## The Canary in the Coal Mine

By Frayach

**Summary**

Justin is tired of his and Brian's "relationship." It seems Brian is merely experimenting with the concept of love - and that he, Justin, has been unwillingly cast in the role of a canary in a coal mine to test Brian's ability to be part of a couple. Meanwhile Brian is struggling with the realization that buying Justin stuff like flowers and taking him on a trip to Vermont doesn't mean he's selling-out to the straight world. Will Brian figure it all out before Justin slips through his fingers? Canon compliant.

**Notes**

The title is an allusion to caged canaries that miners would carry down into the mine tunnels with them. If dangerous gases such as methane or carbon monoxide leaked into the mine, the gases would kill the canary before killing the miners, thus providing a warning to exit the tunnels immediately.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Brian hoped that if he thought the word enough times and with enough venom, then maybe *maybe* Gardner Vance would drop dead from an aneurysm. At the very least chanting obscenities was distracting him on his drive to the baths where he’d be distracted by something far more pleasurable.

Asshole!! And Ryder, too. Ryder could drop dead, and then Brian could bury him and Vance together and save the time and hassle of digging two graves. Assholes!! How was this happening? Not only was his job on the line, but he’d been totally blindsided by the whole thing. He prided himself on being able to see shit on the horizon, but not this time. He’d been *sure* Ryder was going to make him partner when he’d walked into Ryder’s office on Monday. They’d had a deal – if Brian brought in an agreed-upon amount of business during the past fiscal year, then Ryder would make him a partner. Brian had held up his end of the bargain and then some. Ryder hadn’t. Asshole! God, he’d been duped. Taken for a fool. Hoodwinked. Fucked up the ass and not in a good way. All those long hours and lost weekends and a whole year of ass-kissing flushed down the fucking drain.

*I’ve put in a good word for you,* Ryder had said, and Brian’s hands had twitched with the desire to strangle him.

And then along came Gardner Vance. He was so smugly arrogant that Brian seriously considered the possibility that Vance was even more smugly arrogant than he was. Vance had played Brian’s game and beat him. He’d had to put all his effort into hiding his dismay when Vance had said he’d contacted all of Brian’s clients and they’d agreed to stay with the agency with or without him. Damn, had *that* been a kick in the gut! Dumped by Ryder. Dumped by the clients whose accounts he’d spent so much time and effort cultivating, and now he was faced with the prospect of having to pack his shit in a box and be escorted to his Jeep by security personnel.

How had it come to this? And how hadn’t he seen it coming? He’d lost his edge. He’d dropped his vigilance. He’d stopped keeping an ear to the ground, alert to even the softest footstep. He’d fucked up and now he was going to pay for it dearly. This kind of shit simply did not happen to him. It *couldn’t* happen to him. He was not That Guy. The guy who has to sit down with human resources to sign a heap of severance paperwork; the guy who has to tell his assistant that she’s been fired too and watch her eyes fill with tears; the guy who asks an intern to help him clean-out his office and pack up his shit; the guy whose packed-up shit is then searched for pilfered pens and Post-It notes; the guy people watch with pity and secret glee as he slinks toward the elevators with not even a
good-bye because if he opens his mouth he’ll start crying in front of everyone like a fucking pussy. He, Brian, was not That Guy.

The first trick couldn’t give head to save his life, so Brian told him to fuck-off and soon found another guy to take his place. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back, letting it rest against the wall. He needed to stop thinking about Ryder and Vance and the looming prospect of unemployment. It was difficult at first – the trick wasn’t bad at sucking cock, but he wasn’t great at it either. But Brian didn’t have time to search the mostly-vacant baths for another willing mouth, so he focused all his concentration on having an orgasm regardless of the quality of the blowjob. As always, he allowed the world around him to dissolve until he was aware of nothing but his intensifying arousal. He never fantasized while having his dick sucked – fantasies were only for jerking off. Getting blown was totally different; he didn’t want to disappear into his imagination. Quite the contrary. He wanted to be completely present, completely engaged, completely aware of every little thing – a change in pace or depth, a swallow, a sigh, a slurp. He wanted to feel warm fingers fondling his balls and playing with his asshole. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else existed. Nothing else was even real. Nothing except his mounting excitement. As he neared his orgasm, he reached down and held the trick’s head steady with both hands. He was pleased that, when he started fucking his mouth, the guy groaned with pleasure – it was always nice to know a trick’s enjoying himself; it made the whole experience more satisfying. Brian staved off his climax for as long as possible. When he was ready, he grunted to give the trick a head’s-up that he was about to get a load pumped down his throat. And when he finally came, he gave in to the sensation so completely that he became lost, disoriented, undone. 

“Fuck,” he gasped appreciatively. The guy wasn’t a superstar, but he’d gotten the job done. The guy smiled up at him, and Brian gave him a hand to help him stand. He tucked his softening dick back into his pants and zipped his fly, ignoring the trick’s sigh of disappointment.

“Late for a meeting,” Brian said with a twitch of a smile. The guy smiled back, and it was all good.

Back at the office, he and Cynthia spent the day scouring the net for any and every mention of Gardner Vance. It was all the usual bullshit – hometown, boarding school, college, business school, internship, first job, the positions he advanced through, the boards he sat on, when he was made partner, and then, finally, when he got bored and decided he wanted his own agency. Not only was it boring, it stirred up a lot of shit Brian didn’t want stirred. The guy obviously came from money – the town in Connecticut where he grew up probably contained more country clubs and gated communities than Pittsburgh, Columbus and Cleveland combined, and Exeter Academy sure the hell wasn’t free. Then there was his membership in Sigma Alpha Epsilon. Brian could actually taste bile. He’d tried to get in to ΣAE. He’d made it past the first cut, but that’d been it. Same thing with Phi Gamma Delta. Either the members knew he came from a blue-collar background or he sucked cock. Probably both.

“Something wrong?” Cynthia asked. There must be something in his expression that revealed his ire.

“Other than the fact I’m no longer vibrating with caffeine, then no,” he said. “Go get me some more coffee.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” she said, leaping up from her chair and saluting him. “Right away, Your Majesty.”

He gave her half a smile and made a shooing gesture toward the door. God only knew why she still put up with his shit after all these years. Probably because she enjoyed giving as good as she got. He leaned back in his chair and scrubbed his face, making his hair stand up. Why did it bother him so much? Did he really want to have spent his college years getting puking drunk with a bunch of
spoiled cunt-lickers?

Pathetically, the answer was “yes.” He would be in New York right now. With the combination of his grades, fraternity membership and good looks he’d be climbing the ladder of a prestigious agency. Instead he was stuck in fucking Pittsburgh being made to sing for his Goddamn super. Hell, who needed caffeine? He was vibrating with rage and indignation.

“Here you go,” Cynthia said, handing him a mug that still read “Ryder” on it. Brian glared it.

“I’ve gotta be alone right now,” he said. “Go do this at your desk. You can use my password to get past the block.”

“Oh, goodie,” she said. “I get to look at hot guys all afternoon.”

He tried to smile, but he just couldn’t. She winced and left quickly, closing the door behind her. Brian got up and locked it. After he’d pulled the shades, he went to his desk to fetch the lube and a cock ring. He unbuckled his belt and opened his fly and then made himself comfortable on the couch. The ring was going to help him come multiple times, and that’s what he needed right now. It was either jerking off or getting into the bottle of Beam. He had a shit-ton more work to do and couldn’t afford to get drunk, so pulling his pud was the only option. Not that he minded. It was just that a buzz lasted longer than an orgasm.

He slicked his cock and slipped the ring around it and his balls. When he started stroking himself, he closed his eyes and tipped his head back. This was the time for fantasies. Unsurprisingly, the first thing his mind groped toward was Justin’s ass. Justin had the most perfect ass he’d ever fucked . . . hell, Justin had the most perfect ass he’d ever seen, including porn. Brian imagined Justin on his elbows and knees with that magnificent ass in the air. In his mind, he positions himself so he can eat him out. Justin moans. The little fucker loves getting rimmed. When his asshole relaxes, Brian slips a finger inside and finds his sweet spot, making Justin moan again. A finger is not enough though; the little slut wants his cock. Brian aligns the head against his asshole and pushes in slowly, watching the kid take his cock inch by inch. He’s holding still because he knows that’s how Brian likes it when he’s going slow. When he’s in to the root, Brian increased the pace of his strokes, squeezing the head in his fist, making it purple. He was going to come, but it was alright. He’d be able to come again. He stroked himself hard and fast and then froze with a groan, his ass lifted up off the couch, catching the spurts in the Kleenx he held in his left hand.

And then he went right back to work, cupping his balls and rolling them between his fingers. He closed his eyes again and tipped his head back. This time he’s watching another guy fuck Justin while he jerks off. The guy is fucking losing it – of course, he is! Justin can bottom from the top like nobody else. After the guy comes with a sob, he rolls Justin over and shallows the kid’s huge cock. A perfect ass and a nine-inch cock. What more could a man ask for? Justin turns his head so he can watch Brian jerking off. His eyes are half-closed, and his gaze is sultry. “Come,” he says, and Brian does – both in his head and in reality, amazed once again that Justin can command him like that and his body reflexively obeys. It was kind of freaky actually.

Okay, one last orgasm. Brian didn’t want to totally wring himself out and turn his brain into jelly. This time he needed to think of something else, something really fucking dirty – things he’d never do to Justin because they require a certain degree of indifference, and he was never indifferent with Justin. He couldn’t be. It was impossible. He’d come to accept that fact a long time ago. He closed his eyes and imagined fisting some faceless guy, pumping his fist in and out as though it’s his cock. The guy is practically screaming for more, but Brian’s not going to give it to him. Instead he pulls his hand out of the guy’s ass and positions himself so he can fuck the guy’s mouth, which he does, all the while telling the guy to take his cock because he loves it; he loves having his throat fucked. The
guy is choking, but in Brian’s fantasy, he’s loving it. When he’s ready for his orgasm, Brian frees his cock and starts pumping it until he comes all over the guy’s face with massive spurts, while all the time the guy is trying to catch his spunk in his mouth. He’s starving for it . . . he’s . . . Brian shouted “fuck!” and came again into a new Kleenex.

He tried to take as long as possible to return to the world. He couldn’t remember why he didn’t want to be conscious again, but he knew it was something bad. A residual memory was lodged in his frontal lobe – far from the animal part of his brain but there nonetheless.

He slowly opened his eyes and released a stream of profanities. Ryder. Vance. Sigma Fucking Alpha Epsilon. His dream of making partner nothing but a heap of steaming crap. And something else – something that was also on the line . . . .

. . . . Oh, shit! Vermont. The trip. If he didn’t come up with something soon, he was going to have to bail. He stood, slipped off the cock ring and put himself back together, throwing the damp, wadded Kleenexes in the garbage. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit! Justin had been talking about their trip for days nonstop. He’d been looking at ski runs online and deciding which ones they’d go on. He’d looked up restaurants and talked up the nicest ones as though he’d had to convince Brian to take him there. He needn’t have wasted his time. Duh! Of course, Brain was going to take him to the nicest ones. But Brian hadn’t interrupted him – it was clear that Justin had been having the time of his life planning the whole thing.

Jesus Christ. Jesus fucking Christ! What was he going to do?

Just then Cynthia knocked on his door. He got up and unlocked it. She was smiling. She’d found something! She’d found some good news! Brian wanted to hug her and volunteer to fuck her brains out; he was pretty sure she’d like that. A lot.

Brown Athletics. It was the one and only account Vance had wooed and lost. It was his Achilles heel, and Brian was going to stab it like that snatch-thief from Troy.

“Book me a flight to Chicago for tomorrow afternoon,” he said.

“Returning when?” she asked.

Brian leaned back in his chair and gazed up at the ceiling. If he won Brown in a day or less, he’d be back in time to spend at least half a week with Justin. He’d have to strong-arm the head of the art department, but the guy owed him a favor – a big favor. All he needed was five or six photo boards. If they were really good, that would be all it would take. But the art department can’t create anything unless he thinks of a campaign . . .

Brian thought for a moment. He could do what he usually did – after all sex sells. Brown Athletics had already courted and won the Dude market, what about the Fag market?

He stood and told Cynthia to book the return date for the day after tomorrow. She arched an eyebrow, and he knew what she was thinking. Only one day? How could he win Brown Athletics in one day?

He could and he would, and then he’d be made partner, and he and Justin would be off to Vermont.
The flight from Pittsburgh to Burlington, Vermont included a stop in Philly of just a little over an hour. Justin wandered around the airport, stopping at newsstands to thumb distractedly through magazines and then at Cinnabon for a messy sweet roll with extra frosting. The whole time he tried to imagine Brian walking beside him in his jeans and leather jacket, wearing a bored, slightly disdainful expression even though his eyes were ravenously consuming every detail of their surroundings. Brian always did that – it was probably why he was so good at advertising. He watched people, ascertaining their desires in the way they dressed, the way they moved, the things they looked at. It was kind of creepy actually – the whole concept of trying to understand a person’s want and fears so you can get them to buy shit. The irony, of course, was that Brian knew what strangers wanted but was blind to the wants and needs of the person he lived with and saw everyday. Although maybe it wasn’t blindness; maybe it’s just that he didn’t care. After all, Brian couldn’t make money off manipulating him, and it was clear that’s all Brian really cared about. Money and his job - his creepy, manipulative, exploitative job.

But beyond Brian’s appearance, Justin simply couldn’t imagine what it would be like to be with him outside the world of Pittsburgh in general and Liberty Avenue in particular. What would they talk about on the plane? Probably a hot airline steward. Justin rolled his eyes. God, he was so sick of that shit. If he didn’t know better, he could easily assume that Brian was a total bimbo with nothing on his brain except sex.

And business.

*I was at work, Jen!* It’d been his dad’s most common refrain – and it’d also been a load of crap. Even if his dad hadn’t been having an affair (which it turned out he was), the fact that he wasn’t home for dinner most nights was a clear sign that he didn’t give a shit about his family.

Just like Brian didn’t give a shit about him.

He sat down in the waiting area for his next plane and sucked the frosting off his fingers, which would’ve grossed Brian out. Justin snorts an ironic little laugh. That coming from a guy who licked strangers’ assholes and hung out in the backroom which probably hadn’t been cleaned since Babylon opened its doors. It was as though Brian lived his life in a perpetual disconnect. Not washing your hands after taking a piss grossed him out, but spunk-splattered mattresses at the baths didn’t. What
was up with that? Was Brian just so addicted to fucking that his addiction overrode his fastidiousness when it came to everything else?

If so, it explained a lot. Brian would never let stuff as mundane as venereal diseases and flesh-eating bacteria (which the baths were probably full of) stand in the way of a ten-second orgasm. It was an addiction. That was the only explanation that made sense. Either that, or Brian was merely reckless, vacuous and icky.

The airplane lady called his row, and he stood to join the line with his fellow passengers. Life sucked. What the hell was he even going to do when he got to Vermont? Hopefully the mountains and fresh air would inspire him because right now he couldn’t imagine having fun. But that wasn’t why he was going. In fact, fun was the furthest thing from his mind, which had room for little else but hurt and anger. Brian was a total asshole. No, worse than just an asshole – he was an uncaring asshole who broke his promises.

He was never going to make the mistake of trusting Brian again. Ditto the mistake of thinking Brian might have feelings for him. It was bullshit. All of it. Fuck his job! Their relationship should be more important, but clearly it wasn’t. Brian had chosen a pay check over him and then tried to make him feel like a pathetic whiner when he pushed back. He wasn’t the one who was pathetic. Brian was! And throwing the fact that his money paid for Justin’s tuition in his face was a low blow when Brian knew that Justin hadn’t wanted him to pay for school for exactly that reason! He didn’t want to feel indebted to Brian. In fact he hated it, and even worse, Brian knew that! But that hadn’t stopped him from using it as a weapon to make Justin feel bad for being upset. Jesus, what an asshole! Fuck him – Justin doubted Brian would even care that he’d gone to Vermont without him, but hopefully he was wrong. Hopefully Brian felt like the shithead he was. It served him right.

When he arrived at Burlington’s airport, he gave Brian’s name at the car rental kiosk and decided to upgrade from a Ford Escape to a Cadillac Escalade. The fact that it was an extra $99 per day made the choice even easier. Brian could pay for it with his oh-so important job. After all, wasn’t that why Justin was spending the week alone? Because Brian’s job was more important than him and their “relationship”?

The drive to Stowe Mountain was treacherous but beautiful. Snow fell on the branches of the evergreens, bending them to the ground as though they were bowing in prayer. The quaint village of Stowe itself looked like something out of a painting by Thomas Kincaid – but in a good way. The lampposts lining the main street were garnished with little white lights, and people wearing parkas, snow boots and ski hats strolled down the brick sidewalks. It was everything Justin had imagined. For a moment he was happy, but then he remembered that he was alone, and being alone had not been part of the dream trip he’d planned.

Fuck it. Fuck it.

It was dusk when he reached the ski resort itself – it’d taken him longer than it should have because of the snow-covered roads. He pulled up in front of the main lodge. Of course, Brian had baulked at the idea of a B&B, but that’d been okay. The lodge was truly awesome, and Justin was sure Brian had reserved one of the most expensive rooms. He drove up to the main doors and gave his keys to a valet while another valet unloaded his bags and board and brought them up to his room. Justin tipped both men very generously – so generously that both of them asked if he’d mistaken a fifty for a five. He assured them he hadn’t. Fortunately, Brian had given him a wad of cash before he bailed. Justin planned to spend all of it.

He was right about the room. It was on the top floor and had a magnificent view of the surrounding mountains. There was also an enormous fireplace and an even more enormous Jacuzzi. The bed itself
was bigger than Brian’s, and yes, there actually were mints on the pillows. Expensive mints. Justin opened one and popped the whole thing in his mouth.

Now that he was in a private setting, it was easier to imagine Brian with him. Brian would toe off his boots and hang his jacket in the closet before strolling around with his hands clasped behind his back. Eventually he’d turn around and open his arms.

So, he’d say. What do you think?

Justin would run to him. First they’d kiss, then they’d start groping, then they’d undress, and eventually they’d suck and fuck on every convenient surface they could find. Brian wouldn’t be satisfied until Justin had come at least three times, after that he’d let go of his control, and for just a few seconds, he’d become someone else. Someone capable of bliss, of joy. And then it would be over. Next they’d probably soak in the Jacuzzi and take a shower. After that they’d both be starving, and Brian would tell him to ask room service for anything he wanted. When the guy eventually showed up at the door, Brian would turn on his gaydar, and if the guy passed the test, Brian would flirt with him until he either fled or came in. If he came in, they’d have a threesome. By the time they’d finished fucking, eaten supper and turned off the lights, Brian would be asleep in a nanosecond and dead to the world.

In the morning, they’d fuck and then eat and then . . . . but that’s where Justin’s imagination failed him. He simply could not picture Brian putting on ski pants and ski boots and riding the gondola to the top of the mountain. He simply could not imagine Brian skiing along beside him, the sun glinting off his squillion-dollar sunglasses. He couldn’t imagine Brian eating lunch in the crowded summit lodge. He couldn’t picture any of those things.

It was that realization that made him start to cry. He’d so wanted to see Brian outside the fishbowl they lived in. He’d wanted to see his expressions and discover what they’d talk about. He’d wanted to see if there was a them. As it turned out, Brian didn’t even have to be with him to figure out the answer. There was no “them.” There’d never been a “them.” There never would be a “them.”

Brian had made that crystal clear.

It’s business – my business.

Translation:

1.) My job is more important than the trip, more important than our “relationship,” even more important than you.
2.) You mean so little to me that I can’t be bothered to explain the situation.
3.) You’re a whiny little faggot if you argue with me.
4.) Why aren’t you at school? If you weren’t here bugging me, I wouldn’t even have to tell you anything at all because your feelings are that inconsequential to me.
5.) Don’t give me shit – you wouldn’t have a place to live but for my important job.
6.) Don’t give me shit – don’t you remember I’m paying your tuition? Or have you conveniently forgotten that fact?
7.) You are a silly child who doesn’t understand the adult world.
8.) You are a pain in the ass.
9.) You are a waste of my time.
10.) You are nothing to me, Sunshine. You never were, and you never will be.

Justin angrily wiped away his tears. Fuck it! He was going to have a good time even if killed him.
He hadn’t been on a vacation in ages, and he was going to enjoy himself come Hell or high water. The weather forecast looked great. The snow conditions were perfect. He’d been so excited to get on the slopes, and he still could be. The only thing that could stop him was himself. He was not going to wallow in self-pity. He wasn’t even going to sulk and stew in anger. He was going to have a good time, and in the process show Brian he wasn’t needed, so he could just fuck off and take “his business” with him.

He’d stopped a Burger King on his way to the resort, so he didn’t need to order food from the kitchen. He did request a bottle of wine, though - a very expensive bottle of wine - to drink with his Whopper. After he ate his last fry and drained his last glass, he took a long shower, letting the water loosening the knotted muscles in his neck and shoulders. He was not going to think about Brian washing his hair; he was not going to think about Brian soaping his back, and he definitely was not going to think about Brian on his knees sucking his cock, or jerking him off in his slippery fist, or pressing him against the glass and entering him with one thrust and a grunt of satisfaction.

Fuck. Trying not to think of those things made him think of those things. Dammit. He jerked off and came as quickly as possible. The orgasm served no other purpose than to make falling asleep easier. There was nothing erotic about it – it was simply a means to an end.

The bed was huge, and the duvet as puffy as a cloud. He turned on his side, so that his back was facing the center. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be, but was anything about their “relationship” what it was suppose to be? Or was it merely a glorified roommate situation, it’s “rules” defined by Brian’s obsession with being queer and his loathing of anything that smacked of heterosexuality? Was that what Justin wanted? To be a guinea pig in Brian’s experiment? The wall off which Brian bounced possibilities? The eye of Brian’s hurricane of fear and prejudice? The canary to his coal mine?

The answer was becoming increasingly clear, and it was “no.”

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“Get out!” Emmett froze, his spoon suspended in the air halfway between his plate and his mouth.

“It’s true,” Michael said, poking at his “clam” chowder.

“No way!” Ted exclaimed. Unlike Emmett, he’d dropped his fork with a clatter.

“I’m telling you it’s true,” Michael said. “Why would I joke about something like that?”

Emmett’s expression conveyed a look of profound admiration. “One thing I’ll say for sure – that kid’s got some serious balls.”


“Don’t know,” Michael replied. “Justin didn’t say anything about not telling him, so maybe he did tell Brian. I hope he did because if he didn’t that’s pretty shitty.”

“Pretty funny, that is,” Emmett said with a gleeful snort.

“Can you just imagine his face when he finds out?” Ted said, sounding just as gleeful.

“Ah, to be a fly on the wall . . .” Emmett gazed at Ted wistfully

Michael was indignant. “You guys are being assholes – seriously! Brian doesn’t deserve this crap. He had to go to Chicago. He’s going to get fired if he didn’t. Hell, from the way he said it, it sounds
like he might get fired anyway. His new boss sounds like a real dick.”

“C’mon, Michael,” Ted said, patting Michael’s shoulder. “We’re just having a bit of fun. Don’t pretend you don’t feel even a little schadenfreude.”

“Shaw-den what? I don’t even know what that means.” Poor Michael looked confused.

“It means to take pleasure in another’s misfortune,” Ted replied.

“Oh, I’ll have to remember that one. But back to Brian getting ditched . . .” Emmett was interrupted by a red-haired whirlwind of indignation.

“Brian got ditched?! What’re you talking about?!” Debbie had obviously overheard their conversation.

“Ma, will you please calm down?” Michael begged. “I have a headache from doing bookkeeping all morning.”

“That’ll do it to you,” Ted said with sympathy. “Trust me, I know from long, grueling experience.”

“What’s going on?!” Deb screeched, ignoring her son’s plea. “I thought Sunshine and Brian were going to Vermont for the week.”

“They were going to Vermont for the week,” Michael said. “But something came up at work, and Brian couldn’t go . . .”

“. . . and get this, Deb – Justin just went ahead without him,” Ted added to the kerfuffle.

“He did?! ” Deb shrieked. “Good for him! It serves Brian right! He’s been taking that poor boy for granted ever since he met him . . . !”

“That’s not true, ma, and you know it,” Michael jumped in before she could go off on a tirade. “Brian took care of Justin after he was bashed.”

“Maybe,” Deb conceded. “But one good deed doesn’t mean you get off scot-free for the next bad one. Poor Sunshine! He’d been looking forward to that trip so much.”

“So had Brian,” Michael said. “He told me all about the awesome place they were staying . . .”

“. . . and how many times he’d be fucking Justin in it,” Emmett interrupted.

“Well, yeah, but so what?” Michael asked. “That’s how Brian always talks.”

“That’s because all he thinks about is his dick.” Deb readied her pad to take their orders.

“Look, he wouldn’t have made all the plans and arrangements if he hadn’t intended to go,” Michael said. “Everything’s probably already paid for.”

“Like that matters to Brian,” Ted added. “Having to throw money out the window probably didn’t bother him for even a second.”

“Don’t you think that if Brian gets back soon enough, he might still go to Vermont?” Michael replied. “No one’s even considered that. All you guys want to do is criticize him.”

“Well, if he was planning to go to Vermont when he came back,” Emmett said. “He definitely won’t now. Justin basically flipped him the bird.”
“And you know how Brian feels about chasing after people,” Ted added.

“Nothing ever gets in the way of that asshole’s pride,” Deb said, retrieving her pen from behind her ear. “Especially not caring about other people’s feelings. His pride’s almost as important to him as getting his dick sucked.”

“Ma, will you please stop?” Michael pleaded. “You make it sound like there’s nothing at all that’s good about Brian.”

“There is, but it’s pretty deeply fucking buried,” she replied. “Now, what’ll you boys have for dessert?”

“The look on Brian’s face when he gets home and finds out Justin’s in Vermont . . .” Emmett said, rubbing his hands as though preparing to dig into a feast.

“. . . with whipped cream and a cherry on top, please,” Ted added.

Debbie guffaws. “Coming right up. I must say my estimation of Sunshine just got even higher. That kid’s not going to let anyone treat him like shit, not even Brian fucking Kinney!”

“I know I should probably feel bad for Brian . . .” Emmett said, trying to look contrite.

“. . . but you so don’t,” Ted replied. “C’mon, Em, wallow in glee with me for just a little bit longer.”

“You guys are assholes,” Michael said angrily. “I’m going back to the store. Ma, I’ll take my lemon bar to go.”

Deb sighed. “You’re always going to make excuses for him, aren’t you? You always have, and you always will.”

“I’m not making excuses for him,” Michael said. “I’m trying to tell you guys that Brian didn’t have a choice. Ted, you got fired. You must know how it feels to have your job on the line.”

“How do you know his job was even on the line?” Ted asked. “Maybe he was just making an excuse for being an asshole and not going. That’s his typical M.O.”

‘M.O’? Is that like B.O.? Say what you will about Brian, but body odor has never been a problem for him,” Emmett said around a mouthful of fries.

‘M.O. Modus operandi,” Ted clarified. “It means the way you typically operate, and Brian typically operates by making excuses for his bad behavior usually by telling you that you deserved it because you’re a hopeless loser. Believe me, I know. I seem to be his favorite target.”

“Look, I’m not saying Brian’s perfect,” Michael said. “But he’s been good to Justin, and he’s afraid he’ll lose his job. You guys don’t know how important his job is to him. He’s worked really hard to get where he is. Before yesterday, he thought he was going to be made partner, and now he’s having to prove he shouldn’t be fired. It really sucks.”

“Well, so does disappointing poor Sunshine,” Deb added.

“An asshole caught between two assholes – one literal asshole and one figurative one. It’s rather poetic in a way.” Ted couldn’t help but laugh at his own joke even though none of his companions got the reference to the Greek myth of Scylla and Charybdis. If Brian were there, he would’ve appreciated it and flashed Ted that little, secret “we’re in on this together ‘coz we’re smarter than they are” smile. Ted hated to admit how much those moments meant to him.
“Teddy, that’s not very nice . . .” Emmett said with feigned disappointment.

“. . . not nice, but true,” Ted said, grinning at him. “The truth sometimes hurts.”

“Alright, here’s your lemon bar to go, sweetie.” Deb handed Michael a Styrofoam box.

“Have fun with your men in tights,” Emmett said around another mouthful of fries.

“And don’t worry about Brian,” Ted assured him. “I doubt he’ll be broken up when he finds out Justin went without him. He’ll get a blowjob and forget all about it like he always does.”

They all wave to Michael as he walks to the door.

“Bye, sweetheart!”

“Bye-bye, sweetie!”

“Bye, Michael!”

“I’ll go give your orders to the kitchen, boys,” Deb said with a weary sigh when the door closed behind her son.

“Thanks, Deb,” Emmett said with a commiserating expression.

“God, when is Michael ever going to stop twisting the facts until Brian looks like anything but an asshole?” Ted asked, sounding frustrated.

“Never, is my guess,” Emmett replied.

“It’s so frustrating! It’s like he’s willfully blind.”

“There’s no ‘like’ about it – he is willfully blind.”

“Well, thankfully Justin isn’t as well. I wouldn’t be able to stand having two Brian Kinney apologists around making excuses for him all the time and dressing up his bullshit in Armani suits.”

“I still cannot believe Justin went alone. If you’d asked me if I thought he would, I’d say ‘no way.’ Obviously I’ve underestimated him.”

“Seems like we all have.”

“He’s always had balls. Remember when he told half of Liberty Ave that he jerked off that horrible kid who bashed him, and remember that fight with his father when he was attacking Brian?”

“And remember the whole King of Babylon thing?”

“And running away to New York with Brian’s credit card?”

“And taking Brian back even though Brian didn’t visit him in the hospital . . . oh, wait, maybe that’s not something to put in the plus column. He never should’ve forgiven Brian for that.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve always chalked it up to PTSD.”

“Well, putting up with Brian at all takes balls whether or not we understand why he wants to.”

“Do you think it’s the sex?”
“Wouldn’t be surprised. Everyone knows Brian’s a superstar in the sack.”

“But what about after you come? What’s left to like?”

“He can be funny sometimes.”

“Yeah, usually at other people’s expense.”

“He’s nice to look at.”

“Unless he catches you and gives you the Glare Of Death.”

“He drives us around.”

“Sometimes we can hook-up with his cast-offs.”

“He takes care of Michael.”

“Yeah, and messes with his head. Tell me with a straight face that Brian’s good for Michael. See? I knew you couldn’t do it.”

“He helped Mel and Linds with their wedding.”

“Yeah, he whipped out his credit card and bossed us around. We ended up doing all the work.”

“He . . . he . . . darn, I’ve run out of reasons to put up with him. You?”

“I ran out of reasons a long time ago.”

“You know, honestly? I wouldn’t even be hanging out with Brian if it wasn’t because of Michael.”

“I know. Michael was a two-for-one deal.”

“Wanna hang out with Michael, you gotta hang out with Brian, too.”

“I really resented that at first, but now I’m basically resigned to the situation.”

“Me, too.”

“Justin isn’t though.”

“No, he’s not. He’s the only one in the world probably who calls Brian on his bad behavior.”

“Michael sure doesn’t.”

“Neither do I. The blow-back’s just not worth it. At this point, I basically try to ignore him most of the time.”

“He’s hard to ignore.”

“Tell me about it. It’s taken me years to perfect the act, and it’s still a work in progress.”

“Yeah, I know. Even when you tell yourself that he’s a dick who just can’t help himself; sometimes the things he says are just so out of line that it’s impossible to not get pissed off.”

“Ah! Here’s our desserts. Thanks, Deb.”
“No problem, boys, gotta get your calories before you go to Babylon.”

“So, back to Brian?”

“Nah, I’m getting sick of the topic. Let’s wait until we see what happens when he realizes he’s been stood-up.”

“That should make for good conversation.”

“It will indeed.”

Ted and Emmett clinked their water glasses together with grins of anticipatory delight.
Brian shoved his suitcase into the overhead bin and slammed the door shut with unnecessary force. Thank God there’d been a first class seat available. He hadn’t flown in the economy section since he graduated from college. The first time he took a trip that wasn’t business related (a White Party, of course), he’d put a first-class seat on his credit card. It’d taken him six months to pay it off, but it’d been worth it. He’d sworn to himself that when he got a job he was never ever going to fly economy again. And he hadn’t.

He’d also sworn that he would never be unemployed. If he was going to move up the ladder (which he’d been banking on to pay for the 30-year mortgage he took out when he paid more than he could afford for the loft) he wasn’t going to quit one job before he’d signed a contract with a new one. Overlap. There must always be overlap. As tempting as it’d been to quit Ryder’s and take a month off before he started that job in New York he’d wanted so much, he didn’t do it. Thank God. What a cluster-fuck that would’ve been. Classic case of don’t count your fucking chickens before they hatch. In fact, don’t count on anything unless you’ve gained complete control over it.

Christ, his dad had always counted his chickens. Jack never saw a paycheck that he hadn’t already spent. Betting on horses, putting drinks on a tab, borrowing money off anyone too stupid to know better – that was what Brian remembered about his father. Well, that and his belt, whiskey-soaked breath and clothes that stank of stale cigarette smoke. Until finally landing a union job, Jack had been fired every couple of years while Brian was growing up. They’d moved from one down-at-the-heels city to the next. Gary, Indiana; Trenton, New Jersey; Scranton, Pennsylvania, and finally Pittsburgh. He and his sister never stayed in a school district for longer than a year before Pittsburgh. After a while they’d stopped bothering to make friends. What was the point? It wasn’t until he discovered that his dad wouldn’t notice if now and then a bottle of Paddy’s disappeared that people realized he existed. But he wasn’t stupid – he was well aware that if he was invited to the occasional party, it was because people wanted to get drunk more than they didn’t want to hang-out with him.

He hadn’t been crying in his room, though. He’d been out walking around and watching, always watching. Because who knew where an opportunity might pop up? Who knew if a rich old lady needed her lawn mowed, or a fancy restaurant was short a dish washer because their regular guy was too drunk to show up one morning? Who knew if a bar where the local businessmen gathered after work needed its windows cleaned, or some big-shot lawyer needed someone to do their filing while
their secretary was on maternity leave? Sitting in your room all day jerking off got you nowhere. If you don’t sell yourself, nobody’s going to buy you. He wasn’t stupid; he knew he was as much a commodity as corn and soy beans, but he was a commodity that could walk, talk, kiss ass, and curry favors.

In the corporate world, that was called “networking.” Brian was good at it – very good at it. And he was smart as hell and ready and willing to push someone under a bus if they got in his way. Fuck a country club upbringing; fuck Sigma Alpha Epsilon; fuck getting a BMW from daddy on your sixteenth birthday. None of it mattered if you’re cagey, ruthless and in control.

Which was why the present situation was driving his stress level through the fucking roof. He’d lost control – and over his career, of all things! If he’d been certain of one thing, it was that he’d never be fired. He’d made himself essential to the solvency of the agency. Fire him, and the whole place would financially collapse.

Then along came Gardner Vance, who didn’t give a shit whether he kept Brian or not. He had enough capital to find someone to replace him – someone whose salary would equal less than half of Brian’s. Hell, Vance could hire two new people, and he’d still have to pay them less than he’d be paying Brian if he continued paying him the amount Ryder had. If Brian was in Vance’s place, he’d fire himself too!

What would he be without his job? What would he do? Where would he be able to show his face? And who the hell would hire him? Sure he was the fucking best at what he did, but he was also an asshole. He had a reputation that encompassed more than just his expertise as an ad man, and he was sure it preceded him. He’d have to leave town to escape it. People respected him, but they didn’t like him. He’d known that and hadn’t cared. If people were really good at their jobs, he was civil to them – even collegial at times – but everyone else were just hacks. Brian hadn’t had time for them. Until now.

Karma was a fucking train and it was barreling down the tracks straight at him.

He jerked off in the bathroom and then returned to his seat where he opened his lap top and went over his pitch for the zillionth time. He could do this. All he needed to do was focus – push Ryder out of his mind, push Vance out of his mind, push Jack out of his mind, push his terror of unemployment out of his mind, push Justin out of his mind . . .

Christ. Now, that was easier said than done.

He’d fucked up with Justin. He knew he’d fucked-up. He even knew he was fucking-up while he was in the process of fucking-up.

But that knowledge hadn’t stopped him.

He could still hear his own words echoing in his head. It’s business! My business, which, by the way, pays for your leeching ass. Okay. Maybe he hadn’t gone that far, but he might as well have. Justin wasn’t a moron; he knew how to read between the lines – even though his interpretations were probably wrong – so so very wrong.

After what Brian had said and how he’d said it, there was no way Justin could believe that he wanted to go to Vermont – that he wanted to go more than anything he’d ever wanted before. Goddamn it! Why couldn’t he have at least tried to explain that he didn’t want to go to Chicago, but he had to. Why couldn’t he just have said, "Look, Justin, this situation sucks. I don’t like it any more than you do. I really wanted to go to Vermont, but I’m going to lose my job if I do, and it’s not that my job is more important than our trip, it’s that I don’t think I can handle being unemployed. That’s
what’s going on here. This has nothing to do with you.”

How fucking hard would that have been? Why hadn’t he been able to do it? It would’ve taken less than half-a-dozen sentences and about thirty seconds. What the fuck was wrong with him?

Justin hadn’t said anything when he’d realized that what Brian had said was all he was going to say. He’d just gotten up, gathered his school shit, put on his jacket and walked out the door. He’d even had the class not to slam it like a petulant child. Brian had sat down on the edge of the bed and put his head in his hands. He’d felt like shit – no worse than shit. He’d been tempted to drink a couple shots of Beam, but thankfully he was able to talk himself out of it. He needed to keep his head clear. Everything depended on the next forty-eight hours. And who knew? After that, assuming he got the account and Vance agreed to make him partner, he and Justin could go on their trip. There was still time. He hadn’t said anything to Justin though. He couldn’t make another commitment that he might not be able to follow through on. One broken promise was one too many.

He closed his laptop and put it back in his briefcase. Going over his pitch yet again was not the best use of his time. Ideally, he’d get some sleep. God knows, he needed it. But that wasn’t going to happen. The best he could do was close his eyes and rest his brain. He couldn’t afford to let his thoughts unravel into loose threads of what-if’s. The past was the past. All he could do now was focus like a laser beam on doing his job the absolute best that he could, which meant he had to appear calm, collected and supremely self-confident. Thoughts of fucking things up with Justin were going to undermine all of those things. He wouldn’t think about Justin for the next forty-eight hours. And he didn’t.

* * * * * * * *

It was just before dawn when her phone rang. Daphne stumbled (literally) out of bed to answer it, tripping over the pile of laundry she planned to do in the morning. She pulled her phone out of her bag and looked at the caller id. Justin. That could not be a good thing. It was never a good thing when he called after midnight.

“Jus, hey,” she said, her voice scratchy with sleep. “What’s up?”

There was no response. She was just about to ask again when a despondent voice said, “I’m sorry if I woke you up.”

She went back to her bed where she sat cross-legged and pulled her quilt over her lap. It was freezing.

“That’s okay,” she said. “What’s going on? Aren’t you in Vermont with Brian?”

He emitted an ironic-sounding snort. “You’re half right,” he said. “I’m in Vermont, but I’m not with Brian.”

She frowned. “What happened? Did you two get in a fight or something and he left?”

“Nope. He didn’t leave. He was never here in the first place.”

“Seriously? But you went anyway?”

“Yup. And he doesn’t know. At least I don’t think he does. Who knows? It’s not like he’d call me or anything to find out where I am.”

Holy cow! He went to Vermont without Brian? Daphne did a fist-pump and would’ve shouted
“YAY! GO JUSTIN!” except she didn’t want to wake her roommate and Justin might not be in the mood to celebrate. But still . . .

“You are fucking awesome,” she said in as loud a whisper as she dared. “Oh my God, I can’t believe it! I love you, Justin!”

He gave a weak laugh that sounded more for her benefit than a sign of actual amusement.

God, Brian was such a bastard. Daphne would never say so to Justin, but she’d predicted this would happen. She simply could not picture Brian in Vermont, let alone on a snowboard. The question was why had Brian even made the offer if he’d never intended to go? It didn’t really seem like him, but then who knew? Justin had only recently started bitching about Brian, so Daphne didn’t know how accustomed he was to being treated badly.

“So he bailed? Did he say why?”

She heard Justin sigh. “He had to do some stupid thing for his job – go to Chicago to schmooze some big muckity-muck client. At least that’s what he said.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Honestly? I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

He sounded weary and defeated. She hadn’t heard him so down since he’d been in the hospital and Brian hadn’t visited him.

“You are fucking awesome,” she said again. “I hope you know that.”

He sighed again. “I don’t feel so awesome. In fact, I feel like shit. I feel like maybe I shouldn’t have done this.”

“What do you mean? Of course, you should’ve done it. Brian totally deserves it.”

“I don’t know, Daph. Maybe he didn’t. Maybe he really was worried he’d lose his job.”

“What’d he say? Tell me what he said to you.”

“It was the morning we were supposed to go, and he started looking around in his closet for a tie. I asked him why he thought he needed a tie in Vermont, and he said ‘I’m not going to Vermont.’ Just like that. So, I’m all like ‘what the hell?’ and he got all pissy and told me he was going to get fired if he didn’t go to Chicago to meet with this guy. I got upset and he yelled at me about it was his business and business is more important than me – and then when I was still upset, he got all snarky about how I should be cool with the whole situation because he pays for me to go to school and shit.”

Daphne bit her lip. If she spoke now, without taking a minute and a deep breath, the amount of obscenities she’d use would melt her phone like acid.

“But shouldn’t our trip be more important?” he continued. “Shouldn’t I be more important?”

She remained silent. She honestly didn’t know what to say. She knew what she wanted to say, but she’d only make things worse if she said it. What she wanted to say was that maybe it was time to think about breaking up with Brian . . .

“I’m thinking about breaking up with Brian,” he said, and she almost laughed at their telepathy.
They’d always been like that, even since they were kids playing together in their backyards.

“I was thinking the same thing,” she said.

He sighed again and was quiet for a long time while she played with a loose thread on her pajamas. She wasn’t going to press him. If he was going to say anything more, he’d say it when he was ready.

It wasn’t that she didn’t like Brian, it was that she didn’t like the way he treated Justin sometimes. The whole birthday thing was a perfect example. What’s so hard about buying your boyfriend a present or taking him out to dinner or something? *He doesn’t think birthdays are worth celebrating, only achievements,* Justin had said. *And you agree?* she’d asked. He’d merely shrugged and said that of course he didn’t agree, but he didn’t feel comfortable telling Brian. He’d said that Brian would just make fun of him and make him feel like shit.

Honestly, sometimes she didn’t know who she wanted to slap the hardest: Brian for being a jerk or Justin for putting up with it.

“I can’t live like this,” he said at last, his voice sounding very small and sad. “I want someone who actually cares about me.”

“I think Brian does care about you,” she said, unsure why she was coming to Brian's defense. “He just has weird ways of showing it.”

He laughed-snorted again. “Yeah, he does. Like that hustler he got me for my birthday.”

Daphne almost dropped the phone. “What!? A hustler?! No, Justin! You’re not serious! You *can’t* be serious!”

This time her roommate pounded on the wall separating their rooms to get her to quiet down.

“I’m serious.”

Now it was Daphne’s turn to be silent. She got out of bed and started pacing. She was so upset that she didn’t trust her voice not to waver.

“Daph? You still there?”

“Yeah, I’m still here. I’m just in shock, that’s all.”

“You’re not the only one, although why I was surprised, I don’t know. It’s so totally Brian. Honestly? I would’ve preferred getting nothing at all.”

“What did you say when you told him how upset you were? Did he say something even remotely apologetic?”

He took a deep breath and released it. “I didn’t say anything.”

If he was there in the room with her, she would’ve punched him in the arm and then shaken him for good measure.

“You didn’t say anything? Why not?”

She could practically hear him shrug.

“I don’t know. Probably wouldn’t have made a difference. He would’ve probably just said something shitty, and then I’d feel like a loser.”
“Nice.”

There’s another long silence.

“Daph, I don’t know what to do. I’m so angry, and he’s hurt me so much.”

If he was with her, this was when she’d reach for him and give him a huge hug. Instead she could only say that she thought maybe three-thirty in the morning was not the best time to think about it, let alone make decisions.

“He hasn’t even called,” he said.

“Maybe he doesn’t know where you are?”

“Of course, he knows where I am. If he hadn’t figured it out on his own, Michael will have told him. Besides it doesn’t matter where I am. I’m not on the moon. I have a fucking cell phone.”

He was rapidly going from despondent to distraught. She needed to put the brakes on.

“What can I do?” she asked softly.

“I love you,” he said.

“I know you do,” she replied. “And I love you too. Are you going to be okay? Should I be worried?”

He sighed again but thankfully it turned into a yawn. “No, you don’t need to worry. I’m not going to fling myself off the mountainside.”

She laughed in appreciation of his lighter tone. He knew she wasn’t going to be able to sleep without knowing he was okay. “Alright, but promise you’ll call if you want someone to talk to. I’m always here for you, Jus, no matter what time day or night.”

“Thanks,” he replied. “Go back to sleep now. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Apologize again and I’ll steal Brian’s Jeep and drive up there so I can smack you.”

He laughed. Finally!

“Good night,” he said.

“Don’t let the bedbugs bite,” she replied. It was their little ritual.

He hung up and she placed her phone on her bedside table, so it would be easy to find if he called again. It took her a long time to fall back asleep, but by the time she finally did, she’d decided she was not as charmed by Brian Kinney as she used to be.
The flight home was bumpy. Brian was glad that the only reason he had to spend time in the john was to jerk off, not lose his lunch because he’d had too much to drink the night before. He patted himself on the back yet again for not having gotten drunk with Brown and his cronies. He’d drank just enough shots to look like he was throwin’ em back with the boys, but not so many that he acquired a reckless honest-to-God buzz. Fortunately, he had a high tolerance level for alcohol. At least there was one good thing about being a functioning alcoholic.

There was only one last thing on his list yet to do. Corner that fucker Vance and inform him that he, Brian, was now a partner. He’d managed to convince Brown to make it part of the client contract. Brian was pretty impressed himself – he’d scored a major coup without having to fuck anyone . . . well, okay, there had been Brown’s assistant, but that’d been only to get his foot in the door. After that it was just him, Brian Kinney. His dick could take a brief vacation.

But only a brief one. A very brief one.

As soon as he got Vance to sign that crucial document making his partnership a reality, Brian was going to buy the most expensive bottle of champagne he could afford without being ridiculously wasteful – most of the champagne was going to end up flowing down the crack of Justin’s ass anyway, so $500 was really the limit. They’d get nice and tipsy and fuck each other’s brains out. Then they’d order Chinese, and after they’d stuffed their faces, they’d fuck again. Brian intended to fuck and suck the memory of the past couple of days right out of Justin’s head. He was going to pull out all the stops. He was going to fuck Justin like he’d never been fucked before, and then they were going to sleep all tangled up in each other and their nasty sheets. Tomorrow, after Brian had fucked him again, he and Justin were going to pack and be on the earliest flight to Vermont. First class, of course.

He had to do it, and he had to do it right. There was no room for error. Whatever the hell it was that he and Justin had together was on the line. Brian didn’t want to fuck it up any more than he already had.

Things were . . . well, things were not right between them – not like they had been – and he sure as hell hadn’t improved the situation by throwing a hissy (or perhaps he should say a “pissy”) fit over the whole Rage thing. But what else had he done wrong? He’d said he wasn’t going to get anything
for Justin’s birthday, but then he had. Justin had clearly enjoyed fucking that hustler, and Brian had certainly enjoyed watching the show. Yeah, Linds and Mel were scandalized, but they were women. They couldn’t understand the way he and Justin lived – the way they did things, the way they wanted to do things. Lesbians. They might as well be straight for all their hang-ups.

But come to think about it – and if he was honest with himself – he’d noticed that Justin hadn’t jumped with joy when he saw his hired hunk. He’d been quiet for the rest of the day and didn’t want to go to Babylon that night. He hadn’t even been in the mood to fuck when Brian came home. Brian knew why. He really did. He knew that if he’d bought those fucking flowers, Justin would’ve been thrilled. But he just couldn’t. Why was that so hard for people to understand? Had he ever given anyone the mistaken perception that he was someone who bought flowers? The only person he bought flowers for was his mother, but it was only to assuage his lingering Catholic guilt. He did not buy flowers. He did not do candle light dinners. He did not celebrate birthdays because after all what were they? The day your mother pushed you out of her cunt like a giant, screaming turd? What was there to celebrate about that? What you celebrated was achievements – things you worked for and won with your blood, sweat and tears. Hadn’t they celebrated Justin’s acceptance to PIFA? And then his re-acceptance? Hell, hadn’t they celebrated the fact that Justin had finally come down from his high horse and accepted help with his tuition? Maybe there’d been no cake and confetti, but it had been a big, fucking deal that he’d let Justin top him. A thousand roses couldn’t touch that gesture.

And now he was going to throw the party of all parties to celebrate the release of the first edition of the soon-to-be-famous new comic “Rage.”

He was genuinely confused by Justin increasingly evident dissatisfaction. What had changed in their . . . whatever it is? Brian was still abiding by The Rules. He was still inviting Justin to come with him whenever he went out. He was still fucking Justin’s as thoroughly as he always had. He was still giving Justin the space to do whatever he wanted to do – and the means. Was it just about flowers . . . those motherfucking flowers? The flowers and all they represented – snuggling instead of fucking? Whispered “I love you’s”? Chocolates and teddy bears and violin music playing softly in the background? Jesus Christ! They did not live in a heterosexual fantasy land! Justin knew that! He said he was fine with it! So What.The.Fuck?

By the time the plane landed, Brian had worked himself up so much that he was going to have to jerk off again and change into the suit he kept in his office for emergencies before he met with Vance. Despite having cranked up the cold air as far as it could go, his armpits and back were soaked. Even the crack of his ass was sweaty

To his great relief, Vance didn’t put up a fight, and Brian was made a partner of the new agency in less than an hour. Fucking partner! He was giddy as he rode the elevator down to the garage. As soon as he drove out onto the street and got cell phone coverage, he called Cynthia, who shrieked with excitement. Brian could picture her jumping up and down, the wine from her glass flying everywhere, and some poor bastard huddled in a terrified ball on the couch. He laughed and told her that as a partner he had the power to give her the week off. Why the hell not? After all he was going to be in Vermont with Justin, and there wouldn’t be much for her to do.

As he drove toward the liquor store – an upscale one, not the kind with neon Bud Light signs in the windows – he looked around, taking in the sights of the city. For some reason, things seemed different. Brighter. Faster. More interesting. Pittsburgh would never be New York City, but the dissimilarity seemed less glaring than usual. God, he was pumped! For a couple days there, he’d thought partnership had slipped through his fingers. No longer. And who knew? Being a partner made you a much more attractive candidate should you want to move to another agency. Maybe New York City wasn’t out of his reach after all! He was soaring, and he wasn’t even high on coke. Life was good. No, life was better then good! He’d looked into the abyss, but now he was back on safe, solid ground. God, he’d been so scared!
The price of the champagne he bought exceeded the limit he’d set for himself, but only by fifty bucks. What the hell was fifty bucks now that his paycheck would be triple what it had been? Talk about something to celebrate! This was the mother of all achievements – more than he’d achieved since he’d got the job at Ryder’s in the first place ten years ago. He’d probably be the youngest partner, too. Not to mention the smartest and best looking by a long shot. He could taste the money he was going to make. It tasted like success.

He gave the bottle of champagne a big ol’ smooch when he got in the Jeep. Little did he know he’d be pouring it down the drain an hour later.

* * * * * * *

“Shit,” Michael said angrily. “Shit shit shit shit!”

He, Emmett and Ted watched Brian walk away with his head down and his shoulders hunched.

“Wow,” Emmett said.

“Yeah. That wasn’t nearly as funny as I thought it would be,” Ted agreed. “In fact, it really wasn’t funny at all, was it?”

“Not in the slightest,” Emmett said. “Did you see his expression?”

“It looked like he’d been slapped in the face.”

“More like kicked in the balls.”

“Shit,” Michael said again. “Wait here, I’m going after him.”

Ted grabbed his arm. “Don’t,” he said. “He probably feels humiliated. If he does, it might be best to give him some space.”

“But . . . but . . .,” Michael stammered.

“I’m afraid there’s no ‘buts’ about it, sweetie,” Emmett said, holding onto the back of Michael’s collar to stop him from running after Brian’s retreating figure.

It said a lot about their collective mood that no one made a “but(t)” joke.

“He was totally knocked off balance. I never thought I’d see a day when Brian Kinney looked like that,” Ted said, shaking his head with solemn amazement.

“I know,” Emmett agreed. “And I kinda wish I hadn’t.”

Michael pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and called Brian.

“Shit! He’s not answering his phone!”

“Of course, he’s not, honey,” Emmett said soothingly. “My guess is that it’ll be a long, long time before he answers his phone again. Don’t take it personally.”

“What do you think his big news was?” Ted asked, blowing into his hands. It was cold as hell.

“Obviously something to do with his job,” Michael replied. “He probably wanted to tell Justin he didn’t get fired. Not that the little shit would care.”
“Now, now,” Emmett said, this time putting an arm around Michael’s shoulders and pulling him close for a comforting hug. “Let’s not go there.”

“No, let’s not,” Ted said adamantly. “Let’s go inside and try to have a good time.”

“How can I have a good time when my best friend looks like he did after his dad told him he had cancer?”

“Sweetie, the best thing you can do for him right now is give him some time alone,” Emmett said.

“Yeah,” Ted agreed. “Right now Brian is like a wounded animal; if you try to get near him he might bite your arm off even though you’re not the one he’s mad at.”

Emmett gave Ted a sad smile. “I’m willing to bet the person he’s mad at is himself.”

“You might be right,” Ted agreed. “C’mon, Michael. Brian will be okay.”

“Actually he might not be,” Michael said. “You guys don’t know how fucked-up he gets when he’s upset and alone. He might O.D.”

“Alright, how about this?” Ted said. “How about you come inside with us for a couple of hours, and then we’ll drive to the Brian’s so you can check on him, okay?”

Michael hesitated, but then he nodded. “Okay,” he said.

“And if he’s not there, you’re not going to freak out because he’ll probably be at the baths where there are lots of people around who can help him if he needs it.”

“Yeah, right,” Michael said. “A bunch of poppered-up guys high on E wandering around in the dark. What are we hoping? That one of them will trip over his unconscious body and give enough of a shit to call 911?”

Neither Ted nor Emmett replied.

“Uhm, maybe we should go to Brian’s now,” Emmett said, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“Well, Michael can,” Ted said. “My guess is that Brian wouldn’t jump up and down with joy if we walked through his door, too.”

“How does that sound, sweetie?”

Michael nodded. “Thanks. I’d feel better if I knew he was at home.”

“Then to my car, boys,” Ted said. “It’s off to the loft we go.”

They left the line to get into Babylon and walked down the street, their breath smoking in the cold air. None of them spoke again until Ted wished Michael good luck when he dropped him off at Brian’s building.

“Call us,” Emmett said. “Let us know how he’s doing.”

Michael fished his keys out of his pocket. “Yeah, okay,” he said. “Ted, would you call Ben and tell him where I am?”

Ted nodded. “Sure. No problem.”
“What if Brian’s not there?” Emmett asked.

“Then I’ll sit on his couch and wait till he comes home,” Michael replied.

“And if he doesn’t?” Ted asked. “By the way, the right answer to that question is ‘I’ll call you.’”

“Okay,” Michael said. “Look, I gotta go.” He seemed even more antsy to be near Brian than usual.

Ted nodded again. “Right. Okay.”

Michael turned and started jogging toward the door. Emmett lowered his window.

“Tell him that whatever good news he has that we’re happy for him,” he called.

Michael didn’t pause, but he flashed a smile over his shoulder.

“I will,” he said. Then he disappeared into Brian’s building, and the door closed behind him.
A Childish Dream

Chapter Notes

I usually don't deviate from canon events, but the BS about Brian not calling Justin while he was in Vermont is just too stupid (and, in my opinion, out-of-character) to abide by. So, I'm totally ignoring Justin's conversation with Daphne after he returns in the beginning of episode 18.

I also concluded that Brian would've learned how to golf and ski as part of his "business education." A lot of client-schmoozing gets done on golf courses and ski slopes.

Vance knocked on the office door of his new agency’s first junior partner and opened it without waiting for an answer. He didn’t want Kinney getting the mistaken idea that he could decide whether or not to let his boss in.

Kinney had had his new office for only a couple days, but already it looked like he’d been there a whole month – and not because he’d decorated it with the stuff from his old office. Everything was new. New desk, new chairs, new (leather) couch, new rug, new artwork . . . everywhere Vance looked, there was something new – including what looked like a state-of-the-art drafting table.

Kinney’s office was nicer than his – a fact that set Vance’s teeth on edge.

Kinney was looking out his window when Vance barged in, and Vance was impressed. He must have startled Kinney, but Kinney didn’t show it. His demeanor implied he’d been expecting Vance, even though he hadn’t been. It was six in the morning – Kinney had no reason to believe Vance was even in the building.

Damn, he was good. Too good.

Vance not only hadn’t wanted Kinney as a partner, he hadn’t wanted Kinney at all. He had planned on firing his arrogant ass first thing on Monday. Hell, he’d even had human resources draft the
severance paperwork so Kinney could be escorted out of the building no later than lunchtime. He’d been that sure Kinney couldn’t pull off something that would justify keeping his shitty attitude and exorbitant salary.

Vance had to hand it to him – Kinney was one badass motherfucker. It was impossible not to respect him after snagging an account like Brown Athletics, but it definitely made it easier to dislike him.

“Nice view?” Vance asked when Kinney turned around.

“Nicer than my old one,” Kinney replied.

“Well, you are the agency’s first partner – only the best for the best,” Vance said with a wry smile, knowing full well that Kinney thought he was full of shit.

“And as such,” Kinney said, “I want an office for my assistant. No partner’s assistant should have to work in a cubicle along with the rest of the secretarial riffraff.”

“Done,” Vance said. “I’m assuming you want to keep . . . what’s her name?”

“Cynthia, and yes, I want to keep her,” Kinney replied. “I also want her to get a raise.”

Vance bristled. “Of course,” he said tightly.

Clearly he had only one of two choices when it came to Kinney: either they were going to be “friends” or they were going to be out-and-out enemies. Vance quickly chose the former. He suspected Kinney was not a man you wanted to cross – even if he was a fag.

Kinney smiled and strolled over to the drafting table.

“Nice, huh?” he asked, running his hand over its surface as though he was stroking the neck of a trophy-winning thoroughbred.

“Very nice,” Vance agreed. “Tell me where you ordered it from, and I’ll get one myself.”

Kinney leaned against it and crossed his arms.

“So,” he said, looking into Vance’s eyes without blinking. “Were there any ‘homosexuals’ in Sigma Alpha Epsilon?”

Vance was startled by the question – and thus annoyed. He shrugged.

“Probably. I didn’t know any,” he said. “But there probably were.”

Kinney snorted. “Oh, I’m pretty sure you knew some.”

Vance felt uncomfortable. Where was this going? He tried to shift the topic.

“Were you in a fraternity? Where this going? He tried to shift the topic.

“Were you in a fraternity?” he asked.

Kinney gave him a little twist of a smile. “No,” he said. “I wasn’t. Didn’t need to be, as you can see.” He spread his arms to encompass his fancy office.

“That’s too bad,” Vance said. “It was more than just networking, you know. We had a lot of fun – still do. Your SAE brothers are family forever. You can’t buy friendships like that.”

Kinney snorted again. “But you sure as hell have to pay to get in the door.”
He and Vance just stared at each other for a moment, sizing each other up. Eventually, Vance shrugged it off.

“So, do you golf?” he asked. “I ask because there’s a tournament coming up and I want to put together a team to represent our agency.”

There was no way Kinney played golf. No f-ing way.

“Sure,” Kinney replied. “Which course? South Hills or Edgewood?”

Vance was getting an eye tic. A blue-collar boy and a golfer. Kinney had to be bullshitting him. Time to up the ante.

“Edgewood,” he said. “But, of course, that’s a long way off. I was thinking about doing something sooner. Do you ski? I want to take some guys I know from Heinz to Vermont or some place. Ever do ad work for a company as big as Heinz, Kinney? If you want to keep an account like that it takes more than golf and cigars.”

Kinney blanched, and the muscles in his jaw tensed. Game, set, fucking match.

“Sure,” Kinney said, his voice flat. “I ski.”

Vance frowned and cocked his head. “I take it not well, though. Perhaps we could work in a few lessons for you before we go.”

“I ski just fine,” Kinney snapped.

Mawr!

“Great,” Vance said with jocularity and gave Kinney a good, ol’ guy punch in the arm. “I’ll have my assistant set something up. Any resort in particular you’d suggest?”

Kinney closed his eyes wearily with a sigh and then opened them again. “Just not Stowe,” he said.

Vance arched an eyebrow. He was going to follow-up on Kinney’s remark, but something in Kinney’s expression suggested he’d be taking things too far.

“Killington it’ll be then,” Vance said as he headed to the door. “Now get to work and start earning our agency money, Kinney, or we won’t be skiing with the Heinz guys at Killington – we’ll be skiing with a bunch of overweight supermarket managers on some piss-ant hill in West Virginia.”

He walked out and then down the hall toward his office, whistling all the way.

So, Kinney had a chink in his armor like everyone else. The only question was what was it, and how could Vance use it to his advantage.

* * * * * * * * *

Justin was taking his last run of the day when his phone rang. He took off his gloves so he could fish it out of his pocket and looked at caller id. Michael. He let it go to voicemail along with all the rest of Michael’s calls and two of Ted’s. The only calls he was answering were from Daphne . . . and Brian.

The first of Brain’s calls had come three days into Justin’s trip.

*Ring Ring*

“Hi, Brian,” he’d said.
“Hey,” Brian had replied.

“What do you want?”

“Just seeing if you’re having a good time.”

“I am.”

Silence.

“Good. Fuck your hot boarding instructor for me.”

“I don’t need lessons.”

Silence.

“Okay, well then fuck someone else’s hot boarding instructor.”

“There are more interesting things to do here than fuck.”

Silence.

“Well, I’m glad you’re having fun.”

“Good-bye, Brian.”

He’d hung-up without waiting for a reply.

The following night the same thing happened at about the same time.

*Ring Ring*

“What you do want, Brian?” Justin had asked.

“Nothing. Just checking into see if you need anything,” Brian had replied.

“Nope. Everything’s fine.”

Silence.

“Yeah, I can tell from my credit card statements. Want my debit password so you can get more cash?”

“Fuck you.”

“Just trying to be a good boyfriend.”

“I said, fuck you, Brian.”

Brian had laughed a nasty, shitty little laugh.

“Nighty-night.”

This time he’d been the one to hang-up before Justin could reply.

The next night, Brian had been totally wasted.
“Hi, Brian,” Justin had said.

“Helllooooo, Sunshine!” Brian had replied. “Hey, guezz where I am?”

“Babylon.”

“How’d ya know?”

“Because you’re always at Babylon.”

“That’z not true – sometimes I’m at the bathz.”

“Same difference.”

“Lizzen, Sunshine, I got BIGGG newz! I’m a partner now. I landed a big-ass, motherfuckin’ account. You shoulda seen me. I had the baztard at ‘hello’ – you woulda been . . . hic . . . imprezzed.”

“That’s nice. Congratulations.”

“No no no . . . you don’t get it, Sunshine. It’z better than fuckin’ nice. You think I’d’ve bailed on Vermountain if it wazn’t a BIG FUCKING DEAL?”

“I don’t know what you would’ve done, Brian.”

Silence.

“So, enjoying gettin’ poked in the pinez?”

“Yeah, actually, I am. I spent the night with the hottest guy ever last night. We were actually fucking when you called.”

“Hope I didn’t cauze coitdus . . . hic . . . interruptdiz. Tell me, Sunshine, did thiz guy make you so fuckin’ hot that you begged him to choke you with his gigantic, throbbing cock?”

“Shut up, Brian.”

“No, I wanna know. I wanna make sure yer having the bezt pozssible time ever. Did he fuck you so hard and for so long that you pazzed out? Did he suck all the come outta your ballz? Did he eat your ass and shoot hiz huge, hot load all over your chest? Did you scream for more, Sunshine? Did he tie you up and teaze you for so long that you wanted to sell your fuckin’ soul to the fuckin’ devil if he’ll juzt let you come? Did he do thoze thingz to you? Did he even do one of them?”

“Brian, I’m hanging up now . . .”

“No, no! Wait! Did I make you hard? I’m hard . . . let me lizzen to you come . . .”

“I thought you were at Babylon.”


“I’m going now, Brian. Have fun . . .”
“I’M NOT HAVING FUN!! I CAN’T HAVE FUN!”

“That’s really not my problem. Good night.”

Justin had been pretty sure that Brian wouldn’t call the following night, but he had.

*Ring Ring*

“Hi, Brian,” Justin had said.

“Hey,” Brian had replied.

Silence.

More silence.

“I got Cynthia a raise.”

“That’s nice.”

Silence.

“So . . . coming home soon?”

“The day my flight leaves.”

“I’ll pick you up at the airport.”

“No need. I’ll take a cab. Besides, I’ll be arriving during the day, and you’ll be at work, and we know how important work is . . .”

“Justin . . .”

“I’m sorry. That was shitty. Look, let’s not fight, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’ll see you in a couple days.”

“Okay.”

“And, Brian?”

“Yeah?”

“Please don’t call me again.”

Silence.

“Okay.”

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

“Bye.”
“Bye.”

Justin was about to put his phone back in his pocket and finish his run, but suddenly the clouds parted, and evening sunlight spilled like molten gold over the snow-covered peaks of the surrounding mountains. It was so beautiful. Tears filled Justin’s eyes – not only because of the way the sight moved his soul, but because he had so, so, so wanted to experience a moment just like this one with Brian at his side.

He closed his eyes. He’d been strict with himself about not thinking about Brian, and he’d been fairly successful, but this time he set his imagination free. He could see Brian, leaning on his ski poles and squinting at the horizon. The day was warm enough that they wouldn’t have had to wear hats, so Brian’s hair would be washed in the same gold light that was caressing the world around them. His cheeks would be slightly red from days of being outside in brisk, healthy air. It was almost five and they’d have been on the slopes all day, so there’d be just a hint of beard on Brian’s face. Together they’d watch the sun slowly sink behind the mountains, peacefully aware of each other’s presence. After a minute or two, just before the sun disappeared, Brian would wet his chapped lips and lean toward Justin for a kiss. They’d meet halfway, and Brian would take off his gloves and cup Justin’s face in his hands. Their kiss would be as hungry as their kisses always were, but it would also be playful because that was what Justin would have discovered about Brian – that beneath the cold swagger and cutting words was someone timelessly happy, maybe even capable of contentment.

God! Justin was so very, very deeply in love with that Brian – with the Brian he would’ve found and started getting to know. But that Brian had been torn away from him by Babylon-Brian, by the Brian who cared more about his job than he did about their life together.

As soon as the sun vanished, darkness and cold fell like the swoop of a giant crow, turning the snowy trail before him into a purple ribbon leading back to the bottom of the mountain – back toward an empty bed and away from what, in the end, was nothing more than a childish dream.
Brian lay on his bed, smoking and staring up at the ceiling. He’d had a trick, but the guy was gone now. Justin had asked him not to call again, so he wouldn’t, although he had a niggling suspicion that if he did call, Justin would appreciate it. Or would he? Brian honestly didn’t know. If he was in Justin’s shoes and he’d told someone not to call, he’d be seriously pissed off if they did. Wasn’t that what “love” was? Giving people space?

He’d always monopolized Michael’s life, and he knew it – the only realm of freedom he’d allowed Michael to have was the Big Q, and what kind of bullshit realm was that? He knew he suffocated Michael and called it “love,” which it was . . . but it wasn’t like the feeling he had for Justin, which . . . yeah . . . which might also be “love” . . . a different kind of “love.” A “love” Brian wanted to last, and for it to last, he needed to give Justin ample opportunities to be himself – to learn and grow and explore the world. To be his own man free of people’s meddling. He couldn’t do to Justin what he’d done to Michael. He had to learn how to be different with Justin – less overbearing, less clingy, less manipulative.

It wasn’t easy.

He’d always had jealousy issues when it came to Michael. He would never admit it to anybody, but it was true. When Michael first started hanging out with Ted and Emmett, Brian had lost his mind. He’d made it crystal clear that if Michael wanted to spend time with his new friends, Brian was coming with them, and not only would he be coming with them, he’d be deciding where they went and when they’d go. If they wanted to work-out together, they had to go to Brian’s gym. If they wanted to go out for a drink, then they were going to Woody’s. If they wanted to go out clubbing, they were going to Babylon. That was just the way it was going to be, because if Emmett and Ted didn’t go along with Brian’s agenda, then he was going to make Michael choose between him and them, and the result was a foregone conclusion. It actually said a lot about how much Ted and
Emmett liked Michael. Brian did not make life easy for them. He still didn’t, although he thought he was getting at least a little bit better.

He could NOT do the same thing with Justin. First of all, Justin had a stronger sense of self than Michael and would ditch him if he pulled the same shit. Second, Brian didn’t want to do to Justin what he’d done to Michael. He’d basically given Michael no choice. It was either Brian’s way or the highway. He didn’t want to do that with Justin. The feelings he had for Michael were childish – feelings that he should’ve grown out of by now. But his feelings for Justin were the feelings of a man – the kind of man Brian wanted to be. Bold, supportive, generous. Being any one of those things required not acting like a jealous asshole.

Jealousy had the potential to be his downfall. It dominated every aspect of his life and had driven him like a slave to get where he was. He could not let jealousy devour his relationship life with Justin. He needed to step back. He needed to learn to trust that giving Justin extra rope didn’t mean Justin would eventually hang him with it.

He was trying. He was trying really, really hard. Yes, he’d gotten up in Justin’s face about the whole tuition thing, but it’d been agonizing to watch Justin make such patently stupid choices. Letting Justin out of his sight after the bashing had also been tough, but he’d done it. He’d had to. He could help and support Justin, but at the end of the day, Justin needed to seize his recovery and own it and not feel like he owed Brian or anyone else for his sanity.

Brian was also trying hard to deal with a disturbing new breed of jealousy that he’d never felt before – sexual jealousy. The jealousy that compelled him to monopolize Michael’s life was purely emotional. He was emotionally jealous when it came to Justin as well, but it also made him insane when Justin was sexual with another guy unless Brian was right there with him, taking part. It was total, utter bullshit, and Brian tried hard not to let it gnaw on him – after all, he knew that Justin needn’t feel jealous of his tricks, so why did he feel jealous of Justin’s? It made no sense, and it was an insulting double-standard, which was why he encouraged Justin to trick without him. He wanted Justin to know that what was good for the goose was good for the gander. After all, tricking needn’t be a problem – only jealousy when it came to tricking was a problem.

In other words, it was all just fucking . . . unless, of course, he was fucking Justin, and then fucking was . . . well, it was everything.

* * * * * * *

As he walked up the stairs to the loft, Justin prayed for one thing – one little, tiny, simple thing. Please, please, please, he thought with each upward step. Please don’t let Brian be fucking a trick. Please, God. PLEASE!

But as soon as he closed the door behind him, he realized that that was exactly what Brian was doing – and at four in the afternoon, which could only mean one thing. He’d planned the situation. He knew when Justin would be getting home.

It was revenge, and Justin knew it.

Brian was well on his way to having an orgasm when Justin walked into the bedroom. His throat and chest were flushed, and he was bathed in sweat. His head was thrown back. He was barely present, lost in his pleasure. Usually the sight would’ve caused a wave of desire to slam into Justin’s stomach and wash over him. Usually, he’d join in. But not this time. All he felt was angry and hurt.

“You’re back,” Brian gasped.
“You noticed,” he replied.

He went straight to the closet, dumped his stuff on the floor and put new clothes in his bag. He was going to Daphne’s.

Brian said nothing when he walked away. A lustful groan was the last thing Justin heard before he slammed the door closed behind him.

He spent the night with Daphne and the following afternoon with Ethan Gold.

* * * * * * * *

Brian had been close to getting off, but Justin’s entry and then immediate departure had distracted him. It took him a few minutes before he was close to coming again, but he doubted the guy he was fucking minded – not if the sounds he was making were anything to judge by. After he came, Brian held the base of the condom as he pulled out; he was more than ready to end the encounter. His trick had come twice during their session – the first time thanks to Brian’s excellent cock-sucking skills, and the second time thanks to Brian’s unsurpassed fucking expertise. He was going to leave satisfied and add his voice to the Liberty Ave Chorus singing Brian Kinney’s praise.

“Can I use your bathroom?” the guy asked.

Brian nodded in the right direction. He removed the condom, tied it in a knot and tossed it in the garbage bin by his bedside. He lit a cigarette and lay back down. It was his last one. He hoped his trick didn’t smoke because he didn’t feel like sharing.

“Want the rest?” Brian asked, offering the guy the half-finished cigarette when he emerged from the bathroom.

“No, thanks,” he replied. “I’m an athlete”

Brian smirked at him. “So am I,” he said.

The guy laughed and rolled his eyes. Brian gave him a big, Cheshire-Cat grin.

“That was really good,” the guy said. “I’d ask for a repeat, but rumor has it you only do guys once.”

“The rumor’s right,” Brian replied. He took one last, long drag on his cigarette before crushing it in the ashtray on his bedside table.

“Pity,” the guys said with a shrug. “Hope whoever-he-is is worth taking you off the market.”

“Oh, never fear,” Brian replied. “I’m not off the market – everyone’s got a chance to play.”

“But only one.”

“But only one.”

The guy finished dressing, and Brian got up to walk him to the door. The guy turned and gave Brian’s body one last, long, appreciative head-to-toe sweep of his gaze.

“Later,” he said.

Brian just smiled and closed the door. Justin was the only one who got a ‘later’ from him.

Speaking of Justin . . . where’d the twat go? Brian strolled into the kitchen and pulled a beer out of
the fridge. Justin had walked in, dumped his crap and just walked out again.

Brian went to the living room and flopped down on the couch. You noticed, Justin had said. So, he was still pissed. What the hell? Wasn’t a week away long enough to get over his snit? If anyone should be in a snit, it should be him, Brian. There was no reason that Justin had to go to Vermont without telling him. It’d been punishment, pure and simple. And for what? Because Vance had had Brian’s balls in his hand and would’ve chewed them off if he didn’t deliver the impossible? Did he deserve to be pilloried for fighting to save his career? Besides, Vermont had been his idea in the first place. Hadn’t the offer itself meant anything to Justin? Clearly not. The fact he’d researched and arranged and paid for everything meant jack shit. All of it had been eclipsed by the fact he’d had to go to Chicago for a fucking couple of days.

Brian tipped back the bottle and finished his beer in one big swallow. The fact Justin had come home to find him fucking a trick probably hadn’t helped matters, but, hey, it was Saturday afternoon. Brian always spent Saturday afternoons fucking – although for months now it’d always been Justin he was fucking. And it would be again, of course. One trick on one Saturday wasn’t a big deal. At least it shouldn’t be. Justin must’ve been able to tell he was almost finished with the guy. Why didn’t he get on his computer or turn on the T.V. – or even better, join in? Why leave? What the hell was the big deal? Or was it just more punishment for the whole Vermont thing?

Goddamn it.

Well, now what? Was Justin coming back? At this point Brian didn’t know what the hell the kid was going to do. It was upsetting. He’d planned to take Justin to Babylon, but now it looked like he’d be going alone.

* * * * * * * *

Even before Daphne answered the knock on her door, she knew it was Justin. She’d known he was coming home that afternoon and was expecting him to stop by – either because he’d returned to a contrite and apologetic boyfriend and wanted to tell her to forget all his bitching and complaining or because said boyfriend had been a dick.

It turned out that Brian had been a dick.

She gave him a hug before he had to say anything. She’d seen in his eyes that he needed comfort. After they let go of each other, she took his hand and led him to the bed and then went to plug in her electric kettle to make them hot chocolate – the kind that came in a packet with tiny, freeze-dried marshmallows in it. When she was done, she carried two mugs over to her bed and handed him one.

“Want to talk about it?” she asked.

He blew on his hot chocolate before taking a premature sip.

“Ow!” he squawked.

“Hot coco is hot,” she said, and he smiled.

“So,” she said. “Did you have any fun at all?”

He nodded. “Yeah. A bit. It’s really beautiful up there, and the weather was nice.”

She rubbed his back with her free hand. “Good. I’m glad.”

“But mostly I was miserable. I couldn’t stop thinking about him.”
He blew on his hot chocolate again and took another tentative sip. When it was clear it didn’t scald him, she took a sip from her own mug.

“It’s safe,” he said. “You won’t burn the roof of your mouth like I did.”

“I’m glad you gave me the heads-up,” she said. “You were the canary in the hot chocolate mine.”

He laughed. She was glad. She hadn’t heard him laugh much during the past week.

“Did he pick you up at the airport?” she asked.

He snorted. “No, he was at the loft.”

“It’s afternoon – I would’ve thought he’d be working nights and weekends for his oh-so important job,” she said.

He snorted again. “If he had been working, then he took time off to find a trick, bring him home and fuck him right in front of me.”

She took a deep breath and then released it with a sigh. “Do you think he did it on-purpose?”

“Of course, he did it on-purpose.”

“So, let me see if I’ve got this straight: he bails on your trip and then is pissed that you went without him?”

“Pretty much.”

“I guess he was pretty mad that you went without him.”

“Well, I was mad that I had to go without him.”

They sipped their hot chocolate in silence.

“He doesn’t love me.”

Usually she would argue with him, but not this time.

“He’s made that crystal clear. God, I can’t believe he was fucking a trick! He’s such an asshole! He knew when I’d be coming home, Daph!”

“What’re you going to do?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. I’m not a doormat like Michael. He can’t wipe his shit-covered boots on me.”

“You need to tell him how you feel, Jus. Get up in his face and tell him what a jerk he is.”

“So he can verbally abuse me or piss on something of mine again? No thanks.”

“I still can’t believe he did that.”

“I still can’t believe I forgave him.”

“But you didn’t really. You’re still angry.”

He shrugged. “What does it even matter?”
“It matters if you want to fight for your relationship.”

Tears filled his eyes. “Relationship?” he said. “What relationship? Brian and I aren’t in a relationship – we’re in some kind of weird limbo thing. He doesn’t want to be in a relationship. He wants all the benefits and none of the commitments. He wants an ass he can count on if he doesn’t feel like going through the hassle of finding a trick.”

“Then why isn’t the answer clear? Why don’t you leave him?”

He dropped his head and shook it from side to side. He looked like he’d just crawled out of a trench after a long and bloody war.

“It’s not that easy, Daph. If it was, I would’ve already done it by now. I would’ve done it when he pissed all over my artwork. Hell, I would’ve done it after he didn’t visit me in the hospital. But it’s just not that easy. I can’t just walk away.”

She’d still been rubbing his back, but now she slid her hand up to his neck and combed her fingers into his hair. Frankly, Brian was either stupid or insane or both if he didn’t realize how amazing Justin was and how lucky he was to have him. If things had been different . . . if Justin wasn’t gay . . . She slammed her mind shut. She’d already grieved over that lost dream and let it go. But that didn’t mean she couldn’t be furious at Brian.

“What do you think it is? Is it because he’s gorgeous? Is it because you worked so hard to get his attention that now you don’t want to let him go?”

He shrugged. “Probably a bit of both.”

“Those don’t seem like good reasons to stay in a relationship that makes you unhappy.”

He started shaking his head again. “No, it’s also more than that. Brian . . . he’s . . . I don’t know how to describe it. He just has this way about him. You just know there’s more to him than what he allows you to see. Every now and then, I get a glimpse of who he really is, and he’s beautiful, Daph. I don’t just mean looks, I mean his heart. He’s a really beautiful, amazing person, but for some reason, he doesn’t want people to see that. I don’t know . . . maybe he’s damaged in some way. Maybe he’s just really scared people will hurt him. But I can’t be with someone who doesn’t trust me. He can’t love me if he doesn’t trust me.”

She didn’t say anything because she didn’t know what to say. Instead she collected their mugs and put them in a tub with her other dirty dishes . . . one of these days, she’d wash them, but having to wash dishes in a communal bathroom is such a pain in the butt. Next year she was going to move out of the dorms and find an apartment . . .

“I want him so much,” Justin moaned miserably, returning her attention to the depressing situation at hand. “I can’t stop wanting him, and I don’t mean just physically. I want him. All of him.”

“Jus . . . I really don’t know what to say. I can’t think of any good advice that might help.”

He lifted his head and smiled at her weakly. “That’s because there isn’t anything you can do. This is something I have to figure out . . . Dammit! I know it sounds weird and maybe even a little shitty, but I wish I could find someone else that I’m more attracted to. Someone who could give me the kind of relationship I want.”

She winced. “Those are dangerous thoughts. Jus, if there’s anything you need, it’s to be on your own for a while. Leave Brian. Find yourself. Don’t just rebound.”
“Yeah,” he said vaguely. “Yeah, you’re probably right. But I don’t know if it would work. I don’t know if I could stay away from Brian if there wasn’t someone else keeping me away. He’s like a magnet. If I break up with him, he’ll walk into the diner someday when I’m working, and it’ll all come back. All of my feelings for him. It’ll be hell on earth. I need someone to protect me from that – someone who loves me.”

He was blinking away tears again. Time to switch the conversation.

“Want to watch T.V.?” she asked. “We’ll find something really brainless that’ll distract us.”

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “Yeah, that sounds good,” he said. “I can’t stand thinking about all of this anymore.”

She turned on the T.V. and they sat on her bed, leaning against the wall with her quilt pulled up to their chins. She wanted to tell him that everything was going to be okay, but she was pretty sure she’d be lying. She’d never lied to him before, and she wasn’t going to start now.

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

Brian got drunk at Babylon. Woke up alone hungover. Went to work pissed off. Was given another all-but impossible assignment by Vance (who made the first of what was sure to be an endless barrage of snarky remarks about Brian’s salary). And then came home to a sulking Justin. The day really couldn’t have been worse.

Obviously, he wasn’t going to be able to fix it – this situation with Justin. The best he could hope for was that Justin would get over it. He wasn’t going to try to talk about it. Nothing good ever came from talking. What were words anyway? He worked with them all day. Words, words, words and more words. Words that made people want things they didn’t need. Words that scared people into wanting things they didn’t need. Words about anti-aging creams and diet supplements and germ-killing hand soap – all of them lies. Your life will be less insane if your closet was organized and your vacuum cleaner could handle those “hard-to-reach places!” You’ll be a better parent if you buy a particular brand of baby food or diaper or “educational toy!” You’ll be a real man if you buy expensive exercise machines and take a pill for your erectile dysfunction! You’ll be a desirable woman if you buy a particular bra and shave your legs with a particular brand of shaving cream! And on and on and on and on. Blah blah blah. Words didn’t tell the truth; they obfuscated the truth. Hell, words had gotten him and Justin into this mess to begin with. More words weren’t going to fix what words had fucked up.

There were things he wanted to communicate though – like “it’s so nice not to come home to any empty apartment.” Or “you look great with that tan.” Or “life wasn’t all that much fun while you were away.” Or “I didn’t sleep well without you beside me.” Or “I ate take-out every night because you weren’t here to cook me something delicious.” Or “watching T.V alone was a drag.” Or “I missed tripping over your school crap.” Or “things are too quiet when you’re not here.” Or “Babylon was boring.” Or “I drank too much because without you, my demons attack me.” Or “I didn’t laugh much because nothing was funny.” Or “I didn’t have much energy because fucking you in the shower in the morning starts my day off on the right foot and wakes me up better than a triple-shot Starbucks latte – it never used to be like that, Justin. Nothing had ever made mornings okay before you came along.”

He wanted to say all those things and more but . . . well, just “but.”

In the end, the only thing of any substance that he said was, “Why didn’t you tell me you were going?”
When Justin answered that he didn’t say anything because Brian wouldn’t have given a shit, Brian knew he needed to shut him up – he needed to shut both of them up.

Justin loved being fucked standing up, and Brian loved to fuck him how he most wanted to be fucked, so positioning Justin against a beam and entering him with an expert thrust was the only thing to do that made any sense. It took a minute, but eventually Justin relaxed and let his head lull back onto Brian’s shoulder. Brian took careful note of every little, tiny thing – a hitch in Justin’s breathing, a moan when Brian’s cock hit just the right spot, a push backward against Brian’s pelvis in an effort to take him deeper. He put all his focus and effort into fucking Justin thoroughly and well, easing him toward a mind-blowing climax – not too quickly. Brain wanted it to last; he wanted Justin to feel everything he couldn’t say. His own orgasm wasn’t even part of it. He didn’t even care if he came. He would, of course, and Justin would be disappointed (and possibly freaked out) if he didn’t, but his orgasm wasn’t what mattered. Everything was for Justin. Even when he came, it would be for Justin – Justin loved it when Brian let himself go completely, and what Justin wanted was what Justin was going to get.

“God, you’re so fucking hot,” he murmured against Justin’s neck in-between kisses so intense that he sucked blood to the surface of Justin’s skin, leaving behind purplish marks on his pale skin. Justin was going to have to wear a shirt with a collar for the next couple days. “So fucking hot, Justin,” he murmured again, making Justin shiver. He held Justin’s hips still to make sure he achieved the greatest depth possible. The pace he set was steady and predictable so that Justin could count on it as he jerked off. Brian had to bend his knees to make up for the difference in their heights, and his thigh muscles burned with exertion. Each of his thrusts was a tightly controlled, quick, hard upward motion that required more core strength than a hundred sit-ups and as much flexibility and dexterity as the most challenging yoga position. He altered his breathing to accompany his body’s movements – inhale on an upward thrust, exhale as he pulled back, over and over, occasionally punctuating his rhythm with a grunt or a moan. He wanted Justin to know how turned on he was – how completely immersed in their fucking. He wanted Justin to know that nothing else mattered – nothing except this moment, their bodies joined, their sweat mingled, their breaths shared. They were partners in an ancient, primal dance.

“Brian,” Justin moaned, and then again, “Brian.”

He was close, which meant that Brian had to be religious about maintaining his control. Any change in pace or depth or force could interfere with Justin’s orgasm. It was no longer easy. He was rapidly nearing his own climax, but he had to hold on, hold back. It was never this difficult with his tricks – Brian never felt overwhelmed like he did with Justin. Yes, his tricks’ pleasure was important to him, but for very different reasons than Justin’s pleasure was important to him. With his tricks, it was a matter of professional pride – a desire not only to live up to their expectations, but exceed them. A satisfied trick was like a satisfied client, and Brian basked in their appreciation. It was one of the reasons he fucked so many men – it was an ego boost, an affirmation of his worth . . . but, like everything, it was different when he was with Justin. Fucking Justin wasn’t about showing off; it was about being present for another person, being real for him. Justin’s pleasure was everything to him – everything he wanted, everything he strove for – nothing else mattered. Each time he fucked Justin, he wanted to do it better than the last time. Not because he wanted to impress Justin, but because he wanted to give Justin the gift of pure bliss, pure sexual release. He’d do anything to help Justin’s soul fly free of his body. If only for a few seconds, he wanted to help Justin see God.

“Tell me when you’re going to come,” he gasped.

“I’m going to come,” Justin replied with a breathless laugh.
Brian thrust his hips with savage force — once, twice, three times — and when Justin froze, he froze too, letting nothing distract Justin from the sensation of orgasm. Justin was so overtaken that he didn’t make a sound until it was over and he collapsed in Brian’s arms with a beautiful, helpless-sounding cry. Brian held him close and surrendered to his release with a cry of his own. In the midst of the tidal rush of pleasure, he heard Justin say his name again, his voice full of emotion. He was shaking when it was all over, but he still held Justin close as he carefully pulled his cock free and then led him to the couch where they collapsed, lightheaded from breathlessness.

Brian rested his head on the back of the couch and closed his eyes. His heart was still pounding, and with every beat, his still-hard cock throbbed, his arousal diminishing only slowly.

“Fuck,” he groaned. He was still shaking. He’d given his all, and now he was completely wrung out.

He felt Justin tuck his sweat-damp hair behind his ear and softly kiss his cheek. He opened his eyes and turned his head to smile at him.

“Well?” he asked.

Justin returned his smile. Brian waited for his answer. It never came. When Justin’s smile faded, he stood and walked to the bathroom, leaving Brian behind to wonder if he’d made everything okay again . . . or fucked things up even more.

* * * * * * * *

Justin closed his eyes with weary resignation when, instead of answering his question, Brian came up behind him and slid his hands down his chest and into his lap.

Did you miss me?

Why was that such a hard question to answer?

He didn’t want to, but he stood anyway when Brian helped him to his feet. Brian was going to fuck him. No surprise there. Why talk when you can get your rocks off?

Brian led him to one of the beams and turned him around so that Justin’s back was against his chest. Nice. They weren’t even going to fuck face-to-face. Brian pulled off his shirt and then opened his pants so that Justin could shimmy them off his hips and kick them aside. He felt Brian’s hands graze against his ass when Brian opened his own fly. When they were both naked with skin against skin, Justin noticed that Brian was already rock hard. He, himself, wasn’t even halfway there. This is not what he wanted — and it sure as hell wasn’t what he needed.

He heard Brian tear open a packet and then felt him sheathe his dick with a lubed condom. He braced himself for the first thrust because he knew it was going to hurt like hell. He was too tense. Sure enough he was right. Did Brian notice — and if he did, did he even care? It was always all about Brian and his orgasm. Justin was just the convenient hole to stick his dick in . . .

. . . but then — like it always did — pain turned into a pleasure so intense, he had to tighten his grip on the beam to stay standing. His head fell back against Brian’s shoulder. God, Brian’s cock felt so fucking good inside him! How the hell could he live without this? Even if another man loved him, he’d never be able to give Justin as much sexual pleasure as Brian did . . .

. . . the realization terrified the hell out of him and made him almost hate Brian for causing it — for feeding a destructive addiction. Justin couldn’t give this up. No matter how much he might resent it, he couldn’t bear to give up the excruciating bliss Brian made him feel. Brian’s every thrust was perfection — his every breath, his every kiss, his every caress, his every moan was perfection. No one
— no one — would ever fuck him like Brian did. No one could possibly make him feel like Brian made him feel. He couldn’t get enough of Brian’s body. His touch kindled an unquenchable fire that even the most intense orgasm couldn’t sate. He’d starve without Brian, without the exquisite sensation of Brian’s perfect cock inside him.

“No one could possibly make him feel like Brian made him feel. He couldn’t get enough of Brian’s body. His touch kindled an unquenchable fire that even the most intense orgasm couldn’t sate. He’d starve without Brian, without the exquisite sensation of Brian’s perfect cock inside him.

“Do you feel my cock?” Brian groaned against his neck. “Do you feel how hard you make it? I’m so hard, Justin. I need to have my cock inside you. I need to fuck you. I’m so so fucking hard. I’m so so fucking hard that it fucking hurts – that’s how hot and hard you make me. I was born to fuck your ass. You own my cock, sunshine. Fuck yourself on it; that’s right. Just like that. God, it feels so good. You’re so fucking beautiful. You should see yourself. I’m barely able to hold back. My balls ache. I want to shoot my load inside you, fill you up. I’ve got so much come, and it’s all for you. All of it. Every last fucking drop. I’m going to fuck your ass until I come my brains out. God, Justin . . . you have no idea . . . no fucking idea . . . That’s it, that’s it. Take my cock. Take every rock-hard inch of it. It’s yours, Justin. . . Oh fuck! I’m going to fucking lose it. I need to come so fucking bad!”

He was barely conscious, aware of nothing but Brian’s cock and his words, murmured hot and moist against his skin. Brian was hitting his sweet spot with every thrust, his pace steady and perfect. Not too fast and not too slow. Just right. So fucking right! He reached down and started jerking off, completely confident that Brian was going to fuck him flawlessly till he came, and then Brian was going to let himself go, fucking Justin hard and fast and then freezing with a broken cry. His orgasm would go on forever, longer than those of mere mortals, and it would shatter him completely.

God, Justin lived for Brian’s orgasms!

“Tell me when you’re going to come,” Brian gasped.

“I’m going to come,” he replied.

Brian seized his hips in both hands and held him steady as he drove into him, fucking Justin for all he was worth . . .

When Justin came he saw stars, and then wave after wave of black velvet blotted them out. He was on the verge of passing out, helpless and undone and grateful beyond words. When Brian came, he came again even harder and longer than the first time.

He could feel Brian’s whole body shaking when Brian caught him before he could slump to the floor, and he was still shaking when they collapsed on the couch, side by side. An unbearable tenderness filled Justin’s heart when Brian tipped his head back, baring his throat, and closing his eyes. His hair was drenched with sweat. Justin reached out and tucked a lock behind his ear and then leaned over and kissed Brian’s cheek. He was beautiful – so achingly beautiful that Justin thought he could grow to hate him for it.

This man – this unknowable man – was never going to love him the way he needed to be loved. His cock wasn’t enough. Justin wanted his heart . . .

. . . and if he couldn’t have it, he wanted his own heart back before Brian broke it again.

End Notes

This story is a stand-alone companion story with The Gift. It's dedicated to all the people
commenting on my discussion about Brian and giving me tons of inspiration and insight. Thank you!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!