

After the Smoke Clears

By allie_quixotic

Premise: This fic takes place after the bombing of Babylon in episode 510 and splits from canon. Everything up to the bombing still happened. Everything afterward will be an AU.

Chapter One - The Past Revisited

“Each has his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart and his friends can only read the title.”

~ Virginia Woolf ~

Brian's POV

“This just in, WDBX News. There's been an explosion at Babylon,” I lower my magazine and furrow my brow. What the fuck? “a local gay club, where a political fundraiser was underway tonight. Authorities fear there may be many...” I can't comprehend it at first. I can't help but think it's some kind of twisted joke, or maybe I just didn't hear it correctly. “...injuries, possibly fatalities.” The gears turn and click in my brain. “Police say there's no word yet as-”

“Turn around.” I tell the driver.

“Excuse me, Mr. Kinney?”

“I said turn the fucking car around.” I reach into my pocket and pull out my cell phone. “Turn the fucking car around and take me to Babylon.” The driver meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. “Now!” I scream. This time he doesn't question me. He cuts across two lanes of traffic and makes a sharp u-turn.

I hit one on my speed dial and pray because I don't know what else to do. It goes straight to voice mail. Fuck. For a moment, I consider leaving a message similar to those I left when he was running around wearing bright pink and carrying a gun. I don't. Instead, I hang up and re-dial his number manually. I get his voice mail again and want to scream. My hands itch. My whole body is shaking because I'm so fucking scared. Please, don't let anything happen to him. I beg and plead with any god, every god, because I don't know what I would do if... I shake away those thoughts. I refuse to let my mind go there. He'll be fine. If anyone can come through this, it will be him.

I think about calling someone else, anyone else, but realize that everyone I know or care about is at Babylon. I'm the only one not there. I thought I was so above it. What did I really care about Proposition 14? I was going to Australia. I was going to fuck and suck my way into oblivion. I wasn't going to celebrate being completely cancer free. I was going to forget. Forget that he left me again because I can't be what he wants, what he needs. That I will never be, and that this time it wasn't because he found someone else to give him those things. This time it was all because I wouldn't. I will never admit it, but everything Michael told me that night I went looking for someone to blame is true. This is no one's fault but my own, and I knew this time, no matter how much he loved me, he wouldn't come back with a promise on his lips. This time, it wasn't his turn to promise anything.

The closer we get to Babylon, the slower the car inches forward. There are cars on both sides of the street at a virtual standstill. Even from two blocks away, the flashing red and blue lights of the emergency vehicles cut through the darkness of the night. The closer we get to the club, the tighter the knot in my stomach contorts and smolders. I feel the restlessness crawl under my skin. The nervousness chews at my insides like an incurable virus. The sheer uncontrollable panic is what moves my hand to the door, and pushes me from the car. Two blocks away, and I just can't fucking stand it anymore. I run. I forget everything and just fucking run. I have to find him. There is nothing else, no one else I could see right now that would take away the tremors of terror that flow through my body as easily as my blood.

Before I'm anywhere near the scene, I can hear the wail of the sirens and the screams of panic. Part of me wants to turn away, to not see this, to not see the faces of the injured, but he's there. When I reach the outskirts of the

madness, I can't look away. Men and women cry and scream. The lights of the emergency vehicles slide over their ashen faces. As I stand there virtually grounded in place, I find myself surrounded by the pandemonium. The air is thick with smoke, the foul smell of my personal playground burning to the ground, mixed with the sick metallic smell of blood. That rank smell drags me back to another time, another place, and almost drops me to my knees with fear.

My feet feel glued to the asphalt. How the fuck will I find him in this mess? My heart thumps painfully against my chest. As I stand in the middle of this sea of chaos, my eyes frantically search the faces for any that are familiar. They all fucking look the same, wrapped in grey blankets, blood trickling down their pale faces. Frustration starts to overtake me as my eyes scan the swarm of people and fall on no one familiar. I'm about ready to run around, grabbing each and every person, when the crowd parts and I see her. I almost breathe a sigh of relief, but the tightness across my chest doesn't relinquish because it's still not Justin.

Jennifer stands with Tucker, a prison-grey blanket draped over their shoulders, amidst the confusion. Their blond hair is coated with soot, and tiny particles of burnt pieces of Babylon stick to their faces. "Jennifer." The word barely escapes my lips, but it uproots my feet and moves me forward. "Jennifer. Jennifer." I reach her, reach out for her.

"Oh my god, Brian I can't believe--"

"Are you all right?" I look her over, because before this second, I never realized how much I actually care about her.

"She hurt her leg." Tucker says, as he holds tightly onto her.

She shakes her head and grips the collar of my leather jacket in her small fist. "Justin's still in there." She sobs. For one brief second my heart stops beating. "You've gotta find him," she begs desperately, and if I could talk, I know my voice would sound exactly the same.

Her hand falls from my jacket as I turn to run, to where I don't know. I let my feet carry me to the knot of people standing near the entrance to the club. The cries and sirens, the screams and orders being shouted by emergency workers are muted by the loud thumping of my heart in my ears. I push my way through the crowd. It's like trying to swim upstream in rushing rapids. I grab each person by the shoulders as they pass me, hoping against hope that one will be him. My eyes sweep over everyone, and I see Ted. He's standing against the wall, his hand rubbing circles on the back of a man who's hunched over gripping his knees.

I push my way through the crowd and call out to him as I get closer. "Ted. Ted?" He turns toward me, his eyes wide and scared. When I reach him, I grab him by the arm and pull him forward slightly. Quickly, I look him over, grateful on the surface that he appears to be fine. I would never admit it, but these days Ted is the closest friend I have. I search his eyes and hold his arm a little tighter. "Ted, what the fuck happened?"

"I don't know." His voice is raspy and rough.

I shake his arm. "Have you seen Justin?"

He shakes his head rapidly and averts his eyes. Fuck. I release him and turn back to the crowd by the door, which has started to thin out. The knot in my stomach constricts. My heart contorts in my chest as the minutes drip through my fingers, as if they are drops of water I'm trying to hold in my hands. I push aside the few people crowding near the door and run up the small flight of stairs. Just as I'm about to enter the club, a strong hand presses against the middle of my chest, stopping my forward progress.

I look at the large calloused hand on my chest and then up into the ash-streaked face of a fireman. "Sorry sir, you can't go in there."

I knock his hand from my chest. "I'm the owner. This is my club." I don't know if that will make a difference, but it's got to.

As I step forward, he blocks my way again. "I'm sorry sir, but we can't allow anyone in."

I try to side-step him, but he follows my moves and blocks my way. Anger starts to boil under my skin. Grabbing him by his thick heavy coat, I scream, "I don't care what's allowed. I have to fucking get in there."

I stare him in the eyes, trying to get him to just fucking let me in. "Brian!" I look over my shoulder to see Michael taking the steps two at a time. I release the fireman, shoving him back slightly, before turning to Michael. I step forward, arms open, and without hesitation he walks into them. I grip the back of his shirt and hold him tight against me. I forget that we are fighting. I forget the angry words and accusations. I forget everything, except that he's my best fucking friend and he's alive.

Pulling back from him, I cup his face and look him over. "Are you okay?"

He wraps his fingers around my wrists and removes my hands from his face. "I'm fine." His eyes slide to the left, then back to me.

The contents of my stomach rush to my throat. "Have you seen Justin?" I force the words out of my mouth. His eyes dart around the small, smoke filled enclosure. Suddenly, I feel it. I yank my hands from his and grab him by the shirt. "Have you seen Justin?" My voice cracks and breaks, nothing more than a half sob of words as they leave my mouth. He looks up at me with unshed tears glimmering in his dark brown eyes. I yank him forward. "Michael?"

"He's...he's..." He shakes his head and grabs my hand. Turning, he leads me down the steps and out into the alley. I don't fight him. Wherever he's taking me is where Justin will be.

We push our way back through the crowd. I look over Michael's head to see where we're going. When I see Ben walking beside a stretcher headed towards an ambulance, I yank my hand from Michael's and stop...breathing, moving, thinking, functioning. For a few ticks of the clock I'm lost in the past, in a nightmare I fight every night not to relive. My eyes snap back into focus when Michael looks over his shoulder at me. It's written all over his face...the truth. No. No fucking way. My breath catches in my throat as I shake my head at Michael. He nods slightly, his lips trembling. I feel a chill creeping along my spine. Slowly and numbly I force myself forward. I pass Michael, shaking off the hand he tries to place on my arm. As I approach the stretcher, only one thought is in my head, please don't let it be him. Anyone but him. When I'm standing next to the stretcher, I close my eyes and lower my chin to my chest. When my eyes open they see a face I'd know anywhere and I fucking die.

"No...oh god...no." My knees give out, but before I hit the ground Ben's strong arms wrap around my waist, holding me up. I force myself to look at Justin. His shirt is torn exposing the pale flesh of his chest, his face is covered in a layer of black soot, and his hair is matted to his head with...blood.

"Brian, they have to get him to the hospital." I look up at Ben, then pull myself out of his arms.

Cautiously I reach down and caress Justin's face. It's sticky, grainy, and hot to the touch. Tears sting my eyes, but I blink them back. This isn't happening. This can't fucking be happening. Not this, not again. I lean forward, over him, my lips hovering above his. I feel the faint breath that escapes them. "Justin." My voice comes out a broken whisper.

"Sir." A young EMT places her hand on my shoulder. I look up at her without moving my body. "We need to get him to the hospital, now."

I stand upright and grip the bar of the stretcher. "I'm going with him." She looks at me questioningly. "I'm his partner." For the first time in my life it feels like the most natural, most honest thing I've ever said. When she nods at me, I step back so they can load him into the ambulance. Running my fingers across my lips, leaving a trail of ash and blood on them, I turn to Michael and Ben. "Can you...find Jennifer and..."

Ben steps forward and places his hand on my shoulder. "We'll find her, just go."

“Sir?” I turn and look up at the EMT, then back at Ben. He removes his hand as I nod and turn towards the ambulance.

I climb inside and sit down on the small bench next to the stretcher. I feel numb. I feel... I look down at his face. It's so pale. Christ, its fucking prom night all over again except this time...this time feels worse. I never thought anything could ever, in my entire life, rip me apart like seeing him get bashed did...and yet here we are...three years seemingly whittled down as if no time has passed at all. I reach out desperately for his hand as the ambulance starts to move. Gripping his hand tightly between mine, I beg and plead with the only words that I can grasp please, please don't. Please...just...don't.

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I've been here before, only not exactly right here. I'm not dressed in an Armani tux with a soiled white silk scarf around my neck, ignoring the vibration of my cell phone in my pocket. I'm not sitting alone in some far off desolate hallway. In fact, the only thing similar is that when I lick my lips I can still taste his blood. Jennifer reaches for my hand and leans her body against mine, choosing me to comfort her, instead of the man sitting beside her with his hand on her thigh. I look down at her leg and the ankle brace they put on her not long after she got here. She twisted her ankle during the mad escape out of the club. My eyes slide from her leg across the floor until I'm looking at Michael sitting across from me, Ben's arms wrapped around him and tears running down his face without shame. Sometimes I envy how open he allows himself to be. God knows I feel like breaking down, but I can't. I won't. Next to Michael and Ben are Lindsay and Melanie, their hands interlaced, their shoulders pressed together. If I had time to think about it, I might consider that to mean something. Next to them, Drew is holding onto Emmett as though if he let him go he'd fly apart. Shit, even Ted has his hand over one of Emmett's. My eyes slide over and I see Debbie watching me as I watch everyone else. Her knowing eyes pin me to the wall and make me uncomfortable. I quickly avert my eyes, looking anywhere but at her.

Turning to Jennifer, I squeeze her hand until she looks at me. “I'm going for a smoke.” She nods. “Have someone come get me if the doctor comes out.” She nods again as a tear snakes down her ash-covered face.

When I get up, Debbie approaches me. She reaches out and touches my cheek. “Where ya goin' kid?”

“Just for a smoke.” Her eyes search mine before she pats my cheek and takes my place next to Jennifer.

I don't really need a cigarette. I don't even really want it, but I can't stand sitting in there one second longer. I can't stand that heavy feeling pressing against my chest from not knowing if he's okay, if he'll be okay. I walk through the sliding glass doors. The cool air pricks my skin, but I barely feel it. I walk away from the building, but not so far that no one could find me, and light a cigarette. The rush of nicotine into my lungs does little to calm my nerves, my anxiety, my fucking fear.

“He'll be okay.”

I turn to see Michael standing there with his arms crossed. I don't know why he's out here, why he's trying to reassure me. “You don't fucking know that.”

He uncrosses his arms, sighs, and takes a small step forward. “Brian, what happened between us...”

I almost laugh. I almost cry. Now he wants to fix things? Fuck that. Fuck him. “Michael, right now I can't even think about that.” I don't even care what the fuck we were fighting about. It doesn't even fucking matter. In fact, I don't even know what to say to Michael anymore. He feels like a stranger. I never thought that would happen, but that's how it feels. I look over at him. “Go back inside.” There's no way he can understand what I'm feeling right now. No one really can. I just want to be left alone and smoke my goddamn cigarette.

“You should come back inside too.” I wave the cigarette at him as my answer. He stares into my eyes as if he wants to say more. He wants to say more than come back inside, he wants to fix things, and I want that too, in a way, but

not right now, not like this...not because of this. He sighs, but refrains from saying anything else because despite everything, he still knows me. Maybe I should find that comforting, but I don't. He watches me take another drag of my cigarette before he turns and walks back into the hospital.

Once the sliding doors close behind him, I lean against the brick wall and close my eyes. Memories from the past assault me. Thoughts flash in my mind of things I never said, things I should have said but didn't because I was too fucking...what, scared? Justin could cut me open and leave me raw in a multitude of ways, but never that way. I never gave him that, and now my fears seem ridiculous.

"Ridiculously romantic."

I close my eyes tighter and force myself to swallow that emotion, because I can't right now. I can't give into it, not here, not now, not in front of them because they'd never understand. I press my head against the bricks and will this all to be some fucked up nightmare. I want it to be some profound lesson I'm learning in my sleep. I want to open my eyes, and the epiphany I learned in R.E.M. to escape my conscious mind within seconds of waking up.

"Brian?" My eyes snap open. "Oh god, Brian." The cigarette falls from my fingers as Daphne throws herself into my arms.

Another image I'd locked away in some deep dark part of me resurfaces. Daphne falling to her knees beside me on the cold cement in a swirl of shimmering peach fabric, her fingers clawing at my arm, her screams echoing in my head as his blood soaks the hem of her dress.

She pulls back from me now, her hair wild, her eyes wide and watery. Tear trails stain her cheeks. Her hands grip my arms. "I came as soon as I heard. I...couldn't..." She hiccups a sob. "Justin." She chokes on his name.

I don't say anything. I simply wrap my arms around her slender shoulders and pull her against me. Out of everyone in the cold sterile waiting room of this fucking hospital, she's the only one that gets it. She knows where my mind is taking me. She knows because her mind is taking her there too. She cries with her face pressed against my chest. Her tears soak through my shirt until I can feel the wetness on my skin. "Is...it...bad?" She manages to get out between sobs.

I shake my head. "I don't know."

She takes a deep shuddering breath before she pulls away from me. She pushes her hair back from her face, wipes the tears from her cheeks, and pushes her shoulders back. Yeah, she fucking gets it. She reaches for my hand and takes it in hers. Daphne and I have this unspoken, tragic connection. We're bonded by the blood that was shed in a fucking parking garage on a heartbreaking April night. She tugs my hand, pulling me away from the wall. "Let's go inside."

I simply nod and fall in step beside her. We walk through the sliding glass doors hand in hand and it feels so fucking familiar, so fucking like the past revisited, that I want to hold a pillow over my mouth and scream until my voice gives out. As we approach the others, they all turn to look at us with mild interest. No one gets up except Jennifer. She stumbles over to Daphne, who releases my hand to hug her. I sit down next to Debbie, watching as the two women comfort each other. They have a bond too, one that I excluded myself from in the past, two weeks of holding hands and waiting to see if Justin would wake up. I suffered that wait alone. When they release each other, fresh tears on their cheeks, Jennifer resumes her position between Debbie and Tucker. Without hesitation, Daphne sits next to me and reaches for my hand.

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When there is nothing to do but watch the time painfully tick by, it forces a person's mind to wander aimlessly. One random thought leads to another, that leads to another, and soon it's like the fucking domino effect. An endless row of them set up to fall one by one from the slightest of touches. The thought that starts the cascade is so simple: the

first time I kissed him. How he walked up to me with fear and desire fighting in his blue eyes. The way I licked the inside of his mouth with my tongue, tasting menthol cigarettes and peppermint. The gasp that escaped his wet pink lips as I reached for his cock. The wet sloppy first kiss on the night I took his virginity and unknowingly changed our lives forever. That one little thought breeds others, like two horny rabbits procreating in my brain. The way he stole those tricks from me that second night that earned him another night in my bed, and many nights after that. How time after time I found myself pushing him away, only to pull him right back again. How no matter what a shit I was, he was still there the next night and the night after that for years to come. How toward the end of that first year it started to feel strange when I'd bring home a trick that wasn't him, and how that feeling made me want to fuck the trick harder and faster just because I hated how Justin was making me feel even when he wasn't around. The memories were set to flow painfully slow from one scene to the next, but as a short balding man in green scrubs and glasses approaches, my memories are swallowed whole and buried back inside that hollow dark space where they live.

"Mrs. Taylor?"

She looks up at the doctor. "Yes?" When Jennifer stands up, so do I, unknowingly dragging Daphne with me. As I take my place next to Jennifer she places her hand, which feels so cold and so small, in mine. The other members of the family stand and crowd behind us.

"Mrs. Taylor, I'm Dr. Strovolz. Right now we have Justin stabilized. However, due to the force of the blast he has sustained some very serious injuries. Right now we are concerned, because of his medical history, that he's re-traumatized his previous brain injury. From what we've been able to deduce it appears that he's received a blow to the head. Either an object hit him or he hit his head during a fall. Due to the cerebral swelling this injury has caused, we needed to insert an External Ventricular Drain."

"A what?" Debbie asks from behind us.

"It's a tube that drains fluid from the brain." I look down at Daphne questioningly. Her sad brown eyes meet mine and I get it. This isn't something they taught her in med school, this is something she learned about via a two week crash course when she was in high school.

Dr. Strovolz looks at Daphne and nods before looking back at Jennifer. "Right, we had to insert a small tube in Justin's brain to drain cerebral spinal fluid that's the most likely cause of the swelling." Christ. Jennifer clutches my hand tighter and makes a soft strangled cry. "When Justin either fell, or attempted to protect himself from the object that hit him, he broke his forearm."

I release Daphne and Jennifer's hands and step forward slightly. "Which arm?" There is a tone of panic in my voice that I ignore.

The doctor looks at me questioningly and pushes his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. There is no way that he can understand the importance of such a seemingly insignificant thing. He's probably thinking, "What's a broken forearm compared to brain trauma?" It's nothing really, except if the brain trauma affects him like it did last time, why add to his misery by breaking his right arm?

The doctor tilts his head and I hold my breath. "His left." And exhale. The doctor waits for a beat before continuing. "Our biggest concern right now is the trauma that Justin received to his brain."

"What..." As Jennifer starts to speak, I step back and wrap my arm around her. Jennifer swallows hard. "What injuries can...we anticipate from the...brain..." Jennifer's words are choked off by her tears.

"Since Justin is unconscious, there is no way to know for sure the extent of damage the brain trauma has caused. Justin is in the process of being moved to the third floor ICU where his condition can be closely monitored." He looks from Jennifer to me.

"When can we see him?" It's out of my mouth before I can stop it.

He surveys the three of us standing in front of him, as well as the rest of the family. "Once he's settled into the ICU, immediate family members will be allowed to see him."

Jennifer places her hand on my arm. "I'm his mother and this..." She glances up at me then back at Dr. Strovolz. "Is his partner." I should be shocked by her omission, but I'm not. It feels right even when Jennifer says it, even if it's not quite true.

The doctor nods. "During this juncture of his care, I'm recommending that only one person be allowed to visit him at a time, for no longer than five to ten minute periods per hour."

"Fuck that." Daphne places her hand on my arm, but I shrug it off.

"I'm sorry Mr.?"

"Kinney."

"Mr. Kinney, but at this time Justin is in critical condition, and the staff needs to be able to monitor him closely. The next twenty-four hours are vital in his recovery."

I stare at the doctor, his mouth is moving, but I hear nothing over the pounding of my heart. Critical condition. Those two words cut across my throat like a serrated knife. Critical. Not safe. Critical. Twenty-four hours. Death...he could...die.

I shove that thought away just in time to hear Jennifer thanking the doctor quietly before he walks back down the corridor. I'm kind of pissed that he's so cold about the whole thing, but a rational part of me is still working, and I know this is just another day at the office for him. Jennifer clings to me and cries into my leather jacket. I don't know what else to do but hold her.

Despite the chaos as other victims are brought into the hospital, I feel the heaviness of silence settle over us because no one knows what to say. What is there to say? For the next twenty-four hours all we can do is wait and hope, and fucking pray.

* * *

Somewhere in between the doctor leaving and a nurse coming to give us Justin's room location, Jennifer seemed to find the inner strength she'd been without since I'd seen her outside of Babylon. While everyone is fluttering around her, I sit down in one of the empty chairs, watching as it happens. She wipes the tears from her face, smearing the soot that she has yet to wash off. She draws herself up, pushing her shoulders back and jutting out her chin. Blinking her eyes rapidly, she clears away the tears as she brushes her tangled hair from her face.

"Everyone." Her voice is soft, but it commands everyone's attention as their words are swallowed back into their mouths. "I want you all to go home." Everyone starts to protest, but she holds up her hand. "The ICU waiting room is very small, and while I appreciate you all wanting to be here, there really isn't a need." She looks over at Lindsay and Melanie. "Go home to your children." She scans the other faces around her. "Go home, clean yourselves up, and get some rest." Her eyes cut to me through them. "We will let you know if anything changes."

Debbie steps in front of Jennifer, blocking my view of her. As Daphne comes to sit beside me I hear Debbie say, "Is there anyone you want me to call?"

"Thank you Debbie, but I think it's better if I..." I hear her swallow back a sob. "Call his father myself."

After a few more light protests, everyone starts to make their exit, saying things like, "Call if you need anything. We're here for you. Justin's going to pull through this. He'll be okay." I think mostly its all lies and bullshit.

I'm looking down at my clasped hands when Michael approaches me. Without looking at him, I stand up and embrace him quickly. "Call if you need anything." He says as he takes a step back.

I simply nod because right now there is nothing more to say.

He nods in return as Ben approaches him and places his hand on his shoulder. "Let's go, Michael." Michael and I are staring at each other seemingly having a conversation without words, because while we love each other we both know this isn't the time or place to fix what's broken between us, no matter how strong the desire is to make things right.

When Michael and Ben turn to leave, I notice that everyone is gone now except for me, Jennifer, Tucker, and Daphne. I look over as Tucker pulls Jennifer to the side. He slides his hands over her cheeks. "I'll stop by the house and get you some clean clothes." She wraps her fingers around his wrists. He kisses her lightly. "I'll be back soon." She nods and they separate.

Tucker walks by me with a slight nod of his head, and as I watch him leave, Jennifer steps up beside me and places her hand on my arm. When I look at her she stares me right in the eyes. "I'm going to clean up a little and then call."

I clear my throat. "I can do it."

She lowers her head and shakes it. "Thank you, but...I need to do this." She wipes away a stray tear as it slides down her cheek and lifts her face to mine, the sudden strength she's found to handle this flashing in her eyes. She tilts her head to the side and that small little movement reminds me of Justin. My stomach clenches. "You'll be here when I get back?"

I know what she's implying and I feel three years worth of guilt slap against me, leaving a sting that vibrates over my entire body. "Yeah...I'll be here." She nods slightly, embraces Daphne, and walks down the hall towards the restroom.

I look over at Daphne. "Walk me out?" Stepping forward, she holds out her hand. I hesitate for a second before taking it.

As we walk hand in hand out of the waiting room, we pass family and friends of other victims of the explosion. My eyes scan the room until they land on a man who looks a little older than me. He collapses into a chair, his hands covering his face as his body shakes with sobs. The doctor that was just talking to that man passes us with a grim look on his face. I feel a burning tightness seize my chest as I swallow back the sickness that rushes into my throat. I avert my eyes from the man, not wanting to see that, to think about how close I might be to looking and feeling exactly like that.

As soon as Daphne and I pass through the double sliding glass doors, she pulls me over to the side of the building where I had been smoking earlier. She squeezes my hand as she turns to face me. Her eyebrows furrow slightly as she bites the inside of her cheek. Her eyes are focused on the brick wall behind me, and I know she's trying to organize her words for what she's about to say. I'd prefer if she didn't say anything, but she's just like Justin. If there is something she needs to say, she'll say it whether I want to hear it or not.

Finally she looks up at me. "He never wanted to leave you, but you didn't give him much of a choice and..." She takes a small step forward. "You didn't even try to stop him." I try to pull my hand from hers, but she just holds it tighter. "I know you love him. He knows you love him." She places her free hand on my shoulder. "We all know you love him so..." She leans forward as if she's about to divulge a big secret. "Stop running." She waits for a reaction and when I give her none, she nods to herself and steps back, breaking all physical contact with me. "I'll see you tomorrow, Brian." Then she turns and walks away, and all I can do is watch her go.

She's right...I do love him, even if I've never actually verbalized it. It isn't that I don't feel it. Maybe I feel it too much. Maybe I think that one little fucking word can in no way encompass every single emotion that Justin invokes. That word seems way too small to hold everything I carry around inside for him. He isn't like Michael or Lindsay...I can say I love them and I have, but Justin...Justin is different. He always was...always will be.

She's wrong too. I'm not running. I'm standing perfectly still, rooted to the same spot for the thirty-four years I've been alive. I'm not moving forward, I'm not going back. I'm just stuck right here. I push myself back from the brick wall. Maybe it's time to stop standing still and time to start walking toward something, toward someone. I take a single step forward and pause. I release a shaky breath before continuing. As the doors slide closed behind me, I make a promise to myself that when, not fucking if, when Justin pulls through this, I'll just keep fucking walking...even though the mere thought of it scares the shit out of me.

Chapter Two - Always There

“There's this place in me where your fingerprints still rest, your kisses still linger, and your whispers softly echo. It's the place where a part of you will forever be a part of me.”

~ Gretchen Kemp ~

The tick of the clock. The sniffles of the other occupants of this room. The rustling of clothes. The squeak of rubber-soled shoes against the linoleum floors. Doctor so-and-so or nurse so-and-so being paged over the loudspeaker. These are the sounds that cut through the silence, like nails on a chalkboard. The antiseptic smell of rubbing alcohol. The powder inside of latex gloves. Various cleaning solutions meant to drown out the smell of blood, death, and disease. The sounds are shrill, the smells repugnant, but they are nothing compared to the damp memories that swirl around me like a thick fog on a humid summer morning.

His pale skin covered in a light sheen of sweat, his mouth open, his pink tongue darting out, his body bathed in the florescent blue lights making him look like an Adonis that should be admired, but not possessed. “I want you to always remember this...so that no matter who you're with...I'll always be there.” Considering how stoned out of my mind I was, how I remember those words is anyone's guess, but I do remember them. I meant them solely for him as I entered him, took him, fucked him, but now, looking back, those words twist and turn until they become directed at me. As if when I spoke, it wasn't to Justin, but to myself.

I never forgot what that night was like. The way his skin looked under those lights and how I thought that I'd never seen anything quite so beautiful. The way his skin tasted, like innocence wrapped up in a salty-sweet coating. The way his body felt as it moved under me, unsure but wanton, tight and hot. How hour after hour I couldn't get enough of everything he was so freely, so openly, offering me. The first trick I fucked after I fucked Justin left me wanting more, wanting something different, wanting something that I didn't want to admit I might like. It became a curse, those words; because night after night no matter what nameless trick I had in my bed, they could never quite make me forget him. It's difficult to explain, even to myself, what happened that first night. When I left Babylon after a mediocre blowjob and saw him across the street it was like something snapped inside. I wanted him. I had to have him. I had to be the first. I thought I'd take him home, I'd fuck him, and that would be the end of it, but Justin...Justin...he just...stayed. He was always there. In the beginning I said the words, but he performed the actions.

“Brian?” Jennifer's soft watery voice pulls me from my thoughts. Glancing up, I see fresh tears falling down her face. I don't have to ask how bad it is. I can tell by the way she has her arms wrapped around her waist, as if even that is a cold comfort. Her puffy red-rimmed eyes tell me she started crying the second she saw him. She sits down beside me, as if just standing exhausts her. “You can go in now.” Her voice cracks on the last word and her body starts to shake. I don't say anything as I push myself from the chair. There is no word in the world, in any language that I can say that will console her.

There is a part of me that doesn't want to see Justin right now. It is a small insignificant part that is easily overridden by a longing that beats under my skin in time with my heart. It's a desperate aching need. I approach the nurse's station, where a slightly overweight young woman is busy typing on the computer. Her dark auburn hair is pulled back from her face in a loose pony-tail. She's wearing a nurse's uniform with, Christ, Care Bears printed on it, as if her regular duty is in the pediatric ward and she's just covering a shift in the ICU. Pressing my palms flat against the countertop, I clear my throat. Her fingers tap a few more keys before she turns her face up to me. Her eyes are the color of melted chocolate, her lips are pink and shining with gloss, and a few light freckles dot her nose and apple cheeks.

She smiles at me, and I'm surprised at how genuine it is. “Can I help you, sir?” I stare at her, suddenly at a loss for words. Her brows furrow slightly, but the smile stays in place. “Who are you here to see?”

I swallow hard. “Justin...” It comes out rough, grating against my throat. “Taylor.”

She nods and turns her attention to the computer, her fingers flying across the keyboard. “Your name, sir?” Her fingers pause above the keys.

“Kinney...Brian Kinney.”

Pushing herself back from the desk, she looks at me as she stands. “Please follow me, Mr. Kinney.”

When we reach the double doors that separate the ICU wing from the rest of the hospital, she swipes a keycard through a magnetic lock on the wall. The door clicks and she pushes it open, holding the door as I follow her through. As we start walking down the corridor, the only sounds are the constant beep of machines and the low hiss of ventilators, sounds I know I’ll hear in my sleep for years to come. The nurse starts talking. “You made it just in time.”

A sharp knife of panic stabs me in the gut. I freeze, my feet feeling glued to the floor. When she realizes I’ve stopped walking, her eyes widen and her face flushes bright red. “Oh no...I meant...before the ICU closes for visitors...for the shift...change.” Her last word trails off as she looks away from me, clearly mortified by how her words came out.

Right, the shift change. The nurse that told us his room number earlier had also briefed Jennifer and me on the ICU visiting procedures. That nurse was older, obviously bored with her job and her life. “Ask a nurse to let you in to see the patient. A nurse will escort you to the patient’s room, and then back after ten minutes. The ICU will be closed to visitors from 7a.m. to 9 a.m. and 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. for the shift change.” She had droned on and on and after a while I just stopped listening.

I nod my head at the young nurse for her to keep walking. She shakes her head at herself, but turns and continues down the hall. When I fall in step beside her she says, “I’m Julie, by the way.” She looks over at me and smiles nervously. “This isn’t my usual shift...” Her cheeks, if possible, turn redder. “I mean, I’m usually here in the mornings, so if you’re here then...” She bites her lip as if she thinks every word she’s saying is coming out completely wrong. “You’re his partner, right?” She huffs out a breath. “My dad’s gay.” I look down at her and raise my eyebrow. If it were any other day, any other time, if she and I were anywhere else, I wouldn’t give a shit about anything she’s saying, but right now her nervous chatter is the only thing that’s keeping away the morbid thoughts that dance in the dark corners of my mind. She nods her head enthusiastically. “Of course, he didn’t tell me until I was in college. I was really surprised, but maybe not really. I mean, my parents got divorced when I was thirteen and he never had a girlfriend. Maybe I should have guessed...but I didn’t.” She looks up at me. “Not that I care, because I don’t. My dad has a partner too, Jeremy. He’s totally awesome.” She bites her lip again as her age shows through her words.

She stops talking altogether when we get to room 308. I swallow hard. “This it?” My voice is barely a whisper.

“Yeah,” she replies softly. “I’ll be back in ten minutes.” Just as my fingers are wrapping around the cool handle of the door, she turns to me. “Talk to him.” I stare at her and she shrugs. “They say it helps.”

I want to ask, “Helps who? Helps what?” But I don’t say anything. She smiles at me once more before she turns and walks away. Her shoes don’t squeak as they make contact with the floor.

Being limited to ten minutes allows little time for even a mini-battle to play out in my mind of seeing him vs. not seeing him. In the past, I never did this, not because the Taylors wouldn’t have allowed it, but because I just didn’t want to see him that way. At that time my guilt made me a distant shadow that lived only in Justin’s unconscious mind. This time, there isn’t so much guilt as there is...regret...too many regrets...lost chances and lost time. No apologies, no regrets is just a bullshit mantra that I tell other people to protect myself. If I tell people right off that is how it’s going to be, then there is a less likely chance they’ll be disappointed later. The truth is, it doesn’t protect me, and it doesn’t prevent disappointment, especially where Justin is concerned. He never bought my bullshit anyway. I shake my head, realizing that I’m wasting time out here analyzing all the shitty lies I tell myself and other people.

Taking a deep breath, I reign in my thoughts and emotions and push the door open. When my eyes adjust to the dimness of the room, I keep them focused on his covered legs. As I walk toward the bed the knot in my stomach tightness, my breath comes out in shaky puffs, and my heart pounds loudly against my chest. Slowly, I let my eyes travel up his body. His left arm is wrapped in a stark white cast with only his finger exposed. His right arm lies limply at his side, small cuts, scrapes, and red marks that will turn to bruises marking his skin. My eyes pause on his chest, rising and falling, in time with the sharp hiss of the ventilator.

Cautiously my eyes move on, up his neck. There are cuts and scrapes there also. His lips, wrapped around the breathing tube, are dry and chapped. The only light on in the room is the florescent tube above the bed. It washes out his skin, making him look sickly and pale. The right side of his face is dark red and swollen. Splotchy red marks and cuts cover the rest of his face. His eyes are closed as if he's asleep. Only a few strands of his blond hair can be seen around the white bandage wrapped around his head. Once I've taken it all in, I suck in a deep breath and virtually collapse in the chair beside the bed. Christ. Fuck. Jesus. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

My hands ball into fists on top of my thighs. My body vibrates from the emotions I'm trying so fucking hard to keep locked in. I try to shut down, try to blank it all away, but it's too much. It's just too fucking much. The present and past merge and blend like tendrils of smoke from two lit cigarettes. Everything builds and builds inside me like waters of a flood pounding against a dam, and before anything can be done to prevent it, the dam breaks wide open. Tears, warm and wet, race down my cheeks and drip off my chin. I roll my lips into my mouth to keep from crying out. Why him? Why him again? Why is he the one lying in this fucking bed, hovering once again between life and death? Why was everyone else I knew that had been at Babylon walking around relatively unharmed? Why did this happen? Why did this have to happen to him? Hasn't he been through enough? Wasn't getting bashed in the fucking head...almost fucking killed when he was eighteen years old more than enough? Wasn't all the shit he had to go through after that to just fucking live enough? Hasn't he suffered enough in this fucking life? No one deserves this. No one deserves this twice. No one, but especially not Justin.

I move to the edge of the chair. Resting my left hand on his chest, I feel the soft pound of his heart beneath my fingers. I reach up tentatively with my right hand and run the back of my finger over his hot moist skin. Maybe I shouldn't be touching him. Maybe I gave up the right to touch him when he walked out the door and I did nothing to stop him. Maybe I should feel guilty for this one moment, but I fucking don't. There will never be a time when I'm in the same room with Justin and the need to touch him won't be there. It's a pull from deep in my gut. It's a need that my body has craved since day fucking one. My body knew way before my mind did that Justin fucking Taylor would be the one. I don't believe in sentimental, romantic "he's my soul mate" bullshit Hallmark card propaganda, but I fucking know that there was never anyone before, there will never be anyone after Justin that I'll feel this way about. No one. If that makes me some pathetic fag, then so fucking be it.

Talk to him...they say it helps.

Licking my lips, I lean forward. "Jus...Justin." His name comes out a whispered half sob, choked out through everything I'm feeling. What can I say? What should I say? I love you. Fuck that. Yeah, I feel it. I feel it tingling my skin, racing through my veins, I feel it in every single part of my fucking body, but saying it now, saying it when he can't truly fucking hear me...he deserves to hear it, but not like this, not because of this. Like Daphne said, he already knows, everyone already knows, but when I say it...if I ever fucking say it, it will not be like this, because saying it now would be like saying good-bye and fuck that shit. Fuck the I love yous, the I miss yous, the I need yous, I want yous, you're the only one for me bullshit words that can't possibly mean shit right now. Leaning forward, I press my lips against his ear and I whisper the only thing that he needs to hear, "Don't go." Isn't that all I ever had to say?

I lean back, my hand still on his chest, my fingers lightly caressing his cheek. There are no words to describe this. There are no words to describe how I feel when I'm looking at him like this. My mind becomes a book, my memories fill the pages, inside a cold wind blows, and a smattering of words and correlating images flash behind my eyes.

"I need you."

“No, you think you do, because that’s what you’re taught to think, ‘We all need each other.’ Well, it’s a crock of shit. You’re the only one you need. You’re the only one you’ve got.”

“He loves me.”

“Your dreamy-eyed schoolboy.”

“In ways that you can’t”

“In ways that I won’t.”

“You would have told me that you loved me. That’d you’d go on loving me, even after I was gone.”

“Is that what you were waiting to hear?”

“Yes. But as usual you never said it, so it’s just as well that I go.”

“Well, believe me, Mr. Kinney, that is the least of your imperfections. And if I wanted to leave you, I’ve had better reasons. Plenty of them.

“Maybe you should have.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. But I thought we had a commitment. And I plan to stand by it.”

“But to be a couple, both people have to want the same things, to move in the same direction. If they can’t or...or won’t ...they really have no where to go.”

“Probably not.”

“Then why are we still doing this if we both know it’s never going to work?”

“Damned if I know.”

When I hear the door open, I quickly jerk my hands away from him, like a child after touching a hot stove. I wipe the wetness from my face with the back of my hand, and try to get control, to shut down, to make all of these thoughts go the fuck away.

“Mr. Kinney?” I stare at Justin’s bruised face. “The...ten minutes...” Julie trails off and sighs. I hear her cross the room. I feel her stop next to me. I know she’s there, but when she places her hand on my shoulder I flinch. “You have to leave now.” Her words are soft, like a whisper carried by a breeze.

I shake my head. How can I leave? How the fuck did I let him leave? I feel the heaviness of silence settle over me. Flashes of memories still assault me, despite my best efforts to push them away. All the mistakes I’ve made where he was concerned burn my eyes. I made so many fucking mistakes. I denied him so much, and for what? I denied

him everything because I didn't want to be tied down, monogamous, a homo-hetro Stepford fag? I couldn't be that man...or I wouldn't be that man? Why couldn't I, or why wouldn't I, for him? Why was getting my dick sucked, fucking some nameless face, more important to me than him? Isn't that what he was really asking that night he left? Didn't he really want to know why all of that was more important than him? It wasn't, was it? Why couldn't I just give him what he wanted? Somewhere in me, in some deep dark corner of myself, don't I want those things too? Am I so fucking worried about what everyone else would think if I did? Am I truly that pathetic?

I don't deserve him. I probably never did, but he loves me. He knows I love him, even if I've never said it.

"Then why are we still doing this if we both know it's never going to work?"

When he left it wasn't about love, it was about life. It was about what he wanted, what he deserved. I wanted things to be easy. I wanted to let him go if that's what he truly wanted, but not like this, never...like...this. I lean forward. "Justin."

"Mr. Kinney..." Julie tugs at my arm.

My thoughts snap and break. I shrug off her hand and stand. "Yeah...okay."

I look down at Justin, bruised and broken, wishing there was some way I could fix this, but there is nothing I can do except be here. My days of being a shadow on these walls, creeping around the empty corridors in the hours before dawn, are long gone. I refuse to regress to the past because when he wakes up, when he opens his fucking eyes, he's going to know that I'm here, that I was here the whole fucking time. This time he won't have to ask, "Where's Brian?", because I'm going to be right. fucking. here.

* * *

The ten minutes I spent inside his room went impossibly fast, but this, this fucking two hour wait for the next ten minute reprieve has me feeling like a caged animal. Leaning forward, I brace my elbows on my knees and hold my head between my hands. My eyes focus on the floor.

"His father isn't coming." I glance at Jennifer. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised." She sighs. "They haven't been close in years." She laughs bitterly. "Hell, not even two weeks ago he had Justin arrested."

I lean back in the chair and press my head against the wall. "Fuck him." There is no love lost between Craig Taylor and myself. If he doesn't want to come see his son, that's his issue to deal with. I may not be as close to Gus as I'd like to be, but if it was my son lying in a fucking hospital room fighting between life and death, no one would be able to keep me away.

"After we bailed Justin out of jail he told me that sometimes he thought Craig would rather see him dead than gay. I didn't want to believe him..." She pauses and I look over at her.

"Justin's not going to fucking die." Maybe I'm saying it to comfort her, or maybe I'm saying it because I want it to be true.

She shakes her head and quickly wipes away a stray tear. "It's strange how you can live with someone, how you think you know them because you've been around them for so many years, only to learn later that maybe you really didn't know them at all. As if for all those years, you only saw a fraction of who they are. That they've kept part of themselves locked away, even from the person that loved them." She looks up at me. "Like with you."

"Me?"

"I bet, no I know, that despite how long Justin has known you, or anyone for that matter, there are things that you keep locked so far inside that no one-

“Everyone has secrets, including Justin,” I snap, irritated that the conversation has been turned to be about me.

“Mmm.” She turns herself slightly in her chair. “When Justin showed me that shithole he calls an apartment.” I scoff. “He said he wished that things between the two of you could have worked out.” I turn away from her and stare into the hallway. “But that you both wanted different things. I asked if either of you were willing to change. He said, ‘that’s not love, that’s sacrifice.’”

“He’s right.”

When she laughs, I look back at her. “Sometimes I really do think you two are the same age.” I furrow my brow. “He’s wrong. Brian, love is about give and take, compromise, and yes, even sometimes sacrifice. Love isn’t cards, or flowers, or remembering birthdays and anniversaries. Love is fucking hard work.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

She tilts her head to the side, and the movement reminds me so much of Justin that my stomach clenches. “Maybe you need to hear it.” She reaches for my hand. “He loves you.”

I sigh, “I know.”

“And you love him.”

I scoff. “Haven’t you heard? Sometimes love isn’t enough.”

“Quoting overused clichés doesn’t become you, Brian.” I try to look away from her, but she places her hand against my cheek and holds me there. “You and Justin don’t have the first clue when it comes to being with someone, really being with them. I’m certainly no expert, but I know a thing or two. Justin knows what he wants...do you?”

Chapter 3 - What I Want

"I want to feel passion, I want to feel pain. I want to weep at the sound of your name. Come make me laugh, come make me cry... just make me feel alive."

~ Joey Lauren Adams ~

Justin knows what he wants...do you?"

I didn't have an answer for her, and honestly I don't think she expected one. I sit down on a bench in the courtyard that's in front of the hospital and light a cigarette. The cool damp air of early morning makes my skin feel clammy. Maybe I don't know what I want. Maybe the problem is...I don't know exactly what Justin wants from me. A home? A husband, a fucking family? Does he want me to change everything about my life just to make him happy? I wouldn't want him to do that for...me. Christ. I take a deep drag of my cigarette. The smoke burns all the way in and all the way out. Isn't that what Justin has done for years? Hasn't he gone out of his way to bend himself this way and that just to fit into some small corner of my life? It fucking makes me sick that it's taken something like this for me to see that. I guess Saint Joan is right about me after all, I am just a selfish asshole.

I hear footsteps approaching me. Taking another drag of my cigarette, I look up. "What are you doing here?"

He sits down next to me on the bench. "I figured...you could use a friend."

Scoffing, I look away from him and take a drag of my cigarette, neither denying nor confirming the validity of that comment.

"How is he?"

I shake my head. "No change." Like that hasn't been echoing in my head since the doctor said it twenty minutes ago.

He clears his throat. "They...Carl...told me it was a...bomb."

"Well, what the hell did you think it was?"

"It made national news. The gay organizations plan to use it to fight Proposition 14."

I shake my head. Not even twenty-four hours have gone by, and it's back to the political agenda. "How many?"

He sounds tired when he says softly, "Eight dead. Sixty-six wounded. Five of them critical."

"Fuck." I put my cigarette out in the standing ashtray. "This is so fucked."

I hear him swallow. "He...he was getting a drink..." I look over at him. "At the, uh, bar...when it happened." He trails off and pauses for what feels like an eternity. "Ben's the one that found him...under a, uh..." He looks over at me, and doesn't continue. Not that I need him to. The mental picture of Justin trapped under some object is already in my head. "Yeah, it's fucked." I light another cigarette and will the image to leave my head. "You need anything?"

I take a drag of my cigarette. "Yeah." I look over at him. "Go upstairs and tell that little twat to open his fucking eyes."

He shakes his head and laughs sadly. "If only I were God..." He blows out a breath. "Is Jen up there alone?"

"No, Tucker's here." I watch as a nurse wheels a patient near a cluster of trees.

"That's good...that she has someone."

“Well, she needs someone to tell her everything will be all right.”

“Brian?” I look at him and raise my eyebrow. “Everything will be all right.”

I stub my cigarette out and stand up. “Somehow I doubt that, Theodore.”

* * *

I lean forward in the chair and run the tip of my finger over his chapped upper lip. Seeing him like this, lying so fucking still, is fucking killing me. I think each time I walk into this room it will get easier. It never fucking does. It won't, and maybe it shouldn't. “Justin.” That's all I can say, his fucking name. What the fuck am I supposed to say? Am I supposed to clutch his hand in mine, make him promises that I'll do anything, be anything, to make him happy? Am I supposed to break down and lament over how much I fucking love him? Is that what one is supposed to do in situations like this? Well, that's not me, that's not who I am.

“And don't we all know.”

Fuck you, Michael. I lay my hand on his upper arm and press my forehead to the back of my hand. I close my eyes, feeling completely fucking exhausted. Opening my eyes, I set my chin on my hand and look at his face. Sometimes in the early morning hours I'd wake up before Justin and look over at him. Every time I wanted to be surprised he was there, but I never was. I'd roll over onto my side and just watch him sleep. I never thought of anything in particular in those moments. I didn't think he was beautiful, although he is. I sit up and brush a stand of hair from his forehead. I didn't think about how much I loved him, although I do. I stroke his cheek with the back of my hand. I never allowed myself to think of what his being there meant, although I know. I lean forward and press my cheek against his shoulder.

Everyone is self-aware unless they don't want to be. Everyone can pretend to not know themselves, but most people do. I can pretend not to know why I'm so fucked up, but I know. I know everything about myself. I know all my secrets, all my dark thoughts. I know why I am the way I am. At least, I thought I knew everything about myself as a person and how I wanted to live out the rest of my days, and then he came along. He changed everything. He changed me. He made me think that maybe this whole time I was deceiving myself. He made me see that perhaps I have the potential to be...someone else. And that scares the shit out of me.

We let the pain of the past shape the person we are now. Those scars we hide, both physical and mental, become the foundation on which we build our lives. Not that we don't have the ability to move beyond the things that hold us captive behind closed doors. If a person is strong enough, has the willpower, the fucking desire, they can kick down those doors and move beyond the bullshit. Some people find that strength and choose to move beyond it. Some people cater to weakness and choose the pain. Some people are so fucked up that they get stuck in the doorway between both, like a mental purgatory.

When Justin was seventeen he paused in front of the door for half a second before kicking it down and leaping forward. He stumbled, he fell, but he fucking got back up and kept walking, kept knocking down door after fucking door. At twenty-two he's knocked down countless doors and I'm still hovering behind this one, too afraid to make the choice to go forward. Meeting Justin, having him in my life hasn't been a burden to bear. It hasn't been an inconvenience. It hasn't been anything like anyone would imagine.

My mind travels to a morning shortly after he came back from L.A. I woke up before him and rolled onto my side. I brushed his hair back from his face and realized in that second three things: I wanted him, I loved him, and when he's around I never felt like I was alone. I could be surrounded by my entire make-shift family, by countless nameless faces at Babylon, and still feel alone. That never happened with Justin.

My whole life, I realize, is about filling a void. I do it in a variety of ways. I surround myself with friends who I know will love me despite my bullshit. I drink and do drugs to get numb just so I can avoid feeling numb without them. I fuck who I want, how I want, as many times as I want because when a part of my body is in them I can, for just those few moments, pretend that I'm not lonely, that nothing is wrong with me, that nothing is missing. Then

there he is, all blond hair and blue eyes, soft lips and strong hands, his fucking determination and his fucking love. Without realizing it, he filled the void inside me that I didn't acknowledge or believe was there until he was gone...the first time, the second time, and all the times after that.

So maybe I don't know what I want. Maybe I don't want to feel like Justin is my only shot at being...fucking happy, and I fucked it up so thoroughly because I'm a selfish fucking asshole who hides behind all his bullshit because he's too fucking afraid not to.

"Mr. Kinney...Brian?"

She places her hand on my arm and I lift my head. "His lips are dry."

She nods and walks around the bed. I watch as she picks up a tiny jar of Carmex, opens it, and coats his lips with it. "Mary..." I look up at her. "She's the nurse on the night shift. She's...nice, but she's not going to give you and Jennifer the extra minutes without the doctor's permission." Julie has been allowing me and Jennifer an extra five minutes here or there since the ICU opened to visitors this morning. She caps the Carmex and returns it to the bedside table. "So don't give her a hard time when she says it's time to leave the room."

I sit back in the chair, but leave my hand on Justin's arm. "I won't."

Raising her eyebrow, she looks down at her watch. "I'd like to believe you, but..." She shrugs and smiles at me. "I don't." She pauses. "Have you told him?"

I force myself to stand up and remove my hand from Justin's arm. "Told him what?"

"That you love him." I look up at her. Her face turns bright red. "I mean, I know you don't think he can hear you, but you shouldn't let that stop you from saying it."

I glance back down at Justin. "He knows," I say softly.

"Yeah, maybe he does, but that doesn't mean he shouldn't hear it." When I don't respond to her she blows out a breath. "Come on, shift change is in five minutes."

* * *

After getting a lecture from Debbie about how Jennifer and I being exhausted wouldn't help anything or anyone, she forced us both out of the hospital for the two hour shift change, demanding that we "Get some fucking sleep." The last thing Jennifer or I wanted to do was leave, but we were just too tired to put up a fight.

"It's a shame about your friend."

"What?" I look down at the old man wearing a greasy white t-shirt and faded khaki pants.

"I said it's a shame about your friend." We're walking down a hallway. The wallpaper is peeling off in sheets, there are loose floor boards and graffiti all over the walls. Jennifer is right; this place really is a shithole. "He seemed like a nice kid."

"He's not fucking dead," I snap.

"Didn't mean nothin' by that." We reach the door at the end of the hall and he pulls out his keys. "This is it," he states unnecessarily as he puts the key in the lock and opens the door. The smell of oil paints and turpentine assaults my senses. That's what Justin should smell like, not rubbing alcohol and stiff cotton sheets washed in cheap bulk laundry detergent.

I pull out my wallet and hand the old man two fifties. He quickly pockets the money, smiles a toothless smile at me, turns, and walks down the hall whistling something that sounds suspiciously like “You Are My Sunshine.”

Christ. I walk into Justin’s apartment and shut the door behind me. I didn’t plan on coming here. I planned on going to the loft to shower and change, but when I got in the cab this was the only place I really wanted to go. Despite knowing where this place is, I’ve never been inside. I feel like I shouldn’t be here now, but I don’t want to be anywhere else. Taking off my coat, I lay it on the only counter in the room. It certainly isn’t much, but every corner of it screams, “Justin lives here.”

I remember when he told me about this place. It was late on a Friday night. I was just leaving the diner and when I looked up he was just...there.

“Hey.” I shove my hands in my pockets merely to resist the urge to touch him in some way.

A half-smile crosses his face. “Hey.”

“You doing okay?”

“Great...and you?”

“Fine.”

He nods slightly. The tension between us is so fucking thick a person could suffocate in it. He looks toward the street then back at me. “Heading to Babylon?”

“No.” It comes out harsher than I mean it to.

“Mm.” I know he doesn’t believe me, not that I blame him. “Well...” He takes a deep breath and digs in the pocket of his coat. He pulls out a sheet of paper and holds it out toward me. “I got my own place.” He smiles and I can tell he’s proud of it.

I take the piece of paper from him, and suck in a breath when our fingers brush against each other. I look down at the paper and up at him. “No shit?”

“Yeah.” He scratches the back of his head. “My mom hates it.” He laughs and god, do I fucking miss that sound.

I read the address and furrow my brows. “Christ, Justin, no wonder she hates it.”

“Yeah...it’s not the best part of town, but it’s my own...place.”

I pocket the piece of paper and look at him. I don’t know what to say to that. Congratulations? Stop fucking around and come back...home? “Well...” I watch a car pass by. “Take care of yourself.”

“You too, Brian.” He doesn’t smile as he opens the door to the diner and walks inside. I close my eyes for a brief second. I fucking hate these conversations we’ve been having. All the bullshit that is said between the lines fucking kills me. I turn and walk away, because at this point what choice do I have?

I shake off the memory and walk slowly around his apartment looking at the art on the walls. There are some pieces I recognize and some I don’t. From the look of things, his creativity hasn’t been suffering. I stop in front of the piece I remember seeing the night of the Emerging Artists show. He’s so fucking good at this. He’s fucking brilliant. Like his whole purpose in life is to do this, to be this. When I turn around, my eyes fall on an unfinished piece on the table in the center of the room. It’s nothing more than a half-finished background of muted reds and blues. I hope to fucking god that he’ll be able to come back here and fucking finish it. I walk around the table and stop at his dresser next to the bed. At least he’s using the good lube.

I push aside some papers, knowing that I shouldn't be looking at any of his things, but at the same time I just don't give a shit about what's right or not. I pick up the latest Art Forum when I notice a Post-It sticking out of the side. Holding the magazine in the palm of my hand, I flip it open to the marked page. My brow furrows as I see his painting spread across two pages and an article written about him. My eyes scan the page. No, it's not just an article; it's a fucking glowing review of his fucking brilliance. Why the fuck didn't he tell anyone about this? I look up and notice a stack of papers that were hidden underneath the magazine. Setting the Art Forum aside, I sift through the papers and as I do, my stomach contorts into a tight knot and it feels as if an iron fist has wrapped around my chest. Apartment listings for New York? An application to The School of Visual Arts? A list galleries in SoHo and Chelsea accepting submissions? Is he planning to... I drop the papers and sit down on the edge of his bed. Planting my elbows on my knees, I grip my hair. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. "Fuck!" Just...fuck.

Chapter 4 - Questions

“Every clarification breeds new questions.”

~ Arthur Bloch ~

Standing in the shower, I press my forehead against the slick tiles and let the near-scalding water slide down my back. I try to not think about what I saw in his apartment. I try to pretend I don't know what it means. I wish I hadn't gone there in the first place. What the fuck was I thinking? I know what I was thinking, but it's too fucking pathetic to even contemplate. I can't help but wonder if he would have told me about going to New York if this shit with Babylon hadn't managed to blow our lives apart. I close my eyes and let a long-ago memory wash over me. It was one of those rare nights that we decided to stay home instead of going out. We'd fucked twice and were getting ready for round three when he brought it up.

Justin straddles my waist and pins my hands above my head. “Tell me, if you could move to any place right now, where would you go?”

I raise my eyebrow and flip him over onto his back. “You already know the answer, which means you're just asking me so I'll ask you.”

He laughs as he lifts his head to kiss my neck. “Tell me anyway.”

Moving myself between his legs, I curl my fingers into his hair. “New York,” I whisper as I flick the tip of my tongue against his bottom lip. “Manhattan.” I suck his lip into my mouth and release it. “You?” That's the whole reason he asked me, so that I would ask him. I know how to read him as well as he knows how to read me.

His hands slide up my back and down again. “SoHo...or TriBeCa.”

I pull back and furrow my brow. “Why?”

He grins. “Oh don't get that look on your face. I wouldn't move there because of you.” I don't know why, but that statement stings a little. He shrugs. “If I really want to pursue a career as an artist, there's no better place to be than New York.” He cups my face with his hands and brings me forward. With our lips barely touching, his whispers, “You aren't the only one with big dreams, Brian.”

I don't even know how long ago that conversation occurred. I'm sure at the time I blew it off as soon as he was blowing me. I always heard what Justin was trying to tell me, whether verbally or physically, but that doesn't mean I always listened, which probably has been one of my greatest downfalls when it comes to Justin. I may know what he needs, I may know what he wants, but I've never really given into his desires. What kind of man does that make me?

I lean back into the water and let it pour over my face. Is he really going to move to New York? Was that his plan all along, or is this something that he just decided? Has he decided? There are a few people that might know the answer to that question, and I plan to find out the truth before going back to the hospital.

* * *

I flick my cigarette to the curb and look up at the storefront. I don't know why I decided to start here, with Michael, but I figure Justin moving to New York would have an impact on him. Justin is his business partner for Rage, after all. As I open the door, the bell jingles over my head and from the back I hear him say, “Be right with you.”

I let the door close behind me and walk further into the shop. I've been here countless times, but this has to be the first time I've ever felt uncomfortable, like I shouldn't be here. Walking up to the counter, I pick up a comic from the stand next to it, not really paying attention to which one it is exactly. Leaning against the counter, I flip open the book and look down. Rage carrying JT in his arms with rings glittering on their fingers stares back at me. Fuck. Quickly I close the book and return it to the rack. I cross my arms over my chest and lean against the counter.

“Sorry to keep you...” He stops mid-way between the backroom and where I’m standing. “Is everything-is Justin...”

I shake my head. “He’s the same.” His shoulders relax as he walks over to the display case and opens it. “Did you know?”

He doesn’t even look up. “What?”

“Did. You. Know?”

He turns around and closes the door of the display case. “Know what?”

“About Justin.”

He shrugs and walks behind the counter. “Know what about Justin?”

Pressing my hands flat against the wood surface of the counter, I lean forward and enunciate every word, because I want him to know I’m not fucking playing games. “That he’s planning on moving...to New York.”

He shifts his eyes and knowing Michael as well as I do, that’s almost as good as a confession. “He’s been thinking about it.”

I lean back, but keep my hands on the counter. “Right.”

“Look, he hasn’t decided anything, and if he did decide to go I’m sure he’d tell you.” He crosses his arms. “Of maybe he wouldn’t, because it’s not like you’d care anyway, right?”

I shake my head. “Fuck you.”

I push myself away from the counter and turn toward the door. “Brian, wait.” I stop walking, but keep my back to him. “That was a shitty thing to say.”

“Yeah, it was.” Without looking back, I push open the door and step outside. He can judge me all he fucking wants. He can think I’m a fucking selfish, narcissistic asshole if that’s what it takes for him to feel better about himself. Michael may have been my best friend since I was fourteen, but he’s not who I love and he’s certainly not who I have to answer to. Fuck him and his judgmental bullshit. It doesn’t matter what Michael thinks, or how Michael feels, as shitty as that is to think. Justin’s the only one that matters, the only one that should matter. Justin is the only one I have to prove myself to and he’s the only one whose opinion I give a shit about. Everyone else can just go fuck themselves.

* * *

When I re-enter the ICU waiting room, I see Daphne sitting in one of the chairs instead of Jennifer. I glance at my watch as I cross the room and sit down next to her. “She’s with the doctor.”

I jerk my head around. “Did something happen?” My voice cracks and my stomach clenches.

She smiles softly. “The swelling is starting to go down.”

I lean my head back against the wall and let out a deep breath. That’s good, that’s progress. As little news as that really is, it breeds hope that he’ll make it though this and be all right. A comfortable silence falls between me and Daphne. Out of the corner of my eye I watch as she twists and untwists a strand of hair around her index finger. I don’t know why I went to Michael to ask about Justin moving. Okay, maybe I do know why. Maybe on some level I wanted him not to know anything about it. Or maybe I wanted another reason to keep the distance between us. Michael knowing about Justin going to New York only made me feel that even if by some chance we do make

amends in the future, nothing between us will ever be the same. It's fucking pathetic, but that doesn't make it less true. I continue to watch Daphne out of the corner of my eye. No, if I really wanted to know about Justin moving to New York, there is no better source besides Justin himself, than Daphne.

"So when is he planning on leaving?" Her hand stills and she looks over at me questioningly. I tilt my head toward her. "For New York."

"How...did you find out?" She drops her hand to her lap.

"Why? Is it a secret?"

She sighs. "He hasn't decided yet."

I laugh sarcastically. "Yeah, so I've been told." I twist myself in the chair to face her. "But I don't buy it."

"Brian!" I turn my head to see Jennifer coming into the waiting room on crutches.

As she approaches I stand. "When did you get crutches?"

She rolls her eyes and shifts uncomfortably. "Tucker. He had them from an old sports injury." She smiles. "Did Daphne tell you?"

I glance down at Daphne, then back at Jennifer. "Yeah, she did."

"It's not much, but the doctor said that if the swelling continues to go down they'll be able to remove the shunt." She reaches out for my hand. "He said that it's really positive news."

"It is." I help her sit down in one of the chairs. "Have you been to see him?"

She nods. "Yes. He looks better...not as...pale."

I look over at Daphne. "Are you staying?" It's not really a question and I think she knows it.

Jennifer looks at Daphne. "Oh you don't have to stay with me. Tucker's down in the cafeteria getting some coffee."

Daphne nods and stands, her eyes never leaving mine. "I have a test in the morning. I really should head home."

I narrow my eyes. "I'm going to see Justin." I turn and walk away from them. I hope that she doesn't think that's the end of this. I need to know what the fuck Justin is thinking about New York, if he's really planning on going, because if he is, that changes...everything.

I'm almost at the nurse's station when I feel someone tug on my jacket. "Brian." I turn around and raise my eyebrows at Daphne. "I'll wait for you downstairs." She looks over her shoulder, then back at me. "She doesn't know, so don't..."

"I'll see you in ten minutes."

She nods her head and turns to walk away. I don't know what she's going to tell me, but whatever it is can't be good. I know Justin. He thinks, and sometimes over-thinks, about everything. He'll brood about it for a while, contemplate all his options, and let everyone around him believe he's undecided. The truth is that his indecisiveness is a mask. Deep down, he already knows what he wants, what he's decided. He's always been like that. He acts like he doesn't know what he wants: the fucking fiddler, coming back to me, L.A., leaving me again, and now this. So when Michael and Daphne claim that he hasn't decided, I know it's fucking bullshit.

I approach the nurse's station and look down at the slender red-head sitting at the computer. Her hair is short; her green eyes are focused on the computer screen as her fingers fly over the keyboard. Her uniform is a solid dark blue, and for whatever reason I wish it wasn't. "Excuse me."

She sighs heavily and looks up. When she does, I see her nametag. Right, Mary. "Yes?" Her tone of voice hints at irritation.

"I'm here to see Justin Taylor."

"And you are?"

"Brian Kinney."

She looks at her computer, types in a few things, and then looks back up at me. "Right." A sneer mars her features and takes away any beauty that might be there. "Follow me then."

I can tell that she has a problem with the fact that I'm gay, but I don't give a fuck as long as she opens the door that gets me to Justin. As we walk down the hall I realize I miss Julie's nervous chatter. When we reach the room, Mary looks down at her watch.

I'm sure she is going to remind me that I only have ten minutes, so I spare us both that redundant conversation and push the door open before she can say anything. Closing the door, I look over at Justin. Maybe he doesn't seem as pale, but honestly, with the harsh florescent light it's hard to really know one way or the other. I sit down in the chair next to the bed, brace my elbows on my knees, clasp my hands, and lean forward. All the times I've been in this room with him today, I haven't said more than his name. Well, now I have something to say.

I lean forward a little more and roll my lips into my mouth. I release them with a pop. "Were you going to tell me?" I shake my head. "I bet you decided to go long before you even left the loft that night, didn't you Sunshine?" I squeeze my hands together. "Did you think breaking it off would spare me the pain of you leaving town?" I scoff. "Well...in case you're wondering, it didn't spare me shit." Unclasping my hands, I place them on the edge of the bed, using them to balance my weight as I lean forward. My lips graze his ear. "I don't know if you can hear me, in fact I highly doubt it, but I'm going to say this anyway. I fucked up. I know that I did, but if you think I'm just going sit back and watch you skip out of town you're out of your fucking mind."

* * *

The night air is crisp and cold. I pull out my pack of cigarettes and tap one out. As I light it, I walk toward the well-lit courtyard. Daphne is sitting on one of the benches smoking her own cigarette. I stroll over to her, knowing that I've given her more than enough time to think of something to say to me. I'm barely sitting beside her when she says, "He really hasn't decided." I take a drag of my cigarette and say nothing. She takes a deep breath. "Brian, he-

I turn to her. "How long has he been thinking about it?"

She shakes her head and puts out her cigarette. "You should talk to him about this."

"In case you haven't noticed, he can't really talk right now."

"Brian."

I take a drag of my cigarette before putting it out. I suddenly feel angry, at her, at Justin. "Just tell me one thing and I'll drop it."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "What?"

“What exactly was all that bullshit you told me last night about him not wanting to leave me and how I should stop running, when you knew he was moving to New York?”

She stands up and throws her arms out. “He hasn’t decided.” She drops her arms and her head. “Look, I meant what I said last night. He didn’t want to leave you.” She glances up at me with wide eyes. “Oh god, Brian.” She sits back down and reaches for my hand. “He didn’t leave you to go to New York. He didn’t start thinking about it until that article came out in-” She clamps her mouth shut and looks away.

“Art Forum.”

Her eyes snap back to my face. “Yeah.”

I shake my head. “What’s with all the secrets?”

She bites the inside of her mouth. I can only guess she’s contemplating what exactly she should or shouldn’t say. “He just wanted...if he decides to go...he wants it to be his choice. He told me that if you knew, you’d have him on the next flight to New York.” I want to deny that, but I know I can’t. I don’t want him to go, but who am I to deny him that opportunity? Currently, I’m no one. Whatever Justin decides to do with his life should no longer have any bearing on mine, but it fucking does. I look away from her. Do I want him to move away, to fucking leave? “Brian, New York is just an idea. He has a lot of ideas. He...” I look at her. “He’s just trying to figure out what he wants to do with his life. For the first time he’s totally independent.”

I pull out my pack of cigarettes. Right, of course. I want Justin to be independent. I don’t want him to rely on me or his mother. It is time he made his own way in the world. I light my cigarette. I want him to do whatever will make him happy. I just don’t want to be...left behind.

Chapter 5 - I Keep Having These Dreams

“Yet it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top.”
~ Virginia Woolf ~

The darkness surrounds me like a wet blanket. “Do you remember when we danced?”

“Justin?” The sound of his voice is so close, but when I turn around I don’t see him.

“I couldn’t believe you came.” There is a whimsical sadness in his tone.

I spin around in a circle, demanding my eyes to adjust to the darkness. “Justin?”

“And you looked so hot.”

He sighs as his fingers sweep across my face, sending a chill through my body. “Justin, stop fucking around.”

“I’d never seen you move so gracefully on the dance floor before.” I feel the brush of his body against mine.

I turn again, seeing nothing. “Justin.” My voice is hard, stern, telling him to stop playing games.

“Not one awkward move. Not one stilted moment. We fit. We flowed. We were flawless.” He says the last word almost breathlessly.

I twirl and twirl in frustration as I try to find him. “Justin.”

“You can dance-every dance with the guy who gives you the eye, let him hold you tight...” His voice is strong and smooth and every-fucking-where.

I cover my ears with the palms of my hands. “Stop.”

“You can smile-every smile for the man, who held your hand ‘neath the pale moonlight...”

My body convulses as I drop to my knees. When I hit the hard, cold surface, a sharp pain shoots through my thighs and jars my entire body. “Fucking stop.”

“But don’t forget who’s takin’ you home, and in whose arms you’re gonna be...”

I curl in on myself, pressing my hands so hard against my ears that my arms shake with the effort. “Stop, Justin, just fucking stop.” I try to block his voice out, but it’s too loud, too close.

“So darlin’ save the last dance...” His warm fingers wrap around my wrist as he pulls my hand from my head with little effort. I feel his lips against my ear as he whispers, “For me.”

The darkness is suddenly obliterated by the harsh radiance of a spotlight. I blink my eyes against the sudden brightness as he pulls me to my feet. The song crackles over an old PA system where he left off. The only light is the circle of white I’m standing in. I’m alone. Painfully alone. Where did he go?

“Justin.” The word comes out as if he’s shoved his hand down my throat and pulled it from some place deep within me. Two syllables coated in my inner pain.

“And we danced, and danced, and danced.” I turn around quickly, trying to see past the light and into the darkness. “For two minutes and thirty-six seconds we...were...perfect.”

"I...wish I could remember," I hear myself saying.

"Oh...but you do." I feel his hand glide across my shoulders. I look up. The pure-white silk scarf is floating slowly toward me, the light fading behind it as it falls. "You remember everything." The scarf twirls and dances in the air.

"But I don't want to remember." Before the last word leaves my lips, blood starts to soak the scarf from some internal source. It starts to fall, faster and faster toward me as it turns redder and redder.

The spotlight suddenly shuts off. "This is what I remember." His voice is cold, hard, unforgiving. There is a sharp scratch of a needle being pulled off a record as florescent lights flick on row by row. My eyes adjust quickly, and as I take in my surroundings, I swallow back the acid in my throat. Off in the distance I see him. "Justin?" He turns around and smiles at me and then..."Justin!" The soles of my Armani dress shoes slap against the pavement. I fall to my knees beside him. "No, no, no, no. Oh god." I bend over him, cradle him in my arms, press my lips to his blood-stained cheek. "Don't go."

The lights shut off and my arms are empty. I'm left holding nothing as I kneel on the concrete. "Do you know that the only times you've said that to me, I've been unconscious?" His voice is soaked in sadness.

I look up, into the darkness. "That's not..." True. I feel his hands on my face as he materializes, kneeling in front of me, illuminated by a soft blue glow.

"Every time," he whispers.

I shake my head. "No...I never..." I cover one of his hands with my own. "I never wanted you to go."

He tilts his head to the side and smiles sadly. "I know."

"Then why?"

He takes my hands in his and presses them both to his chest. "I feel it every time you touch me, you know? I feel in every kiss how much you want me. How much you need me." I want to deny him, even in this reality. "Words, Brian...are not always useless." He leans forward and kisses me softly. "I love you."

He drops my hand and stands up, steps back into the darkness, the blue light encasing him beginning to dim. I scurry on my knees toward him, wrapping my arms around his waist. Pressing my cheek to his stomach, I grip him tightly, refusing to let him go. He threads his fingers through my hair as he starts humming softly. "I'll make a brand new start of it..."

"No."

"In old New York..."

I shake my head and grip him tighter as I feel him slipping away. "No."

"If I can make it there, I'm gonna make it anywhere..." His voice gets softer and softer with each line.

"No, no, no."

"It's up to you..."

Then he's gone. I fall forward, down into the dark abyss of my own making. Faster and faster, and faster...

* * *

I jerk awake, nearly falling out of the chair. I try to take deep, calming breaths, but fear has each of its fists wrapped around my lungs. Fuck. I sit up, running the palms of my hands over my jeans as I scan the now-familiar faces in the ICU waiting room, looking for Jennifer. I try to shake away my apprehension, to push away the last fading tendrils of my dream. Even in my sleep I can't shut off my mind. Every line of thought, no matter where it starts out, leads back to Justin. I've always been trapped inside my head, always been more introspective than people give me credit for, but this just makes me feel overwrought. This anticipation crawling under my skin, this waiting, is driving me fucking insane.

How many times can I think the same fucking things? How many times can I ask myself the same fucking questions? All I can think about is what I'm going to do, or say, or fucking be when he wakes up. All I can think about is New York, and wonder if he's really going to go, or will it all just be a moot point anyway? And then to top it all off, the fucking million dollar question that chases me around like a ghost with a score to settle, is what do I want? I ask myself that question practically every minute of every fucking day. What brilliant conclusion do I come up with each and every fucking time? Justin. That's it. That's all. I know, better than anyone, that wanting Justin is simply not enough. There are things that come with that. Things like: monogamy, rings, words, a family, and a house in a fag-friendly neighborhood. And when I start thinking about all that shit, I start to deny that I want him at all.

It's useless, this fucking denial. Justin comes with strings attached, but doesn't everybody? Don't I? And hasn't Justin been putting up with the conditions of being with me for years? Is what he wants what I want? Then there is fucking New York, always in the back of my mind. I've always wanted to leave the Pitts, no fucking question about that, but now...I've just started my business here, Gus is here, my friends, my adopted family, everything and everyone. I close my eyes and lean my head back against the wall. The fucking truth is, I've been fucking miserable since he left and I'd be even more fucking miserable if he moved.

It's shit like this that I've been thinking about for fucking days. Christ, if he doesn't open his eyes soon...

"I brought you some coffee." I open my eyes to see Jennifer standing in front of me, holding two cups of coffee. She hands me one. I take the cup from her before she sits down next to me. If either of us think it's weird--and it fucking is--that she knows exactly how I like my coffee, we don't say. I take a sip and let the bitterness, despite the sugar, of it linger in my mouth before I swallow.

She takes a drink of her own coffee before looking over at me with tired eyes. "Are they still running tests?"

"Yeah."

A comfortable silence settles between us. We each drink our coffee and continue doing what we've done for the past few days. We wait. It isn't long before two men approach us. We set our coffee aside as we stand to greet them. Dr. Moore, the Critical Care Specialist assigned to Justin's case, looks to be in his early forties. He's the same height as me with a trim build, sandy blond hair and sharp green eyes. Dr. Kamdor, Justin's long-time neurologist, is an older man with graying black hair and deep crinkles around his soft blue eyes and thin pink mouth.

They stand side by side in front of us. "Mrs. Taylor, Mr. Kinney." Dr. Moore nods. "As you know, we ran several tests on Justin this morning, and I'm happy to report that Justin's EEG readings were normal and we saw no abnormalities on either his CT scan or his PET scan." Jennifer moves slightly closer to me and I drape my arm over her shoulders. My heart starts to beat against my chest a little faster as I wait for the doctor to go on.

Dr. Kamdor smiles slightly and clears his throat. "As the swelling in Justin's brain continues to decrease, we anticipate that he will begin to regain consciousness. As you know, Mrs. Taylor, when someone is coming out of a coma, it is not instantaneous."

Jennifer nods. "I remember."

"His fingers might twitch, his eyelids might flutter, he could mumble a few words, make facial expressions, or even move in the bed."

I clear my throat. “So the injury to his brain...?”

Dr. Kamdor nods. “We cannot, at this time, say for certain that Justin will have absolutely no adverse effects from this injury. Once Justin regains full consciousness, we will test his cognitive and motor responses, but at this time we are hopeful that the accident caused him no permanent injuries.”

“As Justin starts to regain consciousness we will begin to slowly wean him off the ventilator, and once it’s removed, replace it with a nasal oxygen cannula.”

Dr. Kamdor places his hands in the pockets of his lab coat. “We also anticipate that we may be able to remove the shunt in a week or two.”

When neither Jennifer nor I say anything, Dr. Moore picks up where Dr. Kamdor left off. “Since Justin’s prognosis is good, I am lifting the restrictions in regards to the times you can visit him. You can see him, either separately or together, any time during the ICU’s regular visiting hours.”

“Can he have other visitors?” I know she’s asking because Molly wants to see Justin.

“At this time, I’m afraid not.” Dr. Moore shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “After some recovery time, he will be moved out of the ICU and will be able to have more visitors.”

It’s all slightly overwhelming. “It all sounds like such good news.” Jennifer’s voice is slightly shaky and I know instinctively that she’s feeling overwhelmed as well.

Dr. Moore smiles. “It’s great news, Mrs. Taylor. Your son is quite lucky.” I hear what he doesn’t say, “It could have been a lot worse.” Dr. Kamdor looks from us to Dr. Moore, who looks at him, nods, and looks back at us. “That being said, we advise that you both go home and get some rest. It will do Justin no good if either of you look completely exhausted when he regains consciousness.”

Jennifer moves out from under my arm and hugs both of the doctors in turn. “We will. Thank you so much.”

When Dr. Moore and Dr. Kamdor start to walk away, Jennifer turns around and looks up at me with tears swimming in her eyes. “He’s going to make it, Brian.”

I swallow hard, pushing down my own emotions. “Was there ever any doubt?”

She smiles and huffs out a tiny laugh that reminds me so much of Justin that it makes me ache. Stepping forward, she wraps her arms around my waist. Slowly, I move my arms around her. “There’s always doubt, Brian.”

I don’t say anything because I know that she’s speaking the truth. There is always doubt. We had hope, but we didn’t know. He’s going to make it through this. It’s not just some vague sense of hope anymore, it’s the truth.

* * *

The loft feels like the hollow of a man’s chest, and each step I take across the hardwood floor is the beat of its heart. The tiniest noises make the loudest sounds. The fabric of my shirt against the inside of my jacket, the echo of the zipper of my boots, the slide of my socks against my skin, the pads of my feet against the floor, the squeak of the cabinet door, the clunk of the bottle of Jameson’s against the counter, the clank of a tumbler against another, the wet liquid sound of the liquor being poured, the flick of a lighter, the singe of the paper of the cigarette as I take a deep drag. Every movement, every sound reverberates throughout the loft. After expelling the smoke in my lungs, I lift the glass to my lips and down the liquor in one swallow. Its familiar burn erases the stale taste of cigarettes and bitter hospital coffee from my mouth before sliding down my throat and settling uneasily in my empty stomach.

I should feel relieved, grateful, happy even, but I feel decidedly anxious, nervous, stressed the fuck out. Despite the press of exhaustion, another shot of liquor, two more cigarettes, and a long hot shower, my body is still wound tighter than a virgin's ass by the time I'm lying in bed. I roll onto my side and stare at the empty side of the bed, his side. My eyes half close, just from pure fatigue, as my mind drifts to the last night we were together. I felt the distance. I felt him pulling away little by little and I felt powerless to stop it, even if now I know that isn't true at all. Reflection is a son of a bitch.

"Or it can mean you found something more satisfying, more meaningful."

I scoff and then look down at him. "And what would that be?"

Then there was nothing but silence between us. It was just another silence, like the ones that had been growing longer and longer between us. I should have known, should have guessed the end was coming from that conversation alone.

When my question goes unanswered I stand up, momentarily rolling my lips into my mouth, because a trickle of irritation slides down my back and I just want him to say whatever it is he has to say. Get it over with. "I'm going to take a shower." The irritation sharpens my words, which in turn makes me feel like an asshole. "You coming to bed?" I ask it softly, but I walk away before I hear whatever answer he's giving. If he's intent on sitting there drawing whatever the fuck he doesn't want me to see, then fuck him. I strip off my clothes, take a long hot shower, and refuse to think about the vibe that's been coming from him, and that conversation we just had where we were saying so much more than the words that were actually spoken.

We were drifting, but as with everything at that time that involved Justin, I ignored it.

He comes to bed two hours later, and I want to pretend to be asleep as much as I want to fuck him. I lay on my back, eyes closed, listening to him getting undressed. I feel the stillness in the room when I hear the last of his clothes hit the floor. I feel his eyes on me, taking in my naked body which I didn't bother to cover. He sighs softly as he gets into bed. I press my hands, which are resting on my chest, down harder just to resist the urge to touch him as soon as I feel him next to me. Then there is nothing but silence. Silence so fucking loud that it makes me want to scream.

"I know you're not asleep."

"I could have been." I don't even open my eyes.

"You never sleep on your back," he says matter-of-factly.

That's the thing about someone knowing every-fucking-thing about you, not even the little things go unnoticed. I shrug against the bed. "So I'm not asleep."

When he sighs again it makes me want to roll him over and fuck him so hard, so fast, and so long that all his fucking sighs turn into begging moans. I'm so busy being irritated that I'm taken by surprise when I feel his lips pressing against my shoulder and his hand on my stomach. My eyes snap open as I turn my head towards him. We look at each, neither moving, hardly breathing, each of us waiting for whatever is about to come next. Only seconds before, I wanted him hard and fast until he was screaming, begging, panting my name, but whatever he's feeling comes at me through his eyes and I experience something that feels like the sadness of death. I turn toward him slightly, running my hand down my chest until it hits his hand, then I slide it up his arm until my fingers are buried in his hair. He closes his eyes momentarily, as if he's savoring a touch that at this point has to be so familiar. I roll him onto his back and settle between his legs. When both of my hands are in his hair, and his hands are pressed flat against my back, I lean forward and kiss him. My tongue tentatively probes his mouth, almost like I'm asking permission, and in part it feels like I am.

We kiss for what seems like hours, his tongue sliding against mine, licking the inside of my mouth, one moment passionate and hungry and the next soft and sensual. When we finally part, I press my lips to his ear and say a little breathlessly, "Roll over."

“No.” I pull away enough to look him in the eyes. “Like this.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “I want to see you.” His request is so heartbreakingly sincere that I know there is no way I can deny him. I reach for the lube and a condom, once again pushing away what I know are warning signs. We never fuck face to face when we’re in the middle of a fight, and we’ve been in the middle of a fight for days.

I prepare him and myself, almost rushing with the need to be inside him. As I push into him, he grips my upper arms, wraps his legs tight around my waist, and looks me right in the eyes. It’s the most intensity I’ve felt from him in weeks.

We fucked two more times after that, slicked with sweat, bodies pressed together, and our eyes locked. Every touch, every kiss, every thrust felt as if we were trying to fix the connection that was broken outside the boundaries of our bed. I didn’t recognize that night for what it was until the loft door slid shut two nights later, with him on one side and me on the other. That was his good-bye. I remember the finality of it. The way it seemed as if he was trying to memorize every part of my body and savor every taste. The night he left, I remember standing there as if my feet were glued to the floor, the silence of the loft pressing in on me, and feeling more alone at that moment than I’d ever felt in my entire life.

As I replay that night over and over in my head, I reach for his pillow and hug it to my body. I close my eyes and press my face into it, knowing his smell is long gone. I lost him after that night, mentally and physically. I didn’t let him go so much as I just fucking lost him. Somewhere in those weeks, when he was desperately trying to pull me closer, I was desperately trying to hold on to some title that I really shouldn’t have cared about at all. I only noticed how tight he’d been holding on to me after he’d already let go, and the only proof I had was the finger shaped bruises he left on my upper arms.

* * *

The hallway is long and familiar, bathed in the after-hours glow of soft orange lights. I take in the wood paneling, the soft carpet floors, the offices with frosted glass doors, and immediately it hits me. I’m at Vanguard, fucking Vanguard. Looking down at myself, I see I’m dressed in dark blue jeans and a long-sleeved light grey t-shirt that looks almost wrong on me. As I approach the corner office, my former office, I feel the nervousness in me building. The door is open and the tapping sound of fingers against a keyboard drifts into the hallway. What the fuck am I doing here, and who the fuck is in my old office? Taking a deep breath, I moved to stand in the door frame, leaning my hand against the opposite side. The pose is casual, but I feel anything but as I see Justin sitting behind the desk, bent over a laptop. He’s dressed in a black Armani suit, he looks hot...beautiful, even...but it’s not him, it’s not how he’d ever dress.

“Mr. Taylor.” I bite the inside of my mouth. What the fuck? When he looks up at me, I feel like I’ve been sucked back in time, and somehow between the future and the past the reality got fucking twisted.

“Kinney.” He looks down at his laptop. “Come in.” I push myself away from the door frame and walk into the room, my nervousness growing with each step. I stand in front of the desk, my fingers tapping the surface. “Sit down.” I wonder why I even have to wait for permission. He presses a few keys on the laptop, closes it, and sets it aside. He leans forward, clasps his hands on top of the desk, and raises his eyebrows. “You wanted to see me?” I look at the wall behind him, watching with fascination as the painting I used to have up there fades and morphs until it becomes his painting from the Emerging Artist’s show. “Well?”

My eyes snap back to him and I swallow hard. “I gave it some thought....and I decided that you should take me back.” My voice is full of false bravado.

He raises his eyebrows even higher. “Oh?”

I nod slightly. “Even though I’ve made a few...” I pause because this is all wrong. I’m not Justin. I don’t dress like Justin. I don’t fucking talk like Justin. And there is no way in hell that I’d ever do what Justin did that day. I wouldn’t have the balls...or ball.

“You’re wasting my time, Kinney.” He unclasps his hands and reaches for the laptop.

Without even thinking, I lean forward and slap his hand away. “No.” I take a deep breath. “Just give me a second.”

He laughs. “But I already gave you four years.”

“You’re right.”

He leans back in his chair, his eyes widening in surprise. “I am?” Folding his arms over his chest, he covers his surprise with indifference. “I seem to remember you saying...what was it? Four weeks?”

I nod. “I was wrong.”

He looks toward the window. “What are you looking for?” I ask as I follow his gaze, but see nothing.

We look at each other at the same time. “The lightening that’s about to strike you down on the spot.” He narrows his eyes slightly. “I thought Brian Kinney was never wrong.”

“I never said that.”

Rolling his eyes, he pushes back the chair, opens a side drawer, and pulls out a book that would give the bible a run for its money. He slams the book down on the desk and flips it open to somewhere in the middle. Turning the book around, he pushes it towards me. “Right here.” He taps the page with his index finger. “It says, and I quote, ‘I’m never wrong.’”

I shrug without looking down. “Must be a typo.”

“Right.” He slams the book closed, but leaves it on the center of the desk as if he might need it again.

When his eyes meet mine, cool and almost grey, I take a deep breath. “Justin...I fucked up.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“So you’ll take pity on me and forgive me,” I say softly. Smirking he reaches for the book, but I stop him. “Not all apologies are bullshit.”

Removing his hand from beneath mine, he scowls at the book. “I must have an old edition,” he says to himself.

I scan the cover of the book before looking up at him. I press my tongue against my cheek and start to feel almost like myself for a brief moment. “How can that be?” He looks up. “It says you wrote it.”

“Why should I forgive you?” he snaps.

I swallow hard. “I love you.” It comes out soft and rough, each syllable scratching my throat raw.

He leans forward slightly, a small, sad smile on his face. “Haven’t you heard?” He leans even closer, so close I can feel his warm breath on my face and smell the faint hint of cigarettes. “Sometimes love isn’t enough.”

* * *

Shaking the rain from my hair, I knock on the door. It’s barely eight in the morning; otherwise I would have just gone back to the hospital. While I’m waiting for someone to answer the door, I turn and look out at the rain coming down in sheets. It’s a fucking miserable day. When I hear the locks being undone, I turn back around. Lindsay smiles hesitantly at me as she opens the door. We speak at the same time.

“What are you doing here?”

“I want to see Gus.”

Off in the distance I hear the low rumble of thunder. She tightens the sash of her pale yellow terrycloth robe. “Jennifer called just a little while ago.” She smiles, and tears shimmer in her eyes. “Justin’s going to be okay.”

I scoff. “I know. I was there.”

She blushes a little. “I know.”

I raise my eyebrow. “Are you going to let me in?”

Sighing softly, she steps aside. After I’m standing in the entry way, I remove my coat and hang it on a peg by the door. “Where’s Gus?”

I turn around. She’s leaning against the door with her hands in her pockets and a concerned expression on her face. “You look exhausted. You should be trying to get some rest.”

I shake my head. “I can’t sleep. I keep having these dreams.”

She tilts her head to the side. “What kind of dreams?”

I look towards the stairs. “Is he in his room?”

“Yes.”

I hear something in her voice, pity or something close to it. I pinch the bridge of my nose, kiss her cheek quickly to appease her, and take the stairs two at a time. I don’t need anyone’s fucking pity, least of all hers. As soon as I reach the top of the stairs and step into the hallway, I see Melanie holding JR in her arms. She furrows her eyebrows slightly before her face relaxes. We stare at each other for a minute before she finally says, “I’m glad Justin’s going to be okay.” I think “me too”, but simply nod my head. “He’s playing in his room.” She nods to Gus’ bedroom, before walking around me and down the hall. I stand there for a minute thinking the bomb must have tilted the world to the left, because Melanie is never fucking nice, or even indifferent to me. Shaking my head, I walk down the hall until I get to Gus’ bedroom. His door is open, so I lean against the jamb, cross my arms, and watch him for a minute.

He’s on his knees, dressed only in his pajama bottom. His short brown hair is sticking up all over the place, his brow is furrowed, his lips are rolled into his mouth, and his eyes are focused on the floor. I look down to see what he’s concentrating so hard on and almost laugh when I see two Kens and two Barbies laying on their backs in front of him. He picks up one of the Ken dolls, then sets it back down.

“Hey Sonny Boy.”

His head snaps up and his eyes widen. He jumps to his feet and races across the room toward me. “Daddy!”

I bend down and sweep him up in my arms. He giggles, his eyes shining bright green. He rubs his small hands over my face. “You grew hair on your face!”

“Yes, I did.”

He giggles and then lets me in on the joke. “Like a bear!”

I step over his toys as I walk toward his bed. “I don’t think so, Sonny Boy.” His brows furrow slightly as I sit down on the edge of his bed and adjust him so he’s sitting on my lap. I point towards the dolls. “What were you doing?”

His eyes follow where my hand is pointing. He shrugs. “Nothin’” Rolling his lips into his mouth, he stares at the dolls for a moment before looking back up at me. “Daddy?”

“Yeah?”

“You look xahsted.”

I raise my eyebrow. “I do?”

He nods his head vehemently. “Yup.” He squirms off my lap and runs across the room towards the mini-bookcase against the wall. I scoot back on his tiny bed until my back is against the wall and my legs hang awkwardly over the side. I watch Gus as he throws book after book to the floor.

“You know you’re going to pick all those up, don’t you?”

“I knowed,” he says matter-of-factly.

I smile for the first time in days. “What are you looking for?”

“The Book.” The way he says it makes it seem as if I should already know that.

I lean my head back and yawn. “What kind of book?”

“The Book, Daddy.” I almost laugh because he’s talking to me like I’m the four year old in this room.

“And what is so special about The Book?” I close my eyes momentarily and feel myself starting to drift off.

“Ah!” My eyes snap open. “Founded it!” He runs across the room with what looks suspiciously like a homemade children’s book in his hands and leaps onto the bed. He crawls on his knees over to me. Bouncing up and down a little, he shoves the book into my hands. “Read it to me.”

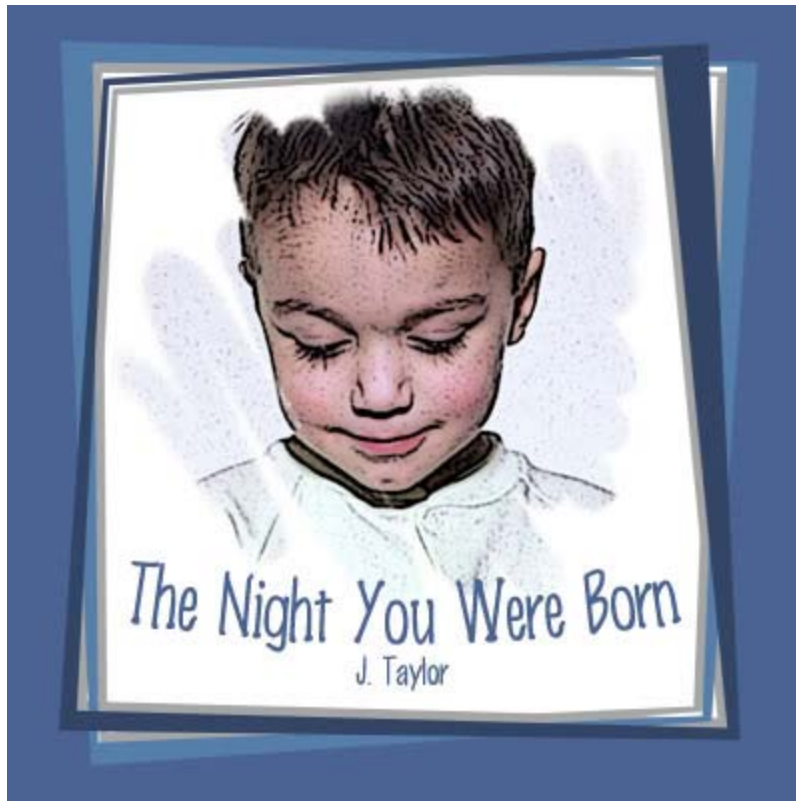
I raise my eyebrow. “Please.”

He sighs. “Please.”

I ruffle his hair and pull him under the crook of my arm. When he settles into a comfortable position, I look at the book that’s facedown in my hands. Christ, it’s probably some fucking little engine that could book Lindsay made for him when she was feeling all arts-and-craftsy one day. I hold in a sigh as I turn the book over in my hands. My mind goes blank when I look at the front cover. All I hear is white noise. What the fuck? I look down at Gus, who is watching me. “Justin wrote you a book?”

“Daddy, read.” I raise my eyebrow. “Please.”

I look down at the cover.



The artwork is fucking brilliant. The picture of Gus on the front is amazing. It must have taken him hours to do such detailed work on such a small scale. “What’s it about?” I ask needlessly.

“Me.” Gus uses the “duh” tone of voice again and impatiently taps the book with his fingers.

I open the book to the first page and clear my throat. “You were born on a-”

“No Daddy.” He points to the opposite page from where I’m reading. “Start here.” I look down at him, and he rolls his lips into his mouth as our eyes meet. “Please,” he says quietly.

I scan the single sentence on the page he pointed to and suck in a deep breath. Fuck. I swallow around the tightness in my throat and try to read the sentence without my voice cracking. “So you’ll always remember.” Christ.



Every line I read after that is a struggle. The fact that Justin remembers almost verbatim what was said that night is just fucking amazing.

“We've been thinking of names. Mel wants to call him Abraham after her grandfather, but ... I like Gus,” your mom said to your dad.

Your dad turned to me and asked, “What do you think?”

I was really nervous, because I'd just met everyone, but I said, “You wouldn't survive a day at school being named Abraham. But I guess Gus is okay.”

Gus stops me. “Coulda been ‘berham.”

“Lucky for you, Justin was there.”

“Yeah,” he almost whispers, and I feel something pulling at me, something inside telling me that Gus isn't the only one that benefited from Justin being there that night.

“And that's what happened on the night you were born.” This, of course is the G-rated version.

As the last words leave my lips, “The End.” something starts to crackle and pop inside of me like a new log being thrown on a fire. Time pauses, the air stills, and I have a moment of clarity so pure it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I want Justin. No, I don't just want him, I want him strings and all, because without him everything is fucking meaningless. My whole life since I met him, from that first night on, has meant something, so much so that the time before it seems like a distant dream not worth remembering.

Gus snuggles closer to me, his small hand resting on my chest. “Read it ‘gain, Daddy.” The request isn't a hard one to fulfill. I turn back to the beginning and start to read again. It doesn't occur to me until much later that I didn't even make him say please.

Chapter 6 - Change

“The first step toward change is awareness. The second step is acceptance.”

~ Nathaniel Branden ~

The window in Justin's room overlooks the westside parking lot of the hospital. The rain streaks over the glass, blurring the images of the cars until they are nothing more than faded smudges of color against the blacktop. It reminds me of something Justin might paint. I look up at the dark sky. It's almost noon, but it looks much later outside. It's been raining on and off for days. It seems fitting somehow. I can see Jennifer's reflection in the window as she leans forward and runs her hand along Justin's bruised cheek. His face twitches at the touch, but he's been doing that for days. It's been frustrating to watch. Each time his eyes flutter, my chest gets tight and I hold my breath, wondering if this is it. I try to imagine what it must be like for him, but the closest I can come is when I came out of surgery when I had my ball removed. I remember feeling like I was swimming up from the depths of the ocean, wondering if the next stroke would break the surface.

I glance back at the parking lot. I know that when he wakes up and sees me here it's not going to automatically fix things between us. I know better than anyone that his days of simply rolling over and taking my shit are long, long gone. I should have a plan on how exactly I'm going to convince him to come back to me, but I don't. Not that I haven't thought about it. It's all I can fucking think about. I know he wants rings and all that shit, but that...that I will not do. I refuse to participate in something that I don't fucking believe in. I'll give him anything else he wants, but not that. I'll do anything else, everything else, but I won't get married. I won't be someone's fucking husband, not even his. It isn't just about the rings and wedding bullshit either. There is so much more to it than that, and I know it. All the wedding/husband/happy hetero-homo life could be a moot fucking point, because hanging over my head, just like the dark rain clouds outside, is the fact that Justin is moving to New York.

Before I left the munchers the other day, I asked Lindsay about the book Justin made for Gus. Specifically, I asked when Justin gave it to him. “A week before the bombing,” was her solemn reply. That only confirmed the feeling inside of me that the book isn't just some cutesy gift that he created on a whim, it's his good-bye to Gus. I wanted to ask Lindsay if she knew about New York, but I didn't. First of all, I didn't want to know that someone else knew about it before I did, and secondly, I didn't want to hear the same rhetoric bullshit about how he hasn't decided yet. If anything, the book confirms what I've felt since I first saw the information about New York in his apartment. He may be telling everyone that he hasn't decided, but his mind is made up.

There is so much at stake for me here, so many ways to lose him all over again. But how can I stop him from pursuing his dreams of becoming an artist? Who is to say that I'm even a factor in the equation at all? What I say or do might not even matter to him anymore. My stomach clenches, because I don't want to believe that's even a little true.

I close my eyes and lean my forehead against the cool glass as Jennifer starts to sing the same song she's been singing to Justin for days. She can't sing, but I know that's not the point.

Golden slumbers kiss your eyes
Smiles await you when you rise
Sleep pretty baby
Do not cry
And I will sing you a lullaby

After hearing the same song every day, sometimes more than once a day, you'd think I'd be sick of it, and yet I find it strangely comforting. I don't have to ask if it's a song she sang to Justin as a child. I know that it is. When Justin was living with me after the bashing, we went to Melanie and Lindsay's quite a few times. It wasn't that I liked going there necessarily, but Justin liked being around Gus, especially during that time in his life.

"I can't believe I'm here on a fucking Friday night." I pull the jeep into the munchers' driveway and turn off the ignition.

"I just want to see Gus," he says quietly as he unbuckles his seatbelt.

I glance at him, but don't say anything as I open the door. He'll never tell me why he always wants to come here, to see Gus, but I know. Gus is a baby, he isn't threatening, and he can't hurt Justin. I walk around the front of the jeep and wait for him. We've been here a few times since Justin came to live with me, so Melanie and Lindsay already know the score. When we walk in, they tell him hello, they don't hug him, and they don't say a thing when he hurries up the stairs to see Gus.

After thirty minutes of snarking with Melanie and placating Lindsay, I'm ready to get the fuck out of here. I take the stairs two at a time and approach Gus' room. When I reach the doorway, I stop. Justin is leaning over the crib, his forearms braced on the railing, as he sings:

Cares you know not
Therefore sleep
While over you safe watch I keep
Sleep pretty darling
Do not cry
And I will sing a lullaby

His voice was quiet and soft, much like Jennifer's is now, only he could sing. The sound of his voice was surprising actually. At the time I remember thinking that he hadn't looked that peaceful in days. Later, when I asked him about it, he just shrugged and said, "My mom used to sing that to me when I was little. It always calmed me down." Now I wonder if he was singing that song more for Gus or himself. I guess it was probably a little of both.

"Mm--"

My eyes snap open and I turn around. Justin's brow furrows. He squeezes his eyes shut tight and presses his lips into a thin pink line. Jennifer and I share a brief glance before focusing back on Justin. Over the last few days he's been moving, making facial expressions and low throaty noises. They just removed the ventilator this morning, so this is the first time we've heard him try to talk. They told us the process was going to be slow, and Christ, it is. If there was ever a time I wished that life had a fast-forward button, this would be it.

Jennifer leans forward and places her hand on his cheek. "Justin, honey, it's Mom." I place my hands on the ledge of the window and lean back against it as I watch her. She's a lot better at the "talking because he might hear you" thing than I am. "Justin, it's okay." Maybe it's the comforting sound of her voice, or just her voice period, but his face relaxes and then the moment is over. She lets out a long breath, strokes Justin's cheek, and leans back in the chair. She looks up at me. "He's getting closer."

I want to ask her how the fuck she knows that, but I know how she knows, so I don't say anything. I turn around and look back out the window. I see her reflection in the glass. She's watching me, maybe waiting for me to say something, but talking has never been my thing. My thoughts pause on that statement. I close my eyes briefly, take a deep breath, and turn back around. She tilts her head to the side as I open my mouth to say, "I know what I want," but when nothing comes out, I huff and close my mouth.

Jennifer pulls the covers up to Justin's chest, stands, and walks around the bed, stopping only when she's in front of me. She reaches up and touches the side of my face, the tips of her fingers sliding through my facial hair that I still haven't shaved off despite Gus' claims that it makes me look like a bear. "He won't go if you don't want him to."

I raise my eyebrow. "You know?"

"When I called Debbie to tell her he was going to make it, she let it slip."

I scoff. "If he wanted to keep it a secret, he should have never told Michael."

“You know better than anyone that Justin never does anything by accident, Brian.” She smiles as she pats my cheek affectionately before removing her hand. “Ask him to stay, and he will.”

I look over her shoulder at Justin. “It’s not that easy.”

When she laughs softly, I look back at her. “Haven’t you heard, Brian? Nothing hard is ever easy.”

* * *

Standing in the third floor outside breezeway, which I discovered via Julie, I take a drag of my cigarette and watch as the rain comes down in sheets. The wind shifts, causing some of the drops of rain to hit my skin. Each one feels like the cold prick of a needle. I try to let the sound of the rain drown out my thoughts, but it doesn’t work. I exhale the smoke from my lungs. There is a part of me, a part that knows that Justin plans to move to New York, that wants to get in the ‘vette and never step foot in this hospital again. It’s the part of me that says if New York is what he wants, who am I to stop him? If that’s his dream, how can I stand in his way? Then there is the other part of me that is desperately trying to hold on, to not give up, to fucking fight for him. The thing is...I don’t know if I know how to do that. I’ve never done it before. When he left for the fiddler, I didn’t fight to keep him. I let him go because that seemed easier, for him...for me. When it comes to Justin it seems I’ve always taken the easy way out and played it off as something different, his choice, his decision, his life, his, his, his.

“Brian?” I whip my head around to see Michael standing near the sliding glass doors. I didn’t even hear them open. As he starts to walk closer, I take a drag of my cigarette and look back out at the rain. “Ma brought dinner for you and Jennifer.”

I exhale. “I’m not hungry.”

“When’s the last time you ate?”

I could answer, “This morning. I had a stale blueberry muffin from the cafeteria.” But what I say instead is, “What the fuck do you care?” I’m fucking tired. I’m fucking exhausted and I just don’t have the energy to deal with any more shit right now.

“Look.” Frustration floods his voice. “I told Ma I’d come find you.”

I turn to him and throw out my arms. “Well, you found me.” I lower my arms and take a drag of my cigarette. “Your job is done.”

“Why are you acting like an asshole?” I open my mouth to reply, but he holds up his hand. “Never mind, I forgot, that’s who you are.”

I sneer. “You don’t know a fucking thing about who I am.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “Right, so the Brian Kinney that I’ve known for twenty years is not the same Brian Kinney standing in front of me?”

I shake my head and flick my cigarette into the rain. “No.” I shrug. “You only see what you want to see, just like everyone else.” Except Justin, but I keep that comment to myself.

“I’m going inside.”

He turns to walk away and something inside me just twists and breaks. “Congratulations, by the way.”

He whirls around to face me. “What prize did I win this time? Who else have I infected?”

I shrug. "You were right."

"Right about what?"

Inside my head I answer him. Inside my head a thousand voices scream, "Everything!" I turn from him and grip the rain-slicked railing. The anger fades away and all that's left is that empty hollow feeling that's become all too familiar to me as of late. I hear the sliding glass doors open and close. I know he's gone, but I'm not surprised. He was right about that too. Just because we've been friends our whole lives doesn't mean we have to keep being friends. Releasing the railing, I turn around and sit down. Leaning against the cold, wet metal, the rain soaks through the back of my shirt. "Well...now I guess I've lost everything."

I pull my knees up to my chest, brace my elbows on my legs, and grip my hair. Everything inside me longs for those two little words from so long ago, not everything. The words don't come, though, and I think maybe this time I did in fact lose every-fucking-thing.

* * *

"Jesus, Brian, what are you doing?" His voice sounds like an echo that reverberates in this blank place. "Brian?"

My eyes snap into focus to see Theodore kneeling in front of me. "What?" I ask, slightly confused.

"You're soaked." I feel my wet shirt sticking to my back like a second skin. "Come on." Theodore grabs me by the arms and hauls me to my feet. His eyes meet mine. "You're a mess."

I yank my arms from his grasp and search almost desperately for my cigarette case. "You have no fucking idea."

"No...I think I do."

I pull a cigarette out and light it. "Right."

"Bri...look if you want to talk about it..." He trails off.

"Talk about what? How my life is a complete fucking mess?" I take a drag of my cigarette. "Or how about how I've lost fucking everything, because you can relate to that, right?" I scoff and turn my back on him.

"Maybe I can help." He steps up beside me.

I take a drag of my cigarette and look at him. "You can't help me."

"Try me." I exhale the smoke from my lungs as I turn my head away. "I've been there, Brian. You think you have it bad? You think you've lost everything? You haven't." He sighs. "Just say it."

Doesn't he know how much I want to? Doesn't he know how much I wish I could just open my mouth and let every-fucking-thing inside me come out? No, of course he doesn't. No one knows that. No one knows that sometimes I wish that I could just open my mouth and say exactly how I'm feeling, exactly what I'm thinking. No one knows how much I want to let go of all my bullshit and speak the fucking truest of truths for just fucking once. No one knows how when I try, my throat closes up so tight that I nearly choke. If I had it in me to let go, to be that fucking free, Justin would have never left. If I had it in me I would have told him I loved him a long fucking time ago. I would have allowed myself to give him anything, everything. If I was a different person, Justin would have me on my knees every time he had one foot out the door, begging, fucking begging, him not to go. If anyone is meant to see that pathetic, lonely, desperate side of me, it's Justin. If I was a different person, a different man, I would have told Justin everything I've ever felt for him. I would have held on so fucking tight to him...never let him go, not fucking once. But I'm not that person. I'm not that man. I don't know how to live like that, to be like that.

I turn to Theodore. "I don't know how to do that." It's as close to the truth as I can get.

“So you learn. Take it one step at a time. Start with something small.”

I scoff. “Is that what they teach you in rehab?”

He smiles slightly. “I know all about avoidance.” He nudges me with his shoulder. “Go on.”

I turn away from him and look out into the cold bitter night. I swallow hard around my constricting throat. Heavy emotions settle in my stomach like a lead weight. I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. I sigh, take the last drag of my cigarette, and flick it away.

He places his hand on my shoulder and I look over at him. “Whatever you say will be kept in the strictest of confidence. I’m not here to judge you.”

I let out a pinched laugh. “How long did it take you to memorize that shit?” His gaze doesn’t waver and he doesn’t even crack a smile. I turn my head away. I roll my lips into my mouth and release them. “I can lose everything, Michael, Kinnetik, the loft, all of it...but Justin...” That’s as far as I get. That’s as far as I can go.

He removes his hand from my shoulder. “That’s a start.” I laugh bitterly. “You told me not so long ago that because of who you are, you’d lost the two most important people in your life.” I close my eyes and open them slowly. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

I throw up my hands. “Why the fuck not?”

“When is the last time you fucked a trick?”

I look over at him, furrowing my brow. “What the fuck does that have to do with anything?”

“Let me ask you another question.” I raise my eyebrow. “Do you think you are incapable of changing who you are, who other people think you are?”

“Do you have a fucking point?”

He takes a slight step closer. “Have you fucked anyone since Justin was brought here?”

“What the fuck?” I shake my head. “No.”

“Have you even thought about fucking anyone? Maybe getting your dick sucked by that hot nurse’s aid that I’ve seen around here today.”

Again, what the fuck? “No.”

He places his hand back on my shoulder and smiles knowingly. “That, my friend, is change.”

* * *

Sitting in a chair in the corner of the room, I watch as Jennifer straightens out the covers for what must be the tenth time in the last hour. My eyes shift to the floor as I think about the conversation I had with Theodore earlier today. When he pointed out the fact that I haven’t tricked or thought about tricking, I was partly surprised and partly not. In the past, if someone had pointed out that fact I would have grabbed the nearest hot guy and let him blow me. The truth is, I haven’t thought about anything or anyone other than Justin in days. I tried to rationalize that the circumstances are what have kept my mind and body otherwise occupied, but that’s bullshit. The last time Justin was in the hospital like this I fucked myself into oblivion. I further try to rationalize that the circumstances at that time were different. When he got bashed, I blamed myself (I still do) and all I wanted was to blank out what I didn’t

want to remember. I wanted to get numb and stay numb so I wouldn't have to feel a fucking thing. So what makes this time any different? I lift my eyes back to Justin. He makes it different.

Jennifer yawns, pulling me from my thoughts. My eyes slide over to her as she stands up and stretches. "I'm going to go get a cup of coffee." I nod. She reaches for her purse and slings it over her shoulder. "I'll be back in a few minutes." I nod again and watch her go.

She doesn't offer to bring me a coffee back, but I didn't expect her to because we aren't allowed to have food or drinks in here. As the door closes behind her, I push myself out of the chair, cross the room, and sit down in the chair she just vacated. I scan Justin's face, the cuts and bruises that are slowly healing, his blond hair poking out from under the bandage on his head, his slightly chapped, pale pink lips. I take a deep breath. I've never been emotionally invested...in anything or anyone, really, not like I am with him. I think that changed the very first night I met him, although I denied it, for all the good that did me. Actually, a part of me, up until the second I heard the announcement about Babylon, was still denying it. I've spent the last ten days not only not denying it, but accepting it. I don't know what's going to happen when he wakes up. I don't know if or how things will change, but I already feel different. Maybe it is possible to change, even this late in the game. It doesn't mean I'm going to sell off everything I own and buy a house in the fucking country and propose marriage, but it does mean something.

I scoot to the end of the chair and lean forward. I run the back of my fingers lightly over his face. "Justin." I suck my lips into my mouth and release them. "You're it for me," I whisper.

When his head rolls towards me, I jerk my hand back. His eyelids flutter and my heart pounds against my chest. When his eyes slowly open, I stop breathing. He blinks lazily, his blue eyes cloudy beneath half-open lids. The tip of his pink tongue pokes out from between his lips. I don't move or blink. "Br-" As his eyes close I let out a long breath, thinking that's it, but slowly his eyes open once again. They are clear, and brighter than they were a moment ago. He takes a deep, shuttering breath. "Brian." It comes out raspy, breathy, and so, so quiet. To me it's the most beautiful sound he's ever made.

I smile slightly and take a deep breath. "Hey."

Chapter 7 - Without a Fight

“He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot, will be victorious.”

~ Sun Tzu ~

Leaning against the far wall, I watch as doctors, nurses, and Jennifer crowd around Justin. Every instinct is telling me he hates it. I can't see his face, but I can feel it coming from him through the flesh and bones and air that separate us.

After briefly explaining to Justin what's going on, Dr. Moore flips a page over his clipboard. “I'm just going to ask you a few questions.”

“I'm tired.” His voice is soft. Some might think it's a sign of weakness, but I hear what they obviously don't. He's on edge and ready to strike.

“What is your name?”

He sighs loud and long. “Justin Taylor. I was born Tuesday, February 22, 1983 at 8:07am. My address is 2215 West Holland Street, apartment 1819.” He pauses to catch his breath. “It's March 20, 2005, but I only know that because I was told. I don't know exactly what time it is.” Another pause. “But it's dark outside. It's not nighttime though, there's too much grey in the sky.” Automatically I look toward the window. The clouds linger even though the rain stopped a little after two this morning. “The last thing I remember is asking for a vodka tonic at Babylon. I also enjoy candlelight dinners and my favorite flower is Birds of Paradise. Anything else?” He ends with a condescending scoff.

Dr. Moore looks over at Dr. Kamdor, as if he has no idea what is going on. Dr. Kamdor clears his throat. “Justin, what is 11 times 12?”

“132. Are we done?” The edge in his voice could cut through steel. “I'm tired and my head fucking hurts.”

“One last thing.” Dr. Kamdor's voice remains calm and even. “Please raise your left arm. Good. Now move your left fingers. Great. Now the right.” There is a stillness in the room, a heavy silence that's only broken up by the monitor's incessant beeps. “Justin, please raise your right arm.” I hold my breath and wait. “Now move your fingers. Good.” And exhale.

“Do you want me to jump through a hoop next?”

“Justin.” Jennifer tries to soothe him with her soft, comforting voice.

“I'm tired.” The edge of his voice dulls.

“We'll let you rest now. One of the nurses will be back in a little while to give you something for the pain, and Dr. Moore and I will be back later this evening to check on you.” Dr. Kamdor nods at the two nurses and Dr. Moore, then they leave the room.

The moment the door closes behind them Justin's eyes meet mine. I wish I could tell what he's thinking, but I can't. Jennifer, working on maternal instinct, or so I imagine, leans over and whispers something in his ear that makes his eyes soften before she kisses his cheek. “I have to go make some calls.” She grabs her purse, kisses Justin again, and smiles at him. “I'm glad-”

“Mom,” he says softly.

She quickly wipes away a tear that's made its way down her face. Before she walks out of the room she comes over to me and leans up to kiss me on the cheek. “He should get some rest soon,” she whispers.

I nod in agreement, and she pats my arm before turning to leave.

When it's just Justin and me, the air becomes thick and heavy, the silence deafening. It's like we are frozen in time, our eyes lock on each other. It feels as if I'm barely breathing. "Come over here." His eyes shift to the chair beside his bed, then back to me. I push myself away from the wall and slowly cross the room. When I finally sit down in the chair, I clutch my hands together in my lap because the need to touch him is overwhelming. He winces slightly as he turns his head toward me.

I swallow hard. "You should get some rest."

"I've been resting long enough." The exhaustion in his voice contradicts his words, but I say nothing. Justin's always been a little stubborn. "I've never seen you with facial hair before."

I actually laugh, because out of all the fucking things I thought he might say, that wasn't one of them. I run my hand along my jaw. "What do you think? Gus called me a bear."

He laughs softly. "I'm surprised you didn't shave it off right then and there." I smirk and drop my hand back to my lap. "I like it. It makes you look—"

"If you say older—"

He smiles. "No, more...distinguished."

I slide my tongue into my cheek. "How very WASP of you."

Our smiles fade and the intensity that's always existed between us fills in the space between where he lays and I sit. He looks at me for a long moment, his eyes searching mine. "How was Australia?" He asks finally.

I furrow my brow. "I didn't—"

"I know." He sighs and looks up at the ceiling. "You know...I never thought I'd be back here." He looks over at me. "It's like I'm in a time warp or something." I know exactly how he feels. "But it's different." I raise my eyebrow. "You're here."

Right. I shrug. "Where the hell else would I be?"

"I don't know, Brian." He looks back at the ceiling. "You could be anywhere, doing anything."

"Justin..."

He looks over at me. "You've been here the whole time." It isn't a question. He shrugs. "Just like last time I guess, only, you know, you're actually in the room." I feel my eyebrow creep up my forehead. "I'm pretty smart when I want to be. I knew when we were at the loft." He swallows hard, his voice getting raspier with each word. "When you said you weren't my trauma specialist, my occupational therapist, my mother holding my hand." His eyes bore into mine. "I mean, you could have gotten that information from anyone, but I knew by the look on your face." He blinks slowly. I can tell he's about to fall asleep. "So I guess what I want to know is...why are you here?"

"I told you—"

"Yeah, I know, where the hell else would you be." He sighs and looks up at the ceiling. "Can you just...you know, not make me read between the lines for once in my life?"

I lower my head and watch as my knuckles turn white from the grip of my hands. I think about everything that's happened since he's been here. I think about all the things that have been trapped inside my head. I think about the decisions I've made. I think about what Theodore said to me not even twenty-four hours ago. I close my eyes and let

out a deep breath. "I'm here because..." I look up at him. His eyes are closed, and he's asleep. I don't know whether to feel relieved or offended.

* * *

I sign my name on yet another form and set it aside. I look at all the shit spread across my desk and wonder if I'll ever finish going over it all. It's late, well past midnight, and Kinnetik is eerily quiet. Everyone is home with their boyfriend, or girlfriend, or husband, or wife, no doubt all tucked in their beds with some infomercial playing in the background because they fell asleep before Conan O'Brien was over. A snippet of memory dances in my mind of waking Justin up to go to bed because he fell asleep on the couch during a rerun of Star Trek: Next Generation. I huff. I never understood his fascination with that Captain Picard.

At the thought of Justin, my stomach twists into knots. I haven't seen or spoken to him in three days. When he woke up after our conversation, he looked right at me and said, "Go home, Brian. Go to work. Just go." He didn't sound angry or sad, just kind of...tired.

I didn't want to go. It was really the last fucking thing I wanted to do, but I did go because he asked me to. I didn't want to be where I wasn't wanted. That thought is like a knife in my heart, and it causes an ache so fucking deep I wonder if it will ever go away.

I lean back in my chair and tap the end of my pen against my lips. I don't know what I was expecting to happen when he finally woke up. It's not like I thought he'd see me and leap back into my arms, figuratively speaking. What I didn't expect was to be so easily...dismissed. Maybe I should have torn a page out of the Justin Taylor handbook and just...stayed.

In retrospect, I know that's exactly what I should have done. I throw my pen on the desk and stand up. Fuck this shit. Fuck him. I yank my suit jacket off the back of the chair and pull it on. Staying away from him is not how I'm going to get him back. It's not how I'm going to keep him. Haven't I learned anything in four years?

* * *

As I approach the hospital doors, I flick my cigarette to the sidewalk. Just as I'm about to walk inside the building, Julie walks out. We stop, facing each other. She looks fucking exhausted. I raise my eyebrow. "Pull a double?"

She plasters a smile on her face and says in a falsely chipper voice, "There is no I in team, Brian."

I laugh. "They're still using that one?"

Her smile fades as she pulls a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of her smock. "What can I say? I'm obviously a doormat." She turns around and looks at me over her shoulder. "Does it say 'welcome' on my back?" I smirk as she turns back around and lights a cigarette. "Haven't seen you here in a few days."

I shrug and look away. "I've been busy."

"Mm." I look back at her as she blows out a cloud of smoke. "Well, in case you haven't heard, they moved him to a private room yesterday morning."

I cock my eyebrow. "Already?"

She takes another drag of her cigarette. It makes me want to light up again, but I refrain. "It seems Mr. Taylor is determined to get out of here as soon as possible."

"He hates hospitals," I say softly.

“Well, I heard they’re removing the drain tomorrow. That’s really the only thing keeping him here.” She takes a drag of her cigarette and tilts her head to the side. “Visiting hours are over, but the nurses on the 5th are slackers. Just use some of that Kinney charm.”

I smirk. “Right.”

She smiles genuinely. “He’s in room 525, maybe you can just walk right on by them.”

I smile crookedly. “Thanks.”

She shrugs. “Pleasure’s all mine.” She blushes slightly, and for some reason I find that endearing. Surprising her and myself, I lean forward and kiss her cheek, feeling the heat of her skin beneath my lips.

I pull back. Her face is a shade darker than it had been. “Call in sick tomorrow.”

I walk around her and head into the hospital. As I make my way towards the elevators, I shake my head. I’m not one for sentiments, but sometimes I think if Julie hadn’t been around I’d have gone fucking crazy. When the elevator door slides open, I get in and press the button for the fifth floor. Every time she was working and had to escort me to Justin’s room she would just talk and talk and talk. It never seemed to matter that I didn’t always talk back. Sometimes just listening to her going on and on about whateverthefuck would just drain away my anxiety. It helped, and I’m grateful she was around.

When the elevator stops on the fifth floor, I get off. The two nurses at the station are talking and laughing. I walk by them unnoticed. This part of the hospital is not as quiet as the ICU wing. The laughter of the nurses and the TVs in patients’ rooms fill the hallway with noise, and beneath those sounds are the steady beeps of those fucking machines.

I pause in front of room 525. The door is slightly ajar. I push it open a little more and look over at Justin. He is propped up in bed. The roll-away on which they usually serve what they call food is lowered and placed over his lap. He has a sketch book open on the surface, the point of his pencil pressing into the paper, unmoving. His eyes are on the TV. I smirk as I look over at it. I should have known.

“You were right, Q. You offered me the chance to better myself, and I took the opportunity. But, I admit now, it was a mistake.”

“Are you asking me for something, Jean-Luc?”

“Only to be able to change things back to the way they used to be, the way they should be.”

“Before, you died in sickbay. Is that what you want?”

“I would rather die as the man I know is truly within me, with a full life - a real life - behind me, than have my name on the biography I just listened to.”

Quietly, I enter the room and close the door behind me. I’m not even three steps away from the door before he turns to look at me. “What are you doing here?”

I press my tongue into my cheek and wave to the TV. “I came to watch Star Trek with you.”

He rolls his eyes and looks back at the TV. “You hate Star Trek.”

I walk over to the chair next to his bed. Removing my jacket, I fold it over the back of the chair before sitting down. I feel anxious and nervous, which is fucking ridiculous. I shove those emotions down. “Correction, I just prefer the original.”

He rolls his eyes again as he sets his pencil down and picks up the remote. As he turns off the TV, his hand shakes.

"I thought they said everything was fine."

He sets the remote down and rests his arm across the roll-away. "It's just from not-" He stops and looks over at me. "Brian, what are you doing here?"

I lean back in the chair, clasp my hands over my stomach, and say the first thing that comes into my head. "I'm thinking of selling the club." That is not entirely true. In fact, I haven't even thought about it. Theodore had the place cleaned after the investigators finished with it. He even had the building inspector check it out. It seems it was all just superficial damage and for the low, low price of one hundred grand, I can have it up and running in no time. I haven't even given it a moment's thought until just now. Hell, I've been content having the thing sit there empty, like a fucking mausoleum.

He huffs. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Do you think I should sell it? I mean, I thought of re-opening, but who wants to pay twenty bucks to dance where people have died?" I can't believe I'm fucking rambling.

He looks toward the window. "If you sell, if you don't re-open..." He looks back at me, his expression serious. "Then they win."

I roll my lips into my mouth and release them. "Well...I haven't really thought much about it."

He scoffs. "Then why did you bring it up?"

I shrug. "It was the first thing I thought of."

He shakes his head as much as he can with the drain in and laughs. "Of course, isn't it always?"

Anger flares inside me. "No, it isn't always," I snap.

Our eyes meet and we just stare at each other, the tension between us so strong I can almost smell it. He leans his head back on the pillows and closes his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you." The anger gives way to something real, something stronger...the truth.

"Why?" His voice is soft, like how it sounds right before he falls asleep.

I think about all the things I could say, all the things I should say, all the things I want to say, but each and every one sounds trite and clichéd inside my head. "I wanted to see how you were."

He slowly opens his eyes and rolls his head towards me. "I'm fine, now can you please just go?"

"I can..." My gaze doesn't waver. "But I won't."

He sighs. "What are you doing?"

I lean forward until my face is only inches from his. I let go, just a little, and tell him the fucking truth. "I don't know, Justin."

His warm breath skates across my face. "You're only here because I got hurt."

"You're right." He starts to turn his head away, but I place my hand on the side of his face to stop him. "But it's not why I want to stay."

He licks his lips and says softly, "I can't do this anymore. I already told you."

"I know what you told me."

"So why make it harder? Why keep going around in circles? We should just let go now and...get on with our lives."

I shake my head. "I can't do that."

"You can't, or you won't?"

I rub my thumb over his cheek, and whether he means to or not, he leans into my touch. "I can't," I whisper.

"Brian." He blows a puff of air out of his nose and shrugs. "I don't know what to even say."

I smirk. "Wow, let me write that down, I've made Justin Taylor speechless."

He smiles, but it fades quickly. "What do you want?"

I shrug and rub my thumb across his bottom lip. "You."

He removes my hand from his face. "Well, you can't have me."

I pull away from him and sit back in the chair. "What do you want me to do, Justin, beg?"

"I want you to tell me what you want."

"I already told you," I snap.

"Right, you want me. You want to fuck me, but you always do."

"It's not just about that."

He turns his head and looks up at the ceiling. "I've spent the last few days just thinking, you know? About my life, about what I'm doing with my life." He turns his head to me. "Everyone told me that you stayed by me this whole time and I thank you for that."

"Christ."

"But, they also told me that you've been freaking out about me moving to New York."

I swallow hard. "Are you...going to New York?"

He looks at me for a long time. His hesitation already feels like an answer. "Yes, I'm going."

It stings, like an unexpected slap across the face. There it is that fear that's been in the back of my mind since I found those papers at his apartment. The confirmation of what I've known this whole time. I wish, now, that I'd come up with some kind of plan, some kind of rehearsed rebuttal, all the reasons why he shouldn't go, but I didn't and now I can't think of any reason for him to stay. How can I ask him not to go? How can I ask him to give that up? How can I fight against that? I can't. Silently, I get up and put my jacket back on. I look down, my eyes meeting his. I clear my throat, and lean over to kiss him softly on the lips before resting my forehead against his. "Just...take care of yourself."

I pull away from him and cross the room to the door. "Brian." With my hand on the doorknob, I look over my shoulder. "Give me a reason to stay."

Then it's right there, every feeling, every thought, every emotion sitting heavy on the tip of my tongue. I swallow hard. "Justin..." I turn around to face him. "I fucked up...and I'm fucking sorry." I shrug. "But I can't ask you to sacrifice your career for me." I shake my head. "I can't compete with that, and I'm not worth it."

I turn away and walk out of the room. I'm not even a few steps away from the door when I stop and lean against the wall. I feel fucking gutted, as if someone reached into my body and yanked out everything inside of me with their bare hands. I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes. Yes, I love him, and god yes I want him, but asking him to give up his future for me? He's given up too much already where I'm concerned. I guess he's right, we should just let go now and get on with our lives. I just wish I knew how to do that...without him. I push myself away from the wall and turn to leave. A heavy feeling of defeat settles in my chest, making each step away from him harder than the next.

You Say You Want Me (Interlude)

“If you really want something you can figure out how to make it happen.”

~Cher ~

Justin's POV

I open the window and light a cigarette as I look out at the cityscape surrounding my apartment building. I take a drag of my cigarette and let my mind take me where it will, back to the night of the bombing.

I looked over at all of them, Michael and Ben, Ted and Louis, my mother and Tuck, for fuck sakes, and I felt in that second more alone than I'd felt in a long time. After the wave of loneliness had subsided, I just felt angry. I shouldn't have felt either because I left him. Not that it wasn't the right choice to make, because at the time, it felt right...and wrong, but then that's how it always felt with Brian. Sometimes it would feel so right, so fucking perfect, like the night we met was meant to be, destiny, fate, written in the fucking stars. But sometimes, it would feel completely wrong, like the fact that we ever met was some kind of mistake in the universe, a wormhole, an oddity, a conundrum. I looked over and suddenly I was surrounded by couples, those that I knew and those that I didn't. Everywhere I looked there was hand holding, intimate caresses, whispers, kisses, and I ached. Fucking ached. The thing is, when I left Brian, I knew it was time to go. I knew that he loved me, but I knew that somehow that wasn't enough. It wasn't enough for me. I wanted him. I wanted only him. And, not that it came as a surprise to anyone, I was hurt. I tried to get over the Syphilis thing. I tried not to freak out about it, even though I did. But when even that didn't phase him...well it really was the last straw. I love him. I love him more than my own life, which is pathetic and sad, and mostly wrong...and right, but I couldn't...I couldn't anymore. Sometimes I feel older than him, that I should be the one fucking around like I can't get enough dick, come, hot asses, warm mouths, or hard bodies. At twenty-two, I've fucked I don't even know how many guys. How many there have been, triple that number and that's how many men Brian has fucked. It wasn't like I woke up one day and thought; this really isn't getting me off anymore, all this causal sex is just really...boring. It happened gradually at first, my dissatisfaction. Then everything hit me all at once, like waves crashing onto the beach during a storm.

I didn't want to be in a relationship with Brian and his tricks anymore. I just wanted Brian. A long time ago, I told him that I knew what he wanted from me and I knew what to expect from him, and it is true. I still know those things, but I just could no longer live in the land of limbo where there would always be those men standing in between the two of us. When it all hit me, I thought about it for a long time. I thought about it until it made me sick, mentally and physically. Leaving him again wouldn't be like last time. I wasn't leaving for someone I thought was better than Brian. I wasn't leaving because he wouldn't say he loved me. I was leaving because I was unhappy. The longer I thought about it the sicker I became, because this time I was leaving and I wasn't going to go back for anything. When I finally did it, when I finally left, voice calm, hands mostly steady, heart pounding in my chest, stomach contorted in knots, it was the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life. I'd walked out of the loft, took the elevator, walked out of the building, and got sick right there on the street. Leaving Brian like that had been physically painful. It was as if someone just reached inside of me and started pulling out pieces of my anatomy, one bloody organ at a time.

So that night at Babylon, surrounded by couples and longing for the man I knew I'd love for the rest of my life no matter where I went, or who else I was with, because he really would always be there, I turned away from what I couldn't have in my life and went to the bar. Maybe I went to drown my sorrows, or maybe I was just thirsty, in any case, that's where I was when it happened. The sting of the vodka had barely touched my lips when everything became white noise and blackness.

When I woke up, and for whatever reason I knew I'd been out for a while, I wasn't surprised to see Brian there. I wasn't seventeen, he didn't deny my importance in his life anymore, we loved each other, we were always there for each other, even when we weren't together. Even when I was with Ethan, if I really needed Brian, he was there. No one knew about those times, and that's fine by the both of us. That's something only we know, something that only we will know, and something we never talk about. It wasn't fucking, it wasn't even talking, it was sitting in a dark booth in a bar neither of us had been to before sharing a beer, air, space, and not much else. So the fact that he was

sitting there, dark circles under his eyes, days worth of growth on his face, his hair looking like he'd been running his hands through it for hours, and exhaustion making his pose both languid and rigid, wasn't a shock. The fact that he was there when I woke up wasn't some kind of validation. I didn't need to be validated. I knew without one shadow of a doubt that he loved me when he so easily let me back into his life after Ethan.

I wasn't surprised, but I still asked why. I still wanted to hear something from him. I didn't send him away because I don't love him or because I don't think he loves me. I sent him away because I had to. When I left him, when I decided, I made a promise to myself that I wouldn't go back. No matter what he said or did, I wouldn't go back because he missed me. Missed fucking me, missed having me around, just missed me. I wouldn't go back without a promise, without something more than I love you, I love fucking you, I love when you're here, but I still love fucking other people too. It really seems so simple. Stop fucking around, stop making me feel like I'm not enough to satisfy you, and I'll come back. It is just so fucking simple. I huff, because we're Brian Kinney and Justin Taylor, Brian & Justin, and nothing has been or ever will be simple with us.

After I asked him to leave, he didn't even fight it...but I knew he wouldn't. So when he came back to see me, I really was surprised. When he touched me and spoke softly and said he wanted me, I wanted it to be enough. In that moment, with him so close I could smell him, almost taste him, I wanted to say, all is forgiven, I love you, of course I'll take you back, I'm sorry I ever left. He wasn't offering a life, but himself, in what ways I don't know because I didn't ask. When I brought up New York, I did so because I wanted him to confirm what everyone had been telling me for days, that he didn't want me to go. I never expected him to apologize, but I did expect him to give that last little push and let me go. Everyone likes to think that Brian is an enigma, some creature of the earth whose wordless speeches and sporadic words aren't decipherable by anyone. Brian said he isn't worth it, which is such fucking bullshit, and the way it was used wasn't an "I'm not worthy of your love", it was an "I'm not worth the sacrifice." The end result is the same. He gives in, gives up, and gives that little push to where he thinks I should be. I don't give a fuck about New York. I've barely even considered going at all. I heard everything Brian was saying, but this time it can't be me. I can't be the only one who wants it, us.

A soft knock at the door disrupts my thoughts, which were destined to run in circles as they had been for days. Stubbing out the cigarette, I walk to the door and open it. Daphne smiles at me and holds up a pizza and a six pack of beer. "Delivery for the depressed." She smirks and walks in without waiting for an invitation, not that she needs one. I close the door and follow her to the counter of my makeshift kitchen. She sits down on one of the bar stools I recently acquired, flips open the pizza box, and grabs a beer. After twisting off the top, she hands it to me, then grabs one for herself. Taking a swig of her beer, she pushes the box toward me. "Eat."

Sitting down next to her, I shake my head. "I'm not really hungry." I pick at the label on the beer bottle.

"Have you talked to him?"

I huff. "What for?"

"Because you're fucking miserable? Because you want to? I don't know, Justin, pick a reason."

I take a swig of the beer and shrug. "I'm leaving." I don't know if I mean it, but I say it nonetheless.

"What?" I glance over. Her eyes are wide and her eyebrows are nearly touching her hairline. "You're actually going to do it?"

I set the bottle down and stand up. "Why not? What have I got to lose?"

"I..." Turning around, I face her. She furrows her brow, sets down the beer, and pushes her shoulders back. "I think you are being a-" She bites her lip as if searching for the right word.

"An asshole? A twat? I should just go running back to him because he wants me?" I throw up my hands. "What does that even mean?"

“Have you asked him?” I shake my head. “Well, he’s the only one who can answer that. I swear, the two of you,,” She shakes her head and takes a drink of her beer. “I told him to stop running from you, but-”

I cut her off with a laugh and walk back over to her. Leaning forward, I lower my voice as if I’m revealing a big secret, and maybe I am. “Daph, Brian isn’t running. Forward, or backward, or anywhere. Brian is...stuck, right in the same place he’s been for,” I shrug. “I don’t even know how long.”

She sets down her beer and places her hands on my shoulders. “You should just talk to him.”

“Right.”

“Justin, you didn’t see him. You...I really think you getting hurt again...he’s...different.”

“He feels guilty. He feels obligated.” I shake my head and step back until her hands fall from my shoulders.

“Jesus Christ, Justin. I thought you loved him.”

“I do.”

She stands up and comes to stand right in front of me. “I know you’re waiting for him to,” she waves her hand in the air, “make some grandiose gesture or something, but you know that Brian only does that when he’s-”

“Pushing people off proverbial cliffs?”

“Exactly!” She places her hands back on my shoulders. “Go to him. Tell him what you want.”

“I’ve already told him.”

She rolls her eyes. “Tell him again and maybe this time, he’ll say okay, that’s what he wants too.”

I laugh and cup her face between my hands. “Can I come live in your fantasy world?”

She smirks at the old joke. “As long as you promise not to mistreat the pink ponies and yellow furry puppies.” She places her hands over mine. “I know you think it’s his turn or something to fix things, but maybe he doesn’t know how. Maybe you do.”

“I asked him to give me a reason to stay.”

“You did?”

“He said he wasn’t worth it.”

She tilts her head to the side. “That Brian, he’s such a fucking liar.”

* * *

Six Fuller, corner of Tremont. The Loft. I stare up at the place I think of, and probably will always think of, as my home even though I love my apartment. I love having something that’s mine alone. I know there are people out there my age who love to be taken care of, who depend on their parents, or guardians, or whothefuckever, who loathe responsibility. When I got my first electric bill, \$62.25, I actually fucking laughed, feeling delirious in my joy. For the first time in my life I wasn’t living with anyone. No one was taking care of me. I was finally independent and it felt so fucking fantastic. Sure, I had a taste of this freedom, and that’s what it is, when I lived with Ethan. We shared expenses, but everything was still in his name. A few weeks before Ethan cheated on me, we’d talked about adding my name to the lease. Of course, things really didn’t go as planned, but in my life, things rarely do. In any case, I have that freedom now, and it feels really good. Sure, it’s lonely sometimes, but it’s also empowering.

I shake away my thoughts and focus my mind back to the situation at hand. I'm actually not sure why I'm here. Last night Daphne and I talked for a long time, about life, about how she's doing in school, about the bombing, Prop 14 being pulled off the ballot because people died, and we talked about Brian. I do want him to be the one to want it this time, to want us, but I know that Daphne is right. What does Brian know about trying to get me back? He's never had to do it before. It's not like I know what to do; I've had two relationships and countless fucks. I'm not any more or less qualified to fix this, but I have to stop lying to myself that I don't want to.

I stare at the intercom for a long time. I know the code to get in. I've had it engraved in my brain since Brian told it to me one night when he was stoned out of his mind, back when I was still in high school. Still, I don't live here anymore and I remember all too well how irritated we'd get when people would just show up knocking at the door, or sometimes even open it without knocking at all. After a while it seemed the only people that ever asked to be buzzed up were delivery personnel and tricks.

Without giving it more thought than it's worth, I press the black button next to the name KINNEY, and wait. "What?"

I smile despite myself. "Your manners are impeccable as usual."

"Justin?" He sounds surprised and a little thrill shoots through me. Surprising Brian, and him actually expressing it, is a rare thing.

"Yeah...can I come up?"

"Of course." He says it like it's the stupidest question I've ever asked.

When the door buzzes, I pull it open and step inside. I take the stairs automatically, because whenever I lived here, I hardly ever took the elevator. As I make my way up, I feel as nervous as the first time he brought me here, which is really fucking ridiculous. When I reach the landing, I pause. The door is open, and I can see inside the cavernous space. It's mostly dark, which is rare. Brian always keeps the lights on, even at night, like he can't sleep in complete darkness. Slowly, I walk toward the door and step over the threshold. The only light on is a lamp near the couch and the one over the kitchen area. Brian is sitting at a bistro table, a new addition to the space I notice. There is a lit cigarette between his fingers. His laptop is in front of him, along with a few papers scattered around the surface of the table and a nearly empty bottle of water next to the ashtray. He's dressed in a black tank top and faded jeans. I don't have to see to know that the top button is probably undone.

I stop near the door. "If you're working..."

He looks up at me from the computer as he takes a drag of his cigarette. "I'm not." I nod. "Close the door."

Right...the door. Turning around, I slide the door shut, taking a deep breath as I do. I feel like a fucking seventeen year old virgin all over again, and if I wasn't so fucking nervous, I'd be laughing.

I'm not sure what to do once I've shut the door, but I'm known for putting on brave fronts when it's required. Pushing myself away from the door, I move into the kitchen and stand across from him. He takes another drag of his cigarette, his eyes focused on mine, as he raises his eyebrows.

Right. "I-" And suddenly, I really have no idea why I'm here. What was I thinking coming here? I don't even know what to say to him anymore. This...was a stupid thing to do. But I'm here, so...I push my shoulders back and jut out my chin. "You're worth it." Worth loving, worth sacrificing for, worth everything, you dumb stupid bastard.

He shakes his head and stubs out his cigarette. "Justin."

"Don't do that." I know that tone of voice. "Don't make it seem like what I'm saying is wrong just because you don't want to hear it." I move from behind the kitchen counter and stand next to him. I know being this close to him, close enough to touch, to smell, to lean forward and taste, is a bad idea, but fuck it. When it comes to me and Brian,

rules of attraction or separation need not apply. "Sometimes you are the smartest person I know and sometimes you are so fucking stupid."

"Oh?" He smirks.

"Do you really think I give a shit about New York?"

He stands up and shrugs. "Don't you?" He starts to walk away, but I don't know where he thinks he's going.

I follow him, move around him, and stop him by standing in front of him. "No, I don't."

He lifts one shoulder. "You should."

I cross my arms and tilt my head to the side. "Why?"

"Isn't it what you want? To be an artist? To be famous? To make something of yourself?"

"I do want those things," I say slowly. "But I also want you."

He walks around me and heads for the living room. "Well, that didn't seem to be the case the other day."

I turn around. "I was in the hospital. I just woke up from a coma for the second fucking time in my life. I almost d-" I pull myself back. I take a deep breath and just reign it all in. "Brian." There is a catch in my throat that I neither wanted nor expected to be there. I stare at his back, the tank top stretched over his tense muscles. "When you said you wanted me...what did you mean, exactly?" There. That is what I came here to ask.

There is a long stretch of silence and part of me knows I should go, because the longer I stay, the longer he says nothing, the more hurt and disappointed I'll become. Slowly, he turns around. The look on his face shocks the shit out of me. He looks so...open, vulnerable, scared. I've known him for almost five years, and I've never seen him look at me that way, not once. I almost want to tell him not to say anything, but I don't. He licks his lips and he presses the fingers of his right hand into the palm of his left. "When..." There is a catch in his voice, and he clears his throat before going on. "That night you left...I almost asked you not to go."

I keep my arms crossed, as if to hold in everything that threatens to leak out. "Why didn't you?" I ask softly.

He shrugs and looks towards the door. "I..." He looks back at me. "I knew what you wanted. I've always known." He rolls his lips into his mouth.

I take a step closer to him. "But?"

"But, I just wasn't sure that..."

"You wanted it too."

He nods slightly. "Then...the bombing..." He looks away. "And I was so fucking scared." He looks back at me, his eyes shining. Fuck. "I thought that if anything happened to you, if I fucking lost you, really lost you..." He runs his fingers across his lips. "I just couldn't."

I take a deep breath and do my best to try to keep my emotions in check. "And now? What about now that I'm here. I'm fine. I'm alive. What now?"

He swallows. I know how hard this is for him, but I also know that he has to do it. If he wants me back, he's got to just fucking say so. "When you were in the hospital, I had all this time to just...think." He pushes his shoulders back. "And I made some decisions about my life."

Words that I'd once brushed off came rushing back to me, look, you're making me fucking nervous as hell. Just...tell me what you want, what you've decided... "And what decisions are those?"

He huffs out a nervous laugh. "I want you. I want to fuck you." I don't disparage his honesty on that count. "I want to be with you. I want to wake up with you next to me in the morning, and when I go to sleep at night I want you there beside me. I want everything." He says it all in a low, whispered rush.

I swallow hard. "What's everything?" My voice mimics his.

He steps forward and cups my cheek, his skin warm and moist. "You're everything."

It's not I love you, it's not I want to marry you, it's not ridiculously romantic. What it is...what it feels like is the truth. I lean into his touch and cover his hand with mine. "I want a life with you, Brian. Can you give that to me? Will you give it to me?"

Something flashes in his eyes, and I remove my hand from his and take a step back. He takes a deep breath. "I do...want to give you those things, but Justin..." He shrugs and looks pained. "I don't know if I'll ever want to get married." He looks so absolutely horrified that I laugh.

I shake my head. "Who cares about rings and vows and bullshit ceremonies that don't even fucking matter?"

His brow furrows. "Uh...you do?"

I run my hands through my hair and step toward him. "Brian, I don't need to be married to you-"

"What about Rage and all that shit about Michael and Ben?"

He seems torn between irritation and confusion. I place my hands on his face, the hair there making the familiar touch seem new and different. "Everyone has fantasies. I do. You do. We all do. When we wrote that issue everything was going so good between me and you...so I indulged and when the issue came out things were shit."

His brow furrows even more. "What about a home, a husband, a family?"

I shake my head. "I never asked for a husband, that was your word. I said I wanted us to be a real couple, to have a home, maybe someday a family."

He runs his hand through my hair and cups the back of my neck. "I don't want to be with anyone...but you."

My eyes widen slightly and I feel my mouth hang open. "You mean..."

He traces my lips with his finger, the intensity, the sexual chemistry between us growing with each casual touch. "Just you." He leans forward, but stops. "What about New York?"

I shake my head. "Fuck New York. I don't want it."

"No?"

I wrap my arms around his neck. "No."

"Justin..." He holds my face in his hands, his thumbs stroking my cheeks. "I do...love you." He says it so softly and so sincerely that it floats into me and explodes into a thousand rays of light.

I let out a breath. "I know."

He leans forward then, pauses, then kisses me. Even this, something we've done more times than one could count, feels different and new. It's not just the beard, it's how softly, how fucking sweetly his lips capture mine. I can't

help the little moan that plays at the back of my throat from the feeling of it all. Maybe it seems too easy, maybe there is more to talk about...I know there is...but fuck it. He loves me, he wants me, he wants only me, and honestly as long as I have that, I really don't need much else.

Chapter 8 - Love

“To love and be loved is to feel the sun from both sides.”

~ David Viscott ~

Brian's POV

I hold him close to me, my fingers splayed over his back, my lips against his neck. There has always been something forbidden about Justin. The first night I saw him across the street, surrounded by yellow mist, it wasn't his looks that drew me to him. It was that he seemed like something I could want but never have. I immediately thought “fuck that” because Brian Kinney does what he wants, who he wants, when he wants, and no subjective moral was going to stop me. Who knew that Justin would be the apple in my Garden of Eden? Who knew that I was both Eve, picking the fruit from the forbidden tree, and Adam, accepting and taking a big juicy bite of it while silently damning the consequences? Who knew that I'd one day be able to apply the oldest story in the bible to my life? I suppose all those forced hours in Sunday School paid off in more ways than one. I hated Sunday School. I had no real interest in the bible, but I had verses and chapters memorized. When I was a teenager the bible was my weapon of choice when battling Joan Kinney.

“What are you thinking about?” He kisses my neck as his hands move up and down my back.

I pull back from him and take him by the hand without answering and lead him to the bedroom. He came back so easily. It wasn't as much of a fight as I thought it would be, but if I think about it, his leaving was always more difficult than all the times he came back. I stop at the bottom of the steps and turn to face him.

He raises his eyebrows and tilts his head to the side. “What?” I stare at him intently for so long that he starts to fidget. “Brian, what is it?”

“It should be harder.” I realize after the words leave my mouth that he can take that any number of ways.

He doesn't smirk or laugh or even smile. “You think so?”

“Shouldn't it?”

He looks over his shoulder toward the door, as if to replay the entire preceding scene in his head from start to finish. After a few minutes of silent contemplation, he turns back to me. “This part was easy. What comes next will be hard.”

He's right, because while we'd somehow agreed to get back together, in our non-verbal, non-linear way, and we are most definitely about to fuck, we haven't discussed how we are actually going to make any of it work. It scares the shit out of me. I watch a range of emotions pass through his eyes, and I think that maybe he doesn't know how it will work out either. I always thought Justin had it all figured out. That he'd always know where to go, where to lead, and how to help me follow. The fact that he might be as clueless as I am is both a consolation and a quandary. Maybe it's not about him leading me, or me leading him, maybe it's about us moving forward together. Maybe Justin hasn't opened as many doors as I thought he had. I tug his hand until he is standing beside me. Together, side by side, we walk up the steps to the bedroom. It's symbolic, possibly lesbianic, but it's the truth nonetheless.

When we are standing in front of the bed, he toes off his shoes as I remove his jacket. Part of me feels like this should go faster because it's been so long since I've touched him like this, but neither of us can seem to speed up the process. Each piece of clothing is removed between long pauses for kissing, touching, caressing. It feels like hours have passed before we are both completely naked.

I press my forehead to his temple and whisper, “Get on the bed, on your stomach.”

He nods and slowly moves away, his fingers skimming my arm as he goes, delaying the break in contact until the last possible second. It sends a chill over my entire body. When he's lying face down, his arms tucked under his

pillow, I stretch out beside him. I touch his hair, twisting the soft strands between my fingers before running my hand over his neck and down his back. It reminds me of when he left me for the fiddler and I paid \$300 for a hustler, but even at that price, I always knew it was a cheap imitation of the real thing. He turns his head towards me, his eyes dark and soft. I lean forward, whispering his name before kissing him again.

When I told him he was everything, it was my ultimate truth spoken out loud for the first time. My life before Justin, all the times between him, really mean very little to me. When he came along, as Michael liked to say in the beginning, it felt as if I'd just been born, like my life was just beginning. That the moment before I saw him, I'd been a fetus trapped in a warm liquid darkness, and all sounds, voices, people, things were muted and dulled. Maybe he feels the same way. We met the night my son was born. The significance of that is no longer lost on me. From that night on Justin, the artist, the man, has painted my life using bold vibrant colors, when before him everything had been in black and white.

I move my mouth from his lips, across his jaw, to his ear where I take the lobe in my mouth, before moving on to his neck and back. "Different," he mumbles.

I laugh softly around the skin I'm sucking on. I lift my head and trace the slightly red area with my index finger. "It's the beard."

He rolls over just enough to look back at me. "No, it's you."

I kiss him again, cupping the back of his neck as I slide my leg over his. I kiss his shoulder blade as he buries his head back in the pillow. As much as I want to be inside him, I want to savor him. I want to retrace the roads on the map I memorized long ago, roads I could follow with my eyes closed and never get lost. I move down his body, mouth preceding hands. He tastes just like I remember only better, because for the first time I truly appreciate it, him. I never really realized before my trip to the land of introspection how much I took him for granted. I tuck away that guilt and remind myself that is the past and I can't change it, I can only move on. I can only learn from it, something that I haven't been doing.

As I reach the small of his back, swirling my tongue at the edge of his crack, he spreads his legs. An invitation I'm more than happy to accept. I slide my body between his legs, gently pull apart his ass cheeks, and kiss his hole. He gasps and arches his back. I wonder if the last time someone touched him like this was the last time I touched him like this. I swirl my tongue around his hole, tasting, savoring, pleasuring. If there is one thing that Justin loves more than anything in bed, it's to be rimmed. Knowing that, I take my time, alternating between light kisses and gentle sucking. Every once in a while, I'll press the tip of my tongue to his hole as if to enter him, but I don't. He moans, pushes back against me, ruts against the bed. I am determined to make him come, just like this. I run my hands up his body, now slick with sweat and heated with desire. Just as he moans my name I push my tongue into him, and out, and in again. It's too much for him, the build up too intense and before he's ready, before he wants to, he comes, his entire body shaking from his orgasm.

I slide up his body, kissing his heated flesh the entire way. He's breathing heavily, almost panting. It makes my cock ache. Once I reach his neck, I push aside his hair and kiss him there before moving off of him and rolling him over. I kiss him quick enough to catch a breath that comes fast and hot in into my mouth. He grips my hair hard and pulls me down, fucking my mouth with his tongue as he breathes heavily out of his nose. Appreciation, retaliation, either way when we break apart I'm breathing almost as fast as he is.

I stop for a minute just to look at him. His eyes are dark and half-hooded, his mouth is slightly open, and his tongue is pressed against the back of his bottom front teeth. He looks so... "Beautiful."

He smiles softly as he reaches up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. The intimacy of this moment feels new and overwhelming, like we've never before taken the time to appreciate the chemistry between us, and maybe save for a few times, we haven't. Bending down, I cover his right nipple with my mouth and gently suck on the already hard nub, then do the same to the other. I take my time, kissing, licking, sucking where I desire on his chest before moving down to his stomach, licking up the come that's smeared on his belly before moving down to his semi-flaccid cock. I wrap my fingers around it and lick off the come from the head. His fingers twist in my hair as I cup his balls. As I stroke his cock, I take one of his balls in my mouth. He gasps, moans, twists my hair hard between his

fingers. I'm doing nothing short of worshipping him, but after everything, after all the bullshit that we've been through together, apart, he fucking deserves it.

As his cock hardens in my hand, I lick the head before taking him in my mouth. I have to admit that I've blown him many times before, but mostly in a rush, mostly to get him hard and ready...not that I didn't love it. His cock is one of my favorite things about him. Either way, right now, I'm giving him a blow job that he'll never forget, and if those sounds are any indication, he won't.

"Brian, oh god." He bucks his hips just as I take my hand off his cock, the combination move pushing his cock deep into my mouth. I pump him up and down with my mouth, pressing my tongue against the shaft and taking a moment on each upstroke to suck on the head. When I look up at him, his eyes are closed; his head is moving back and forth, lost to the sensation. Suddenly beautiful seems like too common a word to describe how he looks at the moment. My cock is pulsating, ridged, leaking, but I ignore it because I can wait and when I come, I want to be inside of him. I take his balls in my hands again, tugging and squeezing them as I continue to blow him. He releases my hair, grips the sheets in his fists, arches his back, and flexes his toes. He's so close he's delirious. "Brian, you...are...driving...me-" I slip my middle finger into his ass as I take him deep into my mouth, effectively cutting off his words and transferring them into a primal, animalist growl that echoes throughout the loft as he comes hot and hard down my throat.

I suck his cock until it starts to soften. As I release it, I look at him. He's limp and sweaty, panting hard, but completely exquisite in his post-orgasmic state. I lay down beside him, my cock painfully hard now, and kiss his neck. "You like that?"

He doesn't answer until his breathing is back to normal. "That...was fucking mind-blowing." He looks over at me. "Pun so fucking intended."

I laugh and lick a bead of sweat from his neck. "Good."

"You've never..." I lift my head. "Done it quite like that before."

I place my hand on the side of his face and rub my thumb across his cheek. "Yeah, sorry about that."

His laugh is like a melodic murmur. He lifts his head as he wraps his arm around my neck. He kisses my lips, my chin, my neck. "God, I want you to fuck me."

I slide my hand up from his hips to his chest and back down again. "I'm going to." He starts to reach for my cock, but I stop him. "No." He pulls away from me slightly. "I want to be..."

He smiles, wide and big, and all...fucking sunshiny. "That's so fucking..." I kiss him again to keep the words from being said out loud. It's one thing to think things like that; it's another thing to say them. He yanks his mouth away from mine. "Hot."

I rest my forehead against his and laugh. "Right."

He sucks my earlobe into his mouth and whispers very softly, "And sweet too." I roll my eyes as I move my body back between his legs, kissing him hard when I'm situated. After a minute he pulls back and places his hands on either side of my face. "I love that you're being..." I cock my eyebrow. "I want you to fuck me." He leans up and kisses my neck. "Hard." My chin. "Fast." Licks my bottom lip. "Like I-"

"Love it." I finish just as our mouths meet in a hard, fast, tongue-thrusting kiss. Playtime is over. I break the kiss long enough to reach for a condom and the lube on the bedside table. He takes the condom from me and opens it. I lean to the side so he can slide it on as I open the lube and squirt some on his hole.

He bites his bottom lip to keep from saying what he always says, but as usual he can't help himself. "Shit that's cold."

I laugh as he lays back, and squirt some lube in my hand. I toss the bottle aside and cover my cock with the lube. I place my hands flat on the mattress on either side of his chest, holding myself above while he gets situated. He grips my biceps, wraps his legs loosely around my back, and looks up at me. "Ready?"

He nods. Keeping one hand pressed to the mattress, I reach between us and guide my cock into his ass. Fuck. It takes everything I know, everything I've learned, and all the strength I have not to come as the familiar tight heat of his body wraps around my cock. Once I'm almost completely inside him, I place my hand back on the bed. His cock is already almost hard again between us. Making Justin come three times in a row in such a short amount of time, especially considering how hard he just came, is actually no easy feat. Yes, he's young, but he's not a machine.

I slide into him slowly, and out again just as slowly. I know he wants it hard and fast, and I plan on delivering, but not before I fully enjoy the fact that he's here, that I'm in him, that I missed this and having it all back is almost enough to move me to tears, almost. I savor it, crave it, lament it, try and memorize the complete overwhelming feeling of it. Our eyes meet, and it's all there, that connection, that understanding that keeps him from thrusting up against me. He's content to just enjoy this rhythmically languid thrusting, knowing that once I've had my fill of it, I'll do just like he wants and fuck him so hard he'll come screaming my name...or god's.

As my thrusts get harder and faster, my body gets closer and closer to his, until my arms are wrapped around his shoulders and head, my fingers buried in his hair, my mouth claiming his over and over. His legs wrap tight around me, his cock, now hard and leaking, slides between our bodies, and his fingernails dig into my back. We push and thrust, moan and growl. It becomes primal, needful, lustful, and almost passionately barbaric. Our bodies are slick with sweat, easily sliding against each other as we fight off the urge to come for as long as possible. I feel hot, wet, surrounded by his...everything. Devotion, power, want, need. Love. Everything feels like fire, sounds like the crack of lightening, and behind my eyes, nothing but the blinding rays of the sun, white, hot, heat. I can't catch my breath, yet I can't stop moving my hips, can't stop thrusting, needing, wanting. Loving.

It goes on and on. I'm amazed by our control. Then, his body tenses as he starts to shake beneath me. His cock twitches, and erupts between us. He clenches down so hard on my cock that I come buried deep inside him. It's the most amazing, fan-fucking-tastic orgasm of my life. The wait was more than worth it.

I collapse on top of him, my face pressed to his neck. I hold him close to my body, kiss his neck, and between deep ragged breaths whisper, "I fucking missed you."

Justin's POV

Sex with Brian has always been amazing. Even when we weren't exactly getting along it was still amazing. Brian is great at a lot of things, but he excels in bed. He is master and commander. In bed, he's the perfect man. This, tonight, the words "amazing" and "perfect" don't even come close to describing it.

Brian has touched, kissed, caressed, and fucked me more times than I can count. Tonight, he worshiped me. Possessed me. Needed and wanted me in ways he's never needed or wanted me before. There is no way to articulate how it feels or what it means. It is simply something that can't be put into a box and labeled this or that.

The weight of his body presses me into the mattress. His cock is still in my ass. His lips are pressed to my neck, his warm breath skating over my skin. I have never felt so completely and utterly satisfied in my life. Suddenly all I can think is, where the fuck has this been hiding for the last four years? What did the bombing, me being in the hospital, really do to Brian? This isn't guilt, this isn't love wrapped in a PTSD red ribbon, this is something completely different. He's different. It's not just the way he fucked me, it's the before, it's how he knew that just because he finally said he loved me, and that we somehow got back together in our own way, and we were going to fuck, it didn't mean everything would suddenly be perfect. The fact that he even acknowledged it at all is more mind-blowing than his blow job.

I run my hands down his back and up again. "Brian?" I kiss his neck as he "hmm's?" I pause, not even sure what I want to say. I must take too long, because he lifts his head and looks down at me. "It has to really work this time." It really, really does because I can't do what we've been doing anymore.

He twists a strand of my hair between his fingers. "I know."

Validated, acknowledged. Loved. "And you know, let's not...rush things." He smirks, pressing his tongue to his cheek as he trusts his hips against me. I laugh and lightly slap his shoulder. "You know what I mean."

He stops smirking and leans forward, my eyes immediately focusing on his lips as I wait for him to kiss me. When he doesn't do it right away, I meet his eyes. There is something familiar about the way he's looking at me, only I can't place it. Slowly, he leans down, his tongue sweeps across my bottom lip and then he kisses me, gently, softly, lovingly.

It makes me feel dizzy and giddy. After a minute, he stops, resting his forehead against mine. "I have to pull out now." His voice is thick and low.

"Okay," I whisper.

He lifts his upper body as he reaches between us to hold the base of the condom and remove his cock from my ass. As he rolls off of me to dispose of the condom, that feeling of emptiness that always comes when he pulls out washes over me, only for some reason tonight it seems stronger, heavier. I roll onto my side and he looks over at me.

He cups the side of my face before his hand is once again in my hair. "You staying?" There is a touch of uncertainty and vulnerability in his voice that tugs at my insides. He probably means tonight, but maybe he means for good.

I smile, and kiss his shoulder. "I'm staying." It's the easiest decision I've ever made in my life. I move closer to him, sliding my arm over his waist, my leg over his, and lay my cheek against his chest. He wraps his arm around me and rests his cheek on top of my head.

I lift my head and look up at him. "I love you."

He smiles and kisses my lips. "I know."

I know we have things to think about, talk about, work out, but for right now, for tonight, none of it matters because it's just us, finally, us.

Brian's POV

I hold Justin closer to me as his breathing evens out, and he falls asleep. It took me thirty-four years and ten long fucking days in a hospital to get here. It's not like people say, that one day you wake up and suddenly wonder, "When did I change?" It wasn't like that for me at all. Each day he laid there unconscious, not moving, barely breathing, I could feel the knobs turning, the gears grinding, the soft clicks as the combination was figured out and the safe was opened. Inside there wasn't money, or jewels, or any material possessions whatsoever. Inside was me, this me, not a new me, a better me, a me that only made sense because of him. Different, better, new, improved, transformed, transfixed, call it what you will, it all means the same thing in the end, for better or worse.

It doesn't matter what happens from here on out as long as I have him, and he...he finally has me.

~The End~