

Through a Mirror Darkly

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Genre: Angst/Horror

Warnings: Character Death but not what you think.

Takes a strange turn at the end of Episode 217, when Brian goes to tell Justin about his new partnership.

Chapter 1

Brian got off the plane that brought him home to the Pitts, a slight skip in his steps and a smirk firmly planted on his face, knowing that he had Vance in a corner and there was nothing his new boss could do about it.

He tried the word 'Partner' out on his lips a few times, ignoring the stares of passersby. He envisioned being introduced to their new clients, Vance no doubt having to choke on the words, 'Yes, and this is my partner, Brian Kinney.'

Brian had to laugh at the ironic turn that line would take when Vance would have to utter those words. Of course he had to laugh again at the sheer audacity of anyone saying the word 'partner' and 'Brian Kinney' in the same sentence. Which of course, brought him back to Justin.

All things led back to Justin.

Brian had known he had been a bit of an asshole to the kid lately. The whole fiasco with the kid's birthday, him pissing on his art, which he still refuses to admit why exactly that bothered him - Brian Kinney really did not do jealousy. But there was something about the fact that when he walked in his loft and found Mikey's hand on Justin, even knowing that nothing could or would have happened, but just knowing that Mikey was getting to share something so intimate with Justin, just...well, it just irked him.

There was a brief moment, very brief, but it was still there, that Brian Kinney, Mr. No Regrets himself, had wished he had never met one Mr. Michael Novotny.

And then the moment was gone and he just felt rage - and how apropos was that - to be pissing on his very image, his very likeness. His alter-ego's was aptly named.

So with everything going on, he had decided to get Justin something. A week away in Vermont - no school, no ad campaigns, no guys, no Babylon, no Woodys. It would be ridiculously romantic. Brian cringed when he thought about the term 'ridiculously romantic' and filed it away, in a file that went into a drawer in a cabinet that was locked with ten different locks and the cabinet was encased in cement and left at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

Of course, things not always going quite as he planned, that stupid fucker Marty sold the agency and put Vance in charge, which made it so he had to protect his job and do something drastic because without that job, there would be no nice loft, no nice things in the loft and no school tuition and as much as he was loathe to admit it to anyone, that thought out of everything else just...irked him.

There were always things about Justin that irked him. Things he didn't want to admit. Things that made him wonder what happened to the Brian Kinney he knew before the night Gus was born. Before he met a kid under a streetlight who...

And that's when Brian shut down again and put those feelings in another file in another drawer in another cabinet that was buried somewhere deep and dark, possibly the Mariana Trench.

Brian arrived at Vanguard, relishing with glee what the scenario would be when he confronted Vance with his news.

Brian had walked out of Vanguard with that same skip and smirk again, loving the gobsmacked look on ole Vance's face. He remembered passing Cynthia on his way out as well, the look of triumph and new found respect on her face making Brian smile all the more. There were not many people he could trust in his corporate world, but he knew he could always trust Cynthia. No matter whatever happened, she would be there for him and he would be there for her.

As he reached the loft, he once again imagined all the different scenarios that would materialize in the next few minutes. Only this time they were concerning one blond and were much more satisfying. He thought about what would happen when he wandered into the loft and greeted Justin with his good news - about the kid running and jumping into his arms, planting kisses all over his face. That left a huge smile on his face.

Another scenario showed him coming home to an empty loft because Justin decided that maybe he should go on the trip to Vermont anyways. Although that scenario was probably more likely and left Brian thinking that he could understand the kid for wanting to do that, it still left him with an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

This of course, caused him to park the Jeep quickly and run up the stairs two at a time, and then pulling the loft door open with a slightly expectant and nervous force.

"Hey Sunshine! Come congratulate me," Brian said as he held the champagne bottle and threw his coat on the couch. "Your partner," Brian said smugly, "just made partner."

That uneasy feeling washed over Brian once again. The diner! He must be at the diner, working, Brian thought. Yeah, that was it.

After Brian had checked the diner and didn't see Justin, he walked over to Woody's and saw the guys. Of course, you couldn't miss them, what with that hideous pink feathery coat Emmett was wearing.

Brian ran up to the guys, bouncing still, not being able to contain his excitement, waiting to see Justin's face when he told him about being made partner.

"Look who it is," Mikey said.

"Oh, hiya stranger," Emmett said while taking his sunglasses off.

"Huh - the face looks familiar," Ted remarked.

"Shut the fuck up," Brian replied.

"Unfortunately the voice sounds the same," Ted responded.

Brian ran up to Mikey and kissed him on the lips.

"When did ya get back?" Mikey asked smiling.

"A few of hours ago," Brian replied excitedly. "Where's Justin?"

Ted looked over at Brian and scoffed.

Emmett looked at Brian questioningly. "Who's Justin?"

Chapter 2

Brian looked at Emmett as if he had grown wings to go with those feathers.

"What do you mean, 'who's Justin?'" Brian asked.

Emmett ducked his head down and looked back at Brian as if he were speaking to a five year-old. "I mean...well...I mean," Emmett said with a flick of his wrist and then put his hand on his hip, "who is Justin?" Emmett then did that head tilt thing that Brian knew meant, 'I really don't get the question.'

Brian looked at Mikey and Ted, who both look confused also.

"Can one of you two please tell Emmett, who seems to have had some kind of memory lapse, probably due to being Babylon's favorite bottom boy, who Justin is?" Brian said while smirking at Emmett.

"Hey," Emmett protested. "I'll have you know that there is still no scientific proof yet that too much bottoming is bad for you." Emmett then laughed.

Brian then turned to Mikey and Ted who had yet to say anything. "Well?"

Mikey shook his head. "Uh, Brian, I would love to explain who Justin is..."

"Good," Brian said and nodded in satisfaction. Then he could find out where Justin was.

"When you explain it to me," Mikey said and then all the men, except for Brian of course, chuckled.

Brian took in the expression of each face in turn. Each one was laughing - not understanding how much the joke was really hurting Brian.

"This isn't funny. Now where the fuck is Justin?" Okay, Brian thought, he'd had enough of this. Besides, it was starting to creep him out.

"Brian," Mikey said while scoffing, "quit it. Now who's this Justin?"

When Brian went to respond to Mikey, he stopped. He couldn't believe he had missed it before. But it was there, as plain as the nose on Mikey's face.

Or in this case, the goatee on Mikey's face.

"When the fuck did you get that thing?" Brian exclaimed pointing at Mikey's new acquisition.

All three men stopped laughing to look at what Brian was pointing at. They followed his line of sight and saw he was pointing to Mikey's goatee.

"Uh...Brian...I've had this for quite a while," Mikey replied while stroking the thing.

"No you didn't. Before I left on my trip, you had no chin hair. Now you have that...that chin rat. It looks worse than that kid's, you know, that violinist who likes to play out in the park by the gazebo."

Ted addressed Mikey as he pointed to Brian, "are you gonna take that from him?"

Mikey looked pissed. "No I'm not! Briiiian!"

"Oh, good comeback," Ted said.

Brian had really had enough. He just wanted to find the kid, give him his news and go on with his life. Unless this was some way to get back at him for leaving for Chicago and Justin had them all in on it.

"You know, if this is some kind of joke - you know - 'oh look at poor, brain-damaged Brian' joke or 'let's see how fucked up we can make Brian look' joke - it's not really that funny. Did Justin put you up to this?" Brian asked a bit desperately.

"If anyone is joking around here, I'm pretty sure it's you Brian," Ted supplied. "And now you've brought in this imaginary co-conspirator."

Everyone looked at Brian with a concerned expression on their face.

"Fine! Whatever...just tell me where Justin is...I have good news and I want him to be the first to hear it," Brian said while wiping the back of his neck. That uneasy feeling that he had been getting ever since he walked into an empty loft was compounding on itself now.

"Brian, we can't tell you where Justin is," Mikey said.

Brian looked up quickly, knowing that finally the joke, as sick as it was, was over.

"Because, we don't know who Justin is," Mikey said with a slightly worried look on his face. "So...what's the news?" Mikey asked excitedly.

The joke wasn't over and Brian had that feeling in his gut again - that this wasn't a joke. The blank stares of recognition on the men's faces were enough to let him know. While trying hard to keep from getting sick all over the steps of Woody's, Brian looked back at the three men gathered before him. He would hate himself later if this was really a joke for what he was about to do but he found himself not really caring at the moment. "Justin...he's blond and sweet and he comes up to here on me," and with that Brian put his hand up to his chin. "Deb always calls him Sunshine because of his smile..."

"Oh, now he's sucked your mother into this delusion," Ted said to Mikey. "Please continue. This is very entertaining."

"He likes to sketch, especially me and my cock, and he's a pain in the ass but he's my pain in the ass. And he's been living with me since the accident..."

Ted scoffed again while Mikey and Emmett started to break down laughing.

"God Brian. You really had us going there. Okay, joke's over now," Mikey said while trying to get his breath back after laughing so hard. "To think you would actually have us believe that you, you of all people, would have someone living at the loft with you. Good one Brian," and with that Mikey put his hand on Brian's shoulder.

Brian swallowed and then continued. "So that night, when Gus was born..."

"What about that night Brian?" Mikey asked, getting that worried look on his face again.

"That night, I didn't pick up a trick and take him back home with me and then take him to the hospital?"

"Shit Brian! What are you fucked up on?" Mikey screamed. "Okay, I'll humor you. You got the call early in the day from Mel. We hung around the loft until they told us it was okay to go over to the hospital. You and I were there. There was no trick. Then you took some E, fucked some nurse, Mel and Linds got pissed off at you and kicked you out of the hospital. I drove you home. You crashed and I picked you up in the morning. End of story."

That was it. Brian saw it in his head. The words were trying to come to the forefront of his brain - big as fucking life. A marquee made up of LED lettering blinking on and off - THIS IS NOT A JOKE.

Brian tried hard not to let his voice crack as he looked back at the men. He was way past the stage of wanting to vomit on the sidewalk and was quickly going straight to desperately wanting to rock back and forth on his haunches while banging his head against the wall. Anything to get this sick feeling to go away. "So that night, I didn't pick up a kid under a streetlight, with blond hair and the bluest eyes you could ever find and a stupid blue plaid shirt?"

Ted and Emmett exchanged nervous glances with each other.

"Um, no Brian, you didn't, but this is really spooky," Emmett said. "Because Ted did pick someone up that same night that fits that description."

Somewhere deep in the recesses of Brian's brain, he hoped to fucking God that that was a fucking joke.

And sometime, about an hour before all this happened, in another place but not another time....

Brian rode the elevator up to his loft. He couldn't wait to get in and change and meet the guys at Woody's. He had just left that fucker Vance with the news that he was now his partner.

He would treasure the look on the asshole's face every time he would be invited to those boring office parties or cocktail parties put on by the little woman. He almost wished he could have gotten it on film. Cynthia, after having seen what had happened had leaped into his arms and crushed him in a hug so tight, he would need to steam press his suit before wearing it again.

Faithful Cynthia - always there. He would need to figure out a way to reward her for all her hard work. He remembered the look she had given him as he put her down from the hug. It was strange and it was almost as if she were looking right through him.

But for now, all he wanted to do was to hop in the shower, get dressed, meet up with Mikey, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, and maybe, possibly bring someone home tonight for some extra curricular activities.

He opened the loft door and walked in noticing all the lights were on. He knew he had turned them off before he left. Maybe Mikey was here. But Brian was sure he told him to meet him at Woodys. Brian stopped when he spotted a desk in the middle of the room - one that was crowded with posters and watercolors and a big computer sitting in the middle of the mess. He looked behind him and sure enough, there was his desk, neat and orderly as always.

Of course, that was nothing compared to what happened next. One minute he was standing in what he thought was his loft, when the next, he had his arms filled with a blond kid who had wrapped his arms around his neck, his legs around his waist, and was currently plastering kisses all over his face.

Being so surprised, he didn't get a chance to speak before the kid started jabbering away. "Did you get it? Is everything okay? Come on Brian, why do you," the kid said but then stopped as he looked more closely at his face. The kid let himself down on the floor and looked at Brian. "Brian, are you okay? Did everything go alright? Speak to me."

The kid walked forward but Brian took a step back. The blond stopped in his tracks.

Brian looked at the kid and after he finally found his voice addressed him. "So...who the fuck are you?"

Chapter 3

Justin looked up at Brian with a confused expression. "Brian? Are you mad at me?"

All of a sudden, a million thoughts raced through his head. Was Brian mad at him for the way he acted before he went on the trip? Did he think he should have gone to Vermont without him? Did he fuck up by getting excited before he knew how the trip went? How did he possibly fuck up this time? "Brian?" Justin asked again while tugging on the older man's elbow.

Now that the kid was standing in front of him and not an anchor on his neck, Brian could take in the lithe form. He didn't normally dwell on the attributes of his conquests, which he couldn't really call this kid because he would have remembered fucking him, but there was something about the man that made him stop and take notice.

The boy was beautiful.

And he was sure he was a boy because he couldn't have been more than seventeen or eighteen. And the way the kid was standing in front of him now, looking for all the world as vulnerable as could be, his blue eyes pleading with him to say something, his full pouty lips quivering just so...

Brian shook his head clear. No matter how fine the specimen was before him, the fact still remained that there was a stranger standing in his living room. And Brian, thought much to his chagrin, one he hadn't even fucked yet.

"Look sonny boy, I'll ask the questions here," Brian replied angrily.

"Brian?" and Brian noted that that hurt expression was in the boy's eyes again. He almost, almost felt sorry for the kid. "Did the job fall through? Did it not go as it planned?"

Brian looked up from his wandering thoughts quickly. "What do you know about the job?"

Justin shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "Just that Vance wanted you to pull some super client out of your ass and hand it to him on a silver platter. Is that it? Did you not get it? Are you mad because I didn't understand why..."

"Look, as I said before, I'll ask the questions." The kid looked at him and this time the hurt look in his eyes was replaced with something akin to anger and defiance. "First off, what the fuck are you doing in my loft? And how the fuck did you get in?"

"What?" Justin started.

"Oh, I get it," Brian said while massaging his temple and pacing back and forth. "I give the key to Mikey while I'm away and he's entertaining tricks up here. Well, listen, this is my place and you can't just stay here."

"Mikey? What the fuck? Ewww...gross, Brian," Justin said disgustedly and walked away.

"Yeah," Brian said while thinking it over again, "you and Mikey - that does seem absurd but you never know." Brian shrugged, "if enough drugs are involved..."

"Brian! What is this shit? This," Justin screamed, "this is why I stayed? I should have gone to fucking Vermont. God! I wish I never listened to Mikey! He told me it would be nice if I was here when you came back..."

"I knew it!" Brian yelled making Justin jump back a few steps. "So you do know Mikey and he's responsible for this."

"Of course I know Mikey! What! What is your fucking problem? What are you fucked up on?" Justin yelled back.

"Hey kid, I am not the one standing in a strange man's loft. What are you fucking on? And another thing..."

"Oh, oh," Justin stuttered, "first off, stop calling me kid. I think we're way passed the stage of you pretending to forget to know what my name is. Second off, I am not the one on any drugs and third off, you got the 'strange' man's loft down right. I have never....never seen you act this 'strange' before. Well, I have, but it was usually after you took some shit Anita passed off to you which brings me back to, what the fuck are you on?"

Brian looked at the kid again, who by this time was getting very agitated. And he found himself getting slightly turned on. What the hell. He would find out what the boy's story was, have some play time with the lad and then berate Mikey for it later.

"So," Justin sighed. "Did you get it? Did you get what you wanted in Chicago?" Justin asked in defeat. He was pretty sure Brian had not succeeded and had done some major pain management before he got to the loft. That could be the only explanation for his odd behavior.

"Oh that? Yeah, I got it," Brian said and smiled smugly. "Say hello to Vance's new partner?"

Justin looked up suddenly. He then smiled and then did what always seemed to come naturally to Justin when he was surprised by something the older man did. He jumped on Brian and started planting kisses all over his face.

Brian noted this was where he had come in. Of course, this time around, at least not having been taken completely by a surprise attack, he found himself quite enjoying it. The kid was all arms and legs and lips and it felt kind of...nice.

"I knew you could do it Brian!" Justin continued to kiss the man. "I just knew it." He then looked up at Brian and smiled again.

Brian smiled back. Okay, he thought, maybe he wouldn't berate Mikey too harshly for it later on. In fact, he actually thought it was rather considerate of his boyhood friend to supply him with a trick for his homecoming. He needed to thank the man later for his thoughtfulness, and compliment him on his exquisite taste.

Even if the boy was slightly touched in the head.

Of course, Brian did have his moral standards when it came to fucking the mentally challenged. So maybe the kid wasn't quite touched. More like, unstable. And of course Brian had no moral standards whatsoever about fucking those who were unstable.

He looked at the kid as he walked over to the kitchen, providing a very nice view of the boy's backside.

Yes, Brian thought, unstable...not touched.

"So...you going to help me celebrate?" Brian asked, his most winning smirk planted on his face.

"What did you have in mind," Justin asked, everything that had happened before momentarily put on the back burner. Everything was always put on the back burner when it came to having mind blowing sex with Brian Kinney.

Brian smiled down at the boy and then told him to get into the bedroom. As Justin was leading Brian to the stairs that would lead them to the bed, Brian noticed the desk again. "What's with the computer? And all the stuff?"

Justin stood there staring at Brian. "Do you want me to move the desk Brian?"

Brian snorted. "Yeah, that would be good."

"Where?" Justin asked as he looked around the loft.

"I don't know," Brian said while shaking his head. "Someone else's place? Who's is it anyways?"

Justin once again found himself in a position he had gotten used to as the night's events unfolded - standing and staring at Brian, wondering what had happened to the man to make him act so oddly.

Brian watched as the kid stormed off in search of something. He looked on all the tabletops and over in the kitchen. Brian noticed how comfortable the kid seemed in his loft. "What are you looking for?"

"My sketchpad. You've got me so mad right now, I need to do some sketching." Brian was about to say something that would probably put any play time in further jeopardy when the boy suddenly bent over to look under the couch.

Brian kept his mouth shut as he took in the view - trying to make sure he didn't drool in front of his temporary house guest.

"Found it!" Justin exclaimed. Justin sat down on the couch and opened his sketchbook. He couldn't take it anymore. Brian was acting so weird and he just needed to start putting something to paper before he completely lost it and said something that would just make Brian even more combative. As he started to draw an outline and then started to fill it in, aware the whole time of the ever watchful eyes which seemed to be glued to him from the entryway, his hand started to shake and then a full on tremor racked his whole hand. "Fuck!" Justin shook his hand out. Of all the times for this to happen, Justin thought.

"What's wrong with your hand? Brian asked.

Justin looked up. "Is that some kind of joke?"

Brian shook his head. "I just noticed you lost control. You're not a junkie, or a recovering one, are you?"

Justin stared back at Brian, his mouth hanging open.

"No?" Brian said. "I didn't think so." Brian looked up again. "An epileptic?"

Justin closed his mouth and glared at the man standing before him. He then slammed the sketchpad on the couch. "I'm going out," Justin said as he went to retrieve his coat. He had a problem trying to get into his jacket, after which he gave up and went to the door deciding he would prefer the cold of the outside than to the sudden chill of the loft.

"Hey, where are you going?" Brian asked. This was not going according to plan. Sure there was a strange kid in his home, sure the loft seemed to be in some sort of chaos, but at least he could get something out of it.

"I'm going out. I heard the guys were at Woody's tonight. I'll go see them there. You...you...can go to...I don't care," Justin said as he got to the door.

Brian stood in front of the door. "Fine. Whatever. Just, take that computer and shit with you."

"Why?"

"Because if you don't, I'll drop kick it all, including that very expensive piece of hardware, into the street via the window."

"Go ahead! You bought it for me!"

Justin then turned around and headed down the stairs.

"Oh yeah?" Brian yelled down the stairs to the kid's retreating back. "No fucking way. I would never buy anything for a trick, especially one I haven't even fucked yet!" Brian tried to get his emotions back under control. He wanted to go back inside and hole himself up. Maybe call in for a trick via the net. Maybe head out to Babylon and it's backroom.

Instead he found himself putting on his jacket and heading for Woody's, telling himself the whole way there in his Jeep that he was going there to catch up with the guys and most definitely not chasing after a piece of blond-boy ass. A very intriguing, yet unstable, piece of blond boy ass to be precise.

Maybe along the way he could give the kid a ride.

And in that other dimension

"Um, no Brian, you didn't, but this is really spooky," Emmett said. "Because Ted did pick someone up that same night that fits that description."

Somewhere deep in the recesses of Brian's brain, he hoped to fucking God that that was a fucking joke.

"Please tell me, I did not hear you correctly Teddy," Brian said, his heart feeling heavier the more he found out about his current situation.

"Emmett and I were at Babylon that night while you guys were at the hospital. As we were coming out, we had decided to get a quick bite at the diner. Then I saw this kid standing under a street light. I asked him where he was headed," Teddy said but was then interrupted by Brian.

"Please tell me he didn't say 'no where special,'" Brian said.

"No. He just said he wasn't sure. He said he shouldn't even be here," Teddy continued. "I asked him if he wanted to go home with me..."

"Oh God, I'm gonna be sick," Brian said.

"Brian?" Mikey asked.

"He said 'sure' and then he got in the car, I said good-night to Emmett, who by the way was telling me that maybe that wasn't something I wanted to deal with," Ted scoffed.

"He was right," Brian said, a hint of jealousy edging his voice. Ted was taken aback for just the slightest moment.

"I drove for awhile and then he said he couldn't do this and would it be alright if I drove him home," Ted finished.

"And you did, right?" Brian asked.

Ted chuckled. "Fuck Brian, no, I took him home and made him my boy toy for the night. You know how I am about non-consensual sex."

Brian turned a few shades pale.

"Brian," Teddy said, "that was a joke. Of course I took him home," Ted said while shaking his head. "Sweet kid. Never got his name though."

"Justin. His name was...is Justin," Brian said with what could only be described as fondness in his voice.

"Hear that Ted?" Mikey said while laughing. "Brian here can't even remember the names of his own tricks, but he remembers the name of one of yours." And with that all three men, except Brian, started laughing.

"Actually," Emmett said conspiratorially, "technically speaking, he wasn't really one of Teddy's tricks."

"Thank you, thank you very much for that wonderful reminder," Teddy deadpanned.

Brian was trying to process all the information that he was receiving. He knew that whatever happened to him, this was not some bad trip.

This was not some dream.

What had happened to him since the night he met Justin was real and was never imagined. If this was some kind of fucked up version of It's a Wonderful Life and someone on high was playing with him, he at least knew one thing.

There was and is a Justin.

Obviously, Ted had picked up Justin that fateful night instead of Brian. Brian, for the first time since he walked into the loft after he got off the plane, had hope. He would find Justin - and then try to make whatever got fucked up right again.

He had to.

As he was turning around to address Mikey and the guys, a man was standing in the way. A man he thought he would never have to see again.

"So now that you're partner, Kinney, how are you going to get my job back?"

Brian looked at the man. He didn't need this now. He opened his mouth and let the only words he could think of come out.

"Hello Kip."

Chapter 4

"Brian," Kip said with what Brian could only label a 'shit-eating grin.' "So, now that the pleasantries are out of the way, how are you going to get my job back after that asshole Gardner fired me?"

Brian bit his lip. He had to wonder what he had done in some past life to have everything conspire against him in this instant by firstly (and most importantly) taking Justin away, but then to have to add insult onto injury by saddling him with this calculating, talentless asshole.

Now Brian was not a stupid man. He knew that whatever had happened to him that night, that he had to accept all possible scenarios. Nothing would take him by surprise at this point in time.

He couldn't afford it anymore. He needed his wits about him to locate Justin and any obstacle that was thrown his way, such as the one standing in front of him, needed to be dealt with as quickly and efficiently as possible.

This was just another surprise hurled at him and it was quite possible it would not be the last.

That didn't mean he had to like it though.

"So, Kip, how is you losing your job at the agency my problem?" Brian asked, trying not to give away the fact that he hadn't worked with the man for over a year and had no idea of their history in that time period.

"Shit Kinney. Are we back to square one here?" Kip asked while crossing his arms over his chest and getting right into Brian's face. "A year ago, I didn't scream 'sexual harassment' and you," Kip punctuated by tapping Brian's chest, "got me a choice position with the company..."

"Yeah, I remember your choice position all too well, flat on your back on my desk," Brian smirked. Brian stepped back from Kip, trying to put enough distance between himself and the repugnant man. "But that was last year, it's Vance's call what he wants to do with you."

"No, no no boss," Kip said and got back into Brian's space, "you see, nothing's changed. I'm still your problem, as you like to call me, until the Statute of Limitations runs out. I can still cry harassment for up to another year. I looked it up. So now that you're partner, you'll need to put in a good word for one of your most dedicated and hard working junior execs, which just happens to be me," Kip said as he pointed to himself with a smug smile on his abhorrent face.

Brian had to wonder why he ever fucked the man.

Twice.

Brian chuckled. "Do you know what I had to go through to keep my fucking job? You're on your own Kip." Brian turned away to address the gang who had been taking in the events with shocked and worried faces. Kip had come up behind Brian and spun him around.

"Oh, I don't think so, Kinney," Kip said. "How hard could it be? Here's how it would go." Kip started to mimic Brian's voice. "'Oh Vance - a word please - you know, I just can't live without my extremely talented, fiercely loyal junior ad man, Kip. It would be such a waste to let him go. He would be such an asset.' See? Easy."

Brian laughed. "And you want me to say all that with a straight face, do you?" Brian gripped Kip's shoulder while getting into the younger man's face. "Kip, you had a few good ideas but you were nowhere near ready for the job

that I apparently put you in. I'm amazed you never brought down the company. And believe me when I say, that the two times we had sex," and Brian had to hope to God that it had only been the two times in this fucked up version of his life, "is not enough to keep blackmailing me."

Brian had to stop and pause while looking at Kip. The man had gone through with his harassment lawsuit in the life Brian had known all this time. But then he had mysteriously dropped the suit, knowing full well that he had an iron-clad case.

It made him have to clear his mind of all the external distractions going on around him and realize something - something he couldn't believe he hadn't seen before. The sudden realization hit him fast and hard.

Justin must have had a hand in getting Kip to drop the case. That could be the only explanation.

Kip was just about to open his mouth to retort when Brian looked at the man. "Oh, you're still here? Go away," Brian said while shooing the man away with a wave of his hand. "You're not my problem anymore."

"Fuck you Kinney! I'll get you," Kip screamed as he stormed out of Woody's.

Brian yelled back, "You're a shitty ad man with unoriginal ideas! Even your threats are cliché!"

"Briiiian," Michael whined. "Are you nuts?"

"Oh what, him?" Brian scoffed. "Like I could give a shit about that right now. I have much bigger problems. I have to go find Justin."

"Who. Is. Justin?" Michael screamed.

"Didn't you hear him the first time?" Ted asked. "He's blond and sweet and he goes up to here," Ted said while placing his hand under his chin.

"And your mother calls him Sunshine because of his smile," Emmett finished off with a flourish while pointing at Michael. Both Emmett and Ted started laughing.

"Will you guys get serious? Brian just told Kip to fuck off," Michael exclaimed.

"And this is something new for Brian in what way?" Ted asked.

Michael scoffed at the two and then turned to Brian. "Brian, what's happening?"

"The reason Kip has something on me now is because I don't know Justin now," Brian said, more talking to himself than the people standing around him.

"So," Ted said shaking his head, "you don't know who Justin is now?"

"Of course I know who Justin is, I just don't know him now, see?" Brian said as if it was the clearest thing in the world.

"So you know Justin now, but you don't know him now-now?" Ted asked.

"Yes," Brian said. "You got it."

"What did I get?" Ted asked confused.

Emmett leaned in to whisper into Ted's ear, "well, when you get it, could you explain it to me?"

"I knew Justin then, so I know him now, but because I supposedly don't know him now, things have changed," Brian exclaimed.

"Oh," Ted said. "So you know him then-now but not now-now, right?"

"Yes," Brian said excitedly. He had to get the hell out of there.

Brian had always refused to admit how much meeting and getting to know Justin had changed him over the past year and a half. But it had and here was living proof in the form of Kip. Of course, Brian couldn't think of all the other ways Justin had influenced his life.

At least, he wouldn't right at that moment. He really needed to keep a clear head about him and dwelling in how fucked up things were at the moment and talking to his friends was not helping matters at all.

"I have to go and find Justin now."

"Is that then-now or now-now?" Ted asked.

"Theodore!" Brian exclaimed. "Michael, you stay here with Abbott and Costello. I need to do this on my own."

"Brian, what about Kip? He could go after you. Don't you care about your job? You know, you have more to lose now that you've made partner."

Brian looked down at Michael and took him in a close embrace. "Oh Michael...I've already lost more than you'll ever know," Brian whispered close to Michael's ear.

Brian broke off the embrace. "I have to go."

"No Brian," Michael stopped Brian from going by putting his hand on Brian's arm, but Brian tore away and ran out of Woody's.

"Well, he's certainly off in quite a hurry," Emmett said.

Michael looked at the exit and slumped his shoulders in defeat. "He's off to find Justin."

"Oh, do you know Justin now?" Ted asked.

Michael and Emmett looked at Ted while Michael swiped at Ted's shoulder. "Quit it Teddy."

As all three men turned toward their table while laughing, Michael stopped and turned around. He noticed he was not the only one who had been watching as Brian had run out of the bar. Michael saw that Mysterious Marilyn had her eyes on the door Brian had just vacated. She then turned and looked straight at Michael.

Michael gasped as he took in the very pale face and trembling form of the normally stoic Marilyn.

And in the other dimension...

After Brian had had the confrontation with the mysterious blond in his loft, he had driven the Jeep around the block a few times trying to find the kid after he had taken off. He finally decided to give up and just head to Woody's. The lad had said he was going to meet the guys there so at least he knew he hadn't completely lost him.

And if the kid wasn't there, then he would just ask Michael about how to find him.

He'd at least get the kid's name, if Michael even knew that.

And how in the hell did Michael know someone like him? Was he some customer at the comic book store? He certainly didn't look like it. Michael would have had to have met him in the past day or two because he certainly would have known about someone that looked like the kid if Michael had met him before Brian had gone to Chicago.

And speaking of Mikey - he had some serious explaining to do. He needed to find out what he was thinking letting a trick stay at his loft while no one else was there, no matter how sweet and trusting the trick may have looked.

Of course, other adjectives also came to mind when he thought of the blond - delicious, fuckable...

And Brian knew he really didn't need to go there right now as he could feel his erection growing.

And what was with all the stuff - the computer and the art supplies and God knows what else? He would have to ask the kid about that later. But then, what he wanted to do with the boy later had nothing to do with talking. He wanted the kid to be using his mouth for other things.

Brian parked the Jeep and still didn't see a blond head anywhere.

Not that he was looking too hard.

He finally caught sight of the guys who were lined up on the steps. Emmett was wearing that hideous coat thing. Brian ran up to the guys.

"Look who it is," Mikey said in surprise.

"Oh, hiya stranger," Emmett said while taking his sunglasses off.

"Huh - the face looks familiar," Ted remarked.

"Shut the fuck up," Brian replied.

"Unfortunately the voice sounds the same," Ted responded.

Brian ran up to Mikey and kissed him on the lips.

"When did ya get back?" Mikey asked smiling.

"A few hours ago," Brian replied excitedly. "I've got great news!"

Michael took that time to look around Brian as if he was looking for somebody.

"Brian," Michael asked, "isn't Justin with you?"

Brian looked at all three men in confusion. "Who's Justin?"

Chapter 5

Ted scoffed while Emmett looked mildly shocked.

"What do ya mean, who's Justin? Did you guys have a fight?" Michael asked while chuckling.

It was then Brian's turn to scoff. "How could I have a fight with someone I don't even know." Brian then shook his head and bounced up and down on his heels. "Can we go in, I'm fucking freezing!"

"Ah, the old Kinney-in-denial. Yep, they had a fight," Ted said.

Brian then headed into Woody's, the guys closely on his heels.

"So what's with the big news Brian?" Michael asked, meaning to ask him later what happened with Justin. He hoped that he had done the right thing by convincing Justin to stay home instead of going snowboarding like he had originally planned.

Thoughts started to race through Michael's head all at once. Could he have misread his unpredictable best friend again? Was he hoping Justin had gone so he wouldn't have felt guilty about having to cancel their trip? Michael had been sure that Brian, although he wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, would have been disappointed to have come home to find Justin gone.

"So," Brian said, interrupting Michael who had been deep in thought, "say hello to Vance's new partner." Brian then smiled smugly.

There was a round of congratulations and Emmett even bounced up from the table to hug Brian.

"So? What did Justin say when you told him?" Ted asked.

Brian looked around the table at the expectant faces and then sighed. "Is someone going to explain to me who Justin is?"

"Brian," Michael started but then Brian put his hand up to stop the man from talking any further.

"No wait, first off, I would like to thank you for the wonderful present you arranged for me up in my loft on my returning home, but fuck Michael, leaving a trick in the loft alone? What the fuck were you thinking? Wasn't it bad enough I had my loft broken into just over a year ago and had most of my stuff taken?" Brian asked.

"Brian," Michael started again when Ted interrupted.

"You're getting tricks now for Brian?! Some friend you are. He's already got sex on tap whenever he wants but for your friend here who is floundering..."

"I did not get Brian any trick," Michael screamed while turning to Brian. "What are you talking about and what do you mean 'who is Justin'? I just don't get you right now."

"The blond, that was waiting for me at the loft," Brian replied, confused more than ever now. "He seemed to know who you were."

"Maybe he's Justin's friend. Where was Justin during all this?" Michael asked.

"Michael," Brian said while he got down at Michael's level, "I can't tell you where 'Justin' was or is because I don't know who you're talking about, unless," Brian started but was then cut off by the new arrival at the table.

"Hi guys."

Brian looked up and noticed the blond kid from the loft. There was a small part of him, small he reminded himself, that was relieved to see him.

"Him! That's the trick you left for me," Brian said while pointing to Justin and addressing Michael.

"What? You mean...Justin?" Michael screeched.

"Oh," Brian said, "this is Justin?"

Okay, Brian thought, it now made sense.

"Brian, what are you..." Michael started once again and then had a hand put on his shoulder.

"Never mind Michael, he's been acting this freaky ever since he got back," Justin said.

Justin sat on one of the stools, once again mindful of the pair of hazel eyes that were watching him from across the table.

Brian watched how Justin sat at the table and seemed quite comfortable with his friends, just like he had been at the loft. This unnerved Brian a bit but he was willing to watch how the evening unfolded to see how the blond enigma fit in with his little extended family. He knew enough to know that every time that he opened his mouth since he had gotten back, he seemed to not only agitate his yet-to-be-trick, but also the gang so he decided to keep it low key until things sorted themselves out.

He couldn't complain too much though. He was partner now. He had the prospect of possibly a very fun night with a very hot blond. And Vance had taken care of a problem he had had to deal with for the past year, namely the 'Kip' problem as he had labeled it.

"Ah Mikey," Brian said as he turned to his best friend and put his hand on his shoulder, "life is good, you know?"

"Oh and how is that?" Michael asked, still looking over at Justin who seemed to be going farther and farther within himself. Justin may have appeared to not care what Brian was doing but Michael knew that it was a front and Justin was indeed hurting from whatever game his best friend was currently playing.

"Being made partner and, and, getting rid of my Kip 'problem' once and for all," Brian said smugly as he leaned back on the stool.

"Kip?" Michael asked in confusion.

Brian suddenly noticed the entire table go quiet. Emmett and Ted had been chatting to themselves but had stopped to hear what Brian was talking about.

Justin's head had popped up instantly, a look of trepidation showing on his face. It was also the first sign of life by Justin since he walked into Woody's.

This did not go unnoticed by Brian.

"Yeah, Kip," Brian said. "Vance fired him and he can't come back," Brian said while taking a sip of his Beam. "He'll probably still try but there's nothing he can do about it at this point. I mean he could technically, but it would only come across as sour grapes now."

Justin started to trace patterns in the wood of the table with the beer that had spilled over his glass.

"Why," Justin cleared his throat, "why would Kip be a problem now, or what I meant to say...is...why did you bring Kip up now, Brian?" As Justin said this, he looked directly at Brian.

The kid was doing it again, Brian thought. Looking directly at him, into him, trying to read what was going on. And once again, it was unnerving Brian in a way he couldn't quite explain. He had never met Justin before, yet it felt as if Justin had known him. He then shook his head clear again (a habit which was annoying him immensely as the night progressed) and addressed Justin.

"Why don't you let the boys explain it to you. You seem to be really...cozy with them," Brian said.

Justin stopped and stared at Brian open mouthed.

Again.

"Brian!" Michael screeched.

Again.

Brian noted the pattern his night was taking.

"Now what is the fucking deal on Kip?" Michael said, this time maintaining his voice so he wasn't yelling. "That 'problem' was taken care of a year ago when he dropped the suit. Why are you bringing it up now? And why should we explain it to Justin. He knows just as much as we do, but now I'm starting to think we know nothing about it!"

Brian stopped leaning back on his stool and took in the expression of his best friend's face. He took in the faces of everyone at the table.

They were all the same. All confused. All blank.

Now Brian knew you didn't survive in the corporate world too long if you didn't know when to keep your mouth shut and just listen to what was going on around you.

Brian also knew that this kind of thinking carried well over into your personal life as well.

And this was one of those times.

"Go ahead, Michael, tell the lad what happened with Kip," Brian said. Now he'd find out what had gotten into all of them.

Michael wasn't sure who he was addressing at the moment but he just decided to start talking, "you fucked Kip once at the office..."

"Actually Michael, it was twice."

"Twice?! Brian! Twice? At the office?" Michael asked.

"No, the second time was at the loft."

"I knew it! You two did it when I was studying for my SATs! I knew it!" Justin jumped up.

"You're not on any medication, are you?" Brian asked.

"Brian!" but this time the shout came from all the men at the table. He did it again. He had opened his mouth and everyone had jumped on him. "Please, Michael, continue."

"So Kip, being the ever pushy and corporate ladder climbing asshole he was," Michael continued, "took it upon himself to seek a promotion within by holding this little information over your head and when you didn't cave in, he filed a sexual harassment suit."

So far, this was the way Brian remembered it.

"May I?" Ted asked. "I find this so entertaining...you know, reliving your past mistakes. So you hired Mel, because the suit was quite serious..."

"Hold on. Did you say I hired Mel?" Brian queried.

"Yes. You know Mel. Short woman, always has your number, the bane of your existence," Ted said. "May I continue?"

Brian nodded his head in the affirmative. Now, Brian thought, this was getting interesting.

"So, she told you your odds, it looked pretty grim and then you showed up with Mel on the day of the hearing and poof!" Ted said while blinking his eyes.

"Poof?" Brian said.

"Well, you know," Ted said with a laugh. "I mean, yeah Poof! Problem was gone. Kip dropped the suit and no one ever found out why."

"He just dropped it," Brian repeated.

"Yeah," Emmett continued. "We were all just as stumped as you were when it happened a little over a year ago," Emmett said, completely misreading Brian's reaction. "You know, I think it was about a month later, I heard through the Babylon grapevine that he couldn't find work in the Pitts. He had to move to Atlanta."

"Hey," Ted exclaimed. "I just remembered. It happened on Justin's birthday!"

"Yeah, that's right!" Emmett jumped in. "I remember that day too. I came back to my senses after that whole 'see the light' fiasco," Emmett said and shuddered.

Everyone laughed around the table except for Brian. He looked directly at Justin.

"Speaking of birthdays...how old are you?"

Everyone stopped laughing. Justin had that gobsmacked expression again.

Come to think of it, so did everyone else.

"What? And if this happened a little over a year ago, you must have just had another birthday, right?" Brian said offhandedly.

Justin stood abruptly, glared at Brian and stormed off in the direction of the bathrooms.

"Now what did I say?"

"Do you take lessons in being a Class One asshole or does it just come naturally?" Emmett asked.

"Fuck Brian! What the fuck is your problem? How could you...you just...his birthday..." but Michael didn't finish his incoherent thoughts as he stormed off in the direction Justin had taken.

"Now where's Michael off to?" Brian asked.

"I know this is an alien concept on your homeworld, but it's called 'comforting someone,' and in this case, your best friend has to go comfort your boyfriend," Ted said.

Brian's head whipped around quickly. "What did you just say?"

"See Teddy, 'comforting' is not in the man's vocabulary," Emmett said.

"No, the other part," Brian said and then swallowed. "The...'boyfriend' part."

"Wow Brian," Teddy laughed, "you just said the 'boyfriend' word and your head didn't spin around on your neck and someone had to call a priest."

"This is a red-letter day for Mr Brian-I-don't-do-relationships-Kinney," Emmett said matter of factly.

Brian was trying to process what the Stooges were saying when he looked across the bar. At first, he thought he had been seeing things but then it happened again.

A mild distortion in the wall...as if the wall were moving. But the wall wasn't moving. It was different. It was different in the way your chest rises and falls in a particular rhythm.

It appeared as if the wall were to be breathing.

Brian rubbed at his eyes, because that seemed to always be the first thing you do when confronted with something so odd and the wall appeared to be solid again. He watched the wall for any more sign of movement (no Brian thought, breathing) but the wall seemed to just continue what it had always been meant to do.

Be a wall.

A non-breathing, stationery wall.

Brian contemplated asking the guys if they saw it too, but decided that now was not the time.

He then looked around the bar to see where Michael and Justin had run off to.

Michael ran out the back door of the bar and finally found Justin, leaning against the brick wall and smoking a cigarette.

"You know, Ma would hate to see how much you've been smoking lately," Michael said as he approached Justin.

When the kid raised his head to respond, Michael noticed the utterly defeated look on Justin's face.

Michael had at once wished Justin would have just gone away. But those days were long gone now. Brian was his best friend, and despite what people thought that he himself wanted, he only wanted what was truly best for Brian. And he knew that without a doubt, Brian cared for Justin. He would also go so far as to say Brian loved the kid. And he didn't doubt Justin's love for Brian. They shared a bond that was very real, very tangible and not even the great Brian Kinney could deny that it existed. But Brian, with his walls, and his fears, was trying desperately to get back into control something he just couldn't.

Well, Michael thought, he could, but he was currently going at it in the worst possible way.

And then there was Justin himself. Michael had also come to like him just as much as the rest of the family - maybe even better. It wasn't just the fact that Justin was turning his dream into a reality - his own comic book - but that he was brave, brave in a way that Michael himself could never be, and that that was what Brian had needed all along.

But lately Brian's denial and Justin's own lack of self-confidence were pitting themselves against their relationship, and yes, Michael thought, they did have a relationship. If they could get over all the obstacles that life and their own shortcomings kept throwing at them, Michael was convinced they would have something that no one could come between. Ever.

"Justin, it's okay, come back in," Michael said. "You know Brian..."

"Yeah, I do," Justin said vehemently, "he's pissed off with me about something. I don't know what. Well, or maybe I do." Justin backed off from the wall and flicked his cigarette onto the ground where he then proceeded to crush it under his foot, thinking about the odd turn of events at the table and how Brian kept bringing up Kip. Justin was worried about the fact that Brian had found out and was now playing with Justin, to see if he knew something.

Or Justin thought, he could be paranoid.

"Actually, I don't," Justin said, not wanting to drag Michael into the whole sordid mess. "Brian is just..."

"Brian, yeah I know," Michael said with a smile. "Was it the birthday thing that got you upset?"

"Shit Michael!" Justin paced back and forth waving his arms around wildly. "He made such a point to not celebrate my birthday. I mean, he was actually making it his life's mission to make sure I knew how just how little my birthday meant to him! But I thought this was all over and now...now he just acts as if he doesn't even remember I had a birthday." Justin slumped against the wall.

"He didn't mean it like that Justin. You know how he feels about celebrating birthdays. God! Remember his own?"

"He gave you a big party at the loft on your thirtieth!" Justin pointed out.

"Yeah, to throw me off a cliff!" Michael said back while chuckling. "And after Ben's birthday party...I mean attempted birthday party, I think Brian might have the right idea."

Justin winced remembering Ben's party. "Maybe that should be a lesson to all of us - no more birthday parties," Justin said with a smile.

"Yeah, but we throw a helluva wedding!" Michael said and then put his arm around Justin. "Come on, let's go back in. I'll have Ted and Emmett take you somewhere tonight and find out what's up with him, okay? And I promise there won't be any recreational drugs involved."

Justin shook his head in the affirmative. "Could you bring back some for me?"

Both the men laughed and reentered Woody's where they saw Ted, Emmett and Brian still sitting at the table.

"Look, this is a good sign. Brian hasn't gone off yet to find a trick for the night," Michael said and laughed.

Justin smiled and then stopped to address Michael. "Thanks Michael," and Justin hugged the man before walking up to the table.

"You okay baby?" Emmett asked.

"Yeah," Justin replied, "just a little hungry, I guess."

"And when is he not?" Michael asked. Justin hit Michael on the side of the arm. "Why don't you guys go to the diner. Brian and I'll catch up with you later."

Emmett and Ted looked at each and got the hint. Sometimes it didn't take much. "Oooh goody! I was hungry anyways. Oh Teddy, I'm a little short, could you..."

"Yes, Emmett," Ted said while shaking his head. "Come on Sunshine," Ted said and all three men vacated the table.

While Brian was watching the men start to leave, he called out, "what about us? I thought we had plans?"

Justin looked at Brian, shook his head and exited Woody's.

"What the hell?" Brian said and turned to leave Woody's also.

"Not you Brian," Michael said. "We need to talk."

"We can talk anytime." Brian looked at the exit, "did you see that ass?"

"Brian! What the fuck is wrong with you?" Michael yelled.

"What's...what's wrong with me?! Look, now I don't get what the fuck is..." Brian started to shout when another presence made themselves known at the table.

Both men looked up and saw Mysterious Marilyn staring at Brian. The normally self-assured and detached Marilyn looked anything but at the moment. Her face was panic-stricken, her hands were shaking profusely.

"You're not supposed to be here," she said as she looked at Brian.

"What the hell? Has everyone gone insane today?" Brian yelled. "Should I be at Babylon instead?" Brian asked while smirking.

"Brian," Michael put a hand on his best friend's forearm. "What do you mean by that?" Michael swallowed, knowing he wasn't about to like what was going to come out of her mouth.

"You're not him. You shouldn't be here."

"I'm not him? Him who?" Brian asked while trying not to laugh. "What? Are you saying I'm not Brian Kinney?"

"Oh, you're Brian Kinney alright. But your aura...it's wrong. It's...skewed. You're not him, the one that should be here." She looked around the bar nervously. "You're the other one."

"The other one?" Michael asked.

"This should not have happened, this is not good, it's bad, very bad," Marilyn started to say as she continued to anxiously wring her hands together. "They will not be happy when they find out."

She once again looked around Woody's, seemingly staring off into space. "Unless they already know."

And in that other dimension...

As all three men turned toward their table while laughing, Michael stopped and turned around. He noticed he was not the only one who had been watching as Brian had run out of the bar. Michael saw that Mysterious Marilyn had her eyes on the door Brian had just vacated. She then turned and looked straight at Michael.

Michael gasped as he took in the very pale face and trembling form of the normally stoic Marilyn.

Michael watched as Mysterious Marilyn quickly turned on her heel and left for the nearest exit. Michael ran after her, ignoring Ted and Emmett's queries as to where he was off to.

Michael caught up to Marilyn outside of the bar. He stopped her by placing his hand on her arm. "What? What's wrong? Why did you flip out like that? What did you see?" Michael was pleading with her to say something.

Marilyn's voice, which usually took on a false earthy, spiritual tone, was harsh and cold. "Who cares what I saw, right? I'm a fake, right? You should just go. It'll just be the ramblings of a fucked up, washed out drag queen." Marilyn turned to go.

"No!" Michael kept hold of her arm. "Just tell me."

"No, I don't think so. I'm...I'm a coward. I don't want them to see me talking to him, your friend. Or you."

With one last tug, Marilyn broke free of Michael's grasp and fled into the night.

Chapter 6

Brian drove the Jeep to the loft. His only passenger only being his boyhood friend, Michael, in a manner of speaking.

The silence in the car was deafening as Brian tried to collect his thoughts, trying to piece together Mysterious Marilyn's cryptic words.

"Who the fuck are they?" Brian asked.

"I've already said too much. I can talk to you, but later, not now, I have to go," Marilyn said as she was about to exit.

"Oh no," Michael said.

"Fuck who 'they' are. Just tell us what you mean by the 'other one,'" Brian asked, Michael standing at his side nodding his head, blocking Marilyn in case she decided to take off.

Marilyn sighed. "Think of it as a mirror, one world on one side and one on the other."

"Parallel worlds," Michael said. "It makes sense Brian."

Sense.

None of this made sense Brian thought. But ever since he had gotten back from Chicago, he had felt that things were not right. Not the same. Little things were off. And then there was Justin.

That brought it all home.

Michael sat in the passenger side of the Jeep, contemplating everything he had heard. Parallel worlds, just like in the comic books.

And they were real.

Marilyn's words went through his head.

Marilyn shook her head as if to confirm what Michael had just guessed.

"Don't look at me like that. It's true," Marilyn said as she addressed Brian. "You can choose to believe me or not. I think your friend does, but his mind is like that of a child's, so I think it may be easier for him to accept. But ask yourself," Marilyn said, "is there anything that's different here - things that should be normal, that should be the same, that should be expected?"

"Brian? Justin," Michael said with a lost look on his face.

"You're not the one that belongs here," Marilyn said to Brian. "I don't know how you came to be here - you shouldn't have. The guardians would never let it happen," Marilyn started to say more agitatedly. "I mean, it's happened but it....look, I can't be seen with you. I'll contact you when I think it's safe."

And with that, Marilyn took off out of the club, never looking back.

Brian pulled up to the loft. But it wasn't his loft, was it? He looked over at Michael.

"Ready?"

"Yeah," Michael said.

Brian wished this was some bad trip, perpetrated by some of Anita's shit, but he knew it wasn't.

He wished it was a joke orchestrated by the guys, but he knew it wasn't that either.

It was what it was, and he would deal, just like he always did.

As they both entered the loft, Brian immediately headed over to the desk that was perched in front of his bedroom.

"This is Justin's desk? And his computer?" Brian asked, running his fingers over Justin's keyboard.

"Yes," Michael said.

"I bought him this?" Brian asked incredulously.

"Yes, his hand was giving him trouble, so you got him the computer so he could continue with his schooling. He goes to the Art Institute," Michael cut it off at that when he realized he didn't know where to begin explaining what happened to Justin when Brian didn't even know who Justin was in the first place.

"Look, do you want to know your history? I mean, the history of you two here? I mean you can't keep pissing Justin off," Michael said in frustration.

Brian looked at the man across from him. This was Michael - Mikey, his boyhood friend. But according to that whacked out drag queen, it wasn't. How much could he trust this one? It seemed like the same Michael, just as it seemed like the same Ted and the same Emmett. Things still seemed to be the same. The same loft, same Jeep, seem job, even the same fucking promotion. Obviously he had gone to Chicago. But before he had left for Chicago, there had been no boyfriends with blond hair or blue eyes that went by the name of Justin.

"Why do I need to know? I mean," Brian said as he ran his hand through his hair, "shouldn't we tell him the truth?"

"No," Michael said as he ran closer to Brian. "No. He's gone through so much this year...I don't know, this just might push him over. Until we figure out what to do, we should just keep this to ourselves." Michael had a strange feeling - one that ran down his spine - the kind that sent signals up to his brain that said THIS IS A BAD IDEA.

"Okay," Brian said. "I can accept that. So how...when did I...meet Justin?" Brian sat down on one of the kitchen stools.

"The night Gus was born," Michael said. "Oh my God! Please tell me there's a Gus where you come from."

"What?" Brian said being taken out of his thoughts, "oh yeah...him? Yeah, Lindsay managed to still get my sperm." Brian started to play with one of the napkins on the counter, "so, that night, we, you," Brian chuckled, "and me, hung out at the loft together until they told us it was okay to come to the hospital. So how did I meet Justin...was he a patient?"

"No, we, you and me, and Ted and Emmett, went to Babylon. You had your phone off."

"I had it on that day."

"Well, that's when it happened then," Michael said and chuckled to himself. Such a little thing, really. Something as stupid and small as having your cell phone off could change entire events in history. "We went to Babylon. I wanted to go to the diner with the guys, you came out a few minutes later saying something about a boring blow job..."

Brian raised an eyebrow.

"And that's when it happened," Michael continued.

"What?" Brian asked,.

"He came along." Michael shook his head and started to pace back and forth. "You were caught. I mean, the look on your face was priceless. I was trying to get your attention and it was useless. I've seen you go after tricks before, but you...I don't know," Michael said while shaking his head. "There was something. Fuck, but it scared the hell out of me!"

Brian looked at Michael and turned from the man. This didn't sound like him. He never felt anything for anybody. Well he felt for those close to him, but not like something that Michael was describing.

"But what about Lindsay?" Brian asked. "What happened...she just never tried to get a hold of me?"

"Like I said, your phone was off. You didn't get the call. You took boy wonder...sorry," Michael said as he saw the confused look on Brian's face, "Justin home and I went with this guy who, well never mind, let's just say I never really got the whole 'don't judge a book by its cover' saying until then."

"Don't tell me I missed the whole birth thing. Oh God," Brian laughed, "Lindsay must have been pissed!"

"No, you were at the hospital," Michael said calmly.

Brian looked over quizzically. "So, I just did the kid and then popped over there."

"No, you took Justin to the loft, and here's where it's fuzzy, since you know," Michael shrugged, "I wasn't there, so I don't know what you did, but you both were pretty flushed when you got to the hospital."

"Hold on! When we both got to the hospital? I brought him with me to the hospital?" Brian asked incredulously.

"Yeah, you came and picked me up and Justin was with you. Boy, was I mad," Michael said while remembering. It was in that split second that Michael had felt that his position in Brian's life was being threatened. "We got there and Gus had just been born. Lindsay asked you what to name your son, Abe or Gus..."

"I told her Gus. Fuck if I was going to have a kid named Abraham." Brian looked at the bemused expression on Michael's face. "What?"

"When Lindsay asked you for the baby's name, you asked Justin what he thought."

"What?! No way. No fucking way," Brian stated vehemently. No way would he have asked a trick, would he? Brian was not so sure what the Brian here was really all about.

Or was this the way he would have acted, had he been placed in the same situation.

"You know, Brian, you keep saying that. But you did. Well, my Brian did. He picked 'Gus' because he thought no kid would survive on a playground with the name of Abraham."

"Good for him. I bet Mel was pissed at him," Brian smirked.

"Yeah, she was. Especially when you told them how old Justin was."

Brian's head whipped around. "How old was he when," Brian didn't like where this was going. The kid did look awfully young.

"Seventeen," Michael said and noticed Brian's shocked expression. "Yep, Brian, you popped a seventeen year old's cherry."

"I need to sit down."

"I know," Michael said while shaking his head, "he was so young."

"No, that's not it. I had a piece of fresh, young, never before tapped virgin ass, and I didn't even have the pleasure of having been the one to have experienced it."

"Yes, because in situations as dire as these, one should truly think about the really important things. Look Brian, this is serious. I don't want to walk down memory lane anymore," Michael said and turned away from the man who he wasn't sure of anymore. "We need to find a way to reverse this or whatever. I don't care what Mysterious Marilyn said, I'm going to find a way to get to her in the morning and see what we need to do."

"Yeah, look just explain it to me," Brian said, apparently not hearing Michael's train of thought, "he lives here with me, yeah?"

"Yes." Michael didn't want to divulge too much information because most of it was too personal and technically speaking this was a stranger.

"Am I" Brian swallowed, "monogamous? I mean..."

For the first time since Mysterious Marilyn had come waltzing over to their table with her ominous forebodings, Michael had laughed, a deep hearty laugh.

"No Brian, God, you still fuck everything that moves. You've got Justin doing it too. 'Date night' for you two is a threesome with some guy you both decide on at Babylon," Michael said the last part with a bit of bitterness. He knew Justin was really not that fond of 'date night.'

"So let me get this straight, and let me just say for the record, thank God that that is not an adjective that describes me in this world, I still fuck anything and everything I want and then come home to Justin and get to do him? Right?"

"Yes."

"So this is sort of a win-win situation for me?" Brian said with a smirk firmly planted on his face.

"Yes, Brian, for you it is," Michael said and then stopped. "Actually, for the other Brian it is. You're not him." Michael ran up to Brian and got into his space. "Maybe Justin should stay with Emmett and me until this is sorted out."

"Now, wouldn't that scare the lad?" Brian asked condescendingly.

Michael stepped back. "You're going to fuck him!" Michael paced back and forth.

"Well.."

"You can't! It would be cheating. You don't...you're not...he's not yours!" Michael was fuming. This was Brian. He looked like Brian. But he wasn't their Brian. It seemed wrong. But what was he supposed to do? 'Justin, you come home with me.' Yeah and then watch as Justin retreated farther into himself.

Or he could tell boy wonder the truth.

Michael knew without a shadow of a doubt that Brian would want him to protect his family, and that included Justin. He would be counting on that.

Michael looked at Brian.

"Don't...don't hurt him," Michael said. "Justin loves and trusts Brian. I'll see you in the morning. We need to talk about things and, and we need to get in touch with Marilyn." Michael turned to go and stopped when he got to the loft door. "Brian?" Michael asked as he stared at the security system on the wall, "did you say your loft was broken into last year?"

"Yeah, why? Wasn't it here?" Of course it hadn't been here, Brian thought. This Brian seemed to lead a charmed life.

"Oh yeah, it was. Did it happen sometime before my disastrous birthday party?"

"Yeah, it did, why?"

Okay, Michael thought, so there was still a birthday party then too. Both Brian's seemed to enjoy throwing people off that proverbial cliff. "We all thought Justin had not set the alarm. But you didn't know Justin, so it couldn't have been him." Michael turned on Brian. "Did you forget to set the alarm?"

Brian scoffed. "You know me Mikey," Brian said as he walked over to Michael, "well, maybe you don't. I would never forget. The only reason I learned about what really happened was I kept looking into it because I know I set the alarm." Brian got up off the stool and walked over to the loft door. "The security company had a theft ring working on the inside. They would disarm the alarm, go in, steal everything and when they took off, they made it look like the alarm had never been set - they made it look like it was the homeowner's fault for not setting the alarm." Brian stopped and turned around, "so it appears your Brian decided to make the kid take the fall, instead of find out what happened, huh?"

"Well he had said he had set it, but he was seventeen and..." Michael suddenly felt sick. He remembered Brian kicking Justin out while the kid had been telling the truth the whole time. He had run away to New York because he had felt trapped.

Michael didn't want to go there.

He needed to leave, go home, get some sleep and then figure out what to do.

Michael opened the loft door to leave and came face to face with Justin.

There were so many things Michael wanted to say - warnings, apologies. They had all rushed together in his mind and Michael knew if he were to open his mouth to tell him, it would come out as a confused mess, words tangled within words.

"See you in the morning Justin," Michael said and with that he walked out of the loft, apprehension his sole companion.

"Okay," Justin said back, while he watched Michael climb into the elevator.

Justin turned to Brian, who happened to be smiling at him. "So are we okay, Brian?"

"Yes, we're okay," Brian said with the same smile. "Now, come here and give me a proper hello."

Justin smiled and knew all was forgiven.

For whatever he may have done.

While on that other side of the 'mirror'

"No, I don't think so. I'm...I'm a coward. I don't want them to see me talking to him, your friend. Or you."

With one last tug, Marilyn broke free of Michael's grasp and fled into the night.

It was after Michael had had a one-sided conversation with the Mysterious Marilyn, that the circumstances had found one Brian Kinney in his Jeep headed to the townhouse complex that Jennifer lived in. Since Brian wasn't there to take Justin in, he must have been living with his mother there.

He drove up to the cookie-cutter house and parked the Jeep in the driveway. He looked at the front door and the step. Memories and ghosts from the past started to assault him.

"The nurse on duty told me," Jennifer continued as shook her head. "I want to thank you for that, but...he's home now, safe and sound and there isn't any reason anymore for you to watch over him, so...so, I would like you to leave and never see him again."

Brian took in the words. "I care about him."

"It was because of you he was almost killed." Words didn't usually mean anything to Brian, but those had truly hurt.

"Forgive me for being so blunt. I've tried to accept him for who he is, to accept your world and that he's part of it. I've even tried to accept you and as a result, I nearly lost him...and I don't intend to lose him again so if you care about him," and with those words, the woman's voice broke, "and I believe you...I believe you do, you'll do what I ask, and return my son to me."

Brian shook clear of the memory of a mother's hateful words who didn't know what to do or who to blame. Brian remembered the words had been there, right on the tip of his tongue, why he had thought he should be there, but he knew his argument would fall on deaf ears.

Brian walked up the path. He just hoped Justin was living here. He stopped before he knocked at the door.

What was he supposed to say? 'Hello, you don't know me, but you don't belong here. I want to take you back to where you belong?'

Yeah, Brian thought, that should do it.

And then he could spend a nice night in some holding cell, or better yet, in a little white room, with a white jacket that tied in the back.

Whatever, he didn't care. He would figure it out as he went along. The first thing to do was to find Justin. If he had to make up a lame excuse for why he was there in the middle of the night, he would. But he needed to see him.

Just like he always needed to see him, and make sure he was okay. Long nights in hospitals behind one-way windows, watching as Justin walked on his own from the loft to the diner soon after the attack, dancing with Emmett at Babylon. And these were just a handful of times that came to mind.

He knocked on the door. The door opened and Brian came face to face with a four-hundred pound woman and a yapping chihuahua dog.

"I...I think I have the wrong house," Brian stammered. What the hell, he came this far. "Do you know if Jennifer lives here?"

"Who? Jennifer? Who the fuck is...Jim?!" the woman screeched. "Get your scrawny ass down here this fucking instant!"

The dog continued to yap and try to bite Brian at his ankle.

A small man came running down the stairs. That old 'Jack Sprat' nursery rhyme came to mind as he took in the shivering form of the man. So people like this actually existed?

"Jim, who the fuck is Jennifer?" The dog decided to stop its torment on Brian's leg and then yap at Jim.

"I don't know cupcake," the man stammered. The man, Jim, looked at Brian with wide eyes.

"He asked for Jennifer. You been looking around someone else's pond you little fuck!" the woman screeched. "Is this what's been going on when you've gone missing?"

"No...no muffin-cake," the man said, trembling even more.

Brian was tired of this shit. He wanted to drop kick the yapping dog. He wanted to tell Jabba the Hut that the next time her husband went missing, she should check the crack of her ass. But most importantly he wanted to know why Jennifer wasn't there.

And then it hit him.

With the force of the door that had just slammed in his face.

Justin never came out to his parents because he had never met Brian, which meant that Craig and Jennifer had kept safe their wonderfully blissful delusion that they were a happy, homo-free home, which meant that Craig and Jennifer had never gotten divorced.

As Brian turned to get back into his Jeep, the sound of Jim's wife screaming behind the closed door fading away, Brian knew he had only one choice.

Brian put the Jeep in 'drive' and headed for the affluent suburb, remembering the house he had taken Justin to, to confront a father who wasn't willing to accept his son for who he was.

Brian braced himself for the battle that was yet to come.

Chapter 7

Justin smiled and ran up to Brian, then flung his arms around his neck.

He stopped just short of kissing his older lover. "Brian? Is everything okay?"

Brian took in the face of the younger man. He was looking up at him, an expectant look on his face. He gazed upon the trusting eyes and that's when it hit him.

He had never seen a trick look at him like this before. They looked at him with lust, with desire, with hope for the best fuck of their lives, but not this - trust, adoration and yes, Brian realized, love. Real, honest to God, love.

It was obvious Justin trusted Brian with everything he had. He could feel it not only in the way Justin looked at him, but the way he held him, the way he moved against him. It was as if he were molded to him, made just for him and there was no other place Justin would rather be.

Brian contemplated the position he was in. It was...intoxicating.

Although there was nothing more that Brian wanted to do at the moment than to take Justin right then and there in the living room, he needed to put some control in. Besides, he wanted to get an answer to a question that had been plaguing him since he first heard about Kip.

Brian stepped back when he realized Justin was still waiting for an answer. "Yeah, it is," Brian said and punctuated it with a kiss to Justin's forehead. Forehead kissing in Brian's mind was a bit too intimate for his tricks but he found it was just what was needed in this situation. Besides, Justin wasn't a trick. He was...well he wasn't exactly sure what Justin was, but he wasn't just a trick.

"Pour us a Beam," Brian said more of a statement than a request.

"Sure thing," Justin said and smiled back as he walked over to the liquor trolley.

"So," Brian continued as he watched Justin pour the drinks, "are you going to tell me what the story is on Kip?"

Justin stopped pouring and looked at the bottle he was holding in his hand. He swallowed once while still staring at the bottle, refusing to look back at Brian. "So you know?"

"I know something caused Kip to drop the suit, and I think, actually I know that you had something to do with it," Brian said smugly. "Why don't you tell me your version, so I don't have to guess," Brian said and then added, after he got into Justin's space and leaned down into his ear, "or have to ask the source directly."

Justin looked up into Brian's face, then finished pouring the glasses of Beam. He handed a glass to Brian and kept one for himself. He then distanced himself from Brian.

Justin drank about half the glass and then took in Brian's expectant face.

It was time to come clean, Justin mused to himself.

"Are you mad at me?" Justin asked while wincing. He wasn't sure if it was because of the liquor or the thought of Brian's answer.

Probably both.

"No, just tell me." Brian then added harshly, "And no bullshit! I'll know if you're lying," Brian added hoping his bluff worked.

"Well, look Brian, it was this way," Justin started and then turned away. "I saw your checkbook that day Lindsay came over with Gus, and I realized how much they depended on you, and how much you could stand to lose," Justin stopped and then turned to look at Brian. "It just didn't seem fair."

"Life isn't fair," Brian said with a shrug. No, Brian thought, because if life had been fair, he would have had this tasty morsel for himself on his world.

"I know, it's just," Justin sighed, "it's just, I knew I could do something. I just didn't know what at the time. Nobody was willing to do anything for you. I mean, sure," Justin said with a wave of his hand, "Mel took you on as a client, but she was going completely by the book and it didn't look good for you, because well, because you had slept with a junior co-worker."

There it was again - Justin had brought up Mel. He had to find out what the story was on that one.

"Yes, I know fucking Kip had been one of my biggest mistakes of my life," Brian said, among others. "Please continue," Brian said, "and without pointing out how royally I fucked up, thank you very much."

Justin smiled. "So we were at Woody's and I saw Kip there. Oh, I knew what he looked like because I saw him that night at the loft right after you sent me away..."

"So you could go study for your SATs," Brian supplied, piecing together information he had gleaned earlier at Woody's from the kid's outburst.

"Yeah. Oh, but he hadn't seen me at the loft," Justin said while shaking his head. "So I came on to him at the bar."

Brian raised his eyebrow at Justin. "Now this is getting interesting. Do go on."

"He brushed me off at first because he seemed pretty upset. So I followed him out to the alleyway and I propositioned him again. I also told him I knew you, and that I thought you were an asshole," Justin said as he winced. Brian did the eyebrow thing again. "Then I kissed him," Justin said and stood firm. He needed to get the story out before Brian wondered what his intentions had been toward Kip. "I hated it, but I needed to do something."

"I'm assuming this was all part of your evil plan?" Brian asked while smirking.

"What plan?!" Justin said while he threw his arms up in the air. "I had no idea what I was going to do. Anyways," Justin said and slumped down on the couch, "he finally became really interested in me..."

Brian scoffed, "yeah, it must have been a real hardship for him, someone like you coming on to someone like him."

Justin bit his lip and continued, "and we went back to his place."

"You went to a strange guy's house?!" Now this pissed Brian off and for the life of him he couldn't figure out why.

"Yes...just like I came here that first time, Brian," Justin shot back. "Anyways, I got there, and I took my pants off and he just kneeled there, looking at my dick. It was...I don't know. I didn't want him to touch me but I pretended that I wanted it. Seriously, Brian, why did you do him? He really was repulsive...or maybe it was just what I knew he did."

Brian thought about it. There was nothing particularly special about Kip. Really.

Even Michael had asked him why he did it. And it was the same reason he did anyone that came along.

Because he could.

"So he was there, you were naked...did you let him fuck you?"

"Oh God. No, Brian, no!" Justin said incredulously. "You're the only...you've been the only one that I've let... So as I was saying, he kneeled down and started to go in for my cock. I couldn't stand the thought of him touching me so I started to talk shit about my age and my father and..."

"You let him know how old you were?"

"Yeah, so then when I saw he didn't care that I was a minor, I told him about my psycho father, which as you already know, wasn't too far from the truth," Justin said with a little chuckle.

Brian considered what Justin had just said. It seems life wasn't all tea and cookies for the other one as he had first thought. Apparently being with the kid had come with a price, and it had something to do with his father.

"So I told him, if he didn't want my psycho dad to find out about what he had almost done...I mean really, Brian, this guy wasn't very smart...we hadn't even done anything yet...then he should seriously consider dropping the suit."

"And that was it? He dropped it?"

"Um, yeah. That was the end of the conversation. I didn't have to convince him of anything else. I didn't hear anything else about it until the next day when it was my birthday and we were dancing and you were celebrating Kip mysteriously dropping the case," Justin said, Brian taking note of the way Justin had emphasized the word 'mysteriously.' "God, I loved that night. Remember how we danced all night long?" Justin asked while putting his arms around Brian. "We celebrated your good fortune, Emmett having seen the light by deciding not to see the light anymore, and," Justin said while planting tiny kisses all along Brian's throat, "we celebrated my turning eighteen at midnight by you fucking me in every," another moan by the kid, "single position."

Brian looked down at Justin who stopped kissing to look back up at him.

Brian remembered that night. Only his version was about one-hundred-eighty degrees from what Justin had just related. He had drunk himself into oblivion while the guys celebrated Emmett having come back to his senses.

He had caved in and had made sure to get the position in the company Kip had wanted - this, after Marty had told him to fix his mess himself. In his universe, there had been no lawyers who would go to bat for him and no little blond boys who had gone the extra mile and played hard ball with his conniving co-worker.

So Brian had got to keep his job, but at a price. He had been saddled with Kip and his incompetence for over a year.

Brian smiled down at Justin.

And there it was again. The look in his guileless, blue eyes - adoration, worship and trust.

Definitely trust.

Brian leaned down so his lips were barely touching Justin's. He took in the younger man's smell. He could smell the Beam but under that he could smell Justin himself. It was fresh, clean. A hint of soap, a hint of sweat. He rubbed his nose with Justin's nose, and then plunged his tongue into his mouth.

Justin kissed Brian back, mapping the inside of his mouth. Brian had become lost in the sensation of kissing Justin, plundering that sweet mouth when he was called out of his daze by Justin pulling away, Brian trying to reclaim the boy's lips.

"So," Justin said with a smile, "did you miss me?"

"Yes," Brian said with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek, "you could say I missed you." Of course, Brian knew that the full implication of the statement was lost on the young man before him. Yes, Brian realized, he had 'missed' Justin, only for him it had been meant on a night when his phone was turned on, the night he became a father for the first (and hopefully only) time.

Justin put his best seductive smile on and led Brian to the bedroom. Brian had stumbled into the desk on his way in.

Brian found he didn't really care all that much.

Meanwhile in the other dimension

Brian put the Jeep in 'drive' and headed for the affluent suburb, remembering the house he had taken Justin to, to confront a father who wasn't willing to accept his son for who he was.

Brian braced himself for the battle that was yet to come.

Brian sat in the Jeep in front of the house, wondering what his next plan of action would be.

He must have sat out there for a good half an hour, not knowing how to proceed. The lights were on in the home and he could see movement beyond the curtains. Silhouettes against the brightness of the light shining from within.

Was one of those Justin?

He was trying to figure out what he would say once he knocked on the door, especially if Craig were to answer.

Hello, my name is Brian. You don't know me but I know your son. I took his virginity over a year ago. He's gay and I'm taking him home with me.

And then while everyone was standing around with their mouths hanging open, he would snatch Justin and they could run away.

Or he could enter the home on a false pretense and then just collect information.

Hello, my name is Brian and I'm with the Church of Latter Day Saints. Do you know God has a plan for you?

Brian had to laugh at the irony of that one. If God did have a plan for him, it was fucked up.

He wasn't going to get anywhere though if he stayed in the Jeep all night. Brian exited the car, walked up the path of the affluent home and stood on the porch, once again the ghosts of the past descending on him, almost as if they were mocking him in his time of pain.

"One more thing, Justin," his father started.

"Craig," Jennifer pleaded.

"No, I'm gonna say this. If you're going to live in this house, there's rules you have to obey. You are not to go to gay bars or talk about your disgusting lifestyle. And you are never, ever to see him again," Craig said while indicating Brian.

Well that wouldn't do, Brian mused.

Everyone was silent.

"So in other words," Brian said while smirking, "in order for Justin to live here, with you, he has to deny who he is, what he thinks and how he feels."

"I didn't ask for your opinion," Craig interrupted, "pal."

Brian stood. "That isn't love," Brian said and looked directly at Craig, "that's hate."

"Get the fuck out of my house," Craig said pointing at the door.

As Brian walked out of the room, "Justin, you coming?"

Would it be as easy as that this time?

He took a deep breath in and blew it out. Whatever Craig threw at him, he would deal with it. No matter what it was he came face to face with behind the door, he would deal.

Of course, he had to knock on the door first.

Brian tentatively raised his hand to rap on the door, or he could ring the doorbell or slam the knocker back and forth. He could do any one of those things. He had to be brave. He knew Justin would be if it were him.

And it was then, with that little bit of information, that memory of him walking down a crowded street to go back to the loft without needing Brian to hold his hand anymore, that it made it possible for Brian to knock on the door.

Steps were heard from inside and then an 'I'll get it.'

The door opened and Brian came face to face with a pleasant looking Indian man.

The kind that came from India.

He reminded him of that M. Night Shyamalan guy.

"Yes, may I help you?"

"Um," what the hell Brian thought, he could be house-sitting, "I'm looking for the Taylors."

"Shouldn't you try the Yellow Pages," the man said without a hint of an accent. He then chuckled, "or maybe try the commercial area of town? I wouldn't know the directions for any tailors."

"I'm sorry," Brian said with a sense of dread in his voice, "the Taylors, not a tailor, but as in Jennifer and Craig Taylor."

'And Justin Taylor,' was what he wanted to add. He didn't give a two-bit fuck about the rest of them really.

The man nodded his head back and forth, "I'm sorry, no one by that name lives here."

Brian's heart, the one he knew he had despite everyone telling him he didn't over and over again constricted.

"Oh, wait up a minute," the man said and Brian's head perked up. "God! The name didn't register for a sec and then I remembered...those were the people I bought the house from about six months ago! Oh, you must be looking for them."

"Yes, yes, I am," Brian said excitedly. "Do you know where they went after?"

Brian felt hope once again.

"No, I don't but," the man started and then called behind him for his mother. He then turned back to Brian, "my mother talked to the woman for quite a while. She might know something."

Brian waited and waited. It seemed like it had taken eons for the woman to come to the door when in reality it was about three minutes tops.

"Yes, Sabah," a small woman with graying hair said.

"This man is looking for Mrs. Taylor," the man said and then the woman turned to Brian. What had once been a smiling, happy woman had changed. She looked closely at Brian, and then tried to slam the door on him.

"Mama! What are you doing? This man needs to know..."

The woman kept trying to close the door. "Do not talk to him! He does not belong here." She continued to try to close the door.

The man looked back. He was trying to mouth the words, 'sorry,' before the door was firmly slammed shut in front of him.

Brian could hear arguing and shouting behind the door. He realized that he was causing that effect everywhere he went tonight.

What was it the woman had said? 'He does not belong here.'

No, Brian thought, they should not be here. Justin should be here. Or more accurately, Justin should be at the loft.

Brian was about to turn away when he heard the front door opening. "Sir? Sir?"

Brian looked at the man coming out of the house walk up to him where he was standing on the porch. "I'm sorry about my mother. She was saying crazy things. You know how...well," the man said laughing, "mothers, yeah?"

"I know all too well," Brian said back, smiling weakly.

"She was saying strange things. I couldn't understand half her ramblings...something about a mirror. Anyhow, once she calms down, I'll ask her what she know about Mrs Taylor, okay?"

"You'd...you would help me?"

"You look like you need it. I can tell you're looking for someone, you look so...lost."

Brian thought that was the understatement to end all understatements.

"My Patricia," the man continued, "that's my wife, if something were to happen to her...well...I would be lost too. And I'd want someone to give me whatever help they could."

Brian smiled again. Maybe all breeders weren't so bad.

"Here's my cell number. Call me...anytime...day or night," Brian said and then smirked.

"What?" the man asked with a smile.

"I think you're the first straight man I've given my number to who I told it was okay to call anytime...that I wasn't hitting on."

The man laughed. "I'll call you as soon as I hear something. I promise," the man said and put his hand on Brian's shoulder.

"Thank you."

Brian watched the man go back into the house and then turned around, heading for his Jeep. He looked over when he heard the sound of rustling leaves on the large tree in the yard. Brian looked more closely at the tree. It was so old, its trunk gnarled. When he turned again, he could hear the leaves rustling once more which was strange since there was hardly any wind.

Brian continued walking down the path. Must be a cat up in the tree or something.

He once again heard the tree shaking and then a strange, squelching sound.

And then nothing.

It was then that Brian stopped in his tracks on the path and remembered something.

There had been no tree when he first walked up the path.

Brian turned around to look at the tree.

The tree was gone.

Chapter 8

Brian drove his Jeep back to his loft and parked the car in his normal spot. As he rode the elevator up to his floor, he went over the events that had happened since he had met the family that inhabited Justin's old childhood home.

The first thing that came to mind, of course, was the tree.

Or lack thereof.

Was he seeing things? Had the tree not really been there when he saw it for the first time? Was it the stress finally getting to him? The stress of wondering what had happened to everything he thought he knew.

Maybe he was crazy.

That could be it.

But he didn't feel crazy. He just felt so...alone.

And he felt more alone as he walked into his loft. He looked around the cavernous living area. Brian couldn't believe he had missed it the first time, after he had confronted Vance and had come back to the loft to greet Justin with his good news. It was the very lack of stuff, stuff that marked that another person lived in the loft with him.

Justin's stuff.

The loft felt so empty. As Brian put his jacket down on the stool by the kitchen counter, he took note of the chaise lounge in the corner. And then they all came back. Those ghosts that had been mocking him before - they were all here now, worse than they had been anywhere else before.

"One spoonful left," Justin said as he poised the utensil above Brian, "you want it?"

"Naw, that'll mean 10 more minutes on the Stairmaster." Brian smiled as he tried to push the spoon away from his face.

"Come on," Justin said, "I wanna see you lick it off the spoon."

Justin fed the ice cream to Brian, the confection getting all over his nose, his throat, which Justin happily licked off, and Justin's cheek. Brian could feel Justin moving against him, while his younger lover plundered his mouth.

"Umm..ice cream kiss," Justin sighed.

Brian moved over to the liquor cart and started to pour himself a Beam. He went over what had happened later, after he had climbed back into his Jeep and headed out after the whole tree incident.

He had decided to go to Daphne's apartment. He knew that if anything, she would still be there. Her life couldn't have changed appreciably. And if she wasn't at the apartment she normally inhabited, well then, she attended Carnegie Mellon. He could get help from Ben, Michael would see to that, and try to locate Justin's best friend that route. Daphne would be so much easier to deal with than Justin's parents anyways.

As luck would have it, Brian had arrived at the apartment building, and had strode up the stairs, not caring of the time of night. After all, only college kids occupied the complex. The word 'sleep' wasn't in their dictionary yet. Once again as luck would have it, when he came to the door marked 5-C, he could hear noise on the other side, and knew it would be okay to knock on the door at this time of night.

Luck seemed to run out though when a tall, red-headed girl answered the door.

"Hello," the girl greeted lazily as she twirled her hair around her fingers. She was wearing a red shirt that had a picture of a fire extinguisher and the words I PUT OUT on it.

"Oh God, I was hoping I could find Daphne, Daphne Chambers here but I see..."

"Daph? Oh she lives here. She's my roomie," the girl said and smiled while she slowly gyrated her hips in a circle, probably for his benefit, he assumed.

"Thank God," Brian sighed. "Could I please speak with her?"

Brian was being as polite as he could be when he really wanted to push the girl out of the way, run in, find Daphne and ask where Justin was, but he had to be careful.

"Sorry, she won't be here till tomorrow, after her classes. She's spending the night at her boyfriend's."

"Of course she is," Brian smirked.

Why would she be home so she could answer Brian's questions, that would have been too simple.

"Could I give her a message?" the girl asked.

"What time will she be here, tomorrow?"

"I don't know, 5:00, I guess?"

"Okay, I'll be back. Thank you," Brian said and started to turn around. He then stopped when he suddenly came to a horrifying realization.

It was then, in what could only be described as the basement of Brian's brain, that part that was marked DO NOT ENTER, the part where things were kept that you didn't want to know about, that Brian decided he needed to ask the question.

Brian spun on his heels before the girl could close the door. "Sorry, but this boyfriend, his name's not Justin, is it?"

"Justin?" the girl snickered. "No it's Travis," and with that the girl slammed the door.

Maybe there was a God, Brian mused.

Brian turned and walked toward the bedroom. He was exhausted and knew he should get some sleep because he needed to be better rested for tomorrow. The thought of sleep was a laughable prospect at the moment though.

As he was about to ascend the steps to the bedroom, he took in the large blank space.

The space where a desk should have been - a desk with a computer that he had bought, to get his young lover's dreams back into motion.

"Why am I here?" Justin asked.

"One night your mommy and daddy wanted to make a baby," Brian started.

"No, no, you know what I mean," Justin asked seriously. "Is it just because you feel guilty about what happened?"

Brian looked back at Justin.

"Answer me. Answer me. If I hadn't gotten bashed in the head, would I even be here?"

Brian winced as he remembered that conversation. He remembered how that night had ended; with Brian telling him that no matter where he went, he would be doing what he wanted to do, but when he came home, he would also be doing what he wanted to do - coming home to Justin.

And it was just as true now as it had been then.

More so, Brian thought sadly.

But tonight, he hadn't come home to Justin, and it was with that and a heavy heart that he made his way into the bedroom, taking in the sight of the large bed.

"The first time you came here, you didn't know anything about me. I could've done anything to you."

Justin flipped over. "I was pretty sure you were gonna fuck me," Justin said with a confident smile.

"Then what?" Brian said as he straddled Justin. "What if...," Brian said as he kissed all along Justin's neck and torso.

"What if?" Justin sighed.

Brian grabbed a hold of Justin's throat, "I started to strangle you..."

Brian remembered wanting to scare Justin. Yes, it was a crazy world out there. You never knew who you could trust. And sure, he didn't listen to his own warnings, but he knew he could take care of himself. It was Justin he was more worried about.

What happened to Justin here? Who had he been picked up by, aside from Ted? Obviously nothing happened where Ted was concerned, but what then? Did he go back to Liberty Avenue? Who did he find the second time? Who had gotten there first? Was he good to Justin?

Too many questions ran around in his head, all bottlenecking to the point where he had to put a hand on his forehead and sank down onto the bed, smoothing the duvet cover with the other hand.

"Oh fuck," Justin breathed out as Brian entered him quickly. Brian then maneuvered his body around Justin so he was up against his ear.

He wanted to make sure he got what he said next.

"I want you safe and I want you around for a long time."

Did Justin always use a condom? Did someone tell him all the pretty words Justin had wanted to hear so they could do him raw? That standard old line came to the fore front of his mind, 'if you loved me, you would.'

Brian rolled around on the bed and breathed in the scent of the linen.

It smelled all wrong.

Obviously, the cleaning lady had washed his sheets and bedding, but there was usually the barest hint that Justin had been there, lingering on the sheets.

Brain bolted out of bed. The bed suddenly seemed too big, so he grabbed a blanket out of the closet, while Brian tried to ignore how bare and empty the closet felt without Justin's clothes hanging in there, and strode into the living area, where he laid down on the couch.

He would just sleep here for the night, because tomorrow he would find Daphne, she would tell him where Justin was, and then he could get the kid back where he belonged.

Here. In the loft. In their bed.

He would set the time line right again, once more wondering how it was he had managed to fuck it up in the first place.

Brian closed his eyes so he could at least pretend as if he were going to sleep, but sleep didn't come so easily, and every time he thought he was about to finally get some rest, another sharp pain would hit him squarely in the chest, and he would begin to worry again.

It wasn't until much later, until he had started to dream about running his fingers through flaxen hair, that he finally fell into a light and fitful sleep.

He would wake many times later that night.

And on the flip side of that world

Justin put his best seductive smile on and led Brian to the bedroom. Brian had stumbled into the desk on his way in.

Brian found he didn't really care all that much.

Brian sat up in bed, smoking a cigarette, while taking in the sleeping form of the body curled up next to him. The kid nearly wore him out, but tonight he didn't think he could possibly lay quietly in slumber.

Justin was definitely out like a light, though.

Brian could now sit back and reflect on what had transpired since the moment they both had retired to the bedroom.

Justin had wasted no time whatsoever in dispensing with his clothes. As soon as he was done with those, he had started in on Brian's and before either one knew it, they both were lying naked in the large bed.

Brian took a moment to breathe in the scent of his bedding. Sure enough, the cleaning lady had indeed laundered the linen, but it was still there. That unmistakable trace of his own scent, but this time it mingled in with that of the kid's.

And as Brian lay back on the warm, downy comforter, he felt Justin climb atop him, and start to kiss along his chest, taking in one nipple at a time. Justin didn't stop until he had mapped every square inch of Brian's body, from the tip of his forehead, to that little indentation right under his left ankle.

If Brian could say anything for the lad, it was that he was thorough. Justin knew every part of Brian - where to lick, where to bite, where to nip. He was a traveler driving on a road that he had traversed several times over.

And the way Justin did everything! Justin didn't just kiss him, he devoured him.

And to Brian it was too much, it was excruciating, trying to hold back from jumping on Justin.

It was sweet. It was hot. It was bliss.

It was perfect.

Justin was it - the perfect lover.

He'd had many tricks. There were good fucks. There were fantastic fucks. There were explosive fucks.

But none of them compared to this.

Justin loved him. He doted on him. He cherished him - each and every bit of him and it showed in the way the boy made love to him.

As Brian had taken Justin that night, he felt something he hadn't felt ever before. It wasn't love - because seriously, how could you feel something as undecipherable and obscure as that.

But still, it was there, all the same, whatever it was.

He fucked the boy with complete abandon. There was no holding back and for the first time in as long as he could remember, he was there.

He was actually there.

He wasn't thinking about how lousy the fuck was, or how he would have to remove the trick from his loft after they were done, or how he fucking picked someone up in the dark of Babylon, only to get them to the brightness of the loft to see them for what they were...

There was nothing in his mind to distract him. It was just him and Justin and he could lose himself to the pure pleasure of it.

And after he was done, and they lay naked and exhausted beside each other, Brian felt something else. Something he knew the word for though.

Jealousy.

Earlier in the night, he had tried to scramble for a word to call what Justin was. Not a trick. Never a trick.

The word mine had been the only word to come to mind but that word was incorrect.

Because Justin wasn't, he was his.

The other one's.

Brian continued to stare off into space, hoping that sleep would claim him soon, realizing that in this life, he was nothing more than a poor substitute. He had finally laid down and covered himself with the comforter, closing his eyes, and if he had started to card his fingers through the soft blond hair next to him, he wasn't aware of it.

Chapter 9

Brian woke to an empty bed.

He then bolted straight up when a thought had occurred to him. It had only been a dream. There was no Kip-less parallel world where little blond boys made them feel like they were the only person that existed.

He found himself somewhat relieved, and yet more so disappointed.

Brian then shook his head clear, something he found himself doing quite frequently as of late. This was good. He had no room in his life for anyone. Love was bullshit. In and out with the minimum of...of...something.

He couldn't think about it at the moment because he suddenly heard the unmistakable sound of running water.

The shower.

Without him in it. Because he was there on the bed. At least he thought he was. And as a man who believed he should find out just why the shower was running without him in it, he got up out of bed and ventured into the bathroom and stopped in his tracks at the vision before him.

The shower's doors were clouded with steam, but he could still make out the lithe form and the curve of that delicious ass.

Oh yeah, Brian thought, that ass and several memories bombarded his mind.

He didn't think he should bother the kid while he was showering. Of course, that was what he was thinking, but he found his physical body deciding that it wanted to be in the shower.

Right now.

Brian headed for the enclosure, opened the door, entered and started soaping Justin's back.

"Oh," Justin said. "Morning," and with that Justin smiled and kissed Brian on the lips.

"You're up awfully early," Brian said as he continued to soap Justin while nipping at his ears.

"Work this morning," Justin said as he turned back under the spray, "I promised Deb I'd be in early and take over Kiki's shift."

That little bit of information saved Brian from asking where Justin was gainfully employed. "I'm meeting Mikey for breakfast there this morning, I'll give you a ride."

"Are you going in to work today, Mr. Partner?" Justin asked while chuckling.

"Huh? What?" Brian whipped his head up. The word 'partner' had suddenly taken on a new spin and he hadn't realized what Justin had meant by it, but then it suddenly clicked into place. "Oh yeah. Um no, I'm taking the day off." Brian turned toward the spray, thinking out loud, "I think I've earned some time away. Besides, I think Vance doesn't want to see me around for the next few days. He's probably licking his wounds and I don't really need him going down on me right now."

Justin smirked evilly up at Brian. "No," Justin said with a huge smile, "but I could." And with that, Justin got down on his knees and took Brian's cock into his hands.

Now Brian was not a man to ever turn away a blow job and who was he to spoil the kid's fun. And there it was again, Brian noted. The way Justin was sucking on him, laving his member with such attention, making it seem for all the world that his cock (not yours, he kept reminding himself, his) was the only cock he would ever do this for.

And when it was over, and Brian came with an almost painful orgasm that was torn from him somewhere deep inside, his limbs still trembling from the explosion, that Brian felt that pain again.

The pain of loss. And it was for something he never even knew he had lost in the first place.

It was as if he never knew that he liked cheesecake because he had never tasted it. He'd never even knew it existed. And then someone gave him cheesecake, through some weird cosmic type of intervention and said, 'here, you just have to eat this,' and he did, and then he realized that he really, really, really liked cheesecake and he couldn't imagine not having cheesecake ever again.

But one day, he knew, without a doubt, that someone would come along, someone who had cheesecake first, and take all the cheesecake in the world away from him.

Even though he knew cheesecake wasn't really good for him.

As they both exited the shower, Justin started to rub Brian dry with the large fluffy towel. Brian reciprocated and did the same with Justin.

Justin smiled and then said, "you know," he said as he rubbed the towel over Brian's abdomen, "I think you let yourself go in Chicago. I think you might have put some weight on, Mr. Kinney."

Brian stopped. So now, after all this, he was also fatter than his counterpart?

"Oh God," Justin said while laughing, "you should so see your face...it's so classic. You are so easy Brian!"

"So...that was a joke?" Brian asked, relief slightly, only slightly, washing over his face.

"Yes! God, you look the same! You're worse than Daphne when it comes to your weight!" Justin turned toward the mirror to brush his teeth, his towel wrapped firmly around his lower half. Brian took his towel and snapped it at Justin.

"Hey!"

"Twat!" Brian said and smiled "And what's this?" Brian asked as he dove for Justin's towel covered ass, "are you storing this up for winter?"

"Brian!" Justin laughed back and then Brian went into tickle Justin on the sides but Justin side-stepped Brian and ran into the bedroom. He then ran into the living space, Brian hot on his heels, the older man securing his towel around his narrow hips.

Brian caught Justin and tackled him to the floor, where he proceeded to tickle the youth mercilessly. "Brian, stop it! That tickles!"

Just then the loft door rolled open, and slid to a halt with a loud 'bang.'

"Oh God, not again," said the woman from the doorway.

Brian looked up quickly when he heard the voice of the woman he thought he would never see again.

"Mel!" Brian said as he immediately lifted himself off the lithe body on the floor and stood up straight, making sure his towel was in place. He then bent over and held a hand out for Justin so he could lift himself off the floor as well, Brian readjusting the boy's towel higher so it actually covered his bottom.

Lindsay cleared her throat and smiled. "Brian, Justin. Nice to see you."

"Yeah, and so much of you too, Justin," Mel said with a wink, while Justin blushed and smirked back.

"You know," Justin said, "knocking has always been the most highly accepted form in civilized society to alerting your potential host of your presence."

"But it's not as much fun," Mel said back with a smile.

Lindsay smiled at her partner and moved farther into the loft, Gus in her arms. Brian noted how happy Lindsay looked, how she seemed to glow with the warmth he knew she used to possess. She walked up to Justin and kissed him on the lips and then walked up to Brian, doing the same. "Look honey, it's daddy!" and with that Lindsay put Gus in Brian's arms.

Brian looked down at the small child, who was looking up at him with wide brown eyes. "Hey sonny boy," Brian said with a smile, slightly confused at what was taking place.

"I need to use the bathroom...please tell me there's nothing disgusting in there right now," Lindsay said.

"Just push aside the thousands of sperm filled condoms on the sink," Justin yelled out. "Oh and make sure to put the toilet seat down," Justin said jokingly.

"You've been hanging out too much with him," Mel said as she pointed to Brian. "How you doing baby?" Mel asked as she kissed Justin.

"Okay. Better now," Justin said smiling at Brian. "I'm going to get dressed," Justin said and headed for the bedroom.

Brian looked down at Gus again, feeling slightly awkward. He hadn't been this close to his son in over a year. He then looked up at Mel. "Lindsay looks happy...not so tired. I guess you always were good for her," Brian said with a shrug.

Mel stopped her trek to the kitchen counter and looked blankly at Brian. She then chuckled while narrowing her eyes as she walked into Brian's space, "who are you?"

There was a slight moment as Brian held his breath in. Had he been found out?

Mel laughed again, "and what have you done with Brian Kinney?" She laughed again and made a big show of looking around the loft. Justin walked in at that moment, followed then by Lindsay.

"What are you looking for babe?" Lindsay asked.

"Brian just paid me a compliment. I swear, if there isn't a pod around here somewhere, then I'm a Catholic priest."

Lindsay laughed with Mel. Brian finally catching on, started laughing too. She meant it as a joke, his secret was still safe.

"I don't get it," Justin said as he stared at the laughing people.

"Honey, we have got to expand your movie habits," Mel said.

"Anyways, we're sorry for barging in. I heard about the good news," Lindsay continued with a smile, "Partner in a big advertising agency!" Lindsay said while going in for a hug with Brian. "I knew you could do it." Lindsay looked at Brian closely while holding him. "Is everything fine Brian?"

"Yeah, everything's fine. It's great, even," Brian smiled. "So is that why you came by? To congratulate me on my sudden good fortune?"

"Yes," Lindsay said and let go of Brian and then took Gus from him, "and I thought it would be nice for Gus to see his daddy."

Strange occurrences indeed Brian mused. Brian smiled at the group assembled before him.

"Brian, we need to go. I don't want to be late," Justin said as he smiled up at Brian and kissed him on the lips. Justin went over to where the girls were and started to play with Gus who was still in Lindsay's arms. He then looked back at Brian and smiled that thousand watt smile again.

He found that although cheesecake was most definitely very bad for him, he didn't really want to give it up.

Screw the calories.

Meanwhile, on the same morning, in the other world...

Brian closed his eyes so he could at least pretend as if he were going to sleep, but sleep didn't come so easily, and every time he thought he was about to finally get some rest, another sharp pain would hit him squarely in the chest, and he would begin to worry again.

It wasn't until much later, until he had started to dream about running his fingers through flaxen hair, that he finally fell into a light and fitful sleep.

He would wake many times later that night.

Brian drove the Jeep to Lindsay's house; he needed to talk to her.

The first thing Brian thought upon waking on his couch - besides the obvious that he wasn't and hadn't been in his own bed and of course, the distinct lack of Justin, and not wanting to dwell on that because for a few shining moments, he had hoped to wake up finding it was all a stupid dream - was that he needed to talk to his best friend, Michael.

But Michael had been no help whatsoever the night before. So he thought about it again and realized that Lindsay was probably the better choice.

And although he knew that he would get some answers later that day from Daphne, he needed to try and do something until then because he couldn't just sit around waiting until 5:00. Besides, Lindsay was involved in the GLC and that they put artists in shows and she was into the art community. She might know something about Justin. He would talk to her and explain what was happening to him.

Besides, he needed to talk to someone who wouldn't give him a hard time about what he was going through. Lindsay was a woman, she might understand these things better.

He would talk to Debbie, but Debbie would probably slap him upside the head and tell him to get off whatever drugs he was currently tripping on.

So it was with that that he threw on some jeans and a shirt.

He had considered a shower but he just wanted to get out of the loft. But he decided he should make an effort.

He couldn't even open the shower door though. Unlike the bed the night before, the shower was too small and he wouldn't have been able to breathe in there without feeling as if the walls were closing in on him.

And also, like the night before, the ghosts had come back; they didn't seem to mind the light of day and another memory had assaulted him as he took in his shower enclosure.

"My mom says sometimes she wished she never had me," Justin said dejectedly.

"That's probably because she's stuck with this annoying brat for the rest of her life," Brian said mockingly.

And it was with that memory, that he was plagued with regret as he drove to Lindsay's. Had he accidentally wished this? Wished for his life to go back to normal, before he had met Justin that night a year and a half ago?

If it was some fucked up wish, then he wondered if he could wish it back. It sounded simple enough to him.

And he had - over and over again.

But nothing.

Brian parked the Jeep in front of the cozy home. He sighed in relief as he noticed Lindsay's car parked in the driveway.

Okay, he thought, this was good.

He wouldn't even care if Mel answered the door. For all he argued with the woman, he did like Mel and thought she was good for Lindsay and knew that she would probably even not be adverse to helping him in the situation he found himself in.

Brian walked up the pathway, stepped onto the porch, knocked on the door and waited.

Brian hated front doors right now. There was always something on the other side of them that didn't fit in with everything he knew, something that took him farther and farther away from Justin.

Brian knocked again and heard it; the sound of footsteps.

The front door opened.

And this time, he knew the person on the other side.

Thank God, Brian thought.

And even though Lindsay appeared rather haggard and tired looking, it was still Lindsay.

"Fuck Lindsay, you look like shit," Brian blurted out.

"I could say the same for you Brian," Lindsay said back bitterly. "Brian, what are you doing here," Lindsay asked then sighed.

"I need your help, I'm...I don't even know where to begin," Brian said as he ran his hand through his hair.

Lindsay looked at her friend and smiled slightly. "You're asking me for my help?"

"Yeah, could you help me," Brian said, hoping his plea wouldn't fall on deaf ears. "Can I come in?"

"Who's at the door Lindsay?"

And that's when Brian knew everything was not fine.

It was not alright.

That wasn't Mel's voice. It wasn't even female.

Brian saw the man as he positioned himself behind Lindsay to see who their visitor was.

"Brian? What do you want?" the man said.

"Hello Guillaume."

Brian hated front doors.

Chapter 10

"Brian...um," Lindsay said nervously, "just wanted to ask me something, Gui, can we have a minute?"

Guillaume made a move to protest but then said, "okay, just remember, we have to leave soon so we can get Gus to school on time."

Lindsay smiled politely and then turned to Brian, her hands on her hips. "What is it you need help with Brian?"

Brian had a million things to say. He wanted to tell her about how ever since he came back from Chicago, nothing has been right. He wanted to tell her about Justin. He wanted to ask if she even knew anyone named Justin. He wanted to ask her where the hell Mel was and why Gui was here in his place. He couldn't think of anything to say so he just said the first thing that came to mind.

"I made partner," Brian said in a rush.

"Good," Lindsay said as she shook her head. "I'm really happy for you Brian," Lindsay continued in a voice that said anything but. She might as well have been saying, 'I have a hangnail,' Brian thought. "So is this part of your new look at the agency?"

Brian ran a hand over the fine shadow that covered the bottom half of his face. Not only had he not showered, he hadn't done any of his normal personal hygiene, which included shaving.

"Look Lindsay, that's not what I came to tell you, I..."

"What Brian? You said you wanted my help? Why now? Huh? Why now?" Lindsay said in exasperation. "I've got my own problems right now, Brian. I don't have time for yours."

As Lindsay was about to close the door on Brian's face, he stepped up and put his hand on the handle, "can I at least see Gus?"

Lindsay scoffed and then glared at Brian. "Why? You haven't really cared about him for the past year. Bye, Brian," Lindsay said as she waved and with that she closed the door.

Brian looked at the door and then stepped around the side to the window facing the living room. Gui and Lindsay were having a heated argument, no doubt courtesy of Brian's impromptu visit. He turned around, and headed down the path that would take him to his Jeep, wondering how on earth things became so fucked up so quickly.

Brian did some mental mathematics concerning what he remembered about the whole 'Gui' incident. He remembered when Gui was taken out of the equation. It was after Brian signed over his parental rights to Lindsay so Mel could become Gus' other mother. It was after that that Mel and Lindsay had gotten back together. All was forgiven as far as the girls were concerned and they were able to play 'dykes with tykes' to their heart's content.

Guillaume was sent packing.

So, Brian thought, what could have changed...

And then he remembered. It was that night that he was sitting on his couch at his loft in the middle of the night, unable to get any sleep, agonizing over what he needed to do to get Gui out of the picture, the girls back on track and Gus with the people he needed to be with, when a sheet wrapped, sleep-dazed Justin came over and lay alongside him.

"Brian," Justin groaned, "I'm the most mature person you know. Think Gus is going to speak French before he speaks English?"

"Why don't you go back to bed?" Brian said.

"Well Lindsay, can't raise him on her own. And as much as you love him, you're never going to be a full-time parent."

"You know, if I wanted the news, I'd watch CNN," Brian said back.

"You can't control everyone's life, even though you'd like to."

Brian grunted. "Obviously. You're still here."

Justin groaned again while keeping his vigil at Brian's side, "Being mean to me has never really worked. You should try another tactic," Justin moaned while kissing Brian's shoulder.

"What're you doing?"

I'm killing you with kindness. It's proven to be a highly effective technique for achieving," another kiss, "one's goals."

It wasn't really the greatest advice anyone could give, Brian had to admit. It didn't suddenly come down from above and say, 'this is what you need to do,' but it did make some sort of crazy sense.

And it was just another way in the long list of things that Justin did or said that helped him to focus and come up with the solution to his problems, whatever they may be.

Everyone else was always busy with their own lives; even Michael at that time was busy trying to figure out how to further develop his relationship with David. Maybe, Brian had thought at the time, that this was why people needed each other, beyond the friendship angle. He had come to the realization that night that it was rather nice having Justin around and he could see why people liked doing that.

And then he had checked to make sure his cock was still there.

It had been.

Soon after he sent Justin to bed, it all clicked into place and he knew what he had to do where his rights over Gus were concerned and how to deal with getting Mel and Lindsay back together. He just knew that if he made this huge gesture (killing them with kindness), there was no other way but for them to get back together and then it was 'au revoir Gui.'

He would also make sure to word it as a bribe.

So he gambled and he had been right.

But apparently without Justin's input, he wouldn't have been able to come up with the idea to do it on his own.

It didn't make sense but the proof was there in the form of Guillaume standing over Lindsay in her own home...and with his son.

And what about Gus? Brian had known that the minute Gui came into the picture, that his own rights would be put in danger. It would have only been a matter of time that somehow, Gui feeling threatened by Brian's presence would have figured out a way to go after those.

And apparently he did, as it seemed he hadn't really visited Gus in over a year.

It was too much to handle all at once.

And he was wishing that Justin were there with him.

And it was then that he remembered that wishing didn't mean shit and that his biggest problem was just that - that he needed to find Justin but that was out of the question until late afternoon, when he could get a hold of Daphne.

Now that Lindsay was out of the question, he needed to re-group with Michael.

So it was with that that Brian headed to the diner, knowing Michael and the gang would be there this morning for breakfast. Maybe Ben would be there and he could see if he knew Daphne or could help in some way. He didn't think he could wait much longer, and Brian didn't think he could deal with any more surprises that the day, just as his night, kept throwing his way.

As he walked into the diner, he caught sight of Debbie balancing three plates and handing them to the men in the booth.

"Hey baby, Michael's not here yet but Ted and Emmett are over there," Debbie said as she pointed at their booth. She stopped as she took in the sight of Brian. "Oh honey, they turn the water off at your loft?" Debbie said with a chuckle.

"No time for anything like that," Brian said off handedly.

And he was right. He seemed to have all the time in the world, but no time at all. He didn't want to sit down. He didn't want to stand in any one place for too long. He didn't want to eat. He didn't want to sleep. He didn't want to shave. He didn't want to make nice with the chit chat.

He just wanted the clock to say 5:00.

After he found Justin, he would do all those things.

"Well hi there Brian," Emmett said. "We saved you a spot," Emmett said as he patted the seat next to him.

Debbie rolled her eyes. "Saved a spot? That fucking spot is reserved!" Debbie said as she patted Emmett on the shoulder.

"I saw Lindsay today," Brian said.

"Oh, baby, why would you do that?" Debbie asked while sitting down across from Brian, Emmett and Ted looking on confused.

Brian chuckled, "I needed help," Brian said and laid back against the booth. "I am so fucked up."

The trio looked at each other with concern.

"Brian?" Debbie asked while putting her hand on Brian's, "what's the matter? Is it Gus? Is he okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine. I mean," Brian started, seeming to be talking to himself, "why shouldn't he be, right? He has the perfect hetero home with a mommy and a daddy," Brian said mockingly.

"Yeah, right, perfect home," Debbie scoffed. "Baby, you can't do this to yourself. There was nothing you could have done to have stopped Lindsay that time. Her and Mel were on the outs and there was nothing..."

"But I did!" Brian shouted as he stood up. "I did do something. If you see Michael, tell him I'm looking for him. I have to go."

"Brian! Sit down. You tell me what's bothering you right now!" Debbie screeched. "You're like a fucking caged animal!"

Brian ran his hand through his hair a few more times and then sat back down. He had no where to go anyway. He was a caged animal, trapped in a cage by a mistake in a time line that he had no control over.

It was then, as he sat down, and looked over to the wall, that he first saw it.

It moved. It was almost imperceptible, but it was there.

Movement. On a wall.

But walls don't move.

"Did you see that?" Brian asked the table, while looking at the wall.

Debbie and Ted looked at each other. Emmett looked up, "see what?"

"The wall...it moved! Like a rolling wave, only really small," Brian said with furrowed brows.

Ted scoffed while Emmett and Debbie rolled their eyes. Debbie then slapped Brian upside the head. "What are you tripping on?"

But it had been there and Brian had known it.

So now, after all this, he was seeing things.

He was most assuredly going crazy, because walls didn't move like that. And trees didn't just disappear, Brian added to himself.

It was then that Michael walked in to the diner.

"Oh, Michael. I need to talk to you," Brian said.

"Good, I need to talk to you too," Michael said angrily. "Where the fuck were you last night? I called you after you took off and then I tried a few times before I finally fell asleep."

"I was...out," Brian said.

"Doing what?" Michael screeched and before Brian could answer, "listen, nevermind, I saw Mysterious Marilyn last night. She was super freaked out after you left Woody's so I followed her. She said some weird shit. But Brian," Michael said while looking directly at Brian, "I think it has something to do with you."

Brian sat and pondered this new information.

Now normally, Brian felt himself a logical, matter-of-fact kid of guy. He didn't believe in mysticism, tarot cards, the after-life or what have you. But because of the strangeness of the events at hand, he knew that something was up and maybe the drag queen could help him. She would at least have some answers.

"What did she say?" Brian asked.

Ted scoffed again, "you're actually asking what she had to say?"

"Teddy," Brian started and then looked at Michael, "go on."

"Well that's just it Brian, she didn't say anything. She was completely freaked and she told me she was a coward and she couldn't say anything else and she ran away."

Brian rubbed his temple. Of course she did. Why would she have any answers. He didn't think he could take much more of this. "Michael, we'll go see Mysterious Marilyn later. Right now, I really want to find Justin."

"Oh God, not this again," Emmett said.

"Who's Justin?" Debbie asked.

"Please, not you too," Brian said.

"Someone you should know apparently," Ted said, "because you nicknamed him 'Sunshine.'"

"Sunshine? Why the fuck would I do that?" Debbie asked confused.

"Because of his smile," Brian said dejectedly. "Look, can we not play twenty questions again? Michael," Brian said as he turned to his best friend, "Daphne goes to Carnegie..."

"Who's Daphne?" Michael asked.

"It's like he has a whole cast of characters made up in his head," Ted said. "So in this made up cast, do I have any beautiful, blond haired, blue eyed boys of my own?" Ted asked while laughing.

"Ohh, how bout a big, beefy top for me!" Emmett sprang up waving his hand.

Brian ignored the chuckles and directed his attention to Michael, who wasn't joining in the laughing. "She's Justin best friend. She goes to Carnegie. You think...I know this is asking a lot....because it's against every privacy law and all, but you think Ben could possibly help?"

"Ben?" Michael asked incredulously.

"I know. I know," Brian said while holding his temple. "It would be going against all the student's rights and blah, blah, blah, but as one friend to another...as the boyfriend of a guy's best friend?" He knew Ben would have a cow about looking into a school directory for Brian, but he was rather taken aback by Michael's reaction. He figured Michael would at least understand.

"Brian," Michael asked in shock, "why on earth would Ben want to help you...or me for that matter?"

"Because he loves you supposedly and you've both gotten really close, and that's the sort of thing people like you two do for each other, right?" Brian asked confused.

"Michael," Debbie started.

"Not now ma! Brian, I don't know what you're talking about but except for one date, that went horribly by the way, Ben and me are not together."

The table became very quiet as everyone stared back at Brian.

Of course, they weren't.

Brian wished the wall would move again so it could swallow him whole.

And at about the same time in that other world...

"Brian, we need to go. I don't want to be late," Justin said as he smiled up at Brian and kissed him on the lips. Justin went over to where the girls were and started to play with Gus who was still in Lindsay's arms. He then looked back at Brian and smiled that thousand watt smile again.

He found that although cheesecake was most definitely very bad for him, he didn't really want to give it up.

Screw the calories.

"So," Brian said as they drove to the diner in the Jeep, "Mel and Linds looked pretty good...happy even."

"Yeah," Justin said slightly confused. "Brian? What's up?"

"Nothing, just, it sure is a good thing that Gui guy took off, huh?" Brian decided if he was to find out what happened a year ago, Justin would know. He also suspected the kid might have had a hand in it somehow.

He sure hoped the kid hadn't tried to sleep with Guillaume.

"Yeah, of course," Justin said laughing. "I mean, I don't think Mel or Linds would have let him stay. I don't think the girls were into a menage a trois, especially if one of them was a guy," Justin said and laughed again, then he looked back at Brian, "or you," Justin smiled.

"Yeah, me and Mel, I can see that." Brian laughed. "Actually I think I could picture Ted in that equation better than myself."

"Ewwww, Brian, bad mental image," Justin said while sticking his tongue out and scrunching his nose.

Brian thought he could get used to that.

He focused again, "yeah, well, you know, it was close, the way she almost married him. I mean, who would have thought they, Mel and Linds that is, could have gotten past their differences, you know?"

"Yeah, well," Justin said, "giving up your parental rights to Mel like that was a pretty hard thing not to notice. It was sheer brilliance, Brian. Really."

So that was it. He had given up his rights over Gus. It made sense.

And the kid was right. It was brilliant.

Why hadn't he thought of it?

Oh that's right, because he was too busy thinking about all the other shit going on his life at the time. Kip, Michael and what's-his-name, Jack.

But they were all distractions and he could do the blame game forever but it all pointed back to him.

He never really stopped to think about what would happen to Gus if he didn't do something to get the girls back together. As things turned out, he lost his rights anyway after Lindsay and Gui had married and now the his son, called a stranger 'Da-Da.'

Brian thought about probing more and learning how Brian came up with the idea but decided that it wouldn't be wise at this juncture. He needed to play it a bit more cool.

But brian knew one thing for sure - Justin was the common denominator in everything.

As Brian and Justin walked into the diner, Emmet and Ted were sitting at the usual booth.

"Well, some things never change," Brian smirked.

"Huh?" Justin said.

"Nothing," Brian said and then Justin reached up on his tip toes and planted a kiss on Brian's lips.

"I have to work now. Pick me up at 1:00?"

Brian smiled, "sure thing." Brian watched as Justin went behind the counter and retrieved a clean apron and then walked over to the booth.

"And how was your night, Mr Kinney?" Emmet asked as he was sipping his coffee.

Brian looked over to Justin who smiled back at him. Brian smiled at the guys.

"This I don't need to hear," Ted said and went back to reading his paper.

Michael came running into the diner. He looked toward the booth and saw the guys sitting there. He decided that Brian and him would go to Marilyn's apartment after breakfast. He'd had a terrible night sleeping, thinking about the situation his Brian would find himself in in the other world. They needed to set things right again and they needed to do it right away. "Brian!" Michael looked around nervously and then sat in the booth across from his best friend, or who he thought was his best friend.

"Michael," Brian said.

"Everything okay?" Michael asked nervously.

"Never better," Brian said and smiled while looking at Justin pouring coffee for another customer.

Michael furrowed his brows at Brian knowing exactly what that smile meant.

"We will talk about this later!" Michael said while fuming.

"Talk about what?" Emmett asked.

"Nothing," Michael said.

"No, he 's right. You said we'll talk about this later. What's this?" Ted asked.

"Nothing," Michael said again more angrily.

"Oh, so you'll talk about nothing later? Can't you talk about nothing now, here in front of Emmett and me?" Ted asked.

"Ted!" Michael screeched.

Brian chuckled. "He meant, Einstein, as in it's none of your business," Brian said in Ted's ear.

"Fine, but if it's nothing," Ted continued.

Brian and Michael rolled their eyes. "So we need to go do that thing," Michael said, directing his statement at Brian.

"The thing," Brian said.

"Yeah that thing," Michael stressed, not wanting to alert the guys to where he and Brian would be going. "So hurry up and eat your breakfast so we can go do that thing."

"What thing is that?" Brian asked.

Ted and Emmett watched back and forth as the conversation went from one to the other.

"The thing, Brian. The thing!!" Michael screeched.

"Oooh, could Teddy and I go do the thing too?" Emmett asked.

"No, only me and Brian," Michael said.

Justin walked over at that moment. "What's going on?" he asked as he put his pencil behind his ear.

"Brian and Michael are going to do some...thing," Ted said while waving his hand in the air.

Justin raised an eyebrow. "You're doing a thing with Michael," he asked.

"It's not that kind of thing," Brian smiled back at Justin.

"And he won't let us go with them to do the thing," Emmett pouted.

Justin shook his head, "do you really want to do this thing with them Emmett?"

"No, I just don't want to be left out," Emmett said. "I never get to do anything."

"You and I can go do something later, okay?" Ted said to Emmett.

"Yay!" Emmett said with glee while clapping his hands.

Debbie walked over at that moment. "What are you guys going to do?"

"Things," all four said.

"Hey Sunshine, go handle table five," Debbie said.

"Sure thing Deb," Justin said as he walked away.

"Sunshine?" Brian asked. He had heard Ted say that same thing last night but thought it a one-off.

Michael looked over at Brian and shook his head to say, 'drop it.'

Justin finished taking the order and dropped by the table again with Brian's toast. He then smiled.

Brian got it now.

Just then, another party joined the table. "Hello fellow diners!" Ben greeted.

"Ben!" Michael said and shot up out of his seat to kiss Ben on the lips, Debbie scowling as she walked away. "Ben, I can't walk with you this morning, Brian and I have to go,"

"They're doing this thing," Ted said.

"A thing. What kind of thing?" Ben asked in mock seriousness. "That's okay anyway, I have to go to the college. I have a thing going on there too."

Michael kissed Ben again and looked at the taller man with an expectant face. "See you tonight?" Ben asked in his best 'come hither' voice.

Michael looked over at Brian. "I hope so. I really need to see you."

Ben smiled one last time, said "I'll see you later," gave another kiss to Michael, squeezed him and then turned to leave.

Michael waved to him as he was leaving.

"Hey, good luck with the thing," Ted yelled out.

Everyone turned back to the table to look at Brian, who had been staring the whole time.

"Brian, what's up?" Emmett asked, scrunching his eyebrows in confusion.

"Since when," Brian asked incredulously, "have you been dating Ben Bruckner?"

The table became very quiet as everyone stared back at Brian.

Chapter 11

"What the fuck do you mean," Michael started and then stopped. "Brian, am I not together with Ben in the other...um...the..."

Ted and Emmett watched on as Michael stumbled over his words, while Brian raised his eyebrows and then bit his lips.

"I don't know what's up with you two but why the fuck would you say that?" Ted asked.

"I'll tell you why," Debbie cut in directing her words at Michael, "because, Michael Charles Novotny..."

"Oh great, my whole name," Michael said in defeat.

Debbie continued, "Brian is just as concerned about your health as I am. He knows you shouldn't be with Ben."

"Ma! Not now! This is really fucking important!" Michael screamed at his mother.

"Don't you give me 'not now' you little shit," Debbie pointed her finger at Michael. "I swear on..."

"What? What Ma...what do you swear on, huh? This is none of your fucking business!" and with that, the entire diner became deathly quiet. Debbie, her lips set in a pout turned away.

"I'll just go now, my opinion is not very important it seems," Debbie said then stopped and pointed her finger at Brian, "but maybe your best friend's will be."

"Well," Emmet said, "that was pleasant." Emmett and Ted gave Brian reproachful looks. "Really Brian, you know how Debbie feels about Michael dating Ben, why did you provoke her like that?"

"I...I...um," Brian said while shaking his head. How was he supposed to get out of this one? So little Mikey was dating the professor. He thought they would never have gotten back with each other after that disastrous date when Michael left after getting scared about having sex with Ben. But they did. Here. It looked like Ben was never going to give Michael a second chance. So what happened to change Ben's mind?

Though it was obvious Debbie still had a problem with him dating Ben.

"Oh my God, the great Brian Kinney has no excuse or witty comeback or anything," Emmett said.

"Someone should check for frogs dropping out of the sky or a plague of locusts," Ted quipped.

"Brian?" Michael said coming out of his daze, created by his guilt that he was feeling over his mother. "We need to go now."

"To do that thing?" Brian asked in all seriousness.

"Yeah," Michael nodded absently.

"So, maybe we'll get together after you guys do your thing?" Ted asked.

"I don't know Teddy," Michael said. "Come on Brian."

Brian started to walk out of the diner but then stopped. He walked over to Justin behind the counter. "1:00, right?"

"Yeah," Justin smiled.

"I'll be here," Brian said with a smirk and then walked out.

After all, he had to keep up pretenses didn't he?

And it was so very obvious to Brian, the kid had something to do with Ben and Mikey getting back together. And as before with Gui, he hoped that hadn't meant Justin slept with Ben.

Though he had a feeling that he hadn't.

Brian wondered for the umpteenth time in the past twelve hours, and really, that was truly the small amount of time that had passed, how this kid fit in with everyone. He didn't really want to dwell on what that meant, about how solidly Justin fit into his and their lives but he found that he didn't mind all that much.

Yes, he thought, the great Brian Kinney, who never did anyone twice (well, he did a few times and all of them disastrous), was actually liking the situation he was in. He had an image to maintain, yet here, he could be with Justin. No one seemed to care. No one called him on it. Well, Ted and Emmett did, sort of.

But it wasn't really a big deal and he still managed to keep his standing. And of course he had to play along, keeping up the pretenses. Apparently it was for Justin's sake, because he had gone through some great trauma not too long ago.

It was the least he could do.

And that brought up another thing; what was this great trauma? Brian reminded himself he would have to ask Mikey again as this could come up again and he didn't want to be left with his pants down.

Unless Justin was going down on him.

Thoughts like that of course reminded him of this morning in the shower and he couldn't go there right now. Because right now, they, as in he and Michael were going somewhere else.

The drag queen's lair apparently.

As the two drove in the Jeep, Brian finally spoke, breaking the tense silence.

"I saw Mel and Linds this morning."

"Yeah, did you say anything?" Michael asked apprehensively. Actually Michael had thought that maybe telling Lindsay about what they knew so far would have been a good idea.

"Not really. Um...seeing them together," Brian said, "was really strange."

"Oh fuck," Michael whined. "Please don't tell me Ben and me aren't the only ones not together where you are..."

"Remember Gui?" Brian smirked.

"Oh God," Michael said while putting his hands over his face, "I don't want to know anymore. So...I'm not with Ben in the," Michael said and swallowed, "other place?"

Michael had to shake his head clear. Because first, the other Michael wasn't him so if he wasn't dating Ben, then it was not really his problem (even though it made him quite sad and filled him with a great sense of loss) and secondly, he was talking to this Brian as if he was his Brian, but he knew he wasn't.

"No, you're not," Brian replied wondering how far Michael would probe.

"It was after that time, right? When I chickened out about having sex with Ben because I looked in the medicine cabinet?"

"Yeah, that was pretty much it. You tried to see other people...your mother tried to set you up with someone, you tried an on-line dating service."

"Yeah, I remember," Michael chuckled, "you made me look hot. God, that guy was an asshole...the one from the computer dating service. He went on and on about how I wasn't perfect. You know," Michael said as he turned to Brian, "I think that was when I realized that no one was perfect and that I wanted Ben back."

"Yeah, I know," Brian said.

"Oh...so I did want him back...the other me?" Michael asked, laughing at the sheer ridiculousness of what he just said.

"Yeah, but Ben didn't really want to get involved with you at that point. He was worried you would freak out again. Well you know the score Michael...you were there...sounds like the same shit," Brian said. Brian remembered how hurt Michael was after that, having lost a chance with the good professor.

"Yeah," Michael said. "But the other me didn't pursue Ben?"

"Nope, you just accepted it and left it at that," Brian said.

Michael looked out the passenger side window and started thinking about that time and how he had to really work at getting Ben back after losing his trust like that. He remembered how he decided he would do whatever was necessary because he knew, he just knew, he could have something great with the man. Michael smiled and then laughed to himself when he recalled all the stupid things he had done to be near him and to remind Ben that he wasn't going away so easily.

Brian heard Michael laugh to himself. "What's so funny?"

"I was just remembering all the things I did to get close to Ben again...to show him how serious I was. I practically stalked the man. No," Michael laughed, "I did stalk him."

Brian scoffed. "What idiot would something like that work on?"

Michael bit his lip and then started laughing. "Well...you."

Brian whipped his head around. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"How do you think Justin got to you...I mean, Brian," Michael said. God this was so confusing.

"I am Brian."

"You know what I mean," Michael said and then continued. "Justin just always made sure to be there. He was such a persistent little fuck." Michael stopped and looked out the windshield, lost in thought. "I think that's where I got the idea from...from Justin. To just be persistent. Because I knew something was there for Ben and me and I didn't want to give up. Just like Justin."

"So the reason that you, in this world, is with Ben is because you got the idea of stalking from the kid? That's a bit of a long shot, don't you think?" Brian asked incredulously.

"Long shot or not, it's the truth," Michael said as he turned to address Brian. "And it's not just the idea of stalking itself, but of not giving in. Not caring how much of a fool you make of yourself, if you can have this wonderful thing at the end."

Brian tried to imagine how he would have reacted to Justin pursuing him where he came from. He tried to imagine if he would give in eventually to the kid's persuasions.

He then remembered last night and this morning and thought, maybe, possibly, he probably would have.

The kid had a way with persuasion.

"We're here," Brian said and parked the Jeep in front of a stylish apartment house and with Michael, walked up the path that took them to the lobby and up the stairs to Mysterious Marilyn's apartment.

Michael knocked on the door. "I know she's in...I've heard she never gets up before 2:00 in the afternoon."

Michael knocked again and then banged heavily on the door. "Marilyn," he shouted. When Michael went to touch the doorknob, he found that it gave and the door opened, allowing him inside.

"Um Mikey, I don't think we should just walk in," Brian warned.

"Listen," Michael turned on him, "we need to get answers and she seems to be the only one who can give them to us right now." Michael wanted to get his friend back to where he belonged. He knew how Brian was probably freaked out right about now, with all the changes that seemed to be on the other side.

And it was with that, that chill that ran down Michael's spine at the thought of Brian in a world without his Justin, that Michael plunged himself into the apartment.

Brian followed Michael inside but then stopped as abruptly as Michael had right before him.

The first thing they noticed were the walls, covered in some strange, ancient language, at least that's what they thought, since they couldn't understand any of the characters. Brian walked up along one wall while Michael examined another.

As Brian ran his hand along some of the lettering he said, "this isn't Latin...I don't now what it is. I've never seen it before," Brian said with furrowed brows.

"I can't understand what any of this says," Michael said, looking at the writing in awe.

"Fuck Mikey, you can barely read English...who could expect you to know how to read this!"

"Fuck you Brian!" Michael said defensively. Well, Michael thought, Brian hadn't changed appreciably from one world to the other.

They both turned to explore the apartment further when a tall man appeared. His hair was buzz-cut and graying at the sides. He was wearing a baggy t-shirt and jeans. The thing that was most notable on the man was his pale face and the haunted look in his eyes. He had a thick black marker in his hand, probably the one used to write the strange words on the walls.

"Excuse me," Michael said, hoping the man could answer his question, "we're looking for Mysterious Marilyn. Do you know where she is?"

"Marilyn isn't here right now," the man said and with that Brian and Michael jumped back in shock.

Despite the lower octave, the voice was unmistakable.

"Marilyn?" Michael asked while swallowing, "is that you?"

"Call me...Bob."

Meanwhile, at the diner, in the other dimension

"Not now ma! Brian, I don't know what you're talking about but except for one date, that went horribly by the way, Ben and me are not together."

The table became very quiet as everyone stared back at Brian.

Of course, they weren't.

Brian wished the wall would move again so it could swallow him whole.

Brian stared back at Michael while everyone at the table stared at him.

"So, you're not dating Ben?"

"No Brian," Michael said while nodding his head back and forth.

"Was it after," Brian cleared his throat, "after the time you wouldn't have sex with him because you got scared?"

"Yes," Michael said while nodding. He was truly getting scared for his best friend.

Brian shot up off his seat. "I have to go now. This place...it's all just...so wrong." Brian turned with unseeing eyes toward the exit. Michael put his hand on Brian's arm.

"No Brian. We need to go see Marilyn. Something's not right and this just proves it," Michael pleaded. "I want...I want to find out what's going on," but as Michael was about to say more, Debbie chimed in.

"Yeah, well I think this is the only right thing," Debbie said. "The best thing you could have done was dump Ben and don't you forget it baby," Debbie said as she took hold of Michael's chin and pinched it.

"But it's not Debbie...Michael's happy with Ben," Brian said, looking at the woman, snapping out of his daze.

"Are you seeing Ben behind my back?" Debbie shrieked at Michael.

"Ma!" Michael screeched back. "First off, what I do is my business and second off, it doesn't matter, I'm not seeing Ben behind anyone's back. Fuck! Brian's fucked up right now. Can't any of you see that?!"

"Let's go, Michael," Brian said and with that, the two men exited the diner and headed for the Jeep, ignoring the shocked faces they left behind at the table.

They drove over to Marilyn's in silence, neither one saying a word, both too wrapped in their own thoughts.

Michael thinking about what he had lost with Ben, too scared to pursue the man who he thought he could have very easily fallen in love with, someone who unlike David before, would have allowed him to grow with him.

While Michael was thinking about his loss, Brian's thoughts were about the Michael and Ben that he remembered together. He thought about how Michael had pursued the professor, and these thoughts just brought him back to another person who had done the same thing.

Justin.

The kid had persisted and persisted and what was it Debbie had said? Somehow that persistent kid had gotten in under the wire and had gotten to him.

And she was right.

But what most people don't know and he never admitted, even to himself, was that he had been happy that the kid had been able to get in under that stupid wire and scale the walls. He had always very easily pushed the kid away, and had on numerous occasions, but he knew he would come back because Justin was like that.

Justin was brave enough to go after what he wanted, despite how it made him look. He wasn't worried about what other people thought. He could do anything that he put his mind to, no matter what it cost him.

This was what made Justin so different from all the rest and worth the trouble.

Brian knew that Michael had taken a page out of Justin's book when pursuing Ben. Not just the tactics, but the sheer unwillingness to give up.

And then it hit Brian like that ton of proverbial bricks.

All the things that had changed since Justin wasn't in his life, the things he was seeing now in the past few hours since his life changed for the worse; it all made sense.

Their little extended family, for as much as they cared and loved each other needed something more. It needed that extra little push in the right direction. Someone to come along and call them on their shit.

Justin was the shot in the arm to their little world, the world they had become entirely too cozy in.

And without him, this, all this was the horrific result.

Brian needed to find Justin now more than ever and if it took him talking to a mystical, possibly bonkers, drag queen, than so be it.

"Brian, why did you think I was dating Ben?" Michael asked.

"Because you do," Brian said while shaking his head in confusion, "or you did, and I'm going to make sure that you do again," Brian said matter-of factly. "But first, we need to find Justin."

"Justin...he's real, isn't he?" Michael asked in a quiet voice, not quite believing what was coming out of his mouth.

"Yes, he is," Brian said out loud for the first time since this all began, most of the time it being said as a silent mantra running through his head on 'repeat.'

"I don't know why, but I believe you. This is it," Michael said as they arrived at the apartment building.

Brian parked the Jeep and they both made their way into the lobby, up the stairs and to the apartment door.

Michael knocked but nobody answered.

"Oh, I've had enough of this fucking front door shit to last me a fucking life time," Brian muttered as he banged on the door loudly. "Marilyn! Open the fucking door!"

"Brian," Michael whined, "not so fucking loud...most people are probably still asleep here." And then, just as if someone had heard Michael's quite plea, a head popped out of another apartment door, two doors down.

"You can knock as loud as you want, she won't answer the door," said the apartment dweller.

"Darren!" Michael exclaimed as he ran over to the man standing in his bathrobe, "is she sick or something?"

"Marilyn packed her bags late last night. She's gone sweetie."

"Of course she is," Brian said dejectedly.

Chapter 12

As Brian drove the Jeep to PIFA, his mind replayed the events that had happened since they left Mysterious Marilyn's apartment after having learned the mystic had took off in the middle of the night. He kept going over the conversation that he had with Michael after driving his best friend back to the comic book store.

"Brian, we need to do something. If something's freaking Mysterious Marilyn enough for her to run like that," Michael said and was then cut off.

"We," Brian said, "are not going to do anything. I have to fix this...whatever it is. We can deal with the other mystical mumbo jumbo later. First I have to find Justin," Brian said as he ran his hand through his hair.

Michael took in a deep breathe and then let it out. "You're really sure about this?"

"Do I look like I'm sure about anything?" Brian yelled as he spread his arms out at his sides.

"You should go to the loft and rest up, Brian. No," Michael said as he grabbed Brian's arm, "you should eat something...fuck! When was the last time you ate?"

"I don't know...yesterday morning, I think," Brian said while scratching his head. "I'm not hungry." Then Brian looked up, "and I'm not going back to the loft."

"I'm really worried about you Brian," Michael said in frustration.

Brian scoffed, "so am I. I can't believe how much has changed, and all for shit!" Brian paced back and forth. He then chuckled to himself.

"What? What could you possibly find funny now?" Michael asked, alarm growing evident in his voice.

"Probably the only good thing that not happened was that I never had the loft broken into," Brian chuckled to himself again.

"Um...Brian...are you talking about the time last year before my birthday party?" Michael asked.

Brian's head shot up. "Yes? You are talking about your thirtieth birthday party, right?" Brian asked, afraid of where this might lead.

Michael rolled his eyes, "well, how many thirtieth birthday parties do you think I had? Yes, the one you nuked when you invited David and Tracy!"

"But, how? Justin wasn't here," Brian asked, his brows furrowed together.

"You've lost me, not that you haven't since you've gotten back but," Michael shook his head clear, "what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"Did I," Brian asked and then swallowed, "was I the one to not set the alarm?"

"What? Brian, remember, it was the security company. Remember, the inside ring?" Michael looked at his best friend pleadingly. "They were responsible...it was uncovered and you did some digging and found out why the company had to change ownership, don't you...don't you remember?"

"The alarm company? It was," Brian turned around slowly when the full impact of what Michael was saying hit him, ironically enough, like a bat to the head.

He remembered seeing Justin's face as he accused him of not setting the alarm, as he told him to get his stuff and get the fuck out, of him running to New York...

Brian turned and ran for the bathroom, what little that had been in his stomach coming up. When he was done, he straightened himself up and took a good long look at himself in the mirror above the sink. He didn't see the man who's life had been turned upside down since last night but the man who accused a frightened boy of something that he hadn't done. A boy who had no where to go so he did the next best thing. He ran.

And Brian had been the one to do that to him.

Michael entered the bathroom and stood behind Brian who was still gazing into the mirror. "What was it you said, Mikey, I'll always be young and I'll always be beautiful. I don't see that right now. I don't like what I see." Brian spun around quickly to face Michael. "I need to go," Brian said matter-of-factly.

"Brian," Michael started then stopped. "Call me, okay?"

Brian pulled into the student parking lot of the Art Institute and parked the Jeep, noticing quickly how deserted the parking lot looked and that's when he remembered.

It was Justin's school break. Even if Justin were still attending this school, he wouldn't be here as this would be his week off. Brian then cursed the fact that Carnegie Mellon was on a different schedule because then maybe Daphne would be home right now instead of in classes and he wouldn't have to be going through this.

Then he thought better of it and realized if Daphne were on vacation right now, with his current run of luck, she'd probably be somewhere like Greenland.

Brian exited his Jeep and decided to go in anyway; he noticed there were a few cars parked and that the doors to the buildings must be unlocked so maybe he could explore the halls and just see what he could find. As he told Michael before, it was a long shot but he needed to do something.

He just couldn't go back to the loft. It was so empty, so devoid of life.

Sure, Justin wasn't always at the loft, but this was different. It was different because he wouldn't be coming home this time. Unless he went and retrieved him from wherever he was.

Brian shook his head clear, tried one of the doors on the first building he came to, found it unlocked and entered. Maybe if he found the admissions office, he could sweet talk the lady behind the counter and see what he could come up with, but then thought differently when he saw how dark the hallways were. There were a few closed doors but quite a few were opened. Brian walked slowly down the hallway, trying to figure out exactly what kind of clue it was he was looking for, to locate a kid who might or might not be attending the school.

Shit, Brian thought. Was Justin able to even go here? His father was pretty pissed off at him for wanting to go to the Institute. Was that what had happened? Did he end up going to Dartmouth? He knew Justin's dad complained about the tuition but since it looked like his parents were still together, did he acquiesce and let him go to art school after all?

Too many variables were running through Brian's head and he started to feel a bit dizzy and befuddled from all the possibilities that Justin's life could have taken without Brian's influence.

Just as Justin had had a hand in influencing everyone around him, Brian was positively sure that he had a hand in Justin deciding on the art school over the ivy league university.

Brian was always so busy making sure no one was influencing his life or him theirs, that he failed to notice how while he was doing all this, life was doing it anyways. What was it John Donne had once said - 'no man is an island.' Brian was beginning to think he truly understood that statement.

Brian continued walking down the long halls, an opened door here and there illuminating an otherwise dark hallway and that's when he saw it...again. This time he was not imagining it; he knew without a doubt, he was not seeing things. When he had been at the diner, he thought maybe, possibly that his eyes were playing tricks on him, his lack of sleep and nourishment finally getting the better of him.

But this time it was real.

And big.

Like, the whole wall was moving in a large wave.

And it was heading directly for him.

Brian stood and stared at the wall until his brain caught up with what it was seeing and sent a message which said RUN. Brian turned and started to run down the hallway, wanting to distance himself from whatever it was that was following him, knowing that walls didn't move but it seemed as if this one did and was searching him out.

He kept running and running, then came to a bend in the hall and took a sharp right. He then stopped and against his better judgment, turned around, expecting the wall to leap out at him, embrace him in its grip but there was...

Nothing. He then peeked around the corner again and sure enough, the wall was immobile.

Like all good walls should be.

Brian stood in the middle of the hallway staring at the walls around him, his heart racing and knowing it was not from the overexertion of running that short distance. It was when he finally got his breathing under control that he heard it. It was faint but it was there but he couldn't place why it sounded so familiar. Brian moved toward the sound, getting closer and closer as it started to become more pronounced.

It was music.

And he was sure he had heard that piece before. As he got closer to the sound, he immediately recognized the music.

It was violin music. And the piece he would know because Justin had been playing that song over and over again ever since he had come back from the violin recital that Mel and Linds had taken him to on his birthday.

Brian walked up to the door and peered inside. It was the guy from the park, the one who played his violin. Brian entered the classroom.

The man stopped playing. "Can I help you?" he asked as the man took a sip of something that was piping hot in his tea cup.

Brian, in his addled state, not really knowing if this was some kind of cosmic joke decided to plunge ahead anyway. "You play the violin."

The dark haired man looked down at his instrument and laughed. "What was your first clue?"

Brian pointed behind him. "Did you see the walls back there? Did they move in here as well?"

The man leaned over conspiratorially and said with a grin, "well, I always want people to be moved by my music, but I don't think the walls would be." The man then laughed at his own joke.

Brian laughed back half heartedly.

The dark haired man extended his hand to Brian, "I'm Ethan by the way...Ethan Gold."

Meanwhile, in the other place

"Marilyn isn't here right now," the man said and with that Brian and Michael jumped back in shock.

Despite the lower octave, the voice was unmistakable.

"Marilyn?" Michael asked while swallowing, "is that you?"

"Call me...Bob."

"Marilyn, what happened?" Michael asked as he walked closer to the tall man.

"Marilyn's not here," the man sing songed. "Only Bob." The man stopped and looked up at Brian. "They came last night you know. They're not happy."

The man turned around and walked over to one of the walls and continued to write in that same strange language.

"Bob?" Michael said, "what does it say?"

"It's my penance," said the man.

"Fuck this cryptic shit. What do you know," Brian yelled, "Bob?" Brian added mockingly.

Bob stopped what he was doing and turned toward Brian. "I can't talk anymore about this. I've already talked too much." Bob turned back to his writing.

"Please, what do you know," Michael asked as he put his hand on 'Bob's' shoulder.

Bob halted in his writing but continued staring at the walls, "They don't know how you got here but they're very mad." Bob stopped and regarded Brian. "You shouldn't fuck," Bob yelled, "with the Guardians. They're very, very mad. They'll never let you cross back now. I shouldn't be talking to you." Bob continued to write.

Brian rolled his eyes, "for someone who isn't supposed to be talking, he certainly is the little chatterbox."

"Brian, shut up," Michael hushed. "Bob, we need to set this right," Michael said, trying to calm the man down.

"Can't," Bob shook his head and continued writing, stopping to lean into the walls. "I don't hear them right now."

"Oh God," Brian said and sighed. "We're not getting anywhere here...let's go Mikey."

"Can't cross over, I don't know what to do," Bob sing songed, "you'll have to go to the old lady who lives in a shoe. The old lady who lives in a shoe will know what to do," Bob continued to sing song.

"Oh this is good," Brian said in exasperation, "he's channeling Dr Seuss. Let's go Michael."

"We can't leave her here," Michael said.

"We'll call someone," Brian said and turned to leave.

"Who?" Michael yelled.

"I have absolutely no answer to that question," Brian said.

Michael looked back at 'Bob,' knew his best friend was right and then walked out the door with Brian.

As they climbed into the Jeep, Brian put his sunglasses back on. "Well that was productive."

"We need to look for the old lady who lives in a shoe," Michael said brusquely.

"Did you hear what you just said," Brian laughed, "and out loud?"

"Brian, this is important. We need to set the balance right, or whatever it is."

"Did you just see her...him? That was a perfectly sane, perfectly normal, okay well not normal, human being before all this. I don't really want to meet these guardians, if that's the they Marilyn...I mean Bob was talking about."

"So you do believe we need to do something," Michael said quickly.

"I believe," Brian stressed, "that this is fucked up, but what are we really talking about here Mikey? I mean, really," Brian said as he shook his head.

All of a sudden, Brian stopped the car in the middle of the street.

"Brian, what are you doing," Michael started and then stopped also. "Is that what I think it is?"

Brian took his sunglasses off so he could look at it more clearly. He was then shaken out of his trance as a car drove by and blared their horn at them.

"Get out of the middle of the street asshole," the driver in the car yelled out the window.

"What do you think Brian?" Michael asked.

Brian pulled over to the side and parked in front of the shop that had a huge sign in front that read JO'S SHOE REPAIR. The sign was in the shape of a boot - the kind that is usually associated with the nursery rhyme about the old woman who lived in a shoe.

"This is such a fucking long shot," Brian said.

Michael looked over at Brian. "It wouldn't hurt."

"So what am I supposed to do, Michael," Brian said while chuckling, "walk in and say 'hey, I'm not from around here, but I bet you get that line all the time?'"

Michael sighed, "it's all we got."

Brian and Michael exited the Jeep and walked up to the front door of the shop. Inside was a small woman behind the counter. Brian recalled the time he and Michael were fifteen and they went to see Silverado because Kevin Kline and Kevin Costner were in it. The little woman reminded him of the woman who played the madam in the movie.

She was wearing a shirt that read BINGO'S BITCH. Brian reflected on the fact that she probably frequented the same establishment Debbie did.

Once the woman was finished with her last customer and they exited the shop, she turned her attention to Michael and Brian.

"Excuse me, I know this sounds crazy," Michael started.

"You want to talk to me about crazy," the woman said as she turned her attention to Brian and smiled, "but you bring him here?" The woman walked right up to Brian and got into his space. "Welcome to the other side of the mirror, Alice."

Chapter 13

Brian looked the woman up and down; despite the diminutive form, he found she had a very commanding presence. He also felt a bit of relief that maybe now he could start getting some answers from a more reliable source, never really having too much faith in Mysterious Marilyn.

"The name's Brian," he said with a smirk.

The woman nodded her head in understanding, never taking her eyes off Brian. Just then, they were both taken out of their thoughts by Michael advancing on them from the side.

"You can tell by just looking at him?" Michael wailed. The woman turned her attention on Michael and then he regretted having said something as he suddenly remembered all too well how Mysterious Marilyn had seen it right away also. Something told Michael though that this woman had more on the ball than the former drag queen and that he might have to watch what he said around her.

"Of course I can see it," the woman said as she circled Brian. "By the way, the name's Jo." The woman stopped pacing and turned to the two men. "You know," she started, "why it is you should never put a person who has suddenly appeared to have lost their mind, in other words, gone completely mad, in a small room, as they do in mental hospitals when they first arrive?"

Michael and Brian both looked at each other in confusion and then back at Jo and shrugged.

"Too many walls," she said and turned away. "You can't put a human being in a room with no where to escape if the very thing that drove them mad was residing in the walls to begin with."

"That's very fascinating and a riveting piece of trivia," Brian said mockingly. "You must be very popular at all the cocktail parties."

The woman chuckled to herself. "Do you always have a witty comeback? You've always thought yourself so smart, so clever. Wasn't that what your mother said to you, after you came out to her?"

"How did you...how could you know that?" Brian asked in confusion and anger. Flashbacks of his mother in church soon after she found out his little secret hit Brian all at once. He remembered the day all too well when Joan Kinney had walked in on him and a trick.

"I know a great many things Mr Kinney," Jo said. "There. Was that ominous enough for you?" Jo went behind the counter to put an accounting book away while chuckling to herself.

"How did you know my last name?" Brian wanted to kick himself after the words left his mouth.

"I just do. So tell me, have you seen anything strange regarding walls?" The woman peered up at Brian as he moved closer to the counter.

"No, I think Brian would have mentioned something," Michael stopped when he saw Brian looking back at the woman. "Brian, you haven't, have you?"

"At Woody's last night," Brian said, "the wall looked like," Brian laughed even though he didn't find it funny, "like it was breathing."

Jo smirked while Michael closed the space in on Brian. "You saw a wall breathing and you didn't stop to tell your best-fucking-friend?" Michael shrieked.

Brian gave Michael a look; the kind of look that said 'please give me a break here, besides, would you have believed me?'

"That was them," she said. "The guardians." Jo then crossed her arms over her chest. "They can move within the walls of buildings and houses."

"But that's ridiculous!" Michael scoffed. "How can they possibly do that?"

"This coming from the man who still reads comic books," Jo said as she passed Michael and looked at him. "They can alter solid surfaces. There's really not much they can't do." Jo pointed her finger at Brian, "they know you're here. Oh, and for now, you'll probably be the only one who can see the movement within the walls."

"But how? Never mind, I don't want to know. Okay," Brian said in a bored tone, "so I take it I should stay away from these guardians. So what," Brian shrugged, "I stay outside, away from walls?"

Jo sighed. "It doesn't matter. Where there are no walls, such as open space, they move through the earth. They can manifest themselves into certain kinds of matter."

"What, like a trash can or something?" Michael asked.

"No...its always organic. They prefer trees," Jo leaned over to whisper to Brian. "See any trees lately that shouldn't have been there?"

"And I would be able to tell this how? I don't usually notice the surrounding foliage," Brian shot back.

"These guardians," Michael asked while walking over to where Jo was standing, "why are they following Brian?"

"Keeping an eye on him...they're not very happy about the upset in the balance of things," she said.

Brian suddenly turned on Jo. "How do you know all this...about me...about these guardians?"

"You know of Mysterious Marilyn, correct?" she asked.

"It's Bob now, but yeah, she's the one who told us," Brian said.

"Bob, huh?" Joe smirked. "Think of me as her, only to, oh...say the power of a hundred." The woman shrugged it off.

Both men stopped and once again revised their opinion of the petite woman and the power she so obviously held. "How did it happen? How did they switch?" Michael asked.

"Come here," Jo said as she motioned with her finger to follow her. She led them to a mirror hanging on the wall. "What do you see when you look into the mirror?" Jo asked of Brian who stood in front of the object in question.

"My reflection," Brian said.

"Of course you do!" she said. "This is a mirror," she said as she tapped the object, "a piece of polished glass with a fine layer of shiny metals painted on the back. It's just a mirror. You lift it up," she said as she hoisted one side up, "nothing's on the other side. Now," she continued, as she went to a doorway, "what if you were looking at your reflection but it wasn't because you were looking in a mirror..."

"But a doorway," Brian said passively.

"Exactly," Jo said. "A doorway between our two worlds.. You saw what you thought was your reflection in a mirror, but it wasn't a mirror, it was you...in a doorway." Jo looked puzzled, "the guardian who let that happen will be dealt with quite harshly, I imagine."

"What mirror were you looking in Brian?" Michael yelled impatiently.

"Christ! I'm a fag, Mikey! What self respecting fag doesn't look in a mirror," Brian yelled back at his best friend while rubbing his temple. "God, I have such a mother fucking headache."

"You might have thought it was a mirror at the time, but really, it would have been...that is to say...it doesn't exactly look like a reflection. Mr Kinney, I'll be fairly blunt with you," Jo said.

"Oh and you haven't been so far?" Brian condescended.

"What were you hopped on? Um...tripping on...whatever it is you people say now," Jo asked. "Exactly how high were you?" And with this she looked up at Brian as if she could read what he was thinking.

Images ran through Brian's head at that moment.

A dark nightclub.

A long, dark hallway.

Him, high as a kite.

Some guy with a tattoo.

And yep, there it was, a mirror, which seemed extremely distorted at the time...

Brian shook his head. "It's there but it's very unclear."

"Hmmm...I thought so," Jo said while raising one delicate eyebrow. "It'll come back to you."

Brian groaned while rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. "Okay, so we now know these guardians are following me because they're really pissed off, which I might add," Brian said as he stopped walking and pointed his finger at Jo, "is not my fault since someone should have been guarding the doorway...I mean, that's what a guardian does, guard, right?"

"Calm down Brian," Michael said.

"That's a good one coming from you," Brian shot back and then turned his attention back to Jo. "Now what? What does that mean? How do I go back? Do I even go back?"

"Well, now that's the \$65,000 question, isn't it Mr Kinney?" Jo asked, again with the upturned eyebrow.

"Hold on...of course he's going back!" Michael screeched. "Brian, my Brian, our Brian, needs to come back. We can't just interchange them, saying," and with this Michael lowered his voice, "hey Mikey, sorry about your best friend and all but this one looks, talks and walks just like him, so here ya go."

Jo looked back at Brian and inclined her toward the raving man, "he's wound a bit tight, isn't he? I don't think he wants to go back, Mr Novotny. Besides, the guardians aren't just going to switch you back, as if changing a pair of shoes."

"But can't we reason with these guardians?" Michael implored while Brian looked away from the pair.

"These guardians are not 'creatures of light' Mr Novotny," Jo said as she made air quotations. "They are not benevolent angel-like beings, not fairy type women in diaphanous clothing, or even your dime-store demons. They're monstrous creations - ancient beings who were the first ones to crawl on this earth." Jo stopped and regarded Michael. "Think of the most horrifying nightmare monstrosity you can and you still don't have the complete grasp on them. Their very image has caused grown men to become completely unhinged...barely hanging on by a thread of their sanity. I know of only one man who was unlucky enough to glimpse one of them and yet survive somewhat with his sanity intact. They say that Howard Philips Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos were based on seeing one of these creatures. Although he turned his madness into a literary success, he died completely and utterly demented, everyone thinking his madness was caused by the pain of the cancer."

Michael and Brian looked on in confusion. Michael then remembered some of the horror comics, comics based on the mythos, he had looked through when he was a kid. He would go to Buzzy's and sometimes look in that section, never buying, just looking, trying to satisfy some morbid curiosity. As he would flip through the pages with their gruesome images and off-kilter colors, he would silently berate himself for doing such a stupid thing because now, no doubt about it, he would have nightmares. He would then put the comics back in their slot and practically run over to the comic book hero section, hiding in the safety of Captain Astro and Superman.

"You mean," Michael swallowed, "those are the guardians?!" Michael screeched. "Please tell me he was just taking poetic license!"

"Actually, he was a little favorable to them," Jo said reflectively.

"So...they're not following me to put me back," Brian said suddenly catching on, clutching at his stomach, feeling quite sure that its contents would suddenly make an appearance.

"Oh," Jo said mockingly, "don't act as if you care. Please, don't insult me. He cares," Joe said as she pointed to Michael. "You don't," she said once again putting all her focus on Brian. "But if you do and I think there still is a part of you that does," Jo sighed resignedly, "then there is a way. If you really want to know how to cross back, it would take me summoning one of the guardians."

"So you can do it," Michael said excitedly.

"Oh yes, I could summon them, but it wouldn't be a very wise idea," Jo said.

Brian perked his head up, "why not?"

"The ancient ones, the guardians, feed on fear but not just fear itself...but on man's inability to confront their fear, to confront that which truly terrifies and scares them." Jo looked pointedly at Brian. "You Mr Kinney, are a coward."

"Now wait a minute," Brian started.

"Oh please, I know you wouldn't run away from a fight...you always go after what you want. You think you don't fear anything. But there are walls around you, thick walls, that you built to allow yourself to not feel anything beyond pure carnal pleasure. Of course, even that has been somewhat harder to feel, I sense. That is," Jo said as she turned her full attention on Brian and smiled knowingly, "until recently."

Before Brian had time to catch up to what she was implying, Michael jumped in, "you can't just accuse my friend like that. You don't know him!"

Jo turned on Michael and then scoffed. "He may have built the walls, Mr Novotny, but you helped him lay the bricks."

Michael turned away, not wanting to admit what he knew deep down was quite true.

"Can we please stop with the walls analogy; I get so fucking tired of it. What? Do you get together with Debbie and take notes?" Brian stopped and then threw up his hands. "So great, I can't go back because I'm a fucking coward. Fine," Brian said in defeat, wondering if it truly was defeat he was feeling.

Jo laughed, "it doesn't matter...you couldn't go back anyway right now. You're not ready and he's not ready yet."

Both men stopped and regarded the small woman. Michael spoke up next, "you mean...me?"

Jo scoffed again. "No, not you," she said as she looked at Michael, "the other one. I can sense it. He doesn't even know where he is yet. He thinks he's screwed up the time line somehow," she said as she waved her hand dismissively. "He doesn't understand that he's simply in the wrong place - right time, but wrong place."

That chill that had come over Michael before ran up his spine again at the thought of his best friend and what he must be going through. No doubt blaming himself yet again for all the wrongs.

And this time, without Justin to see him through.

"So if you summoned them," Michael started, needing to clarify it once and for all.

"It would be disastrous," she emphasized. "It's not the time. They would both be killed instantly...killed or worse."

"There's something worse than being killed?" Brian asked.

"Imagine living inside your head for the rest of your natural life. No one being able to reach you. Not being aware of anyone or anything around you. Lost in your delusions. Sound fun?" Jo asked cheerily.

Brian turned while clutching his stomach again, suddenly feeling sick at the thought of what going back would entail. Michael looked down at the ground, rubbing his hands together for warmth, not finding any to be had.

"Go. I'll let you know when its time," Jo said. "You won't learn anything more from me at the moment."

"So you will summon them," Michael said again, trying to reassure himself as well as Brian, who appeared to not be reassured by the thought at all.

"I said I will...but I won't be held responsible for what comes of it. Even if it is the right time, there is still no guarantee that it will work. The guardians hate to be called upon, especially to fix one of their oversights," the woman said and walked behind the counter once again.

"Marilyn was really scared of them and look what happened to her," Michael said.

"She was let off easily." Jo nodded her head, "yes I know what happened to her. Word gets around fast," she scoffed.

Brian suddenly came out of his stupor to ask the question that had been running around in his head since they arrived at the shop. "Aren't you afraid?"

"I have nothing left to fear. I'm not worried about them. I have certain...protections," Jo said and smiled.

Brian stopped, and then turned to regard the woman again, possibly to find something to say that was witty, but he found he had nothing to say. Nothing at all.

He wondered if his mother's ears were turning red at that moment.

"Come on Brian," Michael said as he grabbed hold of Brian's arm.

And with that, and the new information floating around in their collective heads, Michael and Brian left the store and headed for the Jeep. Brian found it hard not to keep shuddering as he thought about everything they had just gleaned from the woman. The guardians, the doorway. But there was one thing that stuck in Brian's mind most.

For the first time in his thirty years of life, Brian had met someone who could see every little thing about him. Someone who he couldn't hide from. Or behind those walls he so carefully constructed.

She had assessed him, called him on it.

And she had been right.

Despite everything else Brian was feeling, he had to admit, it was very liberating.

Brian got into the Jeep to drive Mikey back to the store and then off to the diner. It was time to pick Justin up after all.

And meanwhile, back at PIFA, in that other place

The man leaned over conspiratorially and said with a grin, "well, I always want people to be moved by my music, but I don't think the walls would be." The man then laughed at his own joke.

Brian laughed back half heartedly.

The dark haired man extended his hand to Brian, "I'm Ethan by the way...Ethan Gold."

"Brian, Brian Kinney," Brian said to the man who just introduced himself.

"Nice to meet you," Ethan said as he placed his violin down on the seat next to him.

"My partner," Brian said and Ethan noticed the way the man looked away with a pained expression on his face, "I think my partner came to one of your recitals about a week ago."

"Oh yeah?" Ethan smiled. "What was his name?"

"His name is Justin, Justin Taylor."

"I don't remember meeting anyone by that name," Ethan said puzzled. "What did he look like?"

Brian bit his lower lip as he had to yet again explain Justin. "He's blond and," Brian sighed as he suddenly had a feeling of déjà vu. "Fuck it!" Brian pulled out his wallet and procured a picture. "This is him," Brian said as he handed the picture over to Ethan. "His hair is slightly longer now. This was taken when he was in high school...last year...right after he found out he had been accepted here...actually, after he decided to go here." Brian looked down at the picture. He looked up at Ethan and then smiled. "He was so happy," he said while he traced Justin's face on the picture.

"Nope," Ethan said with a shake of his head, "he wasn't at the recital. I would have remembered him." And Ethan knew he would have remembered someone as beautiful as the blond in the picture.

"It was stupid, I know," Brian said and put the picture away, glancing at it one last time. "Without Mel and Linds, he wouldn't have gone to the recital anyways, so see? It makes sense. Doesn't it make sense?" Brian asked. Brian looked up at the man with a pleading look in his eyes.

"Yes," Ethan said, nodding at the man. It didn't make sense, but he would just have to humor this man because he wasn't sure if Mr Kinney was playing with a full deck. He looked manic and scattered. But mostly, he looked scared and lonely.

"So, Justin, is it? He goes here?" Ethan asked.

"Yes, he goes here but I'm not sure if he goes here," Brian said absent mindedly.

Ethan nodded his head. "So, you're saying he goes here but you're not sure if he goes here-here?" Ethan asked while pointing at his feet.

"Oh fuck!" Brian said as he was pulled out of his misery. "So help me God if you pull that Ted Schmidt now-now shit, I'll personally pull off everyone of those violin strings and wrap them around your throat."

"I think it might be time to call the campus police," Ethan said and made a move to walk away.

"No, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's just...I don't know what to do anymore," Brian said as he held his arms up at his sides and then let them drop. "Justin listens to that piece over and over again. I thought you might know something. You gave him the CD...for his birthday."

"I did? I told you I never saw him before," Ethan said as he became a little more wary of the man.

"You did, but not here."

Ethan sighed. This was getting them nowhere. "Is there someone I can call for you?"

"Do you know what I got him for his birthday?" Brian asked as if he hadn't heard Ethan.

"I haven't got a clue," Ethan said.

"A hustler," Brian said with a smirk.

Ethan hadn't expected him to say that.

"Yep, a hustler. What kind of idiot gets someone a hustler for their fucking birthday," Brian yelled.

"Well, apparently...you," Ethan said, not caring now how insane the man appeared to be.

"That was rhetorical, Paganini," Brian said while ignoring Ethan's scowl. "Everyone thought I should celebrate his birthday," Brian said mockingly. "I gave them lame ass reasons as to why I didn't want to but you want to know what? I was scared. I was afraid. Celebrating his birthday would have been admitting to something that I couldn't confront," Brian continued, ranting, oblivious to his audience of one, saying everything he had finally wanted to say out loud. "It would have meant so much to him, but I couldn't because then...then it would be admitting...Fuck! What would you have done for his birthday, huh?"

"I don't know...flowers, breakfast in bed, making love all morning," Ethan rattled off while smiling.

"Ha! A romantic!" Brian screamed which made Ethan jump. "They wanted me to get him flowers. Flowers, could you believe it?" Brian said incredulously.

"Is this another one of those rhetorical questions?"

"I almost, almost got them for him too," Brian continued, once again ignoring the man he was venting to, "but I didn't. I couldn't. No," Brian said as he held up his finger, "I wouldn't. Do you know why?"

Ethan nodded his head in the negative.

"Because Justin doesn't need flowers...they're empty. Just like he doesn't need the words...words are empty too."

"But he needs hustlers," Ethan said, lifting one eyebrow condescendingly.

"No, he didn't need that either. It was just another way to push the people I care about off a cliff, you know?"

"I hope that was an allegory," Ethan responded back.

Brian continued on. "I've been playing the music all this time, because lyrics are usually for shit. You know?" Brian said as he rounded on Ethan. He then picked up the violin.

"Um," Ethan said as he moved forward to take the violin away from Brian, "that's really old and I wish you would put it down."

Brian turned with the instrument and kept staring at it. "You gave him music, but so did I. But I'm not sure if I wanted him to hear the music. And I don't think he heard the music. I am so fucked up," Brian said while using his other hand to run through his hair. Brian regarded the violin again. "But I think this is the first time I'm seeing things clearly. I want him in my life. I like coming home to him. I like when we go out. I like it when he kisses me on that spot right below my ankle," Brian said and smiled. He then looked up at Ethan with an apologetic expression. "I can tell this to you. You're nobody. You're not a friend or family. I don't work with you. You're certainly not someone I would fuck."

"Be still my heart," Ethan deadpanned. At this point he just wished the man would go.

But he wished he would put his violin down first.

Brian started waving his arms around, Ethan cringing every time he saw his beloved instrument swaying in the air. "I can't give him words and pathetic gifts." And with that Brian turned around, "because it could never be enough. He means more to me than that." Brian stopped and looked around. "He means more to me than that."

And as if snapping out of a trance, Brian took in where he really was, "what am I doing holding this? I don't even play," Brian said as he stared down at the violin. He put the violin down on its original resting place. Ethan breathed a sigh of relief at the gesture. "I don't even know why I'm talking to you about this. God, I can't even stand your fucking music. I hate the violin...it always sounds like cats dying or something," Brian ranted away while looking at Ethan.

"What?! Well...fuck you! You...you...came in here," Ethan stopped stuttering and then exhaled. "I think you should go now," Ethan said, having had enough of the raving lunatic.

"And another thing...what's with the stupid goatee? You and Mikey," Brian said while running his hand through his hair. "Do the words 'chin' and 'rat' mean anything to you?"

Ethan spluttered while pointing at Brian. "Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

"Actually I have...this morning, and I didn't like what I saw," Brian said and then became quiet. "And then there was that other mirror."

Ethan watched as the man silently contemplated something and was about to ask him to leave when Brian's head shot up.

"I need to go somewhere. I have a college coed's apartment to stake out...see how far I've come?" Brian said while shaking his head back and forth. "There's no where else I want to go anyway. I'll just bounce off the walls if I stay in one place for too long. That is to say," Brian said as if talking to some imaginary person, "if the walls don't happen to be chasing me at the moment." Brian started laughing.

"You're insane. You have taken a serious walk off the map," Ethan said while standing and staring at Brian.

Brian stopped laughing and then looked at Ethan as if realizing something for the first time. "I showed you a picture of Justin, right?"

Ethan rolled his eyes, "yes, it was taken after he found out about going here, oh no - wait, when he found out about not going here-here."

"That means," Brian said, "that picture shouldn't exist. So that means...the time line must be fixed," Brian said excitedly while smiling. "He must be at the loft right now, the time line's fixed," and with that Brian took off for the door. "Good luck with your little life Ian," Brian said then exited post haste.

Ethan looked at the space the man had vacated only seconds before and then ran to the door frame while yelling, "It's Ethan, asshole! And give my condolences to Justin!"

"God what a freak. A good looking freak, but a freak still the same," Ethan muttered to himself. "And now he's got me talking to myself."

Ethan walked back into the room and picked up his violin. He needed to shake off the distraction Mr Kinney had made. Still, he couldn't quite forget the emotions the man had caused in him. He wished he could make that big of an impression on someone and it was quite obvious that Brian loved this Justin. He felt something akin to jealousy at the thought and wondered if he would ever feel that way about someone and if they could feel that way back.

If not, at least he would always have his music.

And with that, Ethan began to play again.

Chapter 14

"Justin?" Brian yelled as he ran into the loft. "Justin?"

Brian stood by the door and waited; waited for what he knew must be true.

Justin must be home.

Pictures didn't lie. Brian looked down at the photo again, the one he took out of his wallet and held in his hand the whole way up the flight of stairs.

The elevator would have been too slow.

There he was in the photo - clear as day. He was wearing that orange shirt he had worn when Brian had found him in Mikey's room when Ted had been in the hospital the year before. Brian had always loved that shirt. It rode up in just the right place on his stomach and exposed just the tiniest sliver of skin, enough to make him want to expose all the beautiful, creamy, pale flesh that lay underneath. Justin's arm was pinned behind him, making his shirt ride up all the more.

And it went without saying, his famous smile was plastered across his face, the one as loathe as he was to say it, brightened an entire room every time he walked into it.

He had been happy that day, the day he had told Brian that he was indeed going to the Art Institute. Brian remembered the proud smile on Justin's face as he told him as well as the genuine smile that adorned Brian's face, which was also reflected back to him on said photo, happy for his teenaged lover that he had made the right choice. It was also, of course, due to relief that he wouldn't be moving out of state.

But he never told anyone that.

Just like he never had told anyone that he carried the photo around with him either. That was why he hadn't shown the picture to Mikey or the guys last night. He had become so used to not pulling it out around them, it hadn't even occurred to him to do so.

Habits such as that were hard to break.

Brian looked down at the photo again, taking in his own image; leaning against Justin, holding him around the waist, his head perched on top of the blond head.

What was it he had said to Ethan? His hair is longer now and it was. And it was getting longer and softer. He always thought Justin could wear his hair whatever way he wanted and it would still be hot, but he had to admit that he liked the longer hair. So much to run his fingers through in the middle of the night, so much to grab onto when...

And Brian stopped his thoughts there. He needed to confirm whether the timeline was or was not fixed and it was with that that he found himself running into his bedroom and advancing on his closet. In the very back would be his proof. It was obvious that there was no sign of Justin living with him here, such as his desk, his clothes, or even food in the refrigerator, but this would confirm if he at least knew him. Brian reached back, deep into the closet, into the very way, way back, the place not even Justin would look and pulled out a small box. In the box were certain papers that he kept hidden and also one item he had purchased last year. He looked through the box and found it devoid of that item.

The picture Justin had drawn of him while he had been sleeping and had sold at the GLC.

To Brian. Of course, Justin never found out about that.

Brian loved that picture. He had brought it home that night and had gazed upon it for hours, not even remembering who had gone down on him, even when the person had quietly vacated the loft. The picture had conveyed so much to Brian. The most important being that someone had taken the time and care to sketch him while he was at his most vulnerable and they had done it with such love. Yes, he knew it had been love because he knew Justin and that's what it had been. Love and adoration. And it always set Justin apart from all the others. And it wasn't the fact that he had the talent to sketch him but that he took the time to do it.

Just as Brian was usually want to throw tricks out of his bed after he was done with them, the tricks usually felt the same way. Once they had received what they had wanted just as Brian had, they were free to go - no attachments, everything was cool. Bye-bye. But there had been a living person lying next to him that first night in his bed, a person who still wanted to give back to Brian.

And the evidence was in the picture that he had sketched.

The sketch that currently wasn't there.

Brian realized once again that the timeline or whatever it was, some cosmic joke played on him on high, had still not changed and he was still as Justin-less as he had been since he came back from Chicago.

He also realized that he had been lured to the loft once again. Brian looked around and not for the first time, tried to black out all the images that kept leaping into his head.

He looked over in the direction of the desk and he suddenly had a vision of Justin, coming home drunk after his first week of school, doing his own version of the great Kinney pain management.

"I went to Woody's...I let guys buy me drinks," a very drunk and stoned Justin said, on the brink of crying, "They all wanted to fuck me. At least I still have my looks. I told them 'no'...I was saving that for you," Justin said and kissed Brian hard on the lips.

After the kiss was over and Justin started in on Brian's neck, Brian laughed. "Well aren't you a sweetheart."

When he looked at the dining room table he saw Justin serving Jambalaya, saying it was always better the second day that first night he came back after having confronted his father the second time.

It wasn't enough that the ghosts kept bombarding him with their shared memories, but now he had the photo there to taunt him, to say 'see... you're not crazy, you were with him, but you're not now.'

Brian looked down at the box devoid of the picture and in an act of utter frustration, kicked it across the floor. He walked into the living area and kicked the side table out from under its legs and then stopped himself.

Brian held his head in his hands, the photo still clutched in one hand, as he deposited himself on the couch. He was so tired but he knew he couldn't sleep. He still had hours to go until Daphne would be home. He was so close to his goal and yet, if he actually went to her apartment and staked it out as he had ranted to Ethan, it would be just his luck and poetic irony if he were to suddenly find himself arrested for loitering or stalking thereby missing his chance to speak with the girl.

So he would stay put until it was time.

And try to get some sleep.

So he lay down and closed his eyes.

Five minutes later, he was still awake and tried his genius strategy again. He closed his eyes.

Nothing.

And then it hit Brian. A change in strategy. After all that was why God created Beam. And if he hadn't, then whoever did should be God.

Brian walked over to the liquor trolley, ignoring more ghosts (a dancing figure with headphones in one of his expensive black shirts) and poured a glass of the beautiful, amber liquid. He swallowed the alcohol in one gulp, shuddered at the sudden burn the Beam had and went to lay down again.

This time he let the drink move through him, trying to imagine the path the liquid was taking through the various channels in his body and it seemed to be working as his eyelids started to droop.

The nightclub looked busy but Brian decided he needed to get something to drink, maybe dance, definitely fuck someone and then head back to the hotel so he could catch his flight the next day. He would have left tonight but they had nothing available.

He thought the sooner he could get home, the more plausible it was that Justin and he could salvage what was left of their vacation.

"Hey!" the man standing on the curb said. "You don't wanna go there...go to the club down the street, this one's for shit."

"I don't care," Brian said as he nodded his head and lit his cigarette.

"Trust me, go to the other one," the man said and walked away. Brian checked out the line and sure enough, the men standing in the long queue didn't do anything for him.

Then again, not much did lately.

Brian shrugged and decided to try the place the man had indicated and found what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse with a huge black door strewn with graffiti and a tall, well built man with a shaved head stood in front of it.

"Looking for a party?" the man said while he regarded Brian.

"I'm bored and this place looks like shit."

"Yeah, well what isn't." The man opened the door and smiled at Brian. "Go in, it won't bite," and with that Brian smirked and walked in...to an empty room.

"What the fuck?" Brian exclaimed as he turned around.

"Go ahead," the man said as he inclined his head toward another door.

Brian opened the door (this one much thicker) and was instantly hit by the sound, the smell and a sudden rush of heat. There were bodies dancing every which way to a beat of loud music, not the techno beat of Babylon or most clubs, but of a more underground type of music. He'd heard the song currently playing before, a piece by Nine Inch Nails, something about not biting the hand that feeds you. It wasn't his thing but he was here and the place was more exciting than the last place, so he ventured within.

Brian made his way through the crowd, pushing aside people who didn't look like the normal crowd he hung with, smoke thick in the air. Brian took in the decor, graffiti strewn across the walls and chains hanging from the ceiling.

And the people; there were no flamboyant colors, gelled hair or tanned, well oiled chests. It was a sea of unwashed, grungy, pierced, tattooed people. Thankfully most of them men.

"Fuck it," Brian muttered and made his way to the bar, ordering two shots of Beam. As he was downing them, someone approached him.

"Here, you need this. It's good," another skin head said. "You'll like it. It's just what you need."

When in Rome, do as the Romans ran through Brian's head and against his better judgment, Brian put the pills under his tongue because it just seemed like a good idea at the time.

By adding the Beam into the equation, it didn't take long for Brian to start tripping on whatever it was he took. He remembered ordering another two shots and trying to make his way to what constituted the back room, bumping into several people along the way. Once he made it there, he took in the scene. There were men in stages of undress along the wall and the middle of the room, holding on to pillars and this of course brought to mind images of what he wanted to do to Justin when he got back.

As he weaved through the throngs of men, he could feel himself getting lighter and yet heavier at the same time. He didn't know what he took, but it apparently was having quite an effect on him. All the bodies of the men started to elongate in one instant and then shorten, as if gravity had taken over, in the next. It was like being in a funhouse with all its skewed mirrors and Brian realized that he must indeed be higher than a kite.

He needed to find someone, fuck the hell out of them and leave. As he stumbled around, being thrown off balance by the way the room was tilting back and forth, a short man - not short Brian thought, but slightly hunched over - grabbed his elbow.

"Hey man, come on, this way, you can fuck me. You can even go bareback," the man said.

Brian took in the man in front of him, luring him away; junkies didn't come more fucked up than this. "I don't think so," but Brian was pretty sure the words that came out of his mouth didn't sound like that as his tongue felt like it was roughly three times its normal size.

None the less, Brian followed the man, to wherever he was taking him. He figured if he closed his eyes, he could pretend it was a certain blond. He found he just couldn't think too clearly.

As they headed toward the other side of the room, he saw another doorway. Brian, thinking it must have been the exit, was a bit surprised when he found them heading for said doorway and it didn't lead to an exit but a hallway.

Brian blindly followed the man, noticing the strange tattoo on the man's back of something with several tentacles.

As Brian walked along, he used the walls to balance himself, as the hallway became narrower and narrower, his drug induced mind almost making it appear as if the walls were expanding and contracting. It also seemed as if the temperature had dropped severely and Brian suddenly felt a chill race through his body.

"I like it better here," the man said as he turned around. Brian noticed for the first time the gashes and cuts across the man's upper torso and face. He knew he must have been majorly fucked up on something as they seemed very pronounced. He also found he didn't really give a fuck. "They don't like to see me up top," the man said.

"Yeah, sure, up top," Brian repeated and he noticed he was going down a small flight of stairs and into another room.

"Here we are," he said.

Brian looked around. There was a dirty mattress on the floor and the walls were adorned with several holes, as if they had been punched in repeatedly.

"You live here?" Brian asked.

"Yeah, I like it here. It doesn't bother me. It lets me stay here," the man said while standing in front of Brian, the man's constant swaying back and forth making Brian slightly sick to his stomach.

Brian laughed not really understanding what he meant when he said 'it.' "Whatever. I'm not lying on that thing," Brian said and pointed to the bed.

"Just do me against the wall. Do it so hard I can sleep tonight without getting totally fucked up," the man said as he turned toward the wall.

Brian pushed the man against the wall, pulled the man's jeans down, unzipped his own jeans and sheathed his cock with a condom. He then looked around for lube as he hadn't any in his pocket.

"I don't have anything to prepare you with," Brian said, once again taking in the strange tattoo on the man's back.

"Just use your spit, I don't care."

Brian's head, which seemed to not want to stay in one place nodded in agreement, spit in his hand and wiped his cock a few times, then thrust himself into the willing body. The man screamed and Brian winced as he felt the burn but continued to move inside the man, barely aware of what was going on, the drugs and alcohol making their way through his system, telling him that thinking was not required at the time and staring at the strange gashes adorning the man's back. He noticed the same gouges and cuts on the man's arms which were braced against the wall.

"What's all this?" Brian asked, while touching one of the scars.

"It likes it when I hurt myself," the man said.

Brian didn't understand what he meant by that either but it didn't matter as nothing seemed real, the room continued to move and he was hardly aware when he came and the man screamed once more as he emptied himself against the wall.

"Oh God, that was...yeah...that was good," the man said and then staggered over to his bed and laid down, Brian noticing the man falling into a deep sleep as soon as his head hit the mattress.

Brian slumped against the wall, trying to make the room stop spinning, trying to get the buzz out of his head, a buzz that was put there by a combination of the drugs and the loud, haunting music that could still be heard coming from the club.

And that's when he noticed it, across from him. The mirror.

A long skinny mirror. But the mirror was strange, distorted in a way. Brian advanced on the object, but he noticed the mirror didn't mimic his actions in exactly the same way.

More repercussions of the drugs, no doubt.

Brian was directly in front of the mirror and looked at his reflection, swaggering back and forth. He thought if he were to touch it, he would fall most assuredly fall through.

But that was ridiculous, but still...

Brian put his hand up to touch the glass when...

"Brian! Brian! Wake up!"

Brian was jolted awake and out of his dream by the fuzzy image of someone who sounded exactly like Michael above him. "Mikey?" Brian immediately bolted up off the couch. "Was I asleep?"

"Asleep? I guess so. If you call the way you were thrashing around on the couch asleep, then yes," Michael said. "By the way, you had this clutched in your hand right before you dropped it."

Michael held up the photo of him and Justin. Brian went to grab it but Michael pulled it away.

"What is this Brian?" Michael asked as he looked at the photo.

"Give it back. You don't know who he is, so don't even bother with it." Brian advanced on him again.

"Is this Justin? The one you've been on about since last night?"

Brian nodded his head.

Michael laughed. "You're fucking high school kids now? What is he...fifteen, fourteen?"

"He's eighteen there. Give it back."

Mikey looked down at it. "So you're not fucking someone in high school?"

"Well, not now," Brian said and looked away.

Michael laughed again. "He's hot."

"You didn't always think so."

"I imagine I didn't," Michael said and gave the picture back to Brian. "Whatever. Look, I called Ben today."

Brian's head shot up and indicated to go on.

"He's been sick...his cell count is down. He told me this wasn't a good time," Michael started.

"And so you gave up," Brian said.

"No, I was persistent and said this couldn't be a better time. We're seeing each other tonight. Well, he wanted to see me tonight, but I don't know. I wanted to see how you were first, Brian. How are you?" Michael asked, looking at his best friend with trepidation.

Brian laughed. "I'm fabulous. In fact, I'm the most fabulous fag in Pittsburgh. That is, if it's possible...to be fabulous in Pittsburgh."

Brian had a sudden bout of deja vu as he remembered the last time he said that to Michael, right before Justin had sought him out at Woody's and gave him the only words that could ever redeem him, because they could only come from him.

It wasn't your fault. It wasn't your fault.

"Brian?" Michael asked, wondering where his friend had gone there for a moment.

"Go tonight. Don't worry about me. After I talk to Daphne, it'll all be right again anyway," Brian said dismissively.

"When?"

"Huh?" Brian asked in confusion.

"When are you going?" Michael asked.

"I'm heading over in," Brian started as he looked down at his watch, "In a couple of hours."

"Get some more rest Brian," Michael said.

"Can't, besides, I don't like what I see when I dream anyway."

"What was it about Brian?"

"I don't know...I mean, I do. It doesn't seem real, but I know that's what happened, but, it was just so...so wrong and I can't remember what happened after I passed out," Brian said as if he was talking more to himself than to Michael.

"You've lost me."

Brian chuckled, "I went to this club in Chicago, one of those underground clubs, and I got really high and I did this guy. But it gets real fuzzy after I'm done fucking him and I remember passing out soon after. When I woke up I was laying on the ground in some hallway. I left the club and went back to the hotel."

"Brian, what did you take? You're usually really careful about taking stuff from people you don't know."

"Fucked if I know! It was a real bad trip, that's all I can say," Brian snapped and then turned to his best friend. "Just go Mikey. Go be with the professor. Make it work," Brian said while waving Michael away and toward the door.

"Brian," Michael said, halting Brian from pushing him out of the loft, "You always say 'never go after anybody...never chase after anyone.' Are you saying you were wrong?" Michael then continued on. "What about David? Did I fuck up because of you? You...I always look to you. Have I been doing it all wrong?" Michael asked in exasperation.

"David was wrong for you. I pushed you toward him even though I sometimes held back...but that was because I always knew he was wrong for you. Ben's good for you," Brian said and then turned his full attention on Michael, "Despite everything. He'll always be there for you and still allow you to be who you should be, not what he wants to mold you into. And yes, I was wrong to say those things." Brian put his tongue in his cheek. "Mark this day on your calendar folks. Fuck!" Brian said and laughed, "Where's Ted when you need him? He'd probably make some 'national holiday' crack."

Michael walked up to Brian and took the man in his arms. "Thank you," Michael said and hugged him.

Brian held onto Michael, needing the closeness of someone and his best friend seemed to fill the bill at the moment. But only barely.

"Get going," Brian whispered into Michael's ear and pulled away.

Michael left and Brian then turned to the once again empty loft, wondering when his living space had seemed so large and vacant. He fingered the photo and looked down into the smiling face.

Soon Sunshine, soon.

This time there was no hint of mockery or sarcasm when he said the name.

And over in the well known dimension...

She had assessed him, called him on it.

And she had been right.

Despite everything else Brian was feeling, he had to admit, it was very liberating.

Brian got into the Jeep to drive Mikey back to the store and then off to the diner. It was time to pick Justin up after all.

Brian and Justin entered the loft after having picked Justin up on time at the diner. Justin jumped in front of Brian to put the mail down on the kitchen counter. "I'm going to take a quick shower. I smell like the diner."

Brian looked at Justin, smiled and leaned down as he made a huge show of smelling Justin. Brian moaned, "French fries, mashed potatoes and gravy, coleslaw and...Justin."

"I'm showering," Justin said while chuckling and then skipped off to the bathroom.

Brian walked over to the counter and flipped through the mail. There was of course, the usual bills and some credit card offers, the kind that offer you a credit card with a 29 percent rate and a low yearly fee, and that's when he saw it.

Two envelopes.

Both from the same clinic - the very same clinic Brian was tested at every six months like clockwork. Brian had just received his results before he had gone to Chicago. His test results had been negative of course, since he was always very careful. But here, in this place, the results came today and this time, there were two envelopes.

One addressed to Mr. Brian Kinney and the other addressed to Mr. Justin Taylor.

Brian opened the one addressed to him, feeling slightly guilty of opening another person's mail, but then again it was addressed to him. He wondered if he could get prosecuted for opening someone else's mail even though it was him and how he would fight such a thing in court.

Brian scoffed at himself and slit the envelope open. He pulled out the results and noticed, with some relief, that this Brian Kinney was just as careful as he was as his test results were all negative also.

But that didn't fascinate him as much as the other envelope.

He knew without a doubt that he couldn't open that one.

But oh, how he wished he could.

So he did the next best thing and walked into the bedroom and waited until Justin was done with his shower.

It seemed like an eternity but Justin finally came out, rubbing the towel over all that wonderful flesh, following the boy's blond happy trail down his torso until it rested on what he hoped he would have fun with soon enough.

"Hey, what's that?" Justin asked as he stopped toweling himself.

"Our test results," Brian said as he held up the envelopes.

"Oh, you can open mine," Justin said and continued to towel himself again.

Brian slit the envelope open, trying not to look overly anxious and read over Justin's results.

"It appears," Brian said while clearing his throat, "that we're both in the clear."

"I couldn't imagine it being otherwise," Justin said in his 'duh' voice. "We are really careful after all."

Brian bit his lip, and then raised his hands over his mouth, advancing on Justin.

This opportunity was just too good to pass up.

They were both in the clear.

Justin adored him; that much was clear.

He could never trust anyone else with something like this, something that he always wanted to do and who better than Justin.

Brian walked up to Justin and finished towel drying his hair for him.

"You trust me, don't you Sunshine?" Brian asked, using the moniker he had heard being used earlier that day. It really was the perfect nickname for him.

"You know I do Brian...with my life," Justin said as he looked up at Brian with those guileless eyes.

Brian smiled down at Justin.

Chapter 15

Brian started kissing down Justin's neck and all along his collarbone; small sweet kisses. Justin tipped his head back, the pleasure evident on his face. The kisses became more arduous as Brian dipped lower, walking Justin backward at the same time, so that he collided with the bed and fell back.

"Brian," Justin said while beaming up at the older man. He then bit his lip and spread out over the bed, Brian never taking his eyes off Justin. "Do I smell better now?" Justin asked.

"You smelled fine before...you always smell good," Brian said and then attacked Justin lips. Open mouthed kisses were exchanged, Brian grasping on to the shower heated flesh before him. Brian suddenly stopped and broke away, Justin still trying to follow.

"Lay back down," Brian whispered and then started to take off his shirt, followed by his jeans and briefs. Brian climbed onto the bed and then draped his long body over Justin, one hand coming to rest at each side of Justin's head. Brian then leaned over and continued kissing Justin, becoming completely lost in the sensation.

Once again, he was made aware of his interloper status in their world. Justin kissed as if this was their sole form of communication, their way of expressing what they felt toward each other without using words.

And it felt heavenly.

Yes, he could admit that. After all that he had found out that day, it had become harder to hide what he was feeling behind his 'walls.' He could very easily admit that this was a welcome relief to come home to.

But it still didn't alleviate his feelings of guilt associated with what he was currently doing.

Brian stopped and sighed heavily.

"Brian?" Justin asked, a confused look on his face, kiss-swollen lips set in a pout.

Brian bit his lip and looked down at the boy. "Justin, I," and it was there, right on the tip of his tongue, to tell him everything but he couldn't and it went beyond doing it out of respect for Michael. It went beyond doing it because it might upset Justin, and he was pretty sure it would.

He didn't want to give it up.

And it went against everything he stood for.

He may have been an asshole where certain things were concerned but despite what everyone thought, he at least was honest.

Well okay, he knew he was never completely honest. If it had to do with his feelings than yes, he was a liar of the first order, but it wasn't just limited to other people, it was also to himself.

This, this he knew without a doubt was dishonest.

He was the interloper and Justin wasn't his.

But, who knew if he would ever get back? What if this was it, and one of those guardian things decided to come in and set the balance right, like by eliminating the problem once and for all?

These were all very good justifications running around in his head but then something else was there, something in the back that continued to niggle and grate at his conscience, and yes, he did have one.

Brian, the other one, his counterpart.

What was he currently going through over on the other side, without this kid in his life?

He tried to put himself in that position and realized one thing. One very big thing.

He probably wasn't coping very well. Because this is why he had constructed those walls so high. It was so he wouldn't have to feel that kind of pain.

He cared for the kid; well, he was fascinated by him. After all, who wouldn't be with someone who seemed to be completely made for them? He didn't know him very well however. Of course, had he been given the opportunity to have gotten to know him for over a year, he could have quite easily become very attached to him too.

So yes, in all likelihood, the other Brian must be going out of his head right about now.

Especially if he didn't know where he really was.

And now, after everything else that he had been contemplating, there was the fact that he wanted to break one of his cardinal rules; to never bareback.

But really, why couldn't he? They were both negative. The thought of putting himself in danger didn't really register because at the moment he wanted it.

He really, really wanted it.

He wanted to feel Justin, not the latex. He wanted to give that same feeling in return, especially to Justin. He wanted to see Justin's face as he was doing him raw. The word 'raw' suddenly became one of the most exciting and erotic words in the English language. And the kid was nineteen, surely he must have thought about it.

There were just too many thoughts and emotions running through his head in the space of a minute and he knew he had to say something.

"I...I want you," Brian said imploringly to Justin, who he had trapped under him.

Justin stretched his arms over his head while wriggling his naked body on the bed. "Well then," Justin smiled deviously, "you can have me."

Brian really didn't think much beyond that before he attacked the kid again, running his tongue over every available surface he could come into contact with, grabbing wherever he could get a hold. He then turned Justin over and ran his tongue down Justin's back, up and over those glorious cheeks, finally coming to rest at his intended destination.

Pushing his tongue into the entrance, he could hear the most wonderful noises emanating from Justin.

"Always so good, Brian," Justin moaned.

Fucking him mercilessly with his tongue, Justin started gyrating and moaning into the mattress.

"Please Brian, in me, now...I'm gonna cum..."

Brian raised up off the bed and grabbed the lube from the side table and squirted Justin's entrance a bit too liberally. He looked down at his cock, made a split second decision and plunged inside.

Without the condom.

Without the latex there to impede him, Brian was hit with several sensations, all very, very good.

It was warm.

It was soft.

The walls surrounding his cock enveloped him into their stronghold and Brian didn't think he could hold out much longer. The skin on skin contact was too much. He could have one of those monster thingies come through the wall right now if they wanted and he would gladly go with them, once he was done of course. He plunged in again and was welcomed with the same warmth and...

Then air.

Because when Brian managed to snap out of his lust ridden haze and he regained some semblance of coherency, he noticed an extremely angry blond in front of him.

"What...what the fuck Brian?!?! I mean...fuck!! What the fuck?" Justin stood there, staring accusingly at Brian, while Brian was kneeling on the bed, his mouth hanging agape.

"I...I thought...you know...we should...um," Brian continued to splutter, not quite sure of the words coming out of his mouth.

"You're babbling!" Justin yelled. "What? You said you would never, never...you wanted me safe..."

And then it happened. Justin was standing, no longer angry and accusing, but as if something had become more clear and then the anger was replaced by hurt.

Real genuine, accept no imitations, hurt.

Justin's eyes were getting that tell tale shade of red that indicated only one thing, one thing that Brian had learned after last night.

Justin was about to cry, trying very hard to hold the tears back.

"Justin, I'm sorry," Brian started. "I was just...I thought you might want to..."

"Brian?" Justin asked as he tilted his head to one side.

"Justin, come here," Brian placated as he tapped the space next to him on the bed, "I m sorry, really, I just thought you might like it too."

"But you said," Justin looked at Brian with that extremely hurt expression still locked on his face.

It might as well have been tattooed on the kid's forehead.

He didn't glean enough from what Justin was trying to say but he knew he had fucked up royally.

"Come to bed. I'm sorry. It just slipped," Brian laughed, trying to add levity to the situation.

It was a lame ass attempt. And judging from the way the kid was still looking at him, he realized he had just tried to diffuse a bomb by pouring cold water over it.

"Justin, come here...to me. Please?" Brian implored. He then let the words escape once more, "I'm...sorry."

Now Brian was never the one to say sorry for anything...ever. But he couldn't find himself helping it now. He was saying the words over and over again. He had done something that was no doubt completely and probably irreparable.

He had done this.

Justin looked at Brian and warily climbed into bed. "Maybe we should go back into the other room," Justin said, his voice on the verge of cracking.

"No stay here," Brian whispered while continuing to stroke Justin, soothing him with his kisses. Just kissing and stroking.

Justin lay back on the covers, his eyes now focused on a spot on the ceiling that seemed to be a good place to have his attention on.

He didn't know why he always picked that spot. It just seemed to be there. He then let his mind wander.

He always wondered why it was Brian wanted him to stay with him. At first he thought it was because he felt sorry for him but he was sure that it was something else. He knew Brian cared for him. He was always doing something to show how much he cared and how much he meant to Brian.

But it wasn't enough.

Because he wasn't sure, with all the mixed signals that Brian threw his way, what exactly it was that Brian wanted.

Brian thought that what Justin wanted was the words and everything that came with them. Romantic delusions, flowers and what have you. He remembered what Ethan had said on his birthday about breakfast in bed and all that bullshit.

He didn't want all that.

But he wanted the words.

He wanted them like he wanted nothing else. He wanted to know that this, all of this, is what Brian wanted. That Brian was happy with him there at the loft and in his life.

He knew Brian cared for him.

But he also knew, as surely as he knew he was right handed, that he was cramping Brian's style and that he must be a burden but Brian would never say anything like that, ever. He would rather leave Brian forever than feel as if he were a dead weight on the man's shoulder.

Because he loved Brian that much.

And Justin knew that if he confronted Brian and asked him if he wanted to leave, Brian would say that it was his call.

And then there was the fact that he wasn't sure what he meant to Brian. There were so many things that went through his head on a daily basis.

Yes, the words would be nice, because then he would know without a doubt whether the man loved him or not.

Justin remembered the person he himself had been only a year ago; so brave and fearless. He missed that man and yes, although he had only been seventeen, he had still considered himself a man. Justin reflected on how confident he had been then. He had felt that the world was his and that once he graduated from St James, he could then take on the art world, it not knowing what had hit it. But now, since the accident, his gimp hand, his father adding insult

onto injury by not paying his tuition, thereby having to rely once again on Brian, his embarrassing and then disastrous turn as one of Sap's dancer's and subsequently, the almost rape that occurred, and of course, and always, Brian's own insecurities - it was all just too much and had diminished his confidence.

And then, then if things weren't bad enough, he had come back from Chicago and he acted like such an ass, that Justin really thought things were fucked up. But then they had come home and they had made love and yes, Justin called it love because it was truly amazing.

It felt as if Brian was making love to him for the first time. Brian had been in such awe as they had been entwined in each other's arms.

It renewed him. It made him feel whole.

But that was all short lived...because here he was.

And despite all that he had been feeling before Brian had left for Chicago, all his own insecurities, the one thing he thought he could rely on, without a doubt, was that Brian cared about him - somewhere in Brian's head, behind all those walls, he meant something to the man because he cared.

Those words kept running through his head on repeat...

I want you safe...I want you around for a long time.

They came back to bite him in his, what Brian called, his fuckable ass.

Brian was letting him know, in his own way, he just didn't care anymore. This is what he meant to the man. He was pushing Justin off a cliff so he didn't have to say it directly. He would never put them both in danger like that if it wasn't so. Justin was good for fucking. That was it. And even that wasn't enough for Brian anymore apparently.

Justin kept looking at the spot on the ceiling. The only sounds that issued from the bedroom were Brian's quiet words of comfort, the cars passing by in the afternoon rush hour and the sound of his own heart, slowly breaking in two.

And in the other place, a few hours later

Michael left and Brian then turned to the once again empty loft, wondering when his living space had seemed so large and vacant. He fingered the photo and looked down into the smiling face.

Soon Sunshine, soon.

This time there was no hint of mockery or sarcasm when he said the name.

Brian slumped against the wall while lighting his third cigarette. It was 4:45 PM and he was waiting for Daphne. Every time he heard someone coming up the stairs, he would look over, only to see another college coed walk down the hallway and to their apartment, ready to get on with their own little lives.

No one seemed to pay any attention to him.

But circumstances being what they were, he would stand with his face turned to the wall, just in case someone decided that he didn't look like he belonged there and decided that he must be loitering.

So his brilliant idea was to make it look like he belonged there.

Yes, he thought wryly, because a thirty year old man who hadn't showered or shaven in over twenty-four hours looked like he belonged in a college apartment complex.

He looked down at his watch after some time had passed.

It was 4:58.

Brian looked at the stairs when he heard someone coming.

A girl with blond hair and a tuba had ascended the stairs, walked by him, said 'sorry' when she bumped into him and continued on.

Brian sighed and then went over all the possible scenarios in his head again for what he would say when he was confronted by Daphne.

Hi Daphne. You don't know me but I popped your best friend's cherry. By the way, do you know where he resides now?

That wouldn't exactly do. It seemed logical but he had to approach it from a different angle. He needed to find a way to reassure her of his intentions.

Daphne, I'm looking for Justin. I'm not a psycho, a stalker or a serial killer, so don't worry. Do you know how I can get in touch with him?

That would certainly put her mind at ease.

Then there was the last possibility, which seemed to him the one he might actually do when push came to shove.

Grabbing her from behind, he could use the Terminator approach.

Tell me where Justin is and I'll let you live.

Yes, that would go over well.

Brian looked at his watch.

5:02PM

She was now officially late.

Another sound could be heard coming from the stairwell and he knew, he just knew, it wouldn't be her.

And then the person came around the bend and Brian knew he needed to stop listening to himself because there she was.

Daphne.

And in that moment, Brian forgot everything he knew. He forgot what he was going to say. He forgot everything that had happened to him. He forgot all the front doors with something nasty or unknown behind them.

Everything, because it was Daphne.

Brian watched as who he now considered to be an angel, go to her door and he then advanced on her.

She looked at him, smiled and said, "excuse me, this is my door."

Brian looked down at her and without warning, took her into a fierce hug, forcing the air out of Daphne's lungs.

"Um...do I know know you?" she asked while trying to catch her breath.

Brian stepped back and looked at what was no doubt and nobody could argue it with him, the most beautiful girl in the world, while trying to speak without his voice cracking.

"Oh God, Daphne, you don't know how good it is to see you," he said and smiled.

And with that, Brian hugged the girl to him once more, feeling for the first time in his life what the tears of relief felt like on his cheeks.

Chapter 16

Daphne managed to pull herself away from the man who was so desperately clinging to her.

She laughed as she held the man out at arm's length. "Not that I'm flattered," she said, "but who are you?"

Brian took in the large, toothy white smile and smiled back. He just couldn't seem to stop being the grinning fool at the moment.

He found Daphne.

A link to Justin.

Not his friends who didn't know him. Not random people off the street, residing in the homes of a supposed past.

But an honest to God link.

"I'm sorry," Brian said as he stepped back, running his hand through his hair. "That must've seemed kind of strange."

Daphne shrugged and nodded her head while smiling. "Yeah, well if you knew my friends, you'd know strange isn't a stranger to me," Daphne said as she laughed at her own joke.

"Well, that's what I wanted to talk about," Brian continued, rubbing his sweaty hands along his sides, "I'm a mutual friend...well that is to say...I was." Brian winced while biting his lips. "I know a friend of yours and..."

"I don't remember meeting you," Daphne prompted.

"No. No, you haven't. I'm a friend of Justin's," Brian sighed.

Daphne stopped smiling while looking at the man confused,

The look was not lost on Brian and he suddenly felt as if he had swallowed his heart. "You do know him, right?"

"Yes, I know Justin," Daphne said cautiously.

"You're his best friend, right?" Brian asked. Had there been some rift between the two?

"Always and forever," Daphne said. Brian noted how she said the last thing almost wistfully.

"Okay, I know enough to know something's definitely wrong here," Brian said while furrowing his brows.

"Yeah I'll fucking say. Who the fuck are you?" Daphne started to yell while advancing on Brian. "You come to my home. You ask me about...about Justin." She then stopped and looked away. "Who are you and how do you know Justin?" Daphne asked again, more quietly.

Brian breathed in and continued, "I just do and I can't explain it." Brian came up behind Daphne. "Is he...is he going to college here, at the Art Institute?"

"The Art Institute? You mean PIFA?" Daphne asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"No of course not," she scoffed.

"Then his father sent him off to Dartmouth? Is that it?" Brian asked.

"What? Dartmouth?!" Daphne yelled once again. "Look, you, whoever you are...Justin's not going to any college."

"That's it, isn't it? His father wouldn't pay for college...any college. Oh God, this is worse than I thought," Brian said as he turned away for the moment. Visions of what Justin had to do to get the tuition together started to float through Brian's head.

Daphne rounded on Brian. "Look, I'm gonna ask just one more fucking time...who are you? You say you know Justin but you're asking me if he's attending college and then you bring up his dad..."

"Daphne," Brian said as he grabbed hold of her arms, Daphne looking down at where Brian was holding on to her.

"Please let me go, you're scaring me," she said as she looked up at Brian.

Brian thought about it. It made sense. What if his father found out he was gay and had still tossed him out of his house? What if Justin was living on the streets somewhere? What if he had done what he had done to get the tuition for school; dance for scum like Sap, or worse? He could tell by the look on Daphne's face that it must be something dire. He was in advertising, he knew how to read people's expressions.

He decided he didn't care what situation Justin was in. He wouldn't judge him on it. He would find him, take him out of it and get him back on track. He wouldn't hold back.

He would set things right.

"I need to see Justin. I don't care how bad it is," Brian said as he looked pleadingly down at Daphne.

"You want to see Justin?" Daphne asked incredulously.

"Please. Is he..is he still in Pittsburgh?" Brian asked.

Daphne looked up at him with narrowed eyes, "yes."

"Can you take me to him?"

"Yes, I can take you to Justin," she said resignedly. Daphne jerked out of Brian's grasp. "We'll take my car," she said and with that Daphne turned around and headed back down the stairs, Brian following closely on her heels.

And meanwhile, in the other dimension, at the loft

Brian was letting him know, in his own way, he just didn't care anymore. This is what he meant to the man. He was pushing Justin off a cliff so he didn't have to say it directly. He would never put them both in danger like that if it wasn't so. Justin was good for fucking. That was it. And even that wasn't enough for Brian anymore apparently.

Justin kept looking at the spot on the ceiling. The only sounds that issued from the bedroom were Brian's quiet words of comfort, the cars passing by in the afternoon rush hour and the sound of his own heart, slowly breaking in two.

Justin was sitting on the couch, his sketchbook in his hand, having sketched for the past fifteen minutes or so, his legs curled up into his chest, trying to block out everything that had happened only a few hours before. Brian walked into the living room from the bedroom.

"What are you drawing?" he asked as he came over and looked over Justin's shoulder.

"Nothing."

Brian looked at the sketch Justin was currently working on. The larger man looked remarkably like the super hero 'Rage' that Brian had seen sketched on a few boards over at Mikey's comic book shop earlier that morning. He had meant to ask Michael what that was all about since he shared a striking resemblance to the super hero. The figure in the sketch he was looking at looked the same, only he had seemed to mutate into a savage beast and was ripping out the heart of the blond boy in the picture.

Brian thought the kid's sketching was good, really good, if not a bit gruesome.

"That's a bit dark for someone like you, isn't it?" Brian asked.

"Please Brian, not now," Justin said impassively.

Brian looked at the young man sitting on his couch. He knew that what ever he had done, well, he knew what he had done, trying to fuck the boy raw, had made him very upset and Justin had been withdrawn ever since then.

Of course, looking at the picture, it didn't take a rocket scientist to read between the lines.

Brian thought that maybe it had been simply a gross misuse of Justin's trust in him, but he didn't think so. It went beyond that and he was racking his brain over how it could have resulted in the fallen man in front of him.

Brian, wanting to give Justin his space, walked over to the liquor trolley and poured himself a Beam. He swallowed it in one gulp, tasting the burn as it went down.

That was better.

He looked over at Justin again, over the glass, hoping he wasn't being too obvious as he watched him.

Justin continued to sketch and a loud 'Fuck' could be heard, followed by Justin massaging his drawing hand.

"Cramp?" Brian asked as he went over to Justin.

Justin looked up at him as he shook his hand out, "don't worry. I'll take care of it myself."

"That happens a lot, doesn't it?" Brian asked. He knew he needed to ask Michael about Justin's hand. Maybe he could find out about it without looking like he was trying to.

Justin sighed. "Yes, Brian, it still happens when I draw. Despite what everyone thinks and what I've been telling them, my hand still spasms out when I sketch free hand with it. Okay?" Justin threw the sketchbook down on the coffee table and stood up. "Yes I'm still your gimp boyfriend, okay?" Justin turned away as he crossed his arms over his chest, as if trying to stem off the cold and walked over to the window. "It still hurts Brian. Is that it? Is it because I'm broken? Thanks to Chris Hobbs, I'm broken. Is that it?"

Brian stopped. Everything else after the word 'Hobbs' didn't even register. He ran over to Justin in front of the window.

"What did you just say?" Brian asked as he stood in front of Justin and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"I'm broken and," Justin sighed, "is that it?" Justin looked up at Brian imploringly.

"Chris Hobbs hit you with a baseball bat," Brian said while swallowing.

"Yes, I know Brian, you don't have to remind me. Is this your idea of a pep talk?" Justin asked.

"At your prom," Brian said.

"Brian!" Justin yelled while he turned around, stomping off back to the living room. "Do you have to keep throwing it into my face?"

"I have to go see Mikey now," Brian said and ran his hand through his hair, looking around wildly. "I'll be back."

"Of course you do. Go Brian...just go," Justin said as he waved to the door.

Brian grabbed his keys and raced out of the loft and to his Jeep.

All the way over to the comic book shop, breaking every speed limit and running yellow lights, words kept going through his head.

Chris Hobbs.

Justin Taylor.

Bat to the head.

Senior Prom.

He thought he had recognized Justin's last name when he had first seen it on the envelope from the clinic. The problem with the hand now made sense. He had obviously sustained nervous system damage.

Brian parked the Jeep in front of Michael's store, heedless of the red curb and dashed inside.

What he saw made him stop in his tracks. Michael was there, along with Lindsay, and they both abruptly halted their quiet conversation to take in who had just rushed into the store.

"Brian!" Lindsay said, slightly wary.

Brian turned to Michael. "You told her?"

"I had to. Brian," Michael said as he ran up to his best friend, "she should know too."

"Brian are you?" Lindsay started.

"Look, we can talk about this shit later," Brian said, and took a deep breath. "Right now I need to know something."

"What?" Michael asked confused.

"Justin...he went to his prom last year, correct?" Brian asked.

"Yes," Michael said. "Fuck! Brian, did you ask him about his hand or something?" Lindsay moved in closer to the two men.

"What happened at his prom...here?" Brian asked.

"Here?" Lindsay said, "Brian are you saying Justin went to his prom and..."

"Not now, Lindsay. Michael?" Brian asked, trying to get some answers and quickly.

"He went to his prom, with Daphne," Michael said.

"His best friend, the Chanders' girl, right?" Brian asked.

"Yes, and then Brian showed up at the prom, they danced a dance, and then," Michael stopped because no matter what anyone thought, it was still painful to remember what happened afterwards and the look of shock on Brian's face at the hospital.

"Michael? Brian showed up at the prom?" Brian prompted.

"Yes, and then when they went down to the parking garage, Chris Hobbs came out of nowhere," Michael said while shaking his head, remembering Brian explaining it back to him, "Brian was trying to get to Justin in time but it was too late. Chris had hit him with the bat. Brian took the bat and hit Chris in the knees and then called 911. Justin was lying on the concrete, bleeding..."

"So Brian was in the garage when it happened?" Brian asked.

"Yes," Michael said as he looked directly at Brian.

Brian turned away while talking, "Justin Taylor was bashed at his prom where I'm from too. I just remembered the whole incident when Justin said Hobbs' name."

"Oh my God! Michael," Lindsay said as she heard the news. "Do you know what that means?" Lindsay said excitedly. "It means Brian wasn't responsible for it." Lindsay then turned to Brian. "He always felt so guilty about that night."

Michael knew what she was saying was true, but somehow he couldn't exactly get as excited as her when he realized what that meant. That Justin had still been bashed.

"How was he...after the bashing? Justin that is?" Brian asked.

"It was really touch and go...he was in a coma but he came out of it. He had been taken to the hospital in time. He was in the hospital for six weeks and there was nerve damage. That's why Brian got him the computer," Michael said, just saying everything that came to mind. He stopped when it came to telling Brian about the nightmares and how Justin was always scared to go out in crowds.

"We have a problem," Brian said and sighed, while looking directly at both Michael and Lindsay. "Justin Taylor...died at his prom."

Chapter 17

"Brian," Michael said as he walked up to Brian, "what you're saying..."

"Oh God!" Lindsay gasped. "No, no, but Justin survived. He was hit but," she stopped before she said anymore because it was just too horrible to think about.

"Where you're from, did he not get to the hospital on time?" Michael asked, his voice starting to break.

"Hospital? Hobbs didn't stop," Brian yelled. "No one was there. I obviously wasn't there," Brian finished, more to himself than the others.

"Oh God," Lindsay said. "Stop, please, just stop," she said as she covered her mouth.

"I'm gonna be sick," Michael said and in his current state of shock, fell heavily into the chair behind the counter.

He had to process what he just heard.

Justin was dead.

In the other place.

Because Brian hadn't been there to save him.

No, Michael thought, this Brian hadn't been there to save him. And why? Because one night his phone had been turned on instead of off.

How stupid was it that it all came down to the little things that seemed to be the cause of such pain and suffering.

"If you knew about all this...there must have been a picture in the paper...on the news," Michael said accusingly. "What, you suddenly recognized him?"

"The picture...it was not a very good likeness...fuck...he looked all of twelve in it...they would flash it quickly on TV. They didn't want to focus on him," Brian started.

"Because he was gay, is that it?" Michael said angrily. "What? Did Hobbs get community service for that too?" Michael stood up and kicked a box on the floor.

"Michael," Lindsay started as she came up to Michael and put her hand on his shoulder.

"No, it was out of respect for the family. They focused more on Hobbs. That's when the whole thing started clicking into place. You couldn't forget the name 'Chris Hobbs.' And I only just found out Justin's last name was Taylor," Brian said, apologetically.

"Hobbs," Lindsay said, "what happened to him? It sounds like this was big."

"You could say that. His name was everywhere in the news afterward. He became Public Enemy Number One. He may have bashed a gay boy, but it was a boy who went to his Senior Prom with his best friend, that Chanders' girl, and then," Brian winced, "the way he came at him. The public just couldn't ignore it."

"When you say, 'came at him,'" Michael said.

"Hobbs didn't stop at one swing with the bat, Michael," Brian said and noticed his best friend slump in his chair. Lindsay bent over one of the counters. "There was a huge trial and he was convicted immediately. He was sentenced to life in prison. There was even talk of the death penalty at one point."

Brian took in the pale faces of the other two. At the time that the crime had taken place, Brian had been lamenting about his own problems - the failed job opportunity in New York and turning all of thirty. He didn't really have time to waste on caring about the lives of others, including little gay boys who didn't know how to keep their mouths shut and stay in the closet.

After having gotten to know Justin up close and personal, he realized what a self-serving and pitying fool he had been. It also brought up the fact that the other Brian had probably not been bothered by such trivialities as his date of birth and job offers if he had had to watch his lover suffer.

Which brought up the other point.

"Michael," Lindsay said, "if Justin died over there and Brian doesn't know where he is..."

That point specifically, Brian thought.

Michael stopped and looked up. "Oh shit...he's gonna freak." This was all too much for Michael. He could only hope that his best friend did not find out about it, at least until he figured out where he really was.

"How was he after the bashing?" Brian asked. He knew it was a given how he was, but he needed to hear it.

"He was such a mess. I mean, forget about when I came to be with him at the hospital that night. He was fucked up then," Michael said while swallowing, trying to hold back completely breaking down. "But after, after...when I came back from Portland. The drugs, the drinking, the tricking...I mean Brian always did those things...but it was constant, almost manic. He was in such denial about how he felt. And the scarf," Michael choked out, tears starting to cloud his eyes.

The scarf.

"The scarf?" Brian asked.

"Michael," Lindsay said, "what about the scarf? You mean the scarf that he had when Justin was first brought to the hospital? The one that was covered in his blood?"

Michael sighed, "yes, Lindsay. He wore it...wore it around when...oh I don't know how long...but he was wearing it under his clothes when I came back. So he must've been wearing it longer than that. I saw him shower once. He took it off and rolled it almost as if," Michael said as if trying to remember something, "like...like he was a priest rolling up his vestments!"

"Shit!" Brian had a sudden chill run up and down his spine. He didn't want to do it but he had to.

He put himself in the place of his counterpart.

He could only imagine how he would feel if that happened to the person he cared deeply for. Especially if he thought it had been his fault.

And that's when he snapped. Who was he fucking kidding? He wasn't talking about himself anymore...he was talking about someone who was exactly like him and for once in his life, he could be honest with himself.

This Brian, the one that belonged here, must love Justin. Yes, he knew if he felt guilt about something, it could change the way he would feel, but it would have to be something more than just caring for the kid and guilt to feel that kind of despair.

And what Michael just described was pure and unadulterated despair. With a capital 'D.'

If...no Brian thought...when, when he found out about Justin there, and he would because that would be Brian's number one priority, to hunt down Justin, he would be devastated and inconsolable.

He knew, because he would be too.

And on the other side of the mirror...

"Yes, I can take you to Justin," she said resignedly. Daphne jerked out of Brian's grasp. "We'll take my car," she said and with that Daphne turned around and headed back down the stairs, Brian following closely on her heels.

Daphne pulled the car up to the curb, parallel to the large expanse of rolling, green lawn.

Brian looked at where they parked and the massive surface area staring back at him.

This was wrong.

This was all wrong.

Brian knew where he was but his brain kept telling him not to worry, because this wasn't real. None of it was, because it didn't happen. It just wasn't real. But there was a tiny part of Brian's brain, behind a locked door chained and clasped with the thickest padlock one could find, that said, 'but it is.'

"What are we doing here?" Brian asked Daphne. He wasn't sure if those were the words that had come out of his mouth because of the constant ringing noise in his ear.

"You wanted to see Justin," Daphne said. The angry girl turned on Brian. "You won't tell me who you are. Justin never said anything about you. If you knew Justin like you say you did, you would know, unless you lived in a cave or something. So we're going to go see Justin."

Daphne made to get out of the car while Brian stayed put.

"No," Brian said while shaking his head, "I don't want to go there. Its...this is wrong. I'm not going." He remembered when he was little, a defense of his, that if you didn't see the scary monster under the bed, then it didn't exist. So he would stay in the car and wait until Daphne took him away.

If he didn't see it, then it wouldn't be true.

"You...you come into my life," Daphne said then stopped while grabbing her temple. "Do you know how long it took for me to get over this? Do you? I don't know what kind of sick joke you're playing Mister, but you're here now. Come on," she said and left the car.

Brian couldn't move. He was cemented to the seat of the sub-compact car. If he went out now, it would confirm what he knew already, so if he stayed there, it would always be an unknown, never knowing for sure one way or the other if it were true or not and then he could go through the rest of his life blissfully ignorant and completely blind.

That's what those locked file cabinets were for. Going through life without having to admit to anything, blind to everyone and everything else.

It was an easy way to go through life, but it wasn't really conducive to living it.

Brian moved one of his legs out of the car, the jelly-like feeling making him slightly sick to his stomach.

The other leg came around and followed the other one out and he stood up. Daphne waited until he made his way out of the car, turned on her heels and proceeded. No longer did he see her as the angel he had visualized before, but a harbinger of doom, someone out of a Charles-fucking-Dickens novel, who had come to show him his bleak future. He followed the girl as she made her way through the maze of gravestones.

Brian looked around him. Pittsburgh's dead, all gathered here for their final resting place. It didn't matter who you were, what you did or where you went in your life - Babylon, Woody's, the bowling alley, hetero pubs, church - because you all met in the same place in the end.

They both stopped when they came to a headstone. Brian kept looking at the ground.

He wouldn't look up.

He knew what it would say.

"I brought you here," Daphne said, "now look at it," she yelled, her voice cracking as he could tell she was about to cry. "Look at it," she said again completely broken.

Brian looked at the stone. It simply said:

JUSTIN TAYLOR

**BELOVED SON
AND BROTHER**

**TAKEN FROM
US TOO SOON**

**MARCH 18, 1983
MAY 24, 2001**

The last date, the date of the prom. Brian remembered that night very well. Visions of a smiling, dancing Justin floated in his head.

"It was the best night of my life," Justin said and smiled.

"Even if it was ridiculously romantic."

Brian stared at the headstone while shaking his head.

It wasn't real so it didn't matter.

"See?" Brian said as he pointed to the monument. "This isn't right. I saved him. And even if I wasn't there, he never knew me, so Hobbs wouldn't have any excuse to do that to him." If his voice was cracking as he spewed his justifications at Daphne, he didn't notice it.

"So you do know what happened?" Daphne said as she looked up, her tear streaked face looking on in confusion. "I don't know what you're babbling on about, but since when did Chris Hobbs need an excuse to do anything to Justin?"

He hated him. He hated that he was out. He hated that he could be honest about it. He hated that Justin had exposed to his friends what Chris and him did," Daphne shouted back at the man hysterically.

"Didn't anyone try...could they have called for an ambulance?" Brian asked, choking on the words as they came out.

He really didn't know why he was asking them. It wasn't real.

"What could they save?" Daphne yelled as she finally cracked and started to sob uncontrollably. "What could they fucking save? Chris wouldn't stop! He just kept swinging!" Daphne tried to get her sobbing under control by taking in huge gulps of air.

It was just a nightmare, Brian continued to reassure himself. Any minute now he would wake up.

Because he had gone to the prom with Justin.

"Do you want to come to my prom with me?" an exuberant Justin had asked.

"As what? Your chaperon?"

"As my date."

No, he hadn't gone with him. He had just shown up.

"I thought I'd recapture my lost youth."

He had one incredible dance with Justin and they had gone down to the parking garage. The there was Hobbs in the rearview mirror, but he got to Justin in time.

Although he thought he hadn't, and then he became confused. Because it didn't matter, because this isn't the way it played out because this wasn't real.

Brian then looked up again, because living life with blinders on, behind walls, was not the way to go through life. He took a good look at the monument again, a monument set up for a boy who had taught him the difference between just living your life and living it.

It was real.

It sunk in and everything came out. There were no walls. No locked file cabinets.

He was naked to the world in that cold cemetery, a place filled to capacity with the dead and you couldn't lie to the dead.

Brian sank down on his knees and reached out to touch the headstone.

Daphne, who had been lost in her own world of misery stopped when she noticed the change in the strange man.

"No, no, no, no, no," the man screamed at the stone. "No!" Brian started to cry and pound on the headstone, trying to lift it out of the ground. "It's not real! "God! No!" he continued to scream.

"Mister! Mister, please," Daphne tried to reach out to the man. Maybe bringing him out here hadn't been the right thing to do. She had thought he was playing some sick joke on her, but this...this was different.

"No! God! I want out of this place!" the man screamed at the top of his lungs, his voice cracking from the strain. "I want it all back! I was wrong. I want it back," the man yelled once again and then calmed down, looking up at Daphne, tears streaking his face, dirt smeared on his hands from where he pounded on the earth. "I want it all back," he pleaded with her.

"What? What do you want back?" Daphne asked, starting to feel sorry for the man.

"It. Him. If I did something to change everything, then I want it unchanged again," Brian said. Brian looked back at the headstone.

"I don't know what you mean. I'm...I'm sorry I brought you here," Daphne said. "I was wrong."

Brian stopped and looked at Daphne again with narrowed eyes. "It was your idea to go to the prom, wasn't it?"

Daphne took a step back from the man. "I wanted...wanted to go...with my best friend."

Brian looked accusingly at Daphne. "He slept with you but he didn't want you. You got weird after, didn't you?"

"How did you know?" Daphne asked surprised. "Look, don't you think I've had to live with the guilt of asking him to the fucking prom in the first place? I was finally getting over it till you showed up!" Daphne screamed at the man.

"You never get over the guilt," Brian said as he turned away from the girl. He didn't know why he had taken it out on her. It wasn't her fault.

It was his.

He would find the ironic turn funny, him being the cause of Justin getting bashed at his prom to the fact that he didn't survive his prom because he hadn't shown up in the first place, but he couldn't seem to laugh about anything at the moment.

He didn't think he could laugh at anything ever again.

He continued to stare at the tablet, knowing it was over. He couldn't fix the time line. Justin was dead. There was nothing left to fix.

Justin was dead.

He could yell and scream and cry, but there was nothing left he could do.

He brought himself to here. He, in his own fucked up way, had wished it because his life was no longer convenient, because he couldn't admit to how he felt for Justin, and brought him to here, to this place, and there was nothing left.

Justin was dead.

A corpse rotting in the ground beneath him.

Never again would he see the vibrant, young man who had danced on stage at Babylon to prove he wouldn't be taken for granted. Nor the man who had proved to the Institute that he wouldn't give in.

Justin was dead.

And now, so was he.

"Mister, let's go now, I'll take you back to your car," Daphne said, putting her hand on the man's shoulder. Brian shrugged it off. She wanted to talk to the man to get him out of his current state. "Is there someone you want me to call for you?"

"Just go. Leave me," Brian said, never taking his eyes off the gravestone, his knees sunk into the ground, his index finger lazily tracing the 'J' in Justin's name. "I can't leave him alone."

"Justin still gets kinda freaky when he's on his own too long."

"He freaks out when he's left alone too long," Brian said, continuing to stare at the lettering, remembering his time with Justin soon after the bashing.

"I don't think," Daphne started, looking on in horror at the man.

"I said fucking go!" Brian yelled, turning all his anger on the girl in front of him.

Daphne took a few steps back, turned and ran, running as fast as she could away from the grieving man. Once she thought herself far from the individual who had arrived only a mere half an hour ago and turned her world upside down, she looked back.

The man was still kneeling on the grave, his arms wrapped around the stone, weeping onto its hard surface.

She didn't know who he was or how to get in touch with anyone he knew, but she had to find help for him.

Chapter 18

The priest finally spotted the man the girl, Daphne, had been talking excitedly about.

Sure enough, there he was, by the grave of the Taylor boy. The priest knew about the Taylor boy and his tragic end quite well.

The result of such hate was a hard thing to forget.

He remembered the night of the prom the year before, how he had wailed in front of his God for such a gross injustice to someone so young over something so trivial.

After all, he knew better than anyone else that sometimes you just couldn't help who you loved.

The priest made his way toward the man, who was rocking back and forth on his haunches, facing the headstone, his arms wrapped around his torso as if to stem off the cold. Of course, it could have been a hot summer day, in the hundreds, and the man would still be battling out the cold.

He was a priest, he knew grief, real grief when he saw it.

The priest walked up behind the rocking man, who was eerily quiet. "Did you know him well?" the priest asked softly.

The man spun around quickly, lost his balance and looked at the priest in surprise. "Well fuck me, Father Tom," Brian said mockingly as he regained his composure.

"Brian? But what?" Father Tom asked in confusion. This had been the last man he had expected to see when the girl pleaded with him to help the grieving man.

"Go away," Brian said as he turned back around to face the stone. "You don't belong here. Of course," Brian laughed, and as he laughed Father Tom had a chill run down his spine, "he doesn't belong here either, but that's besides the point."

Father Tom stepped around the stone and got a good look at Brian. His face was streaked with tears, his eyes bloodshot and chillingly vacant.

"Brian? I didn't know you knew him?" the priest stuttered. "What I mean to say is, you didn't seem to be this way the last time I saw you. Brian?" Father Tom implored once again.

Brian smirked while looking up. "I knew him, only he didn't die when it says here," he said as he pointed to the date on the headstone, "he was still alive when I left only a few days ago. He was alive and bouncing in my arms when I told him about Vermont," Brian smiled wistfully.

"I want to go with you the whole fuckin week!"

"Are you serious?"

"You're off on Spring Break - I'm about to make partner which I say entitles me to a week of snowboarding...and fucking your brains out."

"Really?"

"I don't understand what you're trying to say," Father Tom said, shrugging his shoulders.

"I'm saying," Brian began to yell, losing his temper, "this is all fucked up! Its...its," Brian said as he ran his hand through his hair. "Look, I don't want your sermon or your pity or your inspirational words. Save them for Joan...just...go," Brian said in defeat.

"No Brian. I think I need to take you home," Father Tom insisted.

"You know," Brian said in a mock falsetto, "you're going to have to come up with a better line than that." Brian then stood up and almost toppled over, Father Tom catching him around his waist.

"Don't fight me on this one, Brian," Tom said. "I'm going home with you."

"I'm, going with him."

"Good Boy."

"Why won't they leave me alone?" Brian yelled and was about to cry again when he remembered that he wasn't alone.

"Who Brian? Who won't leave you alone?" Father Tom asked in concern.

"The ghosts," Brian said as he waved his arms around wildly, throwing himself off balance again, Father Tom holding on tightly to the wild man. "They keep taunting me with him as if he's still here. But he's there," Brian choked out as he pointed to the grave. Brian wrestled out of Father Tom's grasp. "I'm not going. I need to stay. I can't leave him alone," Brian said as he faced the stone once more, looking down at the lettering that became more and more fuzzy the longer he stared at it.

If he squinted just the right way, he could almost make the letters rearrange themselves and appear to be a different name altogether.

But these were all games. Nothing he did, no game he played, no way he looked at it, it was the same, Justin was dead.

"Please, Brian, come with me. I'll take you home," Father Tom implored once more.

Brian looked back at the headstone once more, and knew there was nothing he could do. He kissed his fingers and touched Justin's name, then whispered, "I'm sorry." He turned around and started to make his way out of the cemetery on shaky legs with the only other living soul in the area.

After Father Tom had set Brian up on the couch, he made a strong pot of coffee. He had the feeling they would both be needing it.

"I wasn't sure how you took your coffee," Tom said as he sat the cup in front of Brian, who was sitting and staring straight ahead. "I put a little bit of sugar in it. Is that okay?"

Brian then looked Tom's way as if acknowledging him for the first time.

"Sure, whatever. Tell me father," Brian started.

"Tom...just call me Tom, Brian. After all, you've had your dick up my ass," he chuckled.

"Is it okay for you to say that?" Brian scoffed and shook his head clear. "Tom," Brian started again, "do you believe in...I know you're a man of the cloth so you're not supposed to believe...I mean do you believe in angels or

something more sinister, who maybe grant wishes or things you've thought about?" Brian winced as he brought what he'd been feeling out into the open.

For there was no other way to describe what had happened to him in the past twenty-four hours besides something otherworldly.

"I don't believe in that kind of thing, Brian," Tom said fatter of factly. "Angels don't grant..."

"Like that movie," Brian interrupted, "It's a Wonderful Life or something...you think about what your life would have been like if you hadn't met someone and wham! Someone comes along and butts in your life and says, 'okay, here's what it would be like if you hadn't met him.' Cause I gotta tell you Tom, if that's what this is, I've learned, okay? I've learned," Brian said, almost pleading with Father Tom to make it right. He knew he was grasping at straws, but he needed to ask it.

"No Brian, I've never heard of that before," Tom said.

"Of course not," Brian said in defeat. "It would be too easy. No, it's just one of those things I suppose. The time line is screwed up and I can't fix it because Justin's dead."

"Brian, time can't be changed. I don't know what you're talking about," Tom said in exasperation. "Look, I said I didn't know about things like that. I didn't say I didn't believe in things that we have no knowledge of or understanding in. There are things that happen in this world that just can't be explained."

"The after life?" Brian asked mockingly.

"I do believe in heaven if that's what you're implying," Father Tom smiled back. "No I meant, there are things we don't understand in the world and they're not all nice things. This is why I put my faith in God. I believe if you don't have faith in something," Tom started and then stopped at the look of skepticism in Brian's face. "When I was a novice, doing my work for the church wherever they sent me, I saw something once in Central America...this girl..."

Brian shot up off the couch, "if you tell me you were once privy to an exorcism, then don't...just don't." Brian ran his fingers through his hair.

"Not an exorcism...I've never seen one. I've heard stories but I myself have never seen one. That doesn't mean I'll rule it out, it's just that, I don't think they happen the way they say it does," Father Tom scoffed. "Anyways, this girl, the villagers couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. It was as if she were being eaten from within," Father Tom said, as if lost in a memory.

Brian looked at Tom in disbelief.

"Not in the literal sense," Tom continued. "Her sanity was slipping away slowly, day by day. She was a shell when we got there...what is it they say? No one at home. When we found her, myself and the priest I worked under, she was staring at the wall, muttering continuously, 'Las paredes viven.'"

Brian looked on questioningly, "the walls...live?"

"She babbled on about how the walls were slowly eating away at her...feeding off of her," Tom continued as he walked away, once again deep in thought as he recounted the story. "We found out later of course, that her stepfather had been molesting her since she was six years old. She was sixteen when we found her. She lived in constant fear every single day of her life for those ten years. Her family relied on him as their sole provider. She had no one to go to, no one to put her faith in...all alone in the world. When you have nothing left to believe in and fear consumes you, then what would the next logical step be? Obviously in this girl's case, to retreat within herself."

"So what are you saying? Something, that lived in the walls," Brian laughed incredulously, "was feeding off her?"

"No Brian. I'm just saying, we need to rely on someone, something, to get us through these things. I'm not saying that there's some kind of monster out there feeding on us," Tom said and laughed. "That's preposterous. I'm just saying, shit, I don't know what I'm saying," Tom said and ran his hand through his hair. "It's just that sometimes, we can convince ourselves of something else being the monster or the situation that can't be explained, to the point of it happening." Tom sighed, "did any of that make sense?"

"When you say she lived in constant fear every day of her life, was it from this thing?" Brian asked.

"No, from her stepfather, an actual very real fear. Brian," Tom said and went to stand in front of Brian, "I think we're digressing from the point here. There are things we can do to ourselves if we don't handle these things. Things like make ourselves completely lost in the world, such as this girl. And I fear that's what's going to happen to you. No Brian," Tom put his hand over Brian's arm to stop him from turning away, "listen to me. When people don't put their faith in something else, when they feel they are truly alone, and they're scared, they are consumed by their own mind. That's what I think. I don't know about monsters and things like that, but I know what I saw and what I saw was real."

"So what, Father," Brian spat, "I'm supposed to put my faith in your God and then I'll know no fear and I'll be okay? Is that what you're saying?" Brian mocked. "And why are you even telling me this shit. This has nothing to do with what I'm going through."

"Because I believe we all need someone to believe in...I do. I've put my faith in God. It gets me through some of the toughest days. And right now, Brian, you need..."

"Yeah," Brian said as he turned on the priest, "and as soon as your church finds out about what you do at the Baths, how long before..."

"I know what I do!" Tom yelled. "I live knowing what could happen If I'm ever found out!" Tom then became quiet again. "But I'm okay with that." Brian looked up and scoffed. "Yes, the church could turn me away, strip me of my collar and send me on my way or demote me back down to a novice and put me in some backwater village in a third world county. But I'm okay with that. I don't fear it. I'll accept what they'll do to me but I know, no Brian," Tom said as he looked directly at Brian, "I know...God won't turn away from me."

"Fine," Brian said running his hand over his forehead, "so you want me to see the light? All my problems will be over?"

"No. I don't care if you put your faith in God or something else. Do you Brian, do you believe in something or...or someone?"

"I did," Brian said as he looked up again, not really seeing Tom there, "a boy who wasn't afraid. Well, he was, but it didn't matter. He..."

"The Taylor boy?" Tom asked, suddenly everything becoming more clear.

"Yeah."

"Why? Why him of all people?" Tom touched Brian's arm to bring him back into the present. "Why?"

"Because," Brian said as he turned his full attention on Tom, "I liked the person I became after I got to know him."

"I didn't think you would ever admit to something like that," Tom scoffed.

Brian smiled "I wouldn't have, but I'm not the same man I was a few hours ago. There's no one left to lie to," Brian said and looked at Tom. "I could talk to you about theology and philosophy all day Father," Brian said as he put his hand on Tom's shoulder, "well, no I can't because right now I need to be alone so thanks for bringing me home. You can go now," Brian said flippantly, then got up and went to the loft door to open it.

"Please Brian, faith in someone dead is not what I..."

"Don't," Brian said as he raised his hand to shush Tom, "Go Tom, we're done."

Tom walked to the loft door, stood in the hallway and turned back once more to face Brian and it was on the tip of his tongue to say something more, because he felt extremely uneasy about leaving, that the man he was looking at currently was nothing like the man he had seen only a short while ago at the Baths, that this man felt so alone, the air of the loft was thick with it. However, all that came out was, "take care Brian."

Sometimes, he felt so ineffectual in his chosen profession.

"Yeah...sure...thanks," Brian nodded and slammed the door.

Brian looked at the living space before him.

It was so sterile.

So clean.

So devoid of life.

Well, one of them, that was.

No, Brian thought, both of them, because he didn't feel very alive at the moment.

Once again, the ghosts were bombarding him with their memories (Justin doing calculus, Justin sketching, Justin eating) and that's when he saw it.

The photo.

The photo, left behind on the desk in his haste to go find Daphne.

Which of course, in the long run, had turned out so well.

He looked down at the smiling face of his now deceased lover. The picture was still there. It was the only reminder of what they once shared. There to tell him, 'yes, you are now the only one who now remembers all this.' The photo would mock him for an eternity to come. He picked up the offensive picture and made to rip it up, throw the pieces into the trash can and then set it on fire but he found he couldn't bring himself to the task.

So he did the next best thing. He wiped everything else off his desk. His papers, his clock, his computer. Everything, fell to the ground in one big heap. The computer making a terrible crashing sound as it hit the loft floor.

Who cared, Brian thought, it was just stuff. He then went to the kitchen and proceeded to find every breakable thing in there and throw it on the ground too.

He didn't stop there. He ended up in the living room, overtuning tables, couches, bashing in the television screen with a floor lamp.

His living space was in ruins when he was done.

He looked at the disaster he had wrought when he was done.

Stuff.

All just stuff.

He then moved into the bedroom and stopped when he took in the bed.

"Ah! It's cold."

"It'll heat up."

"Just...go slow, okay?"

Brian tried to block out the images as they all came at him at once.

"Go slow."

"Like the first time?"

And another one, one that haunted him.

"I want you safe, I want you around..."

Too many ghosts. Brian pulled himself together and turned around. He knew a place where Ed, the super, kept a can of gasoline in the garage.

That was the only way to handle the bed.

Brian made his way to the steps when he stopped yet again.

No, he couldn't do the bed. Well, first off, because burning the bed might cause a fire to spread throughout the whole building and the thought of being responsible for more deaths (well, why shouldn't he, he thought, misery loves company) would just add to the already heavy burden of guilt he was carrying around. But most importantly, maybe, just maybe, if he laid on the bed and closed his eyes and went to sleep, he could dream about Justin again. He could dream about the first time they had made love, after the bashing, about how he held onto him from behind all night and he could remember the slow kisses and the wonderful little sounds that poured from his young lover's mouth.

That sounded like a good idea. So with that he climbed into bed, fully clothed and lay down, his face looking up at the ceiling at that spot that Justin likes to stare at when he's deep in thought.

Justin didn't know that he knew.

Brian closed his eyes, and for a brief moment he had the lovely idea that wouldn't it be nice if he never had to open them again.

The vision wouldn't come. He then lay on his side, just as he had that night and yet, it wouldn't come.

The only vision Brian had before he finally closed his eyes for the last time that night was that of his mother, telling him he would be damned for all eternity for the sole transgression of loving Justin.

He realized as he drifted off to sleep, that Saint Joan was right for once in her life.

Because this was his hell.

And back in the world more well known...

And what Michael just described was pure and unadulterated despair. With a capital 'D.'

If...no Brian thought...when, when he found out about Justin there, and he would because that would be Brian's number one priority, to hunt down Justin, he would be devastated and inconsolable.

He knew, because he would be too.

Brian drove home contemplating the revelations made in the last few hours, their implications swimming around in his head.

Lindsay, Michael and himself, had all agreed to still not say anything to Justin.

Brian had no problem with that. After all, what was he supposed to say anyway?

By the way, I'm not really your lover, the man you obviously love.

Because that was so painfully obvious in the way the kid responded to him, touched him, made love to him.

"But hey! I'm just as good. Oh, and yes, there are two of everyone out there. Well, not you, because you died over there.

Yes, he could see himself doing that.

Brian had a sudden chill run down his spine every time he thought about that, what happened to Justin. Because it was no longer a faceless individual, who's face had been flashed across the news every so often, his name popping up while commentators talked casually of violence in society today.

The name had a face and the face was attached to a living, breathing human.

A living, breathing human that was currently residing in his loft.

And Brian had to admit, he liked him.

Or more.

He didn't know what he felt more guilty about - the fact that he was cheating on himself or that he hadn't been there in the first place.

Because if he had, then Justin Taylor would have been alive where he came from.

And that thought was too much to handle, so he just filed it away in a folder in his locked file cabinet.

He didn't want to think about it, so he wouldn't. Then it wouldn't bother him.

But it didn't matter what he did, because the thought was still there. If he had just been there that night...

As he exited his Jeep, he cursed cell phones.

When he arrived at the loft, he found Justin was hunched over the computer desk.

"Hey."

"Hey," Justin said while looking up, smiling half-heartedly.

"I got in touch with Michael..."

"I know," Justin said.

Brian looked on in confusion.

"I just got the weirdest phone calls," Justin said as he leaned back in his chair, his shirt riding up over his taut belly and Brian did not need to be thinking about that right now. Justin got up and came over to Brian. "First, I got a call from Michael, who gave the lame excuse for calling me about the storyboards. Then he kept asking me if I was okay. It was really weird," Justin said as he shook his head.

So much for laying low, Brian thought. "Well you know Michael."

"Yeah, but then Lindsay called. She asked the same things. Then before she hung up, she said 'bye sweetie, I just wanted to hear your voice,'" Justin said, smirking.

Yeah, real subtle.

"They just care about you, ya know," Brian said as he took Justin in his arms and looked down at the blond and smiled.

Justin looked up at Brian warily. "And you Brian? Do you?"

Brian smiled and started kissing Justin along his jawline. "What do you think?" he whispered into his ear.

Justin sighed. Brian still hadn't answered his question. This was as good as he was to get.

"Can we just go to bed Brian? I'm really beat," Justin pleaded.

"I know...I'm pretty drained too. Come on," Brian said as he led Justin up the stairs to the bedroom.

There they both proceeded to strip down to their underwear and climb into bed. Justin lay on his side, facing away from Brian.

Brian spooned himself behind Justin, trying to give the boy warmth, giving himself warmth in the process. He really needed that.

It worked and he started to fall into a peaceful sleep, trying to not think about tomorrow and the set of challenges that he would have to face.

For now, he would rest.

Justin lay facing the other way, Brian's arms trapping him against the chest behind him, and try as he might, he just couldn't get warm enough.

Chapter 19

Justin was the first to wake up in the quiet loft, daylight breaking in through the blinds covering the window. He arose and squinted into the light, making his way quietly toward the bathroom for his morning shower.

Maybe if he was really quiet and managed to close the door without slamming it, he wouldn't wake up.

He was due to wake up in about twenty minutes, so this might give him enough time. Justin crept into the bathroom, closed the door ever so gently and listened for any movement outside the door. Breathing in a sigh of relief, Justin started the shower and stepped in. He started soaping himself, thinking about everything that had happened since yesterday.

Ever since after Brian had tried to do him bareback, Justin had been looking more closely at his older lover.

He looked the same.

He smiled the same.

He sounded the same.

He even fucked the same.

It was just everything else. When he touched Brian, he didn't feel the same warmth. When he kissed Brian, he didn't feel the same connection.

But most importantly, when he looked into Brian's eyes, and as lesbian as it sounded (and didn't people say that when you live with someone for a certain period of time, you start thinking like them?), when he looked into those deep, expressive hazel-colored eyes, he didn't see the same intensity.

The intensity was gone.

That connection that they had, the one where Brian could look at Justin and know if he did something stupid. The look he gave him when he didn't approve of something Justin did.

The look Brian had given him when he had said to 'never fuck without a condom.'

It was gone.

So that meant only one thing.

It wasn't his Brian.

And Justin was as sure that it was his own fault as he was sure the sun rose in the East and set in the West.

Because he had changed Brian, and not for the better. The man who he had first fallen in love with had started to make concessions for Justin, probably to keep him happy, because after all, wasn't that what Brian was doing? Making him happy?

His mother had given him to Brian, as a way to 'fix' little Justin's problems. And it had worked, but now it was done.

He was fixed.

And if he wasn't and he went away from Brian, so Brian could get on with his life...what then?

Would his mother pick the next available guy and say 'here, fix my son and you can fuck him?'

Isn't that what happened the first time, despite half-assed reassurances from Brian?

Justin needed to leave. He loved Brian too much to see him pretend that he was happy. He wanted the man to have his life back. Despite what it would mean to Justin himself.

Besides, and this was always the justification he would use when thinking about these things, Justin needed to be with someone who would look at Justin as a prize, that they wanted to be with, and only with, not as a burden and the constant reminder of the guilt they had felt.

Justin couldn't count how many times he had tried to reassure Brian in the beginning that it wasn't his fault; all to no avail. Justin knew Brian would never understand that Hobbs had had his own agenda, and it had nothing to do with his older lover showing up at his prom.

And so now, this was the result. He had gotten what he wanted, at the price of Brian, the man he had fallen in love with.

As Justin was contemplating what he wanted to do as opposed to what he needed to do, because he knew Brian would never forcefully throw him out of the loft, he heard the shower door open and Brian walk in.

"You scared me," Justin said, looking away from Brian.

"Relax," Brian said as he snuggled into Justin's hair from behind. "Here, let me have the soap." And with that, Justin passed the soap over, looking anywhere else but at Brian.

Brian took the soap and started to spread the lather across Justin's back. He knew the moment he had woken up that he was alone in bed. The bed seemed bigger somehow. He then got up and headed for the bathroom, where he heard the shower going. Once again, he found himself in awe of the vision behind the glass doors. Brian didn't think he could ever get tired of that in the morning.

He understood why his counterpart was so taken with the lad. He had just been trying to figure out how he had let Justin slip in, allowed him to make himself at home.

He was beginning to get an inkling how the other Brian had let him in where no one else dare tread.

Brian knew it couldn't have been only the kid's persistence.

He could never get tired of Justin.

After all, why wouldn't he want the kid around. It must have started off slowly and then snowballed from there.

Brian continued to wash Justin's back and then told him to turn around. Brian looked down into the face of the man who had managed to turn his (no, not his, he had to once again remind himself) life around so completely. But Brian couldn't look into the face since it was currently staring down at the shower floor.

"Justin?" Justin looked up and Brian was struck with what he saw there.

It was that look of hurt and something else. Something he had seen in the mirror so many times before.

Resignation.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Brian?" Justin started and stopped. He just couldn't talk to Brian about anything as important as what he wanted to say, in the shower. "I just need to hurry. The early shift at the diner..."

Brian continued to wash Justin while contemplating what was really going on in that pretty head of his. Brian knew that Justin could sense something was not right. He knew Justin was starting to feel disconnected. He needed to do something to make Justin come around; to relax him.

To reassure him.

He made up his mind.

It was for Justin.

Brian turned off the shower and stepped out, watching as Justin was combing his hair through, a towel wrapped securely around his hips. Brian wrapped his own towel around himself.

The older man knew that what he was about to do was out of character, well, for him at least. He knew he would never say something like it, but his counterpart must have.

After all this time.

For surely, the way Michael and Lindsay had gone on and on about how Brian cared for Justin...

No, Brian knew without a doubt, that he could never say the words, those words, but this other Brian, he was different from himself. And Justin needed to hear something to comfort him.

He didn't want the boy to slip any further.

Because if they ever traded places (no, when, when they traded places for the other Brian would probably do everything in his power to get back), he didn't want to be the one that had caused their relationship to implode on itself.

He'd let his counterpart do that one all on his own.

Brian grabbed hold of Justin after he had just finished combing his hair and swung him around to face him.

"Justin?" Brian said and looked directly at the blond.

Justin looked at Brian questioningly. "Brian? What is it?"

"You know I love you, right?" Brian said.

Justin stopped dead in his tracks.

There they were, the words.

The words.

The words started jumping around in his head, tumbling over each. They then started flashing in his mind, like one of those neon signs you find in a diner along the highway, flashing so that those were the only words you could see in the darkest of nights.

I love you.

Justin peered up into Brian's eyes.

The thing that he knew was missing, that intensity, was still not there.

It was still gone.

They had just been words coming out of his mouth.

Only words.

Pathetic little words.

No love, no joy, no heart felt pleas.

Just words.

Words that the old Brian would never have said to placate him.

Justin felt dizzy. It was over.

He then felt sick to his stomach as the bathroom started to spin around him.

Justin jerked out of Brian's grasp and ran to the toilet, retching into the bowl, just as Brian had spewed those stupid words at him only seconds before. Justin turned around and wiped his mouth clean, taking in the shocked form of the man he used to know before him.

"Justin?" Brian croaked out.

'Oh shit,' were the only thoughts that were running around in Brian's head at the moment. What had he done?

Justin backed away into the bedroom and then started throwing clothes on as fast as he could, slipping on his sneakers over his bare feet, one heel still not quite on. Grabbing his messenger bag, he ran to the loft door and pulled it open, looking back only once.

Brian stood at the bedroom entrance, clutching at the towel still wrapped around his hips. "Justin? I...what?"

"I need to...to go," Justin stuttered, turned and walked out of the loft, leaving Brian yelling after him.

Justin took to the stairs and did the only thing he could think of to do.

He ran.

And in the other place...

The only vision Brian had before he finally closed his eyes for the last time that night was that of his mother, telling him he would be damned for all eternity for the sole transgression of loving Justin.

He realized as he drifted off to sleep, that Saint Joan was right for once in her life.

Because this was his hell.

Brian awoke, rolling over to the side of the bed Justin usually claimed for his own and felt...

Nothing.

It was bare.

Brian stumbled out of the large bed, wondering where that smell was coming from only to realize that it was himself. After scratching his belly, he stretched his long arms above his head as he walked into the living area.

The place was in shambles. Nothing had escaped his wrath the night before.

"Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life," he muttered. He looked out the window at the sunny day before him, the brightness taunting him with its cheery overtones.

Brian made his way to the kitchen to put some coffee on. He then looked around the loft when he didn't spot the pot in its usual spot and found it lying where a desk should have been.

Brian went to pick up the pot when he heard his cell phone ring. "Probably Mikey," Brian said to no one in particular.

He could ignore it, but what was the point. He needed to talk to Michael, or his best friend would come over and ask him why he wouldn't answer his phone and then he'd see the loft and ask why he had trashed his loft. Then of course he would have to explain the large elephant in the room.

Better to just answer the phone.

He looked at the caller ID and realized he didn't recognize the number displayed.

"Yeah?" Brian snarled into the phone.

"Mr Kinney?" a man asked shyly. The voice sounded vaguely familiar.

"Yes, this is Mr Kinney. Who the fuck is this?" Brian asked. He didn't need this right now. If it was a tele-marketer, he would tell them to take their product and its special offer and shove it up their ass.

"You...you met me the other night. I'm sorry Mr Kinney," the man said, "but it's very..."

"It's Brian," Brian said into the phone, "you're that guy, the one that lives in the Taylor home."

"Yes, Sabah, that's my name...you remember me. Mr Kin...I mean Brian," Sabah said as he started to talk excitedly into the phone, "I need to talk to you. It's very important."

"Look," Brian said while running a hand through his hair, which was feeling very unkempt and oily at the moment, "I know about what happened to the previous occupants, so you don't have..."

"Brian, my mother's been talking. She feels really guilty about sending you away that night. She says she needs to speak with you or she can never be at peace with herself," Sabah said quickly.

"What? Look, I said I know all about Justin Taylor and what happened to him, okay?" Brian spat back. It was very nice of them to want to tell him what he needed to know, but it was already too late and he didn't need to hear about it again.

"No, you don't understand. She says this is very important. Please Mr Kinney...Brian...we need to meet," the man pleaded.

Brian smirked into the phone, even though he knew Sabah couldn't see it. The guy, and his mother apparently, seemed to have some 'jones' about wanting to talk to him. Maybe they could shed some more light on what happened to Justin's family after the...and then Brian stopped. He didn't want to think about it, but his curiosity still got the better of him. "Fine...whatever...sure. Where?"

"She said the Baths...Liberty Baths," the man said, unsure of exactly what he was saying.

"The baths," Brian repeated. "That little woman I met the other night...wants to meet me at the Baths?"

"She says they won't expect her to go there," Sabah said.

"When?" Brian asked curtly, not even bothering to ask what he meant by 'they.'

"Now...she says, now. It can't wait another minute."

"Sure," Brian said as he hung up.

Brian looked at the phone that he was still holding in his hand.

For some strange reason, somewhere in the back of his mind, the part that still cared about what was going on in his life, he couldn't help but think that this was important.

Really, really important.

He grabbed his keys, which he found strewn in a corner and exited the loft, not really caring about the fact that the wall that had been directly in front of him had been expanding and contracting the whole time he had been on the phone.

Chapter 20

Brian made his way through the maze of the bathhouse, traveling corridors very well known to him. The last time he had been here, he had been fucking Father Tom (Tom, just Tom), Justin at his side.

He remembered that night. Who he was fucking was not important (and would have been forgotten had it not been for his God-fearing mother), but he did remember the look on Justin's face. It was that look that showed he was in control whenever Justin topped someone else, a look that said he was in the driver's seat and his passenger was only too happy to be along for the ride. This was what he loved most about date night. Not the randomness of who they fucked, well, okay, being honest with himself, that too, but mostly it was that look, for those events were the only times he would get to see it on his young lover's face and he was glad he could share it with him.

When Justin was with him and only him, the look on Justin's face was different. It was one of willingness, his trust completely put in the older man, his faith that Brian would never hurt him as he put the control into Brian's hands.

Brian shook his head clear of that memory.

No sense in going there.

He rounded another corner and he was struck with another memory - the one of finding David at the baths last year. The look on his face as he had been caught, no longer so confident in his arrogant viewpoint about what gay males should be doing in their 'monogamous' relationships. The triumph he had felt at that moment had overshadowed why he had originally shown up at the baths that night to begin with.

And of course, that memory brought him back to Justin, because everything always led back to Justin. The reason he had gone to the baths that night was because that had been the night Justin told him he was not going to Dartmouth, but to the Art Institute, right there in the good old Pitts.

Michael and the gang had been so smug in their assessment that he had gone to the baths so that he could show Justin that no matter what he did, he was still his own man.

They were partially right. The other fact was, and he hadn't wanted any of them to know it at the time, and only now, after the shit had hit the fan, could he admit to it, was that he was simply relieved.

And therein the truth lied.

He was relieved.

Now he would give everything that he owned, everything that he hadn't trashed yet, to find out that the boy was indeed still alive and just at Dartmouth.

But he wasn't.

So no sense in going there either.

Brian rounded a corner and came face to face with two people who looked extremely out of place.

"I hear there are tours here every hour on the hour. It's quite," Brian chuckled, "educational."

"Brian," Sabah said as he advanced on Brian to shake his hand in greeting, "my mother insisted it be here...I would have chosen differently."

"Oh, this is the best place. They would never suspect me here," the woman said as she looked at Brian. "Nina, the name's Nina, Mr Kinney."

"Ah mama! I think you do these things to me on purpose! How could I bring my mother to a place like this?" Sabah said, waving his hands wildly in the air.

"Always complaining," the woman said as she turned to Brian. "You should see him when Patricia sends him to the store to get Kotex."

Sabah rolled his eyes. "Please mama, tell the man what you told me so we can leave and this gentleman can get on with his life." Then Sabah lowered his voice, "and what did I say about mentioning the 'K' word?"

"So look," Brian started, not wanting to be part of the little family drama any more than he had to, "as I told your son on the phone, I already know what happened to the Taylors."

"I trust you found out what happened to their son," Nina said crossing her arms over her chest.

Brian bit his lip and looked away.

"You cared for the boy?" the woman continued.

"Yes, you could say that," Brian said and swallowed.

"I could and I did. Your feelings run very deep," Nina said and then turned to face Brian. "Mr Kinney, I have the sight..."

Brian shook his head as if he didn't hear right and then laughed. "So you can see my feelings for Justin because you're psychic?"

"Mr Kinney," Nina sighed, "I was trying to get to the point. I don't need the sight to see that you have feelings for Justin. I have six children and fourteen grandchildren. Give me more credit than that. I saw the look you gave when I brought up the boy."

"Man, he was a man," Brian said. "Okay, so what is the point?"

"When you came to my door the other night," Nina continued.

The other night, Brian thought. Was it only just a little over a gdy and a half ago? It felt like a lifetime.

"When you came to my door the other night," Nina repeated, knowing she had lost Brian there for a moment, "I saw it on you. You see, everyone has an aura about them. They can be in blues, in greens, in purples, even blacks and golds."

"I got it. They come in all the colors of the rainbow," Brian said snidely.

Nina raised an eyebrow. "Everyone here," Nina said as she looked around at the men in their various positions of carnal pleasure, "are exhibiting many colors. They're always changing depending on moods...they go up and down, change colors, brighten, dim. So many different hues right now I couldn't even begin to describe...oh my! What are they doing to that man?" Nina exclaimed.

Brian and Sabah turned to look in her direction. Brian smirked, "why have one dick up your ass when you can have two. Continue, I find this fascinating," Brian sarcastically intoned.

"Mama!" Sabah said. "Don't look!"

Nina peeled her eyes away from the two men.

Without breaking her stride, Nina continued. "You find it fascinating, hmmm? Oh you think you know everything Mr Kinney but you're in for a few surprises here. So as I was saying, we all have different colors, and the brightness varies..."

"Yes I got that. I understand that you have the sight to see everyone's aura," Brian finished.

Brian couldn't completely discount what the woman was saying. He knew he didn't need to have the sight in order to see Justin's aura.

He always just glowed.

"No matter what they look like, they all seem to be the same in one way...they go in one direction. Yours doesn't," Nina said, looking at Brian warily.

Brian raised an eyebrow again. "So...all this...is about my skewed aura? I think I should be leaving now," Brian said as he made to leave.

"No Mr Kinney. Your aura is indeed skewed. But where you come from, it's not," Nina said, hoping that would make it clearer somehow.

"So," Brian started, trying not to laugh in the woman's face, "I'm an alien or something?" Brian then laughed incredulously.

"Mr Kinney," Nina started again.

"Brian," Brian said. This Mr Kinney shit was giving him a headache.

"Brian, you don't belong here," Nina stated.

"You said that the other night."

"Imagine, if you can, and I know you can, because things seem to be all wrong right now, aren't they Brian?" Nina asked.

Brian didn't answer and looked away.

"Right there! They are, aren't they? You came to the Taylor house, looking for the boy..."

"Leave Justin out of this," Brian growled.

"No! No, I think I not," Nina said.

"Mama," Sabah warned.

"You want your Justin back?" the woman asked as she raised an eyebrow.

Brian stopped and addressed Nina directly. "The time line? You could fix it?" Brian asked excitedly, trying not to get his hopes too high. How could this mess ever be fixed again?

Nina sighed. "Time can not be changed Mr Kinney...Brian," Nina corrected. "The time line, as you put it, was never changed, it's constant. Time is constant."

"It was changed!" Brian yelled.

"Was it that night Brian?" Nina asked. "The night you came to our house? Is that when everything seemed different?"

"Before that, after I got off the plane from Chicago...maybe while I was in Chicago," Brian rambled on. "Before I went there, everything was fine. Justin was..."

"Alive?" Nina prompted.

Brian looked up at the woman and sighed, "yes."

"When you were in Chicago, did you talk to him on the phone?"

"I had no time...and he was kinda mad at me, and I tried the loft and I couldn't get him...it was right after I landed the Brown account. I called Michael instead..."

Nina looked at Brian questioningly, "your friend?"

"Yeah...and he said he was working on some storyboards with Justin, so everything must have been fine then..."

Brian was racking his brain to figure out when it must have happened. But without knowing when Justin just...disappeared from his...

Brian shook his head clear as he heard Nina further prompting him.

"Then?" the woman asked again.

"Then I went to a nightclub that night and took a plane the next morning, and came home to everything being fucked up. But I don't know what you're getting at, if you say time can't be changed..."

"A nightclub?" Nina asked, ignoring Brian's ranting.

"This underground night club in Chicago," Brian said despondently. "Look..."

"I'm not sure of where exactly all the doorways are," Nina said, more to herself. "But one of them could have been there..."

"Doorway?"

"Mr Kinney...Brian...I don't have time to go over this with you. Just know, that I think you stumbled through one of the doorways into this world," Nina finished.

"This world?" Brian queried. He had been hoping for something more concrete and now she was babbling about different worlds.

"Yes," Nina nodded. Sabah put his hand over his forehead.

"Mama, do you know how you sound right now?" Sabah exclaimed.

"I'm sorry," Brian chuckled again, "you're very entertaining, but this world is my world. It's just all," Brian said and waved his arms around, "fucked up right now."

"Is it Brian?" Nina asked. "The time line hasn't changed...time is a constant, as I've said before...you're simply in the wrong world!"

Sabah sighed again. "Mr Kinney, what mama is trying to say...that she took a long time to explain to me, is that there are two worlds."

"I was just getting to that," Nina pouted.

"Parallel worlds," Brian droned.

Parallel worlds.

Brian stopped and looked at both of them.

Now normally Brian was not the kind of man to believe in otherworldly things.

He really didn't give a rat's ass about Bigfoot, the lost city of Atlantis, ghosts and the such. But the events of the past few days had certainly changed his mind on the matter and it was with that, that Brian didn't discount anything they had to say.

In fact, it was as if someone had turned on all the lights in a room, after it had been shrouded in total darkness.

And the light was blinding him.

"I never thought of that," Brian said very slowly, Nina nodding her head in the background, knowing the distraught man was finally catching on.

It started to click into place.

"So Justin?" Brian started.

"Is most definitely alive where you come from," Nina finished for him.

"But I don't get it," Brian started talking excitedly. "Parallel worlds, everything seems different yet still the same. Shouldn't things be really changed..."

"There's an old saying, 'the more things change, the more they stay the same,'" Nina shrugged.

It made more and more sense the longer he thought about it.

It was silly for him to think he had changed the time line. Because time is and will always be a constant. Father Tom and Nina were right.

He was simply in the wrong place.

Things started to click more and more quickly, images running through his head at rapid fire.

But he kept coming back to one thing.

Justin.

Because, as he always said, everything comes back to Justin.

Brian looked wildly around the club, his entire being settled on Nina in front of him. He grabbed her around the top of her arms, "how do I get back?"

"Well, now you see," Nina said and then stopped again. "Where did his arm go?" Nina shrieked as she took in the sight of the two men across the room.

Sabah looked over and covered his mother's eyes. "Don't look mama." Nina grabbed Sabah's hand off her face.

"Did he put his fist?" Nina asked. "I've seen contortionists in India who could...but that..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, nothing says 'I love you' like a good fisting," Brian said off-handedly. "Please, Nina, focus. How do I get back?"

Brian needed to know everything right now. He never needed to know anything so badly as he did right now.

He felt alive again.

"It's not as easy as you think Mr Kinney," Nina said in all seriousness.

"But there's a way, right?" Brian asked, not being deterred in the slightest.

"Yes, there's a person I'm going to send you to...they're at Joe's Shoe Repair. In old town Pittsburgh...ask for Joe."

"This Joe...will know what to do?" Brian asked.

"Yes Mr Kinney," Nina nodded. "If Joe doesn't know, then no one will."

"The other night, you slammed the door on my face why?" Brian asked, suddenly remembering the scared look on the woman's face.

"Brian, the guardians, the they of who I sometimes speak...look, Joe can explain much better. It won't be easy, that's all I can say. And the guardians are not the type to easily forgive." Nina stopped and sighed, hanging her head in shame. "I wanted to hide from them, to not get involved for the safety of my family. But I realized in all good conscience, that I couldn't live with my family if I had allowed you to continue thinking you were in the right place. I love my family too much and I know I'm stronger than that," Nina finished and smiled wanly.

"Thank you," Brian said while smiling. He wasn't stupid. Obviously this woman had gone to some sort of risk to tell him all this. And what that risk was and who these guardians she spoke of were, didn't really matter much at the moment.

He was going back.

Come hell or high water, he was going back.

And with that thought firmly planted in his mind, he picked the small woman up and twirled her around. "Thank you," he said again as he kissed her on the cheek and then put her down.

"Oh my!" Nina said and smiled a goofy smile.

"I have to go...Joe...Joe's shoe repair, got it!" Brian stated excitedly.

"Yes," Nina said while Brian shook Sabah's hand.

"Good luck and Godspeed Mr Kinney," he said.

"Thank you. Both of you...thank you."

Brian made to leave. "Oh Mr Kinney," Nina said before he left.

"Yes?"

"Here, take this," Nina said as she handed him a roll of candy, Indian writing printed on one side.

"Is this some kind of candy, I don't know, to help me?" Brian chuckled. "What, does it have magical properties?" After all, anything was possible.

"No they're breathmints," Nina said and rolled her eyes. "When was the last time you brushed?"

Sabah rolled his eyes.

Brian smiled and left the bath house, running toward the nearest exit.

"Do you think he'll be okay mama?" Sabah asked.

"I don't know Sabah...I don't know. But I'd say he is very determined to get back to his Justin."

"Mama?" Sabah said uneasily, "can we leave now? I think I'm being cruised." Sabah looked over at the two men who were waiving at him.

"And why shouldn't you be?" Nina asked, as they started walking out of the Baths, "I've always said you're a very handsome man."

And with that, the two people left the bath house.

Brian broke every speed limit and ran every yellow light to get to Joe's Shoe Repair in record time.

And there it was. A small hole in the wall type place, the sign in the shape of an old shoe.

Brian parked the Jeep in a red zone and ran into the shop. There was an obese woman standing at the counter, arguing with a little man, standing behind the counter.

There was no other way to describe the little man than that he was the spitting image of Steve Buscemi.

"Look, I told you already. You keep comin' back here with your broken heels and I keep telling you, these have a load restriction," the man droned on.

"Why, I never!" the woman exclaimed.

"Yeah, I bet you never. The only way you'd get laid is if some guy who was totally hard up rolled you around in flour and looked for the wet spot."

"I'm taking my business elsewhere," the woman huffed. "You're disgusting."

"What you should be taking your business to is Jenny Craig, down the street," the little man yelled after the woman, who had passed Brian on her way out.

"She'll be back. I'm the only one who can fix her fucking shoes," the man said, as he leaned against the counter. "I'm the only one she has a rapport going with."

"Yes, I could tell that by the way she left, crying," Brian said, a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"Oh well, well, aren't we the high and mighty one. So Alice," the man said as he smiled lazily at Brian, peering up at the man, "did you come to join the tea party?"

Brian looked at the man and smirked. "Who are you? The Mad Hatter?"

"I like that. That's fucking funny, you're a real fucking funny guy," the man chuckled and came around the counter. "I'm Joe and I'd say you'd be wanting my services right about fucking now."

And in the other place

"I need to...to go," Justin stuttered, turned and walked out of the loft, leaving Brian yelling after him.

Justin took to the stairs and did the only thing he could think of to do.

He ran.

Justin had run out of the loft, not knowing exactly where he was headed. He kept running until he came to a street corner and saw...

Ethan.

Justin stood around with the others and watched Ethan finish his set. Justin wasn't exactly listening to the music. He was still replaying the last bit of music that he had just heard in his head.

You know I love you, right?

Oh how long had he wanted to hear those words! And now that he had, they were so empty and without any comfort whatsoever.

It convinced him more than anything what he needed to do would be the right thing.

He needed to convince himself that he was good enough for somebody.

And that he was plain and simply, just enough for somebody.

Somebody who wouldn't lose themselves trying to be what they thought Justin wanted them to be.

Somebody Justin wouldn't have to feel guilty about loving.

Justin shook his head clear as he heard the sound of applause, signaling the end of Ethan's solo.

While everyone was putting money in Ethan's case, Justin walked up to the musician himself. "Hi."

"Hi," Ethan responded shyly. "Couldn't get enough of my show the first time around?" he laughed. "Are you okay?" Ethan asked, noticing something wrong with the beautiful man who he had met on his birthday. He remembered his name was 'Justin.'

"No," Justin said and then sighed. "Yeah."

"Problem with the boyfriend?" Ethan asked, raising one eyebrow. He had to admit, he had wanted to get to know Justin better, but then had been sadly disappointed to find that he was involved with someone else. Maybe this was a good thing.

Ethan kicked himself for thinking such a thing.

He started walking, Justin following in step with him.

"Yes, he um..."

Ethan looked over at Justin. "This is the one that doesn't believe in birthdays?"

"He said he loved me," Justin rushed out.

"He said, 'he loved you?'" Ethan repeated. Okay, maybe this wasn't such a good thing.

Ethan kicked himself for thinking such a thing again.

"It's funny," Justin started talking, not caring one wit about talking to a stranger about his woes. "I've been waiting for those words for a long time..."

"And now he's said them?"

Justin sighed. "It's all wrong. He's wrong. I don't know...he's changed since we've been together. Well, I mean, at first I thought for the good, and then recently, he started doing dumb things, and then in the past few days, he's been like a completely different person..."

"A person is supposed to change a little after you've been together. It's a good thing to change each other," Ethan started.

"But he's not the," Justin said and then became frustrated. "It's like a Catch-22, okay? I want him to change so he'll love me and then when he changes, he's not the same person anymore that I fell in love with. You know?"

"So," Ethan started, trying to get a grasp on what Justin was saying, "he shouldn't say 'I love you,' and just keep taking you for granted?" Ethan asked, laughing slightly at the preposterous idea.

"No! See? That's just it! I don't want him to change, but I do, and because of that...I just wished he really did love me," Justin said and slumped down on a park bench they came upon.

Ethan took the seat next to him. "But he said he loved you..."

"That's just it. They were only words. He didn't mean them. I can tell when he means something and this time he didn't mean it!"

"I don't know what to say...if I were to say the words, I would mean them...look...you wanna go somewhere for a cup of coffee?" Ethan asked.

Justin looked at the young musician before him. Yes, he could see being with him. He could see even being somewhat happy. He could even see Ethan saying 'I love you' one day and meaning it.

But it wasn't what he wanted.

What he wanted was Brian.

And before Brian royally fucked up and said those words, Justin would have gladly gone with Ethan, but Brian had said the words. Whether he meant them or not was inconsequential. He gave them to him.

And Justin knew he couldn't drag Ethan through this.

And most importantly, he knew Brian deserved an explanation.

He needed to confront Brian with it.

It was time to stop running away.

He finally got the words and he now knew they weren't what he wanted.

"No Ethan," Justin said as he got up from the bench. "I need to talk to Brian." Justin smiled one last time at Ethan and with that, turned and left.

Ethan sat at the bench, watching as the young man walked away.

There wasn't anything for him there. It was obvious from what Justin said that there was more going on in their relationship than what Justin was saying.

Ethan sighed and leaned against the bench, smoothing his hand over his violin case. He wished he could have someone who would love him enough like that and that he could love in return.

At least he knew he always had his music.

Chapter 21

Brian entered the comic book shop trepidly, seeking out his best friend who was currently taking inventory behind the massive counter.

"Hey," Brian said as he approached Michael.

Michael looked up. "Hey. Everything okay?" Michael asked warily. It didn't seem to matter that this Brian was not his Brian, he still had that look about him when he felt guilty about something. "Is everything okay?"

Brian looked away and started to play with a comic book that was displayed on the counter.

"Fuck! No matter how things change, they always stay the same!" Michael exclaimed. "What did you do?"

"I," Brian started and then bit his lip. "I think I said something to Justin that made him react badly and he...he..."

"He?" Michael prompted, not liking where this was going.

"He ran away," Brian said and winced, ready for the famous Novotny shrieking to commence.

"What do you mean, he ran away," Michael shrieked.

"Calm down Michael," he soothed trying to calm the upset man, "I think he may have gone to the diner. He said something about an early shift."

"Calm down? You lost Justin," Michael yelled. Michael then narrowed his eyes, "what did you do to him?"

Brian sighed. "I said...I said I loved him and he went really wiggy on me."

"You what?! Why the fuck did you do something like that?" Michael shrieked again. Michael came around the counter and stood in front of Brian, his hands on his hips, looking for all the world as if he was channeling Debbie herself.

"Because I thought that was what he needed...because he was being so despondent and," Brian tried to explain.

"So why was he like that in the first place?" Michael asked as he crossed his arms over his chest, staring accusingly at Brian. "What else did you do?"

"Last night, before I came to see you about the prom, I sort of...I didn't mean to...I just thought that..."

"Brian?" Michael asked warily.

"I tried to fuck him raw," Brian said, glad it was out in the open. Really, it didn't sound like such a horrible thing once he said it out loud.

"You...he...", Michael spluttered as his face turned a few shades of red before he completely exploded. "Are you fucking insane? Why would you do that?!?" Michael stormed into the store room. "Why don't I give you a can of gasoline? You can throw it on the fire you started!!! Completely finish them off!" Michael continued ranting. "What were you fucking thinking? I mean, seriously, what were you fucking thinking?!"

"I thought the kid...Justin...might like it," Brian said sheepishly.

Michael looked at Brian with an 'I don't believe you' look.

"Fine, so I wanted it. I was scared about what that Jo woman said and I knew Justin was negative and I was negative..."

"And how did you know that?" Michael asked.

"The letters from the clinic arrived and showed both of us negative," Brian reasoned.

"No," Michael said and got into Brian's face, "the letters showed Justin and our Brian negative."

"I received my letter before I left for Chicago," Brian said. "Please, give me more credit than that Mikey."

"Well," Michael said, "at least there is that. But you know that just because it says you're negative..."

"Look I know all that. I wasn't thinking," Brian said, knowing all too well what Michael was going to say about HIV testing and it's net of false safety.

"Obviously, you were only thinking of getting your dick wet. You weren't thinking about what it could do to you or...or Justin," Michael said sadly.

No, Brian hadn't been thinking about that. It was true, he had only been thinking about himself. What could have happened to Justin hadn't even entered into the picture.

He had put his counterpart's lover at risk for his own temporary pleasure.

If he were the other Brian, he would probably want to kick his ass right about now.

"I just didn't think he would have reacted so violently about it," Brian said, remembering how Justin looked, standing in front of him.

"You mean...to you suggesting to do it raw," Michael said.

"Um," Brian said and bit his lip.

"What?! Oh no...you didn't. You actually fucked him without asking him first?!" Michael shrieked yet again.

"You make it sound like a bad thing," Brian tried to justify. "It was the heat of the moment."

"Oh fuck. What happened?" Michael asked resignedly.

"As soon as I entered him, he..." Brian said waving his arm around, "disengaged and stormed away. He was so...so...God! The look on his face..."

"Hurt? Crushed?" Michael prompted.

"Yeah," Brian said guiltily.

"Soon after I started dating Ben, Justin had brought up the subject with Brian about fucking bareback. Brian and I were at Woody's that night when he told me about it. He made Justin promise to never fuck anyone without a condom," Michael said as he remembered the story. "Brian was so drunk that night...I don't even think he knew he was talking about it...he said he made sure that Justin never did something stupid like. He said he wanted Justin around for a long time. Of course, after admitting all that, he went into typical Kinney-denial mode and fucked three different guys in the bathroom. Fuck! Brian...do you know what you did!"

"Oh Fuck," Brian said, as he ran his hand through his hair.

"So that's why you told him you love him? To placate him...to make up for what you did?" Michael asked.

"Well...I thought that he needed it," Brian said and then became defensive. "Look, I figured the other one..."

"You mean our Brian," Michael said.

"Yeah, right. I figured that he already would have said it to Justin and..."

"Would you have?" Michael countered.

"Well of course, knowing how Brian feels about him," Brian said.

Michael continued to stare down Brian.

"Well maybe not," Brian said in defeat, "I mean..."

"Brian, you would never say that. Not unless, I don't know, it would have to be something major for you to say it," Michael started.

"So, he never said it," Brian stated. "But it's obvious he does love the kid."

"Oh course he loves Justin," Michael said as he raised his arms in exasperation. "Everyone fucking knows it. Everyone, except for Justin!"

Brian looked at Michael and things started making sense.

The look of hurt when he suggested doing it raw.

The look of utter disbelief when he casually said he loved him.

"Look, before the whole Chicago thing, Brian was doing some crazy stuff...stupid shit...to prove he was still in control. But we all knew better. It's still his way of denying what's going on. In the beginning, after the bashing," Michael said and winced, "he was more open to showing how he felt, because he almost lost Justin, but then he got comfy and well, you know..."

"Yeah and who better to know than myself. Justin doesn't really see it?" Brian asked. Despite everything, the kid was smart, and from what Michael has said, Justin should know how Brian feels.

"Of course not," Michael said resignedly. "He might have, but Brian's been giving off mixed signals, and after everything that happened with Hobbs and his hand, how can he? I keep trying to reassure him, but it doesn't work," Michael finished and sighed. "How did he react when you told him...you know...the words?" Michael said and winced again.

"He well," Brian said as he remembered Justin's violent reaction, "he sort of threw up...got dressed in record time and took off."

Michael blew the breath he was holding in, out. "Justin's not dumb, he knew you didn't mean it." Michael shook his head. "So now he's convinced you don't love him. Great! Just fucking great!" Michael screamed. He started to pace back and forth. "My best friend is stuck in another dimension, not knowing where he is, Justin dead in his world, and Justin in this world wishing he was dead...because of you, I might add," Michael said as he turned on Brian. "Oh this is good."

"Michael," Brian warned.

"Shut up!!!! What were you thinking? First trying to fuck him without a condom and then...then telling him 'I love you,'" Michael said doing a poor imitation of Brian. "What next? Maybe the girls can get him a puppy and you can run it over with your Jeep!" Michael finished while yelling.

"Jesus Michael, calm down. I'll fix this," Brian said lamely.

"No, you won't...you're not going near him again. We're going to do what we should have done before. We need to tell him the truth about who you are and where our Brian is!" Michael stated, his arms across his chest.

"Well, do you really think that's wise," Brian started.

Michael stopped in his ranting long enough to look closely at Brian. "You don't want him to know, do you?"

"That's so ridiculous," Brian scoffed. "I'm not even gonna comment on that."

"You do!!!"

"Mikey, of course I don't," Brian reasoned, "but you said before..."

"Look...if we don't, my best friend isn't going to have Justin to come home to." Michael looked down at a storyboard Justin had created only a few days ago. He picked it up and showed it to Brian. "And if that happens, this is what we'll be facing when he comes back."

Brian didn't know what that meant, except for the fact that his image was once again looking back at him, only in cartoon form. It was an angry face, the first word coming to mind 'rage.' "If he comes back Michael...if..."

"When!" Michael yelled. "Jo said she could do it. It just isn't the time yet."

"And when will it be time Michael? Tomorrow, next week, next month, next year?" Brian yelled back.

"She said she could do it," Michael reiterated quietly.

"We need to be practical here," Brian said.

"You don't want to go back," Michael said. "Jo said that. You don't want to go back," he repeated, looking once again accusingly at Brian.

"Did you only hear what you wanted to hear?" Brian asked in frustration.

"You...you can't have Justin. Justin belongs to Brian," Michael said while shaking his head.

"I am Brian."

"No, the other Brian. Our Brian. His Brian! You can't just step in and claim him!" Michael complained.

"You don't understand, he's so," Brian sighed.

"It was as if he was made for you?" Michael asked.

"Well, yeah," Brian said and ran his hand through his hair.

"Well, that's because he was. But not you! You have some kind of feelings for him, obviously..."

"Yes," Brian said, wondering where that admission came from.

"Great. But do you love him?" Michael asked.

"Well no, of course not, I don't know him well enough..."

"That's it! Brian does. And Justin loves him. They have a history together. They've been there for each other. You weren't there. You've been here a couple of days. They went through everything that made them who they are together. They belong together. Not you and Justin," Michael finished, hoping this was sinking into the other man's conscience.

"So you're saying you'd be okay if they stayed together." Brian continued on, sarcasm lacing his voice, "you could sit back and watch the best friend you've been secretly in love with all these years, be with someone else."

Michael sighed. "I could because I have. I didn't like Justin coming into our lives in the beginning because I knew what a potential threat he would be. But since he's come into Brian's life, Brian's been different. You remind me of him before Justin...selfish, wanting to get his dick sucked, not really caring about anyone but himself. He's not like that anymore since Justin...he's had to rethink a lot of things. I wish," Michael said and sighed again, "I wish I could have been the one to have brought out the best in Brian, but I couldn't. Justin could."

"I thought I'd never hear anything like that come out of your mouth," Brian said, new respect for his best friend showing on his face.

"Well Brian isn't the only one who has grown up. Brian and I might still be those fourteen year old boys if Justin hadn't come along. Instead of being the ever-pining pathetic boyfriend, I've learned how to be the best friend he always needed. Anyways, Brian loves him...we all love him and we can't lie to Justin anymore," Michael finished by shaking his head.

"David," Brian prompted. "The Michael I know, glompped onto David even though he was completely wrong for him because he knew he could never have me. Why did you?"

"Same reason," Michael shrugged.

"So it wasn't because Brian was getting close to Justin?" Brian asked skeptically.

"You kidding me?" Michael laughed. "I thought Justin would be outta there soon enough, or at least I believed it. No it was because of the same reason."

"And Ben?"

"Ben was and is, for me. All me. With Ben I'm happy," Michael said with a smile. "There's still some rough patches we need to get through. And yeah, Brian has something to do with it but Ben makes me feel ten feet tall."

Brian smiled. "I always told you you were worth it. I'm glad you finally realized it."

Michael smiled and looked at the clock. "We need to go find Justin. We need to tell him everything about you, the other Brian, the other world. Oh God," Michael said and ran his hand through his hair nervously, "when he finds out we've been lying to him..."

"You don't have to go looking for me," an ice-cold voice said stepping into the store room.

"Justin!" Michael yelled. "How long..."

"Long enough," Justin droned. Justin looked directly at Brian with narrowed eyes. "Now who the fuck are you and where's Brian?"

Brian took in the form of the boy standing in front of him, his entire body vibrating in anger. Brian had only two words running through his head.

Oh Fuck.

And in the other place, in a shoe store

"Oh well, well, aren't we the high and mighty one. So Alice," the man said as he smiled lazily at Brian, peering up at the man, "did you come to join the tea party?"

Brian looked at the man and smirked. "Who are you? The Mad Hatter?"

"I like that. That's fucking funny, you're a real fucking funny guy," the man chuckled and came around the counter. "I'm Joe and I'd say you'd be wanting my services right about fucking now."

"You know why I'm here?" Brian asked, sounding no doubt stupid. What was it Nina had said. 'If Joe can't, no one could.' It was obvious this man could just as easily see what Nina saw.

"I can see it written all fucking over you, Mr. Kinney," Joe said.

"You know my name..."

"Look, can we get this shit outta the way?" Joe snarked. "I know everything about you, okay? I can just see it. It's all fucking there. Your aura, your name, what you do, what you've done, even your own fucking sexual preferences," Joe said with a lift of his eyebrow. "Oh yeah, don't be gettin any ideas now though, the only fucking dick I like is my own, if you get my drift."

"Is this going to be a problem?" Brian asked warily and then became angry. "Is that it. Are you going to give me shit because I fuck men?"

"I don't give a two-bit fuck what you fuck, you know. You can fuck men, women, cats, chickens, dogs...you know, I almost wished you fucked dogs cause I gotta tell you I have this next door neighbor who has this dog that yaps all fucking night. Turn off the tv to go to bed and the dog's yapping. Go to have a wank in the bathroom before bed, dog's still yapping. Try to get to sleep, dog's still fucking yapping. Now if fucking dogs is your thing, go fuck that dog, with all my blessings. Maybe the fucking thing would finally go to fucking sleep."

"I don't fuck dogs," Brian said in exasperation, shaking his head back and forth, wondering what he had gotten himself into.

"You don't? Then what fucking good are you?" Joe asked back, brows furrowed.

"If I said I fuck dogs would you shut up and help me?" Brian sighed. "Sure, I fuck dogs."

"What are you? Some kind of sicko?" the man shot back.

Brian lunged across the counter and grabbed hold of Joe by the collar of his dirty shirt.

"I don't have time for this," Brian growled.

"Hey, hey, hey. It was a joke, man," Joe said as he pried Brian's hands off of him. "Settle down...settle down," Joe soothed. "Lay off the double tall lattes, okay? Besides," Joe said as he brushed his shirt down and saw Brian settle back down behind the counter, "I can see some of the tricks you've screwed in your past and I gotta tell, you weren't lying when you said you fuck dogs."

Brian groaned and put his hand on his forehead. "Joe..."

"I mean, why anyone would want to fuck some of those fucking contenders for wearing a fucking bag over their head when you got a perfectly good piece of little blond boy ass sitting right at home," Joe finished while laughing and shaking his head.

Brian looked up quickly shaking his head in confusion. "Who are you?"

Joe became solemn and walked around the counter to stand directly in front of Brian, putting his hands on his hips. He then leaned over and whispered, "I'm Batman."

Brian looked on in confusion again.

Joe started laughing hysterically. "Oh you should so see your fucking face. 'I'm Batman,'" Joe said in mock seriousness. "Quick! Which Batman movie is that from?" Joe asked.

"I don't know..."

"The one with Michael Keaton!" Joe exclaimed. "Not the ones that came after. Val and George were for shit in the other Batman movies."

"Seriously, you can see so much by looking at me, who are you?" Brian asked again.

"You know Bob?" Joe asked, getting serious again.

"Bob?" Brian asked.

"Oh yeah, that's right," Joe scoffed. "Mysterious Marilyn?"

"Yeah," Brian exclaimed. Finally, something he knew.

"I'm her, only more like Pi," Joe said, casually waving his hand in the air.

"That doesn't make sense," Brian said.

"It does if you're hungry and I can sure go for some fucking pie right about now," Joe said.

"Fine, you help me and I'll get you all the pie you want," Brian said back.

"I help you, you go across, and then who buys my pie?" Joe asked.

"We'll go now, I'll get your damn pie at the Liberty Diner and..."

"No, no no," Joe said shaking his head, "that red headed waitress gives me the creeps."

"Can we drop the pie for a minute here?" Brian asked in defeat.

"You brought it up," Joe said defensively, "trying to get me to fucking help you through pie."

Brian took a deep breath in, "will you help me?"

"You know," Joe started to speak conversationally, as he went to stand behind the counter again, "I think you guys have the right idea...fucking each other instead of women. I mean, I'll never do it but do you know how fucking hard it is to get some fucking action, and I do mean fucking action? You guys see other guy who is so inclined, in a bathroom and wham! No lights, no music, no fucking flowers or Hallmark cards and you got a fuck buddy for the next five minutes. You take a lady out and you gotta dine her, make with the small talk about stupid shit, watch her eat a salad and say, 'I'm watching my weight' blah blah blah, and you still might not get any. I'm a nice guy, how come I can't get any?" Joe asked in confusion.

"It's a mystery," Brian said in mock sincerity.

"See?" Joe jumped while pointing at Brian. "Right there, you just don't speak my fucking language. Always looking down your nose at someone like me."

"I'm not looking down anything. Of course," Brian smirked, "it would help you to know that the word fuck and all its derivations is not a requirement in every sentence. Now, can you please fucking help me?"

"Oh yeah, now you're talking my language. Yeah, I can fucking help. You need to know some things first," Joe said.

"What?" asked a completely defeated Brian.

"It's not gonna be easy...to get back. First, it has to be the right time. And even it is, there's still no guarantee. The guardians," Joe said and stopped.

"There, there's that word again. What are the guardians? Can they be reasoned with? Why are they so bad?" Brian asked his questions in rapid fire.

"Whoa! Whoa! One at a fucking time!" Joe said. "The guardians reasoned with? Are you fucking insane?"

Just then a man walked into the shop. "Hey Joe! What fucking time is it?"

"It's fucking 11:45, asswipe!" Joe yelled back.

The man waved and walked out.

"See? He speaks my language," Joe said.

Brian, not being the type to be deterred for too long continued, "the guardians Joe?"

"Oh yeah, I'd have to summon them."

"So you can summon them, right?" Brian asked.

"What do I look like? Do I look like a fucking moron? Do I have the word 'moron' tattooed across my forehead?" Joe exclaimed.

"Well," Brian stuttered, "no but..."

"Of course I fucking don't! What moron would do that?! These guardians aren't from some fucking 'Lord of the Rings' movie. Orlando fucking Bloom isn't going to come out of the walls and say, 'I shall take you back whence you came' and then all the fucking fairies in fucking fairy land clap."

"Well, it seems like a 'Lord of the Rings' movie, with the trees moving and all," Brian muttered.

"Trees moving, huh? You're being followed," Joe said as he pointed his finger at Brian. "How 'bout the walls?"

"Yeah," Brian said as he ran his hand through his hair feeling uneasy about admitting what he'd been seeing, "they move and...stuff too."

"Yeah, well, they know you're here, and the word is they're not very happy. Now you wanna make sure they don't get to you first before you cross over all official like," Joe said.

"Why?" Brian asked.

"It would be bad," Joe said in all seriousness.

Brian looked at Joe warily. "You're going to make me quote that movie line, aren't you?"

"You got it," Joe said.

"Ghostbusters," Brian droned.

"Hey, you're all right," Joe said. "See? We've got a good rapport thing going on here," Joe said as he indicated both of them.

"How bad?" Brian asked again.

Joe looked directly at Brian. "Imagine completely losing your mind - it's gone, its outta there, it's packed its bags and gone to fucking Fiji and it's never coming back. You, a shell, gibbering on and on about monsters in the wall, comprende?"

"Okay, got it, the guardians are not nice beings," Brian said resignedly.

"They're fucking nightmares. You've never seen anything like 'em. It's not that they can rip you apart in one easy swipe, which they could do by the way, it's that they leave you alive. You almost wish for death."

"So once you summon them...and you will...right?" Brian asked, confirming that Joe indeed would.

Joe sighed. "When the time is right, I'll summon them, but I won't take responsibility after that. Besides, there's the other one to think about too," Joe finished off-handedly.

"The other one?" Brian asked.

Joe smiled and laughed. "Yeah, you know, the other one."

"The other one as in," Brian prompted and then gave up, "I'm lost Joe. Please just explain it to me and leave out fucking dogs, pie and movie quotes!"

"Look," Joe started and stopped as the door opened and a young woman walked in. "Well hello," Joe said as he straightened out his shirt. "Can I help you?" Joe asked, leering at the woman.

"I was told you can fix any shoe," the woman said, holding out a shoe box.

"Yeah, but I'm with someone right now. Can you come back in like fifteen minutes?" Joe said suggestively.

"Oh yeah, sure," she said shyly as she looked at Brian and smiled.

"Great and maybe when you come back and we're all alone, you could show me if your other lips are as pink as that shirt you're wearing," Joe said licking his chops.

Brian groaned.

"Why...I...oh my! You're a pig," the girl yelled and stormed out of the store.

"She so wants me," Joe said.

"It's a wonder how you never get laid," Brian droned.

"You think?" Joe asked innocently. "So, about the other one," Joe said as he lifted his eyebrow. "I can see how you got here...the doorway."

"Nina said something about a doorway. I don't remember. though..."

"It was the nightclub, after you fucked that piece of slime, who you shouldn't have gone with by the way. Really Mr. Kinney, you should be more careful who you fuck," Joe started and then took one look at Brian's face and continued. "There was a mirror, right?"

"Yeah, but it seems so dreamlike," Brian said, trying to remember the strange feeling he got from the mirror.

"Yeah, well, you were pretty fucked up at the time. The mirror wasn't a mirror, it was a doorway and you stepped through," Joe finished.

"And the other that you were talking about?" Brian prompted, suddenly getting a sinking feeling.

"You can't just step through unless the other person steps through too," Joe said.

Brian started recalling his dream.

It wasn't a mirror, but a doorway. Which meant that he wasn't looking at his reflection but at...

Himself.

In order for one to go through, the other has to go through too.

The words had finally sunk in.

"You can't have two of you in the same world. Chaos would reign, blood would pour down from the skies," Joe droned.

"Really?" Brian asked worriedly.

Joe smiled, "naw, I'm fucking with you. But you can't upset the balance too much so the fact that you both went through at the same time just meant that it took longer for them to catch up with you. Had you been the only one to go through, wham! Instant death. The balance would have been too off."

"So the other one, right now, the other me, is where I would normally be," Brian said.

"Ding! Ding! Ding! Nothing slips past you Einstein," Joe said, his hands on his hips.

"He's there."

"Yep," Joe said.

"I'm here and he's there," Brian said again, starting to feel slightly sick.

"We've established that already. Weren't you listening?" Joe asked.

Brian stopped to look at Joe. He was trying to take in what he just learned; something he hadn't stopped to think about since he heard about parallel worlds existing.

About the fact that there were two of everyone.

And then everything really started to click into place.

The other Brian, someone just like him, the same wants and desires.

Was there, in the other world.

With his Justin.

His beautiful, strong, devoted, adoring, 'I'll do anything you ask, Brian' Justin.

Oh Fuck.

Chapter 22

"I need to get back and now," Brian said, looking directly at Joe.

The thoughts and images running through Brian's head at the moment were too much to bear. Another man, no, not another man, but him, was there with Justin. He always thought that Justin might be happier with someone else, and it seemed he was with someone else now.

But he hadn't meant trading himself for...

Himself.

What were they doing at the moment? Had the Brian of the other world taken one look at Justin, fucked him and then threw him out of the loft? Had he taken him and then taken him again and decided this was a cozy little set up?

"Yeah, I fucking hear you on that one, loud and clear," Joe said, interrupting Brian from his thoughts. "Especially knowing what I know," Joe finished by crossing his arms over his chest and lifting his eyebrows suggestively.

"What do you know?" Brian asked, focusing all his attention on the little man in front of him.

"Word has it, he doesn't want to cross back. I mean it could be nerves," Joe shrugged, "It's not going to be an easy cross over, ya know?" Joe scoffed, "And then there's the fact that he just doesn't fucking want to really go."

"What else do you know Joe?" Brian asked, his voice indicating he didn't want to hear anymore bullshit.

"Word has it your little blond boy toy doesn't know who he is either," Joe said, wincing as he said it.

Brian stopped to gather all the information he now knew and he was pretty sure that Joe wasn't just goading him.

His mental checklist started to click off in his head.

Someone just like him.

Only before Justin had come along.

Someone with the same opportunistic qualities and wants and needs.

Justin completely in the dark and wanting only to please Brian.

And now the new wrinkle, the other one doesn't want to come back.

Well fuck, Brian thought, why would he?

But Justin's not dumb. He would know the difference, wouldn't he?

Sure he would, especially since Brian had been acting like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde for the past few months. Oh yeah.

Brian grabbed Joe by his shirt lapels again.

"You have to send me back. Now!" Brian growled. "I don't give a rat's ass about the right time and all that shit."

"Whoa! Whoa, Tarzan! Down boy. I said I'd get you home," Joe reasoned, trying to pry Brian's arms away from him. "Seriously though, it's not the right time. I can't just send you back now."

"I said I don't fucking care," Brian growled again, not letting go of Joe.

"Look, put me down and we'll fucking discuss this like two rational people. Come on," Joe laughed, "We had a rapport thing going here, hey...amigo?" Brian put Joe down. "I can't just fucking send you back. It would be instant death. It has to be at the exact same time that he's ready to come back and we summon them at the same time. Then you can do the cross over. Actually, one of the guardians would take you back." Joe looked around nervously. "And like I said before, I won't be fucking held responsible for what'll happen at that time. But if I summon them now, knowing what I know? Well, I'm just not fucking doing it."

"Then fine, make him ready," Brian said, as if it made all the sense in the world. "You've got special powers or something. Make him do it!"

"So you want me," Joe said as he pointed to himself incredulously, "To make the other one, in the other world, just cross over, willingly."

"Yeah," Brian shrugged. He was hoping maybe goading the strange little man would make him do something.

"Sure why not," Joe said as he threw his hands up in defeat. Joe put his fingers to his temple and started concentrating, his brows furrowed, his eyes shut tight. He then started murmuring words Brian had never heard before.

Brian looked at the little man and sighed. "You're fucking with me right now, aren't you?"

"I like to think of it as humoring you and yeah, I am. I can't make him do anything," Joe said as he shook his head. "Just like I can't make you do anything. You have to be ready, which I'm still not sure of and he has to be ready and we then can do it at the same time. I can tell you when these things have been accomplished, but I can't make anybody do them. Free will and all that bullshit. Hey if I could, I'd have Angelina fucking Jolie sitting on my fucking face, ya know?"

"Who are you, really?" Brian asked, peering more closely at the man.

Joe chuckled and wiped his forehead. "I'm your only fucking hope Kinney. That's what I am. Feel better now?"

"I need to get back. I need to know when it'll be time...the right time. What?" Brian said in exasperation. "Does Mercury have to be in retrograde or some such shit?"

"Nothing as simple as spiritual mumbo jumbo, believe me," Joe said. "That would be too easy. I don't think you know what you're up against. These guardians, they feed off fear. They feed off man's inability to confront that fear."

Brian's head shot up. The story Father Tom had related to him about the girl in Central America suddenly came forefront in his mind. The girl who had mumbled about the walls feeding off her. Her living in constant fear of her stepfather. It didn't take a rocket scientist to piece these facts together.

"All kidding aside, they're not loving creatures Kinney. They guard the doorways, but some of them have their fun while they're at it and feed off what they can," Joe shrugged. "And some of them don't. And then some of them just don't give a shit one way or the fucking other. They'll take what comes along. They're opportunists. But that's not something you would know anything about, would you Kinney?" Joe smirked.

"I used to," Brian said sadly. "That's why I need to get back."

"Oh yeah," Joe mocked. "To save the virtue of your little blond boy ass. How fucking noble."

"His name is Justin!" Brian yelled.

"Oh look, you can fucking remember it. You didn't that morning, now did you Kinney?" Joe shot back.

Brian stopped to look at Joe.

"But you did remember," Joe continued, not at all phased by the incredulous look Brian was giving him. "Didn't you? You just made him think you forgot."

Brian looked away.

"Oh this is priceless," Joe laughed. "You want to confront the guardians and you can't even confront the truth about yourself and what Sunshine means to you." Brian turned to face Joe at the mocking tone he took when he used the moniker. "What are you afraid of? I know all your shit and so do you," Joe said as he pointed directly at Brian. "Why go back? Why risk your life, your sanity, for him. You got it made here. No Justin. You'd just be going back to the old ball and chain right?"

"I...I don't think of him like that," Brian said.

"What, you love him? You would cross over into the other world for him? You would do that? Why, so you could go back and play more fucking mind games Kinney? Make his life even more miserable. Show him how he'll never be in control. How he doesn't really mean much? Always make him doubt what he means to you?" Joe shot off in rapid fire, getting into Brian's face.

Brian looked backed at Joe. "You seem to have become more eloquent and coherent Joe," Brian shot back.

"Yeah, well I don't want to play any more games with you. And neither does Justin," Joe pointed out.

"Stop! Please," Brian pleaded.

"No! You wanted this. I'm nothing compared to them. What do you want Kinney?" Joe said, getting farther into Brian's space. "No more bullshit. What do you want? I'm not helping you for shit unless you tell me."

"I want to go back," Brian said.

"Why?"

"Because, I need to be with Justin," Brian said.

"Why? To keep the other one away from him? Is that it? Some other dog pissing on your tree? That all this is?"

"Yes...no...that and," Brian started.

"Yeah, I'm waiting," Joe said, not giving an inch.

"I want him. I want to be with him."

"You care for him?" Joe asked as he lifted his eyebrow.

"Yes."

"Care is such a pathetic word. People care for other people all the time."

Brian looked at Joe a long time.

"You still can't say it. You still have yourself convinced that love is not something you can ever admit, something that the great Brian Kinney would never fall prey to. What the fuck am I doing?" Joe scoffed while shaking his head and furrowing his eyebrows. "Talking about love with you. I just hate the fact that you can't even admit a tiny little thing like that."

"It's not a fucking little thing! It means something to me," Brian yelled. He couldn't hide it anymore. He tried hiding it from Justin and it just pushed him farther away. He tried to hide it from Debbie, Michael and the gang and they just looked at him as if he were full of shit. He tried to hide it from himself but it just made him do stupid shit that drove Justin even further away.

And if he didn't admit it now, to the only person in the whole world who he probably couldn't hide it from anyway, and the only person in the whole world (well at least, this one) who could send him back, he would probably be stuck here. Brian sighed in defeat. "I love him, okay? The word seems so trite for what I feel. I just want him to be happy," Brian said while shaking his head. "He'll never be happy with me. I'm damaged goods and I don't think I could ever give back as much as I think he wants."

"Bullshit! And there's an old saying, 'you can't bullshit a bullshitter.'"

"I'm getting just this side of tired of all the old sayings," Brian droned.

"You know what would make him happy. The truth for starters. And he doesn't want that much. You only think he does. You're the one with all the romantic ideals Kinney," Joe said as he pointed toward Brian.

"That's...What?!" Brian laughed.

"It's true," Joe said. "You think the minute you say anything, you have to be a different person. He doesn't want that," Joe finished off while crossing his arms over his chest. "I've had enough of this talking love bullshit. You're cramping my style here. Any minute now we'll join hands singing 'Kumbaya' while daisies spring out of my fucking ass. Now, the truth. What would make you happy?"

"I want him for myself," Brian started. "I don't want to see him with someone else."

"Better," Joe said, smirking. "Would you cross over? Risk everything? I'm not shitting you here. You cross over and you have any reservations, they'll smell it on you. They'll feed off it. They'll have a fucking field day with your fucking carcass. Would you risk it? For him?"

Brian looked at Joe.

There was only one answer rolling around in his head. He could stay here, live this life, get Lindsay and Mel back together, solve everyone's problems, hire hustlers who looked like Justin, three to four times a week, knowing Justin was okay in the other world, but there would still be an empty place in the loft.

And in his heart.

And the sad truth of it was, if there was a Justin here, it still wouldn't be his Justin.

The one who he had met under a street lamp over a year ago.

The one who called him on his shit.

The one who was willing to accept Brian just as he was, even if it meant having to give in to certain things.

So would he risk it all for Justin?

As Joe would say, 'in a fucking heartbeat.'

"Yes, I would. Because if I stay here, I'm dead anyway," Brian said, straightening his shoulders and standing taller. "I'd risk it all."

Joe looked at Brian and smiled. "I believe you would." Joe pointed at Brian, "You're ready."

Brian stopped and looked back at Joe. "Then let's do it," Brian said excitedly.

Joe laughed. "Did you ever think you'd say anything like that to a regular schmoe like me? I told you already, I can't until he's ready."

"And when will he...?"

"I don't know, that's up to the people on the other side. That's all I can tell you Kinney," Joe finished with a sigh. "I'm...I'm sorry."

"That's not acceptable," Brian said.

"Well it's going to have to be. This isn't one of your underlings of yours where you can say shit like that and snap your fingers and things get done. I'm not Cynthia. I can't make shit happen because you demand it. You have to wait."

Brian slumped against the counter, no longer surprised at anything Joe knew about him. "I can't sit still. I can't just wait. I want..."

"You have to go anyway. When I call you, when it's time, you have to bring a friend," Joe said matter-of-factly.

"Why?" Brian scoffed. "Human sacrifice? If that's the case, I think Ted might have a clear schedule..."

"In case everything goes to shit, and someone has to deal with the," Joe winced, "You know...the remains."

Brian shuddered and nodded his head in understanding.

To say it was a bit of a reality adjustment to think about having to go from partner of a prestigious advertising company with a glamorous loft and a hefty bank account, who had a beautiful, smart and talented lover waiting for him at said loft, to possibly nothing more than 'remains,' was an understatement.

This was indeed the weirdest couple of days of his life.

"So you'll call...as soon as it's time," Brian asked Joe again.

"No. I thought, as soon as I found out, I'd take a trip to the park, maybe the zoo, ya know?" Joe shot back, while scratching his head.

"You're...fucking with me again," Brian said, not quite sure.

Joe laughed. "Nothing slips past you, huh?" Joe watched as Brian made to leave. "Hey Kinney!"

Brian stopped to look back.

"It's okay, ya know," Joe shrugged.

"What's okay?" Brian asked, brows knit together.

"To feel relieved," Joe said.

"I don't know..."

"Are we gonna play fucking twenty questions again? I thought we got past that. You're relieved...that it's not your Justin that's six feet under right now."

"I shouldn't feel that way," Brian said sadly. "Maybe I am as callous as everyone thinks."

"Fuck that shit. Deep down, whenever they see something on the news, when something happens to someone else, when they see an accident along the side of the road, people are always, 'isn't that tragic.' But deep down, they're all the same. 'Thank God that wasn't me or someone I loved and cared about,' you know?"

"But still, it's a world without Justin. He's still dead here," Brian said.

"Look, I'm not the kind of guy who goes in for that 'do you see the glass as half full or half empty shit,' okay? I think...fuck it!" Joe said while waving his arms about wildly. "I get the whole fucking pitcher of beer and before I'm even done with it, I'm three sheets to the wind. But look..."

Brian looked at Joe, "You're going to tell me to look at this in a good light?" Brian scoffed.

"What if I were to tell you that maybe, just maybe, Justin was supposed to go to his prom in both worlds, and that he was supposed to get hit by Hobbs in both worlds, and that he was supposed to die in that parking garage in both worlds but maybe, just maybe," Joe said looking directly at Brian, "Because something that was never meant to happen, that thing being that your phone was off in your world, happened, so bingo bango boom, you meet Justin and you go to his prom with him, and hey! Look, he's still alive in one of the worlds."

Brian stopped to look at Joe again, "You're saying that..."

"Yeah, I'm saying that. I'm saying that maybe, just maybe Justin Taylor wasn't meant to fucking outlive his prom, and maybe there aren't any 'maybes' here. I'm just saying that," Joe sighed, "Isn't it kinda nice that he's at least alive in one of the worlds?"

Brian had to admit, it was. And he wanted to be in the world with Justin in it.

"You'll call me?" Brian asked and then almost kicked himself.

"No matter what, I'll call. We just gotta wait."

"Who the fuck are you?" Brian asked once more.

Joe continued to look at Brian and laughed. "You just wouldn't fucking believe me if I told you. Look, sometimes, shit happens, someone fucks up, and someone has to clean up after them. I'm doing a favor for an old friend. I'll call you. Go," Joe said as he indicated the door. "You're bad for business."

Brian walked out of the shop, taking one last look back at Joe, who was still looking out after him, almost daring him to continue on with his life until it was time.

Brian walked away from the shop and to his Jeep.

Which wasn't there.

"Fuck!" Brian yelled. "Mother-fucking..."

Maybe he'd been hanging out too long with Joe.

And maybe one of the guardians took it for a joy ride to further fuck with him.

"Excuse me," an old lady said who was standing at the bus stop.

"Yeah," Brian said curtly. "Sorry. Yes?"

"Were you driving that black Jeep?" the woman asked.

"Yeah," Brian said with trepidation.

"The nice policeman came by and had it towed since it was in the red zone," she said.

Of course he did.

Because that's what nice policemen do.

Brian started to walk in the direction of Liberty Avenue. It wasn't far from the shoe store. If he kept walking, he could get to Ted and maybe borrow his car. Or call the impound yard and get his Jeep out.

When he rounded the corner, he knew the long, dark alleyway he came to was a short cut into the Gay district.

As he walked down the alleyway, he heard something behind him and turned around quickly, expecting it to be a tree where it shouldn't have been or the wall, to take him away.

It was just Kip.

"What? You following me now Thomas? Do you know how pathetic that is?" Brian asked in exasperation, his hands thrown up at his sides.

"You owe me Kinney! Gardner won't take me back. Said I never did shit for Marty before," Kip yelled, advancing on Brian.

"Well, I underestimated good ole Vance. He did do his homework. Look, I...I can't deal with this shit right now. I'm dealing with much, much bigger things than your prospective job offers," Brian said and turned to walk away.

Kip advanced on Brian further and spun him around.

"Fuck you Kinney. You're going to help me!"

"Or what? Huh? You gonna tell everyone what terrible things I did to you a year ago?" Brian yelled in Kip's face. "What, and now you decided to come forward when hey...look, you just got fired? That is so laughable. It'll just be sour grapes. Now fucking let go of me," Brian growled and went to get out of Kip's hold.

Kip made to hit Brian but Brian side stepped the shorter man and then grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. Brian looked at Thomas, drew his fist back and hit him square in the jaw.

"That's for fucking with me in this world Kip," Brian said, his eyes wild and manic. "Sure, it may not have been me, but it's the fucking principle of the thing. And you know the best part Kip? Are you listening...Kip?" Brian said while shaking Kip. "When I get back to where I belong, I'm gonna fucking enjoy looking up your sorry ass and doing this all the fuck over again for daring to touch Justin because I know you must have."

Yep, Joe was definitely rubbing off on him.

A stunned Kip kept shaking his head back and forth. "What the fuck are you on?! What do you mean...not you?! Who the fuck is Justin?"

"Good answer," Brian said as he came in very close to Kip, their noses almost touching, his breath hot and heavy on Kip's face. "What are you afraid of Kip? You afraid you can't make it in the big bad advertising world?" Brian whispered.

"Actually, I'm kinda afraid of you right know. You don't look so well," Kip said nervously.

"You should be more afraid of me now. Grow some fucking balls," Brian said and released Kip harshly and turned away, Kip falling to the ground. Brian walked further down the alley. Just then, the wall on one side started to display a ripple effect.

"Now you wanna make sure they don't get to you first before you cross over all official like."

Those had been the words Joe had said.

"Oh fuck!" Brian yelled. "Run Kip. Get the fuck out of the alley! Now!" Brian yelled back as he ran down the alley, toward the light that indicated the busy street.

Kip continued to nurse his broken cheek. "You're insane Kinney...you know that?" Kip yelled after the running man.

As Kip was getting up, he noticed the slight movement in the wall. "What the fuck?" he said in confusion.

He heard a squelching sound behind him and as he turned around, he saw the thing that had come out of the wall.

He didn't have time to scream before the thing took him in its cold embrace.

And at the comic book store in the other world...

"Justin!" Michael yelled. "How long..."

"Long enough," Justin droned. Justin looked directly at Brian with narrowed eyes. "Now who the fuck are you and where's Brian?"

Brian took in the form of the boy standing in front of him, his entire body vibrating in anger. Brian had only two words running through his head.

Oh Fuck.

"Justin," Michael started.

"Don't Michael! Don't," Justin said as he pointed his finger at Michael. He turned to Brian. "Did you hear what I just asked you?" Justin asked again, his voice very steady and brooking no argument.

"Yes, Justin. Look, I," Brian started, "If you heard the conversation, than you know what and who I am."

"I want to hear you say it," Justin said, his arms folded across his chest.

"And you know where Brian, your Brian is," Brian continued.

And still, Justin stared Brian down.

Brian sighed and rolled his eyes. "I'm the Brian from the," Brian winced, "Other world and your Brian is there. Happy?" Brian asked as he threw his hands up in the air.

"There," Justin said calmly and smiled, "Was that so hard?"

"No, no it wasn't," Brian smiled. So the kid wouldn't go ballistic. Maybe everything would be okay. He took in Justin's beatific smile.

"Um...Brian," Michael said, and what exactly was he supposed to say.

It was the calm before the storm.

"Was it that fucking hard to say it the first time you saw me? Huh?!" Justin screamed. "Did you think it was so fucking funny to pull one over on me, the stupid, gullible kid, is that it?! Answer me! Answer me!"

Justin stood vibrating, his rage a tangible object hanging in the shop's atmosphere.

Michael knew that if Justin had been a weather front, his shop would have been leveled and FEMA would have been called in.

"I...I didn't know when I first...and then there was Mysterious Marilyn...and Michael said we shouldn't," Brian babbled.

"Shut up!" Justin said.

"You wanted an answer," Brian winced.

"Shut up, Brian," Michael whispered. Justin turned his attention on Michael and narrowed his eyes.

"And you! You knew all this time?!" Justin screamed as he turned his rage on Michael.

"I...yeah...but I did it...cause I knew...and then...Bob was all," Michael stammered.

"Oh for the love of...," Justin exploded, "I know you guys can cover up way better than that!"

Michael and Brian stood staring at Justin.

"Fine! Whatever Michael. I get you. You're just like all the others." Justin then lowered his voice a few octaves. "'Let's not tell Justin,' or 'let's tip toe around poor little Justin because you know, after all he's been through, he can't handle shit anymore.' You all think I'm so fucking weak."

"No Justin, that's not it at all, we could never think that...none of us would ever think that," Michael laughed nervously. "Oh God, Justin, you're the last person we would ever think that of. We just thought, well I did, that everything you'd been through..."

Justin threw his hands up in the air again and glared back at Michael.

"Poor choice of words, okay?" Michael said.

"And you," Justin said as he turned back to Brian, who was backing up against the counter while Justin advanced on him. "So you thought nothing of fucking me, knowing all that time that you weren't the Brian I thought you were."

"I needed to keep up appearances, you would have expected that of me," Brian shrugged.

"That is so laughable. I mean fuck! Try again please and cut the bullshit!" Justin yelled at Brian.

"I wanted it, okay?" Brian said, looking directly at Justin. "But, I felt really bad about it."

"Oh my God. You felt bad about it," Justin stated incredulously. "Yeah, I could tell by the way you were in the shower in the morning and when you...you. Oh God," Justin said as he stepped back from Brian. "You tried to fuck me raw."

Brian lifted his hand to make his point clear, "But we're both negative."

"No, my Brian was negative. Oh God," Justin said, clutching at his stomach.

"I got my test results right before I left for Chicago. Please Justin...you know how careful your Brian is...I'm not any different, really," Brian reasoned.

"So you're negative," Justin prompted.

"Yes, I'm not that stupid. I've done stupid things..."

"You two aren't really that different after all," Justin said mockingly.

"I'm sorry for that Justin, really, I just saw that we were both negative and...I'm sorry," Brian sighed.

"Stop saying that!" Justin yelled. "You're sorry. He's sorry!" Justin yelled pointing to Michael. "Why?" Justin yelled once more as he threw his hands in the air in defeat. "Why try to fool me? You thought I wouldn't notice something wrong? I live with Brian! I sleep with Brian. I fuck Brian! Or I should say, he fucks me." Justin looked down at the ground. "That's it, isn't it Michael," Justin said as he turned to the man, "I am just Brian's fuck buddy, the annoying kid who over-stayed his welcome. I wouldn't notice anything. You could replace my Brian with this one," Justin said as he turned to Brian, "And it wouldn't matter, right? Right?" Justin yelled.

"No Justin, he wasn't supposed to do anything," Michael said as he was trying to reason with Justin while turning to glare at Brian.

"That was my fault," Brian said. "I took advantage..."

"Then you're not like Brian!" Justin said. "Brian's not like that!"

Michael sighed, "Justin, the Brian we know now, might not, but the Brian before you two met, before you two became more involved, would have."

"Bullshit! My first time, our first night, he was so good to me! He...I couldn't have asked for a better first time," Justin said, remembering that first night and how he had fallen in love with Brian after that. Justin rubbed furiously at his eyes. He would not cry now.

"Of course it was great!" Michael said incredulously. "But he knew he shouldn't have done it. He felt bad about what he had done. How he had mislead you. Do you know how shitty he felt after that Goodfuck guy left?"

"So, he is sorry he met me," Justin said, trying to hide the hurt in his eyes.

Brian chuckled, "I'm sure he's not sorry he met you."

"Justin! He'll never be sorry he met you!" Michael said as he ran up to the younger man. "He just felt bad for how it happened. But after everything, he's not sorry about it. And believe me when I say, and I can admit this now, none of us are sorry he met you."

"What do you mean by that?" Justin asked.

"You just said that the Brian you know wouldn't have done the things that this Brian did. That's because Brian has changed. You did that," Michael said.

"Yeah, I changed him," Justin said in defeat. "I didn't mean to. That's probably why he's better off where he is now."

"What?!" Michael and Brian screeched at the same time.

"What the fuck do you mean by that?" Michael asked, more calmly.

"I've changed him. I've turned him into something he always hated," Justin said, looking at Michael, tears starting to form in his eyes.

"No! He's grown up, that's all! I've grown up! He's a better person since you've come along, don't you get that?" Michael asked. He couldn't believe all this time Justin had felt this way. "And what do you mean he's better off where he is?! He's probably going fucking nuts not knowing where you are!"

"But," Justin started.

"Justin," Brian said as he stepped forward. "There are so many things that are different here than from where I'm from. That's because of you," Brian said as he looked directly at Justin. "Me and your Brian, we're the same person, only he's different now, because he met you. See? He's someone who's put other people before his own gain. He's the person," Brian sighed, "He's the person I should be."

"You are right. You're not him. He wouldn't ever admit to something like that," Justin said as he shook his head.

"And neither would I, but I think circumstances have changed and you deserve to know the truth," Brian said intently. "I owe you that." Thoughts of turning lesbian seemed laughable right now. He couldn't hide the truth any longer.

Justin regarded the man before him. Was that true? Is this the person Brian was before and was his Brian happy with who he was now?

And was Brian really going crazy in the other world, because he wasn't there?

"Justin," Michael said as he stepped forward and took hold of Justin, "Brian is not happy in the other world. If anything, I'd say he's anything but."

"And you know this because of some cosmic type of telepathy?" Justin shot back incredulously.

"No," Michael laughed, "I know because I know Brian. He doesn't know where he is and you're not there and...oh shit!" Michael took a step back and swallowed. "How much did you hear? Really?"

Brian looked at Justin warily.

"Justin?" Michael said again.

"I heard enough," Justin shrugged as he toed the ground.

"Justin," Michael said as he went to hug the boy.

"Don't," Justin said as he stepped back. "Don't okay? How did it happen?" Justin addressed his question at Brian.

"At your prom," Brian said.

"No one was there to stop it, right?" Justin asked.

"Yeah," Brian swallowed.

"Because you weren't there," Justin said as he looked at Brian.

"No," Brian said as he looked at the ground, not being able to confront the boy in front of him.

"That's why you didn't know me. Because we never met...or," Justin said as he thought of something else, "Maybe you did fuck me over there and just forgot me."

"I've never seen you before, really. I wouldn't have forgotten you," Brian smiled. "My phone was on the night Gus was born, I never made it to Babylon so I never met you."

A phone.

Because a phone was on instead of off, he didn't exist in the other world.

Justin shivered as he felt someone had just walked over his grave. And maybe someone had.

Maybe it was Brian.

He never told anyone, but when he and Daphne had been twelve, they had visited the coast of Jersey with her parents that summer. One of those palm readers had been there and Daphne had convinced him they should get their fortunes read. The woman had taken Daphne's hand and had gushed about her prosperous career, her handsome husband and her perfect children.

She had taken one look at Justin's hand, dropped it and said she couldn't read it; that it wasn't readable. She then shoed them out of the tent and told them the reading was free.

They had left the tent, Daphne looking back with furrowed brows, "Well that was weird."

"What? The part about you marrying someone handsome or your perfect children?" Justin laughed.

Daphne hit Justin playfully about the shoulder. "Yeah, I know. She probably couldn't think up any interesting bullshit to tell you."

"Shit Daphne!" Justin said as he looked down at his hips where his sweatshirt had been tied. "I forgot my hoodie back at the tent. Go on and get a cone, I'll be right there."

Daphne headed off in the direction of the ice cream stand and Justin made his way back to the tent.

As he entered, he noticed the woman cleaning up. She stopped immediately when she took notice of Justin. "What do you want?" the woman said testily. "I'm done for the day."

"What...what did you see? About my future?" Justin asked timidly.

"Nothing. I saw nothing," the woman shot back.

"Well, even if it's nothing to you, it might be something to me," Justin shrugged.

The woman looked directly at Justin and sighed. "I saw nothing. You have no future. If events do not change, I see no future for you. Please leave," the woman said while indicating the door. "I only like telling good fortunes."

Justin walked out of the tent, pulled his hoodie over his head, the one he had left there on purpose and made his way to Daphne, pretending as if nothing had transpired between him and the woman.

Although he didn't believe in such things, the words still stuck in his mind for awhile, and as time wore on, they became less and less important, but they were still there, somewhere in the back of his mind, reminding him of his mortality. He had almost forgotten them after he had met Brian, because the older man had given him a reason to still believe in a future.

"Justin?" Michael asked, breaking Justin out of his recollection.

"Is it...is it wrong for me to feel relieved?" Justin asked, pleading with the men before him to tell him it was okay. "Does that make me a bad person?"

"No Justin, no," Michael said.

Brian walked up to Justin. "It's okay."

Justin took a deep breath in and let it out. He then furrowed his brows when he suddenly remembered something. The thought of him not existing in another world could wait when he thought of something more important. "So...Brian doesn't know where he is?"

"That was the last thing we heard from Jo," Michael said.

"And Jo would be?" Justin prompted.

"The person who'll summon the guardians...," Brian started.

"The guardians?" Justin asked.

Brian sighed. "She'll summon the guardians, who by the way, are some of the most unpleasant creatures you'll ever meet, and then we can switch...cross over...whatever," Brian said.

Michael and Brian mentally counted the seconds before the questions would start coming in rapid fire from the teenager.

"So how bad are these guardians? Why aren't we summoning them now? How come Brian doesn't know?" Justin shot off excitedly. "Why are we just standing around? Let's go get this 'Jo.'"

"Justin, calm down. The guardians are the creatures that guard the doorways, between the two worlds," Michael said.

"Well, why weren't they guarding it when they went through?" Justin yelled.

"Don't know," Brian said. "We can't summon them until it's time and we don't know when the right time'll be," Brian finished.

"So when it's the right time, we can get our Brian back," Justin said, a question more than a statement.

"Yes," Michael said, "But there's going to be risk."

"What kind of risk?" Justin asked, getting scared all over again.

"Death? Insanity?" Brian winced. "You know, standard type risks," Brian mocked.

"Oh Fuck!" Justin yelled. "And Brian doesn't know?"

"As of the last time we talked to Jo, he didn't know. That was yesterday," Michael said, feeling inadequate in his knowledge.

"So we go talk to Jo again," Justin said defiantly. "This time we get more answers...find out when and how we can make it the right time."

"It doesn't work that way," Michael said. "You can't just fix this Justin."

"You said the same fucking lame ass shit when Brian was faced with that sexual harassment suit by Kip! And I did something then!" Justin yelled.

"Yeah, well, what are you going to do? Huh? Justin? Offer to sleep with one of the guardians?" Michael yelled back. "It won't work that way."

"There has to be something...and Brian, shit!" Justin exclaimed as he thought about Brian, in a world he had no idea what was going on in. Not only was he going crazy, but he probably thought he was crazy.

"Don't worry," Brian said as he advanced on Justin and took the younger man in his arms, "You'll be okay. Brian'll be okay. In the meantime, I'll take care of you, okay?"

Justin looked up at the man.

He looked like Brian.

He was Brian.

But he wasn't his Brian.

And if what Michael said was true and what Brian, this Brian, was confirming was the truth, then his Brian was sad, scared and alone.

Justin loved Brian. He loved him with his entire being. He loved him too much to stand by and accept a cheap imitation, no matter how nice the man in front of him seemed to be, even if he was a bit misguided.

Justin stepped out of Brian's arms and looked directly at both men.

"We need to do something."

Brian took in the man before him. He now knew his place in Justin's life.

And that there was none.

It was at that very moment his cell phone rang.

Because it was on of course.

"Yeah?" Brian said angrily into the phone.

"Mr. Kinney?" the woman asked.

Brian knew, though, the woman knew good and God-damned well who it was on the phone.

"Hello Jo," Brian said.

Michael and Justin's heads shot up at the greeting.

Brian listened intently to what Jo had to say.

"Okay, thank you Jo," Brian said and clicked the phone shut.

Michael and Justin stood staring at Brian, waiting for him to clue them into what he just learned.

"It's time," Brian said.

Chapter 23

As soon as the three men received the call from Jo, they climbed into the Jeep and sped over to the shoe repair shop, Brian parking the Jeep in the red zone in front.

"We're here!" Brian announced.

"So I see. Nice to see you again Mr. Kinney, Mr. Novotny and," Jo said with a smile as she faced Justin, "Mr. Taylor."

"Um...we've never met," Justin said surprised.

"No, we haven't. But I do know who you are," she said as she pointed her finger at him, "And I would just like to add that's it nice to see that circumstances have changed." She finished by winking at Justin.

Justin regarded the woman and smiled. "Yes, it is, isn't it?" It was obvious to Justin that this woman was not a charlatan or a fake. She knew things. Hell, she probably knew everything. "You're going to switch both Brians, today?"

"Yes, well, me and my counterpart over there. We can communicate with each other. That's how I knew it was time," Jo said as she turned on Brian. "That...and other things."

"What exactly made it the time?" Michael asked.

"Lots of things Mr. Novotny." Jo walked up to Brian and peered closely at the man. "He's ready," she said as she pointed to Brian, "Even though he thinks he isn't." She then turned to face Michael and Justin, "Your Brian is ready. Very ready, indeed."

Justin and Michael stepped forward. "He knows now," Justin asked excitedly, "Where he is?"

"Not only does he know where he is," Jo said and lifted one eyebrow, "But he was most insistent about crossing back over. Most insistent," Jo laughed and walked behind the counter. "You know, he threatened my counterpart with bodily harm," Jo said and chuckled again.

All three men looked at the small woman incredulously.

"That doesn't sound like me," Brian said with furrowed brows. "I'm not into threatening little women, half my size," he said sarcastically.

"Oh and you think you have all the answers," Jo scoffed.

"See?!" Michael said as he whacked Justin upside the head.

"Owww," Justin exclaimed as he rubbed the side of his head. "Taking lessons from Debbie?"

Justin, for the first time, in as long as he could remember, smiled. His true smile. The one Debbie had nicknamed him for.

Brian wanted to come back.

He was most insistent.

He even threatened the nice little lady.

Which sort of bothered Justin but he didn't really want to think about it.

"So when does this happen?" Justin asked, unable to contain himself.

Jo regarded Brian again, "I don't know, when does this happen Mr. Kinney?"

Brian looked at everyone in the shop. "Justin," Michael said, "It's not that easy. There are risks."

"I know, you said that before, I mean...how bad...are they in actual danger?" Justin asked, almost pleading with Jo to tell him differently.

"If there are any reservations Mr. Taylor, about crossing back, any fear or doubt, the guardians will pick up on it and it will most likely be disastrous," she warned. "This is not an easy thing. We're creating a doorway here, it requires a guardian to be here to take them back."

"Well, where's a doorway?" Justin asked simply.

"It doesn't work that way," she replied.

"But it did for them!" Justin said as he screamed, pointing to Brian. "It's not fair."

Jo smiled, "I agree Mr. Taylor, but you more than anybody should realize how life is not fair."

He did.

"I'm scared," Brian said in a very small voice. Yes, he had admitted an extremely 'pussy' thing. But now was not the time to mince words.

"I should think you would be," Jo said as she turned her full attention on Brian. "Anyone would be. But maybe I haven't made myself clear. It's your ability to confront that fear, to face it which could lead to total success or dismal failure."

Brian swallowed and looked at Justin.

Justin loved Brian, he knew he didn't have a place here with him and besides, you couldn't just swap places. They had a history together that he could never intrude upon.

He had his own set of friends, his own life. This life was not his.

But he was scared.

Really scared.

His father's ghost and the image of his mother kept popping into his head, taunting him with his lack of courage. He could never confront anything and his parents had made sure to convince him of that. That he could never measure up.

Measure up to what, he never did figure out, but it put enough doubt in his head.

"Then I'll go," Justin said.

"What?!" Michael and Brian screeched.

"No Justin, you are not going over there," Michael said emphatically.

"See? It's perfect!" Justin said, trying to justify his crazy plan, "I go over, both Brian's can stay where they are. I'm the only one putting myself at risk."

"No Justin, no! I forbid you to cross over!" Michael stated.

"You forbid me to cross over? You really are taking lessons from Debbie, aren't you?" Justin asked with a raised eyebrow.

Brian watched the whole scene taking place and was just about to say something when Jo interrupted the argument.

"Mr. Taylor," Jo said, "You can not do this. The balance would be off. You're already over there. The guardians would kill you on contact."

"But I'm not over there," Justin said. "I'm dead over there!" Justin said as he indicated the wall. For all he knew, 'over there' could have been anywhere.

"But you are," Jo sighed. "There are the...the remains."

Justin shivered as she said the word. His entire life, well not his, but his counterpart's, reduced down to 'remains.'

It made him appreciate what he had all the more.

But he would still give it all up for Brian.

"And please," Jo said as she lifted one finger threateningly, "Do not suggest what I think you plan to suggest. To switch the Brians would set the balance completely right once again. To switch you, would still throw off the balance."

Yes, Justin realized, this woman did indeed know everything.

Brian regarded the three people arguing in front of him.

The boy, no, not a boy, the man, for that was the only word he could surely call someone who was brave enough to do this, was willing to sacrifice himself.

It almost made him ashamed to be so afraid.

If someone like Justin could do this, could face these things, so could he.

It was time.

It was time he grew up. It was time he stopped running.

It was time to confront not only the guardians, but the voices in his head that told him he couldn't do it.

"I'm ready," Brian said, "Let's do it."

Jo walked up to Brian and peered up at the man. "Ready to risk it? Ready to cross over and risk insanity or death? Are you truly?"

Brian took a deep breath in, looked over at Justin and smiled, "Yeah, I am."

"I do believe you are," Jo said with a smile. She then turned around and addressed the men before her. "Mr. Taylor and Mr. Novotny, over on the other side of the shop. Whatever you do, do not look at the guardians after they come. I repeat...do not look at them," Jo said as she glared at Justin. "They have driven people mad for centuries, with just

one glimpse. When I say so, you must cover yourself...hide...close your eyes. But do not look at them. Mr. Kinney," Jo said as she faced Brian, "When I summon them, you too must not look at them. You will stand here and let them come to you. Do you understand?"

"Come to me?" Brian asked.

"No matter what you feel, no matter what you are thinking, do not project fear. Do not radiate it. They can smell it. Your only hope is that you show that you are willing to confront them. Do you understand? There is no backing down now."

Brian swallowed. He then nodded in understanding.

Jo smiled, "Good luck Mr. Kinney."

Michael and Justin ran up to Brian. "Good luck Brian," Michael whispered as he hugged the man to him. No matter what, this was still Brian.

"You're the best friend I was always hoping for," Brian whispered back. And he was. No longer the lackey, the best friend who followed him around blindly, who put his entire life on hold for the sake of his whims.

They disengaged and Brian was left looking at Justin. Justin smiled and launched himself at Brian.

Brian held on tight and then disentangled himself from Justin's arms. "I guess this is the last time I'll be seeing you," Brian smiled.

"You could always see me in your dreams?" Justin said and laughed, covering his face with one hand. "Sorry, that was bad." Justin had tried to add levity to the situation. No matter what had transpired between the two men, he was still Brian, maybe not his Brian, but Brian, and he knew of the wonderful things the man before him was capable of.

Brian laughed, "Sounds like something I would say." He stopped laughing then, "Unless I already did?" He smiled again and lifted Justin's face by placing a finger under Justin's chin. He then placed a chaste kiss on Justin's forehead, looking down into the blue eyes he would never see again.

It didn't matter what these guardians looked like, because a glimpse at them would never be as scary as the glimpse he was given into a life he could have had with Justin and all that brought with it, and how it was taken away.

Michael and Justin moved away from Brian as he faced the wall.

"Are you going to summon them," Michael asked and swallowed, "Now?"

"Yes, it is time, but we must wait. I must do it at the exact same time as my counterpart. I'll know," Jo assured them with a wave of her arm before the two men could further protest. "I'll know."

And in the other place, roughly some time before...

"Oh fuck!" Brian yelled. "Run Kip. Get the fuck out of the alley! Now!" Brian yelled back as he ran down the alley, toward the light that indicated the busy street.

Kip continued to nurse his broken cheek. "You're insane Kinney...you know that?" Kip yelled after the running man.

As Kip was getting up, he noticed the slight movement in the wall. "What the fuck?" he said in confusion.

He heard a squelching sound behind him and as he turned around, he saw the thing that had come out of the wall.

He didn't have time to scream before the thing took him in its cold embrace.

Brian had exited the alleyway at a frantic pace, looking back only once to see if Kip had made it out. He didn't see hide nor hair of the annoying man.

Maybe he went the other way Brian thought. After all, the guardians were after him, not Kip. He soon found himself on Liberty Avenue before he knew it and he saw the diner straight ahead.

Just then his cell phone rang.

"Hey chucklehead," Joe said into the phone.

"Joe?" Brian asked into the phone.

"It's time, get over here. Bring a friend," Joe said and hung up.

It was time.

He was going home.

He was going to see Justin very, very soon.

It was as if he had those butterflies flying through his middle all over again, like the night he showed up at his lover's prom.

And he didn't care how lesbian that sounded, even to himself.

He needed to find Michael.

Brian rushed head long into the diner. "Debbie," Brian panted, "Michael, where's Michael?" She stood there staring back at Brian, stopped midway through her gum-smacking.

"Bathroom," Debbie said as she pointed toward the back. Brian looked at the three people staring at him. Emmett and Ted were sitting at the booth, stopping their eating progress to take in the man panting before them. Debbie started chewing her gum again.

"You okay baby?" Debbie asked, as she went to run her hand down Brian's cheek.

"Fine, never been better," Brian laughed as he picked up Debbie and swung her around. "I'm going home!" Brian said excitedly. "Isn't that great?"

Ted looked at the man. "Um...yeah...if that means you're going to go home and take a shower and shave and you know, change clothes. Brian?" Ted laughed incredulously, "Are those the clothes you had on two nights ago?"

"What? Oh yeah, they probably are," Brian said distractedly. "What's taking him so fucking long in there!?"

"No offense sweetie," Emmett said, "But you look like shit."

Brian waved Emmett away. "Don't care...there'll be time for showers when I get home."

"Maybe that's why he's so excited about going home?" Ted asked.

"Oh, I always love a good hot shower. Gets me all excited too," Emmett gushed and mock-shivered.

"Where is Michael? I can't go home until he gets here!" Brian made to go to the bathroom when Michael emerged from the back.

Michael took one look at his best friend and ran up to him. "Brian? What the fucking hell happened to you?" he screeched.

"Nothing. Everything! I don't have time for this. You need to come with me. We have to go," Brian said excitedly and stopped when he took in the shocked faces of everyone sitting at the booth. He then lowered his voice and looked directly at Michael. "We have to go do this thing."

"A thing? What kind of thing?" Michael asked.

"A thing," Brian said again and rolled his eyes.

"Is this the thing that'll get you home?" Ted asked.

"Yes!" Brian exclaimed as he pointed to Ted, as if he had just won the grand prize.

"What do you know about this thing, Teddy?" Emmet asked.

"I don't know anything. I'm just going with what I know," Ted shrugged.

"It's a thing only Michael can help me with," Brian said as he took hold of Michael's arm. "Well, bye! Have a nice life!!!" Brian called back.

Michael stopped all forward motion. "Wait Brian. What thing is it we're doing!"

"I don't know if I like this thing," Debbie said as she sat at the booth next to Ted.

"You shouldn't. I may not come back from this thing. Or I may, but not very sane. Okay? It's a dangerous thing! Happy now?" Brian asked in exasperation. "But Michael'll be okay, it's only me that's in mortal peril."

Debbie rolled her eyes. "Smart ass," she said as she got up and slapped him upside the head. Debbie went over to another table to take their order.

"So, let me get this straight, this thing is dangerous and you might not come back from it?" Ted asked.

Brian nodded his head in the affirmative.

"Well, good luck," Ted laughed. "Don't forget to pack an extra pair of underwear."

Brian grabbed a hold of Michael's arm again and dragged him out of the diner.

Michael stopped in his tracks as they exited the diner. "No Brian. You need to tell me what's going on and I don't want any bullshit now. We're alone."

"Look, I'm going home. You need to be there. It's time."

Michael stood staring at Brian.

"What? What the fuck are you talking about? Does this have to do with Justin?" Michael asked seriously.

"Yes, it does. I'm going home, so come on," Brian said as he continued to walk, stepping up the pace. Michael then had to run to catch up with Brian.

"Look Brian, after I talked with you yesterday, I did some research. That Justin kid. He...he died less than a year ago," Michael said as he put his hand on Brian's arm to stop him.

"I know he did...here. But not where I'm from. Walk with me. I don't have time for this because it's time now," Brian finished as he pulled away from Michael and started walking again.

"Brian, you're not making any sense," Michael said, panting to keep up with his best friend.

He came to the alleyway that he had used to take a short cut with earlier. This time, Brian decided to stay away from alleyways. He was too close now; he wouldn't risk it again so he continued down the busy street.

"Brian, you're not thinking of killing yourself or something dumb..."

Brian stopped. "I'm going home. Look Mikey, I just found out, there are two worlds out there. Parallel worlds." Just then Brian stopped as he took in the musician on the corner who was playing his violin.

"Oh hey Ethan!" Brian said and dropped a one hundred bill in Ethan's case.

"Freak," Ethan muttered and then looked down. "Hey! Thanks!" he yelled after the retreating men.

"Brian! You just gave him a hundred. Are you insane?" Michael screeched.

"Yes! No! For the first time in forever, I'm thinking clearly. Okay Mikey? As I was saying," Brian began again.

"Yeah, yeah I heard you," Michel said, "Parallel worlds. Jesus, Brian! You don't really believe this shit, do you?"

"Joe can explain it to you," Brian said off-handedly.

"Who the fuck is Joe?"

"My new best friend," Brian said and laughed.

Michael stopped walking. "What?!"

Brian stopped long enough to placate his friend. "It was a joke. It's a joke," Brian laughed. "He's going to get me home."

They continued walking.

Brian and Michael arrived at the shoe shop, and entered. Joe was standing behind the counter, going over some books.

"Hey Tarzan's back! And look," he said as he indicated Michael, "You brought Cheetah with you."

"Who the fuck are you?" Michael asked the little man snidely.

"Oh the monkey has fucking teeth. I'm Joe."

"Very funny, very funny, it was so funny, I forgot to laugh," Michael said.

"Laugh while you can monkey boy," Joe said in a bad Italian accent, "He's a-going home!"

Michal looked at the man again in confusion.

Joe rolled his eyes. "What movie's that from?"

"Um, Buckaroo Banzai, but," Michael said indignantly and with just as bad an Italian accent said, "The line is 'Laugh while you can monkey boy, I'm a-going home.'"

"Yeah, but it wouldn't fucking fit the context here," Joe reasoned back.

"Shut up, both of you!" Brian yelled. "God! It's like geek in stereo!" Brian rubbed his temples.

"Brian?" Michael started as he walked up to Brian.

"What do I do, where do I stand?" Brian shot off his questions at Joe, ignoring Michael.

"Over there. But shouldn't we explain to Cheetah over there what's going on? He looks like he's about ready to burst a blood vessel," Joe said, indicating a fuming Michael standing off to the side.

"Joe, could you?" Brian asked of the man.

"Look, Mikey," Joe said. "I can call you Mikey, right? Better than monkey boy. Anyways, your best friend here fell through an open doorway between the two worlds. So did your Brian. So now, I'm gonna mutter some words, and some ugly motherfuckers are going to come and switch them back. Got it?" Joe peered closely at Michael. "Actually," Joe said as he looked back at Brian, "I think he does."

Michael's head shot up. "What, whaddya mean by that?" Michael asked.

"You believe it, don't you? You know this isn't your Brian. You knew something was wrong ever since the night Mysterious fucking Marilyn took off outta Woody's. You knew the minute you saw that photo of Justin in Brian's hands. You do believe that strange things are possible. That's why you looked up the Taylor kid."

Brian looked at Michael. "Mikey?"

Michael stared at both men with his mouth agape. "Okay, I did believe something was up here, especially after Mysterious Marilyn. But parallel worlds?" he scoffed.

"Doesn't it make more sense than the time line?" Brian said as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Who is this guy...really?" Michael said as he pointed to Joe. "Can we trust him? How does he know everything?"

Joe laughed. "I'm the only one who can help him now. I'm the only one who'll make sure that lover-boy here gets back to his boyfriend."

"Brian doesn't do boyfriends," Michael said as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"Wow, look you've got your monkey trained real well here. Get him some accordion lessons and a fez and you got something here."

"Fuck you!" Michael shouted angrily at Joe.

"No, I don't think so," Joe said as he walked up to Michael. "How'd the date go with Ben last night?"

"Brian! You told him..."

"He didn't tell me shit," Joe continued. "You have something there. Don't blow it. Look, it's great to make yourself believe that Tarzan here will never let anyone else but you in behind his walls. It'll always make you feel special, am I right?" Joe didn't wait but continued on. "The problem is, when you help someone build their walls so no one else can scale them, you're stuck behind that wall too," Joe said as he pointed at Michael.

"Michael," Brian said as he looked at Michael and smiled. "I do do boyfriends, well, one boyfriend, and everything that comes with it. Okay?"

"You are definitely not my Brian," Michael snickered but he couldn't find anything funny about it. "Well, why did I have to come?"

"In case everything goes belly up," Brian said.

"Why do you say that?" Michael asked genuinely scared.

"Look," Joe said, "The only way for him to go back is if a guardian takes him back."

"Are you a guardian?" Michael asked.

"Do I look like a fucking guardian?" Joe scoffed. "I actually fucking resent that!"

"Joe," Brian warned. "He doesn't know what the guardians look like. Come to think of it, neither do I."

"You're into horror comics, aren't you?" Joe asked.

"No I've only read the super hero comic books," Michael said innocently.

"Bullshit. You always snuck to the back of Buzzy's to look at the Tales from the Crypt and Eerie. You'd look through a couple of pages and then wet yourself cause you got so scared," Joe shot back.

"How did you know...hey!" Michael exclaimed. "I did not wet myself!"

Joe laughed. "Gotcha! Remember the ones based on the creations of Lovecraft and his Cthulhu mythos?"

"Yeah," Michael said slowly.

Joe could swear he saw the light bulb come on. He then mentally counted down. 3...2...1...

"Those are the guardians?" Michael screeched. "Oh Brian, you can't do this," Michael pleaded with Brian, taking hold of Brian's arms. This may not be his Brian, but it was still Brian. "Come on. You have everything here. It can be just like..."

"No Michael," Brian said, as he took Michael's arms off him. "I don't have everything here. I don't have Justin." Brian smiled, "How did it go with Ben last night?"

"Good," Michael smiled and shrugged. "I forgot how much I liked being with him."

"Good, don't forget that," Brian said as he hugged the man to him. "It's time to grow up Michael," Brian whispered into Michael's ear.

"Aw," Joe said mockingly, "This is very touching. Can we fucking get to it now, before I spew all over my stylish yet affordable shoes?"

"What do we do?" Brian asked.

"You face that wall. Remember no matter what happens, don't let them sense any fear on you. They can smell it. Confront it. Confront them. You're the one in charge here. Well, you're not," Joe shrugged, "But you need to make them think that. And for God's sake, don't panic! Got it?"

Brian nodded in understanding.

He could do this. Justin was waiting for him.

On the other side.

He would for the first time in his life, confront something and not back down.

"I'll stand over here and summon them. They're waiting for me on the other side to start the incantation," Joe said. "And you monkey boy," Joe said as he pointed to a gobsmacked Michael.

"Yeah?" Michael said.

"Close your eyes the minute the guardians start coming."

"Guardians? It only takes one, right?" Michael asked nervously.

"One for each side," Joe clarified. "Just close your eyes and huddle in the corner."

Michael did as Joe said.

"Everyone ready?" Joe asked.

Michael stood against the back wall and nodded.

Brian looked at the wall. He took a deep breath in and let it out. "Oh yeah," Brian said and then stopped to look back at Joe, "Um...tell Brian I'm sorry about the loft...and the...um...Jeep."

Joe looked at Brian with one raised eyebrow. "Good thing we're not Greek. Got it. Here we go!!!"

Joe stood in the middle of the room and started to chant words Brian couldn't understand.

Ancient words.

He wasn't a linguist who specialized in dead languages, but somehow he just knew. These were the kind of words that were kept in heavy tomes, that when opened, a dank musty smell emanated from within.

This time Joe was not fucking around.

It started slowly, a ripple effect started on the wall facing Brian.

This was nothing new to Brian.

"Joe?" Michael said, his voice shaking slightly.

The ripple effect started to grow and consume the ceiling and the flooring, Brian being able to feel a slight water-bed sensation as it passed under him.

The wall's rippling effects grew to a large rolling wave.

He'd seen that at the Music building back at the Art Institute.

The waves started growing and then the walls started to creak and groan.

This was definitely new.

"Joe?" Michael yelled again.

Brian stepped back slightly from the walls as he took them in. The wall was being punched out from the inside, as if something were trying to get out, the moaning and groaning and creaking of the walls becoming extremely loud.

Joe stopped chanting and looked over at Brian.

"They're coming," Joe said and shook his head back and forth, "And man, are they pissed!"

Chapter 24

Jo looked at Michael and Justin who were standing at the other side of the shop. "It's begun," she said and proceeded to start chanting.

Brian listened to the words being said.

It was real.

It was happening.

Any minute now, he would be confronted by something he had no idea he could and would be able to confront.

Suddenly the walls started rippling, followed by large waves and the waves continued to grow.

The waves grew to take over the ceiling and the floor.

"Oh God!" Justin said as he took in the scene before him.

"Don't look Justin!" Brian yelled. "Don't look!"

The walls started vibrating viciously, as if someone were trying to get out.

The walls were creaking and there were loud groans coming from every crevice.

The loudness of the creaking and groaning made it so Jo almost couldn't be heard.

"Now! Cover your eyes!" she yelled. "They're coming!"

Michael pushed Justin to the ground and fell on top of the boy, shielding him from whatever was to come.

Brian took one look back to make sure they weren't looking and turned around, just in time to close his own eyes.

There was a sudden implosion and Brian made to step away from whatever debris that would come flying out at him.

But there was none.

But he felt something there.

Something big.

Something that enveloped him. He could feel it all around him.

The atmosphere was suddenly too cold for him and yet it was too stifling, as if he were confined to a small space and couldn't breathe.

And then that something wasn't a mere feeling but very real as he could feel the thing start to grab him. He had a sudden rush of light-headedness as he was swooped from the ground and could feel himself hoisted into midair. But that couldn't be right, because there was no way he could be that far up.

The ceiling of the shoe store was not that high, but he had felt as if he had gone four or five stories into the air.

The hand, and could it be called a hand, that was gripping him, was crushing him under its weight. And then no longer did he feel light headed, but repulsed as he was brought close to the thing's face because he could feel it's very breath on his skin.

And something else, he felt as if something was touching him all over.

But it wasn't touching him, it was reading him.

It didn't care what he felt like, but what he was feeling.

And what was he feeling?

He was scared.

Yes.

There was fear there.

But he wouldn't be afraid. He thought about what Justin would do because even though he had only known the kid for a few days, he knew without a doubt the kid would face this thing down no matter what and ask it if that was all it had.

So Brian cleared his mind.

He thought about what he needed to do.

He needed to go back.

He needed to set things right with the girls.

So he could set things right with his son.

He needed to go back to make sure that Michael became the person he should and needed to become.

He was his best friend, and he loved him and he owed it to him.

He needed to go back because the other Brian would do everything, and he was sure of this as he was sure he had two balls, that the other Brian would do everything in his power to get back to his Justin.

And he needed to make sure Justin had his Brian.

So he could do this.

His mind was at ease for the first time in his life. He knew what he was doing.

And why.

The ghosts of his past were no longer very important, and really, after this, laughable.

He was given a glimpse of what he could become, and his parents were wrong.

He could become a man who was worthy of love, and who could love in return.

And he could say that.

And so with that, Brian opened his eyes.

And confronted the thing in front of him.

And back in the other world, at Joe's shop...

Brian stepped back slightly from the walls as he took them in. The wall was being punched out from the inside, as if something were trying to get out, the moaning and groaning and creaking of the walls becoming extremely loud.

Joe stopped chanting and looked over at Brian.

"They're coming," Joe said and shook his head back and forth, "And man, are they pissed!"

"Joe?" Brian said warily as he stepped away from the wall.

The wall's pounding and groaning were increasing in its intensity.

"Now! They're here!" Joe yelled. "Don't look at it!"

Michael huddled in the corner, his eyes closed tight, his hands over his ears.

Brian stood facing the wall, watching as it grew to twice its size and looked back at Joe. "What?"

Brian turned back suddenly as the wall seemed to explode, and yet he was hit with no debris. In fact, there was no wall. And he had no idea what was behind the wall because there was something blocking it.

A very big something.

And he was pretty sure it was one of the guardians.

"Holy...Mother...fucker," Brian gasped.

Brian wasn't sure what the whole creature looked like because he couldn't take the whole being in one view. It filled the shop, if that was what you could call the place he was currently residing in, for Brian was quite certain he was no longer in the shoe store unless of course the shoe store had grown to about ten times its size.

Brian stood before the massive creature.

There were tentacles, or maybe they would be better called feelers, stretching out from every angle.

Of its mouth.

There were arms, several of them in fact.

All with long claws.

Brian was pretty sure one of the claws was roughly his size.

The guardian looked down at Brian and groaned, long and low.

Brian stood in front of the guardian and stared up at it. His breathing was ragged. He could feel his heart as it begged to leave his chest. His legs felt as if they could collapse at any time. If he could speak at the moment, he wasn't sure of what would come out.

He could understand how people could lose their minds by just looking at the thing in front of him.

His mind wanted to jump ship also, along with the rest of his body.

But he stood firm.

And stared at the thing.

He would not show fear.

He would not back down. This was it. He was going home.

If a young man could walk down a street full of people on his own, people he was terrified of, then he could handle this.

If a young man could get up on a stage and dance in front of everyone to prove he would not be taken for granted, he could handle this.

If a young man could change his art and face the dean of admissions so he could continue following his 'dream,' you bet your bottom dollar he could do this.

Brian stood taller and faced the thing head on.

If this thing thought it was scary, it had nothing over Brian having come face to face with Justin's grave.

Brian looked at the thing above him. It continued to bellow and thrash. It bent low and tried to push Brian back and forth, as if he were a ball to play with.

And still, Brian stood firm.

The guardian picked Brian up and brought him close to it's mouth, the tentacle-feeler things feeling every square inch of him.

Brian looked at the creature. He managed to stare it back in the eyes.

Well, one of them.

The creature breathed out and stopped groaning as it looked at Brian once more.

Brian stood firm.

He was confronting it. For once in his life, he was confronting something head on.

Nothing was in the way. No other voices. No one talking in his ears. No one telling him he'll fail and that he can't do it.

He was going home and there were no more obstacles.

And when he got home, there would be no more obstacles in the way there either.

Because for the first time in as long as he could remember, things were very clear.

He knew what was important now. His friends, his son, his son's mothers, and Justin.

Because everything led back to Justin.

His image, his reputation, and all that it came with, were obstacles.

No longer would he allow those things to control him. He was in control.

He no longer feared that loving Justin meant losing himself. He could still be Brian.

But all that would have to wait, because right now he had to get home first.

And the first step in going home, was to get this thing to take him back.

What was it Joe had said?

He was in charge.

Because he was. This thing was nothing more than the cosmic cab driver that would take him back, trying to locate the shortest distance between the two worlds.

And maybe, just maybe, he would leave him a tip.

It wondered how it was brought to this, one of the ancient ones many, many millenia old. It had been summoned and it had come, despite its unwillingness to. But the law was the law and it had been summoned by one of them, one more ancient than it, so it had to come.

And why?

The sheer audacity! It had been called upon to transport a mere mortal, something that would never even see a full century. The mortal should have been destroyed, along with the other one.

It had hoped dearly that the mortal it had been summoned for was weak minded for then the law didn't apply and the mortal would be food.

It hated the strong willed ones.

Which this one appeared to be.

It wasn't backing down.

The mortal had only one purpose. That was to go home.

There was nothing there to feast on anyway.

It would take the mortal back.

But it would find the guardian that had allowed this to happen and make it pay dearly.

Brian looked into the guardian's eyes, not backing down.

This was the school yard bully he couldn't walk away from.

The guardian suddenly tightened its hold on Brian, groaned again and swept Brian around, his head trying in vain to stay on his shoulders.

There was a moment of time there where he felt the world crushing in on him, the coldness of the flesh of the guardian almost freezing him where he was.

And then.

Nothing.

Nothing, but a floor, and a wall behind him.

And now, back to the other place where the other Brian was left hanging in mid-air...

And so with that, Brian opened his eyes.

And confronted the thing in front of him.

It had been summoned.

How dare they summon it.

But the law was the law, and if they chose to summon it, they could do so. They had an agreement and one never went against the agreement with them.

But for what? For this mere mortal? Such a small insignificant life really.

Although, it was most interesting. The mortal was showing no sign of fear.

It was rather...disappointed.

They weren't supposed to confront it!

It needed more. It would wait, for the mortal would surely start to weaken and then it would be food.

And then...

What was this?

The mortal suddenly opened its eyes and was confronting it.

This mortal was staring it down.

If this continued the mortal would surely win.

And if the mortal won, it would make sure the guardian who had allowed this oversight to occur in the first place would pay dearly.

Brian looked at the thing before him.

He wanted to scream, but he didn't.

He wanted to thrash about in its grip, but he didn't, nor he couldn't.

He continued to stare the thing down and would not give in.

It was at that moment the thing groaned loudly and swept him around, Brian getting that light-headed feeling once again, and then a feeling as if being crushed by something large.

And then, he felt the floor.

The floor was beneath him.

The floor of the shoe shop, which appeared to be normal.

As Brian looked up, he caught sight of a little man.

A man who looked exactly like Steve Buscemi.

"Hey, what a fucking ride, huh?" the man laughed while shaking his head back and forth. "Man, that's like an E ticket from Hell!"

"Who...who are you?" Brian asked.

"Joe," the man said, "and you owe me pie."

And back at the other world, where Brian was still on the floor...

And then.

Nothing.

Nothing, but a floor, and a wall behind him.

And there was a nice little lady standing in front of him.

"Hello Mr. Kinney and welcome home," she said.

Brian furrowed his brows. "Who are you?"

"I'm Jo."

"No you're not," Brian said as he shook his head back and forth, the motion giving him a slight headache.

"I beg to differ," the woman scoffed. "I should know who I am."

"You're a nice little lady and Joe's...well...he's not."

"That's because he's the Joe over there. I'm the Jo over here."

"And over here would be?" Brian prompted.

"Home Mr. Kinney," Jo smiled as she indicated the far wall.

And there Brian saw them.

He saw Michael standing and brushing himself off. And helping someone else up.

Justin.

"Oh God!" Brian exclaimed.

Brian tried pulling himself off the floor but stumbled, finally making it up and then ran at a frantic pace towards the duo and wrapped his arms around a very stunned Justin.

"Brian!" Michael exclaimed.

"Brian," Justin mumbled, who was currently being crushed by Brian.

"Oh God, it's you! It's you!" Brian panted out excitedly as he pulled Justin away from him. Brian looked down at Justin and smiled. "It's you. Oh God, I was so scared. I was so fucking scared," Brian mumbled again and again as he crushed Justin to him once more.

"Is it really you Brian?" Justin whispered as he took in the disheveled man before him.

"I love you. I love you so much," Brian said as he rained kisses down on Justin's face. "I never want to be away from this again. I love you," Brian said as he crushed Justin to him yet again.

Justin stepped back from Brian. "Jo! You gave us the wrong Brian!" Justin said in a panic.

"I'm quite certain this is the correct one," Jo said and chuckled.

Justin looked up at Brian who was smiling back at him, a huge goofy grin lighting his face. He looked up into Brian's eyes and it was there.

That intensity.

That thing that marked him as his Brian.

And he could see it. It was there. Brian did love him.

It might as well have been tattooed right on his forehead.

"Brian!" Justin jumped into Brian's arms again and kissed him back furiously.

He didn't even care how bad Brian smelled.

"I just wanted to look at you again," Brian laughed as he pulled away and that goofy grin was back. He cupped Justin's face in his hands and looked long and hard into Justin's eyes. "Still the blue I remember." He then touched his forehead to Justin's and breathed in deeply.

He wanted to douse himself in that smell.

Brian was still looking at Justin and holding on tight to him when Michael approached the two.

Michael cleared his throat.

"Hey Mikey," Brian smiled and went to hug his best friend, never letting go of Justin as he did. All three were in a tight circle as the men embraced.

"It's good to have you back," Michael said as he went to kiss the man he had grown up with on the lips.

This was what it was all about. He had his friend back. And his friend had Justin back.

All would be right.

Brian reveled in the glow of the men before him. Never again would he take for granted what he had in these two men, his lover and soulmate, and his best friend and brother.

"And you," Michael said as he pointed accusingly at Justin. "You thought he didn't want to come back!"

Brian looked taken aback at Justin. "Sunshine!" Brian said in his mocking tone, "why the fuck would you ever think that?"

Justin was about to say something when Brian interrupted. "Not important. Just note," Brian said as he touched foreheads with Justin again, "I crossed over at great risk to my health, my sanity and my very life. Not to mention the fact," Brian said and laughed, "look at me! I look like shit. I haven't changed clothes in two fucking days!"

"The world must be coming to an end," Michael laughed.

"You are pretty ripe," Justin said as he scrunched his nose and laughed.

Michael broke away from the two men as they took up their vigil of kissing and touching each other and walked over to Jo.

"It seems my counterpart had quite an effect on Mr. Kinney," Jo said with a raised eyebrow.

Michael looked at Jo in confusion.

Jo laughed, "nevermind. Well, it seems that your Mr. Kinney and the other Mr. Kinney," Jo said and smiled when Michael's head turned towards her, "yes, he made it. It seems they had enough courage to cross. Quite impressive. I'd say that Mr. Taylor was brave enough for both of them."

Michael looked at Jo and smiled. "Fuck! He's always had enough for all of us."

"True, very true." Jo smiled back at Michael while she held out her hand, "it's been a sincere pleasure Mr. Novotny."

Michael shook her hand and then turned to look at the two men who seemed to be joined at the hip, as they stared at each other, Brian whispering things to Justin only they could hear.

Michael walked over and put his arms around the two men, "you guys ready to go?"

"Oh yeah," Brian said. "Wait," Brian said as he turned around.

But Jo wasn't there.

"Come on," Michael said, "I had a feeling she would be gone."

Brian took one look around the shop. It was completely normal again. And no Jo, or Joe, in sight.

He never even got the chance to say thank you. But somehow, Brian knew they already knew.

All three men left the shop and went to where the Jeep was parked on the curb.

But it wasn't there.

"Hey!" Justin said as he looked around. "Where's the car?"

Brian saw a little old lady waiting for the bus at her stop. "Excuse me," Brian asked of the lady, "did a nice policeman come by and tow my Jeep?"

"Why yes...yes he did," she said.

It was nice to know that in both worlds, there were still nice policemen.

And with that, Brian did something that felt entirely too good.

He laughed.

And finally, back at Joe's in the other world...

"Who...who are you?" Brian asked.

"Joe," Joe said, "and you owe me pie."

"No you're not. Jo is a nice little lady. You're...well...you're not."

"I'm Joe here. She's Jo there," Joe said and shrugged.

"Oh," Brian said. Right now, it made all the sense in the world. Brian looked up at the man and then the other side of the store.

"Mikey?"

"Brian!" Michael yelled as he came running over. "Jesus! You're okay. Shit, all that screaming and moaning...."

"Yeah, and that was just from monkey boy," Joe said as he pointed to Michael.

"I'm taking you home," Michael said as he helped his friend up.

"I'll call a cab for ya, it's the least I could do," Joe said.

"I think you've done enough Joe," Brian said.

"Yeah, fuck it, you're right," Joe said as he put the phone down. "I'm just fucking with you," he laughed and called for a cab.

"Brian?" Michael started.

"You'll never believe what was over there," Brian said as he shook his head back and forth.

"I think...I think I do. Did you meet...Justin?" Michael asked trepidly.

Brian laughed. "I bet that was all he talked about. Yeah...yeah I did." Brian put his hands on his temple. "I just want to get home."

The cab eventually came and Michael put Brian in it. The drive to the loft was silent as Brian came down from the high of confronting the guardian and everything that came with it.

Brian made his way up the elevator and to his loft where he put his key in the lock.

As he slid the door open, he took in the state of his living space.

"Oh fuck," he groaned.

He then did something he thought he never would have done.

He laughed.

Chapter 25

Justin and Brian stumbled into the loft after having not been able to keep their hands off each other in the elevator all the way up.

"Mmm...shower now...I stink," Brian murmured between kisses to Justin.

"Don't care," Justin moaned back.

Brian laughed while pulling away from Justin and then touched foreheads with his earnest lover. "Believe me, you will. The last time I showered was before I got on a plane in Chicago."

Justin dove in for another kiss, "Okay, you win." Justin smiled as he turned around and Brian grabbed Justin's hand, turning him to face him once more.

"I didn't say I wanted to shower alone. After all, who'll wash my back?"

Justin laughed and broke away, running into the bathroom, Brian hot in pursuit. They both stood in the bedroom, facing each other, Justin starting by stripping first, and then he stood there, completely naked.

Brian did not make a move to take off any of his clothing. He just stood and stared at his young lover in all his beautiful, unadorned glory.

He was right.

Justin did glow.

Brian took the moment to bask in it.

He had almost not been able to come home to this.

"Brian?" Justin asked, his head tilted to the side.

"I...I missed you," Brian choked out. "And now you're here. I thought I would never..."

Justin ran up to Brian and held on to the man, "I am here though," Justin said while showering kisses all over Brian's face. "See? Real," Justin said again as he took hold of one of Brian's hands and put it to his own bare chest.

Brian looked down into the face he thought he would never see again. Justin looked up at him, those guileless blue eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "Hey," Brian said as he cleared his throat, "Help an old man get out of these clothes. I've been wearing them so long, I think they've attached themselves to my skin," Brian chuckled, wanting to lighten the mood.

Justin started to remove Brian's clothes from him, until the man was standing before him naked also.

Without saying a word, they both entered the bathroom and started the shower. Justin climbed in first and wet himself under the spray, Brian watching on avidly.

"Coming?" Justin asked as he turned around.

"Hopefully, four or fives times," Brian smirked. Brian entered the shower and took the bar of soap down from the shelf, just in time for Justin to snatch it away from him.

"You were saying something about someone doing your back?" Justin asked slyly. Brian turned around and put his forehead against the shower wall, delighting in the movement of Justin's hands over his back.

Justin's touches, light and heavy, all combined to relax and soothe him. He could feel as the soap roamed lower and between his cleft. There was a breeze against his upper half as he realized that Justin had just squatted down behind him and was now running the soap up and down his legs, leaving no spot unwashed.

Brian chose that moment to turn around and looked down at his lover, kneeling before him. Justin smiled up at Brian and proceeded to take Brian's cock into one hand and stroke it. Justin dove for the cock before him, halting his progress when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"No, not now," Brian said.

Justin looked up in confusion. "Since when does Brian Kinney refuse to get his dick sucked?"

"Since he has plans for something better," Brian smiled down. Brian took Justin by the hands and pulled him up. Justin was about to say something when Brian stopped him with a kiss. "Just the shower right now, just the shower."

Justin continued to run the soap all over Brian's chest and up around his neck, stopping every now and then to lick parts of his skin.

"Mmmmm...feels so good," Brian moaned. Brian let the water from the spray cascade down over him, washing him of the past few days, taking all the filth and grime that had been associated with that other place and letting it escape down the drain.

The shower had never felt so good. As he opened his eyes and looked at his lover who was staring back at him, Brian reached over for a condom that was on one of the inlaid shelves. Justin saw the condom and knew he needed to address something.

"Brian?" Justin started and then stopped.

He didn't know how to approach this with Brian.

Brian, deciding not to be so flippant anymore with Justin when it was obvious he had something on his mind, along with the image of Joe standing there nodding his head back and forth asking if he didn't fucking learn anything, asked simply, "What's on your mind?"

"The other Brian," Justin started.

Brian groaned. He was almost afraid to hear what Justin had to say about him. Good old Brian Kinney, the man who didn't do jealous, was doing jealous big time now.

Somewhere, he could almost hear Joe laughing.

"Go on," Brian said with trepidation.

Justin sighed. "He wanted to fuck me...bareback," Justin started. "Actually, he did fuck me bareback," Justin winced.

Brian stopped all thought processes and grabbed hold of Justin around the top of his arms. "Did he force you?"

"No," Justin said as he shook his head back and forth, "No. Of course not! After all, he is you! You would never do that!" Justin pointed out, "But, then why would he do that?"

"First off, how did he...how did it happen?" Brian asked.

"He just did it," Justin said.

"I see," Brian quipped back calmly. Visions of him gleefully running a huge skewering rod through his doppelganger sprung to mind. "So what was his excuse? It just slipped?"

"Actually," Justin laughed, "It was."

Well, of course it was. It was him. "You didn't let him...finish?" Brian inquired. The mantra running through Brian's head was 'Please say no.'

"You kidding me?" Justin scoffed. "The minute I felt what was going on I was so outta there. I mean, I was so pissed."

Brian watched as his lover recounted that last bit and smiled.

He bet he was pissed.

So the other him got a little taste of his Sunshine's wrath.

Life was good after all.

"I just don't get it though Brian," Justin asked, "You would never do something like that. Michael gave some bullshit line about how the Brian before I came along, might have. But no," Justin said and shook his head, "He's wrong."

Brian sighed and looked away. He grabbed for the shampoo and poured a generous amount in his palm and started to lather his hair.

"Let me," Justin said and reached up and began massaging Brian's hair.

"You don't know how good that feels," Brian moaned in pleasure.

"You're stalling," Justin sing-songed.

"No, actually I'm not. I'm just trying to figure out how best to answer it. Look," Brian said as he opened his eyes and looked down at Justin, "You don't know how many times I was tempted to...that is to say, I wanted to...I really, really wanted to. That time you suggested it though, I was so scared for you. It was no longer about my pleasure; it was about your safety. But before that," Brian winced as he turned from Justin.

"Brian?" Justin said and turned Brian back around.

"Don't you get it? I don't know how many times before the bashing, before you even started living with Debbie, and I knew you were clear, and I knew I was clear...God!" Brian groaned in frustration. "Shit! I got soap in my eyes!"

Justin gently moved Brian under the spray and made sure to get all the shampoo out of his hair. As soon as he was done, he pulled the conditioner down and spread it throughout Brian's hair.

"You can open your eyes now," Justin said as soon as he was done massaging Brian's scalp with the conditioner.

Brian opened his eyes. He grabbed hold of Justin once again and looked directly into his eyes. "I don't know if I would have done it in the same way as he had, but I do know I had thought about it numerous times before. As time wore on, and I became closer," Brian sighed, "As I got closer to you, the thought seemed more and more dangerous. I didn't want to put you in danger. Before, I didn't do it because I didn't want to put me in danger."

"So, do you want to," Justin started.

"Oh fuck yeah," Brian laughed. "But not until we've both taken all the necessary steps. We have to be clear for at least six months and...and you know," Brian shrugged.

"Monogamous?" Justin laughed.

"Yeah, that word," Brian said and chuckled.

"Well, then, I see us doing something like that way into the future," Justin said and laughed, kissing Brian on the lips. He turned around and turned off the water which started to go past lukewarm and into cold.

"Not that long," Brian muttered.

Brian hadn't been sure if Justin had heard that last little bit. He knew though that Joe had a point. Why go elsewhere when he had Justin at home?

Justin could always be and would always be enough for him.

More than enough.

It was still a part of him that he couldn't let go of. And what about Justin? Could he let go of that kind of lifestyle.

Justin was right. Some things needed to be addressed.

But farther down the line.

Today, new things would be brought up and dealt with.

Justin rubbed Brian down vigorously with the large fluffy white towel and ended by drying his hair with a smaller towel.

"I should shave," Brian commented.

"No!" Justin exclaimed. "I like it. Keep it...just for a little bit, okay?"

"Can I brush my teeth?" Brian asked, a smirk firmly in place.

Justin scrunched his nose, "By all means."

"Twat!" Brian said and snapped a towel at him. Justin ran into the bedroom and made himself comfortable on the bed.

Brian looked up and into the mirror above the wash basin. He tentatively touched the glass.

Yep, just a mirror. Nothing more.

He looked long and hard at the face staring back at him.

The face of a man who was no longer confining himself to the dark, to living behind walls and to locking emotions that he couldn't confront in file cabinets, encased in concrete.

He had confronted the monster that lives between the walls, under the bed and in the closet. He had confronted him head on and had crossed over, back into a world that he very much wanted to be in.

A world with Justin.

Brian brushed his teeth. He then brushed them again.

And then one more time and gargled with mouthwash.

"Brian, are you coming soon?" Justin called from the bedroom.

He could floss tomorrow.

Justin was languishing on the bed, turned on one side, facing Brian as he walked out of the bathroom. "Feel all clean now?" Justin asked.

"Yeah, ready to get dirty again?"

Justin rolled his eyes and snorted. He raised himself slightly off the bed and watched as Brian made his way over to him. Brian grabbed hold of Justin and set to kissing him all over. He rubbed his head all along Justin's chest, eliciting a "That tickles," from Justin.

They rolled around on the bed, laughing and whispering, until Justin was above Brian. Looking down at Brian, Justin stroked the man's cheek. Brian made a move to flip Justin, when Justin put his hand over Brian's chest. "No."

Justin moved over toward the nightstand and grabbed a condom and lube. Brian raised an eyebrow at Justin. "Trust me," Justin said.

Brian smiled, "Always."

Justin prepared himself with the lube, Brian watching in fascination as Justin spread the lube over his fingers and then proceeded to finger himself. He then tore open the condom wrapper with his teeth, his eyes never leaving Brian's, and sheathed Brian's cock.

Justin positioned himself over Brian's turgid member and impaled himself, crying out as he buried himself to the hilt on the man below him.

"Oh...God," Brian moaned out. He felt as Justin encased him, the walls constricting around his penis.

This was it. This was coming home.

He was home.

And it wasn't just about the fucking.

It was about the warmth of the body above him. The way his skin felt when it touched his, the chemical reaction as they came into contact with each other making both their bodies vibrate.

It was about the way Justin looked at him when they were joined together. He didn't look at him with only lust in his eyes, about what pleasure only he could derive from their union. His eyes shone with love, adoration and trust.

It was about the way Justin touched him all over, as if this were the only place he wanted to be and he could do it till the end of time.

And it was about the way they were joined. Usually fucking was just fucking; no thought was put into it except for the mechanics.

This was different. It wasn't about a dick up someone's ass until one or the other reached climax.

It was about being joined so perfectly, so closely, that nothing, no matter what, could come between the two of them because it was at that precise moment, that they were one.

And Brian didn't care one wit how lesbian that sounded.

Justin moved up and down on Brian, moans and gasps escaping both men as Justin sped up his ministrations.

Brian reached out to touch Justin, and Justin opened his eyes. Justin continued to move up and down while locking eyes with Brian, neither willing to close their eyes, so wrapped up in only each other.

The friction between the two caused Justin to orgasm, spilling between their sweaty bodies, Brian moaning loudly and shaking as his orgasm took him.

Justin collapsed on Brian, panting heavily, Brian putting his arm around Justin's back. "Always so warm," Brian moaned. Justin moved to the side of Brian, and placed his head on Brian's chest, idly making circles on his lover's skin. Justin's tiny ministrations stopped but Brian needed to talk to Justin.

"Justin?" Brian said. "You asleep?"

"No, I don't want to sleep right now."

"Me neither," Brian sighed. "I need to talk to you."

Justin jumped up from his spot. "Brian Kinney wants to talk about something?"

"Yeah, well," Brian laughed, "I know, it's unheard of, but hey, Brian Kinney would never have said 'I love you' either."

"Point taken. What is it?" Justin asked as he took up his spot on Brian's chest again.

Brian idly played with the hair on top of Justin's head while staring up at the ceiling. "You know what I saw over there, right?"

Justin stopped tracing patterns on Brian's chest and moved onto his back and to take up his vantage focal point on the ceiling. "I'll go with something to do with me, with what happened to me."

Brian swallowed. "Yeah. Look," Brian said as he rolled over so he could look directly at Justin. "No look at me," Brian said and turned Justin's head to face him. "We don't need to talk about what happened with the other you. We don't need to go into any of that. I just need to tell you what happened before your prom...and later."

Justin looked at Brian and furrowed his brows. "What do you mean?"

Brian bit his lip and continued. "The night before your prom. Right after Mikey's going away party. I didn't come because I was doing something stupid."

"What were you doing that night Brian?" Justin asked, genuinely curious. He always wondered what had happened that night but then the prom happened and all thoughts of it were put out of mind.

"It's called scarfing and it was dumb and I didn't really mean to kill myself, I was just trying to reach...it doesn't really matter," Brian said frustrated. He didn't want to get into that night, just what happened afterwards.

"Brian, that does sound important," Justin started and was stopped by Brian putting his fingers to his lips to shush him.

"No, it wasn't. Michael came over, to whine about David and how he was taking control of everything. Well anyway, he says he saved me...I don't know...whatever...it was just what he said when he realized how despondent I had become, and must have been to have had to try and 'kill myself,' after not getting the job in New York and turning thirty."

"What did he say?" Justin asked.

"He said, 'I'll always be young and I'll always be beautiful,'" Brian said.

"He said he would always be young and beautiful, that doesn't make sense," Justin said as he furrowed his brows.

Brian put his tongue in his cheek. "He meant me," Brian said and smiled.

"Oh," Justin said. "Oh. I still don't get it," Justin said, shaking his head.

"Exactly!" Brian said and jumped up, sitting straighter on the bed. "I had never heard such a load of crap in all my fucking life! I mean, fuck! Did he get it from a fortune cookie? The point is I was upset because I had to grow up. I was upset because things were going to change and I needed to change with them. We were deluding ourselves about everything!" Brian ranted.

"Okay, so Mikey's words of non wisdom turned your life around?" Justin asked and laughed.

"Yes! That's why I showed up at your prom the next night. It was time to change. It was time to stop running and get out and live. So I decided I would do something that I knew would make you happy and...and yes, that would make me happy."

"I always wondered why you showed up," Justin said and smiled. "Then I just tried to remember that night period."

Brian winced when Justin reminded him of the fact that he hadn't even remembered the happiest night of his life.

Well, they would just have to make new memories.

"I reached a turning point. I let my walls down for a little bit. And after you left me at my Jeep," Brian started.

"You mean when I was hit by Chris..."

"No, right before that, I was so fucked," Brian said and laughed. "I knew it. Then you were hit by that bat and...well, the walls came back up."

"Why?" Justin asked.

"Because it just proved a point. That you show someone anything remotely like love or caring or any of that other happy horse shit and Wham! Someone comes along and takes it all away from you. Once I knew you were okay, I knew I needed to stay away from you. I was bad for you," Brian finished and looked away.

Justin grabbed hold of Brian's chin and turned him towards him. "But, it wasn't your fault. I told you. You mean all this time, this is what it was about? I thought it was me!"

"No," Brian said and shook his head. "It was me. And...no matter what anyone said, I thought it was my fault. People actually said it was my fault for showing up at your prom. The people who said it wasn't, I just thought they were trying to make me feel better. But I get it now," Brian said as he looked up at Justin. "I get it. It wasn't my fault. In fact, had I not shown up," Brian said and swallowed. He couldn't finish.

"But you did," Justin said and smiled. "You did." Justin leaned in and kissed Brian squarely on the lips.

"All this time, I've been an idiot," Brian said as he touched foreheads with Justin. "It stops here. You know, I was so worried when I found out there was another me here."

"Didn't you trust me?" Justin asked.

"Yeah I did, but I also knew the way I'd been acting, that maybe you wouldn't notice."

"I noticed...it was just," Justin started.

"Just what?" Brian prompted.

"He was so, so into it our first time..."

"First time?" Brian roared.

Justin rolled his eyes. "Yeah, our second time was kinda disastrous. Anyway, our first time, he was so into it, I thought it was great."

Brian looked hurt.

"You don't get it. It was great because he made me feel like he was having sex with me for the first time, period. Do you get tired of me, sometimes, because it's not like our first time anymore, Brian?"

"Oh Justin. It always feels like the first time with you," Brian said and kissed Justin again on the lips. "Only better."

And with that the two men rolled around together again before starting on round two.

Epilogue

It had been a quiet couple of days since Brian had come back from the other side. Michael had asked millions of questions regarding the guardians but all Brian seemed to be interested in was Justin.

Eating with Justin.

Sleeping with Justin.

Making love to Justin.

And of course making love in and on every available surface in the loft. They must have christened every spot they could think of.

And it was with those thoughts in mind that Brian made his way down Liberty Avenue, a smile firmly planted on his face and Justin securely ensconced at his side. Brian rubbed his cheek against the side of Justin's face, happy that he had decided to finally shave that morning. Despite how much Justin protested and how 'rugged' it made him look, he noticed Justin starting to develop a rash wherever Brian rubbed against him.

Which was just about everywhere and made Justin look like he had a sunburn.

So the stubble, now fully turned beard, had to go.

As they were laughing and horsing around, they were joined by Michael and Ben.

"Where you two headed?" Michael asked.

"To the market. We seem to be out of supplies," Brian said as he leered down at Justin.

"No more condoms, huh?" Michael smirked.

"All gone," Justin shrugged.

"You know, this is terribly domestic of you Brian," Michael said while laughing.

"I would normally allow the lad to go on his own," Brian quipped, "But after everything I've been through, I've decided to stay close." At that moment, if it was at all possible, Brian pulled Justin in tighter to his side.

"Close?" Justin scoffed. "I'm pretty sure we're super-glued at the hip." Brian hit Justin's hip with his own hip after the comment.

"You know," Ben started in lecture-mode, "In cases such as what Brian has experienced, when such a fierce trauma has been inflicted, it's quite a natural reaction for one to behave in an over-protective fashion, such as his laughter when his Jeep was towed. It was a release of tension caused by the confrontation..."

Brian stopped and put his hand on Ben's shoulder, "I so missed this guy." He then reached up and planted a kiss on Ben's lips.

"He was mocking me, wasn't he?" Ben asked.

"Yeah," Michael said, shaking his head. Justin was nodding too.

Ben laughed and continued on to the store, all four men talking and laughing about nothing in particular.

As they entered, Ben and Michael went their separate ways. Justin and Brian made their way to the most important aisle first.

The condom aisle.

Just as they entered the aisle, Brian took in the scene of the three people arguing.

"Why does everything have to have wings?" the man said.

"Wings are supposed to be better for coverage," the woman said.

"I don't understand the purpose of wings either, Sabah," the little old woman said.

"Patricia, just pick something out so we can leave this aisle," Sabah whispered urgently.

Brian watched with an amused grin and approached the trio. He then looked at the younger of the two women and picked up her hand. "I must say Sabah, you were right, Patricia is beautiful. I could very well see you doing anything for her," Brian said as he kissed Patricia's hand.

"Why thank you," the woman named Patricia gushed. "Have you and my husband met?"

Sabah looked over at the man who was currently smirking at the three of them. "I know we haven't met before. You are...?"

"Brian, Brian Kinney. And no we haven't met," Brian laughed.

"But you know us?" Patricia asked.

Just then the small woman walked up to Brian and peered closely at him.

Brian looked down at the woman. "So, do I belong here?" he asked.

The woman looked taken aback. "Here? In the feminine sanitary napkin aisle?" she chuckled.

"We were getting condoms," Justin said as he held up a large box of condoms and then tilted his head so it was resting against Brian's, "Because he loves me."

"Yes, so he does," the woman laughed.

"So...do I Nina?" Brian asked again.

Nina looked at Brian and smiled. "You don't seem to not belong here."

"Good," Brian said and nodded.

"Um, we're sorry, my partner doesn't usually accost random people in the market," Justin apologized.

Brian watched as the trio turned and walked away from them, Nina occasionally glancing back at Brian.

"It's always the good looking ones who are crazy," Patricia was saying.

"I don't know, he seemed okay," Sabah said. "And he liked you so he wasn't completely crazy!"

"You make me crazy Sabah," Patricia exclaimed.

Brian laughed as the trio turned a corner and then were gone from sight.

"Taken to scaring breeders now," Justin asked with a lift of his eyebrow.

"Those breeders," Brian said, "were the ones who helped me get back to you. Well...the ones over there were in any case," Brian said as he kissed Justin on his forehead.

Justin looked up and smiled. "Public displays of affection again, Mr. Kinney?"

"You know it," and just as Brian was about to dive in for another kiss, a tall man with a rough crew cut walked by them.

"You're back," the man said, a far away look in his eyes.

Both Justin and Brian looked at the man in confusion, his voice sounding somewhat familiar. Just then Michael and Ben approached them.

"Hey we're done. Oh, hey Bob!" Michael said, patting the man on his back.

"He's back," he said.

"I know...isn't it great?" Michael said as he was bouncing. Ben, Justin and Brian looked at each other in turn, daring the other to ask Michael who this 'Bob' guy was.

None of them did.

All four men made their way to the cashiers and then the outside as soon as their purchases had been taken care of.

"So, see you at Babylon tonight?" Ben asked Brian and Justin.

"Wouldn't miss it. We'll see you there," Brian said as he watched his best friend and his lover walk away.

"So, you're really okay with those two now?" Justin asked.

"Not only am I okay, I'll fucking plan their wedding when the time comes," Brian said.

"You should travel to a parallel dimension more often," Justin said in all seriousness.

The two made their way down the street; Brian's arm slung over Justin, Justin snuggled in close to Brian's side as they approached the violinist who was currently playing on the corner.

"Hi Ethan!" Justin said.

"Hi Justin," Ethan smiled. He then looked over and caught sight of the man who was currently clutching Justin for dear life to his side. "This the boyfriend?" Ethan asked and plastered a large, fake smile over his face.

"Hey Ethan," Brian said and smiled. Ethan and Justin were both taken aback by the familiar tone the man took with him.

"You know Ethan?" Justin asked with one raised eyebrow.

"Oh we go way back. We shot the shit, you know," Brian said nodding his head.

"I've never met you," Ethan said as he shook his head.

Brian smiled and took a one hundred dollar bill out of his wallet and threw it into the violin case.

"Keep it up Paganini, after all, you'll always have your music," Brian smirked and walked away with Justin.

"Freak," Ethan muttered to himself and then looked down and saw the bill. "Hey! Thanks!"

"You just gave Ethan a hundred?!" Justin asked incredulously.

"Yeah, well, think of it as a consolation prize."

Justin laughed and snuggled, if it was at all possible, closer to Brian as they continued to walk down the street.

And in the other place...

Brian leaned over the railing of the catwalk at Babylon, surveying the lot tonight. Ever since he had returned home (and to his upturned loft), he had not had time for this as he had started to put into action his plans to set things right with his extended family.

No longer would he sit by and let things occur. That's what he had done, and look what had happened to Michael and Lindsay.

He had already taken steps to finding Mel and in finding a way to soon rid themselves of Gui.

Gus needed a set of parents to love him for him, not a woman who had completely given up and had become the shrew she never wanted to be nor a man who was using Gus as a bargaining chip to gain citizenship.

It also seemed that his 'Kip problem' had been handled. Kip was currently the most looked after resident at the State Mental Health Facility. He kept babbling on about monsters and walls.

He now sports a new white jacket and has a three hundred pound nurse by the name of Doris who caters to his every whim.

When he's not drooling all over himself or banging his head against the wall, that is.

As for Michael? Well, it seems he, his counterpart, had already taken steps in that direction as it were.

Michael and Ben had been seeing each other every chance they got since he had been back.

And Brian had to admit, it was kind of nice.

He had looked long and hard in the mirror when he had come home and realized that, yes, he was not the same man. He was more confident in who he was, not just in business because he was never lacking there, but as a human.

Never again would he look at himself as the son of parents who were sadly disappointed in him, a person who would never count.

He did count and he was responsible for other people's lives.

He had changed and no longer would he be afraid of what he didn't know was to come.

Brian took the picture out of his wallet. It had been the only thing to survive the other Brian's wrath in his loft.

And now it was his.

He looked at the boy, wearing an orange shirt and a radiant smile, Brian snuggling in close to him.

Whenever he needed to remind himself that he was worth it, that there was more to life than the usual grind, he would take the picture out and look at the man looking back at him with that winning smile.

He could almost believe the smile was truly meant for him.

Almost, but not quite.

Justin wasn't his and he had learned to accept that. Luckily he hadn't gotten too attached to the kid, not like his counterpart.

Brian was given a short glimpse of the life he could have led, the man that could have loved him, and the fact of the matter was, he wouldn't trade that experience in for anything, not for all the most amazing tricks and perfect clients in the world.

No matter what happened to him later in life, no matter who he met, who he did, he would always have that.

And that was surprisingly, enough for him.

Brian sighed and put the picture back in his wallet.

Now, now was the time for what he liked best.

This.

Babylon.

This was where he belonged as he surveyed the dance floor once more.

He was a lover to every man and a lover of no one.

Brian saw a man walk through the crowd, a man he had seen earlier who had been checking him out. He was a good looking enough man, his type, with dark hair and those smouldering bedroom eyes.

He was definitely a prospect for the night's activities.

Brian put all other thoughts from his mind. This was his kingdom and he was its King, and the King wanted to play.

Brian made his way down the catwalk and to his prey.

"Hail to the fucking King," a voice said coming out of the shadows.

"Oh, don't be so cynical," said another voice.

"You believe his shit?" Joe said as he turned to the other voice.

"Actually, I do," Jo said and smiled. "I actually do. Mr. Kinney will be fine. You know, Rome wasn't built in a day."

"And who should know better than you," Joe smirked.

"Or you," Jo shot back. "Mr. Kinney has come a long way since he first step foot on the other world. He's come a long, long way, but there are things that will still take time."

"He doesn't have his own little Sunshine though," Joe mocked.

"No he doesn't. Only the other Mr. Kinney does. No matter where this Mr. Kinney goes, he won't find his own Justin. But he found someone just as important."

"Oh don't say it," Joe said shaking his head.

"He found himself," Jo said, ignoring Joe.

"Man you just had to fucking say it, didn't you? How fucking corny and cliché can you get?" Joe said. "Why don't you just take up writing fucking Hallmark cards?"

"Oh, that's rich coming from you. I know about everything you made Mr. Kinney confront when he was here...about his feelings towards Mr. Taylor," Jo said and pointed her finger at Joe. "You accused him of being a romantic. I think it goes both ways here."

"That was different," Joe scoffed. "I needed to know he could confront the guardian before he crossed over. And call me a romantic, and I'll...well, I don't know what I'll do, but it won't be pretty."

Jo nodded her head. "Really, you can fool some of the people some of the time and most of the people most of the time but you can never fool me."

"Yeah, yeah whatever. Shut up. It's kinda funny though, you know?" Joe said.

"What?" Jo asked.

"The only person someone like Kinney could love is someone who was never even meant to live. Fucking ironic, huh?" Joe said.

"It is rather ironic. You know, he actually once said something like that too...to Michael. He said, 'the man didn't exist who he could fall in love with,'" Jo finished while reflecting.

"Self-fulfilling prophecy, huh?" Joe quipped.

"Has the guardian who let this travesty happen been dealt with accordingly?" Jo asked, more seriously.

"Yeah, well you know after we summoned Heckel and Jekyll?" Joe said.

Jo rolled her eyes heavenward at Joe's cartoon references. "Yes."

"They were pretty pissed off afterwards. They fucking cleaned that guardian's clock," Joe nodded.

"Imagine," Jo said as she crossed her arms over her chest, "Setting that human, who was barely coherent, to watching the doorway while it slowly feasted on the emotions of the club goers."

"Yeah, well, the guardians have free will too, just like the talking monkeys. You know? You can't control what they do. We can only come in when we're needed and clean up their mess. I mean, what are you gonna do?" Joe shrugged.

"Exactly what we did and exactly what we have always done," Jo said, "To guard the guardians."

Jo kept on walking, Joe at her side. "Can we fucking merge now? This monkey suit I'm wearing is really fucking with me. I swear humans aren't worth the flesh they're printed on."

"Are you quoting an ancient philosopher?" Jo asked, genuinely curious.

"Naw, Billy fucking Zane said it in Tales from the Crypt: Demon Night. And you know," Joe said as he pointed a finger at Jo, "We really should have just eliminated both Kinneys. If they hadn't been able to confront the guardians, they would've been history and there would have been a lot of explaining to do."

"I had faith in them," Jo laughed.

"I know you did," Joe said. "Now, please, can we fucking merge?" Joe pleaded.

Jo laughed. "I really was hoping to make it to Bingo Night tonight. I'd like to keep this form for just a while longer, if you don't mind. We can always merge later."

Joe sighed, "Yeah, sure, okay, no skin off me back, right? Oh wait a sec, yeah it is! Hey!" Joe said and perked up his head. "Maybe I can get lucky tonight and get some use out of this pecker while I still have it."

"I'm sure I'll have better luck at Bingo," Jo said and started to walk away.

Joe started yelling after Jo. "Fuck you! You know, you're looking at the better half here!" Just then, two women walked by, hand in hand. "Well, well, two for one night here on Liberty Avenue," Joe leered at the women.

The two women looked at Joe and scoffed, "Back off little man! You're not our type."

Joe watched as they walked away and yelled after them, "You can do all the work! I'll just watch. Maybe I can lend a hand!!!"

Joe slumped down in defeat as the women rounded a corner.

Really, what good was a twelve-inch cock if you didn't even get to use it?

And back at Babylon, in the other place...

Justin and Brian were dancing close together, swaying on the floor, arms and hands and lips touching each other, both sets of eyes locked on the other's.

They were both lost in their own little world.

And as the tempo changed as the mix changed and the dancers around them danced with the music playing, Brian and Justin continued to stay in the same place, swaying to the music, regardless of what was playing.

Justin put his arms around Brian's neck and reached up to plant his already kiss-swollen lips on that of his lover's.

They kissed just like that, and so it was that they were completely and totally lost in each other and when Brian pulled back, he realized that yes, he indeed was lost in Justin.

And that was exactly as it should be. Lost in Justin, never to be lost from his Justin ever again.

With that Brian continued to sway to the music, holding Justin close, and checking to make sure his cell phone was off.

After all, there was no one that needed to reach him as the most important person in the whole wide world, both of them, was there with him at that moment.

The End