as
she demonstrates, you put two fingers through the holes and they become the giraffe’s legs. Along with that, she gives him a turkey, a picture of god knows what made with her footprints, and a picture of a sailboat and the ocean made out of cupcake wrappers, which makes her laugh because it reminds her of the time he felt sick on the sailboat ‘that one time.’

That one time where she caught a fish that put 100,000 dollars in her college fund. That one time that slowly led up to her papa’s heart being crushed by his mother.

It’s funny how kids perceive major events.

They move the crafts so that they can set the table for five and eat. It’s a smaller meal, comforting and nice for a colder day. Brian forces himself to just have one bowl, but everyone else has two, and Eric still has enough to put some aside in containers for Jess and Justin, as well as store some in the freezer. Jess takes hers after she helps load the dishwasher, then hugs Lily goodbye. Justin gathers some of his tools before Brian offers to take him upstairs to the nursery while Eric keeps Lily occupied.

“Here it is,” Brian drawls, walking into the room and patting the crib, “Eric must have put everything else in the attic so that you would have room. Do you need this moved anywhere?”

“Not right now,” Justin tells him, before he gets into visualization mode, or whatever he’s doing. Brian goes to watch Justin from the doorway as he the younger man starts to measure the walls in full, before random portions that probably only make sense to Justin.

“This will take you a while,” Brian tells him, “It’s not exactly a small room.”

Justin looks around the room and sighs, “...Yeah.”

Brian lets out a breath, “You know, you don’t have to do it. If I had known Eric was going to ask you, I would have let him know you were going to be busy.”

Justin shrugs, “I’m always busy anyway. And besides. Both you and Eric can appreciate art, both of you are the types to let an artist have a little bit of freedom when it comes to their projects. And I think Eric wants to pay me a shit ton, even though I told him not to. So it’s not like it isn’t worth it.”
“Yeah, but Justin, you know you’re going to be more busy than you usually are,” Brian tells him softly.

“You don’t even know the half of it,” Justin laughs.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Justin doesn’t answer, but turns around and looks at Brian, “Why didn’t you tell Eric about me becoming a dad?”

Brian looks at Justin for a catch, “I didn’t know I was supposed to. I figured you would tell everyone when you were ready. It’s not my place to tell people your business.”

“Eric’s not people,” Justin points out.

“No, I guess he’s not...Do you want me to tell him?”

Justin stares at him for a moment, before turning back to face the right wall, “...Nah. I’m going to make an announcement at Thanksgiving. At both of the dinners I’m going to.”

“What other dinner are you going to besides ours?” Brian asks.

Justin huffs, “My own. Somehow, with my mom becoming excited over Molly and Hunter moving in together soon and wanting to get to know Ben and Michael better again, I got roped into hosting it. So I think the guest list is my mom, Tucker, Molly, Hunter, Ben, Michael, JR, Max and Lola since their families are out of state. Oh, and my dad. I invited Nathan. I didn’t want him to be alone. But I guess he’s going to Petra’s family’s dinner.”

“Your dinner sounds like it’s going to be awkward as fuck anyway. Probably for the best,” Brian shrugs.

“The only single ones who will be there will be my dad, me, and JR. And JR doesn’t count. She’s not even 12.”
“Come on, Sunshine,” Brian sighs as he walks back into the room to put his hands on Justin’s shoulders, “Self-pity makes my dick soft.”

“Shut up.” Justin shakes his head, “Seriously, go downstairs, get your dick hard around your husband, so that I can mark up your wall in peace.”

“Debbie Downer,” Brian says into Justin’s ear, but still feels a spike of concern at Justin’s demeanor, “...Are you sure you’re alright? You’re tense. I can feel it in your shoulders.”

Justin lets out a breath, “I just have a lot on my mind. And your pseudo shoulder massage is not helping. Don’t worry about me. Things are...Things are good. Better than. It’s just taking me a bit to realize it.”

Brian gives him a look of confusion, “You literally said ‘Things are good’ so obviously some part of you realizes it.”

“Oh my god, quit analyzing my words and go downstairs,” Justin finally laughs, “I really want to get started on this. Eric is giving me full reign so I’m actually pretty excited.”

“...Fine,” Brian gives in, “I’ll leave you to it. Let me know if you want a water or a beer or something.”

“I will. Now go.”

Brian heads downstairs, smiles at Eric pretending to look for Lily during a game of Hide and Seek, then takes Lily’s gifts and puts them in his office. He puts the Turkey and the sailboat picture up on the hanging whiteboard with magnets and props the giraffe up next to his laptop. He decides that the other picture, the one of her feet creating an image of god knows what, deserves a frame. He’ll keep it in his drawer until he buys one that will fit it tomorrow.

It’ll be the sappiest action performed by a father yet. But he can’t find it in himself to be as embarrassed by wanting to frame it as he might have been years before. He’s still embarrassed, although not enough to keep him from going through with it.
But, just like his shitty eyesight, he chalks it up to age.

Not that he’ll ever admit that out loud.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait and for another short chapter (short for me, anyway. Unless you like short chapters. In that case, you're welcome.)

I am very excited for the next chapter, which will be a long Thanksgiving chapter. So stay tuned for that and let me know what you think on this chapter as well!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!