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**Kaite's Domain**

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**SERIES**

**Seeking the Truth**

Brian goes in search of some answers and doesn't like what he finds

Ethan Gold. Ethan fucking Gold. Ethan home wrecking Gold. Brian stared at the CD in his hand, the one that Justin was always playing, trying to figure out what it was about the boy on the cover that attracted his young lover into considering breaking things off with Brian. He couldn’t see anything special about the musician. If anything, Brian thought the kid was kind of on the boring side when it came to his looks, but there had to be something and Brian was going to find out what it was. Ethan Gold might have his lover snowed, but Brian Kinney was no fool and knew that no one could be as perfect as Justin seemed to think his new lover was.

The next day-Pittsburgh Institute of Fine Arts

“Brian, been a long time. What can I do for you?” Jerry Stockwell, Dean of Students at PIFA, greeted the ad exec.

“I need a favor,” Brian told his old trick. “I need some information on one of your students.”

“You know I can’t give you that,” Jerry answered. “All information in our students’ files is confidential.”

“I understand this, but I would consider this a personal favor.” The way Brian emphasized personal left Jerry with no doubts as to what the other man meant and he smiled.

“Don’t even try it Kinney,” Jerry admonished him. “You and I both know that nothing will happen between the two of us. Even your considerable charm has its limits.”

“I haven’t found them yet.” Both men laughed.

“I see you haven’t changed since we last met.”

“You’d be surprised,” Brian replied, something in his face changing. Jerry watched as a faraway look entered the other man’s expression and he wondered about it. He had heard rumors that Brian had finally gone ahead and done what everyone had thought was impossible, fall in love. He hadn’t thought it was possible, but he could admit that maybe he was wrong. “So, can you help me?” Brian interrupted Jerry’s thoughts by bringing up the reason for his visit. Jerry sighed, knowing what his answer should be, but also knowing what it was going to be.

“What student?”

“Ethan Gold.” Brian watched in surprise as Jerry suddenly seemed to get nervous. “I take it you know who he is.”

“Why do you want to know about Ethan?” Brian took a deep breath, ready to tell him the cover story that he had come up, and then found himself telling Jerry the truth.

“It seems that this kid has decided to try and come between my,” Brian looked uncomfortable for a minute before continuing, “lover and myself. From what I understand he’s been telling Justin all the things that he wants to hear and I know from personal experience that no one is as perfect as he seems to be. I just wanted to know a little more. And, if the look on your face is any indication, you know something about this kid. What is it?” Jerry looked away from Brian’s face for a moment, before turning to face him again. “Jerry, look, I just need to know if I should be concerned for Justin. He’s been hurt a lot the past year, and I’ll admit I had a lot to do with it. I just don’t want him to have to go through anything else.” It was Brian’s last plea that finally got Jerry to open up.

“You have very good reason to be worried about Ethan Gold and his intentions,” Jerry told him.

“Why?”

“Because Ethan Gold is a manipulative little bastard that thinks of no one except in terms of what they can do for him or his reputation,” Jerry spat out. Brian sat back, an interested, yet calm expression taking over his face.

“Sounds like you are the one speaking from personal experience now.”

“Oh I am, trust me, I am.”

“What happened?”

“Did you know that when Ethan Gold first applied to PIFA that he was turned down,” Jerry supplied. Brian’s eyebrow rose at that bit of new information.

“Really. I had been led to believe that he is considered to be some kind of prodigy when it came to the violin,” Brian countered. “I would figure you would have been honored to have someone like him consider the school.”

“Oh, I’m not saying he isn’t good,” Jerry told him. “Ethan Gold has talent; unfortunately he doesn’t have the drive. The passion it takes to succeed. Granted, he likes to think he does. Hell he has most people fooled into thinking that he’s some kind of violin God, when in reality the most he can hope to get with his talent alone is a second chair in a second rate orchestra.”

“Then why is he here.”

“Because one night I was drunk, angry and hurt and got careless and stupid. Not exactly a good combination in my line of work,” he admitted. “And that’s when he struck.”

“What happened?”

“I had just found out that Paul, my partner, had been cheating on me. I later found out it wasn’t true, but at the time I was so hurt by it,” Jerry explained. “I went to Babylon to drown my sorrows, and looking for a little payback. I wanted to hurt him as much as he had hurt me and that’s where he found me.”

“Ethan Gold.”

“Ethan fucking Gold,” Jerry repeated. “He came over to me, insisting that he should buy me a drink and giving me a shoulder to cry on. I was so turned on. The fact a hot young thing like him would even be taking the time to even bother with someone like me set me off and the next thing I know I’m at his place and we’re fucking like rabbits. Two days later I got a care package from him. Pictures of the two of us, along with a copy of a birth certificate, showing that the trick from the other night was only seventeen.”

“A little blackmail material I take it.”

“Exactly,” Jerry confirmed. “Ethan would keep our little tryst a secret if I would agree to get him admitted to PIFA, on full scholarship yet.”

“But of course.”

“I didn’t have a choice. Even Paul knew how much trouble Ethan could make for me if it ever got out,” Jerry continued. “Ethan became a member of the freshman class of 2001, full scholarship and Paul and I got to live our lives.”

“You and Paul are still together even though he cheated on you?”

“Like I said, it wasn’t true,” Jerry reminded Brian. “Ethan was very thorough.”

“He set you up.” Jerry nodded.

“Played me like one of his violins, only better.”

“Fuck.”

"Exactly. So, if your partner has attracted Ethan’s attention, the only thing I can tell you is to do anything and everything that you can to get him out from under his control,” Jerry stated. “If you don’t, then god help you both.” Brian sat still for a few more minutes, before seeming to come to a decision. He stood up and held out his hand, which Jerry took, shaking it.

“Thanks Jerry. You’ve been a help.”

“Good luck, Brian. Let me know if you need anything else. I’ll do anything I can to help you out. I would like nothing more than to take that little bastard out.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Brian turned and left the office, all the while thinking of what Ethan Gold might want with Justin and what he was going to have to do to get Justin to see that Ethan was nothing but a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Part 2

Brian looked around the office as he waited for Melanie to get of the phone. He still couldn’t believe that he was actually there, about to ask the woman that enjoyed making his life miserable to help him with proving that Ethan was not all that everyone made him out to be. Finally, just as it seemed as if Melanie was purposely delaying the end of her call, she hung the phone up and turned her attention to Brian.

“So, to what do I owe the dubious pleasure of having Brian Kinney visiting me in my humble office,” she sarcastically greeted the father of her son. Brian took a deep breath and said the words that he never thought he would utter.

“I need your help.” Melanie’s eyes opened wide in shock at hearing Brian’s reason for visiting, not sure if she had heard him correctly.

“Could you please repeat that because I’m sure I didn’t hear you say what I think you just said?”

“I said that I needed your help.” Brian repeated, slowly as if to a child.

“Help in what?” Melanie couldn’t wait to hear what Brian needed her to do. ‘This is it,’ Brian thought, ‘this is when I finally bite the bullet. Damn, I hope Justin knows how much I care about him to be doing this.’

“I need you to help me find out some things about Ethan Gold,” Brian finally stated, looking directly into Melanie’s eyes, refusing to back down from the challenge he saw in them.

“Ethan Gold,” she said. “Isn’t he the boy that Justin is….friends with?” There was no doubt that Melanie knew exactly what kind of friends Justin and Ethan were. Hell, it wasn’t a secret among anyone in the group. Mikey had seen to that and, of course, everyone had blamed Brian for the fact that Justin had gone to someone else to get what he needed.

“Fuck it,” Brian said, standing up and making as if to leave the office. He didn’t know why he had even bothered to go there. He should have known that Melanie wouldn’t listen to him. Hell, she was turning into one of the bigger supporters of Justin leaving Brian for the violinist. She had never made it a secret that she thought Justin could do much better than Brian Kinney and in her eyes; Ethan Gold was just what Justin needed. Someone his age who was willing to give Justin the romance and the kind of relationship that he deserved.

Melanie watched as Brian stood and grabbed his coat, ready to leave. There was something about the way he was acting that seemed off, not like the Brian Kinney that she had gotten to know and, although she would kill anyone if they repeated it, begrudgingly like. And, as much as she liked the young man that was beginning to mean so much to Justin, there had to be something seriously wrong if Brian was seeking her out for help.

“Brian, wait,” she ordered, halting him before could leave the office. Brian turned to face her, a neutral expression on his face. “What exactly are you looking for?” Brian looked over at Melanie, trying to decide how serious she was. Finally, accepting that she was at least willing to listen to him, he moved back to the chair he had just vacated and began to tell her what he had learned so far.

“So you’re telling me that the only reason Ethan is even in PIFA is because he set up the Dean of Students and then blackmailed him with pictures of the two of them together before he turned seventeen,” Melanie sighed. She couldn’t believe it. If she didn’t know any better, she would swear that Brian was making up the story that he had just told her, but she didn’t think that even he would stoop that low. “Shit. Would your friend be willing to sign a statement verifying everything you just told me?”

“I don’t know,” Brian shrugged. “He doesn’t want to get into any trouble with the law because the bastard was underage.”

“Technically he wasn’t,” Melanie informed. “The legal age of consent in Pennsylvania is sixteen, so there aren’t any real legal repercussions. And we could probably work something out where he doesn’t get into any trouble with his place of employment.”

“In that case, he might be willing to do something,” Brian said.

“Good. Give me his number and I’ll give him a call,” Melanie promised, reaching over to look through her rolodex. “And I’m going to contact a private investigator that I’ve used in the past, see if he can turn up anything. He’s good Brian. One of the best in Pittsburgh. He would impress even you.”

“You mean, you’re actually willing to help me?” Brian asked, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice. Up until that minute, he didn’t think Melanie would believe him.

“As much as you may annoy me. Hell, you piss me off more often than not,” Melanie replied, “you are the father of my son. And, for some unknown reason, Lindsay loves you. And, even if it means being with you, I don’t want to see Justin hurt by this kid, even if his intentions are pure. From what you’ve told me, even if this was only one incident, which I doubt, Ethan is not the man that we’ve all been led to believe.”

“Considering how fucked up we all are, I’m surprised any of you actually took him seriously,” Brian rolled his eyes. “He’s too fucking perfect to be believed.”

“Now that you point it out, he does seem to know exactly what to say to everyone to make us accept him,” the lawyer agreed. “That should have been our first clue that something was off.”

“And here you all thought I was the conniving son of a bitch in the group,” Brian said sarcastically.

“Don’t worry Brian. I’m sure you’re still ranked right up there with the best of them,” Melanie smiled. “And you’ll always be number one in my book.”

“That touches me deeply,” Brian shot back, holding his hand over his heart. “Right here. Really.”

“I’m sure.” Melanie then grew serious again. “Brian, what are you going to tell Justin about what you found out today?”

“Nothing,” he replied. At Melanie’s unspoken question, he continued. “Melanie, you know how Justin gets when someone he cares about is attacked. He goes on the defensive and that includes this bastard. If I told Justin what I just told you, without any proof there is no way in hell that he would believe me. He would just assume I’m trying to break him and Ethan up.”

“So you keep quiet for now until we can get some proof and then we go forward from there.” Melanie looked down at her notes then looked back up at Brian. “What are you going to do if and when we discover what other shit Ethan might have pulled?”

“I’m going to make sure that he regrets ever fucking with me and Justin,” Brian said so seriously that Melanie actually shivered. She had never seen so much anger directed at anyone, and she had seen plenty of anger in her life.

“Okay, so it’s agreed that we don’t tell Justin about this,” Melanie went on. “What about the others? I’m sure they would want to know what’s going on and I don’t know if I will be able to keep this a secret from Lindsay. She loves Justin like a little brother.”

“I don’t want the others to know yet,” Brian told her. “Its not that I don’t trust any of them to not say anything to Justin, but I don’t want to take the chance that they might start to act differently.”

“And Linds would certainly do that,” Melanie agreed. “Okay, so for now this is just between you and me.” Melanie and Brian both stood up, walking over to the door. Neither person said anything else, knowing that nothing else needed to be said. They both knew what had to be done and, their personal feelings about the other aside, knew that they would do it. There was no way they were going to let Ethan hurt anyone in their little family.

Part 3

Three weeks later

Lindsay watched as Brian anxiously paced the space of her living room. He had arrived at her and Melanie’s home fifteen minutes before hand for some kind of meeting with her lover. She knew how Brian and Melanie felt about each other, usually only putting up with the other because of their mutual feelings towards her, and was curious as to what they were meeting about. Melanie had been secretive when she had mentioned it to Lindsay earlier in the day and, so far, Brian hadn’t said so much as one word as to what was going on.

“Finally,” Brian sighed when he heard the front door open and Melanie walked into the room.

“Hey,” Melanie greeted the two people, going over and giving her lover a kiss and causing Brian to make a gagging noise.

“Please, not in front of my son,” he rolled his eyes.

“Fuck off, Brian,” Melanie and Lindsay both replied. The two women broke apart, Melanie placing her briefcase on the table in front of the couch and everyone sat down.

“I take it by your call this afternoon that you’ve got something for me,” Brian stated, wanting to get right to the point.

“I got the investigator’s report this afternoon,” Melanie informed him. There was something about her manner that had Brian on instant alert.

“And?”

“And, it isn’t pretty.” Brian sat back in the chair he was using.

“How bad?”

“Bad.” Brian nodded his head, and then glanced over at Lindsay as if to ask why they were having the meeting at the Marcus-Peterson home instead of Melanie’s office. “She needs to hear this too. She cares about him.”

“I know.”

“Hello, can someone please tell me what’s going on here,” Lindsay interjected, trying to figure out what was going on between the two most important people in her life. From what she could tell, Brian had asked Melanie to have someone investigated and whatever had turned up wasn’t good, but she didn’t know who if could be if she was involved too.

“About three weeks ago Brian came to my office,” Melanie began, surprising Lindsay who looked over at the ad exec, who only shrugged his shoulders.

“Why?”

“I found out some information and I needed Melanie’s help to verify it and find out if there was anything else that I needed to know,” Brian supplied.

“Okay,” Lindsay drawled. “What kind of information?”

“About Ethan,” Brian answered.

“Justin’s Ethan.” Lindsay didn’t miss the wince her comment caused Brian to have. “Sorry.”

“Yes, that Ethan.”

“What kind of information?” ‘Damn it’s like pulling teeth with these two,’ she thought.

“Ethan’s not exactly who he appears to be,” Melanie explained. “In fact, the only thing that he’s told us that is true is his name and the fact that he plays the violin and is a student at PIFA. After that, it’s nothing but so much bullshit.” Lindsay sat back in shock. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing, not just from Brian but from her lover as well. She thought back to the young man that she had met and who had impressed her with the way he was treating Justin, knowing how much it meant to the young artist to have someone give him the attention that he desired. She knew how much it hurt Brian that Justin was seeing someone else but she hadn’t been able to begrudge Justin his shot at happiness. And now, here she is, about to listen to her lover tell her that she had been played for a fool. ‘Shit, what the hell have we let ourselves fall into?’

“What did he find?” Brian asked Melanie, bringing Lindsay out of her thoughts and back to the conversation on the table. Lindsay and Brian watched as Melanie opened her briefcase and pulled out a file. It wasn’t a thin one.

“He found a lot, actually, but I’m only going to go over some of the bigger things.”

“Bigger things?” Lindsay repeated, not liking the sounds of that. Melanie nodded her expression serious.

“First off, Ethan is not the starving artist living off scholarship that he has led us all to believe. He’s not even from Pittsburgh.” Melanie opened the file and began to read what was inside of it. “Ethan Gold is the only son of Martha and Edmund Gold of Scottsdale, Arizona. His mother is a successful attorney whose practice represents some of the biggest companies in Phoenix. His father runs a multi-billion dollar corporation that deals with medical equipment.”

“Just because his family has money, it doesn’t mean that they have to be giving any of it to Ethan,” Lindsay defended the absent youth, much to the annoyance of Brian. “Hell, Justin and my family is proof of that.”

“True, except for the fact that it isn’t all new money,” Melanie continued. “In fact, upon his eighteenth birthday, Ethan received a twenty million dollar trust fund, which he is able to access with no problem.”

“Then why the hell is he living in some run down walk up studio with a bunch of Salvation Army reject furniture?” Brian tried not to bellow and barely succeeded.

“That I can’t tell you but, from what I’ve been able to find out, I do have a working theory. I’ll tell you about it when I’m done.”

“What else, Mel?” Lindsay wanted to know.

“Well, from what my investigator was able to tell, Ethan grew up wanting for nothing. He started violin when he was five. His grandfather had been a violinist before World War II and his father wanted him to follow in his footsteps. He took to it instantly and his family believed that he was a prodigy and destined for greatness. Unfortunately for him, by the time it was ten, Ethan had apparently peaked. His teacher told him that he didn’t have what it took to be a great violinist. He didn’t have the heart, the passion that it meant to succeed. Ethan didn’t take it well.”

“I bet,” Brian snorted.

“What happened then?” Lindsay asked.

“This is when Ethan’s machinations start to come out. Apparently Ethan told his parents that his teacher made a pass at him, tried to force him to have sex with him. They pressed charges against the man, but they were never proven. Unfortunately the bad publicity was enough to ruin the man’s career. He eventually had to leave Arizona and was never able to teach again.”

“Fuck,” Brian swore, standing up and pacing again. “God damn it. This just keeps getting better and better and this is just when that little shit was only ten. I can only imagine what the hell he’s capable of doing now.”

“Well, your friend gave us a good clue as to what he’s capable of, if not more.” Melanie pointed out.

“I take it you found out some more things,” Lindsay questioned, earning herself a nod from her lover. “What else?”

“Brian?” Melanie looked over at the agitated man who made his way back to his chair. When it appeared that he had finally calmed down, she continued. “Well, after that little bout of manipulation, Ethan only got worse. At first, it was just with the kids at his school, and then with his teachers. Each instance was covered up. The Golds had a lot of money and were not afraid to use it if it meant that their only son wouldn’t be in trouble. Unfortunately this just meant that Ethan never had to deal with the consequences of his actions, until two years ago.”

“What happened two years ago?”

“Ethan was involved with an older man,” Melanie explained. “A much older man. He was in his late forties and was a partner in his father’s business. I don’t know how the two of them became involved. It was difficult enough for my investigator to find out about the affair in the first place, but it appears that the partner was involved in an attempt to take over the company from Edmund Gold, Ethan’s father. From what I found out, shortly after the takeover attempt began, Ethan seduced the other man, even though he was in a committed relationship with someone else.”

“Sounds familiar,” Brian muttered. Melanie nodded her head.

“It does seem to be a popular theme with him,” she agreed. “Anyway, the affair lasted a few months, until the takeover attempt was withdrawn and Edmund’s position strengthened instead of weakened. Ethan ended it quickly and, from I’ve been able to find out, not too nicely. In fact, according to a letter that the partner’s lover discovered, Ethan had only been using the man in order to gather information to help his father and to come between him and the others that were trying to kick his father out.

“Shit,” Lindsay was the one to swear this time. “And this is the same man that had risked a loving relationship to be with the kid.” Brian looked carefully over at Melanie and could see that there was more to the story.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Melanie took a deep breath, knowing that the next bit of news was not going to be taken happily.

“The letter that the lover found,” she stated. “It was a suicide note. The partner killed himself because of what Ethan had done to him. He couldn’t live with himself because of it. And that’s how Ethan came to be on the East Coast. And how he found out about Justin.”

“Fuck,” Lindsay and Brian both said.

Part 4

“What the fuck do you mean, that’s where he found out about Justin?” Brian thundered. While it was true that Brian had his suspicions about the man that was trying to win his lover away from him, he didn’t like hearing that he had reason for them.

“Ethan’s parents sent him to live with a distant uncle of theirs,” Melanie explained. “Apparently they hoped that a change of scenery might do him some good, and at first, it looked like it worked. Ethan’s grades in school got better and he met some people his own age. He appeared to be settling down. Then, sometime last winter he met someone and they got involved. Again, it was an older man, but not as old as the man in Phoenix. The man had just moved to Philadelphia. Seems he was chased out of where he used to live because of something that he had done and it had come back to bite him on the ass.”

“Sounds like someone that Ethan would get along with,” Brian commented. Melanie nodded her head. “And who was this fine upstanding citizen?”

“Does the name Kip Thomas ring a bell?”

“Fuck.” “Shit.” Brian and Lindsay swore at the same time, recognizing the name of the man that had sued Brian for sexual harassment the year before, only to later drop that case for an unknown reason.

“This just keeps getting better and better,” Brian muttered, looking over at Melanie. “And your detective is sure this is the same bastard?”

“Oh yeah, he’s sure,” Melanie affirmed. “He showed me a picture he had gotten of Kip from Ethan’s family. His uncle isn’t as forgiving as his parents are when it comes to Ethan’s faults. They wouldn’t tell me why, but from the indications they gave me when I talked to them earlier, I think Ethan might have done something there too.

“Anyway, I saw the picture and it is Kip. According to Ethan’s Uncle, Thomas Markham, Ethan began to spend all his time with Kip. His grades started to slip. He was constantly skipping school. He got into fights. They didn’t know what to do with him. When Ethan told them that he had decided to move to Pittsburgh to attend PIFA, they were more than happy to see him go. They didn’t want to deal with him anymore. They had no idea what he had done to get accepted, but they weren’t surprised.”

“I can’t believe this,” Lindsay whispered. “I mean, this doesn’t sound like the boy that we’ve met. How can anyone be like this?”

“Not to mention, how the hell did he find out that Justin was even going to be going to PIFA in the first place,” Brian asked, his anger barely being held in check. The more Melanie told him, the more he wanted to go and find the violinist that had wormed his way into his lover’s life and kills him.

“I don’t think he did. Know, that is,” Melanie continued. “From what I’ve been able to tell, that was just an unexpected benefit for him. He was just going to PIFA to study his violin and be closer to Justin, and you.”

“Me?” Brian shouted. “What do I have to do with it? Don’t tell me the bastard is going after Justin because of what happened between Kip and me? Shit.”

“Actually, it wasn’t just what happened between you and Kip,” Melanie proceeded cautiously. “It seems that when Ethan moved, he left behind his journal and his uncle found and read it. My investigator gave it to and, before you ask, no I don’t have it with me. It’s in a safe place at my office.”

“What’s in the journal?”

“It contains a detailed account of everything that Kip told Ethan about his little fling with you, and the reason he dropped the lawsuit.”

“Why do I have a feeling I’m not going to like the reason?” Brian asked.

“Because it involves Justin.” Brian groaned when he heard that, afraid of what the young man had done to help him. “It seems that he picked up Kip and they went back to his place. Justin then got him all hot and bothered and then told him he was only seventeen and blackmailed him to drop the lawsuit.”

“Fucking little twat, I’ll kill him.”

“Brian, he was only doing it to help you,” Lindsay reminded him. “Give him a break.” Brian didn’t say anything, not sure that he would be able to keep what little leash he had on his temper in check.

“I know,” he admitted. “Doesn’t mean I still don’t want to kill him for doing that. Didn’t he have any idea of what could have happened to him?”

“I don’t think he even thought about the consequences,” Melanie told him. “He was probably too worried about saving your sorry ass.”

“Thanks, Mel.”

“Anytime, Bri,” Melanie smiled sweetly. “Anyway, according to the journal, Ethan had decided to take it upon himself to get revenge on behalf of Kip. His uncle said that sometime in the spring, around the same time that Ethan had told them about his decision to go to PIFA, he began to disappear for days at a time. His family had no idea where he went until they found the journal.”

“Do I want to even ask?”

“He was coming to Pittsburgh,” Melanie told them. “The latter part of the journal was a history of what seems to be his stalking of both you and Justin. We’re talking some serious details here. Things I never wanted to know about you, that’s for sure. God, Brian, how many times a month did you feel the need to go to the baths.”

“Mel,” This time the warning came from Lindsay, “not now. Please.”

“You’re right,” she apologized. “We need to concentrate of getting Justin to listen to use about Ethan, whether he wants to or not. And, as much as I know you’re going to hate hearing me say this, Brian, but I don’t think you can be the one to tell him what we’ve discovered. There’s no way that he would believe any of it if it came from you.”

“I know,” Brian sighed, something which neither of the ladies was used to hearing from him. “The little shit would just think I made it all up to get him to leave the bastard.”

“So, it’s agreed. Lindsay and I have to be the ones to tell Justin,” Melanie said, looking over at her partner, who nodded her head.

“Now the only decision is when,” Lindsay agreed.

“As soon as possible I would think,” Brian finished. “And I want to be here, even if I don’t get to say anything,” he said quickly, interrupting Melanie from whatever she was going to say.

“How about Friday night,” Melanie suggested. “Lindsay and I were going to go out to dinner and Justin volunteered to sit Gus. That way we won’t cause him to be suspicious about being asked over. And it will give me more time to talk to my investigator and get him to give me a finished copy.”

“Don’t tell me you still have him looking for things,” Lindsay asked.

“Yeah,” Melanie nodded her head. “He’s talking to a few people that have been involved with Ethan since he moved to Pittsburgh, including a former roommate and some classmates of his. From what he’s already uncovered, things have definitely progressed since Ethan’s come to town and he thinks that these people are the best bet to discover whatever plan he has to get back at the two of you.”

“Fine, then,” Brian reluctantly agreed. “We’ll wait until Friday but, I’m telling you both right now, if you don’t tell him then, I don’t care what it will cost me, I will. I’m not going to let this psychotic little bastard take what’s mine.” And with that final declaration, Brian stood and stalked out of the house, leaving behind to shocked and worried ladies behind him.

Part 5

Friday Night

Brian, Melanie and Lindsay waited nervously for Justin’s arrival. The final report had come in describing everything that the private investigator that Melanie and Brian had hired to find out everything he could about Ethan Gold. Melanie had told both of the other two that the interviews that the investigator had had with Ethan’s former roommate and a couple of fellow students had indeed turned up some interesting tidbits about the violinists and made her feel guilty about her and Lindsay’s part in introducing Justin to the his fellow PIFA classmate. She felt that, maybe, if she and her lover hadn’t taken Justin to Ethan’s concert, maybe they wouldn’t be where they were at that moment. At that point, though, only she knew that the tickets they had received from Lindsay’s friend had actually been at the seemingly off hand suggestion of Ethan’s. She didn’t know how to tell her lover that they, as well as her friends, had been used as unwitting pawns in the game that Ethan Gold was playing with them all. And she really didn’t know how to tell them that Ethan now had a partner in crime.

Promptly at 6:30, the doorbell rang. Lindsay took a deep breath and went over to let Justin in. “Hey, Linds. Ready for your big date?” Lindsay moved to the let Justin in. The teen entered, moving to drop his back pack in the living room. He saw Melanie sitting on the couch and smiled a greeting towards the dark haired woman. A smile that dies on his lips at his first sighting of Brian standing in the doorway between the living and dining room.

“Brian, what are you doing here?” Justin looked between the three other people in the room, confusion evident on his face. He could tell by the serious expressions on their faces that something serious was happening and it began to scare him. “What’s going on? What’s happened?”

“Nothing’s happened, baby,” Melanie assured him, guiding him over to the sofa. “Well, not like you’re imaging I’m sure.” Melanie looked over at Brian who, she was glad to see, was doing exactly what he had said he would. Remain silent. “It’s just that, we’ve found out a few things that we think you should know about.”

“What kind of things?” Justin hadn’t missed the look that Melanie had shot his lover and knew that whatever was going to be said he wasn’t going to like hearing it.

“It’s about Ethan, sweetie,” Lindsay told him, causing Justin to jump out of the woman’s grasps. The teen shot a look over at Brian, who actually flinched from the anger that was in his eyes.

“What the fuck do you mean something about Ethan?” Justin shouted, stalking over to Brian. “What the hell have you been telling them?” Justin turned to face Melanie and Lindsay. “How can you believe anything Brian tells you about Ethan? You know how he feels about him.”

“We do know, honey,” Melanie answered calmly, refusing to let Justin’s anger get to her. She had expected it. “And when Brian first came to me to ask for my help, I didn’t believe him. At first. Then, when he told me what he had heard, my curiosity did get the better of me. I just wanted to make sure that you were okay, baby. I didn’t want to see you hurt, so I got one of the investigators that my firm deals with to look into Ethan’s past. Whether to confirm or deny Brian’s claims, it didn’t matter. It was to set my own mind at east.”

“And what did your investigator find?” Justin sneered. Melanie looked over at Lindsay, who took her hand to offer her support. The attorney took a deep breath and answered the angry teen.

“He told me that Brian had every reason to be worried and that Ethan Gold is nothing like the boy that he says he is.” Justin looked at Melanie, looking for something that said she was lying, but could only see true concern on her face. The same could be seen on Lindsay’s. Justin felt Brian’s arms wrap around his waist, pulling him against the older man’s chest.

“Just listen to Mel,” Brian quietly asked, his warm breath whispering against Justin’s ear. “That’s all I’m asking. Just give her a chance to tell you what she’s found out, with no help from me, I swear. If after that, you still don’t want to believe any of it, then that will be the last word.”

“Promise,” Justin whispered his heart pounding. He had never heard Brian make such a plea and his resolve to leave the house was severely weakening.

“Promise, baby.” Brian placed a gentle kiss against Justin’s cheek before releasing him. Justin turned and looked at Brian once; nodding as if accepting what Brian was asking of him and then went to join Melanie and Lindsay.

“Okay, so just what is it that you’ve supposedly dug up that’s so bad?”

“It all started about three weeks ago, when Brian showed up at my office and surprising the hell out of me,” Melanie began. Thirty minutes later, and just as many questions from Justin, she had caught him up to what she had already told Brian and Lindsay about the discoveries her detective had found out about the elusive Ethan Gold.

And, good as his word, Brian hadn’t interrupted once. He sat in the dining room, listening in on every word of the conversation, at times biting his tongue, and waited to see what was going to happen. His heart broke at the look of despair and anguish that began to overtake Justin’s handsome features and wished there was a way to take away the pain his lover was feeling. It surprised Brian to feel what he was feeling. He had never felt so strongly for someone before and the fact that Justin was hurting bothered him and he wished, more than anything, that Ethan Gold was in front of him right then so that he could kill him with his own bare hands.

“Shit,” Justin sighed, falling back into the chair he was sitting in. He couldn’t believe what he had just been told. None of it made any sense. It went against everything that Ethan had told him and yet, Melanie had proof of it. She had shown him everything that her investigator had discovered on his fact finding mission to Philadelphia. Melanie had even brought home the journal that Ethan’s uncle had given the investigator detailing the details of Brian and Justin’s lives up to the point before Ethan had apparently moved to Pittsburgh, right before the bashing. Justin couldn’t believe how many details Ethan knew of his life with Brian, and that included the people that they were involved with. It was obvious that Ethan had made it his goal to know everything and anything he could about Justin and Brian and the teen couldn’t believe that he hadn’t seen it coming.

“Justin?” Brian said, coming to kneel before his lover. The ad exec was worried by the silence that had taken over the younger man, knowing that if Justin was true to type, he was probably blaming himself for whatever Ethan’s plan might be and there was no way Brian was going to let that happen. “Justin, baby, are you okay?” Melanie and Lindsay looked over at each other, not bothering to try and hide their smiles and Brian’s use of the word baby. They just sat back and let Brian handle Justin’s shock, knowing that he was what the teen needed at that moment.

“God, how could I have been so stupid?” Brian heard Justin mutter. “I believed him. Every fucking word and I bought it. Hell, you would think that, after everything I’ve been through I would know better but I still fell for it. All that bullshit he was spouting about romance and relationships and his past and I listened to it.

“Just it wasn’t your fault,” Brian tried to reassure him. “Ethan has been doing this a long time and he knew exactly what you wanted to hear. The bastard’s journal is proof of how long he’s been planning this. You didn’t stand a chance against him.”

“But you saw right through him,” Justin pointed out. “You knew he was up to no good, that’s why you had Melanie investigate him. You knew he was up to no good.” Brian kissed Justin’s forehead, taking him into his arms.

“I just wanted to make sure that he was the right man for you,” Brian told him. “I wanted to make sure that he could make you happy if he was the one that you wanted to be with. True, I didn’t trust him, but that’s my nature. I don’t trust a lot of people, especially those that appear to be as perfect as he always tried to make himself out to be, but I didn’t expect all of this, baby. I didn’t.”

“Maybe I need to learn not to trust anyone,” Justin sighed.

“No, baby. Don’t you dare,” Brian admonished him. “Your ability to see the best in everyone is one of the many reasons I love you.” Justin pulled away from Brian, looking deeply into the older man’s hazel eyes.

“You love me?” Brian heart broke at the pain filled blue eyes that stared back at him.

“Yeah, baby, I love you,” Brian admitted, knowing that maybe the time had come for him to stop hiding behind his emotional bullshit, especially if it meant that maybe Justin would be able to get through whatever was to come. “I’m sorry I haven’t shown you just how important you are to me, but you know how I am.”

“Yeah I do,” Justin admitted, smiling for the first time since Melanie had begun her story. “I love you, too, you know.” Brian nodded his head, leaning forward and kissing Justin’s lips, causing the young man to sigh. A few minutes passed before the broke apart again, Brian moving to sit next in Justin’s chair, the teen curling up on his lap, needing Brian’s comfort.

“Ummm, guys,” Melanie began hesitatingly, not wanting to break the spell that had seem to come over the two men, but knowing that they needed to know what else she had discovered. “I hate saying this, especially now, but……there’s more.

Part 6

“More?” Justin tensed, Brian’s arms wrapping around him as if protecting him from whatever else Melanie had to say. “How much more?”

“A lot,” Melanie admitted, watching as Brian gave Justin another little kiss. “I won’t tell you if you don’t want to hear it. I haven’t even told Brian or Lindsay yet. We can wait until later if you want.” Justin looked up at Brian, a question being silently asked and answered between the two men.

“What else is there?” Melanie looked between the two men and saw the resolve they had to see this thing though and nodded. She reached over to the table and retrieved the thick file that she had placed there a few minutes before, opening and finding where she had last left off.

“Okay, so now after Ethan came to Pittsburgh, he got himself a roommate,” Melanie continued. “A young man by the name of,” Melanie referred to her notes, “Matthew Coyle, a twenty two year old law student at the University of Pittsburgh. They met through the classifieds when Ethan answered an ad that Matthew had placed looking for a roommate. Matthew said that when he had met Ethan, he had been given the impression that Ethan was a teen that had been kicked to the curb, so to speak, when his parents had discovered he was gay.”

“Sounds familiar,” Justin muttered from his perch on Brian’s lap.

“Yeah it does, but in this case we know it’s not true,” Melanie reminded him. “Anyway, it was one of the reasons that Matthew had accepted Ethan as his roommate instead of some of the other people that had answered the ad. He said that there was something sad about him, something that made him seem…..vulnerable and that called to Matt. It wasn’t until a few months had passed that he realized how well he was being played and got away from Ethan, although he said that the breakup of the roommate situation had not been pretty. Ethan screwed him real bad.”

“Were the two of them fucking?” Brian asked. Melanie shook her head.

“Actually no,” she answered. “Matt said that Ethan wasn’t really his type. A bit too serious for his taste, but that didn’t stop him from showing Ethan the sights and sounds of Liberty Avenue. And he answered all of his questions too, and apparently quite a few of them revolved the legend that is Brian Kinney.” Melanie watched as Brian squirmed in his seat until Justin calmed him down with just a touch. At first, Matt didn’t think anything of it. Hell, even he had a thing for the unobtainable Brian Kinney. But then, one day when Ethan was out, right before school started, Matt went into Ethan’s room to get a book that Ethan had borrowed from him and had discovered Ethan’s dirty secret.”

“Why do I not like the sound of this?” Lindsay sighed, already feeling for her two friends.

“Probably because you have good instincts,” Melanie said.

“What did he find?” Justin asked.

“He found a box and, even though he knew he shouldn’t have, he looked in it,” she began again. She took a deep breath and continued. “Inside were pictures. A lot of them. Of you and Brian at Babylon. In the jeep. At the store. The diner. Pretty much everywhere, including the loft. And we are talking some pretty explicit pictures, at least, according to him. And there were a lot of newspaper clippings about the bashing and then the trial.”

“Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.” Justin muttered, almost like it was a mantra. “This can’t be happening. It can’t. It’s not possible.”

“Shhh, baby. It’s going to be okay,” Brian soothed. “I promise.” He looked over at Melanie, silently asking her to confirm what he was promising and was not happy when it didn’t appear as if she would help him. “We’ll get through this, baby. I swear.”

“I wish I could be that sure,” Justin cried.

“Justin, I wish there was something I could say that we could make this all go away,” Melanie told him. “Unfortunately I can’t. The only thing I can do is promise you that we will all be there for you and will do anything that we need to in order to make sure that Ethan won’t get away with it.” Justin nodded, accepting what he was being told and looked over at Melanie.

“Did he find anything else?” Brian questioned, anger in his voice, even though his hold on Justin was still gentle.

“Another journal.”

“Crap,” Brian said. “And what did this one say?”

“Some of the same things that were in the first,” Melanie explained. “But this one also had his plan as to what he waned to do while in Pittsburgh.”

“Damn it, Mel, don’t make me fucking drag this out of you one sentence at a time,” Brian swore.

“Sorry,” she apologized, meaning it. “Well, unfortunately I don’t have a copy of this particular journal, but Matt did read it, again, knowing he shouldn’t have and he told me what he remembered.” Melanie reverted to looking back at her files. “His main plan was to make both you and Justin pay for what you did to Kip, at least at first. But then, over time, apparently your reputation got to him and he decided he wanted to take you down, Brian. Basically, because he likes to be the best at everything, he wanted to be known as the man that takes away Brian Kinney’s lover. What other way can prove, beyond a shadow of doubt, that he is the ultimate gay?”

“That’s fucked,” Brian said. “What? He figured that if he could get Justin away from me that it would somehow make him more desirable to the fags on Liberty?”

“We aren’t talking about someone who is thinking to sanely,” Melanie pointed out. “Who knows what is going through his mind, really. This is a boy who is not exactly mentally balanced and he’s proven that with his actions over that past few years. Anyway, that is only one of the things that Matt discovered. He also saw what appeared to be a detailed list of some of the plans that he was going to use to get what he wanted. The first, of course, was to meet Justin and, unfortunately, that’s where Linds and I fall in.”

“What do you mean, where we fall in?” Lindsay asked, before remembering when Justin met Ethan. “The concert?” Melanie nodded her head.

“I talked to Katie, your friend at PIFA. Seems that one of Ethan’s teachers is Katie’s partner,” Melanie told her stunned lover. “Ethan suggested to Sam that he give us the tickets as a wedding present. Sam didn’t even think of how Ethan might have known about the ceremony, figuring that maybe he had overheard him and Katie talking about it. Sam said that Ethan had suggested that maybe we knew another couple that wanted to go so he gave us the extra tickets. I’m pretty sure that he knew that Brian wouldn’t go.”

“But how did he know that I would even go over and talk to him?” Justin asked.

“Who knows,” Melanie shrugged. “Maybe he figured that you would want to compliment a fellow artist. Maybe he just thought you would find him attractive and want to talk to him.”

“And he got what he wanted,” Justin moaned. “Fuck.”

“Justin, it wasn’t your fault,” Melanie admonished him. “None of us figured out what he was doing. How could we? Hell, we didn’t even question the tickets, thinking they were only a gift. And Katie and Sam didn’t question Ethan’s suggestion. He played us all. It’s just that, so far, it’s affected you the most. Yes, you might have been the one to go up to him first at the concert, but I want you to remember that, no matter what, he would have found a way to meet you. That was his plan. And then, after the meeting, he knew exactly what to say to get you to keep coming back.”

“How did the little bastard know what to say?” Brian demanded. “I mean, stalking is one thing. Seeing Justin from a distance. But he knew exactly what Justin wanted and needed.”

“That’s true,” Justin agreed. “It was almost like he was inside my mind.”

“He didn’t need to be inside your mind,” Melanie told them, knowing that the next bit of information would kill both of the men in front of her, as well as destroy the group of friends that they belonged to. “He had help.”

“Help?” Melanie nodded.

“While Ethan was stalking you two, he found out everything he could about everyone in your lives. I guess he was looking for your weaknesses and he found one. Your biggest one, Brian.”

“What do you mean?” Brian asked, almost afraid of the answer.

“He found someone who would be more than happy to have you and Justin break up and was willing to do what it took to make sure it happened.”

“Who?” The ad exec demanded, already planning revenge on the person who had betrayed him and Justin.

“Michael.”

Part 7

“What?” Brian shouted, the only thing preventing him from jumping out of his chair being the fact that Justin was still in hip lap. As it was, Brian was so startled by Melanie’s announcement that his grip on his young lover tightened to the point that Justin actually flinched from it. Brian noticed immediately and loosened his hold. “Sorry.”

“No problem.”

“Are you sure he said that Michael was involved with Ethan?” Brian asked, unable to believe that his best friend could betray him like that. “There’s no way that Mikey would do something like this. I mean, I know in the beginning he had a problem with Justin and mine relationship, but I thought he had gotten over that. Especially since the….last year.” The others in the group knew that Brian had been about to say since Justin had gotten bashed and knew that it was still difficult for the older man to talk about the night of the prom.

“Yeah,” Justin agreed. “And Michael’s been, I guess I can say it, a friend over the past few months. He’s always been willing to listen to me, especially when I was upset…..” Justin trailed off from whatever he had been about to say as a thought crossed his mind.

“Fuck,” he swore. “Son of a bitch, how did I miss it? All this time, I thought that bastard was just trying to be a friend. That he was concerned about me. But he was just pumping me for information. No wonder Ethan knew what to say to me all the time. Michael was telling him everything I told him. Fuck.”

“Justin?”

“Sweetie?”

“Justin, babe, what’s going on?” Brian asked, overriding Melanie and Lindsay’s concern. He could feel the tension in Justin’s body increase as the teen seemed to become more and more upset and held him closer to his chest, trying to calm him down.

“I’m so fucking stupid,” Justin continued to mutter. “I trusted him.”

“Who, Justin? Mikey?” Justin nodded his head at Brian’s questions.

“It all started when he came to me about the comic book,” Justin began. “It’s not like we were friends or anything but we had that in common. He listened to me when I talked about the bashing. He made me feel like I could open up to him when I was having problems, especially when it came to the two of us. And we were having a lot of problems. The day you destroyed all the artwork, I was so depressed. I was convinced that you didn’t love me. That I was deluding myself all along, but he was the one telling me that you did love me.”

“Oh, baby,” Brian soothed, pulling Justin closer to him. “I’m so sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am. And I know that I can’t take back what happened. I know that’s impossible. The only thing I can say is that the way I acted was because of pure jealousy on my part.”

“Brian, why did you destroy the Justin’s art work?” Lindsay asked. She and Melanie had heard about what had happened that morning in the loft and had been curious as to why Brian had done what he had. They watched as Brian squirmed in his seat beneath Justin, unable to look them in the eyes.

“Iwashmgnvho,” he mumbled.”

“What was that?” Melanie asked, a smile alighting her face.

“I said I was jealous,” Brian repeated, his voice taking on an angry tone. “Happy now?”

“Actually, yes,” she smiled back at him. “But the question is. Why were you jealous of Justin and Michael?”

“I’d like to know the answer to that myself,” Justin added, his blue eyes meeting Brian’s hazel ones. “You know that nothing ever happened between us, don’t you?” Brian nodded his head.

“I know. It was just that Ben had been going on and on about how much more intimate creating something like that was more orgasmic than sex and then I got back to the loft, after having been stood up by you.” Brian kissed the tip of Justin’s nose to take some of the sting out of his comment, “only to find you and Mikey in bed together and his hand on you and that just set me off.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I don’t know why Michael was in bed with me,” Justin offered. “I mean, he did ask me if he could spend the night, saying he was tired and shit, but the last thing I remember was him getting the couch ready to sleep on. Hell, even I’m not stupid enough to offer your side of the bed to someone else. I like my life very much, thank you.” A thought came to Justin and he squirmed on Brian’s lap. “Christ, I wonder if what happened that morning was an accident after all.”

“What happened?”

“I was still asleep and I felt someone begin to grope me. I thought it was you and I was getting into it. I turned over; wanting to get my morning kiss and it was Michael.” Justin shuddered at the memory. “We both screamed and pulled apart. I had chalked it up to us just waking up and thinking that the person in bed with us was our partner, but what if it was something else? What if he was hoping that was what you walked in on?”

“Fuck,” Brian swore. “I’m going to kill him.”

“Do you really think that’s possible?” Lindsay questioned, not wanting to believe what she was hearing about Michael. She hated the idea that someone that they were all so close to was able to do something like they were saying. It went against everything she believed in when it came to family and friends. “That doesn’t sound like something Michael would do.”

“Baby, I know you don’t want to think that someone could do this,” Melanie comforted her lover, “but from everything the investigator was able to find out, it does sound like something Michael could, and did, do.”

“It also explains how Ethan knew exactly what to say to me to get me to keep coming back to him,” Justin said, bringing their attention back to me. He looked up at Brian again, knowing that his lover was hurting not just for Justin but for himself also. “It was right after you went to Chicago instead of our trip to Vermont. I was so hurt and angry at you for doing that.”

“Justin, I told you…” Justin cut Brian off before he could continue.

“I know,” he promised. “I know you had no choice but to go. Your job depended on you going to Chicago and proving yourself, but at the time I was so angry and hurt that I didn’t care. I just thought it was your way of getting out of spending the week with me. We had already been having so many problems, especially after my birthday. And I had already met Ethan and he was telling me what he would do if he were my boyfriend and it was everything that I wanted. It hurt me when it looked like you didn’t want to give those things to me. I vented to Michael, right before I left for the trip. I told him I wanted someone that put me first. That would get jealous of some guy sucking my dick in front of him. The next thing I know, a week later and Ethan says the same thing to me. We’re talking almost word for fucking word. He knew exactly what I wanted to hear to get me to keep coming back. Fuck how could I have been so stupid.”

Brian watched as Justin continued to beat himself up over what had been done to him. While he was glad that his young lover seemed to be more than willing to believe that Ethan was using him for some ulterior purpose, going to far as to already see what had been done to him in regards to the way Ethan had been treating him, he wished there was something he could do to make Justin realize that he wasn’t at fault. That there was nothing he could have done to prevent what had been going on. Everyone had been pulled into Ethan’s little trap. Brian just hoped that Justin was strong enough to deal with what he was being told and that the two of them would be able to survive what was happening to them.

Part 8

Melanie and Lindsay left the room when it became apparent that Brian and Justin needed some time alone to deal with everything that they had been told. For the first time in her life, Melanie Marcus felt sorry for Brian Kinney. To find out that your best friend, the one person who should know you better than anyone, was willing to go to such lengths to break you and your lover up had to be difficult for the man who found it hard to trust anyone. She was surprised that Brian hadn’t immediately gone after Michael, ready to do anything to get back at the other man for daring to interfere in his relationship with Justin.

When Melanie had first heard that Justin was seeing someone new, someone other than Brian, she had been happy for the teen. Over the past two years, Justin had found a path to her heart and she knew how much the young man longed to have the kind of romantic relationship that Hollywood seemed to have a fascination with and she knew that he wouldn’t find it if he stayed with Brian. Brian wasn’t the kind of man to give someone flowers for no reason. To show jealousy over Justin fucking some guy. Brian didn’t talk about his feelings, preferring to keep them locked inside him, safely hidden from anyone who might decide to use them against him.

Ethan Gold has seemed to be the answer to Justin’s prayers. Here was someone who put Justin first. Who had no problem telling Justin exactly how he felt. Someone the same age as Justin, who knew exactly what Justin was going through in regards to his relationship with Brian because he had told Justin that he had gone through the same thing with his ex-lover. Ethan made Justin feel loved and Melanie had been excited for him. Sure, Lindsay had told her that Brian loved Justin, and Melanie had to grudgingly admit that the ad exec did seem to care for the teen, but Melanie was willing to begrudge Justin his happiness and if it came at the cost of Brian, then so be it.

That had all been blown out the water the day that Brian had showed up in her office, asking her for help in finding out about Ethan’s past. At first Melanie had dismissed Brian’s claim, believing it to be some sort of last grasp at saving his relationship with Justin. Brian’s last ditch effort at keeping Justin under his control. But when she had seen the look in his eyes as he was leaving her office, she knew that Brian genuinly cared for Justin and admitted that, maybe, they had all been wrong about Ethan and had listened to Brian’s story. What she heard shocked her. She couldn’t believe that the same young man that had been so charming to her could truly be so ruthless. And then, the more her investigator discovered, the more Melanie began to become concerned over Justin’s well-being and the motives behind Ethan’s involvement with him. The fact that Ethan’s own uncle was more than willing to help her in the investigation only strengthened her resolve to help Brian get Ethan out of Justin’s life for good.

“Melanie, how could we have missed this?” Lindsay broke the uncomfortable silence. “There had to have been some kind of sign that we didn’t see. Brian saw right through him.”

“That’s because Ethan was going after something that Brian considered his,” Melanie reminded her lover.

“That and Brian’s generally untrustful nature,” Lindsay added, causing Melanie to smile. The two women moved together, holding each other close. “God, poor Justin. He’s already gone through so much and now this. He was already having a hard enough time dealing with his feelings for Ethan and Brian, but to find out that Ethan was just playing mind games with him.”

“It’s not going to be easy,” Melanie admitted, “but he’s a strong kid. And he has us and, as much as I hate to say it, Brian. I think he’ll make it. It’s Brian that I’m worried about.” Lindsay pulled back from Melanie and looked at her lover.

“Why do you say that?” Melanie just raised her eyebrow at Lindsay. “Because of Michael. I still can’t believe that he had anything to do with this. That just doesn’t sound like him.”

“I know but it’s true,” Melanie assured her. “And my investigator did give me the proof that I needed before I was even willing to believe it and I don’t think Brian will take what I have to show you guys well.”

“Brian has never been the most forgiving person,” Lindsay admitted. “And this is the ultimate betrayal, especially coming from Michael. He tried to interfere in Brian and Justin’s life and that’s what’s going to hurt. Especially because it brought someone like Ethan into their lives. That’s something that I don’t think Brian will be able to forgive anytime soon, if at ever.”

“Do you think he might do something to Michael?” Lindsay nodded her head.

“I think it’s an extreme possibility, if not a probability.”

“Shit, maybe I shouldn’t tell him what else I have then,” Melanie told her.

“At this point, I don’t think you have a choice,” Lindsay said. “No matter what you tell Brian now, he is going to do whatever he thinks is necessary to punish Ethan, and Michael, for daring to hurt Justin.”

In the living room, Brian and Justin continued to hold each other, comforting themselves in their lover’s arms. Brian could feel the tension radiating through the younger man’s body and wished there was something he could do to help Justin deal with everything that he was being told but knew that only time would be able to do that. Hell, time would be the only thing that would get either of them through this. Time and each other because Brian wasn’t sure that they could count on their friends, especially if what Melanie was telling him was true.

‘Fuck, Mikey,’ Brian thought. ‘How the hell could he do this? The little twat. What the fuck was going through his mind?’

“Brian,” Justin ventured, talking into Brian’s chest. “Are you okay?

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that question?” Brian joked feebly. “You’re the one this kid is going after.”

“Somehow I think he’s going after both of us,” Justin countered, smiling up at Brian before turning serious again. “But I was talking about what Melanie said about Michael. He is your best friend.”

“If what Mel’s saying is true, then I’m not sure what I’m going to do,” Brian admitted. “I’ve known Mikey a long time. He’s the closest thing to a brother that I’ve ever had. Fuck, what the hell was he thinking getting involved in this. I can’t believe he could be that stupid.”

“He was probably thinking he could protect you,” Justin said, defending Michael. He knew how much the friendship with Michael meant to his lover and didn’t want to see Brian lost it if there was a reason behind Michael’s betrayal. “You know. Something along of lines of showing you that maybe I didn’t love you like I said I did if Ethan could pull me away so easily. He probably didn’t think you would fight to keep me. That’s not the Brian Kinney he knows.”

“That’s not the Bran Kinney he fucking wants to know,” Brian swore. “And I don’t care what his excuses might be, what he did was over the line and I can’t believe that you’re actually defending him. Fuck, he gave that bastard the information he needed to get you away from me. Aren’t you even a little angry about that?”

“Fuck yes I’m angry,” Justin shouted, jumping out of Brian’s lap for the first time in awhile. “I’m fucking pissed. Because of what Michael did I might have lost my one chance at happiness because I was too busy being played for a god damn fool. He caused me to question everything that I had believed in because of some stupid reason that only he knows and I’m so angry that I want nothing more than to kill him for doing that. But what I’m the most pissed about is the fact that he might have caused me to lose you and there isn’t a damn thing I can do about it.” Brian stood up and walked over to a pacing Justin, taking the younger man into his arms and holding him tightly.

“You haven’t lost me,” Brian whispered, causing the blonde to look up at him.

“Really?” Brian nodded his head, leaning down to place a kiss on Justin’s lips. “How can you ever forgive me for Ethan?”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Brian promised. “Just don’t it again.”

“Promise.” Justin smiled up at Brian and the two men kissed again, reveling in the taste of the other man, both knowing that, while damage had been done to their relationship, they were secure in the knowledge that they could overcome this and any other hurdle that crossed their paths.

Part 9

Thirty minutes passed by before Melanie and Lindsay made their way back into their living room. The women stood in the doorway between the dining room and living room, smiling at the picture in front of them. Brian and Justin, cuddling together on the chair, holding onto each other like their lives depended on it and sharing sweet and loving kisses that left no question as to how they felt towards each other. Finally, when it became apparent that Brian and Justin hadn’t notice their entrance, or were choosing to ignore it, Melanie cleared her throat, causing the two men to look up at her. Melanie and Lindsay’s hearts broke when they noticed that Justin had been crying.

“Sorry,” she apologized.

“That’s okay,” Justin sniffed, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. The two women made their way into the living room, resuming their places on the couch. “We didn’t mean to force you guys into leaving.”

“You didn’t sweetie,” Lindsay promised, smiling at the teen. “We know how much this must be hurting you.” Justin nodded, burrowing further into Brian’s chest, who had no problem with it. The women wouldn’t have believed it if they hadn’t seen it with their own eyes. Brian Kinney doing the whole supportive, loving, caring thing. It was something they would never thought was possible.

“Do you have any proof to back up the claims that….” Brian couldn’t even finish his question. The thought that his best friend could betray him the way he did still too painful for him. Melanie looked between the two men nodding as she removed a tape from the file.

“When I had the investigation started and it became apparent that Ethan wasn’t as perfect as he claimed, my guy decided to put a tap on his phone line,” she explained. “He didn’t really expect to get anything from it so he didn’t pay too close of attention to what was being said. That is, until this conversation. It’s obviously between Ethan and his cohort and I’ll think you’ll agree with me, there is no mistaking the voice. It is Michael’s.”

Melanie reached over to the table where she had previously set down that tape recorder, pulling it closer to her. She put in the tape, looking over at Brian and Justin. She waited until they both gave their silent permission before she pressed play. She watched Brian and Justin closely as the tape began and noticed the moment they recognized the two voices.

M-“We have a problem. I think we might have to push up the time table.”

E-“What are you talking about?”

M-“Brian and Justin are planning a trip to Vermont. A nice, romantic trip filled with snowboarding and fucking.”

E-“Shit. How the hell did that happen? I thought you said that the two of them were drifting apart after the birthday fiasco.”

M-“They were. Everything was going perfectly. Justin hated the fact that Brian got him a hustler for his birthday.”

E-“And he never said anything about it being your idea?”

M-“Hell no. I don’t even think Brian realized that I was the one that planted that seed in his head when I found out what he really wanted to do.”

“Mel, stop the tape,” Justin ordered, turning to Brian as he did so. “Michael was the one that suggested the hustler?” Brian thought back to when he had been discussing getting something for Justin and remembered how Michael began talking about Brian’s own nineteenth birthday and how their friends had gotten Brian a hustler. Brian had laughed it off but from that moment on, it had been in the back of his mind and for some reason that was what he went with, and even then knowing it wasn’t something that Justin would like.

“Yeah he was,” Brian finally answered. “We had been talking about our nineteenth birthdays and he reminded me about the presents we each got.”

“But it wasn’t what you wanted to get me?” Brian shook his head. “What did you want to get me?”

“I was going to surprise you with some new art supplies,” Brian answered softly. “I had noticed you were really low, and I knew that even the things you were buying were on the low end of the scale because you didn’t have a job so I thought you would like getting some of the things that you really liked.”

“It would have been a wonderful present,” Justin murmured, touched by the thought that Brian paid enough attention to his art that he knew which supplies he preferred. The younger man cursed silently the person that had prevented him from getting his very special gift from Brian. “I’m sorry I never got them.”

“I’m sorry for getting you what I did.” Justin kissed Brian softly.

“It’s in the past,” he told him. “Let’s forget about it.” Brian nodded his head and Justin turned back to Melanie. “Okay, you can restart it.”

E-“What brought up this trip to Vermont?”

M-“Who fucking knows. All I know is that Justin was going on and on about this great little Bed and Breakfast place he found up in Sugarbush and how he couldn’t wait for him and Bran. It was completely disgusting.”

E-“And Brian was okay with this? We are talking about the same man that doesn’t do romance right?”

M-“MMhmmm.”

E-“Fuck, this is not good.”

M-“What makes this even worse is that Brian’s boss just sold his agency and he doesn’t even know what’s going on with it.”

E-“Really? Interesting. Do you know who bought it?”

M-“Some guy name Vance.”

E-“Gardner Vance?”

M-“Yeah, that’s it. You know him?”

E-“Yeah. He and my Dad go way back. His agency does that advertising for my Dad’s company. Maybe this could work out for us.”

M-“How?”

E-“Maybe we can get him to convince Brian that he’s job is on the line unless he does something drastic.”

M-“Making it so Brian can’t go on the trip….”

E-“Exactly. And in not going on the trip, he’ll end up pushing Justin away…”

M-“And into your waiting arms.”

E-“That would be the plan.”

M-“Yeah, but how can you be so sure that Justin will go after you when Brian blows him off.”

E-“Easy. I’ll just make sure that he has no problem running into me and then I’ll just make sure that I say all the right things to get him interested and have him keep coming back for more.”

M-“Are you sure he will. I mean, no matter what Brian has thrown at the little shit, he keeps coming back for me. It might not be that easy to lead him astray.”

E-“Are you having second thoughts about this?”

M-“Hell no. The quicker we can get Justin and Brian apart, the better.”

E-Laughing “You that sure you can get Brian interested in you?”

M-“Of course. Hell, if it hadn’t been for that interfering little stalker, Brian and I would have been together a long time ago.”

E-“Well, just make sure to stick to the plan and we’ll both get what we want. I’ll get my revenge and you’ll get your Brian.”

“And that’s the end of the tape,” Melanie said once the tape ended

“Mother Fucker, I’m going to kill him,” Brian swore, pushing Justin off his lap and he stood up, his stance radiating anger. “That fucking son of a bitch. And he’s supposed to be my best friend. Damn it, with friends like him, who the hell needs enemies.”

“Brian,” Justin started, causing Brian to go over to him and take him into his arms.

“He’s going to pay, Justin,” Brian swore. “They’re both going to pay for what they did to you. To us.” And Justin knew it was true and couldn’t find it in himself to feel any pity for either man and was looking forward to helping.

Part 10

“Brian,” Justin hesitantly called out to his lover when they returned to the loft. The older man had been uncommonly silent on the drive back to their home and Justin had been able to feel the tension running through Brian’s body. After listening to the phone call that had been between Michael and Ethan, things had only gotten progressively worse. Brian had pointed out to Melanie that there was no way the phone call could have been for real because it would have taken place before Justin and Ethan had even gotten together. Long before the investigation had been started. Melanie squirmed a bit before admitting that the tape was real and that the call had taken place but her investigator hadn’t been the one to record it.

It turned out that at the same time that Ethan and Michael were conspiring against Brian and Justin, Ethan was also harassing his former roommate Matt. The violinist had been making repeated phone calls to Matt, threatening bodily harm if Matt didn’t drop his plans to sure Ethan for the damage to the apartment that he had caused and the back rent he had owed. Matt reported the harassment to his father, who was friends with the Chief of Police and the police had put a phone tap on Ethan’s line, hoping to get enough proof to at least get a restraining order against him, even if they couldn’t prosecute him. And they did get the proof; they had also recorded the conversation that Melanie had given them. The investigator had discovered it when he had mentioned his investigation to a detective friend of his who had been in on the surveillance in the first place and had given him a copy of the tape.

“Brian, are you okay?” Justin watched as Brian went over to the refrigerator and grabbed a beer, opening it and downing half of the bottle in one gulp. “Brian?”

“I’m fine, Justin,” he finally told him. “I’m just trying to process everything.” Brian turned to face his young lover, taking in the disheveled appearance and held out his arms, which Justin instantly filled. The two men stood in the kitchen like that for awhile, taking comfort in the love that the other person felt for them.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Justin muttered against Brian’s chest. “It all seems like a bad dream and I want nothing more than to wake up from it.”

“I know, baby. I feel the same way.”

“And the way the two of them could get everyone else to do their dirty work, including your boss.” Justin shuddered at the thought of how far Michael and Ethan were willing to go and who they had no problem using to get there. Melanie had told her about the meeting she had with Brian’s partner/boss, Gardner Vance, and how she got him to admit that he had been lying to Brian about his job ever being in jeopardy. In fact, just the opposite had been true. Vance had lied to Brian about everything, including the fact that the clients that Brian had brought in, like Liberty Air, would stay if the advertising exec left.

“What are you going to do about work?”

“I’m not sure,” Brian admitted. “You know I’ve been unhappy since Vance took over the agency. If it wasn’t for the fact that he made me a partner, something I don’t think he was too fucking happy about, and I really don’t want to start at the bottom somewhere else I would have been long gone. I just can’t believe I bought into his bullshit.”

“Brian there’s no way you could have known,” Justin said as the two men made their way over to the couch. “He was playing along with Ethan and he knew exactly what to tell you to make you believe it.”

“You mean, like Ethan did to you,” Brian reminded the younger man, who looked away from him. Brian took Justin’s chin in his hand, gently forcing him to look into his eyes. “Justin, stop blaming yourself.”

“But if I had only stayed away….,” Brian cut off Justin by kissing him.

“He would have found another way of getting your attention,” Brian told him. “And with Mikey,” Brian had to swallow hard at the mention of his now former friend, “helping him, it would have only been a matter of time. I don’t want you to think that any of this was your fault. It wasn’t. Melanie showed you, showed us, that Ethan and Michael were very determined to get between us and break us apart.”

“And they almost did,” Justin cried. “God, Brian, that night in Babylon I walked away from you. I saw the smug look on Michael’s face but I didn’t even think about it. I was just so hurt when I saw you with that trick and then Ethan was there telling me all this shit about how I was his inspiration and all.” Tears began to roll down Justin’s cheek as he remembered the night he had walked away from Brian and the emotions he had felt at the time.

“I thought I had lost you for good that night,” Brian finally admitted, talking about the night his world had ended. “When I saw the two of you kissing, I thought it was over between us. And then when I didn’t hear from you for a week and finding out you were staying at Debbie’s again. Everyone thought you’re leaving was for the best. That now you would be able to live some kind of normal life. Only Michael seemed to understand how hurt I had been at the time.”

“And I’m sure he used it to his advantage,” Justin hissed. “He sure made no secret about how he felt about me whenever I saw him. It pissed him off to no end when he found out the Debbie was letting me stay with her again.”

“Why did you decide to go back to Debbie’s instead of moving in with Ethan?” Brian asked the question that had been foremost on his mind for the past month and a half.

“Because I didn’t love him,” Justin told him. “And it was too soon. I thought it wouldn’t be fair to any of us if I moved right in with him from you. And I was so confused. I was so in love with you and so hurt because I didn’t think you cared for me. And I think a part of me knew that Ethan wasn’t going to be the right answer, even then, but he was what I needed at the time. Said the things I needed to be said.”

“And now we know why.” Justin nodded his head.

“Can you ever forgive me?”

“For what, baby?”

“For doubting you,” Justin answered. “For doubting your feelings towards me. For walking away from us.”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Justin,” Brian told him. “We both fucked up and fucked up big. You had every reason to doubt me. I never gave you any clue how I felt. I refused to tell you how much you meant to me.”

“But I never pushed you to tell me until Ethan came into the picture,” Justin rebuked. “I should have known that would have only put up those defensive walls you have.”

“I only wanted you to be happy, Justin.” Justin snuggled closer to Brian, enjoying the closeness of the older man. “And if Ethan was the one who made you that way, then you had every right to pursue your relationship with him.”

“He never made me truly happy, Brian,” the blonde admitted. “He couldn’t because he wasn’t you.” Justin and Brian fell silent again for a few minutes.

“Brian,” Justin hesitantly began.

“Hmmm.”

“Can we try again?”

“Try what again?”

“Us.” Brian didn’t answer right away.

“No.” Justin nodded numbly, keeping the tears in this time. “This time, we try it right.” Justin popped up, looking at Brian and quietly asking him to elaborate. “This time, no rules. They were a bunch of bullshit and didn’t work anyway. And we don’t listen to what everyone says or tells us how our relationship should be. We do it for ourselves.” Justin nodded his head, a smile taking over his face. “And, I can’t believe I’m about to say this. No more tricking. For either of us.”

“You mean it?” Justin’s smile got even bigger. Brian nodded his head and Justin threw himself into Brian’s arms again, the two men kissing passionately and losing themselves in each other and, for a moment, forgetting about the two men that had tried to separate them and the plans they needed to make in order for them to pay for that interference.

Part 11

Justin and Brian spent the weekend together, avoiding both Ethan and Michael as much as possible while, at the same time, not allowing either man to know they were back together. They decided that, until they could figure out a way to make sure that Michael and Ethan pay for what they did to the two of them, they didn’t want to arouse a lot of suspicion, although they knew that the first part of their plan would bring some to be thrown their way. So each night, Justin returned to Debbie’s and placed his nightly call to Ethan, while Brian remained at the loft, alone. Neither man liked the separation, not wanting to part from their lover now that they were back together, but they knew it was necessary if they wanted their plan to work. They had even made Melanie and Lindsay promise not to say anything to any of their other friends and, while the women didn’t like it, they had agreed knowing that Brian and Justin had to deal with the betrayal in their own way.

Monday had begun the first part of their plan, although to the outside world it just seemed like any other day. Brian had spent most of the day on the phone with his clients. That is, the clients he had brought to the agency back when Marty Ryder was still in charge and a few, very few, clients that he had gone after himself when Gardner Vance had taken over the company. Once the final call had been completed, he had Cynthia arrange a formal meeting with Vance for the following morning. He also explained to his assistant what he was planning on doing and the reason behind it. Once Cynthia heard what was going on, she whole heartedly agreed to help Brian any way she could. She had become fond of Justin over the past few months, having talked to him a few times, both on the phone a couple of times when she had to come by the loft to drop something off. She knew how much Justin’s leaving had affected Brian, even if her boss never admitted it, but she could tell just by the long hours that the executive had taken to spending in his office. In fact, there had been mornings when she had come to the office and found Brian asleep on the couch in his office, even if he had no projects on his desk at the time. Cynthia was glad that the teen was back in Brian’s life as something other than a distant friend because when Brian and Justin were together, Brian was a much better person to be around.

Tuesday morning, ten A.M. found Brian sitting in a chair opposite the man that had played a part in separating him and Justin. Gardner Vance was on the phone and Brian waited patiently, anticipating the reaction to his announcement, knowing that Vance would not be happy about it and Brian couldn’t wait to see what the other man would do to prevent what he was going to do.

“So, what can I do for you today, Brian? What was so important that you had to have Cynthia schedule an actual appointment?” Vance asked, once his phone call had ended. The other man had been surprised when Cynthia had requested the meeting. Usually when either of the partners wanted to discuss something, they just went to the others office and the fact that Brian was going against this practice had the older man curious.

“I’ve been thinking about our deal and it’s not working.”

“What’s not working?”

“Our partnership,” Brian began. “It was a mistake.”

“What are you talking about? It seems to be working perfectly from where I sit,” the smug man replied. “What exactly do you have a problem with?”

“You mean other than the fact that I seem to be doing all of the work while you sit back and enjoy the fruits of my labors.” Vance’s smug look didn’t disappear from his face. “My main problem is the type of accounts that you and the rest of your people seem to be concentrating on.”

“A client is a client, Brian,” Vance patiently reminded the younger man. “As long as they have the money, who cares what they want to sell. It’s not our job to be picky about it, just to help them sell it.”

“I care,” Brian said. “And there used to be a time when this agency cared. It was one of the reasons the Ryder Agency was the best in town and, I thought, one of the reasons you bought Marty out. But now it seems that we go after whatever account if up for grabs, no matter what crap is being sold, and that’s not how I work. Not how I want to work. “Vance leaned forward, his expression blank and he stared at Brian.

“What exactly are you trying to say, Brian?”

“I’m saying, I’m leaving the agency,” Brian announced flatly, causing the other man to stare at him in shock.

“You’re what?”

“I said. I’m. Leaving. The agency,” Brian repeated slowly, enjoying the look of stunned amazement on Vance’s face.

“Where…where do you plan on going? What…what agency?”

“None. “I’ve decided to go out on my own. Start my own agency.” Brian watched as a smile crossed Vance’s face and was curious as to why it was there. “Did I say something amusing?”

“No,” Vance said. “It’s just that, do you really believe that you can go out on your own? Just like that? It’s not as easy as it sounds.”

“I know that,” Brian admitted. “And I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but I’m willing to take that chance. And it isn’t like I’m going to be going into this blindly. I do have my clients, course.” The stunned look returned to Vance’s features as well as another look. One that Brian would term as something akin to fear and this time he was the one who smiled.

“Your clients? What clients?”

“Liberty Air. Brown Athletics.” Brian’s smile became predatory as he watched Vance squirm in his chair. “They’re, of course, two of the man companies that have already signed contracts with me, but I also have a number of other clients I’ll be taking with me.”

“What makes you so sure that they’ll go with you?” Vance took a last stab at trying to get Brian to change his mind. He had no idea what had happened to cause Brian to want to go out on his own but he knew he had to do something to prevent it from happening.

“You mean, why am I so sure they’ll go with me after you made sure to make me believe otherwise when you took over this agency.” Brian watched as Vance’s pallor got considerably paler. “You thought I had forgotten about that? You said you did your homework on me. If you did, you would have realized I have a very long memory and I never forget when someone fucks me over, which is what you tried to do. But, unfortunately for you, I’m patient. I’ve already talked to all of my clients, the ones that you said wouldn’t leave if I did and, surprise, surprise, they all said they would be more than willing to go with me to my new agency. They told me that the only reason they had even agreed to stay with this agency when you took over was because you had to agree that I would continue to be in charge of their campaigns. Imagine their surprise when they found out the only reason I had stayed was because you had told me that they would stay.”

“Brian, I can explain….”

“Save it,” Brian cut Vance off. “I’m not interested in anything you have to say.” Vance nodded his head, knowing that there was nothing that he could do to prevent Brian from leaving. The only thing he could do was try and make sure that Brian didn’t destroy his company because of what had been done, because he knew that Brian had the power, and talent, to do so. Once again, Vance wondered why he had agreed to his friend’s son’s request to threaten Kinney’s job.

“When are you leaving?”

“Cynthia is packing up my office as we speak,” Brian informed his former partner, standing and walking towards the door. “And yes, she will be going with me. She’s the only one that’s worth anything here and she’s been with me too long to make her stay here and suffer from this company’s downfall.”

“You make it sound like this is a war.” Brian smirked at Vance.

“Oh it is, and it’s one I don’t intend to lose.” And with that last pronouncement, Brian walked out of Vance’s office. He arrived at his soon to be former office, commenting on how quickly Cynthia had been able to pack up both of their belongings.

“How did it go?” His assistant asked from her spot by the couch where she was going through Brian’s files.

“Just like I thought it would,” Brian told at her as he went over to the phone. He dialed a number from memory and waited for the other person to pick up.

“Hello.”

“Hey. Can you talk?”

“Not right now.”

“Gotcha. Just wanted to tell you that step one was a success.”

“That’s good to know.”

“See you at the loft later.”

“Yes.”

“Love you.”

“Same here. Later.

“Later.”

Part 12

Justin and Ethan were walking along Liberty Avenue, holding hands and enjoying the weather. They were talking about their plans for the following day that included Ethan giving a concert for some kind of benefit that Justin couldn’t remember. For all intent and purpose, they looked like a couple in love. It made Justin feel sick. The artist had no idea what was preventing him from getting sick from the touch of the man that had planned his own seduction. Ethan had set out to separate Brian and Justin and had almost succeeded. If it wasn’t for Brian’s distrust of Ethan’s intentions, and hatred of anything of his being taken away, the other teen would have succeeded and that tore at Justin’s heart. The fact that he had been so desperate, for something that he could now see was bullshit, bothered him. He knew now that the words didn’t mean shit, even if the actions were there too. They could all be faked. Ethan always knew what to say to Justin. Had been more than willing to be sweet and romantic and it had all been lies. Sure, Justin’s life with Brian might not have been easy. Hell, even before Ethan came into the picture he had already gotten tired of the tricking and everything, but at least Brian never lied to him. The older man had never made it a secret of whom and what he was. He was Brian Kinney and Brian Kinney didn’t do boyfriends. Didn’t do relationships. Didn’t do someone twice. Except with Justin.

Emmett and Ted had told him that Brian had even referred to Justin as his boyfriend and what they had as a relationship and yet he still didn’t appreciate it. Brian had taken him into his loft, into his life, and yet Justin still hadn’t been happy. Instead, Justin had allowed himself to be lead away by the first boy to come by and spout of all the romantic bullshit that he had always been lead to believe should be in a romance. Hell, if Justin was honest, he had no idea how Brian could even look at him, let alone forgive him for what he did. He knew how much it took for Brian to trust someone. To let them into his heart and he broken that trust. But instead of turning his back on him, Brian and Justin had remained semi-friends, talking occasionally both on the phone and in the diner whenever the older man went in while Justin was working. Sure, it was awkward, especially if Ethan was present. Or Michael.

Justin shivered as he thought of Brian’s best friend. ‘Well, ex-best friend would be more appropriate I would guess.’ He couldn’t believe that Michael had been so willing to help Ethan get between Justin and Brian. He didn’t understand the other man’s reasoning for it. They had all thought that Michael had finally gotten over his infatuation with Brian, especially now that he and Ben had seemed so happy. Could that have all been a ruse? Could Michael be using Ben as a cover so that no one will suspect that he was now actively pursuing a relationship with Brian? Brian had mentioned that Michael had been trying to spend more time with him lately, since the break up. Offering a shoulder to cry on, if Brian needed it. Trying to encourage him to go to Woodys or Babylon. Hell, Brian even said that Michael was trying to get him to trick again, almost like he wanted the old Brian back. The one that didn’t do relationship and was more than willing to lose himself in a warm body. Brian hadn’t understood it at the time. Why his best friend was encouraging him to return to his old ways. Justin was interrupted from his musings when his cell phone rang. He saw the phone number and smiled inwardly when he saw that it was Brian’s office number.

“Hello.”

“Hey. Can you talk?”

“Not right now.”

“Gotcha. Just wanted to tell you that step one was a success.”

“That’s good to know.”

“See you at the loft later.”

“Yes.”

“Love you.”

“Same here. Later.”

“Later.”

Justin closed the phone, his smile remaining on his face. He couldn’t wait to get to Brian’s and find out how well his meeting with his now ex-partner had gone. He almost wished he could have been there when Brian informed the bastard that had prevented Brian from going on their trip that he was leaving the agency and taking his clients with him. The biggest clients that the agency had, let alone the most prestigious. And the fact that Brian was doing it to start his own agency was just another nail in the proverbial coffin.

“Who was that?” Ethan asked, seeing the smile on his lover’s face. He loved the way it made Justin’s whole face light up. He shook his head. He couldn’t believe it. He had gone and fallen in love with Justin. His mark. Ethan had no idea when or how it happened, but his revenge for Kip had become personal. He had gone and done something that he swore he would never do, fall in love.

“Oh, it was Daphne,” Justin lied.

“Really. What did she want?” Ethan bristled at the mention of Justin’s best friend. There was something about her that he just didn’t like and he wasn’t sure what it was. Then again, he had the same feeling about most of Justin’s friends. They meant that there was a part of Justin that he didn’t have. Couldn’t have because they had a history with Justin and he was slowly trying to wean Justin away from them all. At first, he didn’t think it would be too difficult, especially since they were also friends of Brian’s, and older, but he was finding that once you became a member of the tight knit group, it wasn’t easy to leave and Justin was no exception. What made it even worse was the fact that Justin and Brian still talked. Ethan didn’t want that to happen, even when he knew nothing was going on. He didn’t want to take the chance that Brian might try to get his old lover back and he knew that, if Brian wanted to, he could still get Justin back because, no matter what Justin said, Ethan knew he was still in love with the older man.

“Oh, she wanted to remind me that I’m supposed to meet her downtown later today,” Justin replied. “We have to get the office ready for business next week.”

“What office?” Ethan inquired. “What business?” Justin stopped and looked at Ethan.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Ethan shook his head. “Oh, damn. I thought I did. Well, anyway, Brian decided to go out on his own. Start his old advertising agency and he asked for our help. You know, to help keep a pulse on what the younger generation wants.” Justin smiled as he said that knowing that Brian would kick his ass if he heard him explain it like that. “I’m going to work on the graphics and stuff like that. I even got Professor Johnson to let me get some extra credits for school for it since I’ll basically be doing everything I do in class there.”

“Wait a fucking minute,” Ethan stopped, pulling his hand away from Justin’s. “What the hell do you mean you’ll be working for Brian? I don’t fucking think so.”

“Excuse me?” Justin’s eyebrow rose.

“I said, there is no way in hell I’ll let you work for Brian fucking Kinney,” Ethan shouted, causing a few heads to turn, which he pointedly ignored. “You are not going to work for your ex-boyfriend. I won’t allow it.”

“You won’t allow it. Since when was it your decision who I did or did not work for?” Justin’s smile disappeared from his face, but on the inside he was laughing his ass off.

“Since you and I became lovers.”

“And that gives you the right to dictate to me?” Ethan nodded his head. “That’s bullshit. Even Brian didn’t try that shit with me when I went to work at Babylon, even though he made no secret of how he felt about that. Besides, I need the money. The diner barely pays my bills. If it wasn’t for Brian having already agreed to pay my tuition I wouldn’t even be able to go to school. This is just my way of paying his back for that.”

“You could always go back and work on the comic book,” Ethan suggested. “I’m sure Michael would love that.”

“You know how I feel about Michael,” Justin said. “He and I were never super close and after what he did…”

“He was only looking after his best friend,” Ethan defended the other man. “I would have done the same thing.”

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t mean I have to be happy about it, now does it? Besides, I want to help Brian. He’s done a lot for me and I want to repay him.” Ethan could tell that there was no way that he was going to be able to talk Justin out of his decision. He just was going to have to make it plain to Brian, and Justin, that Justin was his and that he didn’t share his toys. He pulled Justin close to him, leaning over and giving him a kiss.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.” Ethan didn’t feel the shiver that ran through Justin at the nickname. “It’s just that I’m afraid that Brian will decide to go after you again.”

“We’re just friends now,” Justin told him. “Besides, he knows I’m with you.”

“Doesn’t meant he had to accept it thought does it?” Justin shrugged. “Just promise me that you won’t let him make you do something that you don’t want.”

“I promise.” Justin said smoothly, glad to see that his part of the plan was working just fine. He had anticipated his announcement that he would be working for Brian was going to anger his young lover and was glad that he hadn’t been disappointed. And the reasons he gave for working with Brian were valid. He did want to help the other man out for all that he had done for Justin, but it also gave the two of them an excuse to spend time together. While Ethan might not be happy about all the hours Brian and Justin would have to be together, he couldn’t prove that it wasn’t work related. Now for the next part.

“But if it makes you feel better, I’ll talk to Michael and see if he wants to work on the comic thing again.”

Part 13

Justin entered the soon to be office of Kinney Advertising. He smiled when he saw Brian in what was going to be his office, unpacking the boxes he had brought over from his former employer, and putting them away in the file cabinet that stood in one corner. Justin paused for a moment, just enjoying the view of Brian’s tight blue jeans hugging the ass that Justin had missed while he had been with Ethan.

“So, are you going to stand there all day or come over here and help me with this shit?” Brian asked, not turning around to face Justin.

“Just admiring the view,” the blonde replied, shutting the door behind him and locking it. Brian smirked as he heard the clock click into place. Justin smiled as he walked over towards the older man, who took him in his arms and kissed him. When the two men parted, oxygen becoming an issue, Justin looked up at his lover. “Mmmmmm, now that’s what I call a greeting.”

“With that door locked, I’m sure we could thing of a few other ways of saying hello,” Brian teased, leaning down and flicking his tongue against Justin’s ear at the same time he ground his erection into Justin’s matching one. “And I think you like that idea too.”

“God, yes,” Justin groaned, leaning into Brian’s form, the two men losing themselves in their kiss again. Brian lifted Justin, who quickly wrapped his legs around the other man’s torso, and carried him over to his desk. He swiped off all of the papers that had been lying there, not bothering to notice what they were or where they fell. The only thing that Brian cared about at that moment was the man in front of him. The man that he hadn’t been allowed to touch in so long. While Brian and Justin had been together as often as possible since their reunion, one week before, they had yet to be able to get too much of their lover. It had been too long since they had been together. “I’ve missed you so much, Bri,” Justin groaned.

“Missed you, too, baby,” Brian matched Justin’s groan with one of his own. Brian couldn’t believe he finally had the teen in his arms again. He had thought that was a pleasure he had lost for good. “I hate it when we aren’t together. Especially knowing you’re with him.”

“You think I like it any better,” Justin said, his hands going under Brian’s shirt and gliding against his back. “I hate having to let him touch me. To let him kiss me. I can’t get to a shower fast enough. The only thing that keeps me going is the thought that I can see you. Can be with you.”

“Always baby,” Brian promised. “I’ll always be here for you.” Brian and Justin parted for a minute, both men ripping their shirts up and over their heads before diving back into their fierce kiss.

“Make me forget him,” Justin begged, which Brian did happily.

“Damn, you would think they haven’t seen each other in weeks instead of only a couple of hours,” Daphne grinned as she and Cynthia paused in their organizing at the sounds of pleasure that were coming from Brian’s office. They were sounds that had become a common occurrence in the week that had passed, neither woman saying anything to their friends. Instead they just smiled and went about their business.

“Well, they do have a lot of time to make up for,” Cynthia reminded the younger girl whom she had gotten to know over their time together. The two women had discovered that they had quite a few things in common while they had been alone to set up the day to day operations of the Kinney Agency, not the least being their mutual love for the two men in the adjoining office. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen Brian as happy as he’s been since he and Justin got back together. Hell, I think I knew they were a couple again before he had even said anything to me last week. There was just something about the way he was acting. Different. Not as moody as he had been since the night of Justin’s party.”

“I know,” Daphne agreed, remembering back to the night that Justin had walked out on Brian, in Ethan’s arms. She shivered as she recalled the devastated look that had resided on Brian’s face, and the way that he had attempted to lose himself with the man that he grabbed to dance with. She couldn’t wait to talk to Justin and find out what the hell had been going through his head at that moment. Sure, she had known that things weren’t going nearly as well as Justin had hoped, the conversation the two teens had had in regards to Justin leaving for Vermont on his own going through her mind, but as far as she knew, Justin was still in love with Brian. And she knew that even if he said otherwise, Brian did love Justin. “Justin’s happier than I’ve seen him in a long time. Even before he knew what the deal was with Ethan, that boy could never make Justin as happy as Brian could.”

“You’ve known Ethan longer than I have, obviously,” Cynthia observed, remembering the dark haired boy that had decided to surprise Justin the other day by coming to the office. Luckily Cynthia and Daphne had been able to delay him long enough for Justin and Brian to get presentable and appear to have been working on some important presentation when Ethan finally got in to see him. “What’s he like?” Daphne thought carefully what she wanted to say before finally speaking.

“He was perfect,” she finally explains. “Almost too much so, if you know what I mean.” Cynthia nodded her head. “He always seemed to know exactly what Justin needed to hear. Of course, now we know why. And he was always around. Whenever Justin showed up at the diner, or at my dorm, Ethan was right there with him. It was almost like he didn’t want Justin to be by himself with any of his old friends. I think the only ones Ethan was comfortable leaving Justin alone with were Lindsay and Melanie, even if Gus was Brian’s son too. He credited them with getting him and Justin together, and he knew how much Mel hated Brian, so I guess he figured he was safe.”

“So that’s why they were able to confront Justin there without Ethan interfering,” Cynthia concluded. She looked over at Daphne, assessing what she was being told. “I can understand Ethan’s reluctance to leave Justin alone with the others. They were Brian’s friends first after all. But what problem did he have with you?”

“I don’t think he liked the fact that Justin and I are such good friends,” Daphne stated. “We used to tell each other everything. Maybe he was afraid I would say something about their relationship, like I used to do with Justin and Brian’s. Or it could also be that I was there for the entire Brian/Justin show the first time around. I was there the night of the prom. After the bashing. Everything. Maybe it was just our history that he was worried about. And he was right.”

“Why?”

“Because, I was never supportive of Justin being with him,” Daphne answered. “I mean, other than the fact he was cute, there was just something about him that I didn’t like. That and I knew how much Justin loved Brian. Sure, their relationship had problems, but I also think that if Ethan hadn’t shown up when he did and started offering Justin everything that he thought he wanted, Justin might have been more willing to open up to Brian. That maybe they would have been able to talk things out.”

“So you think that if Ethan hadn’t come along, none of this would have happened?” Daphne nodded as the sounds of pleasure increased until they ended with the shout of two names.

“Brian.”

“Justin.” The two women’s smiles got wider and they laughed.

“You know, I think I actually feel sorry for Ethan and Michael,” Cynthia stated before looking over at Daphne, both shaking their heads. “Nahhhhhhh.”

Part 14

“What the fuck is going on between Brian and Justin?” Michael Novatny shouted as soon as he heard the other man answer the phone. “I thought you were going to make sure that the two of them stayed as far away from each other as possible, unless it was absolutely necessary that they had to see each other.”

“And I was,” Ethan countered, not happy with the older man’s tone of voice. No one spoke to him like that.

“Then how the hell did it come about that Justin is now working with Brian at his new agency?” Michael continued to rant. “Fuck, their spending more quality,” Michael sneered out the word quality, “time together then they did before when they were together. If it wasn’t for the fact that Daphne and Cynthia were always there with them, I would swear that there was something going on between the two of them.”

“Justin wouldn’t dare fuck Kinney,” Ethan growled, his voice becoming similar to that of a dangerous animal and causing shivers to course through Michael’s body. “And I am working on getting Justin to quit that job. Unfortunately the money that Brian is offering him is too much of a lure for him right now, especially since Brian is still paying Justin’s tuition.”

“Well, hopefully, for all of us, we can start making money off of the comic book so we won’t have to worry about that. We’ve already gotten a few good offers for distribution,” Michael commented. “I’m glad that you finally were able to talk him into working with me on that again.”

“It wasn’t easy,” Ethan admitted. “Justin was pretty pissed off at you for telling Brian about us kissing. I should have expected that but still, I didn’t think he would react as badly as he did.”

“Yeah but luckily Brian reacted just like we thought he would,” Michael pointed out. “He did everything I thought he would to push Justin to you because he believed you were what Justin wanted and needed to be happy.”

“True,” Ethan agreed. “The only thing the surprised me with his actions was him calling me ahead of time and telling me to come and get Justin.”

“That’s Brian for you. He’s always been one to go for the extreme,” the store owner observed. “I can still remember how pissed I was at him for what he pulled at the party he threw for my thirtieth birthday. I didn’t talk to him for over a week. I was so hurt by what he had done. In fact, it was Justin who actually got us talking again.”

“You aren’t planning on returning that particular favor are you?”

“Hell no,” Michael answered. “The last thing I was if for Brian and Justin to get back together. It would completely defeat the purpose of us working to break them up in the first place.”

“Out of curiosity,” Ethan purred, “how exactly do you plan on seducing Kinney? If he hasn’t slept with you yet, what makes you think he will now that Justin is no longer in the picture?”

“I plan on being the shoulder that he uses to cry on,” Michael stated simply. “After all, who better should listen to how much better it is that Justin has finally left him and know it for the bullshit that it is…”

“Than his best friend,” Ethan finished.

“Exactly,” Michael confirmed. “And all the while I’ll be making sure to mention how happy Justin is with you. How much he loves spending nights at home with you instead of club hopping and tricking, how much he loves you.”

“And you would know this because?”

“Justin would be confiding in me, of course, as we spend time working on the comic book.”

“Oh, of course, because we both know how close the two of you are,” the violinist said sarcastically. “The two of you are best friends, after all. Why does that not sound believable to me?”

“Because you are a cynic,” the older man answered. “And I know Justin and I aren’t close friends, hell we barely tolerate each other, but we are working together on the comic book. And I was the one that listened to him talk about the bashing. I’m the one that he bitched to when Brian went to Chicago instead of Vermont with him. Hell, I’m the one who encouraged him to go on the trip by himself.”

“And that was a stroke of brilliance,” Ethan complimented.

“Thanks. As I was saying,” Michael continued, “it would make sense that I’m the one for Justin to try and convince about how happy he was now that he’s with you.”

“He is happy with me,” Ethan told him.

“Who are you trying to convince?” Michael asked. “Me or yourself. If he’s so happy with you, why are you so worried about him working with Brian? There better not be trouble in paradise.”

“Fuck you, Michael,” Ethan hissed. “And I’m not worried about Justin working with Kinney. I just don’t like the two of them working together. I don’t trust Kinney and I’m sure he’ll be trying to find some way of taking advantage of Justin.”

“Well, we’ll just have to make sure that the two of them are never alone.”

“Easier said than done,” Ethan admitted. “As much as I’d like it to be otherwise, there is no way I can be with Justin twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, especially if I don’t want him to begin to feel suffocated. We can’t afford to arouse any suspicion yet. I have classes, not to mention rehearsals and concerts that I had to deal with.”

“Not to mention the meetings that the two of them will have to together to brainstorm ideas,” Michael continued. “At least Daphne and Cynthia will there too. Maybe that will keep the two of them apart. I know Daphne has always been off and on when it came to Brian and Justin’s relationship.”

“I don’t know,” Ethan hedged. “There’s something about that girl that I just don’t trust.”

“You don’t trust a lot of people, do you?”

“I find it’s easier to get by life that way,” Ethan informed Michael. “That way you can’t get hurt when others fuck you over.”

“That’s not a healthy outlook on life.”

“Anyway, you’re one to talk about trust,” Ethan countered. “Brian is your best friend, a friend that trusts you implicitly, and here you are purposely fucking his relationship with Justin up just for your own goals. Not to mention your lover Ben. And you want to talk to me about trust. Imagine how pissed both of those men would be if they ever found out about what we were doing.”

“Brian would forgive me,” Michael stated confidently. “He’s my best friend. Sure, he might be pissed at first, but he’ll get over it. He and I were meant to be together. As for Ben, granted, his not going to Tibet fucked up my plans, but I can work around it. Besides having him around prevents Brian from getting suspicious about my plans for him.”

“And what do you plan to do about Ben when you and Brian eventually hook up?”

“I’ll just tell him that things weren’t working out. That it turned out that I wasn’t handling the whole positive thing as well as I thought I was. Especially after this last stint in the hospital,” Michael explained. “He’s a great guy and all but he’s not Brian. Never can be.”

“Who the hell is that?” Ben asked, stunned at what he was hearing. He looked over at the two men who had surprised him by coming to see him.

“That would be my supposed best friend and your lover,” Brian commented.

“Talking to my lover,” Justin finished. “I’m sorry.”

“I can’t believe that that’s my Michael,” Ben said softly. He couldn’t understand how the man that had been sharing his bed for the past months, who had declared his love for him only the night before, could talk about him so callously. Could toss aside his feelings so casually.

“It’s not your Michael,” Brian told Ben. “I have no idea who that is, but that isn’t the Michael that I grew up with. That Michael would never be this much of a prick.”

“But that is Michael?” Brian and Justin nodded their heads. “Shit. No wonder he didn’t seem that happy when I told him I wasn’t going to Tibet this summer. God, I can’t believe I let myself fall for this shit.”

“Is it too late for you to go?” Justin asked, hoping that maybe some good could come out of this. His hopes were dashed when Ben shook his head.

“There isn’t any time. I would have to deal with shots and taking care of my classes and my apartment,” Ben explained.

“Fuck,” Brian shouted, getting up and pacing the small office. “I hate this. I hate what that prick and Mikey are doing. I hate the fact that they almost cost me the most important thing to me. Damn them both.” Ben watched as Justin got up and stood in Brian’s way, instantly stopping the older man. Ben’s heart seized when the two men took each other in their arms and comforted the other. It reminded him of what he had thought he had finally found with Michael.

“What are you going to do about them?” Ben asked, already knowing that Brian and Justin had to have a plan.

“Ben?” Justin asked, not sure why the other man wanted to know.

“Don’t give me that look, Justin,” Ben admonished. “Knowing Brian, I’m sure he has to have come up with something to make the two of them pay for what they did to you both.”

“Are you sure you want to know?” Brian questioned, pretty sure of the answer already.

“Yeah, I want to know. And I want to know how I can help.”

Part 15

“Mikey, what are you doing here?” Brian sighed as he closed the door to his home behind his friend, grateful that Justin had had to finish a project for school so had left the loft just minutes before hand. Michael looked around the loft, taking in the messed up bed and Brian’s disheveled appearance and put two and two together and realizing that Brian must have had a trick there.

“Was he any good?” Michael asked, distaste in his voice. The thought of Brian having a trick in the loft upsetting him, especially when he saw the trademark Kinney grin.

“He wasn’t bad,” Brian told him. ‘More like perfect but you’ll never know that, Mikey.’

“I thought you said you were working today,” Michael reminded Brian. Brian’s grin only got larger.

“I needed a break,” he replied. “And he was a good distraction.” ‘Damn good. I don’t know how either of us is ever going to get any work done while we’re together. Fuck, all Justin has to do is look at me and I’m hard.’

“I bet.” ‘Crap, Brian, why can’t you call me when you need someone like that. Don’t you understand that I want to be the one you turn to for everything?’

“Look, Mikey, as much as I’m enjoying this conversation,” ‘NOT,’ Brian’s mind screamed. “I’m sure you didn’t come here to talk to me about my sex life.” Brian walked over to the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water, quickly drinking it down.

“Ben broke up with me,” Michael cried. Brian turned to look over at the other man, fighting to keep his laughter to himself. ‘How does it feel, Mikey when you’re the one being dumped? Not too good I bet, even if you didn’t have the same feelings for Ben that you said you did.’

“What happened?”

“He said he had met someone else,” Michael told Brian, tears falling down his face. Brian was almost ready to believe that Michael was upset over the fact that Ben had left him. In fact, if it wasn’t for the phone call that Melanie’s investigator had recorded three days previously where Michael had so casually pushed aside his feelings for Ben, and the knowledge that Michael still had designs on getting into Brian’s bed, he would have even been willing to believe that his former friend had actually cared about the college professor. As it was, though, Brian knew that Ben was the one that was truly hurting, and that he was the one that his sympathy at the ending of what had seemed to be a good relationship.

Michael waited for the sympathetic shoulder that he knew Brian would be willing to provide. He had made sure he had kept telling Brian how much Ben meant to him. Granted, Michael had been planning on pushing Ben aside one he and Brian got together, he hadn’t expected Ben to be the one that would be doing the breaking up and hearing that Ben had met someone else did bother him a bit. He was more than willing to use it to his advantage of the sympathy that he felt would be coming his way by his best friend because of the action, though. The first thing he had to do, though, was get Brian’s attention again since it appeared that the other man had lost himself in though. ‘Probably thinking about the Boy Wonder leaving with Ethan the night of the party at Babylon. This just gives us one more thing to share. Who better to commiserate about your lover leaving you than someone who is going through the same thing?’

“Brian are you even listening to me?” Michael whined, breaking Brian out of whatever zone he was in.

“I’m listening, Mikey,” Brian assured him, going over and putting his arm over Michael’s shoulder and leading him towards the couch. “You said that Ben had left you and then told you there was someone else. Did I get it right?” Michael nodded his head and allowed Brian to sit him on the couch. Michael then watched, a small smile on his lips, as Brian went back to the refrigerator, this time grabbing a couple of beers, coming over and handing one to Michael. “Here you go. You look like you could use this.” Michael silently thanked Brian and drank the beer.

“So, Mikey, did Ben tell you who it was he was leaving you for?” ‘This ought to be good.’

“He didn’t give me a name,” Michael gulped, as if he was trying to control his emotion. For all intent and purposed, Michael truly did appear to be heartbroken. “All he told me was that it was someone that he had met years ago and that they had recently become reacquainted through a mutual friend of theirs. He said that they had both thought they would only be friends, especially because they were both already involved, but that recently they had begun to have feelings for each other. Then his friend and his lover broke up and Ben and he decided to give in to what they were feeling.”

“I thought Ben was in love with you,” Brian observed. “At least, that’s what we all believed. Was he lying to you about that? Using you until something, or someone, else came along?” Brian allowed the bitterness he had felt when Justin had left him to come through in his voice. He was surprised at how easy it was, even though he and the teen were working on their relationship.

“That’s the worst part,” Michael said. “Ben told me that he still cares about me. That he still loves me.”

“And yet he broke up with you?” Michael nodded. “Just goes to prove what I’ve always said. Love is what straight people made up to get into someone else’s pants. It’s bullshit and not worth the crap you have to deal with when the other person leaves. And they will always leave. That’s why I don’t believe in it.”

“But you loved Justin,” Michael pointed out; ignoring the harsh glare sent his way by the other man. “Even if you refuse to admit it, you did love him. I saw how much it hurt you when he left with Ethan that night. Everyone did.”

“Fine, you want me to admit it,” Brian nearly shouted. “I loved Justin and looked what happened. He left because it wasn’t the right kind of love. The kind of love that he was willing to accept. Well, fuck that. I don’t want it and I sure as hell don’t need love.” Michael flinched at the anger in Brian’s voice.

“Brian…”

“What Mikey?” Brian said tiredly, his anger dissipating as quickly as it came. Michael got up and walked over to his friend, taking the other man in his arms.

“Maybe we’ve just both been looking for love in the wrong places.”

“Fuck, Mikey, now you’re starting to sound like a god damn country western song,” Brian laughed. Michael smiled, pulling back before dropping a quick kiss on Brian’s lips.

“What I meant to say,” Michael continued finally, “was that maybe we have just been overlooking the obvious when it comes to love.”

“And the obvious would be?” ‘Come on, Mikey, say it. It’s what you’ve been leading up to.”

“You know how I feel about you, Brian,” Michael stated. “I love you.”

“And I love you too, Mikey.” ‘Damn, did I really just say that? Shit.’ Michael’s smile grew and he leaned over to kiss Brian again, but instead of the friendly kiss that they had just shared, he tried to make this one deeper. More passionate. Letting his kiss speak for him. That was, before Brian pushed him away, staring at him in shock.

“Shit, Mikey,” Brian exclaimed. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Come on, Brian,” Michael tried to move closer to Brian again, who only backed away. “You already told me that you love me, and you know I love you. And now that we’re both free, why shouldn’t we be together?”

“How about the fact that you just broke up with your boyfriend?”

“Even Ben knew how I felt about you,” Michael stated. “Brian, we’d be perfect together.”

“Michael, listen to me,” Brian said slowly, as if he was talking to a child. “Yes, I love you, but only as a friend. That’s it. We have never been, now will we ever be, lovers. That’s just not in the cards.” Michael looked at Brian, confusion written all over his face.

“Brian?” Brian walked over to front door of the loft, opening it. Michael followed, not sure what was going on.

“I think it would be best if you leave, Mikey,” Brian informed the other man.

“Brian,” Michael nearly pleaded, again moving to take Brian in his arms, but Brian only shook his head, holding out his hands and pushing Michael out the door. As soon as the store owner realized that Brian was truly turning him away, he became desperate. “Don’t do this Brian. Not after everything that we’ve been through. We were meant to be together.”

“As friends, Mikey. Just as friends. Nothing more. Now why don’t you go home and forget that this ever happened. That’s exactly what I plan on doing.” And with that, Brian shut the door in the stunned man’s face, a smile growing on his face as Michael left his view. ‘And now for step two.’

Part 16

Justin shut the door behind him, watching in stunned amusement as Ethan stormed around his small apartment. It was the first time that Justin had truly witnessed Ethan’s anger, other than the time that the violinist had told him to go back to Brian, and he couldn’t believe how much violence the other boy seemed to contain within himself. It actually scared him and Justin had to fight the instinct he had to run. Instead he stood his ground and hoped that Ethan wouldn’t take his anger out on him.

“Ethan, what’s wrong?” Justin asked, his voice the epitome of the concerned boyfriend. “What happened?”

“What happened?” Ethan parroted, pausing his current course of destruction. “What happened? I’ll tell you what fucking happened. That sniveling bastard Dean of Students Jerry Stockwell finally decided to find his fucking back bone and now I’m out on my ass.”

“What? You lost your scholarship?”

“My scholarship,” Ethan screamed. “I fucking got kicked out of school. Those bastards actually had the nerve to expel me and then have a security guard watch me as I cleared out my studio and escort me off of the campus. Everyone was fucking staring and I could hear them all whispering about it.” Justin flinched as Ethan punched the wall in frustration.

“Because they’re nothing but a bunch of jealous no talents who can’t stand the fact that I’m better than them.” Justin watched, horrified, as Ethan threw another punch at the wall, this time his fist going right through the thin plaster. It took everything he had to not run away, but he made sure that he was near the front door in case he had to make a quick escape.

“I meant, why did they expel you?” Justin elaborated. “What did you mean when you said that Dean Stockwell grew a backbone? What does he have against you?”

“He’s pissed because I slept with him once,” Ethan answered quickly. Justin had to give his soon to be ex credit for his quick thinking. “He wanted it to be more than what it was and I turned him down flat. He didn’t like it and has been hassling me ever since.”

“So that’s why he got you kicked out?” Justin questioned. Ethan nodded his head. “But he can’t do that. It’s illegal. Why didn’t you fight it?”

“Fight it with whom? Who would have believed me over him?

“Well, what’s he accusing you of?” Justin continued to ask. “I mean, he had to have given some reason for wanting you expelled.”

“Oh yeah, he gave them a reason,” Ethan sneered. “He had the balls to tell those bastards that I had blackmailed him into being accepted to that school. Told them that I had threatened him with pictures of us together when I was only seventeen. And those sanctimonious bastards believed him.”

“He had to have some kind of proof of what he was saying,” Justin countered. He moved closer to the door when Ethan’s angry glare was directed towards himself.

“Whose fucking side are you on?” Ethan yelled, his eyes narrowing as he saw Justin move even closer to the door. “You believe them, don’t you? You think I did it.”

“No, Ethan,” Justin said, hoping to calm the other man down. “You know I don’t think that.”

“I don’t know anything of the sort,” Ethan growled, advancing on his lover. “You think they’re right. You think I blackmailed that bastard into letting me into school. Like I needed his fucking help. They should have been damn grateful to have me there.” This time Justin didn’t even try to hide his attempt at escape. He quickly finished the distance between him and the door, opening it before Ethan could stop him.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

“I think it would be better if maybe I leave. I’ll come back when you’re calmer,” Justin calmly told him, all the while feeling his heart beat skyrocket. Brian and he had figured that Ethan would get extremely upset when he discovered that he was no longer welcome at PIFA, but they never thought he could become violent.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Ethan hissed, grabbing Justin’s arm, his nails digging into the tender flesh.

“Fuck,” Justin said through gritted teeth. He tried to break Ethan’s grip, but the violinist held strong. “What the hell are you doing? Let go of me, Ethan.”

“I don’t think so,” Ethan stated, trying to pull Justin back into the apartment before his neighbors became curious. Justin grabbed at the doorframe with his other hand, stopping the forward movement but he still couldn’t break the powerful grip. “Don’t think I don’t know where you’re going. I’m not that stupid.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Justin cried out. “Ethan, please, let go. You’re hurting me.”

“What is it about him that has you so enthralled with him? Sure he’s gorgeous but that’s all. After everything he did to you. All the tricks that he brought home. His not going to Vermont with you. Getting you a hustler for your birthday. And yet you still go back to him time and time again.” Ethan changed his grip, not holding Justin by both arms. Justin’s eyes went wide as he realized just how much danger he was in. He could see the madness that inhabited Ethan in his eyes.

“I offered you everything you could ever want. Gave you everything you asked for to make you happy.” Ethan was nearly hysterical at the point. “And you still go back to him.”

“No,” Justin kept denying, praying that someone would come to investigate the commotion Ethan’s screams had to be overheard by his neighbors.

“Don’t you fucking lie to me,” Justin,” Ethan raged. “I’ve given you everything I had. I have you my love and how do you repay me. By fucking Kinney behind my damn back.”

“I’m not doing anything with Brian,” Justin tried to explain. “We just work together. That’s all.”

“Bullshit,” Ethan spat. “I know Kinney’s not tricking and there’s no way in hell he would ever go celibate.”

“How do you know that Brian’s not tricking?”

“I’ve got my sources and they make sure I’m kept well informed about Kinney’s activities, or lack thereof.” Ethan pulled a still resisting Justin closer to him. “So the fact that Brian Kinney isn’t picking up tricks means only one thing. That he has someone else to take care of that particular need.”

“I swear it’s not me,” Justin pleaded. “We haven’t been together like that since I left him. He’s found someone else.”

“Yeah right. You expect me to believe that.”

“It’s the truth.” Tears streamed down Justin’s face and Ethan’s hand dug deeper into his arms. He knew there would be finger shaped bruises there come morning. “Brian’s moved on. He’s with someone else now.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know,” Justin cried. “He won’t tell me.”

“You’re lying.”

“No,” Justin shook his head. “It’s the truth. Brian’s with someone.” Just then, the sound of someone coming up the stairs caused Ethan to finally loosen his grip enough that Justin could break free. The artist backed away from Ethan, exiting the apartment but making sure that he kept a wary eye on the other man.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving,” Justin informed him. Ethan nodded his head, suddenly weary and realizing that his anger and jealousy, two things he swore to not show Justin, might have actually pushed his lover away. The violinist knew that he was going to have to work hard at regaining Justin’s trust but he was sure that he would be able to do it. There was no doubt in his mind that he and Justin would be together again. They were meant to be forever.

“Are you coming back?”

“I’m not sure,” Justin admitted, reaching the stairs. “I think it would be better if maybe we spent some time apart.”

“I’m sorry, Justin,” Ethan apologized. “I don’t know what got into me. I’m just upset because of school. You know how much it meant to me to go there.”

“I know, Ethan. I’m sorry you got expelled but you showed me a side of you tonight that I didn’t know existed,” the artist explained. “And I didn’t like it. You have to give me time.” Ethan nodded his acceptance at Justin’s request, not making a move towards him. Once Justin was sure that Ethan wasn’t going to go after him, he turned and fled down the stairs, wanting nothing more than to get to Brian and let his lover hold and comfort him as only Brian could.

Part 17

Brian took one look at Justin’s shivering form and quickly took the teen in his arms, not knowing what was wrong but needing to make it better. He had been surprised at his young lover’s appearance at his home, knowing that Justin had planned on spending the evening with Ethan. While the thought of Justin in Ethan’s arms upset him, Brian knew that it was a necessary evil if they didn’t want to arouse anybody’s suspicion about them being back together. As it was, the circle of people that knew that Justin and Brian were back together was expanding, so that it now included Emmett and Ted. Emmett, because the man had decided to surprise Justin at his new job and take him out to lunch and had walked in on Brian and Justin sharing their idea of a benefit package. Ted, because there was no way Emmett would have been able to keep what he had discovered away from his lover.

After Emmett had walked in on them, Brian and Justin had invited both he and Ted over to the loft, making them swear not to tell anyone what Emmett had witnessed until they had a chance to explain what was going on. They had agreed, reluctantly, and later that night two more people found out about the deviousness of one of their own. Emmett’s eyes had tears in them and even Ted’s seemed to be wet as they realized just how far Michael was willing to sink in order to separate Brian and Justin. They had both thought that Michael had finally accepted that he and Brian would never be anything more than friends, especially after Ben had turned down his chance to go to Tibet. The couple had seemed to be so in love and Michael had every appearance of being happier than he had ever been. It was why they had been so surprised to find out that Ben had broken up with Michael, saying that he had found someone else. Now they understood, all too well, why Ben did it and why Michael didn’t appear to be as upset over the break up as they thought he would have been.

Brian then explained what they were doing to make Michael and Ethan pay for the lives they had tried to destroy. At first, Emmett and Ted had balked at the idea of helping Brian and Justin’s plans but then Ben had shown up and they could tell how hurt he was at Michael’s using him as a pawn in his and Ethan’s plans and decided that maybe the newly reunited lovers were right. Michael and Ethan had been more than willing to do anything and everything possible to separate Brian and Justin, including involving an innocent man, and they needed to be shown that there were consequences that had to be paid. They began to separate themselves from Michael, using the newness of their relationship as a cover. Emmett spent more and more time over at Ted’s condo. And the separation even helped in regards to their plan to get even with Michael because it meant that the store owner was spending more time pouring his heart out to Brian, in the hopes that eventually he would wear Brian down and he would take Michael to his bed. The four friends, five if you counted Ben, seven if you brought in Lindsay and Melanie, hated the fact that they couldn’t’ tell Debbie and Vic, the parental units to their little family, what was going on but they knew that it would break the siblings’ hearts if they discovered what Michael had done. Debbie was Michael’s mother after all.

Brian was brought out of his musings by movement from the boy in his arms, which tightened around Justin. Justin sighed into Brian’s chest, finally feeling safe now that he was with his lover. Once Justin had gotten away from Ethan, the teen hadn’t stopped running until he had reached the loft on Tremont. He had known that Brian hadn’t been expecting him but the only thing he could think of was washing away the memory of Ethan’s anger. As soon as Justin saw Brian, the fear induced shaking that he had been fighting overcame him. He gratefully accepted Brian’s embrace, needing the comfort that the older man offered.

“Shhh, baby,” Brian murmured to Justin, holding him close. “I’ve got you. I’ve got you. It’s okay.”

“Hold me, Brian. Please.”

“I’m holding you, Justin. I’ve got you.”

“Don’t let go.”

“Never, baby,” Brian promised. “Never letting you go.” Justin and Brian continued holding each other for several minutes before the older man felt his lover relax. Brian led Justin over to the sofa, sitting and pulling Justin into his lap, never ceasing in his comforting.

“What happened, Justin? What’s got you so upset?”

“Ethan.” Brian nodded his head. He knew that the violinist had been expelled from PIFA, Jerry having called him and informing him after the board’s decision. If Justin’s behavior was any indication, Ethan’s reaction must have been even worse than they had anticipated.

“What did he do?” When Justin didn’t answer, Brian pushed him away gently and lifted Justin’s chin so that he could look into his lover’s eyes. “Justin?”

“It was bad, Bri,” the blonde finally answered. “Real bad.” There was something in the way that Justin answered that, when put together with the way Justin was clutching onto him, that made Brian afraid of just what might have happened.

“Justin, what did Ethan do? Did he hurt you?” Justin’s eyes looked away. “Justin did that bastard hit you?” Justin shook his head.

“No, he didn’t hit me,” he finally replied. “He just…..he grabbed me when I tried to leave. He wouldn’t let me go. He kept accusing me of lying to him.” Justin’s eyes met Brian’s again. “I’ve never seen him like that. He was completely out of control.” Tears began to form in Justin’s eyes and Brian pulled the teen back to his chest. “I’ve never been so scared Brian. Not even with Hobbs. It was like he was a completely different person. His fingers kept digging into my skin and I couldn’t get away, no matter how hard I tried. If it wasn’t for someone coming up the stairs, I don’t think he would have let go.”

“Son of a bitch,” Brian cursed. “I’m going to kill that bastard with my bare hands. There won’t even be enough left of him for anyone to identify when I’m through with him.”

“No, Brian, “Justin shook his head. “Don’t do anything rash. Please I’m fine now and he’s not worth your getting in trouble for. I don’t want to be responsible for you going to jail. I need you with me.” Brian nodded his head, giving Justin his silent promise to do as his lover wanted. As much as the older man wanted to make Ethan pay for daring to even think of hurting Justin, he didn’t want to cause Justin to worry.

“I don’t want you going back there,” Brian announced. “I don’t want you anywhere near that bastard.”

“What about the plan?”

“Fuck the plan,” Brian swore. “You’re more important than any damn plan.”

“Okay,” Justin agreed, suddenly smiling up at Brian. “Besides, I already told him that we needed to spend some time apart.” Brian allowed himself to answer Justin’s smile with one of his own.

“So, I guess this means that you’ll have a lot more time on your hands now that you don’t have to deal with the boyfriend.” Justin nodded his head.

“Yup.”

“Hmmm, whatever will you do with all that time?”

“Study?” Justin murmured as he felt Brian’s lips caress his ear, his warm breath sending shudders through his body. “Draw?” Justin’s hands ran over Brian’s back as he began to lose himself in what the other man was doing to him. Even at their worst moments, Brian’s body never failed to react to Brian. “Work on some of the presentations at the office?” Brian’s mouth was now just centimeters from Justin’s.

“Or I can just stay here and make love to you.” Brian grinned as he lifted Justin in his arms.

“Sounds like a plan,” Brian finished, his mouth closing the distance between himself and Justin, kissing the teen with all of that love and passion that he felt for him, before carrying him into the bedroom.

Part 18

Michael scanned the dance floor at Babylon, trying to locate his missing best friend and hopeful love interest. It had been a week since Michael had spoken to Brian, despite his numerous attempts. Michael had even stopped by Brian’s new office, which was already doing extremely well, both because of the clients that the advertising exec had taken with him when he had left Vanguard, but also because of the word giving gotten out about the innovative new approach that the Kinney Agency had of advertising. Michael had gone there, hopping to talk to Brian, on the pretense of needing a shoulder to cry on about his break up with Ben, but had been told each time he called or stopped by that Brian was busy in a meeting and couldn’t’ talk to him. Michael had begun to think that he Brian and Justin had gotten back together, but had seen the blonde teen talking to Daphne or one of his assistants instead of in Brian’s office.

Michael knew that there was a good chance that Brian might decide to go after the blonde twink that had never left, especially if the split between Justin and Ethan became permanent. Michael knew that Brian truly did care for Justin, as much as it pained him o admit it, and that Brian might actually consider letting Justin back into his life, his home, and his bed, if the teen decided to pursue him as he had the previous year. The store owner couldn’t believe how much Ethan had screw up, especially considering how precarious their situation was with Brian and Justin working so closely together. As it was, the two former lovers spent more time together now then when they were semi-couple. It was why Michael was so desperate to see Brian and to make sure that he and Justin remained apart.

“Hey, if it isn’t the faithful sidekick,” someone behind Michael quipped, causing him to turn, smiling at the couple that had joined him.

“Hey guys,” Michael greeted Ted and Emmett, taking the drink that they offered him. “Long time no see. What have you two been up to, as if I couldn’t guess?”

“Oh, you know, just the usual, hun,” Emmett answered, glancing quickly over to his lover.

“I’m sure,” Michael teased, giving them a knowing look. “Although I was beginning to get the feeling that you were avoiding me for some reason.”

“Now why would we want to do that?” Emmett said, again looking over at Ted, this time with a little bit of guilt added to the glance. Emmett hated lying to his friend and roommate but he also knew that there was no way he wanted to spend as much time with Michael as he had in the past, knowing what he did about the other man’s part in the separation of Brian and Justin.

“So, have you seen anybody you like tonight?” Ted asked Michael, wanting to take away some of the tension that was beginning to build in his lover.

“Not really,” Michael answered, his attention once again focused on the crowded dance floor. “Actually I’m looking for Brian. Cynthia mentioned that he might be showing up tonight.”

“And that’s supposed to be a shocker?” Ted sarcastically questioned, not even bothering to point out the oddity of Brian’s assistant even knowing, let alone volunteering the information, that Brian would be at Babylon. “I mean, this is Brian Kinney you’re talking about.”

“I know,” Michael admitted. “Seeing Brian at Babylon isn’t exactly a surprise, but even you have to admit that he hasn’t been their best customer lately.”

“Not since Justin walked out,” Ted chimed in. “He probably doesn’t want to show his face here again. I know I wouldn’t after being embarrassed in front of everyone like that.”

“As Brian would say, thank God he isn’t you,” Michael angrily stated. He was so tired of hearing everyone talk about how much Justin’s leaving had affected Brian. Brian had obviously moved past whatever hurt he had been feeling. His offering Justin the job at his new agency a sign of that progress. “Besides, Brian’s over Justin. It’s not like he cared for the Boy Wonder anyway.”

“Mrrreow,” Emmett hissed. “Somebody needs to bring in the claws.”

“Fuck you, Em,” Michael notices Ted’s attention turn to the dance floor, something obviously catching his eye.

“Well, well, well. Seems as if you’re right, Mikey,” Ted drawls. “Seems as if Brian has moved on to greener pastures, although I am surprised at the choice.”

“But what a picture they are, hun,” Emmett added, looking in the direction Ted indicated Brian was in. “Who would have thunk that Brian went for the brainy type?” There was something in the way Emmett and Ted were talking about whomever Brian’s dace partner was that made Michael apprehensive. With a growing feeling of alarm, he turned to see who it was that had gotten Brian’s attention. His eyes opened wide in shock and disbelief. He shook his head, looking away for a minute before returning to the scene in front of him. There he was. Brian Kinney. The man that Michael had given his heart to dancing with someone that he never would have imagined seeing with him. Emmett and Ted looked at Michael, a mixture of curiosity and sorrow on their face, although he never noticed it.

“Ben?” Michael said in disbelief. “Brian is dancing with Ben?’

“You have to admit, they do make a good looking couple,” Ted stated. “I can certainly see why they hooked up at the White Part all those years ago.”

“They are completely edible,” Emmett added. “Everyone is looking at them.”

“Who wouldn’t,” Ted agreed, but Michael never heard them. All that was going through his mind was the conversation between himself and his former lover, when the professor had told him that they were through.

“Why?”

“There’s someone else.”

“Someone new? Where did you meet him?”

“Not new. We met a few years ago. Where isn’t really important. It wasn’t something we planned. We hadn’t expected to see each other again and when we did, we were both involved with other people. I was involved with you and he was in a relationship with someone that I could see was god for him, so we contented ourselves with only being friends.”

“Then what happened? Why are you breaking up with me now? What’s changed?”

His lover left him for someone else. He needed a shoulder to cry on and I volunteered to help him deal with what had happened. We didn’t plan to let anything go any further than friendship, but one thing led to another and we realized that what we had felt before was still there, so we decided to take a chance. I’m sorry Michael.”

“As Brian would say, sorry’s bullshit.”

“It was Brian all along,” Michael finally said, coming out of whatever trance he had fallen into upon seeing the couple on the dance floor. “It was always Brian. Mother fucker.”

“Mikey, what are you talking about?” Emmett asked, not surprised to see the total look of anger on his roommate’s face. Emmett knew that he should feel bad about what Michael should be feeling upon seeing Brian and Ben so obviously together, but he couldn’t. Not now that he knew Michael didn’t truly care for Ben. Had only been using him to mask his intentions towards Brian.

“I’m talking about taking back what’s mine,” Michael hissed, heading down towards the dance floor.

“You can’t force Ben to come back to you,” Ted pointed out.

“I’m not talking about Ben,” Michael yelled before disappearing into the crowd.

PART 19

Brian watched Michael storm his way across Babylon, in his haste to confront his best friend and former lover. He smirked as he realized that Michael was reacting exactly as he has thought he would. Brian knew that Michael would make a scene in the crowded dance club instead of waiting until they were all somewhere more private. It’s what made Michael the drama princess that Brian knew he was. Hell, the boy proved it during the party that he and the good doctor had thrown for the Senator. Michael couldn’t do anything halfway.

Brian noticed Ted and Emmett following Michael, their expressions grim, and wished that Justin was there; knowing that his young lover would appreciate what was about to happen since it had partially been his idea in the first place. It still surprised Brian at the deviousness that resided in his young lover’s mind and he wasn’t sure whether he should be proud of the teen or scared.

“Showtime,” Brian told Ben, turning to face the irate store owner, a smile on his face. “Mikey, what a surprise. I didn’t think you would be here. Thought you had some inventory to do at the store or something.”

“I bet you didn’t, asshole,” Michael hissed. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“It looks like you’re dancing with my boyfriend.”

“Ex-boyfriend,” Ben corrected, causing Michael to glare at him, hatred in his eyes. Anyone looking at the angry young man would never recognize him as the normally cheerful man that he usually was. “We broke up, remember?”

“I remember you saying that you and an ex decided to get together,” Michael turned on Ben. “I didn’t realize that you were talking about Brian. I figured it was someone else that you knew.”

“I dropped enough hints,” Ben countered. “I told you that he had just broken up with his lover, which was what had happened.”

“You knew how I felt and yet you still went after him,” Michael continued on, not even bothering to notice the crowd that was beginning to form around the altercation. “Fuck, how could you do this to me?”

“Michael, sweetie, why don’t we get out of here?” Emmett asked, trying to ease the tension in the group and to get them away from the scrutiny of the dancers. As angry as he was at Michael’s duplicity, he didn’t want Michael’s humiliation to come in front of the crowd at Babylon. He still considered Michael a friend, even if he had lost his way for a bit. Emmett tried to pull Michael away from Brian and Ben, only to have the older man throw off his attempt.

“Back of, Em, “Michael growled. “This is between Ben, Brian and me. Ben’s the one that started this.”

“It just happened. We didn’t plan on it,” Ben countered. “I didn’t start anything.”

“You went after Brian,” Michael countered. “You took advantage of him being vulnerable after Justin left to get what you wanted.”

“I thought you said that Brian didn’t care whether or not Justin left him,” Ben said. “In fact, I distinctly remember you saying something along the lines of you being glad that Justin was gone because you felt that he was too demanding of Brian. That he was forcing Brian to do and be something that he wasn’t and now that Justin was gone, Brian could go back to his normal self.”

“What exactly is my normal self, Mikey?” Brian questioned.

“You know.”

“No really,” Brian raised one of his eyebrows. “Why don’t you tell me what I should be doing?”

“Come on, Brian,” Michael whined. “You know how you were. You never did boyfriends. You didn’t believe in love and you never fucked the same guy twice. But Justin changed all that. He made you into something you weren’t.”

“Everyone changes, Mikey.”

“Not you, Brian,” Michael replied. “That was something I could count on. That no one could ever have you because you never wanted them back.”

“Including you,” Brian pointed out, causing Michael to nod his head before realizing exactly what it was that he had just agreed too. He looked at Brian, about to deny the accusation when he saw the knowing smirk that crossed Brian’s face and the scowl that came upon Ben’s.

“That’s the real problem, isn’t it, Mikey?” Brian drawled, moving closer to his best friend. “It’s not that Ben left you for someone else, is it? It’s that he’s with me now. It’s the fact that, once again, I’ve chosen to be in a relationship with someone that isn’t you. That will never be you.”

“Brian,” Michael stuttered as he felt Brian’s hot breath against his skin.

“Isn’t it, Mikey?” Brian continued leaning in to whisper into Michael’s ear. “Admit it. You wish that it was you that I’m dancing with. You who I take home. Who I fuck.”

“Yes,” Michael nodded, lost in the sensual haze that Brian was weaving. “God help me, I want you Brian.”

“Well, you can’t have me Mikey,” Brian pulled back from the stunned young man. “And you never will.” And with that, Brian and Ben walked away leaving behind a stunned Michael wondering when it had all gone wrong.

Part 20

“Brian Kinney, open this fucking door now before I break it down,” a loud female voice yelled through the metal door to Brian’s loft.

“Hold your fucking horses, will you,” Brian shouted as he wearily made his way towards the door, pulling on a robe that had been lying near the end of his bed. The other person continued to pound the door, causing Brian to wince. “Christ, I said I was coming.” Brian pulled open the door, quickly moving away again as Debbie Novatny shoved her way into his home. “Why don’t you come in, Debbie?”

“Don’t take that fucking tone with me, young man,” Debbie ordered, turning furiously towards the man that she considered her son. “I want to know what the fuck you think you’re doing screwing around with Ben.”

“I see you’ve been talking with Mikey,” Brian drawled, heading towards the kitchen and going about making coffee. He glanced at the clock and groaned when he saw the time. “Jesus, Deb, couldn’t you have waited until it was at least a decent hour to come over to my home and rip me a new one?”

“And why should I be so damn considerate towards you when its obvious you don’t give a shit about anyone else, including your best friend,” Debbie countered.

“Debbie, don’t get in the middle of this,” Brian gently told her. “It’s not a place you really want to be. Trust me. This is between Ben, Mikey and myself.”

“You shouldn’t even be in that equation,” Debbie reminded Brian. “Brian, Michael is your best friend. How could you go after Ben like that? Knowing how much Michael cared for him.”

“Mikey doesn’t care for anyone other than Mikey,” Brian countered. “He’s just a good enough actor to make the rest of us believe otherwise, including me, and I’m the most cynical bastard in this town when it comes to people.”

Debbie stared at Brian in shock. She couldn’t believe the words that were coming out of his mouth or the venom in which he was saying them. Debbie had watched Brian grow up and knew what a heartless bastard he could be but she had never thought he could be so cruel against the man who was his best friend.

When Michael had come into the diner after leaving Babylon, upset and angry, Debbie didn’t know what to think. She had never seen her son like that, not even after Brian’s birthday fiasco when he had been outted in front of his co-worker, Tracy. Debbie had instantly gotten one of the other waitresses to cover her tables and went over to her son.

“Michael, sweetie, what’s wrong? What happened?” Debbie asked, concerned over what had her son so upset.

“Brian and Ben,” he answered between tears.

“What about Brian and Ben, honey? Did something happen to them?” Debbie couldn’t keep the worry out of her voice at the thought of something happening to either of the men. Brian, because he was like a son to her, and Ben because, even though he and Michael were no longer together, she still worried about him.

“They’re together. Ben broke up with me to be with Brian.”

“Honey, you know that’s not true,” Debbie comforted, wrapping her arm around Michael’s shoulder. She wasn’t sure what had caused him to get the idea into his head that the other men were involved but she was sure there had to be more to the story. “What gave you the idea that they were together?”

“I saw them tonight. At Babylon,” Michael explained. “They were dancing and kissing and they couldn’t keep their hands off of each other. It was like they knew I was there and were throwing their relationship in my face. Fuck, I just want to kill them both. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.” Debbie sat back in shock at what she had heard. Sure, she had always said that Brian Kinney was a suck and fuck machine, who didn’t really give a damn about anyone, but she was almost positive that the one person he would go out of his way not to hurt was her son. Well, other than the occasional well meaning push off the proverbial cliff.

“I couldn’t believe it Mom. And Ted and Emmett were there and it was almost like they knew it was going on,” Michael continued.

“What did they do?”

“Nothing. Nobody did anything,” he told her. “I felt like I was being kicked in the gut. Then Brian and Ben just walked out of Babylon, together, and I know they were just going to go back to the loft to fuck.” Michael threw himself into his mother’s arms. “I’ve lost them. They both left me.”

And it was the despair in her son’s voice that had Debbie over at Brian’s loft so early in the morning to confront the men that had broken Michael’s heart because she was sure that if what Michael was saying was true, that she would find both Brian and Ben still asleep and she had a few choice words for both of the men that had hurt her son.

“Brian, you and Michael have been best friends for over fourteen years. The two of you have seen and done things together that no one else knows about or would probably understand,” Debbie started. “Sure, there was a time that I was worried about him being friends with you. I could tell you were trouble the minute I first saw you, but you proved yourself to be a good friend. But now this. You can get any guy you want. Why did you have to take the one that was with Michael? And where exactly did all this hatred I hear in your voice when you’re talking about him come from? What happened between the two of you?”

Brian didn’t answer Debbie right away. He didn’t know what to say to her. Even though he never showed it, her opinion of him meant a lot. She was more of a mother to him that his own and the fact that she was so angry at him hurt him a lot. But he also knew that she was Michael’s mother first and he didn’t want to hurt her by telling her what he son had done to keep him and Justin apart. That decision was taking out of his hands by a voice floating down from the bedroom.

“Tell her, Brian.” Justin said, stepping down from the bedroom, his appearance making it obvious to Debbie that he had not spent the night on the couch.

“Sunshine?” Debbie looked between the two men, surprised to see the teen in the loft. She watched as Justin walked over to Brian, taking his hand in his and raising it to his lips, placing a gentle kiss on the palm. She was stunned at the tenderness and affection between the two of them. She had known that Brian and Justin were close still, the fact that they worked together necessitated that, but she didn’t know that they were lovers again, and of that she had no doubt. What she could see between them was definitely love. And it made what Michael had told her all the more unbelievable. “What’s going on here?”

“It’s a long story,” Brian sighed, going over to Debbie and leading her to the sofa. She reluctantly allowed herself to be led, knowing that whatever she was about to be told would not be good. Justin went into the kitchen and made coffee for everyone. He knew that Debbie would not take the news that her son had helped bring about the entrance of Ethan into Justin and Brian’s life in the hopes of finally getting Brian to himself and he just hoped that his second mother would be okay.

“First off, you need to know that despite appearances to the contrary, there is nothing going on between Ben and me. There never has been.”

“But Michael said he saw you and Ben…”

“I know what Michael saw,” Brian interrupted her. “Michael saw what we wanted him to see. It doesn’t mean it’s the truth though.”

“Why would you want him to see you and Ben together like that,” Debbie asked confused.

“Because we wanted him to know what it felt like to see the man he was in love with in the arms of someone else,” Justin answered, bringing over the mugs of coffee, handing one to Debbie and Brian. He then went and joined Brian, sitting as close to his lover as he could get without sitting in his lap. “To make him hurt as much as he made Brian and I hurt.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It all started a couple of weeks ago when I asked for Melanie’s help….”

Part 21

Brian walked into the Liberty Diner, quickly spotting Justin and the rest of their friends, excepting Michael, as they sat and ate their breakfasts. He smiled softly as he looked over at his young lover, whose back was currently turned to him, and quickly thanked whoever was listening that he had gotten a second chance to have Justin in his life. And this time around, Brian was making damn sure he didn’t screw things up and so far, he was succeeding. The only regret Brian had, was the fact that the two men had to keep their reunion a secret, except for those people that had to be told, but that was about to change. Starting right there and then.

Brian sauntered over to the booth, surprising all of those present by leaning down and kissing Justin, leaving no doubt in anyone’s mind that there were no hard feelings between the two of them over what had happened at the Rage party so long ago. At first, Justin was so startled by the unexpected action; he froze up, before returning the kiss with equal fervor. The teen had no idea why Brian was making such an open declaration about their relationship being back on track, but he was more than willing to go with the flow. Finally they broke apart, but didn’t move away from each other.

“Hi,” Justin said breathlessly, moving over a bit to give Brian room to sit down. Neither man seemed to notice or care about the attention that was being sent their way by the other patrons in the diner.

“Hi yourself,” Brian replied, leaning in and kissing Justin again.

“You know, Brian, you have a perfectly good loft. You don’t have to molest the boy in front of everyone, although I’m sure they are enjoying the show,” Ted quipped, smiling at his two friends. It had been a long time since he had seen Brian and Justin so happy and not afraid of letting the outside world see them in love and he thought that if anyone deserved happiness it was them.

“I don’t know,” Debbie broke in as she brought over a cup of coffee for Brian, “Personally I think the jaded people in this diner need to be reminded that true love can win out.”

“Hear, hear, Debbie,” Emmett agreed as Brian and Justin again broke their kiss. Justin leaned into Brian’s side while the older man wrapped his arm around Justin’s shoulder.

“Not like I’m complaining or anything,” Justin began, “but what brought that on?”

“What, can’t a guy kiss his lover for no reason?” Brian smirked. Justin just looked at him. “Okay, fine, I just decided I was tired of hiding the fact that you and I are together again.”

“What about Mikey and Ethan?”

“Fuck em.”

“But the plan?”

“Plans change,” Brian said simply. At everyone’s look at him, Brian sighed and continued. “Look, Ben left for Tibet last night. Mikey is still freaking over what he saw at Babylon last week. You keep telling us about how Ethan is constantly bugging you to move in with him. For you to quit working with me. I just think its time for us to stop pretending that we don’t mean anything to each other. That we aren’t involved.”

“So what do you want to do?” Justin asked.

“Move back in with me,” Brian stated simply. “I want everyone to know that you and I are together and that this time it’s for good.”

“Geez, Brian, why don’t you just have a commitment ceremony and be done with it,” Ted joked, causing everyone to laugh. Everyone that was, except for Brian. Ted’s face grew serious again when he saw that. “Oh my god. You’re actually considering that?”

“Brian?” Justin questioned, hope evident in his voice. The ad exec refused to look in Justin’s eyes. Justin lifted Brian’s chin so that he had no choice. “Brian, is there something you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it,” Brian finally admitted, looking unsure of himself. It was something that his friends had never seen before. He looked around, silently asking them for some privacy, something that none of the others were willing to give him. Brian took a deep breath and turned back to Justin.

“You know what I’ve always said about relationships and love. That is was bullshit made up for breeders and had no place in our lives,” Brian began, taking Justin’s hand in his when the teen made to move away. “It was something that I had learned growing up and watching the way my parents acted towards one another. If that was love, I wanted nothing to do with it. Hell, remember my father’s idea of showing his love was a smack to the face.”

“Brian….”

“No, let me talk,” Brian interrupted. “I never knew the kind of love that Hollywood keeps trying to show us. I didn’t think it even existed. That is, until you came into my life. And, yes, I’ll admit it. I fought it every step of the way. You were challenging my very way of thinking and I wasn’t sure if I could change. It was why I tried to push you away and into Ethan’s arms. But then I realized that I didn’t want you gone. I didn’t want to do to you what my father did to my mother.”

“You could never do anything like that,” Justin denied. “You’re nothing like your father and besides, I’m totally nothing like your mother.”

“But we were already like them, just without the fists,” Brian told him. “Even though you never said anything, I knew you hated the tricks. The partying. All of it, but I couldn’t change. Wouldn’t change. And it was killing you. Then you met Ethan and suddenly you had someone willing to give you everything that you wanted. And he made you happy in a way I couldn’t. And I was going to let you go. I had every intention of removing myself from you life, forcefully if necessary, but I couldn’t do it. It was why I asked Melanie to look into Ethan’s past for me. I wanted o know if there was something there that would give me the hope that I would be able to use against him.”

“And you sure as hell found it,” Debbie spat out, anger at what the violinist and her son had done to Brian and Justin. “Fucking bastard.” Brian just ignored her outburst.

“Then, after Melanie told me what she had found, and I realized just what had happened, my heart broke, because it made me understand exactly what it was I was feeling. It made me realize that I had to stop running from my past. I had to face up to it and say fuck you to my parents and prove to them that I could love someone. That love was real. And I want to do that with you, Justin. I want to stand up in front of all of our friends, our family and say that I am willing to commit myself to one man for the rest of my life. That I want to spend the rest of my days doing my damndest to make you happy. That is, if that’s something you would like.”

Justin didn’t know what to say. He had never thought he would hear the words coming out of Brian’s mouth. Even though he and Brian had been spending the past few months working out their relationship and actually talking, the words that Brian was saying were things Justin didn’t think he would hear, at least not so soon. Justin watched as Brian squirmed in his seat, waiting to see what he would say and Justin couldn’t help it. He smiled and threw himself into Brian’s arms, kissing him deeply.

“I think Brian just got his answer,” Emmett said dreamily, leaning over and placing a kiss on Ted’s lips.

“Attention everyone,” Debbie’s loud voice interrupted both couples. “I have an announcement to make. As of this moment. Brian Kinney and Justin Taylor are off the market.” Amid a round of cheers from the other customers, Brian and Justin kissed once more.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO.”

Part 22

“What the fuck is going on here?” All eyes turned to face the upset and angry young man that had entered the diner, only to see the man he loved kissing someone else. Someone that he despised with every fiber of his being. Someone that he had been told was out of their lives for good, the only interactions the two men having been about work.

“Now this promises to be interesting,” Emmett crowed, seeing the new arrival.

“And it should get even more interesting now,” Ted added, noticing someone else heading towards the diner. “Michael’s heading this way too.”

“Shit,” Justin groaned as he watched Ethan make his way over to the booth. Justin stood to face off with his now ex-lover, only to have the violinist push him aside and throw a punch at Brian’s head. Unfortunately for the teen, Brian’s quick reflexes prevented the hit from being successful and his own hand caught the punch. Instead of letting go of the younger man’s hand, Brian instead began to squeeze it, causing Ethan to wince as he began to feel pain.

“No one, especially some sniveling little shit like you, will ever get the chance to hit me,” Brian told him coldly, applying more pressure to his hold. Ethan bit back a scream as he felt the bones in his hand bend, but a moan did manage to escape.

“Brian,” Justin said simply, resting his hand above his lover’s. The ad exec looked over at him and nodded, releasing Ethan and pushing him away from him. Ethan stumbled, barely remaining on his feet, and cradled his injured hand to his chest.

“You almost broke my fucking hand you asshole,” Ethan swore.

“After you tried to hit him,” Justin countered, coming to Brian’s defense. The artist moved to stand between Ethan and Brian, making sure that there was no mistake as to whose side he was truly on.

“You were fucking kissing him,” Ethan said. “And this bitch was screaming like a fucking maniac about you and him being off the market.” This time it was Justin who did the hitting, smacking Ethan right across his face.

“Never, and I mean fucking never, say anything like that about Debbie, or any of my friends,” Justin said coldly. “Do you understand me?”

“Yeah, I understand perfectly,” Ethan hissed. “I understand perfectly.” Ethan mover closer to Justin, pretending he didn’t see the way Justin instinctively moved closer to Brian. “I understand that they’ve done something to you. Something to confuse you and make you think that he can make you happy. But Justin, you know the truth. You know how only I can give you what you want. What you need to be happy. He’ll only hurt you even more if you stay with him.”

“The only one who’s hurting me right now is you,” Justin replied, eyes turning towards the door to the diner as the door opened admitting the final player in their little game. “You and your little partner in crime.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Michael, I believe you know Ethan, right?” Justin said sarcastically. Michael looked between Justin and Ethan, confusion evident on his face.

“How the hell would I know him,” Michael asked, making a move towards the booth to sit by Brian, only to have Justin intercept him. His eyes narrowed, the hatred and anger he felt towards Justin apparent in his eyes. “Look, Boy Wonder, I don’t know what the fuck your problem is, but I’m really not interested in it. I don’t know what little game you’re playing here with your new boyfriend, but I’m sure nobody here is really that interested in it.”

“But I thought you and Ethan loved playing all kinds of games together,” Justin stated.

“Justin, what’s wrong with you?” Ethan asked, not sure what was going on but not liking the way the conversation was turning. There was something in Justin’s voice that didn’t sit right with him. “What would make you think I know Michael and what do you mean partner in crime? What partner? Hell, what crime?”

“Brian, what’s going on?” Michael asked, looking around Justin towards the other man.

“You’re talking to me now, Mikey?” Brian asked, raising his eyebrow. “I thought you were upset with me over what happened with Ben.”

“I was,” Michael admitted, shrugging his shoulders. “But I know that Ben left the country so I thought that maybe it was time for you and me to talk.”

“Is that what they’re calling it nowadays,” Ted commented sarcastically, earning himself a smack from both Debbie and Emmett.

“What does Ben leaving the country have to do with you talking to me now?” Brian asked, genuinely confused at Michael’s logic. Michael looked at the crowd in the diner, not failing to notice that he and the rest of his friends seemed to be the center of attention.

“Brian, look can’t we go somewhere to talk?” Michael asked his voice near begging. “Someplace a little more private?”

“Why, Mikey?” Brian questioned. “We don’t have any secrets from our friends, do we? I mean, it’s not like you’re going to tell me something that you wouldn’t want everyone else to hear.”

“Brian,” Michael continued to whine.

“Can’t you just shut the fuck up, you sniveling spoiled brat,” Ethan hissed, angry at the way things were going. Nothing was the way it was supposed to be. Justin wasn’t supposed to be hanging around Brian and his group of friends. He was only supposed to want to be with Ethan. Instead, the violinist had entered the diner, planning on surprising Justin, only to hear the announcement that Justin and Brian were no longer on the market, apparently because the two men were together. He didn’t have time to deal with Michael’s hysterics over Brian not paying enough attention to him.

“Fuck off, fiddle boy,” Michael countered, turning his attention to Ethan. “It’s not like you’re not invested in this too.”

“Guess they’re not happy with their partnership now,” Justin whispered to Brian, joining his lover in the booth. Brian for his part only smiled as he wrapped his arms around Justin, making sure that there was no question as to who the younger man belonged to. It was a declaration that didn’t go unnoticed by the arguing men.

“Get your hands off of him.”

“Brian, what the hell is going on?” Justin and Brian looked at each other, lovingly kissing each other before turning back to face the other two men.

“What’s going on, Mikey,” Brian drawled, “is that, despite your and Ethan’s best attempts, Justin and I are still together. In fact, I just asked him to marry me and he actually said yes.”

“You’re lying,” Ethan denied while Michael just paled at Brian’s announcement. Ethan tried to pull Justin away from Brian, but the other teen refused to leave his lover’s side. He looked at Justin in confusion, not able to miss the way that Justin was leaning into Brian’s arms. “Justin, tell him. Tell him that you and I are together. Tell him that it’s me you love now, not him.” Justin made no move to do as Ethan requested. “I said tell him, you bastard,” Ethan began to shout, his temper getting the better of him. He made to grab Justin again. “You’re mine.” Brian’s hand intercepted Ethan’s once again, this time the older man didn’t even try to hold back his strength.

“If you ever try and lay a hand on Justin again,” Brian threatened his voice low and menacing, “I will make damn sure your life isn’t worth anything.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me, little boy. Right now,” Brian continued, “the only thing keeping me from kicking your worthless ass is that fact that you did make Justin happy, in a way. And, if it wasn’t for you, Justin and I wouldn’t be where we are now. You were a good friend to him, even if Justin didn’t know the real reason you were interested in him, at first.”

“Oh really? And what exactly was the real reason I was interested in Justin?”

“Revenge,” Brian stated simply. “Revenge for a perceived wrong against someone who you cared about. You came to Pittsburgh with the sole purpose of getting back at Justin and I for what Kip Thomas said we did to him. You even figured out a way to turn one of my family against me, against us, to help you do it. It was just your misfortune that you ended up falling for your mark and your underestimating me in what I would do to keep Justin with me.”

“Brian what the fuck are you talking about?” Michael finally joined back into the conversation, his voice conveying the panic he was beginning to feel as he listened to the conversation between his best friend and the violinist because it was beginning to sound like Brian knew exactly what Michael had been doing.

“I’m talking about you and Ethan conspiring to break Justin and I up so that Justin would be with him and I might go with you,” Brian answered. “Which, as I’ve told you time and time again Mikey, was never going to happen. There is no way in hell I would ever be desperate enough to fuck you, you whiny, self-centered, immature asshole.”

Part 23

Silence descended upon the diner as the patrons gave up any pretense of not paying attention to the fight that was taking place between Michael, Brian, Justin and Ethan. It was no secret how the relationships within the group worked; most of the customers had been present at the, now infamous, Rage party that had seen Justin walking away from Brian in the arms of Ethan. And the friendship between Michael and Brian was practically legendary; everyone knowing that to cross one was to cross the other. Even the other employees stopped their tasks so that they could satisfy their curiosity.

“Brian?” Michael quietly called out his friend’s voice, disbelief evident in it. He couldn’t believe what Brian had just said. “What are you saying?”

“Do you need a translator?” Brian asked sarcastically, his voice dripping with disdain. “Even you can’t be that stupid.”

“But, Brian, you and I,” Michael stopped as if he was trying to gather his thoughts. “Brian, we’ve known each other for so long. You’re my best friend. I don’t know what he,” Michael nodded his head towards Brian, his distaste at the closeness between the ad exec and artist, “told you but its all bullshit. Nothing but a bunch of lies. He cheated on you, Brian, remember.” Michael made to move closer to his friend but Brian stopped him cold with only a look.

“Michael, don’t you dare say one word about Justin,” Brian warned.

“He cheated on you…”

“I said, not one word.” Brian signaled Justin to get up, following his lover closely. The confrontation looked to be coming to its climax and Brian didn’t want to face the two men that that intentionally made it their business to break him and Justin up sitting down.

“How dare you stand there, Mikey, and say that you’re my best friend after everything that you’ve done to me the past few months,” Brian began. “I trusted you. You knew me better than anyone, other than Justin, and you used that against me in the vain hope that you might have a shot in hell of getting together with me. You helped this psychopath,” Bran motioned to Ethan, “in his little plot to get between Justin and me, even though you had to know exactly what that would do to me. Did you think I wouldn’t figure it out eventually? Come on, Mikey, you had to know I’m not that stupid.”

“Brian, I know you’re not stupid,” Michael tried to placate him. “I never said anything like that.”

“Than how could you think that I wouldn’t figure out what you and fiddle boy over there weren’t planning?”

“Brian, you don’t understand,” the store owner tried again. “All I wanted was for you to finally see that you and Justin weren’t meant to be together. That the two of you were too different to make a relationship work. And when I found out that Ethan was interested in Justin, and that it seemed as if that feeling might be mutual, I just wanted to prove to you that I was right.”

“Shut you, you stupid fuck,” Ethan hissed, turning his angry glare towards Michael.

“Why don’t you shut up,” Michael countered. “It was your fucking plan. You were supposed to keep Justin away from Brian. Make him only remember the way that Brian always tossed him aside.”

“And I was doing my job,” Ethan practically growled. “You were the one that was supposed to make sure Brian kept up his old patterns. Make sure that word got around town that Brian Kinney was back up to his old tricks, sucking and fucking his way through gay Pittsburgh, but you couldn’t even do that right. You’re fucking useless.”

Brian, Justin and the rest of the diner watched in amusement as the two co-conspirators fight amongst themselves. It was an odd spectacle to see in the Liberty Diner, which was considered something like neutral territory among the Liberty Avenue crowd. Not to mention that fact that very few people had ever seen Michael Novatny truly angry and yelling at someone.

“You know, even though I heard the tape, and saw the reports that that detective had given Brian, I really didn’t believe that Michael could be involved with something like this,” Emmett whispered to Ted.

“But there’s no denying it now,” Ted agreed, looking sadly at the man he had once thought he was in love with. “Michael isn’t the same person we thought he was.”

“I wonder if he ever was.”

“Boys, boys, boys,” Brian interrupted the fighting, actually getting tired of listening to their arguing. “As interesting as this is, it’s becoming counter-productive.” Michael turned back to Brian, hoping to convince the other man to give him another chance.

“Brian, look, I don’t know what you know, or how you found out, but you have to believe me,” I began to plead. “I never meant to hurt you. All I wanted was you to see that Justin wasn’t right for you. He cheated on Brian, and I had nothing to do with that. And you’re only fooling yourself if you think he won’t do it again.”

“You’re the one fooling yourself, Mikey,” Brian corrected him. “Justin and I were doing just fine, and you know it. You knew that I was finally ready to believe that I was capable of love, of being in a relationship, and you couldn’t accept that. You went out of your way to make sure that Justin began to doubt his place in my life. Doubt my love for him.” Murmurs could be heard around the diner at Brian’s easy use of the L and R words in regards to him and Justin. They couldn’t believe the surprises that they were being treated to.

“And you,” Brian turned his attention to Ethan, “you got it into your head that it was your job to get revenge on Justin and I because of what happened to Kip Thomas. That’s the first clue of how completely stupid you are because you actually believed that idiot. And then you fell in love with your mark, which I can actually understand.” Brian looked over at Justin, the love he felt for the teen apparent to everyone who saw them. He reached over and took the younger man’s hand in his own.

“You are a sorry excuse for a queer. Hell, you’re a sorry excuse for a human being.” There was no mistaking the contempt Brian felt for the violinist. “How many lives do you have to ruin before you’ll be happy. You’ve already destroyed your family. You hurt innocent people in your quest to be the best, and yet it hasn’t been enough. You blackmailed your way into a school that wouldn’t take you because you weren’t talented enough. You’ve terrorized a boy who had taken you in when you had no place else to go. And then you made the biggest mistake of your life. You tried to take what was mine.”

“And I did it too,” Ethan said smugly.

“That’s what you think,” Brian retorted. “Justin and I were never finished. Even though he had moved out of our loft, but didn’t mean that he was out of my life. If it did, do you really think we would be here now. That I would have even bothered taking the time to find out the deal with you. Justin and I continued to see each other. Hell, we became better friends because of all the shit you put us through and for that I thank you. But only for that.” Brian advanced on the younger boy, anger radiating through his body.

“I’m going to tell you this once, and only once. I want you to get the fuck out of here. And I’m not talking just out of the diner. I’m talking out of Pittsburgh. I don’t want to even hear that you are performing some kind of fucking concert in this city.”

“And what will you do if I don’t?”

“I’ll make your life such a hell that you’ll wish you were dead.” Ethan continued to stare at Brian, searching his face to see how serious the older man was. What he saw there actually seemed to scare him and he turned around and left the diner as quickly as possible, allowing Brian to turn his attention back to Michael.

“Now for you, Mikey,” Brian drawled. “What should I do about you?”

“Brian?”

“I can’t tell you to get out of town because of Vic and Debbie.” Brian nodded his head in acknowledgement of the waitress that was standing there, disappointment in her eyes as she watched her son. “But I will tell you that you no longer exist to me. I want nothing to do with you. I can’t tell you that you can’t hang out with Ted and Emmett, that’s up to them, but I will tell you that Justin and I are completely off limits to you. So is my son. If I hear that you came within ten feet of Gus, I will kill you.”

“Mel and Lindsay won’t keep me away from Gus,” Michael countered. “They know how much I love him.”

“Who do you think got me all of my information?” Brian watched as that set into Michael’s mind. “They don’t want you anywhere near Gus or them. Don’t test me on this, Mikey. You will not like the results.”

Michael looked around the diner, trying to find a sympathetic person among the crowd, but not even those that had been his friends could meet his eyes. He looked over at Debbie, but his mother couldn’t bear to look at him and went into the back. Tears began to fall down his face as he realized that in his quest to gain Brian’s love, he had lost everyone that he cared about and he ran out of the diner. Brian watched him go, sadness etched on his face, as he remembered the young boy that he had befriended when he was fourteen and he wondered where that boy had gone.

“Are you okay?” Justin asked, wrapping his arms around Brian, offering his lover a comforting hug. Brian returned the hug, uncaring that his hard as nails attitude was taking a serious beating.

“As long as you’re with me I will be.”

“Always. I love you, Brian.”

“Love you too, Sunshine.”

Epilogue

“I now pronounce you, husband and husband,” Reverend Tom announced to the two men in front of him. “You may now kiss the groom.” The room watched, many still in stunned shock, at the sight in front of them. They couldn’t believe what they had just witnessed. Brian Kinney, legendary stud of Liberty Avenue, had officially and permanently been taken off of the market. He had done what he had sworn he would never do. He had committed himself to someone. A blonde twink had managed to do what countless others had not. Justin Taylor had tamed the big bad.

The witnesses to the big event included family and friends, along with some former tricks of both of the grooms. Debbie was there with her fiancé, Carl Horvath. Ted and Emmett had stood up for the men, both of them considering it a rehearsal for when their big day would come. Lindsay looked on, Gus in her arms and Melanie at her side, happy that her longtime friend had finally found the courage to accept the love that was due him. Vic and Ben stood together, Ben having come back to Pittsburgh specifically to witness the commitment ceremony of his friends. And standing together were Jennifer and Joanie, the two proud mothers of the grooms. Joanie had come a long way in accepting Brian’s lifestyle and Jennifer had done a lot to help that process. The two mothers helped each other accept the relationship between their sons and had actually grown somewhat close over the past few months.

Brian and Justin made their way through the throng of well wishers; both wishing they had just run off and gotten married instead of going through the whole commitment ceremony thing. They wanted nothing more than to have a few uninterrupted moments alone, preferably horizontal, but they also knew that their friends had been there for both of them during all of the hard times and that they had deserved the celebration as much as Brian and Justin did.

“I can’t believe we actually did it,” Justin enthused, his arms wrapping around his husband. “I can’t believe we actually got married.”

“Neither can I,” Brian agreed. “What was I thinking?” Justin grinned up at Brian, the love he felt for the man in his arms apparent to everyone that saw them.

“You were thinking that you love me and want to spend the rest of your life with me,” Justin stated, no doubt of what he was saying in his voice.

“Actually I believe I think it was more along the lines that I must be insane to want to tie myself down to just one person,” Brian said, tongue in cheek. Brian smiled down at his lover, now his husband, and couldn’t resist the red lips that seemed to be calling to him. He kissed Justin, throwing all the love he felt for the younger man into it. It was obvious to all watching, and everyone was watching, that the two men were right for each other.

“I can’t believe Brian actually went through with it,” Melanie commented, surprising herself by smiling at the happy couple. “Who would have thought that Brian Kinney would actually settle down?”

“Not me that’s for damn sure,” Debbie agreed, “and I’ve known him for a hell of a lot longer than you.”

“Well, I for one am happy for both of them,” Lindsay added. “After everything they’ve been through, they both deserve some happiness.” Everyone in the group grew quiet at Lindsay’s comment, the memory of one person not there getting to them all.

It had been six months since the final confrontation between Brian, Justin, Michael and Ethan at the diner. Six months that had seen a few changes take place along Liberty Avenue. Gone was the closeness of the once tight group. The hurt and anger over what had been done to Brian and Justin hurting everyone. Debbie and Vic felt the need to be supportive of Michael, although they were angry and hurt over what he had attempted to do. Still, Michael was their family and they felt the need to be there for him and try to get him the help that they believe he needed. Unfortunately their offers were constantly rebuffed until they finally had to give up. Two months after Brian told him to get out of his life, Michael left Pittsburgh for parts unknown. As a favor to Debbie, and because of his long history with the other man, Brian did make an attempt to locate him but with no success. No one has heard from him since. It was a loss that they all felt.

On the other hand, the entire gang knew exactly what had happened to Ethan Gold. His downfall was the biggest news throughout gay Pittsburgh. The boy that had been known for stealing away the twink that had tamed Brian Kinney was now awaiting sentencing for attempted murder, stalking, blackmail, grand larceny and a variety of other charges stemming from his activities in both Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. The trial had been short, the evidence overwhelming. Between Justin, Ethan, Ethan’s old roommate and the dean at PIFA there was no doubt of his guilt. Ethan Gold was going to prison for a very long time and there was no one that was mourning for him. Even his family had finally washed their hands of their problem child.

“Excuse me, everyone, I would like to make a toast,” Jennifer interrupted everyone’s thoughts as she picked up a glass of champagne. Everyone quieted down as they turned to face her. Finally, when she had everyone’s attention, she turned to face her son and his new husband.

“As any of you here know, when Brian first entered Justin’s life I wasn’t exactly thrilled about it.”

“That’s an understatement,” Debbie said, earning herself a few chuckles. Jennifer smiled at her and continued.

“As I was saying, I wasn’t thrilled about it. I’ll admit it, at first it was because I didn’t like the concept that my son was gay, but I learned to accept it, but I still couldn’t accept Brian. I thought he was too old for Justin…”

“Hey watch who you’re calling old,” Brian shouted out to his mother-in-law before being shushed by his husband.

“Well, I did. And then I heard stories about him and I was terrified that he would hurt my son and no mother wants to go through with that. I thought that had come through the night of Justin’s prom and I am sorry to say that I took my anger out on Brian, telling him not to come near my son. Of course, that backfired on me big time and I was forced to come to terms with the fact that Brian was a major force in Justin’s life and I decided to get to know the man that had stolen my son’s heart. Surprisingly I found out that I liked him. Instead of trying to keep Justin under wraps and separated from everyone, which is what I feared, I discovered that Brian didn’t want Justin to miss out on all of the opportunities that were being offered to him. Of course, that almost broke them up, but in the long run it made them stronger. Which leads us to today.

“Justin, I am so proud of you. You are everything that a mother could want in her son. Your strength is equal to your capacity to love. I am so happy that you have found what you are looking for with someone that I know will be there for you. Brian, while you may not be exactly what I was looking for in a son in law, I can’t think of anyone else that I would want in my son’s life. I know you will protect him and do everything you can to make him happy and that’s all I want. For both of you. So.” Jennifer raised her glass high in the air, the rest of the guests doing the same. “To Brian and Justin, may your lives be happy and may your marriage be the thing that legends are made of.”

“Hear, hear,” everyone agreed, toasting the couple. Brian and Justin took a sip of their champagne before kissing once more. Jennifer walked over and gave both young men a kiss. “Be happy boys.”

“Thanks mom.”

“Thank you, Jennifer.” She walks away from the couple, giving them a moment of privacy.

“Did you ever think you would live to see the day that my mother would willing kiss you?” Justin teased his lover, neither man willing to separate from the other.

“Only if I was lying in a casket,” Brian countered, earning himself a playful tap. “So how did I do with the whole romance thing?”

“Well, on a scale of one to ten I would have to say this is around an………eleven.” Brian smiled as he bent to kiss his new husband. “Have I told you lately that I love you?”

“Well, not within the past ten minutes or so.”

“Oh, how remiss of me. I love you Brian Kinney.”

“And I love you, Justin Taylor.”

**Changing Family Dynamics**

Based on my speculation on how the group reacts to Mikey and Mel's kid.

Part 1

To any passers-by, the gathering appeared to be a birthday for the young child that was being fussed and fawned over by all the guests that had gathered. It was obvious that the child was loved and well cared for and people smiled as they saw it. Unfortunately not all was as it appeared. What they didn’t see was the unhappy four years old who watched as his family paid no attention to him, instead focusing on his young sister. Unseen tears fell from his face as he realized that the party that was supposed to have been for his birthday, was instead going to be another day where he would be ignored in favor of young Annie Michelle Novatny-Marcus.

Gus made his way out of the back yard where his family was fawning over his little sister. He kept looking back, hoping that someone would notice his leaving and try and stop him, but he wasn’t exactly surprised when no one did. In the little under a year since her arrival, Gus had learned what all young children fear. That it was indeed possible that when a new child is brought into the house, the eldest can be soon forgotten. Well, maybe not forgotten, but at least pushed aside. The young boy knew that he was loved by his family, but he noticed the change in the way people treated him away. The first time his Grandma Debbie had come over after Annie had gotten home, Gus had immediately gone over to her to get his customary hug and kiss, only to be told that she wanted to her granddaughter and that she would pick him up in a minute. That minute never came.

“Hey Sonny boy, what are you doing out here, all by yourself?” Brian asked, picking up his son and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“Daddy,” Gus exclaimed, smiling for the first time that day. He looked over Brian’s shoulder, his smile getting bigger when he saw the blond man that was there. “Da Justin.”

“Hey Kiddo.” Gus allowed himself to be exchanged from one strong set of arms to another, happy to be with the only two people that seemed to want to be with him more than his sister. “Why are you out here instead of at your party?”

“All Annie,” Gus pouted, confident that his daddies would understand. And he was right. Brian and Justin shared a look, having witnessed on many occasions Gus being ignored by the rest of his family in favor of the prodigal daughter, as they began to call the child of Melanie Marcus and Michael Novatny. It was something that upset both men, but neither one of them knew what they could do about it. They had brought it up to Mel and Lindsay, but both women swore that Gus was just overreacting and that they loved both their children equally. It was just that Annie was so small and young that she required more attention, especially since Gus was getting ready to start school. That argument didn’t hold water with either male.

“You know that’s not true, Gus,” Brian tried to reassure his son, but even he didn’t believe what he was saying.

“I bet everyone’s looking for you right now, wondering where you are,” Justin joined in, tickling Gus trying to get him to laugh, but it didn’t work that well.

“Stop Da,” Gus commanded, his face still showing his frown even though he was giggling. When he crossed his arms and began to pout again, it took most of Brian and Justin’s self control not to laugh at his antics. “I hate her.”

“Oh Gus, you know that’s not true,” Justin said, looking over at his lover helplessly.

“Uh huh,” Gus promised. “No one loves me. Only Annie.”

“Christ,” Brian swore. He turned away from Justin and Gus, not wanting his son to see how angry he was. He had known since the moment Annie had first come home from the hospital that things were not going to be okay in the household. While he and Justin always made sure to try and not show favoritism among the siblings, although they weren’t always successful because Gus was Brian’s biological child, they watched as the rest of their extended family didn’t seem to have that same goal. On many occasions when the group of friends got together, it was obvious which of the two children they wanted to see. Michael and Debbie were constantly over at the Munchers, bringing Annie gifts, completely ignoring Gus. Ted and Emmett often did the same thing when they were there.

Annie Marcus had been born 10 months before, after a somewhat difficult pregnancy. Melanie had refused to stop working, no matter what her doctor, Lindsay or Michael had said, and the pressure that she was under in regards to some of her cases left her body unable to deal with the pregnancy has easily as she would have liked. She was forced to have a caesarean done before her due date and little Annie was born underweight. Everyone kept vigil over the tiny infant, and the recovering mother not even thinking about what her big brother might be going through knowing that one of his mommies was sick. It fell upon Brian and Justin to look after the little boy and they could see how he was already beginning to feel displaced by the newest member of his family.

When Annie was finally brought home, things didn’t improve for him. While Melanie was spending more time at home recovering, it was time spent with her daughter, leaving Gus to fend for himself and she never even realized it. Gus began to ask to spend the night with his Daddy and his Da, much to both Lindsay and Mel’s disapproval, and there were many nights where the young boy would listen to his mothers fighting, crying himself to sleep. He hated hearing his Ma calling his Daddy bad names, but there was nothing he could do about it. The only thing he could do was tell his Daddy and that was what he had done, and Brian had been livid. He had gone over to speak to the two women about what Gus had said and was told, in no uncertain terms, that he was to “fuck off” and let them deal with their family in their own way. And Brian had made the mistake of listening to them. That is, until now.

Brian looked over his shoulder and watched as Justin rocked Gus, calming him until the four year old was almost asleep. Justin looked up, his blue eyes meeting Brian’s hazel ones, an unspoken question in them. Brian nodded, taking out his phone and hitting speed dial.

“Hello.”

“Linds, it Brian.”

“Brian where are you? You’re late.” IN the background Brian could hear Mel screaming, “You tell that asshole that he better not even think of not coming.”

“I’m on my way. I just thought I would call to say hi to Gus before I got there.” Brian hoped that Lindsay didn’t think of his request as odd, but the blonde woman appeared to be as clueless as ever.

“Oh how sweet.”

“So, where is Sonny boy?”

“Oh he’s around here someplace,” she answered, and Brian could tell she was shrugging her shoulders and tried to contain his anger. Here he was, speaking to the mother of his four year old, who was supposed to be hosting the young boy’s birthday party and she didn’t even know that Gus had been away from the house for over a half an hour. “He’s just playing hide and seek. But I bet he can’t wait for you to get here.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Look Linds, I have to go. Talk to you soon.” Before she could say anything else, Brian hung up. “Fucking bitch.”

“Brian?”

“She hasn’t even realized that he’s not there. She doesn’t even care where her kid is,” Brian growled. Justin had never seen his lover that angry and was glad that it wasn’t directed at him. But he was also pissed off in his own right, thinking about what Gus had to be going through.

“What are we going to do?” Brian looked over at his lover holding his son, thinking for a moment before coming to a decision. One that he hoped Justin would be able to support.

“We take Gus and head back to the loft and then we call my attorney.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s obvious that the Munchers have no intention of taking care of Gus, so I’m just going to make sure that there is someone who will.”

“Who?”

“Us.”

Part 2

Justin sat quietly next to Brian as they drove back to the loft. Gus was sleeping contentedly in his car seat in the back seat of the Jeep; Brian had gotten another one when it became apparent that his convertible was not exactly child friendly. The blond artist listened in as his lover talked to his attorney in regards to what had happened back at Mel and Lindsay’s.

“I know they are his legal parents, Mark, and that I gave up my parental rights, but I didn’t exactly kidnap my son. The Munchers had already agreed that he could spend the night at the loft. All I did was take him a little earlier than anticipated….MmmHmmm….Yeah….Of course I am….Of course I do…Okay I’ll see you in an hour at the loft. And thanks Mark.” Brian hit the end button on his phone, silence taking over that car. It stayed that way all the way back to the loft.

Brian carried Gus up to the loft, carefully making sure that he didn’t wake up. Justin followed close behind, the gifts he and Brian had been taking to Gus’s party in his hands. Brian went over to the corner of the loft that had once housed his TV and sofa. Now it was blocked off with painted silk screens that showed various colorful cartoon characters. Brian and Justin had put them up a year earlier when it became apparent that Gus was getting old enough that he was going to need his own room in the loft, especially since he had begun to spend more and more time with his father. Brian and Justin also enjoyed the sense of privacy it gave them on the nights when Justin spent the night in his lover’s bed. And Gus loved his little room; especially it had been Justin that had painted the scenes from some of Gus’s favorite books.

After Brian had Gus settled in his bed, he went out into the living area and watched as Justin guzzled down some bottled water. When the blond noticed his attention his raised the bottle in his hand, silently asking his lover if he wanted some also. Brian nodded and Justin grabbed two more bottles, bringing them over to the sofa, joining Brian who was already there.

“Brian…about what’s going to happen,” Justin began, unsure of what to say. “You know how I feel about Gus, and that I’ll support you with any decision that you make.”

“I know you will, Sonny boy.” Brian leaned over and kissed the other man’s cheek.

“And I agree that the way Linds and Mel, and the rest of the gang, have been treating Gus since Annie’s birth truly sucks and is completely unfair to him…”

“But?” Justin smiled, knowing that he should have even tried to sugarcoat what he was trying to say.

“But, I don’t know that I’m ready to take on the responsibility of being a parent,” Justin finished. “Hell, there are days when I can’t even deal with my own bullshit and I see how hard it is for the girls raising Gus and Annie and I don’t think I can do it.”

“You can do anything that you put your mind to and you know it,” Brian assured the younger man. “Besides, Gus loves you and he already thinks you’re his father. If we do get custody of him, it will just make it official.”

“You.”

“Huh?”

“When you get custody,” Justin emphasized.

“Justin…” Brian groaned, not liking the direction the conversation seemed to be going. He understood the reasons Justin felt the way he did, especially considering he felt them a bit himself, but he hoped that the blond would be willing to help him make sure that Gus knew he was loved. He also figured that the fight for Gus would mean that Justin would finally be willing to move back into the loft, something that Brian had wanted for over a year, but for which the blond kept refusing, saying that the two men weren’t ready for the kind of togetherness just yet. Brian felt that argument was ridiculous considering the amount of time the two men already spent together.

“No, Brian, listen to me,” Justin went on, not wanting Brian to think that Justin didn’t support him, or want to be a father to Gus. “I will do anything and everything I can to help you. And if that means supporting you in getting custody of Gus, then that’s what I’ll do, no matter what everyone else says, or what the odds are against us. The only thing I won’t do is move in here just for that reason. It wouldn’t be fair to me, you or Gus. If we live together it has to be for the right reasons, not just for appearances sake or so that you would have a full time baby sitter for Gus.”

“Justin, you know that wouldn’t be the case.”

“I know, I’m just giving examples, but there’s a better than good chance that that’s what everyone else would say giving the timing of the move.” Brian stayed silent, knowing that Justin was right. Everyone would say the he only allowed Justin to move into the loft to help with the custody fight. As it was, many believed Brian was the reason the two men kept two separate residences, not Justin.

“Fuck em.” Justin laughed, leaning into Brian’s body and allowing the older man to place his arms around the artist’s shoulders.

“No thanks,” Justin shot back. The two men enjoyed the silence for a few minutes more before Justin continued what he was trying to say. “Brian, I want you to know. Even with me not moving in here, you know I will be more than willing to help you out with Gus if you do manage to gain custody, whether joint or permanent. I love that little boy, just like I have since the day he was born. And between the two of us I’m sure it will be no problem with at least one of us always being with him. Now that I’m in my third year, my classes are a lot more flexible considering the professors prefer us spending time in the studio as opposed to the classroom. And I can just switch to the dinner shift at the diner, that way I can spend the day with Gus while you’re at the office.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Brian told him. “You know Gus loves spending time in the office, and Cynthia loves having him there. I just thought I could bring him into work with me.” Justin smiled at the picture of Big Bad Brian Kinney bringing his son into work with him everyday.

“And what exactly would Gus be doing at the office? Somehow I don’t see him going into meetings with clients.”

“Well, no,” Brian admitted. “But considering how much he likes to draw, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind spending time in the art department. Maybe I could even get him his own little desk.” Justin thought about what Brian was suggesting and, while he could see some drawbacks, he could also see how it could work. And, if truth be told, Gus loved going to the office with his daddy.

“And I’ll be more than willing to watch him on my days off.”

“You know Debbie isn’t going to be too happy with you if you do support me in this,” Brian remarked. “No matter how she treats Gus now that Annie is around, she will still think that I’m the unfeeling asshole that is just trying to hurt the mothers of her granddaughter. She might decide to take that out on you.”

“She even tries to and she’ll be sorry,” Justin assured her. “I love her and the girls, but Gus is who’s important now. He’s the one who is feeling unloved by those that should be supporting him. I know how that feels and no kid should have to go through that.”

“I know, Sunshine. I know.” Brian took Justin into his arms and the two men continued to hold each other, allowing the silence to over take them. They stayed that way until the buzzer went off letting them know that someone was there. Brian went over to the intercom. “Yeah.”

“It’s Mark Cavanaugh, Brian.”

“Come on up, Mark.” Brian buzzed in the attorney turning to face Justin who made his way over to his lover. Brian raised his eyebrow at the younger man, his silence a question. Justin took Brian’s hand in his own, squeezing it.

“Whatever it takes, Brian, I’ll stand by you.”

Part 3

“Come on in,” Brian said as he slid open the loft door, allowing Mark entrance to his home. The lawyer entered, taking in the surroundings. Justin came to stand by Brian, nervously shifting his balance from one foot to another. He didn’t want to appear too young in front of the man that they hoped would help them make sure that Gus would be taking care of. For his part Mark didn’t even do a double take when Brian wrapped his arm around his nervous lover. He looked over to the painted screens that made up the walls to Gus’s room and smiled at the pictures that were there.

“Nice place you have here,” Mark commented, finally turning his full attention to Brian and Justin.

“Everyone seems to say that when they first get a look at the place,” Brian smirked. “Mark, I want you to meet Justin Taylor. Justin this is Mark Cavanaugh, one of the best family law attorneys in the State of Pennsylvania and my old roommate at Penn.”

“Ahhh, I was wondering how you knew each other,” Justin grinned, shaking Mark’s hand. “Thanks for coming over on such short notice. I hope we didn’t take you away from anything.”

“Nothing that couldn’t wait,” Mark assured the blond before turning back to face Brian. “In fact, I’ve been waiting for you to call since you first told me what was going on. I’ve been looking into a few things on my own while I’ve been waiting. I hope you don’t mind.”

“That’s fine.”

“Good. Now why don’t we all have a seat so we can get started on deciding what we’re going to do,” Mark suggested.

“Good idea,” Justin agreed, seeing how nervous his lover was, not that it was obvious what was happening. “Before we do though, can I get anyone anything to drink?”

“I’m fine.” “No thanks,” were the answers so the blond just followed the other two men to the living area where they all took a seat. Brian and Justin sat together on the sofa while Mark took one of the chairs. The attorney set his briefcase on the coffee table in front of him, opening it and taking out a pad of paper and a pen. He leaned back into the chair and the lovers watched his demeanor change from friend to lawyer.

“Okay, Brian, the last time we talked you told me that you felt that your son was being ignored by his mother and her partner, in favor of their new daughter. If I remember right, you said that Michael was the father,” Mark began, shaking his head.

“Right.”

“You also told me that Melanie and Lindsay didn’t require Michael to sign over his parental rights, something in which they demanded of you knowing that you didn’t want to do so, correct?”

“Right again.”

“Why did you decide to sign over your rights anyway?” Brian sighed, looking over at Justin, a silent question in his eyes. Justin took Brian’s hand in his, squeezing it in support.

“There were a few reasons,” Brian finally spoke. “Mel and Linds had been having problems. Turned out that Mel had cheated on Linds and the two of them had broken up. Things got bad for Linds and, like usual, she went to extremes to take care of it.”

“I can only imagine,” Mark smiled, remembering some of the more outrageous things that the blonde woman had tried back in college, especially when she discovered that Brian was gay.

“Well, this was time it was pretty out there,” Brian told him.

“What do you mean?”

“Okay, Mark, I know you need to know this stuff and I want you to do everything you can to make sure that we get the best for Gus, but what I’m about to say…I only want it to be used as a last resort. It can mean real trouble for Lindsay and, no matter what’s happened, she’s still the mother of my son.”

“Brian, I can’t promise you anything, you know that,” Mark said. “The only thing I will say is that I will try and do what you wish, but if I think what you’re going to tell me will help your case, or if it will show that Lindsay isn’t as perfect as I’m sure she will try to project, I will use it.” Brian stayed silent for a minute and Mark began to wonder if maybe Brian had decided not to tell him what was going on.

“You know how Linds gets whenever someone is in trouble,” Mark nodded, remembering the blond woman that he had once been attracted to. “Well, there was this teacher at the school where she worked. She needed some help with the bills and watching Gus because Mel had moved out, and he needed his Green Card to stay in the country, so they came to an agreement. They were going to get married. ”

“Didn’t she know how much trouble she could get into if the INS found out what they had planned? They don’t look fondly upon Green Card marriages. Why didn’t you try and stop her?”

“I would have if I had known about it,” Brian answered. “But after she and Mel split, she started to spend less and less time with us. Hell, every time I tried to come over and see Gus she made up some excuse why I couldn’t, like he was with his grandparents or he was asleep. And those were the times they were actually home. We didn’t know what was going on until Mel had tried to call and got the answering machine which had Gui on it.”

“Gui is the teacher she was planning on marrying?” Brian nodded as he watched Mark write the name down. “Okay so what did you do when you found out what she was planning?”

“We tried to talk some fucking sense into her. Well, Melanie and I did,” Brian amended, remembering as Emmett and Ted instantly going for the food that Gui had prepared that night they confronted the two of them. “Needless to say, it didn’t do any good.”

“But I still don’t understand what any of this has to do with you giving up your parental rights to Melanie.”

“One day I had stopped at the market for lunch. I was just going to grab some fruit and I saw Gui with Gus,” Brian explained. “I went over to see my son, because I hadn’t seen him in awhile. The fucker was not happy to see me, and wouldn’t even hand over my kid so I could hold him. Then he said something about how after he and Lindsay were married, that they would need me to keep my distance from Gus because they needed to look like a typical family. That they were even thinking of having Gui adopt Gus. Needless to say, that didn’t sit well with me.”

“I bet,” Mark told him. “Did you ask Lindsay about the adoption, because she had to know that without you signing away your rights, they wouldn’t have been able to go through with it?” Brian shook his head.

“No. I just knew that I had to do something. I spent the entire night thinking about it.”

“I remember that,” Just said, finally finding his voice. He knew how tough it had been on Brian when he was trying to decide whether or not he should sign over his rights. Unlike the rest of their supposed family, Justin didn’t think Brian was just a cold hearted bastard who thought of no one but himself. He knew Brian loved his son and would be willing to do anything and everything possible to make sure Gus was happy.

“Killing me with kindness,” Brian smirked, leaning over and gently kissing his lover. Before the two men could lose themselves in each other and their memories, Mark cleared his throat bringing them back to the present. Brian turned his attention back to his old friend. “Anyway, I tricked Mel into meeting me at the house and told her and Lindsay that I would sign over my parental rights, allowing Mel to adopt Gus, but only if the two of them would get back together. That I wanted my son to be raised in a happy home with two loving parents, even if I couldn’t stand one of them.” All three men laughed, breaking some of the tension that had been present.

“So they got back together and you signed over Gus,” Mark concluded.

“But Brian never stopped being a father to him,” Justin stated, wanting to make sure that Mark understood that even though Brian didn’t have any legal obligations to Gus, Brian wasn’t giving up on him. “Brian’s given them money, babysat for them when they’ve wanted to get away. He’s done everything that they’ve asked of him and more. Hell, he’s even taking on more responsibility now that Annie’s around.”

“What do you mean?” Before either man could answer, the phone rang. Justin went over to grab it, looking at the caller ID before handing it over to Brian.

“It’s the girls.” Brian reluctantly took the call, noticing that Mark, as well as Justin, seemed to be intent on listening in.

“Hello,” Brian said, his voice calm, even though Justin could see the tension that was in his body. The blond resumed his seat next to Brian and leaned into the older man.

“Brian, please tell me you have Gus,” Lindsay frantically cried over the phone.

“Yes, I have Gus,” he replied, not revealing the anger he felt toward the mother of his child.

“Oh thank God,” she sighed. “I had a feeling that he was with you. Why didn’t you tell anyone that you were taking Gus?”

“Gee Linds, if I thought anyone would have actually given a damn, maybe I would have,” Brian countered, his patience over the situation involving his son growing thin.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, when did you finally notice that your son wasn’t at his own god damn birthday party?” Silence greeted him over the phone. “What, Linds, no answer to that one?”

“I thought Melanie was watching him,” Lindsay tried to explain. “There was so much to do for the party and I knew Mel was outside with Annie and the family.”

“So you just figured that she would actually be willing to pull her attention away from Annie and pay attention to our son.”

“Gus is her son too. She loves him, Brian.”

“Well she has a fucking weird way of showing it,” Brian countered. “Considering the way she’s been acting since she’s been pregnant with Annie you would think that she only has one child.” Brian saw a sleepy Gus come out of his bedroom and fought to control his temper. With all the upheaval that the young boy had been having to deal with, Brian didn’t want to add to it by showing his anger toward Gus’s mothers. “And you haven’t exactly been helping the situation.

“Daddy,” Gus yawned.

“Can you get Gus for me?” Brian whispered over to Justin, who quickly went over to the boy, picking him up and carrying him over to the kitchen to get him something to drink. Brian turned his attention back to the phone.

“Brian, you know how hectic it’s been since Annie’s been home,” Lindsay tried to excuse her actions. “I know we haven’t been able to pay as much attention to Gus as possible, but it’s only to be expected with two children now.”

“How long, Linds?”

“What?”

“How long did it take for you to discover that Gus wasn’t at your house? How long until you discovered that he was missing?”

“I went outside a few minutes ago because it was time for some of Gus’s friends to come over. You know how we wanted the family to come over first for lunch. That’s when I discovered that he wasn’t in the back yard like I thought.”

“Christ Lindsay, how much more proof do you need that you and Melanie have your priorities completely fucked? I’ve been telling you two for months that Gus has been feeling neglected and unloved by the two of you and you kept saying that it was only because he had been an only child and that he just had to get used to having a little sister.” Justin was standing at the kitchen counter, holding Gus who was happily eating a cookie and drinking some milk. He was trying hard to keep his own anger in check thinking of the way the little boy in his arms had been ignored over the past few months.

“Brian I don’t think you have any right to tell Melanie or I how we should be raising our son….”

“Two hours, Lindsay.”

“What?”

“It’s been two hours since I’ve had Gus,” Brian explained. “Justin and I found him wandering the sidewalk while Melanie and the rest of the gang were fawning over perfect little Annie. We’ve had him now for over two hours and you’ve just realized that he was missing. Can’t you see anything wrong with this?”

“Oh God,” Lindsay cried, thinking of what her little boy must have been thinking to have actually left his own party. “I had no idea.”

“That’s because you haven’t wanted to know. You’ve been too busy placating your wife to even think of what that was doing to your son.”

“You know how hard it’s been on Melanie,” Lindsay tried to say. “With all of the complications, she was so worried that something would happen to Annie and then when nothing went wrong, we were all so happy.”

“But that doesn’t excuse what’s been going on.”

“I know that, Brian. I know that. And you know I love Gus. I would never do anything to hurt him. I feel so bad about what’s happened.”

“But can’t promise that it won’t happen again, can you?” Silence greeted him once more. Brian sighed, knowing that there was no use continuing the conversation, especially with Gus just a few feet away, and Mark right next to him. “Look, Linds, just go tell everyone that Gus is fine and that Justin and I will be taking care of him for the weekend. I’ll drop him off at his school on my way to work on Monday.” Before Lindsay could say anything else, Brian hung up the phone, turning it off in the process. He looked over at Mark.

“So I guess now you have an idea of why I finally called you. So what do you suggest we do now?”

Part 4

“Christ, Brian, considering what you’ve already told me, and what little I’ve been able to find out on my own in just the week since you first talked to me about this, I don’t even know where to start with my questions,” Mark sighed, trying to take in everything his old friend was going through in regards to his son. “Especially considering what I remember of Lindsay from back in school.”

“But are you willing to help me?” Brian demanded, wanting to know if the lawyer would be able to overlook his history with Lindsay and help him gain custody of Gus.

“Tell me everything, and I mean everything, and I will do all that I can to make that we get the best for Gus.” Brian and Justin both released the breaths that they didn’t even realize they had been holding. Brian looked over to Justin, signaling his young lover to bring over the boy in question.

“Well I guess the first thing I should do is introduce you to this guy here,” Brian said, taking Gus into his arms, kissing his son on the top of his head. “Mark Cavanaugh, this is my son, Gus. Gus, this is an old friend of mine, Mark.”

“Hello Gus.” Gus looked over at the other man shyly, at the same time as he tried to hide within his father’s arms. Mark couldn’t help but smile at the little boy, and then looked back up at Brian. “He’s certainly a heartbreaker, Brian.”

“Just like his father,” Justin added.

“Daddy want to go to park,” Gus demanded, causing everyone to laugh.

“I can see he’s just as demanding as his father too,” Mark chuckled.

“I can’t go to the park, Gus,” Brian told his son, hating to disappoint the boy but not knowing what else to do. “I have to talk to Mark about some things.” As soon as Justin saw the tell tale signs of an upcoming pout on Gus’s face, he knew he needed to do something.

“Hey, Gus,” Justin began, taking him out of Brian’s arms, “how about me and you head over to the park while your Dad talks to Mark, and then maybe when he’s done he’ll come join us.”

“Daddy come later?” Gus looked up hopefully at his father.

“Yes, Gus, Daddy come later,” Brian promised, kissing his son before handing him over to Justin. Brian watched as Justin grabbed a few things to keep Gus occupied at the park before going over to Justin, taking him into his arms.

“I’ll meet you guys as soon as Mark and I are done here.”

“I know,” Justin said. Brian watched as Justin and Gus left the loft, wishing that he could have joined them but knowing that his meeting with Mark was more important.

“You’re a lucky man, Brian Kinney,” Mark broke into Brian’s thoughts. “Gus seems like a great kid.”

“He is,” Brian agreed. “That’s one of the reasons why I hate what’s been going on with Mel and Linds. He deserves so much more than to be treated like the unwanted sibling, especially by his own mother.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Mark said. “To make sure that Gus gets everything that he deserves.”

“So what do you think my chances are of at least regaining my parental rights?” Brian asked, getting back to the reason that Mark was there in the first place. “I know that’s we have to take care of that before anything else happens.”

“Actually, we don’t have to worry about that so much.” At Brian’s look of confusion, Mark continued. “It seems that you actually still have legal rights to Gus.”

“How is that possible? I signed that paper that Mel had made up so that she could adopt Gus.” Brian didn’t understand what Mark was telling him. After everything that the two women had put him through, making him feel guilty for not signing over his rights in the first place, not to mention how many times they had thrown it in his face that he no longer had legal rights towards Gus, here was his lawyer telling him differently.

“When you first called me about gaining custody of Gus, I told you that I would start doing some digging to see what I could find out,” Mark began. “First thing I did was check the public records to find a copy of the adoption by Melanie, alone with trying to obtain a copy of the papers signing over your parental rights.”

“And,” Brian tried to keep his voice low, but Mark knew that Brian was barely holding his patience in.

“And while I couldn’t find any record of the first, I did find the parental rights papers. They were marked denied.”

“What the fuck do you mean by they were denied? How the hell could they be denied? I signed them in all the right places, didn’t I?”

“Yes you did sign them correctly, so I looked up to see which judge heard the argument for the papers. Luckily it was a friend’s of Tonya’s, so he was a bit more willing to give me some information, even though he shouldn’t have.” Brian smiled at the mention of Mark’s wife, one of only a handful of straight women that he could stand. She reminded Brian a bit of himself, even if she was a civil court judge.

“Nothing like having friends in high places,” Brian quipped.

“True, true, especially in this case. Anyway, Judge Thomas was the judge who heard the case and he is very much in favor of father’s rights.”

“Is that why he denied the papers?”

“In a way. When Melanie and Lindsay should up in court for the motion hearing, Dennis, that’s his name by the way, asked them a series of questions.”

“What kind of questions?” Brian asked, his curiosity aroused.

“Basically about your relationship with Gus. How many times did you see him. Did they ever leave him in your care. Did you provide them money for Gus’s care. In essence, he wanted to know if you behaved like a father towards him,” Mark told him.

“Of course I behaved like a father towards Gus,” Brian almost yelled. “I am his fucking father, for Christ’s sake.”

“I know. The thing is, what Melanie and Lindsay were trying to do with the motion was say you weren’t a father to Gus. Unfortunately for them, their answers to Dennis’s questions only proved that you were. He even asked if you were going to continue acting as a father towards Gus and the answered in the affirmative. That’s what was the deciding factor.”

“What, the judge decided that because I was actually in Gus’s life as a dad, he wasn’t going to let me relinquish my paternal rights?”

“Exactly.”

“That makes no fucking sense. What was the purpose of me signing those fucking papers then if they weren’t going to be any good?”

“Usually they are good, but Brian, this case isn’t exactly the norm,” Mark explained. “You are a part of Gus’s life. You had been supporting him. And even the girls admitted that you would continue acting as a father figure towards Gus, even after the papers were filed. Dennis saw no reason why he should approve the motion.”

“Which means?”

“Which means that you are still Gus’s legal parent and it will make your case for custody stronger.”

“Then let’s get to work.”

Part 5

Monday afternoon came entirely too soon for Justin. Before he knew it, it was time for him to go to work at the Liberty Diner. Justin had spent the weekend with Brian and Gus, the two men spending Sunday making sure that Gus knew that he was loved. They had taken the little boy to Kennywood, where they weren’t surprised at all to find out that Gus was fascinated with the roller coasters and other thrill rides. They already knew that as soon as he was big enough, there would be no way they would be able to keep him off of the rides. That night, Brian read Gus some of his favorite books as Justin quietly sketched the scene. All in all, it had been the perfect weekend, but now Justin had to return to the real world. A world where his lover’s attorney had filed the papers that said Brian wanted custody of Gus, at least jointly, in a move that he knew would most likely divide the tightly knit group of friends.

Brian had called Justin’s cell earlier that day to tell him that Mark had filed the forms that would begin the custody battle. He had told the younger man that Mark said that he had planned on having Melanie and Lindsay served that day, also telling him that he would be avoiding the diner for the time being, and most likely staying at the office later than usual to avoid Mel and Linds’s first rants on what was going to happen. ‘Then again,’ Justin thought, ‘Brian did arrange to have the locks changed at the loft so it’s not like anyone can get in without him letting them.’

“Hey Sunshine,” Debbie greeted the blond cheerfully, “get that bubble butt of yours in gear. You’ve got tables waiting.”

“No problem, Deb,” Justin smiled, thinking that maybe he would receive a reprieve from having to deal with the custody issue that day. ‘Maybe this day won’t be so bad.’ Justin’s mood stayed cheery as his shift continued. As it got closer to seven, and the end of his shift, he began to think that he wouldn’t have to deal with the repercussions of Brian’s actions over the weekend.

“Hey baby, how about something to drink?”

“Coming right up, Emm,” Brian replied, carrying over the coffee pot in his hand to the booth where Emmett, Michael, Ben, and Ted were sitting. The foursome had come into the diner about a half hour beforehand.

It still surprised Justin that Emmett was even able to stay in the same room as Ted, let alone sit in the same booth considering everything that Ted had put Emmett through the year before when he was hooked on drugs. Justin still remembered how upset Emmett had been when he lover had his downfall. It had gotten so bad that even Brian had gotten involved in trying to make him feel better and eventually it worked. Emmett began to take back his life, including dating again. Then when Ted left the rehab center, with Blake on his arm, Emmett had made a point of being the supportive best friend that he had always been to Ted, all the while hiding his heartache.

Justin could still remember the night that he and Emmett had gotten together at Woodys. The two men had contemplated the state of their love lives. Emmett was the only person in their little group of friends who knew the truth behind Justin’s relationship with Brian. The older man would often listen to Justin as the blond talked about the things that were going on between him and Brian, willing to be a sounding off board for Justin as he thought about the changes that were going on between himself and Brian. In exchange, Justin listened to Emmett lament over the sorry state of his own relationship with Ted. Or lack of one, as the case may be. Justin was the only one in their family who knew how hurt Emmett had been when Ted had announced that he and Blake were getting back together. Everyone had seemed so supportive of the couple, glad to see Ted getting back on his feet, even Melanie and Lindsay had forgiven Ted for what he had done after he had returned the money he had taken. No one gave a thought to what Ted’s announcement would do to Emmett, not even the two women that had taken him in after he left Ted, they were all too happy to see the Ted that they all knew and loved back. Only Justin had been there for Emmett, making sure he knew that he was there for Emmett whenever he needed someone to talk to. As did Brian, in his own way, which included hiring Emmett to help with the party that launched Brian’s company.

Justin looked at his watched, glad to see that he only had five more minutes until the end of his shift. He had arranged with Brian to meet the older man at his loft. Brian had made Justin promise to call him as soon as he left the diner, letting him know that he was on his way. Justin couldn’t wait to see his lover, knowing that both of them needed to release the stress of the day, and Justin knew exactly how, and with whom, he wanted to release that tension with.

“Hey Sunshine, move that bubble butt,” Debbie hollered.

“I’m coming,” he replied, moving to pick up the gang’s food.

“Don’t worry, Sunshine,” Debbie told him. “As soon as you drop the food off, you can take off.”

“Thanks Deb.” Justin smiled as he carried over the tray with the gang’s food. He continued smiling as he placed the plates down on the table. He was even smiling as he heard the bells above the door, but that smile disappeared when he saw who it was that had entered.

“Mel, Linds, what are you doing here?” Michael asked as the women made their way over to the booth he and the others were in. Justin took one look at them and knew exactly why they were there and groaned as he realized that there was no way in hell that he was going to get out of the diner without listening to yet another rant about what an asshole his lover was.

“We’re here to talk to Justin,” Lindsay said, looking over at the blond.

“What’s wrong?” Michael asked as he picked up his daughter. He could tell there was something wrong with the two women and was concerned. Ever since Annie had been born, and even for a couple of months before that, Michael had grown closer to Mel and Linds, often going over with Ben to have dinner with the other couple.

“The asshole is suing for custody of Gus,” Mel spat out, glaring over at Justin. “He says that Lindsay and I aren’t responsible parents to our son. Know anything about that Justin?” Mel glared over at the blond, who refused to meet her eyes. For his part, Justin went into the back to grab his things. He knew what was about to happen and he didn’t want to have anything to do with it. He knew that his friends were going to try and convince him to do one of two things. Either leave Brian, thus siding with them and leaving his lover on his own. Or spy on him to help prove that Brian was the unfit parent.

“What are you talking about?” Debbie asked loudly, unable to believe what she was hearing. “What do you mean that Brian is fucking suing for custody of Gus? And why do you think Sunshine would have anything to do with it?”

“There’s no way Brian Kinney would sue for custody,” Ted said. “Having a kid around would interfere too much with his fucking every man in town. Besides, there’s no way in hell that man would be willing to be responsible for anyone else. He’s too fucking selfish for that.”

“Well that’s not stopping him from once again making our lives a living hell,” Mel spat out. “Just one more reason why we shouldn’t have had that bastard be Gus’s father.”

“Mel please,” Lindsay pleaded with her lover. “You need to calm down. It won’t do you any good if you get all stressed out.”

“Don’t you dare tell me to calm the fuck down,” Mel yelled, drawing the attention of the other diner patrons. “That fucking bastard thinks he has the right to say that we’re unfit parents when he barely has anything to do with his son. We’re the ones who have raised Gus. We feed him. Clothe him. Provide him with a place to live and now Brian “Fucking” Kinney thinks he can just come in and take him away from us. That’s bullshit and maybe, if you were willing to finally take the blinders you have on when it comes to him, you would see it too.”

“Do you think I’m happy about this?” Lindsay hissed. “I’m not. I had no idea this was happening or that Brian would even be thinking about trying for custody of Gus. He never talked about wanting to have any part of raising Gus on anything even remotely resembling a temporary basis, let alone a permanent one.”

“Well he sure as hell changed his mind, hasn’t he?”

“Have you girls tried to talk to Brian?” Debbie asked. She motioned for the girls to have a seat before turning to the other customers in the diner. “This isn’t a soap opera folks. You want to see drama go home and watch your damn TVs.” It was only after Debbie yelled that Melanie and Lindsay noticed the attention they were getting.

“Thanks Deb,” Linds said. “And yeah, we tried talking to Brian. We called his office and his assistant kept telling us he was in meetings all day.”

“More like he was avoiding us, the asshole,” Melanie muttered.

“Maybe he’s home. Did you try there?” Michael suggested, holding onto a fussy Annie. Melanie smiled at her daughter, reaching into the diaper bag and handing Michael a bottle for him to give their daughter.

“Yes we tried there,” Melanie replied, “and the asshole changed the locks on us. We couldn’t get in.”

“I was wondering when he would get around to doing that,” Emmett finally chimed in, only to earn himself glares from the others at the table. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m just saying, considering how many times we’ve all just barged into that place, without knocking or calling, it was only a matter of time before he got around to changing them. I’m just surprised that it took this long for him to do it.”

“He didn’t say anything to me about him changing the locks,” Michael commented.

“Michael, you have to admit,” Ben said quietly, but firmly, “you are one of the worst offenders. How many times have you just gone over to Brian’s without any notice, just walking into his home? Without any thought that he might want some privacy.”

“But he’s my best friend,” the shop keeper whined. “Why shouldn’t I have a key to his place?”

“Does he have a key to our apartment?” At Ben’s question Michael grew silent.

“No.”

“Then why should you be angry that you no longer have one to his?”

“That doesn’t change the fact that that asshole he trying to take Gus away from us,” Mel broke in again, wanting to get back to the subject. She saw movement off to her side and turned to see Justin, who had been trying to sneak out without becoming too involved with the conversation. “Justin, did you know what that prick was planning on doing?” Justin sighed as he realized that he wasn’t going to be able to get out of the diner without saying something.

“Of course Sunshine didn’t know about this,” Debbie defended the young man. “There’s no way he wouldn’t have said something to you girls if he had. He knows that Gus is better off with you two.”

“I did know, Debbie,” Justin told everyone. “I was there when Brian’s attorney showed up at the loft. Even talked to him myself for a bit.”

“Why didn’t you tell us what was happening Justin?” Lindsay asked, feeling betrayed by the blond. “Give us a heads up on what Brian was planning on doing?”

“Why are you acting so surprised Lindsay?” Justin countered. “I know Brian and you have talked about what has been going on with Gus. How Gus doesn’t feel as if you and Mel love him anymore. And you know that Brian grew up in a household where his parents never made any secret of the fact that he was the unwanted child Why is it such a surprise that he would want to make sure that Gus doesn’t grow up with those same feelings?”

“Gus knows we love him,” Mel replied.

“Really? Tell me Mel, if Gus knows that you and Linds love him so much, what happened on Saturday at Gus’s party?” Lindsay looked down at the table, not able to meet the other blond’s eyes, knowing what she would see there.

“What are you talking about?” Debbie demanded. “What about Gus’s party?”

“Where was Gus at while you were all supposedly celebrating his birthday?”

“Gus was there,” Melanie insisted. “That is until the asshole showed up and took him away without even bothering to tell anyone. We were all worried sick.”

“Brian didn’t take Gus,” Justin said loudly, his patience gone. He was not willing to let anyone badmouth Brian, especially in regards to the way he took care of his son. “We found him wondering the sidewalk because no one was paying any attention to him at his own party. According to him you were all just fawning over Annie. What would you have Brian do? Leave him there?”

“He had no right taking Gus away from his home,” Mel shot back. “He gave up parental rights which meant I could have had him arrested for kidnapping if I wanted.”

“Really? That’s not what Mark said.” Justin looked down at Mel. Debbie looked between Justin, Melanie and Lindsay, noticing that the two women seemed to look guilty about something.

“Mel. Lindsay. What’s Justin talking about? Who’s Mark?”

“Mark Cavanaugh, Brian’s lawyer,” Justin explained.

“Justin,” Lindsay pleaded, realizing that there was a good chance that the young man knew much more than anyone had given him credit. Knew much more than they wanted anyone to know. “This isn’t the place.”

“You should have thought about that before you decided to rip into Brian when he wasn’t around to defend himself or his actions.”

“There is no fucking defense.”

“Don’t even start,” Justin interrupted Melanie, who promptly shut up. Justin faced everyone. “As I was saying, Mark Cavanaugh is Brian’s lawyer, and a damned good one from what I understand. And considering what he’s managed to find out in just the past week leads me to believe that statement.”

“What did he find out?” Lindsay whispered, her voice betraying the fear of what Justin was about to say.

“Not much except for the fact that Brian is still legally Gus’s father.”

“What?”

“What are you talking about?”

“But Brian signed away his rights,” came from various people sitting in the booth.

“That’s right. Brian did sign away his rights,” Brian explained. “But when Mel and Lindsay finally decided to file the papers, almost a year after they were signed, the judge refused to allow them to be filed. He said that the fact that Brian paid them money to help with Gus, not to mention the fact that he had been acting in the capacity of a father, which Lindsay had encouraged, caused the judge to state that there was no reason why Brian’s rights should be negated.”

“Linds, sweetie, is this true?” Emmett asked the quiet brunette, who could only nod. “Why? Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I’ll tell you why,” Justin broke in. “Because as long as Brian didn’t know that he was still a legal parent to Gus, Mel and Lindsay could still get the money that Brian handed over to them to help, knowing that he would continue to do so no matter what, and yet they could also threaten to take away Gus if he dared do anything that they didn’t like.”

“That’s not true,” Lindsay denied.

“Isn’t it? Then why didn’t you tell anyone that Brian still had his parental rights?”

“I knew,” Ted replied, his voice so low that they barely heard him. He looked up at the startled group. He looked over at Melanie who nodded her head. “Mel told me after if happened. I ran into her about a week after it happened. She was upset and drinking.”

“I needed someone to talk to and Ted fit the bill,” Melanie explained. “Besides I knew he feels the same way about Brian as I do.”

“You both hate him,” Justin said simply. Neither Ted nor Melanie said anything to that. “Yeah that’s what I thought. And you know what? Gus knows this. It’s coming through as you hating him Mel and that’s why Brian is seeking custody of Gus, because he wants his son to know that he is number one in someone’s life. And because you guys are all so busy fawning over Annie, and I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with that, she’s a beautiful child; but you have to start remembering that you have another one.” And with that said, Justin left the diner, leaving behind a stunned group of friends wondering if things were going to ever be the same.

Part 6

“Well, if anything proved that Justin has once again been brainwashed by that asshole Brian, that was it,” Melanie finally said, breaking the silence that had descended upon the group after the blond had left them.

“I can’t believe that Sunshine is supporting Brian,” Debbie said still looking at the door that Justin had just left by. “Of all the asinine things that Brian Kinney has done, this has to top them all, and Justin just stood there and said that Brian had a fucking reason for doing this.”

“Justin will do anything to get Brian,” Michael stated. “He knows that what Brian is doing will alienate him from the rest of us so he figures that this will be his best chance to get close to him. Get Brian when he’s alone.”

“That’s just a load of crap,” Emmett told his friend. “Justin said what he said because he loves Brian, and Brian already loves Justin so didn’t even start with that Michael. Besides, as much as it pains me to say, I think Justin may have a point.”

“What?”

“How can you say that?”

“What the fuck do you mean he may have a point?” Came from various occupants of the booth.

“Emmett, don’t tell me you actually agree with Justin about Brian suing for custody of Gus,” Lindsay asked, hurt that her friend might think she was a bad parent.

“I’m not saying that Brian is right about suing for custody,” Emmett tried to clarify, not withering under the stares by his friends. “All I’m saying is that I can see where he and Justin might get the idea that you are favoring Annie over Gus to the extent that Gus might be feeling ignored and unloved.”

“I can’t fucking believe this,” Mel shouted before lowering her voice. “After everything we’ve done for you, including taking you in after you left Ted, you’re trying to tell us that we aren’t good parents to Gus. You’ve lived with us. You’ve seen how we are with Gus. How can you even fucking sit there and try to say we’re unfit.”

“Emmett, what the fuck are you thinking,” Michael interjected, obviously supporting Melanie and Lindsay.

“I’m not saying that you’re unfit parents and I do know that you love Gus,” Emmett explained. “And I know you’ve done a lot for me. And, yes, I know you love Gus. I’m just trying to say that ever since you had Annie, I’ve noticed that you seem to concentrate more on here than on Gus. But it’s not just you, though. All of us are guilty of doing it. We’ve all been so busy paying attention to Annie that we’ve been ignoring Gus and I’m sure that he’s seeing that as us not loving him anymore.”

“Gus knows we love him,” Debbie objected. “We’ve told him that since the day he was born. How can he think that we don’t love him anymore?”

“Probably the asshole has been saying something,” Melanie said. “He’s always willing to take advantage of whatever he can and if he has an opportunity to fuck up our lives, he takes it. He hates me and Lindsay together and probably hopes this will split us up.”

“Mel, honey, you know that’s not true,” Emmett interrupted. “Brian has never gone out of his way to interfere in your relationship with Lindsay and you know it. You’re just too damn stubborn to admit it, if only to yourself. If Brian didn’t want you and Lindsay together, why did he go out of his way to make sure your wedding went off perfectly? Why was he willing to sign over his parental right to Gus in the first place, if it wasn’t to get the two of you together? As for him hating you, he has never let his feelings towards you show in front of Gus, and that’s something I can’t say about you. How many times have you yelled at Brian, or called him asshole or fucker or bastard in front of Gus. That kind of thing has an affect on a child.”

“He’s right,” Ben agreed, finally speaking up. “There are so many studies out there about how much children hear, even when we don’t think they are in hearing distance or we think that they are too young to understand what you are saying. The fact that you have made no secret of how you feel to Brian has to of come through to Gus. And, in a way, I can see that it is affecting how everyone acts towards Annie as opposed to Gus.”

“Mind explaining what the fuck you mean?” Debbie asked, not even making a pretense of getting back to work. Luckily most of the customers had left, most of them to go spread the latest gossip about the reigning king of Liberty. Ben took a deep breath, organizing his thoughts. He didn’t want to offend anyone, especially his lover, so he wanted to make sure everyone understood what he was trying to say.

“Okay, let me try and break this down. When everyone here thinks of Brian, what are some of the first things that come to mind?”

“Slut.”

“Asshole.”

“Pain in the ass.”

“Stubborn, selfish bastard.”

“Someone who cares only about himself,” were the various replies from around that table and Ben shook his head. He wasn’t surprised by the answers.

“Okay then. Now say what first comes to mind when you think of Michael.”

“Caring.”

“Helps a friend.”

“Good father.”

“Goes the extra mile.” Again, Ben wasn’t surprised by the answers. They were all things that he thought of when thinking of his lover.

“All the same kind of things that could be used to describe Brian.”

“Bullshit,” Mel said.

“It’s not bullshit,” Ben countered. “In the two years that I’ve been around, I’ve seen Brian Kinney do more for his friends than anyone else here. He got everyone together to help plan a wedding, supported his lover and his best friend in their endeavor to start their own comic. Paid for Justin’s education, even when Justin was with Ethan. Helped out Emmett by getting him some extra business, and helping to locate a place from which he could run that business, and contributed some free marketing to. Something which most companies pay a small fortune for.

“He helped Michael and I find a good lawyer to get custody of Hunter, not to mention him lending Michael his car when he was going to take off with Hunter. And how can any of us actually forget Brian almost going bankrupt by single handedly paying for all those ads back when Stockwell was in trying to go for Mayor. He lost his job, had to sell off almost everything, and he didn’t ask for anything in return. Not even an acknowledgement of what he did.”

“We didn’t ask him to do that,” Mel defended. “He did that all on his own.”

“With a whole lot of prodding from everyone one of you. Hell, Deb, I witnessed on more than one occasion you basically told Brian it was his fault that Stockwell had such a good chance to win. And yet not one of you said anything to him when it came out that he had financed the ads that won Deekins the election. You were all just more than happy that he did what none of the rest of you were willing to do, which is basically to put your money where your mouths were.”

“We didn’t have the money.”

“And neither did Brian, or did you all forget that he was out of work when he did those ads? But, admittedly, that has nothing to do with Gus. Let’s get back to him and what Brian has done as a father.

“Lindsay, since you’ve had Gus, how much money has Brian given you and Mel?”

“I’m not sure,” she answered hesitantly. “A couple thousand maybe. Maybe more.”

“And did he ever stop? Even when he didn’t have the money to spare?” She shook her head. “And what about now that Annie is around? Is he giving you more money to help?”

“A little, but that doesn’t mean a thing.”

“He just knows that Michael can’t afford to give us that much,” Mel defended, looking over at Michael. “Not that we’re blaming you Michael. We knew going into this that you couldn’t give it to us, not with the comic and the store and then with Hunter but we still wanted you to be the father.”

“But you naturally assumed that Brian would help out even more when you had Annie, didn’t you,” Emmett joined in, seeing where Ben was going. “Don’t even bother trying to deny it, Mel. Like you said, I stayed with you for quite a bit of your pregnancy and I overheard quite a few conversations between you and Lindsay and there was more than one occasion where money came up.”

“Well why shouldn’t Brian help out the girls,” Debbie insisted, jumping to their defense. “He always makes sure that Gus has the best of everything, its only fair that he helps out for Annie.”

“Why?” Ben broke in. “Annie isn’t his responsibility. He had nothing to do with her conception, other than supporting Michael in his decision to father her. And you said that you didn’t expect Michael to help out because of his responsibilities. What about Brian’s? He already has Gus, not to mention helping Justin out with his tuition. Plus he has the added expense of opening his own agency, which cost much more than running the store. I’d say all in all, expense wise, Brian has just as much to worry about, if not more than Michael, because at least Michael has me to help him out. Justin can’t do as much just yet.

“Brian doesn’t have to help you out with Annie, or bring her presents like he does Gus, and yet he always makes sure that she doesn’t feel left out. I’ve seen him on more than one occasion bring something for Annie if he was bringing something over for Gus. And that’s something that none of us can claim doing for Gus.”

“What do you mean, Ben?” Michael asked his lover.

“Michael, how many times have we gone over to the girls’ house and brought something over for Annie, without even thinking of bringing something for Gus?”

“Annie is my daughter. Why shouldn’t I bring her a gift when I visit?”

“I’m not saying that you shouldn’t bring her something, but is it fair that it appears that she is the favored child,” Ben asked. “I understand you wanting to make sure that Annie knows she has a father that loves and adores her, but can you see how Gus might see it. We’re talking about a four year old boy who is being forced to watch as his role in his family is being usurped by his little sister. He is being forced to watch as he is constantly pushed aside, if not completely forgotten, in favor of Annie.” Ben then turned to Lindsay and Melanie, who had become quiet as Ben and Emmett had spoken.

“Speaking of Gus, where is he?”

“We left him with a sitter,” Lindsay said softly. “We didn’t want to take bring him when we went to confront Brian.”

“But you didn’t think to leave Annie with the sitter?” Emmett asked. “Gus must have loved that.”

“Can we please get back to the problem at hand,” Debbie questioned. “Namely what the hell we’re going to do about Brian and this idiotic idea he has of suing for custody of Gus. We have to decide what we’re going to do about it. We have to make sure that Brian knows that we aren’t going to support him in this. And we have to get Justin to see that he is making a huge fucking mistake in supporting Brian.”

“Count me in, Ma,” Michael chimed in. He handed Annie back to her mother. “You let me know if there is anything I can do to help you, and I’ll do everything I can to try and talk Brian out if this. I don’t know what the hell he’s thinking, but I’m sure that if we all give him time he’ll realize what a mistake he is making. There’s no way that Brian will want to have Gus around full time. That’s just way more responsibility than he will be able to handle, let alone want to handle.”

“And you know Blake and I will support you in any way we can,” Ted agreed, not noticing the wince that statement caused in Emmett. “It might not be much but we’ll do what we can.” Everyone looked over at Emmett and Ben, waiting for them to join them in their support. Ben gave his lover a sad shake of his head.

“I’m sorry Michael, and Mel and Lindsay, but I can’t choose sides on this.”

“Ben?”

“No, Michael,” Ben repeated. “I can’t, and won’t, be made to choose sides. I know how hard this is going to be for you, Mel and Linds and I’m sorry about that, but we have to think about what’s best for Gus. He’s a little boy who doesn’t think you love him. I’m not saying that Brian is the best father; lord knows he’s got a lot of problems, but maybe he is what Gus needs right now to adjust to having Annie in your lives. Maybe he needs to feel like he’s number one in someone’s eyes. And Brian and Justin will do just that. In fact, I’d say out of all of us, they may be the only ones who are capable of doing that right now.”

“I agree with Ben,” Emmett said quietly, drawing gasps from the other occupants, and a look of betrayal from Melanie and Lindsay. “Now that Justin brought it to our attention, especially the way he did, I can see what he means. We do favor Annie over Gus, and I can’t help but think that a lot of that has to do with who their fathers are. Gus’s birthday party was a prime example. We were all fawning over Annie, even brought her presents, when it should have been Gus’s day. We completely ignored that little boy to the point that apparently he decided he would rather leave his own party than deal with that. And that’s when he is only four. What’s going to happen if nothing improves and can any of you promise that it will?” No one answered.

“That’s what I thought. None of us have ever made any secret of how we feel about Brian, and Mel you hate him. “You’ve never made that any secret. In fact, you go out of your way to cut down Brian every chance you get, even when he has done something that we should be proud of him for doing. And I’m sure Gus is sensing that on some level since you have never made a secret of that. That little boy sees, and hears, us bitch about his dad while none of us ever really have a bad word to say about Michael. On some level, he’s got to think that’s affecting how we all feel about him. Maybe staying with Brian will be good for him.”

“I don’t fucking believe this,” Debbie exclaimed. “I don’t understand how you two can sit there and say how Gus will be better off with Brian Kinney.”

“Debbie,” Ben tried to get her to calm down but the red wigged waitress wasn’t having any of it.

“Don’t Debbie me, Ben Bruckner. Not when you’re sitting there and telling me that you think Gus, sweet, innocent, little Gus, would be better off if he was raised by that asshole Brian,” Debbie said. “In fact, I don’t want you saying another word.”

“Debbie.”

“You too, Emmett,” she interrupted. “In fact, why don’t you and the professor just leave now so that we can try and discuss how we are going to make sure that this doesn’t happen?”

“You can’t be serious, Debbie,” Emmett asked, having never been on the receiving end of Debbie’s anger. The waitress just glared at him. “Debbie?”

“Out.” Ben and Emmett looked at her, and the around the table, seeing only silent glares reflected at them. Ben nodded his head, standing up. He didn’t even lean down to give Michael a kiss goodbye.

“Come on, Emm. I’ll buy you a drink.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Emmett said, standing and joining Ben. The two men left the diner, the remaining members of their family wondering what other havoc Brian Kinney would cause them.

Part 7

Brian didn’t move when he felt two arms wrap around his waist as he was taking his shower. He knew only one person had the new key to the loft. Not to mention he had no trouble recognizing the smell of greasy food from the diner.

“I take it things went about as well as we thought they would,” Brian commented as Justin leaned his head between his lover’s shoulder blades, taking comfort just from the older man’s presence.

“I knew it was going to be bad. Hell, considering its Mel and Lindsay that we’re talking about, I knew it was going to be worse than bad. You and Mark did everything you could to tell me what to expect,” Justin answered.

“What happened?” Brian asked, turning and taking Justin into his arms. Justin relaxed in the comfort of his lover’s arms, loving the feeling of safety he only could get from Brian. And as much as he knew he had to tell Brian about what had happened at the diner, he didn’t want to ruin his memories of their times together in the shower.

“Can we get out of here first?”

“Sure,” Brian kissed the top of Justin’s head before turning the water off. The two men were quiet as the dried off, both dressing in sweat pants. They then headed to the living room, with Brian making a detour to the kitchen to grab a couple of beers. He had a feeling that both of them were going to need it. Brian joined Justin on the sofa, setting the beers on the coffee table. He leaned back, opening his arms to his lover, who gratefully sank himself into them. The two men sat quietly for a few minutes, both knowing that the conversation they were about to have was important, but not wanting to have it all the same. Eventually though, Brian decided to get Justin to tell him what had happened.

“So, should I make a guess as to what happened or do you just want to tell me?”

“It was just as bad as we thought it would be,” Justin sighed. “Fuck, even Michael seemed to be siding with Mel and Linds about the case.”

“And you didn’t see that coming?”

“Considering how many times he seemed to support you, no matter what you were doing, no I didn’t see it coming,” Justin answered. “Actually I was beginning to think that I might even be able to get away with not have to fucking deal with it at all.”

“Why?”

“Because Mel and Linds didn’t show up until the end of my shift,” Justin explained. “It they had come five minutes later I would have been gone and they could have all fucking ranted to themselves. It’s not like they were fucking listening to me anyway. All they could do is bitch how you were just doing this because you wanted to fuck over their lives. None of them could see what they’ve been doing to poor Gus. Bitch is, they almost proved our point that they seemed to be ignoring Gus for Annie because they had brought her with them but Gus was no where in sight.”

“That seems to be the case a lot lately,” Brian agreed. “I can’ t even begin to count how many times they’ve come to the diner with Annie and left Gus with a sitter.”

“And yet they still can’t see that they’re doing anything wrong,” Justin continued. “And of course you’re going to be the bad guy in all of this even though all you’re doing is try and look out for your son. I don’t understand how they can be like that.”

“Considering the history all of us have with our families, why should we be any surprised that this is just one more fucked up example of parenting?” Justin snorted at Brian’s comment, knowing it as all too true. None of their little family had the best relations with their parents. Other than Justin and Jennifer, who still wasn’ t able to truly accept Brian as Justin’s chosen partner, and Michael and Debbie and Vic, none of their parents accepted their children.”

“I know. It’s just that…”

“It’s just that you hoped that this time it might be different. That after what happened at Gus’s party on Saturday that they might have been willing to see what has been going on,” Brian grinned down at his lover, kissing his forehead. Brian understood exactly what Justin had been thinking. Even after everything that the younger man had gone through, Justin still refused to think badly of people. There was still innocence about the blond and, as much as Brian might joke and tease his lover about it, it was one of the reasons that Brian had fallen in love with the boy.

“Yeah,” Justin nodded his head. “It’s just that Gus is such a great kid, he doesn’t deserve this shit.”

“No kid deserves to have his parents treat him like shit,” Brian told him. “But life’s not perfect so there’s not one fucking thing we can do about it.”

“Except what you’re trying to do, which is make sure that Gus knows that he is loved and wanted, by at least one of his parents.”

“Two parents,” Brian corrected, pointedly looking down at Justin. “No matter what you say, you are Gus’s other dad.”

“Brian…”

“Don’t even start, Sunshine,” Brian kissed his lover. “You are Gus’s second father. Hell, if the munchers had their way, you would probably be his only father. Then again, if you were his only father, I have a feeling we wouldn’t be going through all this shit in the first place.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is,” Brian explained,” I think the main reason Mel is treating Gus as a second class citizen is because he’s mine and Lindsay is getting caught in the middle because she wants to do what’s right for Gus, but she also doesn’t want to upset Melanie by making her think that Lindsay is treating Annie as a secondary child.”

“But it’s okay that they’re treating Gus like he’s the secondary child? That’s bullshit.”

“I’m not saying it isn’t bullshit. It’s complete bullshit. Then again, when have those two ever made any sense?” Justin and Brian laughed together for a bit, releasing some of the tension that both men had felt. “But that’s why we have to make sure Gus knows that we love him and that we want him. He has to know that we are there to make him number one.”

“And that’s just what we’ll do,” Justin told Brian. “Hopefully the rest of the gang will understand why you’re doing this.”

“I’m not going to hold my breath for that to happen.”

“Well, I think you might be surprised.”

“Why?”

“Before I left, Mel and Lindsay told everyone that you had changed the locks and Ben and Emmett stuck up for you, saying that they weren’t surprised that you had done it,” Justin informed his stunned lover. “In fact, Emmett even said that he was surprised that you hadn’t of done it before.”

“Just because they seemed to agree with that, doesn’t mean that they’ll agree with the case,” Brian pointed out.

“I know, it’s just that, I saw their faces when they found out that the girls had lied and that you still had your parental rights. They were shocked. I honestly think that because of that, they may be a little more willing to see why you are doing what you’re doing. Especially Emmett. You’ve been a good friend to him through the whole Ted mess. You were the only one who wasn’t willing to just forgive and forget everything that Ted had done while he was on crystal.”

“Just because Ted was trying to fuck up his life becoming a crystal queen didn’t mean that I had to let Emmett do the same,” Brian replied, brushing aside Justin’s comments.

“You still did a good thing,” Justin leaned up kissing his lover. “You did the right thing. Just like you’re doing now and if the others can’t see it, that’s their own damn fault.”

“You know things are going to get ugly, Justin, and they’re going to try and put you in the middle.” Justin shifted, turning and straddling Brian.

“Brian, you aren’t telling me anything new. You and Mark made damn sure I knew what I was getting into if I decided to support you. I told you before, and I’m telling you again, the only thing important in this is making sure that Gus gets what he needs. And I think what you’re doing is best for Gus.”

“What are you going to do about working at the diner?”

“Well,” Justin smiled, leaning forward until his forehead touched Brian’s. “I was thinking. I’ve been offered a job doing something I love.”

“Really?” Brian smirked. “And just what would this job have you doing?”

“It’s an up and coming advertising agency and I would be working in their art department,” Justin answered. “It’s really a good opportunity. And it has the best benefits.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I would be getting a chance to make a living doing my art, which is something that I’ve always wanted,” the blond kissed his lover. “Not to mention I’ll get a chance to work with the owner of the company, who happens to be the hottest man I’ve ever seen.”

“I see. And just what do you plan on doing with this hot man.”

“Oh a little of this,” Justin leaned down and lick up the left side of Brian’s neck. “And a little of this,” he moved up to Brian’s ear, nibbling on it, feeling his lover harden under him. “And a whole lot of this.” Justin kissed Brian, hard, tongues dueling for supremacy, both losing themselves in their lust and putting aside the rest of their conversation until later.

Part 8

“So, Ben, somehow I don’t think Michael is going to be too happy with you when you get back to your place?” Emmett observed, as he took a sip from the beer that was sitting in front of him. The two men had decided to go to Woodys after they had been kicked out of the diner. Not surprisingly, a few people had come up to them, knowing that Emmett loved to gossip, and asked them about what had been overheard when Melanie and Lindsay had come to the diner. Just as suspected, word had gotten out quickly that Brian Kinney was seeking custody of his son and people wanted to know if it was true or not.

“I know,” Ben responded, “but that doesn’t mean that he’s going to keep me away from our home. Michael knows that just because we don’t agree on some things doesn’t mean that I’m just going to roll over and do what he wants. And sometimes he comes around to my point of view. He did with Hunter.”

“True, but this is different than the whole Hunter situation. I mean, we are talking about Brian going against the mother of Michael’s daughter. I don’t think Michael wants to think that the girls might be capable of neglect, even if it’s in favor of Annie. This may be the first time that Michael won’t be defending Brian.”

“What worries me is what this may do to everyone in the group.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that, for all the differences that exist between everyone, we belong to a very tight knit group,” Ben explained. “We fight, argue, sometimes get downright nasty with each other, but over all we are there for someone when it’s needed.”

“One big, dysfunctional family.” Ben laughed at Emmett’s apt description. Emmett joined in for a minute before becoming serious once more. “Do you really think that this can divide the group? I mean sure, right now it looks bad but everyone’s just acting on emotions. Maybe once we all have time to think about what’s happening, and why Brian’s doing this, things will calm down.” Ben just looked at Emmett. “Then again, maybe not.”

“Look, Emm, I know I’m one of the newest members of this family, but even I know when something is going to tear it apart, and this just may be it,” Ben said. “If it was anyone but Brian that had said that Gus was being ignored in favor of Annie, I don’t think we would be going through this. We would probably discuss it and try and work something out, which is what I think Brian wants, if he hasn’t already tried to do just that.”

“From the way that Justin was talking, it sounds that Brian has said something, at least to the girls.”

“And yet it doesn’t appear as if anything has been done to change it, most likely because it came from Brian. Justin said it perfectly, Melanie hates Brian. She lied to him, shit both of them lied to all of us about Brian no longer having his parental rights. They even tried to get Michael to sign over his parental rights to Annie. No wonder they backed down when he said no. They probably already knew that the judge would deny the petition.”

“I still can’t believe that they didn’t tell any of us,” Emmett stated. “Do you think that Justin was right about them keeping it a secret because that way they could basically keep threatening Brian with keeping Gus away from him?”

“After some of the things I heard tonight, not to mention what I’ve witnessed since I’ve been with Michael, yeah I think there’s more than a good chance that Justin was right,” Ben replied. “I think the girls kept it quiet is that they had something to hold over Brian’s head. They are constantly pointing out to Brian that he isn’t Gus’s legal parent yet at the same time, whenever they need something for Gus, he is the first one that they go to, no matter what it is.”

“Like when they needed money for Gus’s clothes because they had to spend what they had for the nursery for Annie.”

“Or when they were trying to get him into that school and asked Brian if he would be willing to pretend that he and Lindsay were married.”

“I so wish I could have seen his face when they asked that,” Emmett laughed. “That had to have been one hell of a conversation considering how Brian feels about the happy hetero family. Not to mention how much he hates lying about how he lives his life.” Their conversation was interrupted when Ben’s phone went off.

“Hello?”

“What?”

“Whoa whoa whoa, slow down Hunter. I can’t understand you.”

“Okay now tell me what’s happening.”

“What do you mean Michael is packing? Packing what?”

“He said what?” Ben looked over at Emmett, unable to believe what his foster son was telling him. “No I did not tell him I was moving out. What gave you that idea?”

“He did, did he? No that’s not what happened and no I don’t want to get into it over the phone.”

“I’m at Woodys with Emmett.”

“Fine, fine, come on over but do me a favor. Put Michael on the phone for a minute.”

“What’s going on?” Emmett asked as Ben waited for his lover to get on the phone.

“That’s what I intend to find out.” Ben’s attention was drawn back to the phone. “Michael, what the hell is going on over there?”

“What do you mean that you think it would be best if I moved out for awhile? Why?”

“You have to be kidding me. Just because I don’t agree with you over this whole custody thing, you’re breaking up with me. That has to be the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. You’re being completely unreasonable…”

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN I’M BEING UNREASONABLE?” Emmett couldn’t help but wince as he heard Michael’s voice come through the phone loud and clear. Ben held the phone away from his ear as Michael continued to yell. “BRIAN KINNEY IS FUCKING SUING THE MOTHER OF MY CHILD FOR CUSTODY OF HER SON SAYING SHE IS UNFIT AND INSTEAD OF STANDING BY MY SIDE, MY LOVER HAS GONE OUT OF HIS FUCKING MIND AND DECIDED TO SUPPORT HIM.”

“Michael, I never said I was supporting Brian,” Ben tried to remain calm, hoping to work out something with his lover. “All I said was that we need to do what was right for Gus. And, that, now that it was brought to our attention I can see why Brian is concerned. We have been favoring Annie.”

“ANNIE IS MY FUCKING DAUGHTER. WHY SHOULDN’T I FAVOR HER?”

“Damn it, Michael,” Ben swore, “I’m not saying that you shouldn’t favor Annie, just like it’s completely understandable that Brian would favor Gus, but that doesn’t give Melanie and Lindsay, not to mention the rest of us, the right to treat him as if he doesn’t exist. We were supposed to be at the girls’ house on Saturday for Gus’s birthday and we completely ignored him. He left his own party. Thank god that Brian was the one to find him.”

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU’RE TAKING HIS SIDE.”

“Damn it Michael, how many times do I have to tell you that I’m not taking his side in this.” Whatever Michael’s reply was, Emmett couldn’t hear.

“Michael, don’t be like this.”

“Fine, you want me to move out, I’ll move out. But what about Hunter?”

“Actually no, he can’t stay with you if I’m not there. Not legally.”

“What I mean is that I am Hunter’s foster father. He’s my responsibility.”

“What do you mean you won’t let me take Hunter? It’s not your decision.”

“Actually I was planning on letting Hunter decide where he wants to stay. He’s had too many people try and dictate to him already.”

“Michael I’m not going to argue with you about this. You’re the one that is kicking me out of our home over something that we have no reason to be involved in. Gus isn’t our child. He’s not our responsibility. It’s between Mel, Lindsay and Brian.”

“If that’s the way you feel, then I guess there’s nothing I can say. Have Hunter bring a suitcase or two when he comes to Woodys.”

“Because he wants to see me and I want to explain things to him. And I am not willing to put him in the middle of this.”

“Goodbye Michael.” Ben hit the off button of his phone, looking down at it for a minute trying to figure out what had just happened.

“Ben are you okay?” Emmett asked, worried about his friend. “What happened?”

“I have no idea,” he replied, still reeling from the conversation he had had with his lover.

“What did Michael say?” Ben raised his head. “Well I mean, I heard some of what he said, but you know what I mean.”

“He said that if I didn’t support him against what Brian was trying to do, then he didn’t think there was any reason that we should stay together,” Ben tried to explain. “Basically it went along the lines of I was choosing Brian over him and he wasn’t willing to live with someone who obviously didn’t trust his judgment. I kept trying to tell him that I wasn’t supporting Brian but Gus, and he didn’t want to hear it.”

“That doesn’t sound like Michael. He loves you.”

“That’s what I thought too, but apparently I was wrong if he’s willing to throw it all away because of this. Christ we don’t even have anything to do with this. At least we shouldn’t. And now Hunter is going to be caught in the middle of this mess between Michael and I and that’s something that he doesn’t need either. ”

“Can I be honest with you, Ben?” Emmett asked.

“You know you can,” Ben reassured his friend. “What is it?”

“I think, if it came down to it, I’m supporting Brian. After listening to Justin, and hearing and seeing how everyone else is reacting, not to mention doing quite a bit of thinking about it, I think Brian is the better parent for Gus,” Emmett concluded. “I’m not saying that Linds and Mel are bad parents, they aren’t. It’s just...”

“It’s just when it comes to Brian, and his relationship with Gus, they can’t see straight and it’s starting to affect him,” Ben finished. “I know. I see it too. And I think you’re right. I think when it comes down to it; Brian is the better choice for raising Gus. And I think, if given half a chance he’ll be damn good at it. He’s already proven that he can change, even if no one else wants to see it.”

“I think a lot of that has to do with Justin,” Emmett pointed out. “Then again, I don’t think that boy will be giving up on Brian Kinney any time soon. Those two have gone through too much shit to throw it all away.”

“Well, Justin already showed that he is supporting Brian in this.”

“I know. Thing is, this will be the first time that Justin will be going against the rest of the group,” Emmett said. “Even after he left Brian for Ethan, we all stood by him, which is something that we can’t say about supporting Brian. It won’t be easy for either of them.”

“Then I’ll guess we’ll just have to make sure that they know someone is supporting them,” Ben stated.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to be supporting Brian. You were going to support Gus.”

“I think in this case, supporting one will be supporting the other. I don’t think there will be any middle ground in this fight. Nothing is going to be the same again.” Emmett nodded his head, not knowing how true that statement would be.

Part 9

“Mel, I really wish you would calm down,” Lindsay pleaded with her lover, as she shut the door to their home. The two women had just spent the past hour at the diner talking about their plans to stop Brian in his quest for custody of Gus, and it didn’t appear as if Melanie was in any mood to calm down just yet.

“Jesus,” Mel swore, “the way you keep telling me to calm I’m beginning to think that you don’t care that Brian is trying to take Gus away from us.”

“You know that’s not true,” Lindsay denied. “I’m just as upset as you are about this, but that doesn’t mean that I want Gus and Annie to see how upset we are.”

“Well, Gus isn’t here and Annie’s too young to care,” Mel argued. “Anyway, why shouldn’t Gus hear what I think about his father? Maybe that will knock Brian off that pedestal that everyone has put him on.”

“Nobody has Brian on a pedestal,” Lindsay countered. “What happened at the diner proved that. You saw how everyone supported us.”

“Not everyone,” the brunette snorted. “Then again, what should we have expected from Justin. For such a sweet kid, he sure is willing to defend everything that Brian does. That man can do no wrong in his eyes.”

“That’s not true and you know it. Justin was just trying to explain why Brian was doing what he is.” Lindsay watched as Melanie filled the teapot before slamming it down onto the stove. “You can’t blame him for that, even if we think he’s wrong for doing it.”

“Of course we can’t blame him,” Melanie spat. “He’s just defending Brian “Fucking” Kinney as he tries to take our son away from us by saying we’re bad parents. Why the fuck should I be mad at Justin for that?”

“Justin wasn’t the only one who tried to defend Brian,” the blonde pointed out. “Ben and Emmett seemed to agree with him.”

“Don’t remind me,” Melanie said. “Justin I could understand. He thinks he’s in love with the asshole. But Emmett and Ben defending that prick is just unbelievable. Granted, Emmett might not be the brightest person around, but I figured that even he had to be smart enough to see through Brian’s bullshit. And I can’t believe Ben saying that Brian might be right in seeking custody. He’s Michael’s partner and Annie’s other father and now he’s saying that we’re unfit parents.”

“That’s not what he was saying,” Lindsay said. “All he said was that he could see where it would appear that we’ve been favoring Annie and that it wasn’t so strange that Brian would favor Gus because Gus is his son, the same way that Michael and Ben favor Annie because she’s Michael’s daughter. All he did was try and make everyone see Brian’s point of view.”

“Are you excusing Ben now too?” Melanie couldn’t believe what she was hearing from her lover. “He’s saying that Gus would be better off with that asshole and you’re going to try and tell me that he was right in saying the things that he did.”

“I’m not saying that he was right,” Lindsay argued. “You know I don’t think Gus would be better off with Brian. I can’t think of two better parents for that little boy than us.”

“That’s not what it sounds like to me,” Mel countered. “Maybe you would be happier if Gus went to stay with Brian.”

“Of course I don’t want Gus to live with Brian, but I also don’t want him to have to see us arguing over this,” the blonde said. “If we start arguing in front of Gus and keep bad mouthing Brian where he can hear, it will only make matters worse. What we need to do is make sure that Gus knows that we love him just as much as Annie, and that’s exactly what I intend to do as soon as we get him from Claire’s.”

“Well then we have all night to argue without having to worry about Gus hearing anything bad about his precious father,” Melanie informed Lindsay.

“What are you talking about?”

“What I mean is that when I went over to drop off Gus, I asked Claire if she would keep him for the night,” the brunette told her. “She loves having him over there and I know how much he enjoys spending the time with her and Mike.”

“And you didn’t think to ask me about our son spending the night away from home? Again?”

“You’ve never seemed to mind before,” Melanie pointed out, not seeing why Lindsay was so upset. Since Annie had been born, even for a few months before that, the women had asked their next door neighbors to keep Gus for the night so that they could have time for themselves. “And you know how much Claire and Mike enjoy having Gus since they don’t get to see their grandchildren that often.”

“That’s not the point, Mel,” Lindsay argued.

“Then what is the point, Linds, because I’m just not seeing the problem here.”

“The problem is that you didn’t bother to ask me if it was alright if Gus spent the night over at Claire and Mike’s,” the blonde said. “You don’t like it when I make decisions about Annie without consulting you, so I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t do the same thing with Gus. He is my son.”

“I thought he was our son. Or have you changed your mind on that?”

“No I haven’t changed my mind,” Lindsay sighed, tired of having the same argument with her wife. “All I’m trying to say is that, with Brian trying to take Gus from us, saying that we’re unfit or that we’re spending too much time with Annie and ignoring him, maybe it would be better if Gus stayed with us. He spends more time at Claire’s house than here. And if he isn’t there, he’s with Brian and Justin. The fact that you already asked them to take Gus for the whole night, without even asking me, just proves Brian’s point. In fact, us having just Gus stay with a sitter, while we took Annie to the diner, proves his point. We have been ignoring Gus.”

“Great, I can’t fucking believe this,” Melanie spat out. “One again Brian Kinney gets to dictate how we raise our son. Why am I not surprised?”

“Mel, please…”

“No, Linds, I have had it up to here with that asshole trying to dictate to us how we raise our son,” Melanie said. “I knew we should have never had him be the father but you just had to insist on it and look how well that has turned out. He has done nothing but caused problems since the day Gus was born and I have had enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that if Brian Kinney thinks that he can take away my family he is sorely mistaken. If it’s a fight that he wants, it’s a fight that he’s going to get and it will be one that he will never forget.”

Lindsay watched as her wife picked up their daughter to take her upstairs to bed. She knew how upset Melanie was about Brian suing for custody of Gus, all the while knowing exactly why Brian had felt the need to do so. As much as she hated to admit it, even to herself, the family had been ignoring Gus in favor of Annie, but the blonde woman had no idea of what to do to make things better. All she could do was try and make thinks up to her son and hope that thinks wouldn’t get worse before they got better.

Part 10

Vic Grassi walked into the home he shared with his sister, his lover Rodney behind him, surprised to see her sitting on the couch with a drink in her hand. While it wasn’t an unusual occurrence for Debbie to have a drink, usually her preferred choices were beer or wine. It was the bottle of Smirnoff’s vodka on the table in front of her that had him worried. He knew his sister well enough to realize that only when something major, and upsetting, had happened when she resorted to drinking the harder stuff.

“Sis, what happened?” He asked worriedly, quickly joining her on the couch. He took in the half empty glass and looked back at his lover, his eyes showing his concern. Debbie appeared to be in a daze and Vic wondered what had caused her to be in that condition. “What’s wrong? Sis?”

“What?” Debbie said shakily, coming out her stupor. She shook her head, clearing the cobwebs that had gathered during her drinking binge, looking around her living room. Her eyes fell on her brother. “Vic?”

“Yeah, sis, it’s me. Care to tell me what has you breaking out the hard stuff?” Vic couldn’t hide the worry he was feeling. It had been a long time since he had seen Debbie drinking vodka. The last time was when he had told her that he was positive.

“Brian.” Vic rolled his eyes as Rodney took a seat nearby. Both men realized that their quick trip to pick up some clothes for Vic wasn’t going to be as fast as they had hoped.

“So what evil thing has Brian supposedly done now that has you so upset?” Vic moved Debbie’s glass further away when she went to reach for it. “I think you’ve had already had enough.”

“I’ll tell you what that asshole has done,” Debbie shouted. “He’s decided to make Melanie and Lindsay’s lives miserable.”

“And why would he be doing that?”

“Because he’s nothing but an asshole who likes to cause as much trouble as he can, because heaven forbid anyone actually try and have a life that isn’t centered around Brian “I’m the fucking center of the world” Kinney.” She spat, her anger at what at had happened at the diner coming through once more. She missed the shared look between Vic and Rodney.

“So what else is new, Sis,” Vic asked, sighing as he thought of how, once more, his sister was blaming other’s problems on her surrogate son. It amazed the man how much Debbie swore she loved Brian like a son, and yet everything that went wrong in everyone else’s life, whether it be Michael quitting his job at the Big Q to Melanie cheating on Lindsay, was somehow Brian’s fault. Like he had some kind of mystical power to make others do exactly what he wanted them to do, whether it was what they wanted to do it or not. He and Rodney had discussed it at length one night when Rodney had inquired about the dynamics of the psuedo-family that was a big part of his lover’s life.

“Well, this time he’s going for an all time low, even for him.”

“What did he do?”

“He’s fucking suing the girls for custody of Gus,” she stood up and began to pace, her voice getting louder and her rant continued. “He’s saying that they’re unfit parents. That they’re neglecting Gus and paying too much attention to Annie. Like there’s something wrong with paying so much attention to that adorable little girl. Melanie went through hell during her pregnancy. Fuck, it was a miracle that she could even get pregnant and now Brian Kinney is trying to fucking punish those two wonderful girls because they had the nerve to have a child without him being responsible for any of it. That’s so fucking selfish of him.

“And what makes him think he’s any better fit to be a parent to Gus? Shit, the asshole is too busy always fucking and sucking every man in Pittsburgh and a few from outside the fucking city to even pay any attention to his son. He’s probably thinking that Justin will watch Gus for him so he can go out and get his dick sucked in the backroom.”

“You know that’s not true, Sis,” Vic interrupted; trying to figure out what it was that his sister was talking about. “Brian loves his son, and Gus loves Brian. I can’t think of a better father for that little boy, and that’s saying a lot considering the lousy example of parenting Brian grew up with.

“Please, Justin is more of a father to that little boy that Brian has ever been,” Debbie spat.

“Brian is a great father to Gus,” Vic argued.

“Fine, you’re right, he’s a great father. Are you happy?” Vic didn’t even bother answering, knowing that his sister didn’t really want one. “But that still doesn’t give him the fucking right to try and take Gus away from his parents. Mel and Lindsay love that little boy and there is no way they would do anything to hurt him.”

“I know that, and I didn’t think Brian had any doubts as to the girls’ ability to raise their son, so why is he now saying that they’re unfit?”

“He’s saying that they’re ignoring Gus in favor of paying more attention to Annie. And that they argue about Brian in front of Gus making him think that its somehow his fault,” Debbie explained, her voice lowering as she told Vic what Lindsay and Melanie had told everyone at the diner. “And he’s using Gus’s birthday party on Saturday as the big example of how neglectful everyone has become, like’s it their fault Brian decided to take Gus away from his own party.” Vic took a deep breath, looking over at his lover quickly as if to gather strength. He knew what he was about to say would most definitely start his sister off once more, but he couldn’t help it. He just didn’t think it was fair that Brian be blamed for putting his son’s needs first for once, and that’s exactly what it sounded like Brian was doing.

”Debbie, you were ignoring Gus in favor of Annie at his party,” Vic gently reminded his sister, even though he knew she didn’t want to hear it. In fact, he was already preparing himself to listen to her blow up at him for having the nerve to contradict her version of events. ‘Ah hell, at least I was already planning on staying with Rodney for awhile anyway.’

“We were doing no such thing,” Debbie denied. “Gus was having a wonderful time at his party.”

“Sis, do I have to remind you that I was the first person who realized that Gus was no longer at the house, and I had only just arrived five minutes before I said something about that,” Vic said. “Lindsay was inside dealing with the food; Melanie was holding Annie and the rest of you all were fawning over that little girl, while Gus was nowhere to be found. There’s no telling how long it would have been before anyone had noticed he had disappeared.”

“So you’re saying that it is okay that Brian is trying to ruin Mel and Lindsay’s lives?”

“I don’t think he’s trying to do any such thing,” Vic countered. “I think he’s just trying to look out for his son. We’re talking about someone who knows what its like to have parents treat him like shit and I’m sure Brian wants to make sure the same thing doesn’t happen to his son.”

“Those two girls do not treat Gus like shit,” Debbie shouted. “They love that little boy and I can’t believe you’re sitting there saying what you are. You’re beginning to sound like Ben and Emmett.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What I’m talking about is how Lindsay and Melanie’s supposed friends seem to be sticking up for that asshole,” Debbie replied. “Justin I can understand. He thinks Brian does no wrong. But the rest of you, I can’t believe you’re sticking up for Brian.”

“What did Ben and Emmett say?” Vic questioned, curious as to what the other two men had done to make Debbie so upset with them.

“Basically they said the same thing you just did. That Brian was just looking out for Gus’s “best interests” and that we have all been ignoring Gus,” Debbie answered. “That we have been favoring Annie, always bringing her things when we go to visit and completely forgetting to bring anything for Gus.”

“I hate to break it to you, sis, but they’re right.”

“What the fuck do you mean they’re right?” Debbie shouted.

“Sis, you always have something for Annie, whenever you go over to the girls’. When was the last time you brought something over for Gus too, and I don’t want you to count his birthday,” Vic warned, knowing that would have been her answer. He didn’t even bother mentioning the fact that he knew she had also brought a gift for her granddaughter that Saturday. He could tell Debbie couldn’t think of the last time. “That’s what I thought. There used to be a time that you would have always had something for Gus.”

“Annie is my granddaughter, why shouldn’t I treat her to something if I want to,” Debbie finally said, using the same argument that Michael had used.

“I’m not,” Vic countered. “All I’m saying is that, if the reason you want the best for Annie is because she is your granddaughter, you can’t fault Brian for doing the same for Gus since he is his son.”

“That doesn’t mean he should take the girls to court. Gus belongs with his mothers.”

“I’m not saying that what Brian is doing is right or wrong, all I’m trying to show you is that there are two sides of this story and you can’t just go blindly deciding which course is right without listening to both sides.” Vic stood up, leaning over and kissing the top of Debbie’s wig. “I’m going to be staying over at Rodney’s for awhile. Call me over there or at Emmett’s if you want to talk.” Vic and Rodney went upstairs to Vic’s room to pack some of his clothes, knowing that Debbie had quite a bit of thinking to do. He was also planning on visiting a certain advertising executive in the morning and finding out exactly what was going on.

Part 11

Two days had passed since Melanie and Lindsay had discovered that Brian was filing for custody of Gus and the whole of Liberty Avenue was talking about the changes that had come about because of it. No longer was there a tight knit family of friends that had once been the envy of many a lonely person who wished they were a part of it, instead of being on the outside looking in... Instead, there were couples that were now no longer together and friends that no longer talked, using silence to speak of the anger they felt towards those that they felt had betrayed them. No place was safe from the awkwardness that had descended. Woodys. Babylon. The Liberty Gym. Even the Liberty Diner saw a change when everyone’s favorite twink waiter came into work only to be told that his services were no longer required there. People could have heard a pin drop in the silence that had descended over the patrons of the diner when Debbie had informed Justin that she didn’t think it would be a good idea for him to be working there anymore.

The day before….

“What the fuck do you mean you don’t think it’s a good idea if I keep working here?” Justin shouted, not caring about the customers in the diner.

“What I mean is that, considering what that asshole is trying to do to my grandbaby’s mother, and the fact that you seem to be supporting him in that decision, I think it would be better if you stayed away from the diner until the fucker comes to his senses,” Debbie replied, her voice harsh.

“That’s such bullshit,” the blond spat. “You can’t fire me because you don’t like what Brian is doing.”

“I can fucking do anything I damn well please,” Debbie shot back.

“So you’re basically saying that if I want to keep my job here I have to break up with Brian and support Mel and Lindsay, even if I don’t think they’re the best parents for Gus? That’s seriously fucked.” Justin was furious. He knew there would be repercussions for his choice of supporting Brian, but he couldn’t believe that Debbie was basically firing him because of something that had nothing to do with work. Especially after the discussion he and Brian had had with Vic. The older man had come over earlier that day to find out what was going on, and had told them both that he thought that there was a very good chance that Debbie would calm down after he had talked to his sister the night before. Justin was now finding out that was anything but the case.

“Well you know where the door is, I suggest you use it then.” Justin just looked at Debbie for a minute and then shook his head.

“You know what, fuck this. This place isn’t worth the bullshit,” Justin finally said. “I just have one thing to say first. Deb, you’ve been like a second mom to me. You took me in when I had no place to go. You supported me in ways that my own family couldn’t, or simply wouldn’t. You helped my mom accept my lifestyle and I don’t think I can ever truly tell you how much that has meant to me. I always thought you were a great lady who was willing to go out of her way to support her family, both by blood and by love. I’m just sorry I was wrong, because it was all a lie.”

“What the fuck are you talking about now?”

“What I’m talking about is this. If Annie wasn’t Michael’s daughter, would you be so willing to see Brian as the bad guy here, even though he is only doing what he thinks best for Gus?” Justin tiredly replied. “You just don’t want to think that the mother of your grandchild could be ignoring her other child, Brian’s child, in favor of Annie. Or does it have nothing to do with Michael? Is it because that Gus is Brian’s son that makes it okay for everyone to push Gus aside, because we all know that Brian is always the root of all things evil that happens in the world. Michael quits the Big Q, blame Brian. Michael refuses to move in with David, must be Brian’s fault. Melanie and Lindsay break up, damn that Brian. Ted gets arrested; it’s all Brian’s fault. Noticing a little trend here?”

“Brian’s an asshole, Sunshine, and you need to learn that,” Debbie said, refusing to back down.

“I already know Brian can be an asshole, Debbie,” he told her. “I’ve known that. I have first hand knowledge of that fact, so you aren’t telling me anything new. But, while I will admit that he’s an asshole, sometimes of epic proportions, I also know that he is one of the most caring and generous people that I have had the privilege of meeting. I’ve seen him agonize over his decision to sign over his parental rights to Gus. I was here when Ted came in to thank him for helping keep him out of jail. I was the one who tried to get your precious baby boy to forgive Brian for doing exactly what YOU asked him to do. So yes, I know that Brian is an asshole, but unlike you, I’m not going to forget that he is also willing to do anything for those he loves, no matter how many times they hurt him.” Justin turned away from the red-wigged waitress and walked towards the door, turning at the last second.

“And, by the way Debbie, thanks for firing me, and giving me the reason for doing it in front of all of these witnesses,” Justin said. “I’m sure that our lawyer will find it very interesting, especially the legal aspects of it.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“What I’m talking about is the fact that you’ve just given me one hell of a good case for filing a wrongful termination lawsuit.” And with those final words, Justin turned his back on the woman who had always supported him and walked out of the diner. Debbie just stared at his back wondering what the hell she was going to do now, especially if Justin followed through on his threat. She turned to face the stunned crowd that had watched the fight.

“What the fuck are you all staring at?” She yelled, unable to gain her composure. She took one look at the customers and, upon seeing the shock on all of their faces, hoped she hadn’t just made a big mistake. Debbie was pretty sure that Justin wouldn’t follow through on threat to sue for wrongful termination, or whatever the fuck it was he called it, but she also knew that with Brian pushing his button, she had no clue what could happen. She hadn’t meant to snap at Justin. In fact, after talking to her brother she had actually calmed down some, but after her talk with Melanie before work, and hearing how upset the other woman still was, and then seeing Justin walk into the diner looking as if he didn’t have a care in the world, she snapped. She knew she shouldn’t have done it, but she couldn’t help herself. She just hoped that she didn’t just fuck up Melanie and Lindsay’s chances at keeping Gus.

Present Time

Mark Cavanaugh was sitting outside of the courtroom of Judge Patricia Fox waiting for his clients to show up. He was looking through the papers that had arrived in his office as soon as he arrived at work, at the same time going through the information that his assistants had been able to come up with in such short time. It made him proud of his people that they had been able to find out what they had in only the ninety minutes they had before he had to go to the courthouse. It made him relax a bit about what was about to happen. The only thing he was truly worried about was that his client wouldn’t be able to make it there on such short notice. A worry that disappeared within the next five minutes when both Brian Kinney and Justin Taylor were spotted at the end of the hallway, a full fifteen minutes before they had to go before the judge.

“Brian, Justin, glad you could make it. I wasn’t sure f you would be able to rearrange your schedules at the last minute like this,” Mark said in greeting, rising to shake both men’s hands. “Especially you Brian. I was afraid you might have a meeting with a client or something that you couldn’t get out of.”

“I did have a meeting scheduled but luckily Cynthia was able to take it over for me,” Brian replied. “She knows what she’s doing so it shouldn’t be a problem. And she knows to only call me if it’s an emergency.”

“What about you Justin? I have to admit, I am surprised to see you here, especially with the short notice.”

“I already had one class today and my only other one is later tonight so it wasn’t a problem,” Justin explained. “Especially since I don’t exactly have a job anymore.” At a look from Brian, Justin continued. “At least not at the diner that is.” Mark looked between Brian and Justin and knew instantly that there was a story behind Justin no longer working at the diner, a job that Justin had enjoyed or so Mark had been told. He also knew that now was not the time to find out what that story was.

“I can assume that I will find out why you are no longer at the diner later, correct?” Justin nodded his head at Mark, having already talked to Brian about what had happened. Brian had not been happy when he had been told that Debbie had fired Justin because the young man was sticking by his lover’s side. Brian hated being the reason that anything bad happened to Justin and he had wanted to go and confront the waitress by Justin stopped Brian from doing, or saying, anything that he would regret in the future. Brian understood that Justin was still hoping that the others would eventually come around and see that Brian was only doing what he thought was best for Gus. Brian, on the other hand, knew that nothing would remain the same and that there was a very good chance that the family that had accepted Justin into their ranks was broken.

“So Mark,” Brian began, steering the conversation away from Justin’s sudden lack of employment, “what exactly can we expect today? What exactly are Mel and Linds up to?”

“From the paperwork that I received earlier, it appears as if they are going to try and overturn the judge’s earlier ruling to annul your parental rights, in essence making your bid for custody moot because you wouldn’t have any rights to Gus at all,” Mark explained. “And if the judge doesn’t find in their favor, they are asking that you only be allowed strictly supervised visitation with Gus, that is, if they can’t convince the judge that you shouldn’t be allowed to see him at all.”

“Wait a minute,” Justin interrupted, “are you saying that they can take Gus away from Brian completely? That he wouldn’t even be allowed to see his son? That’s completely fucked.”

“I agree, although I won’t exactly be using that wording when telling the Judge Fox out position,” Mark said. “To be honest here, I really don’t think this is anything to be worried about. In fact, I want to try and use this hearing to our advantage by getting the judge to grant Brian visitation, including having a schedule set up, that way the girls can’t keep Brian and Gus apart. That’s also why I wanted you to do everything you could to get here. You’re dropping everything in order to be come to court at the last minute shows your commitment and desire to do everything possible to make Gus happy.”

“So you don’t think this is anything we should worry about?” Brian asked, just wanting to make sure that he wouldn’t be forced to give up Gus. He might never have wanted to be a father, but that had definitely changed in the four years that Gus has been in his life. Now Brian couldn’t even imagine not being able to be involved with his son’s life.

“Honestly, no I don’t think this is anything to worry about,” Mark assured both men. “This is just Melanie and Lindsay trying to find a quick fix to a bigger problem. And it’s a quick fix that they aren’t going to get.”

“Mr. Cavanaugh, the judge is ready for you,” a court bailiff said, coming up behind the men.

“Thank you,” the lawyer replied, turning back to his clients. “Ready?” At twin nods, he started towards the court room. “Then let’s go.”

Part 12

“All rise. The Honorable Patricia Fox presiding.” The bailiff called. Mark and Brian both advanced to the tables in the front of the courtroom. On the other side of the room was an attorney from Melanie’s law firm, both neither Melanie herself, or Lindsay, seemed to be present. The judge came from her chambers and walked up to her bench.

“In the case of Marcus-Peterson v Kinney, is everyone present?”

“Mitchell Wilson, you honor, for the plaintiffs, Melanie Marcus and Lindsay Peterson.”

“Mark Cavanaugh, for the defendant Brian Kinney, your honor.”

“Please be seated.” Judge Fox looked through the papers on her desk, describing what the hearing before her was about, although she had already read through them before she came in. “I see here that your clients, Mr. Wilson, are seeking to overturn an earlier ruling that enabled Mr. Kinney to retain his parental rights to the minor, Gus Kinney-Peterson. Is that correct?”

“Yes your honor.”

“On what grounds?”

“My clients want it on the record they believe that Mr. Kinney is an unfit role model for his son. Ms. Marcus also wishes to adopt the minor, Gus Kinney-Peterson, now that she is in a committed relationship with his biological mother, Lindsay Peterson. Also, I would like it on record that, before Ms. Peterson became pregnant, and during the time that she was pregnant, it was always the agreement that Mr. Kinney would sign away his rights to the child.”

“If that is the case, Ms. Wilson, why is Mr. Kinney listed on the birth certificate as father, not to mention why does the child have Mr. Kinney’s last name?”

“I don’t know, you honor. That is something that only my clients can answer.”

“And are your clients present, Mr. Wilson?” The attorney squirmed a bit.

“Unfortunately your honor, my clients had previous engagements that could not be changed on such short notice. Ms. Peterson is a manager of a major art gallery in the city and had to be present to supervise arrival of numerous pieces of art today. Ms. Marcus is an attorney at my law firm and had meetings with various clients today and also could not be called away.”

“And yet it appears that Mr. Kinney has managed to arrive for the hearing, and I believe he had even shorter notice than your clients, is that not true Mr. Cavanaugh?”

“Yes, your Honor,” Mark replied, standing. “Even though he is the owner of an up and coming advertising agency, and had in fact had a meeting that could net his agency a multi-million dollar contract, Mr. Kinney, as well as his partner Mr. Justin Taylor, both managed to rearrange their schedules to be here today. They felt it was in the best interest of the child to do so.”

“I see. Well, going over the papers that you presented to me, Mr. Wilson, I can’t see any real reason to overturn the previous ruling granting Mr. Kinney his parental rights. From everything I’ve read, Mr. Kinney has supported his son both before and after he had signed those papers, not to mention the fact that, regardless of whatever arrangements might have been made, he is listed on the child’s birth certificate as father, as well as the minor having his last name.”

“I understand your honor.”

“Now, as to the matter of visitation, I see that your clients are asking that Mr. Kinney only be allowed supervised visitation, once a week for one hour at a time, is that correct.”

“Yes your Honor.”

“Mr. Cavanaugh, I take it your client wishes to contest this?”

“Yes your Honor. Mr. Kinney would like be able to see his son on the weekend, either Saturday or Sunday, or if possible, he would like to have his son both days. He would like the court to make an official ruling on visitation, at least for the duration of the custody hearing, so that the plaintiff’s will not be able to keep his son away from him, which is something that they have a history of doing.”

“Let’s save that for arguments. Mr. Wilson, what are your clients reasons for wanting to limit Mr. Kinney’s presence around the minor?”

“There are many reasons, your Honor. To begin with, they are afraid of the influence Mr. Kinney may hold over his son. The defendant is well-known within the homosexual community as being rather promiscuous. In fact, when the bars and backrooms of some of the various clubs along Liberty Avenue were close during the Mayoral Election by then Police Chief Stockwell, the defendant turned his own home, the home where his son has stayed, into a den of sex. And that is just one example.”

“Your Honor, we are talking about something that occurred almost two years ago, and Gus wasn’t present at the time so there was no influence over him,” Mark interrupted. “Besides, Mr. Kinney’s reputation along Liberty Avenue may be well known, but it is also outdated.”

“You’ll have your turn to state your case, Mr. Cavanaugh. Please continue Mr. Wilson.”

“As I was saying, Mr. Kinney has no shame in his sexual escapades. In fact, both Ms. Marcus and Ms. Peterson have gone to Mr. Kinney’s home and been exposed to his sexual antics. They are concerned that their son may too be subjected to said activities.”

“Is that their only concern Mr. Wilson?”

No your honor. They also believe that Mr. Kinney’s home is an unsuitable place for a child to spend time, let alone over night.”

“And why is that?”

“Mr. Kinney owns a loft apartment. One that has only one bedroom that is open for all too see. There is no privacy or separate room for the child. Also, my clients stated that, at times, Mr. Kinney’s home seems to have company coming at any time, many just entering his home without knocking, or not waiting for him to open the door.”

“I see, go on.”

“And last, my clients’ major concern is that Mr. Kinney may be poisoning their son’s mind against them and his younger sister. Just this past weekend, Mr. Kinney removed the minor from his own birthday party without letting anyone know, including my clients. And since his return Monday afternoon, my clients said that he has refused to leave his room, except to eat and go to school. They are afraid of what might happen if Mr. Kinney is allowed prolonged visitation.”

“It seems that your clients have valid concerns. Mr. Cavanaugh what does your client have to say?”

“First your honor, I would like to address the points that my opponent has brought up. In regards to Mr. Kinney’s sexual practices, while he will not deny that in the past he was promiscuous, he has never made a secret of this fact, he has never exposed his bedroom antics to his son. In fact, the one time that Ms. Peterson had brought his son over while he had someone there; he did not allow that person to be near the child. Mr. Kinney on the other hand has seen instances where Ms. Peterson and Ms. Marcus were, for lack of a better term, extremely affectionate in front of the minor.

“As for Mr. Kinney’s sexual partners now, I have an affidavit from Mr. Kinney stating that, as for the past five months, the only sexual partner he has had is Justin Taylor.” A gasp the gallery is the only response to that, but a warning look from the judge has Justin remain quiet.

“That certainly seems a change from the image that has been presented to me. Is there a reason for this seemingly out of character behavior, Mr. Kinney?”

“Your honor, I’ve done a lot of things in my life that, looking back now, I’m not proud of. My life has gone through a lot of changes in the past two years and one of those changes was getting Justin Taylor back in my life after I had lost him. And, with him by my side, I was able to see that I didn’t need to prove that I was the biggest stud in Pittsburgh, especially as long as I had him by my side. I won’t say that I won’t screw up and trick again, I would be lying if I said I could, but I have realized that, as long as Justin is with me, I don’t need anyone else.”

“Sounds like you discovered something very important, Mr. Kinney. Congratulations to both of you.”

“Thank you, your Honor.”

“Continue Mr. Cavanaugh.”

“As for MS. Peterson and Ms. Marcus being exposed to Mr. Kinney’s past sexual activities. In all instances, the only reason the Plaintiff’s were exposed to anything at all was that they barged into Mr. Kinney’s home, without knocking or calling ahead. In fact, both Plaintiffs have made it a point to interrupted Mr. Kinney in his home. They have made it a practice to arrive at his home, entering without having the courtesy of knocking, no matter the time, to ask for his help. In fact, it’s not just his home that they have barged into. I have witnesses that state that Ms. Marcus walked into the locker room of the Liberty Gym, an all male gym, searching for Mr. Kinney when she was having problems with Ms. Peterson. I also have an affidavit from the owner of a local Hollywood Tans Tanning Salon that states that Ms. Marcus threatened him with bodily harm if he didn’t tell him which room Mr. Kinney was in. This time it was because Ms. Marcus was upset because Ms. Peterson wanted to call off their wedding.

“As for Mr. Kinney’s apartment. Yes it is a loft. But, saying that his son has no privacy or a room to call his own isn’t correct. Mr. Kinney, with Mr. Taylor’s help, has constructed a room for his son. Also, Mr. Kinney is currently looking for a house that would allow his son to have greater freedom, including a backyard. And he has already taken steps to prevent people from just entering his home. Over the weekend, my client arranged to have the locks to his home changed, the only person having a key being Mr. Taylor, and myself. The lock on his door also is automatic, meaning that it locks upon closing. And he has arranged with his building manager to change the code to the front door of his building to prevent people from coming upstairs without being announced first.”

“What about the Plaintiff’s accusations of your client poisoning the minor’s mind against them? Not to mention his removing the child from his home without his mother’s knowledge?”

“Your Honor the day in question was this past Saturday and was the child’s party for his fourth birthday. My client and Mr. Taylor arrived at the Plaintiff’s home, only to find Gus wandering out front with no one watching him. When asked why he wasn’t with everyone else, my client was told by his son that no one wanted him and that they were all ‘acting like Annie was the one with the birthday and that no one loves me’ to quote Gus. In fact, I was present at Mr. Kinney’s home when Ms. Peterson called to ask if their son was there, and that was after my client had had him for over two hours. While my client understands that it would have been a good idea to inform either of the Plaintiffs that he was taking his son, his only concern at the time was making sure his son was okay.

“As for my client poisoning his son’s mind, nothing can be further from the truth. If anyone is guilty of trying to poison the child’s mind, it would be Ms. Marcus. I have spoken to the child, in the presence of both his father and Mr. Taylor, and was told that it was a common occurrence for Ms. Marcus to bad mouth my client in front of the child. I have also talked to others that have witnessed Ms. Marcus yelling about Mr. Kinney in front of his son, often using profanity to describe him. Studies have proven time and time again that that kind of negativity towards one parent is bound to affect the child. And from all of my research, things have only been getting worse since the birth of Ms. Marcus’s daughter, Annie Novatny. It appears that Mr. Kinney’s son is slowly, but surely, being pushed aside in favor of the new child.

“And I just want to state one more thing. While Mr. Kinney might have been wrong to take his son away from his home this past Saturday, there is no actual custody agreement in place and he does have a right to see his son. Ms. Marcus on the other hand removed the child from his father’s home when he was still an infant because she did not like the fact that Mr. Taylor had been left to baby-sit. While this might not seem like a major problem considering her relationship with the child’s biological mother, at the time, Ms. Marcus and Ms. Peterson were separated, thus Ms. Marcus had no legal rights to the child at the time and could have been charged with kidnapping. Something which Mr. Kinney refused to do, even though I told him otherwise.”

“Is that everything, Mr. Cavanaugh?”

“Yes your Honor. Thank you.”

“All right. I’ll take everything I’ve heard into consideration in my chambers. We’ll adjourn for thirty minutes and then I will make my decision.”

“All rise.”

Part 13

“Fuck Mark, I forgot how good you were in the courtroom,” Brian said after Judge Fox went to her chambers. Brian, Mark and Justin had left the courtroom also and were currently standing out in the hallway. “You had Mel’s buddy beat, hands down.”

“Yeah. And if his face was any indication, I bet he’s in the phone first thing during the break to those two. I have a feeling that Melanie and Lindsay left out a few things when discussing the case with him.”

“I just can’t believe that they didn’t even show up,” Justin said. “Considering their reactions when they found out about the lawsuit, I was sure that they would show up and plead their case.”

“Them not coming was definitely in our favor,” Mark told them. “Especially considering the short notice we had and the fact that both of you are here, despite your own schedules. It showed the judge what your priorities are and where you place Gus among those priorities. I think the judge will have no choice but to use that in her considerations.”

“So what do you think out chances are that the judge will grant the visitation request?” Brian asked, worry evident in his voice at the thought that he might not be able to see his son.

“I’d say that our chances are damn good that you’ll get at least one day a week, if not the whole weekend, which is what I was asking for as per your request, with Gus,” Mark assured Brian.

“Even after Brian told the judge about Brian’s tricking and the parties that he’s had at the loft?” Justin questioned. “I mean that can’t have gone over well with her.”

“And I’m sure it didn’t,” Mark admitted.

“No shit,” Brian muttered, earning himself a swat from his lover.

“But,” Mark broke in, “I think we countered that argument well with Brian’s admission that he hasn’t been with anyone but you for the past five months. It shows that he has changed his ways in regards to that aspect of his lifestyle.”

“Yea, you shit,” Justin turned to his lover, hitting him again in the stomach. “Let’s talk about that admission. Is what Mark told the judge true or just so much bullshit from you so that you can get Gus?”

“It’s not bullshit,” Brian mumbled. Justin just stared at the brunet for a minute, his mouth wide open. Even though he had heard Brian say it, he couldn’t believe it. And then it finally hit him what Brian was admitting.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me that you weren’t tricking? I mean, I thought we were fucking partners, at least that’s what you led me to believe.”

“We are partners,” Brian affirmed.

“Then when were you planning on telling me that you decided to stop fucking around,” Justin fought hard to keep his voice down. He didn’t want to cause a scene in the courthouse, afraid that it would get back to the judge and affect her ruling. “I mean, shit Brian, you know how much I’ve wanted to be the only one in your bed and you didn’t even have the decency to tell me.”

“I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know if I could do it,” Brian admitted. “I didn’t want to get your hopes up, because I know how much this means to you, only to have me fuck up like I usually do. I just wanted to make sure I could do this before telling you.” Justin looked over at Brian, trying to decide if he should be angry at Brian for not telling him about his no longer tricking or ecstatic over the fact that his lover wanted to do that for him. Finally he decided to not look a gift horse in the mouth and kissed his lover.

“You know Brian, if you aren’t careful, one of these days you might actually have me believing that you love me,” he teased his lover.

“Well, fuck, we can’t have that now can we.” The two men stood a moment, looking at each other before kissing lightly, mindful of where they were and the people around them. Mark cleared his throat, getting their attention. The two men pulled apart, but Mark smiled when he saw Brian take Justin’s hand.

“So, Mark, what happens now? I mean, where do we go from here?” Brian asked.

“Well, first off, we’ll see about getting a court date set with the judge for the actual custody hearing. In fact, she’ll probably say something about that today. And we’ll also have to arrange a visit from Child Welfare, which is SOP for all custody cases.”

“Great, just what we need,” Brian moaned. “Some bureaucrat deciding which place is better for Gus. He’ll probably be some kind of homophobe who would rather see a child in foster care than with a couple of fags.”

“Brian, not everyone is a homophobe,” Justin told his lover. “Even if it does seem like that sometimes. There are some good people working for the government.”

“Well, we won’t have to worry about that,” Mark assured his client. “I’ve already talked to Child Welfare. I’ve worked with them before with other cases and, if everything goes according to plan, you should have a visit scheduled next weekend with a case worker. And, because of the parties involved, I asked them to make sure that whoever they send out is open-minded when it comes to sexual orientation. Also, don’t be surprised if they decide to do a couple of surprise visits, especially if Melanie and Lindsay continue to say that your lifestyle is harmful to Gus. They’re going to want to make sure that those allegations are baseless.”

Mark looked down at his watch and noticed that it was almost time for the judge to come back and give her decision. “Well guys, it’s almost time. Are you ready?”

“As ready as we can be, I guess,” Brian replied.

“It’ll be okay, Bri,” Justin assured the older man.

“Remember, Brian, no matter what happens now, this is only the first step. We still have the actual custody case to get through.”

“Don’t fucking remind me.” The three men made their way back into the courtroom. The girl’s lawyer, Wilson, was already behind his table. Brian and Mark took their places again, with Justin right behind them.

“All rise,” the bailiff called again, as Judge Fox came back from her chambers.

“Please be seated,” she told everyone. “First off I want to say that this has been a difficult decision for me, because of the age of the child in question, as well as the reputation of Mr. Kinney and the allegations made towards Mr. Kinney by his son’s biological mother and her partner.” Brian groaned. By the way the judge was talking, Brian already had an idea that what he was about to hear wasn’t good news.

“But Mr. Kinney’s reputation is not what is on trial here today. In fact, I would have to say that both Mr. Kinney and his attorney have done a good and thorough job of proving that said reputation is based on the past and is not what is part of his current lifestyle. Mr. Kinney has also proven, by his presence here on such short notice, his sincerity in doing his best to see that his son is happy. On that note, I just have to say Mr. Wilson, that if I find out that your clients purposely failed to inform Mr. Cavanaugh and Mr. Kinney of this court date with the express purpose being their hope that they would not be able to appear, I will find them in contempt. I do not like being used. But that is not what is important right now.

“The case in front of us today is Ms. Peterson and Ms. Marcus request that Mr. Kinney be limited to a one hour supervised visit a week with their son Gus Kinney-Peterson. Mr. Kinney has requested unsupervised visitation at least one day a week if not the whole weekend. Based on the information I have been given, I am granting Mr. Kinney’s request. Mr. Kinney will arrange to pick up his son on Friday evening and drop him off Monday morning at his school.

“As to the custody hearing, I am scheduling that hearing for two months from now. That would make if November 28. Before that time, both parties can expect a visit from Child Welfare, who will report on the living conditions of both homes. I trust both parties will be prepared for a hearing at that time?”

“Yes your honor.”

“Of course, your honor.”

“In that case, this court is adjourned.”

Part 14

It turned out that Mark Cavanaugh’s assessment of how upset Melanie and Lindsay’s lawyer was with them over their failure to tell him about their actions towards Brian, let alone the reason Brian had taken Gus the previous weekend, was right on the money. While he didn’t call the women over the break of the court case, he made a beeline for Melanie’s office as soon as it was over, both to tell her what happened and to yell at her for not telling him everything that he needed to know. When he found out she wasn’t with a client, which is why she had said she couldn’t be at the hearing, he barged into her office without knocking and waiting to be announced.

“I see your very important meeting got canceled,” Wilson said as he shut the door behind him, not wanting the other attorneys in the office to overhear their conversation.

“What meeting?”

“You remember. The meeting with a client that was so important that there was no way you could cancel it in order to go to the hearing,” he reminded her. “The hearing that you insisted was so damn important that it had to be done as soon as possible.”

“Oh that meeting,” Melanie said, getting over her shock at Wilson’s outburst. “I had a message waiting when I came in. Turns out that the client had to reschedule for tomorrow.”

“And you didn’t think that maybe you should go to the courthouse and let the judge hear your side of the case,” Wilson stated what he thought should have been the obvious. “Let her hear from you the reasons why you don’t think Brian Kinney should be allowed access to his son?”

“Honestly no,” Melanie admitted. “I had complete faith in you and you abilities in a courtroom and, with the things we had told you about Brian, Lindsay and I knew that you would have no problem in getting the judge to agree with us.”

“Well she didn’t.” At that pronouncement, Melanie went pale.

“What did you say?”

“I said that the judge didn’t see things your way, and considering what I found out, I can understand why,” Wilson told her, his anger at Melanie’s lack of disclosure coming out. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me you took Gus away from Brian when he was still an infant and Lindsay had left him with Brian for the weekend?”

“I’m his mother,” Melanie argued. “I had every right to take Gus away from what I observed to be an unhealthy and dangerous situation.”

“You had no right to remove Gus from Me. Kinney’s home,” Wilson argued. “In fact, right no, you still have no right to do legally, but especially back then when you weren’t even with your partner. In a relationship I mean.”

“So?”

“So? That means that he could have charged you with kidnapping if he wanted, which his lawyer had told him is exactly what he should have done,” he told her coldly. “And he would have had a damn good case against you too.”

“I was only looking out for Gus and what was best for him and that’s to be as far away from his so-called father as possible,” Melanie defended, not liking the way her actions were being called into question. “And besides, that happened almost four years ago. What bearing does that have now?”

“About the same as Mr. Kinney’s promiscuity.”

“What?”

“Well, according to an affidavit which was entered into the court papers, Brian Kinney hasn’t had sex with anyone other than Justin Taylor for the past five months.” Mel couldn’t help herself. She snorted in disbelief.

“Bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit,” Wilson countered. “Brian gave an interesting little speech that had the judge very impressed with him.”

“What kind of speech because there is no way in hell that Brian Kinney would ever be faithful to one person, even if we are talking about Justin Taylor,” Melanie argued, barely containing the laughter that wanted to come out at the thought of Brian Kinney being monogamous.

“The kind of speech that basically said that because of his responsibilities, like Gus, he grew up and part of his growing up included realizing that he didn’t need anyone other than Justin,” Wilson continued. “He also impressed the judge because he admitted that he might screw up and trick, but as of now, he had no plans to do so.”

“Shit, Brian ‘Fuck anything with a dick’ Kinney monogamous. Hell must have truly frozen over.” Melanie was quiet for a few minutes and Wilson chose not to say anything, seeing that she was trying to process what he had just told her. After a few minutes had passed Melanie appeared to have finally digested what she had been told, although a large part of her didn’t believe it.

“What was the judge’s decision?” Melanie asked. “What did she say about the visitation?”

“Brian gets Gus every weekend, at least until the actual custody hearing, which is in two months,” Wilson rushed out when he noticed Melanie’s anger was about to surface again.

“Every weekend,” she said, loud enough that it made Wilson glad that he had already shut the door when he had come in. “That’s bullshit. There is no way in hell that I’m going to allow that asshole to have my son overnight every weekend.”

“Actually, it will be three nights,”” Wilson explained. “Judge Fox ordered that Brian pick up Gus Friday evenings from your home and then drop him off Monday morning at his school.”

“Fuck. How am I supposed to tell Lindsay that we have to let Brian have Gus every weekend?”

“I don’t know but you’ll have to think of something,” Wilson told her. “And then you will need to find yourself a damn good lawyer.”

“What do you mean find a good lawyer?” Melanie asked in confusion. “What about you? Why can’t you represent us?”

“I told you in the very beginning, in fact I stressed to both you and Lindsay, that the two of you had to be honest with me,” Wilson explained. “I told both of you that I needed to know everything there was that Brian and his lawyer could use again you. I told you on Monday when you came to me after being served that Mark Cavanaugh us one of the best family law attorneys in the city, if not the state. He had taken cases that no one wanted because there were considered un-winnable and he managed to do the impossible. And I have to tell you honestly, just with the information that I found out at the hearing, that this case is anything bit impossible to win for them.”

“So? What you’re telling me is you’re not going to take this case because of Brian’s lawyer?”

“No, that s not why I’m not willing to help you,” Wilson said. “I’m not willing to help you because I can’t trust you and Lindsay to tell me everything and I’m not willing to have as a client someone I can’t trust. If you want me to, I can give you the names of a couple of good family attorneys that might be able to help you, but I suggest you help yourself and tell whoever represents you everything you can.”

“And what are you going to tell the other partners about why you are no longer representing me?” Melanie asked. “It’s not going to look good that you suddenly decided that you didn’t want to represent me.”

“The other partners all no better than to ask me about this case, no matter the situation. And, on the extremely off chance that they even think about you finding another attorney, they all know my case load is heavy right now, so they’ll probably assume that I don’t have the time to take on another case, which is the truth. The only reason I had even told you I would help you was because you’re a co-worker. For what it’s worth, I do wish you luck. I’ve seen you and your partner with your son and you’re a great mom.

“Thanks. Now I just have to convince a judge of that.”

Later that day

Melanie took in the scene in front of her, quietly observing the scene before her. Lindsay was sitting on the floor, Annie in her lap, as she and Gus drew a picture. It was the first time since they had picked the little boy up from school on Monday that she had seen him with a smile on his face. In fact, he had taken to spending the time in his room, only coming out when he had to for dinner or school, and even then he didn’t say anything.

“Hey guys, looks like you two are having fun,” Melanie said, as she put down her briefcase and began to remove her coat. Her happiness at finally seeing Gus playing vanished at the same time the smile on his face did.

“Mommy, can I go play in my room now?”

“Sure you can honey,” Lindsay told him, not missing the tension that had suddenly appeared in the room at her wife’s arrival. Lindsay didn’t know what she could do about it either since she wasn’t sure of the cause. Sure, she had her suspicions, but the blonde woman didn’t like to think about them for fear of realizing that Brian’s accusations had merit. Lindsay watched in sadness as Gus ran around Melanie, who had leaned down to kiss him.

“Well, I see that Kinney still has our son brainwashed into thinking that I’m the biggest bitch around,” Mel stated without waiting to see if Gus was out of the room yet, but Lindsay saw him and the look on his face.

“Mel, please, don’t say stuff like that,” Lindsay begged her wife. “It’s one of the main reasons that Brian thinks we’re bad parents to Gus?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Keep your voice down,” Lindsay snapped, standing up, Annie still in her arms. Melanie reached for her daughter and Lindsay handed her over. “And what I mean is that you didn’t even wait until Gus was out of the room before you began bad-mouthing Brian. And this isn’t the first time either. I have to wonder what kind of effect it has had on Gus. You saw how he was when he realized you were in the room.”

“So now you’re saying that I have to watch what I say in my own fucking house because Brian Kinney might get offended,” Melanie sneered. “Just another way that that fucking asshole can control our lives. What’s next? Is he going to tell me when I can make love to my wife, or maybe he would just prefer it if I just disappeared from Gus’s life all together.”

“Mel, don’t be like that,” Lindsay pleaded. “You know Brian doesn’t think that it would be better if you disappeared.”

“Then why is he suing for custody of Gus?” Lindsay didn’t answer. Knowing that whatever she said, her wife would take it the wrong way. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Brian Kinney has finally done something that you can’t condone. Or is it that you don’t mind that Brian wants to be more of a father figure to Gus/ Maybe this way you and he can finally be that couple you’ve always dreamed about.”

“Christ Mel, not that again. You know this jealousy thing you have with Brian is getting really old. Especially because there’s no foundation for it. It’s completely irrational. I’m in love with you.”

“Irrational. You insisted the asshole be the father of our child, even after I told you how much I despised the idea.”

“Then why did you say yes to Brian being the father?”

“Because I loved the idea of you carrying our child more than I hated the fact that that asshole would be the father. And we all agreed that other than his sperm, he wasn’t going to have anything to do with Gus, but he still had to find a way to fuck up our lives.” By this point, Melanie’s voice was so loud that she was practically screaming. Annie could feel her mother’s anger and began to cry, which only upset Melanie more. She tried to quiet her daughter but she didn’t have any success. “Fuck, see how angry he makes me. I can’t even hold my own daughter without her getting upset.”

“And I suppose you’re going to try and blame that on Brian, too.”

“That asshole is the reason I’m upset in the first place,” Mel continued to try and quiet Annie, finally having some success. At the same time, Melanie also calmed herself down, not wanting to fight anymore, especially since she had yet to break the news to her wife that Brian had won temporary joint custody of Gus. When the blonde noticed that Mel seemed better, she breathed a sign of relief.

“Mel, trust me, I do understand why you’re upset,” Lindsay said. “All I was trying to say was that no matter how we feel about Brian, we have to think of Gus and what this is doing to him. We can’t let our anger over everything show through to him.”

“I know,” Mel sighed. “It’s just that when it comes to Brian Kinney, I act before I think.”

“Well, we’ll just have to make sure you don’t do that anymore.” Lindsay watched as Melanie began to squirm and look away from her. “Mel, what’s going on?”

“Linds, I was just trying to do what I thought was best for Gus,” Mel said without really answering the question. “I mean, I figured once a judge heard about Brian’s lifestyle, that this case would be thrown out.”

“Mel, what did you do?”

“I tried to get the judge to revoke Brian’s parental right.”

“Mel,” Lindsay groaned. “Christ, I don’t know what to say. I’m sure it didn’t go over well with Brian. What did the judge say?”

“The judge refused. Brian apparently convinced her that he was some kind of changed man. She couldn’t help the snort that escaped. “He even went so far as to produce some kind of affidavit that he hasn’t even tricked in the past five months. Can you believe that? I can’t wait to see that thing.”

“Wait a minute,” Lindsay interrupted, stuck on something her wife had said. “Why does it sound as if you weren’t even at the hearing?” Again Melanie couldn’t meet her eyes. “Oh no, Mel. Tell me you at least showed up for this thing.”

“I can’t, okay?” Mel shouted, the frustration she had been feeling since she had found out what had happened in court finally coming out. “I fucked up and now that asshole has custody of Gus from Friday night until Monday morning. Is that what you wanted to hear? Are you happy now?”

“Oh Mel,” Lindsay cried. “How could you? You know how much Brian loves Gus. You had to know that he would fight you. It’s why we never told him that he still had his rights, knowing that he would use that to see Gus more often.”

“I fucked up, okay? I fucked up and now Gus is going to have to pay by spending his weekend with his whore of a father and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Maybe if we talk to Justin, he can help us reason with Brian,” Lindsay suggested, knowing that the young man had a lot more influence over Brian that anyone else. “Granted, it’s a long shot but maybe if Debbie backs us up he’ll see that leaving Gus with us is the right thing for everyone.”

“He was in the fucking courtroom with Brian,” Melanie screamed, having sat Annie in her playpen. “Admit it Linds, Justin is with Brian in this, most likely because he thinks that Brian will let him be more than a fuck that stayed too long. I don’t even want that little prick in this house anymore if he’s going to stick up for Brian.”

“Mel,” Lindsay was shocked, “you don’t mean that. This is Justin you’re talking about. You know, our baby brother.”

“Brian Kinney’s whore,” Melanie spat, grabbing her coat.

“Where are you going?”

“I need to get out of here before either of us says something we’re going to regret,” Melanie explained. “And I need to get some fresh air and cool off.”

“Mel, please, we have to talk about this.”

“I’m all talked out.” Lindsay watched helpless as Melanie grabbed her coat and left the house. Tears streamed down the blonde woman’s face as she realized that, no matter what she might want, there was no way things were going to go back to normal anytime soon. Lindsay went into the kitchen to make dinner, the act of cooking always something that had calmed her down. She never noticed the little boy who sat at the top of the stairs, his face tear streaked after listening to his mother’s fight and who wondered if his family was okay.

Part 15

Michael stood at the back of the darkened classroom, listening as Ben discussed with his students what was being pictured on the screen. It was the first time he had seen his lover since the argument two days before. They were the unhappiest two days of Michael’s life. Even for those few weeks he had been away from Ben, back when they had been trying to protect Hunter; Michael hadn’t felt so alone, knowing that his lover was back in Pittsburgh, waiting for him. When the lights went up and the students made their way out of the room, Michael kept his place. Eventually the classroom was empty except for the two lovers. Ben stared up at Michael, having noticed him before the class had even let out. Silence stretched for minutes before Michael said something.

“You’re right, you know,” Michael said. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking the past couple of days and I shouldn’t treat Gus any differently now than before. He’s grown up knowing how much we all love him and it isn’t fair to him to watch us shower Annie with love and presents while we ignore him. I don’t think I can even imagine what he was thinking when we were all hanging all over Annie during his birthday party, but I can understand why he wanted to leave. I wouldn’t want to hang out where I wasn’t wanted.”

“And?”

“And, I guess we do treat Gus differently than Annie because he’s Brian’s son. I mean, yes I do love Annie more because she’s my daughter, just like I do know that Brian loves Gus more because he’s his son, but we shouldn’t treat them any differently. They’re brother and sister and it’s not the kids faults. As for why the others might be doing it, yeah I guess it does have a lot to do with the fact that Brian is Gus’s dad. Its no secret that most of us think that Brian is a total asshole, even if he is our friend, and we’ve never had a problem telling him what we think about him either, especially Mel. We’ve all heard her bad mouth him, and a lot of times she did it in front of Gus. I think we all have and I’m sure that’s probably affected the way he thinks we feel about him.”

“What are you trying to say, Michael?” Ben asked his lover, surprised to hear what he was saying.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that, while I might not agree with what Brian is doing, I can’t exactly say that I wouldn’t be doing the same thing if the positions were reversed,” Michael admitted.

“What made you change your mind?” Michael looked embarrassed as his eyes locked upon Ben’s.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think with you and Hunter out of the apartment and I realized that I over-reacted the other night when I packed your things. I didn’t really want you to move out, but I was just so angry and scared that I didn’t want to even think that you were right.”

“Scared? What were you scared of?” Ben asked, confused. He went over to his lover, taking Michael into his arms and leading him to one of the classroom chairs. The two men sat down, holding hands, not wanting to be apart from the other.

“I was afraid that what Brian was saying was true,” Michael explained. “And it got me thinking that if Mel and Linds could do that to Gus, who I know they love, because of who his father is then what might happen if they have a problem with me one day. Could they start treating Annie as if she’s a second class citizen? I don’t want that for my daughter.”

“That’s why you tried to defend the way they’re acting, isn’t it?” Michael nodded his head. Ben leaned over and hugged his lover. “Michael, I understand why you might be worried about what this could mean for Annie, but I’m glad to see you understand why Brian is doing what he’s doing. As hard as it is for any of us to admit, the way things stand now, Melanie and Lindsay aren’t the best parents for Gus. And while Brian may have a lot of faults, he does love his son and I truly think believe he wants what’s best for Gus.”

“Fuck, how did things get so screwed up?” Michael asked. “I mean, we all used to be so close. Nothing could break us apart, no matter what happened? Sure, we would argue and fight but it always blew over. We loved each other too much to truly stay angry with anyone. I just don’t see us surviving this. Not intact.” Ben didn’t have anything to say to that. He had always thought the closeness of their little group of friends was something that was enviable, something that not a lot of people had in their lives, but now it was the very closeness that was driving them apart.

“Michael, people change, move on. In fact, giving the different personalities of our little family, I’m surprised that you guys have remained as close as you have for so long,” Ben told his lover. “But what I find interesting is that, despite what you all say and know, it’s been Brian that’s been like the glue. He brought Lindsay into the group, which included Melanie. And we can’t forget about Justin. You brought in Ted. I’m not sure how Emmett joined in, but I’ll tell you right now, after that whole thing with Ted and the way he treated Em while he was on crystal, the only reason I think Emmett is still hanging with you is because of Brian. Brian and Justin have been the only ones who haven’t fully accepted Ted back into the group and I think a lot of that has to do with the way he treated Emmett. He and I have gotten to know each other a lot the past couple of days and I can tell you, he’s grateful to have those two as his friends because they’ve made sure that he’s still out there, living his life.”

“Is that where you’ve been staying?” Michael asked. “With Emmett?”

“Yes,” Ben answered. “He was with me when Hunter called and told me what was going on. He offered me a place to stay and I accepted. And before you ask, Hunter has been staying at Melissa’s. You know how much her parents love him and they were more than happy to let him use their guest room, although I’m not sure how much time he’s actually spending there.” Michael grinned at the thought of his adopted son and his girlfriend. They had all been surprised when Hunter had told them about Melissa, but when they saw that he was happy dating the young girl, they couldn’t begrudge him that. And surprisingly it was Emmett who got them to understand that what Hunter was going through, explaining that since Hunter had never been truly allowed to explore his sexuality, even though his living as a hustler might belie that assumption, it was only natural that he would so now. Thinking of Emmett had Michael depressed once more.

“I haven’t exactly been a good friend to Emmett either, have I?” Michael said sadly, realizing how much he had truly let down his friends. “I was just so happy to see Ted regain control of his life, even if that meant bringing Blake back into our lives again, that I didn’t even think about what Emmett was going through. Fuck, he must hate me now.”

“I’m pretty sure that Emmett will forgive you, if you make sure that you let him know that you do support him. Don’t throw Ted and Blake in his face. It’s not fair to him and you know that if the positions were reversed, he wouldn’t do the same thing.”

“I know,” Michael promised. “I’ll do whatever it takes. And if that means supporting Brian, than that’s what I’ll do.” Michael sniffed.

“Michael, you don’t have to support Brian to get Emmett back,” Ben said. “You don’t have to support Brian at all, unless you think it’s what’s right for Gus. That’s all any of us ask. Yes, it does appear that Emmett and I are supporting Brian, but that’s just because right now that’s what we believe is best for Gus. For that little boy to be with two people who will make him the number one priority in his life. Gus deserves that. All children do.” Michael leaned into Ben’s body, his lover’s arms wrapping around him easily.

“I love you, you know that right.” Ben just smiled down at Michael, leaning in and giving him a brief kiss.

“I know, baby. I know.”

Part 16

Brian and Justin sat in the jeep, looking over at the house in front of them. They were at Melanie and Lindsay’s to pick up Gus for his first weekend with his fathers and they were nervous about the reception that they would receive from the people within the house. They knew that the women would start in on them as soon as they opened the door; the messages left on their machines at home assured Brian and Justin of that. It was Gus’s reaction to everything that was going on that they were worried about. Neither man had any idea if the young boy even knew that they were coming over to pick him up for the weekend.

“You don’t think Mel was serious, do you?” Justin asked, looking between the house and his lover. “About not letting us take Gus for the weekend? She wouldn’t do that, would she?”

“I don’t think even Mel is that stupid,” Brian stated. “She’s a lawyer. She knows how it would look to the courts if she interfered with the temporary custody agreement, especially after basically being told that one of the reasons we have joint custody is because her and Linds couldn’t be bothered to show up in court.”

“I still can’t believe that they tried to take Gus away from you,” Justin said. “I mean, I knew they weren’t happy about you suing for custody, but I just figured that they would agree to talk to you about what was happening and maybe the two of you coming to the joint custody agreement, but to try and make it so that you couldn’t see Gus at all. That’s seriously fucked. That’s not just hurting you, it’s hurting Gus too. He loves you.”

“I thought we established that, when it comes to Gus and his happiness, the girls aren’t thinking all that clearly right now,” Brian said. “If they were, we wouldn’t have to be doing all this shit. I hate what this whole thing might do to Gus, especially as it gets closer to the hearing date. Shit, half his family isn’t talking to the other half and that includes the father of his little sister.”

“Fuck, I never thought about that,” Justin swore. “Mel and Linds had to be pissed when Michael told them he wasn’t going to take sides now. I wonder what this will do to his relationship with Annie.”

“Oh I’m sure they’ll make it a bitch for him to see Annie, but if they were smart, they won’t do anything too drastic. It would look bad for them.” Brian looked over at the house and took a deep breath. “Guess we should go and get this over with.”

“Yup.” Justin leaned over and kissed Brian, trying to pour all the love he felt for his lover into it. “Come on. The quicker we get this done, the quicker we can get back to the loft and start the weekend.”

“Right.” Brian opened the door and got out of the jeep, Justin doing the same on his side. The two met at the front of the sidewalk and made their way to the front door, which opened before they had even hit the porch, revealing a none too happy Melanie.

“So you finally found the balls to actually get out of your fuck mobile,” Melanie sneered, her eyes moving over both men. “I was beginning to think that maybe you thought we would actually bring Gus out to you.”

“Nice to see you to, Mel,” Brian quipped, standing in front of her, slightly in front of Justin, trying to deflect her anger from the younger man.

“Hi, Mel,” Justin greeted the brunette.

“Justin,” Melanie said, her tone becoming slightly less hostile. “I see you still haven’t come to your senses when it comes to siding with the asshole. Still thinks he walks on water, do you?”

“I just want to see Gus happy, Mel,” Justin defended his choice to support Brian. “And right now, I know he’s not. I think Brian and Gus spending time together will be good for him. You know how much Gus loves his father.”

“And yet another innocent person taken in by his bullshit,” Mel bitched.

“I am standing right here, you know,” Brian broke in. Mel returned her glare to him.

“I was trying to forget that,” she told him. Before anything else could be said, an excited voice came from inside the house.

“Daddy,” Gus screamed, running towards the open arms of his father, who scooped him up and planted a kiss on the little boy’s cheek.

“Hey Sonnyboy, ready to spend some time with me and your Daddy Justin?” Brian asked, enjoying the open affection of his son.

“Yeah,” Gus clapped his hands excitedly. Justin and Brian couldn’t help themselves and laughed at his antics.

“Linds, do you have his stuff ready?” Justin asked the blonde standing behind Mel. While Brian was busy whispering something in Gus’s ear that made the little boy laugh, Justin watched the emotions crossing Lindsay’s face, seeing both happiness at seeing her little boy and his father together, and sadness at something that he could only imagine, before she turned her attention to Justin.

“Umm, well Mel and I were talking and we thought it might be a good idea if we eased Gus into his weekends with Brian.” Her announcement brought Brian’s head up and he stared at her.

“What the fu..What do you mean, ease Gus into the weekends?” Brian demanded, making sure to amend his language since his son was in his arms. He knew Gus was accustomed to hearing his family swear, but he was getting to that age where he was repeating everything he heard and Brian didn’t want him to get into trouble for saying something he shouldn’t.

“What she means, asshole,” Melanie said, “is that maybe it would be best if maybe for the first couple of weeks, that we think it would be better if you only took Gus for a little while, bringing him back later tonight before he goes to sleep.”

“Then you can pick him up tomorrow for a couple of more hours,” Lindsay continued. “Then, if it looks like Gus is handling that okay, we can see about him spending the whole weekend with you.” Brian and Justin looked over at the women, shocked. They couldn’t believe what they were hearing. The two men shared a look, before Justin reached over and took Gus out of his father’s arms.

“Hey, little man, what say you and me go get you into your car seat while your daddy finishes talking to your moms, okay?”

“K,” Gus said, turning to his mothers. “Bye, Mommy. Bye Mama.”

“We’ll see you in a little bit, Gus,” Lindsay said, waving to her son. Brian watched his lover carry his son towards the jeep, not saying anything until he was sure they were out of listening distance.

“I don’t know what kind of fucking games you two are playing,” he said, turning to Melanie and Lindsay, “but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let you put Gus in the fucking middle of it.”

“You already put him in the middle when you decided you wanted to act like his fucking father,” Mel spat out.

“I am his fucking father,” Brian hissed, not wanting to shout and risk Gus hearing him. “And, just in case you forgot, the judge said that Gus stays with us for the weekend, so I ask again, do you have his things ready.”

“Brian, please,” Lindsay pleaded. “I know how you feel about Gus. I know you love him, but we’re just trying to do what’s best for everybody. Gus isn’t used to spending so much time away from home and we’d just like to ease him into this whole thing.”

“Linds, Gus has spent plenty of time at the loft, especially in the last year,” Brian reminded the women. “Fuck, where do you think he was the entire time you were in the hospital with Annie. He is used to it and he loves spending time with me and Justin so there is nothing to ease him into.”

“Brian,” Lindsay sighed. “Please, we’re just trying to do what’s best for everyone.”

“So am I,” Brian retorted. He looked back towards the jeep, seeing that Justin had Gus occupied, although he did catch a concerned glance his way. “Gus needs to know that he’s number one in someone’s life. He needs to know he’s loved and that’s what I’m concerned about right now.”

“He knows we love him,” Melanie said. “And we’re sorry that if we’re not giving him our undivided attention, but we do have another child to worry about also. Gus needs to learn that he has to share our attention and your taking him away from us isn’t going to help that.”

“I’m getting sick of your bullshit excuses,” Brian almost shouted. “I know you have to worry about Annie, and believe it or not Gus understands that too. He loves his little sister. What he hates is the fact that ever since you two brought her home, Gus has been pushed aside in favor of her. I’ve tried talking to you about what’s being going on and you’ve both been saying that you were going to take care of it. That things were going to get better and they haven’t. Gus is still on the outside looking in and I won’t fucking have it. Last weekend was the final straw. Unless the two of you get your fucking act together, I’m going to make damn sure that when we go in front of that judge in two months, I’m going to be the one that gets custody of Gus.”

“Fuck you, Brian,” Melanie shouted, Lindsay having to physically hold her back. I’ll see you in hell before you get custody of my son. Not as long as I have something to say about it.” Brian smile evilly as he leaned closer to the brunette woman.

“But you don’t have any say about it, Mel, because he isn’t your son.”

“Brian please,” Lindsay pleaded. “Just think about what you’re doing.”

“I have Linds and I’m doing what I have to so that my son doesn’t think that he isn’t loved,” Brian told her. “Maybe you need to start thinking about what that means before it’s too late.” Brian turned then, quickly making his way to the jeep and the two people that meant the most to him.

Part 17

The next few weeks passed with the once tight knit group further apart then they had ever been. Lindsay and Melanie refused to have anything to do with Emmett, Ben or Vic when it became apparent that they were going to support Brian in his quest for custody of Gus. Debbie had even made it so that the men were made aware of the fact that, unless they changed their minds, that they were no longer welcome to eat at the diner if she was working. Vic had officially moved in with Rodney, the two men finding a cute one bedroom apartment not far from Vic and Emmett’s business. Michael did what he could to show everyone that he was going to stay firmly in the middle of the group, not deciding one way or the other who he thought should have Gus. While Mel, Lindsay and Debbie, as well as Ted, did their best to make him see that the women were the best choice, Michael wouldn’t support them. The only reason that they didn’t pressure him more was because they knew that he was doing what he needed to keep his own little family of him, Ben and Hunter together.

Justin, having been fired from the diner, had begun to work longer hours at Kinnetic, and at his studio at school, finishing up the projects due before he graduated in December. In between his work at the advertising agency and his time at the studio, Justin also made sure he was available for most of the weekend, wanting to give Gus some more stability during the youngster’s time with Brian. Justin also was helping Brian get the loft ready for sale, the two men having found a house that they had agreed to purchase together, even if Brian was paying for most of it at the moment.

Brian and Mark met a couple more times, usually with Justin present; to discuss what was going on with the case. The three men had met with the girls and their new attorney to see if an agreement could be reached by all concerned, but that meeting had ended quickly when Melanie and Lindsay both stated that the only thing they would agree on would be allowing Brian to have one night a month with Gus. According to Lindsay, while she understood that Gus was feeling left out and wasn’t happy with the family situation at their house, she didn’t feel that things would get any better if he wasn’t living with them. If anything, she said, that would just alienate him even further from his mothers. Brian stated that, anything short of a continuation of the current custody order was out of the question, and the girls promptly left. Since then, he had heard that Melanie and Lindsay had begun fighting, although being very careful to put on a united front, about Mel’s treatment of Gus and her favoritism of Annie. It made Brian and Justin feel hopeful that maybe things would finally begin changing for the better.

Brian looked around his new home, taking in all the differences between that house that he and Justin would share, and the loft that had been Brian’s home for so long and wondered once more at the changes that his life had gone through in the years since he had met Justin. The fact that he met Justin on the same night his son was born had caused Brian to wonder at the kind of fate that would bring the two most important people in his life into said life in the same night. He would be the first to admit that, in regards to both Gus and Justin, Brian had fought admitting that he did love them. He didn’t want anyone thinking that the great Brian Kinney might actually have a heart. He had done his best to chase away the boy that insisted he was meant to be in his life, actually driving him away at one point, but in the end all Brian’s fighting his destiny did was bring him closer to the man he loved. And now he was the owner of an actually house. A house with a huge backyard, complete with swimming pool and a gym set that would make any kid happy. All he needed now was for his lover to return home so that they could christen a few more rooms in the house.

Thinking of Justin made Brian wonder if this weekend would finally be the one that saw Justin return to his side fulltime. Justin had said that one of the reasons he didn’t move back in with Brian was the fact that the loft held too many memories of all the times the blond had walked in on Brian with one of his tricks. He also said that, while he enjoyed spending time at the loft and did so often, the loft would always be Brian’s home and Justin was tired of living in someone else’s domain. When Brian pointed out that Justin currently inhabited Daphne’s apartment, Justin countered with the fact that, while small, the apartment he shared with his friend showed both personalities of the people that lived there. Brian had bought his home, and asked Justin to help him in furnishing and decorating it, in the hopes that it would give Justin that same sense of home that he seemed to have at Daphne’s.

A pair of arms wrapping their way around his waist brought Brian out of his musings. A pair of hands snaking their way down his chest brought out a moan. “If you stop there, you are going to be one sorry little boy,” Brian threatened when the same wanderings hands stopped at the top of his pants.

“Promise?” Brian turned, smacking Justin’s ass as he own arms circled his lover’s waist.

“Twat.”

“But you love me anyway,” Justin stated, sure of the brunet’s feelings for him. Instead of the silence that would have greeted that statement a few months ago, or the teasing from when they first met, Brian just smiled and kissed the blond in his arms. “Mmmmm, I’ve been looking forward to that all day.”

“Glad I could please you,” Brian smirked.

“Oh, you definitely know how to please me,” Justin smiled, leading Brian over to the couch. He pushed Brian onto the couch and straddled his lap. “And I think you’re going to please me right now.”

“Really?”

“MmmHmmm,” Justin moaned, grinding his ass over Brian’s hard on and kissing him hard. Then, just as the two men were beginning to lose themselves in their lust, the phone rang. Justin broke off the kiss, looking down at his lover. He knew that, no matter how lost in each other they were, Brian had the tendency of stopping if they were interrupted, and prepared himself for the break.

“Fuck,” Brian said, reaching over to get the phone. “What?” When nothing but silence greeted him Brian frowned in annoyance. He could hear someone crying and recognized the sound. “Gus? What’s wrong?”

“It’s dark,” came a small voice. Brian looked over at Justin, whose own face showed concern.

“I know its dark, Sonnyboy. It’s night time,” Brian said. “Why don’t you ask your mommies to turn on a light?”

“Not here. All alone.”

“What do you mean you’re all alone?” Brian nearly shouted, only keeping his voice down because he didn’t want to scare Gus anymore than the little boy obviously already was.

“Brian, what’s going on?” Justin asked.

“I don’t know,” Brian answered, pulling the phone away for a minute. “Gus says he’s all alone.”

“Where are Mel and Linds?” Justin asked, going with Brian as the brunet made his way to the front door, grabbing the keys to his jeep as he went.

“I don’t know,” Brian hissed, “but I’m going to kill them both if something happens to Gus. Do me a favor and call Mark and let him know what’s going on. Tell him we’re on our way over to the house now.” Justin nodded his head, taking his cell phone out of his backpack as Brian turned his attention back to his son.

“Daddy, I scared. I don’t like the dark.”

“I know, Sonnyboy, but Justin and I are on our way over,” Brian tried to reassure his son. “Gus, do you know where you mommies are?”

“Not here.”

“I know they’re not there, but do you know where they went?”

“Uh uh. I woke up and they gone,” Gus informed his father, causing Brian to swear under his breath, not wanting to upset Gus any more than necessary. In the background he could hear Justin talking to Mark and letting him know the situation. He was also telling the attorney that they were on their way over to the house to see what was going on.

“Daddy, why they leave me?” Gus’s little voice asked. “Not my fault I came home? I wasn’t bad, I promise.”

“I know you weren’t bad, Gus, and what do you mean it wasn’t your fault you came home?” Brian asked, confused. “Why would you think you coming home was a bad thing?”

“I supposed to play at Joey’s house but his sister got sick,” Gus explained. “Told momma that I was going to play in my room. Fell asleep and woke up and no one here. Daddy, why don’t mommy and momma love me anymore? Was I a bad boy? I promise to be good if they love me again.”

“Shit,” Brian cursed. “Gus, your mommies love you very much, even if it doesn’t look like it right now.”

“Why they leave me then?”

“I don’t know, Sonnyboy, but I promise you that I will find out.”

Earlier that afternoon

Melanie sat at the dining room table, surrounded by legal briefs and law books. A playpen nearby held Annie, who was taking her afternoon nap. While normally Melanie would have been at her office working, she had taken the day off wanting to spend some quality, quiet time with her daughter. She hoped that the day working at home would help relax her, something that she hadn’t been able to do since Gus’s birthday and Brian suing for custody of her son. Mel and Lindsay were constantly fighting over the case and how they thought it should be handled. Lindsay wanted to work out an agreement with Brian, where everyone would be able to spend time with Gus, even if that meant Gus continuing to spend the weekends at his father’s. The blonde woman had been impressed with the fact that Brian was so willing to change his lifestyle, including buying a new home, in order to give Gus the best living situation that he could. She saw it as Brian finally growing up into the man that she had thought he could be.

Melanie, on the other hand, didn’t think Brian was growing up at all. It didn’t matter what Brian did, she was positive that Brian’s only motivation was to make himself look good in front of the judge. She had no doubt at all that everything was a front and that he was just doing what he could to get between herself and Lindsay. In fact, she was waiting for Brian’s ultimatum that Lindsay choose between Gus and Mel. She conveniently forgot that Brian had given up his parental rights to Gus in the first place to get Mel and Lindsay back together. The way she figures it, any good will that Brian Kinney might have felt towards his son’s second mother disappeared around the same time that Annie was born.

Yes, Melanie was willing to admit, at least to herself and maybe her wife on a good day, that maybe she had been favoring her daughter a bit. Then again, she wondered, who could blame her for that. She certainly hadn’t been the only one. And she was the one that had had to take the last three months of her pregnancy off of work because of her health. She was the one who had been in labor for almost two days before the doctor’s finally decided to do a caesarian to ensure that both mother and daughter survived, even so Annie’s health had been touch and go. It wasn’t until almost a week had passed that the doctor had told them that everything would be okay and that the women could take the newest addition to their family home. It was only because they had all come so close to losing Annie that she, and Lindsay, wanted to make sure that they spent so much time with their daughter. It didn’t mean that they loved Gus any less.

The thought that Bran Kinney found her to be unfit to be Gus’s mother made her angry. What made her furious, though, was the fact that some of their friends seemed to be agreeing with him. Justin she could understand, even if she didn’t like it. The young man was so in love with Brian that he was more than willing to support the man in anything that he wanted to do. But the others that had thrown their support Brian’s way surprised her. Ben and Emmett had been sticking up for Brian since they had found out about his filing for custody, saying that they could see where the ad exec was coming from. Vic, the man that was like a father to everyone in their group, had even gotten into a fight with his sister, Debbie, when he told her that he thought that maybe Brian was right. That everyone was favoring Annie over Gus. Michael, for once, hadn’t automatically stuck up for his best friend, which had to be a first. But, Melanie couldn’t help remember, Michael didn’t come out and say he supported Lindsay and herself either. Instead, the store owner said he was going to stay in the middle. Ted and Debbie were the only ones that were behind Melanie and Lindsay’s bid to keep Gus for themselves and it hurt both women to know that their friends didn’t think they were good parents.

“Mama, I home,” came a shout from the front door. Melanie barely looked up as Gus came in the house. She wasn’t expecting him home and so had immersed herself in her work. “Joey’s sister got sick and I had to come home.”

“MmmmHmmm,” Melanie said, distracted, only half listening to her son. Gus could tell that his mother was paying attention to him and frowned. He didn’t know what he did to make his mama not love him anymore and he wished that she would pay attention to him instead of just work or play with Annie. He missed the stories she used to tell him and how she would sing to him when she was getting him ready for bed.

“Can I play in my room?”

“Sure, Gus, go ahead.” Gus waited to see if his mama would at least turn around and look at him but then, when she didn’t, he slowly made his way up to his room, a place he had been spending a lot of time in. Gus lay down on his bed, tears silently rolling down his face as he once again cried about the fact that his mothers had no time for him. Melanie and Lindsay had explained to him that he had to share them now with Annie, and he didn’t really have a problem with that. What he didn’t understand was why they didn’t ever seem to want to spend any time with him. Before he knew it, Gus cried himself to sleep.

An hour later Lindsay came home, excitedly greeting her wife with a kiss and picking up Annie and giving her the same. Melanie couldn’t help laughing, enjoying the sudden attention. The past few weeks had been tense between the two women and this was the most affection that she had gotten from her wife since Gus’s birthday.

“Wow, what’s all this about?” Melanie asked, curious as to Lindsay’s mood.

“I just made a huge sale and got a great commission for it,” Lindsay told her.

“What kind of commission?”

“The five figure kind,” Lindsay told her shocked wife. “I just sold seven different paintings to some out of town business executive. I couldn’t believe it and I couldn’t wait to get home to celebrate with you. I thought we could do something special.”

“Well, we both have the day off tomorrow for the holiday, we could always go out of town for the night,” Melanie suggested. “It’s been awhile since we’ve had some time to ourselves and it might do us some good to get away for the night.”

“Hmmm, I like that idea,” Lindsay said, kissing Melanie again. “But what about the kids?”

“Well, you know Mrs. Aberson next door loves watching Annie and Gus is staying at Joey’s tonight,” Melanie replied, forgetting that Gus was now upstairs in his room. Actually it wasn’t that Melanie had forgotten that Gus had come home, it was that between her trying to get some work done and her thinking about what was going on with the custody case, she simply hadn’t been paying attention to what was going on around her, but something in the back of her mind was telling her that she was forgetting something.

“Where do you want to go?” Lindsay asked.

“Someplace quiet, romantic and where the two of us can have some quality adult time,” Mel suggested, leering at her wife. Lindsay leaned over and kissed Melanie once more.

“Sounds perfect. Why don’t you call Mrs. Aberson and see if they’re willing to take Annie while I go upstairs to change and start packing.” Melanie nodded her agreement and Lindsay turned to go upstairs. As Lindsay passed by Gus’s bedroom door, she noticed that it was closed. She paused wondering why, since usually unless Gus was home they left the door open. She reached to open it, but before she could, Melanie came up behind her.

“They said they would love to keep Annie for the night,” she told the blonde. “So all we have to do is pack up some of her things as well as our own and then we can drop her off and be on our way.”

“Then let’s get started,” Lindsay replied, moving towards their bedroom. She stopped when she realized that Melanie wasn’t following her. “Hun, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I just got the sudden feeling that I was forgetting something.”

“What?”

“I’m…I’m not really sure. All I know is that it’s something important,” Melanie looked over at Gus’s door a minute, lost in thought, trying to remember whatever it was that she needed to before shrugging and joining Lindsay. “Oh well, I’m sure if it’s really important I’ll remember it,”

The two woman went about packing what they figured they would need for a nice, romantic getaway, both hoping that the time alone together would help get them back on track. While Lindsay put their things in a suitcase, Melanie was busy packing up a bag to take over to their neighbors with the things that were needed to take case of Annie. She was grateful that they didn’t need to bother with the portable crib since the Abersons often took care of their young grandchildren and had one already. It took them a little under an hour to have everything ready. Melanie had already dropped Annie off at their neighbors and Lindsay had their bags in the car. They had decided to go to Hershey and treat themselves to a night and day at the spa at the Hershey Hotel. Lindsay had already called and made the arrangements.

“Ready to go?” The blonde asked as Melanie got into the car.

“Yes. I just wish I could think of what it was that I’m forgetting,” Melanie answered.

“It’ll come to you,” Lindsay assured her. “Trust me.”

“Always.”

Present Time

Brian and Justin made the best time they could to Lindsay and Melanie’s and yet the police were still there waiting for them. Justin had told Brian that Mark was going to call them, as well as the social worker in charge of the case, that way there would be some official proof of what was going on. Brian pulled into the driveway and a police officer made her way over to his jeep.

“I’m Officer Jenson, can I help you?” The woman asked.

“My name is Brian Kinney. My attorney is the one who called you guys about my son being in the house by himself. He lives here with his mother.”

“How do you know that he’s inside? We can’t hear anything.”

“He called me,” Brian said, holding out his cell phone, where he still had Gus talking. “My partner and I taught him how to do it in case he ever wanted to talk to either of us. He’s still on the line.” Brian put his attention back to the phone.

“Gus, Sonnyboy, where are you right now?”

“In Mommy’s room. Daddy, where are you?”

“Justin and I are right outside. Can you make your way downstairs?”

“Uh huh.”

“Okay, can you do that now?”

“Kay.” Brian listened until he heard Gus put down the phone, without hanging it up. He and Justin, as well as the two police officers made their way over to the front porch. They could hear Gus coming down the stairs.

“Gus, are you okay?” Justin called out to the young boy, wanting to make sure that he knew they were there.

“I okay,” came the small reply.

“Sir, do you have a key to the home?” The officer asked. Both Brian and Justin shook their heads no. “Do you know who might have one?” Again two headshakes were the answer.

“Damn, looks like we might have to break in,” Jenson’s partner, who had introduced himself as Kendall, stated.

“Excuse, but what’s going on?” Someone asked from behind the group. The group turned around and Brian recognized the older man as Lindsay and Melanie’s neighbor, although he couldn’t remember the man’s name.

“You’re Mr. Aberson, right?” Justin asked. Brian smiled. HE should have known his partner would remember something like the name of Lindsay’s next door neighbor.

“Yes. And you’re Justin and Brian, correct.” Mr. Aberson said. He took in the scene in front of him, especially the police presence. Lindsay and Melanie had told him and his wife how they were fighting for custody of Gus and he was wondering what was going on that would require the police to show up. “What’s going on? Is there a problem?”

“Do you know where the residents of the home are?” Officer Jenson asked. “Or how to contact them?”

“The girls went away for the night. I’m not sure where they were going. My wife probably does though. I wasn’t home when they dropped off their daughter for us to watch.” The older man explained.

“Wait a minute,” Brian exploded. “They made sure that Annie was taken care of but they didn’t think of maybe doing the same for Gus. Fuck.”

“Gus?” Mr. Aberson asked. “What about Gus? Has something happened to him?”

“Daddy, what’s going on? Why you still outside?”

“Oh dear God,” Mr. Aberson exclaimed. “Don’t tell me that little boy is inside.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Officer Jenson explained. “You wouldn’t happen to have a key to the house, would you?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Melanie gave it to me and my wife in case we ever needed to get anything while we were watching Annie. Let me go and get it.”

“And yet they won’t even give you a key,” Justin murmured.

“That’s not important right now,” Brian admonished his lover. “What’s important is making sure Gus is okay and seeing that something like this never happens again. If that means we have to go through the munchers’ neighbors then I really don’t give a fuck.”

Brian and Justin waited with the two officers for Mr. Aberson to come back. The entire time both men made sure to keep talking to Gus so that the young boy would get any more scared than he already was. Just as he returned with the keys, two cars pulled up, one carrying Mark and the other the social worker that was dealing with the custody case, Dana Parker.

“Brian, what’s going on?” Mark asked as he joined the others already on the porch. “Where’s Gus?”

“He’s still in the house,” Brian told his attorney. “We were waiting for Mr. Aberson to bring over the key he had for the front door. He’s the girls’ neighbor.” He turned to the older man. “Can we please have the key? I want to get my son.”

Aberson handed over the key to the officer, who promptly opened the front door. No sooner was the door open than Brian was through it, picking Gus up in his arms and holding him tight. Justin joined his lover in holding onto Gus, wrapping his arms around both Gus and Brian.

“Its okay, Gus, I’m here,” Brian reassured his son. “Justin and I are here now. Everything will be okay.”

“I was so scared, Daddy,” Gus said, his voice trembling, but he knew he was safe now that his daddy was here. He always felt safe in his daddy’s arms. His Daddy Justin said that he felt the same way when he was being held by Brian.

“I know you were, Sonnyboy,” Brian rubbed his hand up and down Gus’s back. “But you don’t have to be scared anymore. We’re here now and you’re not alone anymore.”

“I go with you and Daddy Justin now,” Gus wanted to know, resting his head on Brian’s shoulder. Brian shared a look with his lover.

“Yes, Gus, you’re coming with me and Justin. You can finally see the new house,” Brian told the toddler. Brian turned to the social worker. “That’s not going to be a problem is it?”

Dana Parker didn’t mistake the hostility in Brian’s voice for anything other than the challenge that it was. A challenge that she had no intention of taking up. “Normally Social Services would take the child into custody and place him in a temporary foster home. But,” Dana held up her hand, stopping Brian from commenting, “this is anything other than normal. I think the fact that you have joint custody already, and are suing for full custody, is good enough to allow you to take Gus tonight. I can tell you now that an emergency custody order will have to be issued tomorrow so that Ms. Peterson and Ms. Marcus can’t accuse you of kidnapping Gus.”

“I don’t want him left alone with them,” Brian told the woman. “Before it was just little things that showed to me that they weren’t doing their best for my son, but this is an entirely different story. Anything could have happened to Gus while they were away.”

“I understand and, while I can’t speak for what the judge might decide, I can tell you that I am going to recommend that you gain full custody of your son,” Dana assured a relieved Brian. She looked over at the family of men, holding onto each other. “Right now I would suggest you get that little boy home and make sure he understands that you love him and will always be there for him. He’s going to need it after this. I’m sure he thinks it was his fault his mothers left him alone.”

“Fucking cunts,” Brian swore, one of the only times he did in front of Gus since his son had started talking. “So help me, when I see them its not going to be pretty. And it’s going to be a cold day in hell before I let them hurt my son again. Ni child deserves to think his parents don’t want them.” “Good luck,” Dana said, taking her leave. The two police officers, as well as Mr. Aberson, had already left once they knew everything was under control.

“Brian, I know you just moved into your house today, and I’m sure that you’ve got a lot of unpacking to do, but are you going to be okay having Gus this soon?”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine. Gus’s room already has a bed and some other furniture,” he assured the attorney. I’m just going to go up to his room and pack some of his stuff.”

“Here, give me Gus,” Justin said, taking the little boy into his arms. Gus went reluctantly, afraid that his father was going to leave him too, but once he realized that it was only Justin taking him, he went willingly. “Hey, little man, how about you and I go get something to drink while your daddy gets your things together?”

“Want to come upstairs with me while I pack?” Brian asked Mark, not turning to face the attorney. He just began that walk up the stairs sure that his old friend would be right behind him. “Make sure I don’t take anything I shouldn’t?”

“Somehow I don’t see you really wanting to take anything from here,” Mark quipped, taking in the home of his old crush.

“So, after this, what’s our next step? What do I have to do to make sure something like this never happens again?”

“Well, like Dana said, I’m going to file for an emergency custody hearing tomorrow,” Mark explained. “I don’t see that as being a problem. Especially with what happened tonight. I have copies of the police report and Dana said she’ll give me a copy of her own report when she’s done with it in the morning. That should go a long way in proving that, at least for right now, it would be in Gus’s best interests to live with you full time.”

“What about visitation with Mel and Lindsay?”

“I don’t know,” Mark admitted.

“I don’t want Mel left alone with Gus.” Brian held up a hand when it looked like Mark was going to interrupt. “From what Gus said, Lindsay wasn’t home when Gus got here so it’s entirely possible that she didn’t know he was here. It was Mel that is responsible for what happened. She’s the one who forgot that my son was in his room. There is no way in hell I want that bitch near my son again.”

“That might not be a possibility,” Mark told Brian. “Because Melanie is Lindsay’s partner, and Gus’s other mother for the first four years of his life, the judge might not be willing to order her to keep away from Gus.”

“I fucking know that. But I don’t want her left alone with Gus,” Brian adamantly repeated as he grabbed Gus’s backpack and began to put some of his son’s clothes in it from a basket nearby. “I don’t want to get another call like the one I did tonight. Shit, Mark, my heart was pounding through my fucking chest when Gus called. I couldn’t get here fast enough. He should have never been left alone.”

“I’ll do my best to make sure he’s safe. You just make sure that you make that little boy know how much you love him.” Brian turned to his lawyer, zipping the backpack.

“Trust me, that won’t be a problem. Like I said before, I don’t want my son growing up the way I did, and if that means I have to become a full time dad, I will.” Brian led Mark out of Gus’s bedroom and they made their way downstairs. Just as they reached the lower landing, the front door flew open and a panicked Lindsay and Melanie flew threw the door.

“Gus, Gus,” the both screamed stopping short when they saw Brian and Mark in front of them. Then their attention was drawn to the side when Justin came out of the kitchen, Gus still in his arms. Both women rushed to their son, who cringed and burrowed his head into Justin’s neck.

“No,” the little boy shouted, refusing to be taken from his second father. Lindsay again reached for him, but Gus refused to let go of Justin.

“Gus.”

“Leave me alone,” the little boy ordered.

“Sweetie, I’m so sorry,” Melanie said, her heart breaking at the scene in front of her. She couldn’t believe that she hadn’t remembered that Gus had come home. Her mind had been on so many other things that it hadn’t registered. Then, when Lindsay agreed to go away for the night, it completely slipped her mind. It wasn’t until they were well on their way on the turnpike that she had remembered that Gus had come home. The two women had immediately turned around at the next exit and come home.

“Justin, why don’t you take Gus out to the jeep,” Brian suggested, handing his lover Gus’s backpack.

“You’re not taking Gus anywhere,” Mel said, her anger at herself finding an outlet in Brian. While she was grateful that Gus was okay, she was upset to see that it was his father that made him feel safe.

“Justin.” The blond nodded, stopping by Brian so that his lover could give Gus a kiss. “Be out in a minute, Sonnyboy.”

“Kay.” Brian waited until Justin and Gus were outside, the door shut behind them. He turned to Lindsay and Melanie, angrier with them than he had ever felt towards anyone before and he was grateful that Mark was still there to stop him from doing anything that he might regret.

“Brian,” Lindsay began, “you have to know that we would never do anything to hurt Gus.”

“Linds, there was a time when I would have known that,” Brian said, “but not anymore. Fuck, when I picked up that phone and heard Gus crying into it. Shit, Mel, where the fuck was your head that you forgot my son was even home. You fucking left him alone while the two of you decided to go away for the night.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Melanie defended her actions, although she knew that there really wasn’t any defense she could make that would help her. She had screwed up and badly. She just hoped that, in the long run, it wouldn’t affect Lindsay’s and her’s chances of keeping Gus. “It was just when he came home; I was so absorbed in my work and thinking of some other things that it didn’t register in my mind that I had heard him. Don’t tell me you don’t ignore him when he’s over your house.”

“Actually, I don’t,” Brian smugly informed her. “Unlike you two, I put Gus first, so that when he’s with me and awake, he’s what I pay attention too. And now I’m going to take my son home and make sure he knows that he’s not alone.”

“When will you bring him home?” Lindsay asked, knowing that it would be better for all concerned if Gus went with his father that night. She already knew that she and Melanie would probably end up fighting for most of the night. It would be a contrast to how they spent the drive back, which had been in silence, both women concerned with their son.

“I’m not,” Brian told them, heading towards the door, Mark in tow.

“Brian, we have custody of Gus during the week,” Melanie reminded him. “We don’t even have to let you take him now if we don’t want. We could have you arrested for custodial interference.”

“Call the fucking cops, Mel. I’m sure they would love to have a little talk with you and Linds. I think they mentioned something along the lines of child endangerment, but I could be wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Lindsay asked, scared. She had a really bad feeling about what Brian was saying and she wasn’t sure if she wanted clarification.

“It means that, until an emergency custody hearing can be held, which could be as soon as tomorrow, Brian has sole custody of Gus,” Mark informed the shocked women.

“No,” Lindsay denied, sitting heavily on one of the steps.

“You’re lying,” Melanie said.

“It was either Brian or foster case, and everyone agreed that Gus going home with Brian was a better choice,” Mark explained. “Especially considering the fact that he has partial custody now. You’ll be contacted about the hearing.” Mark turned to Brian. “I’ll give you a call tomorrow and let you know what’s going on.”

Brian watched Mark leave and turned once more to Melanie and Lindsay. “Just so you know, I honestly didn’t want it to come to this. I figured that once the way you were treating Gus was brought to you attention, you two would do something about it, instead this happens. Lindsay, you’re Gus’s mother and I know you love him. I won’t stop you from seeing him but know this. There is no way in hell I want him to ever be left alone with Melanie. Never.”

“I’m his fucking mother,” Melanie shouted. “You can’t fucking tell me when or if I can see my kid, you bastard.”

“Actually I can because Gus isn’t your kid. He’s mine and I’m going to do everything I can to make sure you don’t fucking hurt him again.” With that said, Brian left, slamming the door behind him.

Part 18

Five weeks had past since the incident where Gus had been left home alone and, because of what had happened to the young boy, a judge had given temporary custody of Gus to Brian. Melanie and Lindsay were given visitation, but it had to be supervised, although not with a social worker. As long as there was someone else present, whether it be Brian, Justin or one of their friends, the girls could see Gus when they liked. They were just grateful that Judge Fox was out of town when everything had happened or else, they were afraid, they might not have any chance to get Gus back. Everyone involved knew that the presiding judge at the time hadn’t wanted to step on Judge Fox’s toes by taking over Gus’s case completely so had ordered that the custody would only be temporary until the permanent hearing was held. The girls took advantage of the time without Gus to try and begin to figure out what had gone wrong. They had even begun to go to therapy, hoping that it would help them understand why they were treating Gus the way their were, and Melanie even went to an extra session every week to work past her feelings towards Brian, finally acknowledging that it was having an adverse affect on her son.

As people began to find out what had happened that night at Gus’s, and considering the group of friends involved there was no way of keeping it quiet, they began to admit that maybe Brian was right. That maybe he wasn’t just trying to screw over Melanie and Lindsay that he had a reason to be concerned about the way his son was being raised. Debbie and Ted, while still supporting the girls, stopped treating the others as if they didn’t exist. Debbie had even offered Justin his job back at the diner, which he politely told her he didn’t want. With Ted finally acknowledging that Brian was right about how they were treating Gus, the hostile atmosphere between he and Brian at work, while not disappearing, shrank considerably and the rest of the staff breathed a little easier.

As for the little boy that all the drama circled around, Gus was happy. While he would still have his moments of quiet, when he was usually thinking of why his mommies didn’t love him, he loved living with his father at Daddy Justin. Brian had installed a gym set in the backyard and Gus could often be found playing there, with Justin on the deck sketching something while Brian would alternate between a book and watching his two favorite boys. Gus had even made friends with a couple of the neighborhood kids, whose parents loved having Gus over to visit, often volunteering to keep Gus while Brian and Justin were at work. Brian sometimes took the women, and one house husband, up on their offers, but quite often he would bring Gus into the offices of Kinnetic Inc., letting the little boy go with Justin to the art department where he could spend hours drawing at the little desk that they had set up there for him. On the days when Gus was present, Brian discovered that most of his employees would find one reason or another for going to the art department. It turned out that the little boy had twisted all of them around his little fingers and he often when home with some kind of treat given to him.

At home, Brian and Justin would spend their evenings playing with Gus, or reading to him, anything that would make up for the time where he had been ignored by his mothers. They still went out to Woody’s or Babylon, but now instead of going out four or five times a week, it was usually only once or twice. On those nights, they let Debbie watch the little boy, knowing that she would let Melanie and Lindsay join her so that they could spend some extra time with their son. Brian didn’t mind the visits, understanding that the girls needed to see Gus as much as he needed to see them, as long as Debbie was always somewhere in the house. He was especially grateful that for those nights, the girls left Annie with their neighbors, wanting to make sure that they could give their undivided attention to Gus.

And now it was finally time. Brian, Mark and Justin were waiting outside the courtroom doors. They had just seen Melanie and Lindsay go inside, along with their new lawyer, Steven Anderson. The rest of their friends had arrived a little earlier and were already seated inside, waiting for the trial to start. The tension surrounding everyone was palpable and Brian was grateful that Cynthia had agreed to take the day off and watch Gus for them. She currently had him across the street in the park, knowing that there was a good chance that the judge would want to talk to Gus at some point during the day.

“God, I can’t believe how fucking nervous I am,” Justin said, smiling a little when he felt Brian’s arm fall across his shoulder. He wrapped his own arm around Brian’s waist. “I’m not even involved in this and I can feel my heart pounding.”

“Just imagine what it will be like while we’re waiting for the judge to make her decision,” Brian commented.

“Fuck,” Justin moaned, burying his head into Brian’s chest.

“Later,” Brian promised, before turning his attention to his lawyer. “Mark, tell me the truth, no bullshitting around, what are the chances that I’ll get custody of Gus?”

“Brian, I told you, it depends on a lot of things. You past history, especially the drugs and tricking. Mel and Lindsay past, who luckily for us hasn’t been exactly clean either. The judge’s mood. What Gus and Social Services says. There are too many variables for me to say one way or the other what will happen. The fact that, as far as I know, you’ve been completely honest with me about your life, even the ugly parts.”

“And there have definitely been a lot of those,” Justin muttered.

“True,” Mark agreed. “Somehow though, if past history is anything to go by, I have a feeling that Melanie and Lindsay have probably left a few things out when discussing things with their attorney. That could work in our favor if they’re unprepared for my questions. Throw them off-guard, which is something that I want.

“I’ve also got a copy of the report that Social Services is entering and it is in our favor. They say that the home environment that you two have created for Gus is a good one. They even mention that you’ve been allowing Gus to see his mothers on days other than their normal visitation ones.”

“When he goes to Debbie’s,” Brian explained. “I know the girls go over there those nights and I don’t want to deprive Gus of them. It’s not fair to him.”

“I understand and I also have to say that it looks good for our case,” Mark told him. “Your willingness to allow that to happen, even though you don’t have to, shows that you truly do want what’s best for Gus. That you aren’t doing this for some selfish reason, which is what their attorney is going to try and convince the judge of.”

“I still can’t believe that it’s come down to this,” Justin said.

“I know,” Brian agreed. “When this whole thing started, all I wanted was for Lindsay and Melanie to agree that something was wrong and work on some kind of compromise.”

“At least they’re going to counseling now,” Justin continued. “That’s got to count for something. Prove that they do care for Gus. That they’re willing to do what they need to make sure that what happened before doesn’t happen again.”

“Brian, it looks like the judge is about to start,” Emmett said, sticking his head out of the courtroom door. All three men nodded their head and Emmett went back inside. Brian took a deep breath, trying to calm the sudden tension that he felt.

“No turning back now,” Brian said. “Hopefully at the end of the day I’ll be a full-time father.”

“You already are a full-time father,” Justin told him. “And a damn good one. Gus is lucky to have a dad like you. Not every kid has a dad who will go against everything he believes in himself just to make sure that their child is happy, and that’s exactly what you did. When we met, you always told me that you didn’t plan on being a father to Gus. In fact, you told me that Melanie was going to be the masculine influence in Gus’s life.” Brian laughed at the reminder of his and Justin’s first shower together. “You said that you didn’t know how to be a father, or at least not one like your father, but still, when push came to shove, you were always there for that little boy. When Gus needed you, you stepped up to the plate and you were there for him. And, while you may not be perfect,” Brian snorted, “you love that kid and there is nothing that you won’t do for him and that’s what makes you his dad and I couldn’t be prouder of you for that.”

Brian didn’t know what to say to that so he did what came naturally for him. He pulled Justin to him and kissed him hard, letting his lover feel the emotions going through him. They stayed like that for a few minutes, alternately kissing and holding each other until Mark finally cleared his voice.

“I think it would be a good idea for us to get inside,” the attorney told them. He didn’t say anything about the display that they had just given him, although he loved what Justin had just done. He could see the tension that Brian was feeling was almost completely gone and Mark knew that it was due to what Justin had said. He was glad that his old friend had finally found someone to love. Mark had always wondered if Brian would spend the rest of his life fucking and sucking his way through life, only allowing himself to trick instead of letting himself open up enough to allow someone into his heart. He was happy that Justin had broken his way past the walls around Brian’s heart and that he supported his lover.

“Ready?” Brian asked Justin, their heads leaning against each other. He felt Justin nod and then straightened up. He faced Mark. “Let’s go do this.”

Part 19

“Court is now in session. All rise for the Honorable Patricia Fox.

“Be seated.” The Judge shuffled through the file on her desk. “Ms. Peterson and Ms. Marcus, I see you have retained new counsel.”

“Steven Anderson, your Honor.”

“Mr. Anderson, Mr. Cavanaugh, I presume you both are ready to present your cases.”

“I am, your Honor.”

“Yes, you Honor.”

“Then, Mr. Cavanaugh, you have the floor.”

“Your Honor, it is my client’s intention to prove that his son’s living situation with his mothers is unacceptable. That they have proven over the past year, time and time again, that they have little to no regard to how they have treated the minor child, Gus Peterson-Kinney. So little regard that a month ago, they went away for an overnight trip and left the child at home, alone. If it wasn’t for the fact my client had taught Gus how to call him, there is no telling what might have happened to him. Since that night, Gus has been living with Mr. Kinney and his partner, Justin Taylor and has seemed to flourish. What my client is looking for now is a permanent custody order in his favor. He knows that his lifestyle might be unconventional and admits to having a questionable past, but he is willing to do what he has to in order to make his son happy. To do what is best for Gus and that is something his mother hasn’t been able to do lately.”

“Mr. Anderson, would you like to say a few opening remarks?”

“Thank you, you Honor. First, I just want to say that my clients are extremely sorry for what happened a month ago. They will be the first ones to admit there was no excuse for leaving Gus at home while they went away. But, they also want to say that, because of that incident that they have admitted that they need help in understanding what is going on and are taking steps to fix things. In that respect, they believe that one of the best ways to fix those things is by bringing Gus home and allowing their family to heal. They love their son and never had any intention of harming him. They also believe that Mr. Kinney’s lifestyle is not one that will be a healthy environment for Gus. My clients feel that Mr. Kinney’s history of drug abuse and promiscuous sex will be detrimental to Gus. It is our intention to show you that, no matter how much Mr. Kinney may try and make you believe that he has changed, the fact remains that he hasn’t.”

“Thank you Mr. Anderson. Mr. Cavanaugh, you can call your first witness.”

“I would like to call Brian Kinney.” Brian walked up to the stand, where he was sworn in. “Mr. Kinney, I want you to tell the court, in your own words, why you think it would be in your son’s best interest for you to have full custody of him.”

“When Lindsay had first come to me and ask me to donate sperm so that she and her partner, Melanie Marcus, could have a child, it was on the condition that I wouldn’t have any responsibility towards that child. Melanie and Lindsay would be the ones raising him. Even after Gus was born, I was prepared to sign over my parental rights to Gus because I knew that they would be the best parents that little boy could ask for and my lifestyle wasn’t exactly conducive to having a son.”

“But you didn’t sign over your rights at that point?”

“No. When I went over to their house to sign the papers, they had Gus sitting on top of the table and, I looked over at him and, I can’t describe it. There was just something. I couldn’t do it. I told them that I changed my mind and that I wanted to try and be a father to Gus. I still let them be the primary parents. I wasn’t prepared to change my life at the time and he was better off with them. Then Melanie decided that she wanted to have a child. They asked me to be the father again, even after all the hassle of before, but because Melanie was going to be the one carrying the child this time, I told them no. They chose my friend Michael Novatny to father the child, Annie. They swore that they wouldn’t favor one child over the other, but ever since Annie was born, I’ve had to watch as Gus got pushed further and further aside until it got to the point that they actually forgot about him one night and left him alone.”

“We’ll get to that later. Why didn’t you want to be the father of Melanie’s child?”

“Melanie and I have never gotten along. She doesn’t approve of my lifestyle or my relationship with Lindsay. She hates the fact that Lindsay and I have slept together, even though it was back when we were in college and before they had even met. I think it also has something to do with the fact that Melanie and I have more in common than she wants to admit.”

“Like what?”

“We’re both strong-willed. We want to be in control. We both love Lindsay, although in different ways. We both love Gus. We both have questionable things in our past. We both fought our way up the ladder to reach the top of our chosen fields. But most importantly, Lindsay loves both of us.”

“Why would that bother Ms. Marcus?”

“Because Lindsay has had to choose between us quite a few times, more often than not because Melanie has made her do so. And on quite a few of those occasions, Lindsay has decided in my favor.”

“Can you give the court an example?”

“About a week or so after Gus was born, I received an invitation for his bris. Melanie’s Jewish. There was some Hebrew written on the bottom, but I didn’t pay any attention to it. I just figured that it was some kind of blessing. Then my friend Michael called me and told me that what it actually was saying.”

“What?”

“It was a mention about circumcising Gus.”

“And you had a problem with that?”

“Of course I had a problem with that. They wanted to cut off part of my son and they had never bothered asking me about it. And I knew that it was Melanie’s idea. Neither Lindsay nor I are Jewish. We’re barely religious. I went over to their house and stopped it. Melanie was not happy about that. And she got even angrier when Lindsay ended up siding with me.”

“So Gus wasn’t circumcised?”

“No?”

“Is that the only time when Lindsay has seemed to side with you against her partner?”

“That was the only time she did so directly. There have been other times where her decision to, while not directly support me, but not denounce me have caused problems.”

“Can you give an example?”

“The fact that I would sign over my parental rights is a major one. Melanie was furious but Lindsay didn’t really get that angry over it, but I knew they fought about it. I know it was one of the reasons they had broken up a few months after Gus had been born. Or at least, that’s what they told people. It was often stated that I was the cause for any problems in their relationship, even when I had nothing to do with them.”

“You already stated that Ms. Marcus does not approve of your place in Lindsay and Gus’s life. Has she ever done or said anything in front of Gus about that dislike.”

“More times than anyone can count. She often calls me asshole or bastard in front of him, and those or just some of the more benign names, and that’s just to my face. Gus has told me that he’s heard Melanie and Lindsay often arguing about me when they think that he can’t hear them.”

“And how does this make him feel? Has he said?”

“He hates it. He thinks it means that his mothers hate him too. Justin and I keep telling him that’s not the case. We make sure that he knows that all of his parents love him.”

“Is that why you allow him to spend the night with Debbie Novatny, knowing that she is allowing Ms. Peterson and Ms. Marcus to spend the night also?”

“Yes. I never intended for Gus to stay away from his mothers. I know how much they love him and I know that they didn’t intend for Gus to get hurt by their actions. The fact that they are so willing to seek help only confirms that and I want to make sure Gus has everything that he needs.”

“What if the courts decide that it would be in Gus’s best interest for him to go back to his home with his mothers?”

“I wouldn’t be happy with that decision because I don’t think that it is in Gus’s best interest right now to live with Lindsay and Melanie, but I would do my bets to make sure that he knows that Justin and I will always be there for him and that he should feel free to let us know when he needs anything.”

“Mr. Anderson has stated that he plans on showing how your lifestyle isn’t conducive to a healthy home for Gus. He stated that you are a drug abuser and are promiscuous. Can you tell us about your lifestyle?”

“I don’t have the best record of healthy living, I’ll admit that. I have used drugs.”

“What kind of drugs, Mr. Kinney?” Judge Fox interrupted.

“Pretty much anything I could get my hands on. E. Poppers. Special K. But I never did any of that when Gus was around. And I haven’t touched anything stronger than pot in a year.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know. I guess it had something to do with starting my own agency. I couldn’t party as much as I had before. Then I was diagnosed with testicular cancer and was going through radiation treatment. Anything stronger than pot didn’t agree with the therapy. After my doctor told me I was okay, Melanie began having problems with the pregnancy and I was taking on more responsibility in regards to Gus. He began spending more time over at the loft and there was no way I was going to do anything while he was there. I grew up with alcoholic parents and I know what its like to have the people that are supposed to care about you lose themselves in their need to drink. I didn’t want Gus to have to deal with that. He was already worried about what was going on with Mel. Then, when Mel went into labor early, the doctors weren’t sure if she and Annie were going to make it, Lindsay spent all her time at the hospital, and I took care of Gus. There wasn’t any need for me to go back to the life I was living before that.”

“That was the life that included the promiscuous sex, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“Mr. Kinney, can you tell the court exactly how many sex partners you’ve had over the course of your life.”

“Not really.”

“And why is that Mr. Kinney?” Judge Fox asked.

“Because there were too many to count.”

“Can you give me an estimate?

“Well, I would say I had about twenty-five to thirty tricks a month since I was about twenty-two.” A murmur went through the crowded court room. The Judge banged her gavel.

“Silence please. Mr. Kinney, are you telling me that you have had over three thousand lovers?”

“Give or take.” Judge Fox wrote something down.

“Your Honor, I think Mr. Kinney’s own admission of using dugs and the shear number of his sexual partners are an indication that Gus would not be safe in his home.”

“Mr. Anderson, you’ll have your chance to question Mr. Kinney. Please be quiet.”

“Your Honor, I love my son. I would do anything to make him happy. I’ll admit my past isn’t the best but I have changed. I don’t do the drinking or the drugs that I have in the past and I haven’t had a sex partner other that Justin in over six months. I’ve learned that I don’t need that part of my life anymore. As my partner would tell you, I’ve grown up.”

“Your partner is Justin Taylor, correct?” Mark took over the questioning again.

“Yes.”

“And how long have you and Mr. Taylor been together.”

“Justin and I have been together, off and on, for a little over four years. In fact, we met the same night that Gus was born. It was Justin who helped give Gus his name. She and Mel were trying to decide between Abraham and Gus.” Brian smiled as he remembered that night. “Justin said that he wouldn’t survive a day at school with the name of Abraham but that maybe Gus would be okay.”

“You said that you’ve been together off and on. Can you explain that?”

“When we first met, I wasn’t prepared to have someone in my life, let alone a seventeen year-old twink. That would be Justin, by the way. Justin just wouldn’t take no for an answer. He basically barged his way into my life. When his father kicked him out of the house for being gay, and involved with me, Justin moved in with me. That didn’t last. He began to live with Debbie Novatny, but he still spent more nights at the loft that I can remember. I even showed up at his prom.”

Brian didn’t want to talk about what had happened at the prom and he had told Mark that. He didn’t understand what the bashing, and its aftermath, had to do with gaining custody of Gus. Mark had explained that Melanie and Lindsay’s lawyer was trying to prove that Brian and Justin’s relationship wasn’t stable and that the two men were basically fuck buddies. It was Mark’s intention to show that the feelings involved went deeper than that.

“What happened at Justin’s prom, Mr. Kinney?”

“Objection, your Honor. I don’t see what any of this has to do with the custodial issue. Mr. Taylor isn’t a party to this action, only Mr. Kinney.”

“I have to agree, Mr. Cavanaugh.”

“Your Honor, Mr. Anderson has stated in his briefs that he plans on proving that Mr. Kinney and Mr. Taylor’s relationship is based solely on sex and that they are only stating they are partners now to gain custody of Gus. I want to show that they have been in a long-standing relationship, with all the ups and downs, just as Ms. Peterson and Ms. Marcus.”

“Continue. You may answer the question, Mr. Kinney.”

“I showed up at Justin’s prom. We danced one dance and then left. Justin walked me out to my jeep where we made plans to meet up later after he had dropped off his friend Daphne Chanders, who had gone to the prom as his date. As he was walking away, one of his classmates, Chris Hobbs, came up from behind and hit him over the head with a baseball bat.” Brian choked up a bit as he thought back to that night. He could still see the events in his head. The sound of the bat as it struck. “Justin was in a coma for two weeks and in rehab for a couple of months. When he got out, he went to live with his mother.”

“And your relationship with Mr. Taylor at the time? Did you go see him?”

“I went to the hospital every night,” Brian admitted, startling almost everyone in the courtroom. “Justin never knew I was there. Nobody knew I was going to see him. I found out later that his mom, Jennifer, knew I was there but didn’t say anything because she also knew that Justin was fighting so hard to get better so that he could see me.”

“When did Justin move back in with you again?”

“Justin was having problems with nightmares. He also couldn’t stand being around people. He hated large crowds. I was the only one that Justin let touch him and I helped him. I encouraged him to start drawing again. Even bought him a computer to help with his art. Things were good for awhile.”

“Justin moved out again, though, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Why was that?”

“Justin and I were having problems. A lot of them and we weren’t communicating. He found someone else that could give him what he wanted at the time.”

“So what you are saying is that Mr. Taylor left you to be with someone else?” Brian nodded his head. “How long were you and Mr. Taylor apart?”

“A couple of months, but just because we weren’t a couple anymore, Justin and I were still in touch. I had hired him to make a poster for a charity event I was promoting. Justin even helped clear my name when my nephew falsely accused me of molesting me. And I was still paying his tuition.”

“So the two of you still cared about each other?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Taylor recently moved back in with you, correct?”

“Yes. After Justin and Ethan, that’s the man he had been with, broke up, Justin had moved in with Daphne. After we had been together for awhile I had asked him if he would move back in with me, he spent most nights at my place and I had a lot of his things there already, but Justin said that he didn’t want to move back into the loft just yet. That it held too many bad memories for him and I couldn’t argue with him. That’s one of the reasons I had no problem in finding a new place to live. I did it for Justin just as much as I did it for Gus. I wanted someplace for both of them to feel comfortable in.”

“Mr. Kinney, can you tell us what happened the afternoon of Gus’s fourth birthday party?”

“Justin and I arrived at Lindsay and found Gus walking down the sidewalk. Alone. When we asked what he was doing out there, he said that he didn’t want to stay at the party because all anyone was doing was paying attention to his sister, Annie.”

“And what did you and Mr. Taylor do?”

“We had already made arrangements with Lindsay and Melanie to take Gus for the weekend, so we just brought him to the loft.”

“And do you know how long it was until it was noticed that Gus was absent?”

“I’m not positive but I know that Lindsay finally called me about two hours after we found him.”

“You honor, at this time I would like to give you an affidavit stating that I was present at the time Ms. Peterson contacted my client in regards to her missing son.”

“So noted, Mr. Cavanaugh.”

“And what did Ms. Peterson have to say when you told her that you had Gus?”

“She was relieved that I had him, but she was upset that I didn’t let her know we were leaving. I tried explaining to her what had happened but she didn’t want to admit that anything was wrong.”

“Did things get any better?”

“A little but then they left him at home alone while they went away for the night.”

“Can you tell us about that?”

“Justin and I had just moved into the house when my cell phone rang. It was Gus and he was scared and crying. He was saying how he had woken up and there was nobody there. I had Justin call you while I stayed on the phone with Gus. We raced over to the house where the police had already arrived. One of their neighbors came over trying to find out what was going on and that’s when we learned that the girls had gone away for a little over night trip. They had left Annie with the neighbor. Luckily the neighbor had a key so we could get in.

“It turned out that Gus had come home from his friend’s where he had been playing. When he got home, he had gone upstairs to his room where he had fallen asleep. For some reason, Melanie had forgotten that he was even home so that when she and Lindsay were making arrangements for Annie they never realized that they needed to worry about Gus too.”

“When did Ms. Marcus and Ms. Peterson return home?”

“They got back just as Justin and I were getting ready to take Gus home with us. The social worker that had arrived from CPS said that she would allow us to take Gus home instead of forcing him to go to a temporary foster home. Melanie and Lindsay said that they had gotten about halfway to Hershey before Melanie remembered that Gus was home in his room.”

“And what was Ms. Peterson’s reaction to her son’s abandonment?”

“She looked upset, especially when Gus refused to go near her. I know she was hurt by that. I don’t know if she and Melanie argued about it but I do know that Mel is still living at the house and would be taking care of Gus at times.”

“Do you trust Ms. Marcus to take care of your son?”

“I know Mel says that she loves Gus but trust her to take care of Gus? That would have to be no.”

“Thank you.”

“Your witness, Mr. Anderson.”

“Thank you, your Honor. Mr. Kinney, you keep talking about how much you care about your son. How you wouldn’t do anything to hurt him. That your lifestyle of drug abuse and sexual promiscuity wouldn’t affect your son, but isn’t it true that you once left your son with Mr. Taylor when he was only an infant to attend something called the “Leather Ball” at Babylon.”

“Yes.”

“And isn’t it also true that Ms. Marcus arrived at your home only to find Mr. Taylor about to feed Gus milk that was too hot.”

“Yes.”

“And you call this making sure your son was safe?”

“I hadn’t originally planned on going to the club but my father had just told me that he was dying of cancer. I had also just told him I was gay and he told me that I should have been the one dying. I needed to get out for a bit. And Gus was safe with Justin, but Melanie didn’t want to see that. Instead she took him out of my home, without my permission.”

“Moving on,” Stevenson quickly, not wanting Brian to explain his statement. “Mr. Kinney, you stated that you hadn’t intended on being a father to your son. If that was the case, why did you interrupt the bris?”

“Because I wasn’t going to let them do that to my son. He was barely a week old and they already were trying to change him. Not to mention, they had never talked to me about what they were planning on doing.”

“But if you were going to sign over your rights, why would you care?”

“He was still my son.”

“Mr. Kinney, has your son ever been subjected to any of your sexual partners?”

“Yes, he has seen some of my former sex partners.” Brian couldn’t help but smirk. He had an idea of where the attorney was going to try and go with his question.

“And yet you don’t think your lifestyle will affect him? Just how many times has your son been in the home with one of your lovers?”

“Gus has seen four of my sex partners.”

“How can you be so sure of that?”

“Because one of those is Justin. One is Ben Bruckner, Annie’s other father.”

“And the other two?”

“They were tricks that was in my apartment when Lindsay decided to pay me a surprise visit. And I couldn’t get rid of them fast enough. I didn’t want them anywhere near Gus.”

“Have you ever done drugs while your son was in your home?”

“No. Never.”

“But you did say that you use them.”

“Used to. Like I said, other than an occasional joint I don’t do any of the hard stuff anymore.”

“Mr. Kinney, you stated that the reason Ms. Marcus doesn’t like you is that she is jealous of the relationship between you and Ms. Peterson, but isn’t it true that time and time again you purposely tried to interfere in their relationship, hoping to break them up.”

“No.”

“Isn’t the reason you refused to give up your paternal rights to Gus is because you wanted to get between my clients?”

“No, I didn’t want to give up my rights because Gus is my son and I didn’t want to cut my ties to him. If I had signed away my rights, Mel and Linds could have kept him away from me and there wouldn’t have been anything I could have done about it.”

“Then why did you refuse to give my clients money for Gus’s day school this past July?”

“I didn’t refuse to give them the money. I told them to give me the information for the school and that I would then pay the tuition to the school directly. They didn’t like that idea.”

“Why would you rather pay the school instead of allowing my clients to pay?”

“Because I wanted to make sure that the money would be used for Gus but they never gave me the information.”

“Why would you doubt that the money would be used for its intended purpose? Didn’t you trust my clients to have Gus’s best interests in heart?”

“I know that they say they have Gus’s best interests, but I also knew that at the same time they were asking me for the money, they were also looking to get a new car. I figured if they needed the money for Gus that badly that Melanie would be willing to ask me, that they would have been willing to forgo getting a new car. And they didn’t and Gus is going to school part time.” The lawyer frowned as he realized that his questioning of Brian wasn’t going the way he wanted it to.

“Mr. Kinney, you stated that you had found Gus wandering up and down the street in front of his home during his fourth birthday party. Why didn’t you take him back to his house? Why did you take him home with you?”

“I didn’t take him back to the party because Gus didn’t want to go back. I also didn’t want to subject him to watching everyone ignore him even more in favor of his little sister. I had been watching them do it over and over again for the past couple of months and I couldn’t do it anymore. It was why I had called Mark that night to start the custody proceedings.”

“Yes, but why didn’t you let anyone know that you were taking Gus? You just let them think that something had happened to him. Do you call this responsible?”

“I already had permission to take Gus for the weekend so I didn’t see any harm in taking him back to the house. As for not letting any know about it, I didn’t really care about their reactions. Their ignoring Gus was the reason he was walking alone as it was, I didn’t think they had any right to know where he was.”

“Mr. Kinney, isn’t it true that you were raised in an abusive home? That both of your parents were alcoholics?”

“Yes, but I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“Did you know that children raised in an abusive home often grew up to abuse their own children?”

“I would never hurt Gus. I’ll admit that one of the reasons I didn’t think I could be a good father was because of the examples of parenting that I had, but I think that growing up with Jack and Joan Kinney showed me what not to do in regards to raising Gus. It’s why I don’t drink or do drugs while Gus is with me. Well, one of the main reasons. I don’t want Gus to think there is anything wrong with him to make his parents not love him.”

“You say that you would never hurt Gus. Do you consider yourself a violent man?”

“Not really, but I will defend myself.”

“Isn’t it true that, in front of your son, you hit Michael Novatny for no reason?”

“No.”

“Mr. Kinney, there are witnesses to this encounter. Are you denying that you hit him?”

“No, I’m not denying that I hit Michael. What I’m denying is that I didn’t have a reason.”

“And what reason would you have had to strike at what most consider your best friend?”

“I would rather not say.”

“Mr. Kinney, please answer the question,” Judge Fox ordered.

“The party was the first time that Justin and I had seen each other after we had broken up. He was there with Ethan, the boy he left me for.” Brian looked over at his lover, who only smiled at him. Brian took a deep breath and continued. “Michael was talking about how he couldn’t believe that Justin had shown up, let alone brought Ethan with him. I kept trying to get him to be quiet but he just kept going on and on about it. Then he said…he said…”

“Mr. Kinney,” the judge said gently.

“Michael said that it would have been better if I had left Justin lying on the garage floor.” A stunned gasp broke out among the audience, causing the judge to bang her gavel to silence them.

“Quiet please. Mr. Stevenson, your next question please.”

“Yes your Honor,” the lawyer replied, trying to back track. He tried to regain his line of thought since Brian’s questioning hadn’t gone the way he had thought it would.

“Mr. Kinney, you own your own advertising agency, correct?”

“Yes.”

“That must keep you pretty busy. Long hours I would imagine. An occasional business trip.”

“Yes.”

“And how do you expect to take care of Gus during these hours?”

“The same way I have now. I’ve cut back on my hours at the office and the work I do bring home; I save to do after Gus has gone to bed. On those days when I can’t avoid staying at the office, Justin has made sure to be home. I’ve also taken Gus into the office a few times. My employees seem to like him. As for business trips, there really aren’t that many and the few that I have, depending on where they are, I can make arrangements and that does include seeing if Melanie and Lindsay would like to take care of Gus. I already said that I didn’t intend on separating Gus from his mothers and I meant it.”

“So, if you would trust your son into his mothers’ care while you’re away, why do you not trust them to raise him permanently?”

“Because I don’t trust them to continue doing what they have in the past.”

“And what’s that?”

“Take Gus for granted.”

“No other questions your Honor,” Stevenson said, not happy with what was said but knowing that he was going to have to wait and come up with something else to rattle Brian and his case

Part 19b

“At this time I would like to call Justin Taylor to the stand.” Justin made his way to the stand, giving a small smile to Brian as he passed his lover. Mark began his questions as soon as the blond sat.

“Justin, can you please state your relationship to my client.”

“We’re partners.”

“Business or personal?”

“Personal, but I do work with him also.”

“And how long have you known my client?”

“We met the night Gus was born. I went to the hospital with Brian and Michael. I helped name him.”

“Mr. Kinney has previously stated that you had lived with him off and on during the time that you have known him. Can you tell the court the circumstances regarding the reasons you moved in with him?”

“The first was after my father found out I was gay. He had shown up outside of Babylon as Brian and I, along with some of our friends, were leaving. He came up behind Brian as he was unlocking his car and attacked him. My dad then told me that I had to make a choice, either go home with him or never go home again. I chose to go with Brian.”

“That must have been tough.”

“It was.”

“Isn’t it true that Brian tried to get you and your parents to reconcile?”

“Yes. Brian had come to pick me up from school and we drove over to my parents’ house. He told me later, after we had been together for awhile, that he didn’t want me to regret the way things were with my parents like he did.”

“What happened at your parents?”

“Your Honor,” Stevenson interrupted, “what does any of this have to do with the case before you now?”

“Judge, as I said before, one of Mr. Stevenson’s arguments is that my client and Mr. Taylor’s relationship is only based on sex. I’m just trying to prove that, even before they were in a committed relationship, my client still cared for Justin and wanted what was best for him.”

“Continue Mr. Cavanaugh. You may answer the question Mr. Taylor.”

“So, Justin, what happened when you and Brian arrived at your parents’ home?”

“My mom and dad told me that they wanted me to come home but my dad placed conditions on that return.”

“What kind of conditions?”

“That I could never see Brian again. That I had to never mention being gay again. That I couldn’t go to any gay clubs. Basically he wanted me to deny who I was.”

“What did Brian do then?” Justin looked over at his lover and smiled.

“He said that what my dad wanted wasn’t love. It was hate and then he started walking out of the house. As he passed me he asked if I was coming and I left with him.”

“You moved out though, correct?”

“Yes. I had forgotten to set the lock on Brian’s door and it got robbed. When he found out he got angry and kicked me out. I ended up running away to New York. Brian came after me. He arranged for me to move in with Debbie then.”

“Brian said that you moved back in with him after you got out of the hospital, is that correct?”

“Yes. I was having nightmares and I had trouble being around people. Brian was one of the only people I trusted enough to allow him to touch me so my mom asked him to take me in.”

“Then you met someone else and moved out again.”

“Yes. Brian and I were having problems. We weren’t communicating and things just kept getting worse and worse between us. Lindsay and Melanie had taken me to a concert for my birthday and that’s where I met Ethan.”

“That would be Ethan Gold, the other man, correct?”

“Yes. At first I turned Ethan down when he asked me out, but we kept bumping into each other and Brian and I were drifting even further apart. I ended up getting together with Ethan.”

“And when Brian found out? Did he kick you out?”

“No. He told me it was my decision whether I wanted to stay or go. He told me that he wouldn’t give me what it was I was looking for and I thought that was it. That he was telling me that he wouldn’t love me and I left.”

“But the two of you are together again.”

“Yes. Ethan and I were having a few problems. He wanted us to keep our relationship a secret because his manager didn’t want the public to know he was gay. He had even introduced me as his cousin when I walked in on an interview he was doing at our apartment. I didn’t like being forced back into the closet, I was proud of who I am, but I did it for him. Ethan had even given me a ring, a commitment ring. Then I found out that Ethan had cheated on me and I got angry and left him. As the weeks went by I realized that it was always Brian that I had wanted. That, even though he didn’t give me the words that I wanted to hear, he still showed me that he loved me with his actions.”

“Justin, you just said that you left your other lover because you found out that he cheated on you, but isn’t it true that until recently, you and Brian weren’t monogamous?”

“Yes, but Brian and my relationship was never based on monogamy, although at one time that’s what I thought I wanted. Brian never promised me more than he could give. Ethan on the other hand had promised me monogamy and he broke that promise.”

“Justin what is your relationship with Lindsay Peterson and Melanie Marcus?”

“I would consider them my friends. Lindsay’s an artist like me and even encouraged me to show my sketches at the GLC. The Gay and Lesbian Center.”

“And your relationship with Gus?”

“I love that little boy almost as if he were my own. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him.”

“It was stated earlier that Ms. Marcus had removed Gus from your and his father’s care when he was only a couple of months old, without his father’s permission. Can you tell the court the circumstances surrounding that night?”

“Lindsay had just gone back to work and she got called out of town for a conference or something and needed someone to watch Gus.”

“Where was Ms. Marcus at the time?”

“Mel was out of town too, but she and Lindsay weren’t together then anyway.”

“Do you know why they weren’t together?”

“Melanie had met someone. Another woman and they slept together. Lindsay wasn’t exactly happy about that and Melanie ended up moving in with her sister.”

“Thank you. Okay, so since neither Ms. Peterson or Ms. Marcus was available, Brian was asked to watch his son, correct?”

“Yes, although I don’t know how much notice he had. I think Lindsay sprung it on him at the last minute. He even had to take the day off of work to stay with Gus.”

“Then why were you watching him?”

“It was the night of the Leather Ball and Brian had decided that he wanted to go to it. He asked me to come over and then had me watch Gus.”

“And when did Ms. Marcus show up at my client’s home?”

“A little after midnight I guess. I was just getting ready to give Gus his bottle when I heard the door open. At first I thought it was just Brian coming home so I took Gus’s bottle out of the microwave and went to give it to him. The next thing I know, Melanie grabbed my hand and began yelling at me that I had to test the bottle first.”

“And is this when Mr. Kinney arrived.”

“Yes.”

“What did Ms. Marcus do then?”

“She began yelling at Brian how he should have been at home and that it was just like him to be more concerned with going out than with watching his son. Then she demanded the keys to his jeep.”

“Why did she do that?”

“She said that she wanted to get Gus’s car seat so that she could take him home.”

“So what you’re saying is that, after entering Mr. Kinney’s home in the middle of the night, without notifying anyone that she would be there, without even knocking on the door, she tried to remove Gus from his father’s care?”

“Yes.”

“And what did Mr. Kinney tell her?”

“He refused. He said that Lindsay had left him in his care and there was no way that Melanie could take him. He said that he was Gus’s father.”

“But Ms. Marcus did remove Gus from his father that night.”

“Melanie threatened to break into the jeep if Brian didn’t hand over the keys and take Gus so he finally relented.”

“Did he actually believe that Ms. Marcus would actually follow through on her threat?”

“When I asked him about that, he said he wouldn’t put anything passed her.”

“Mr. Taylor, was this your first encounter with Ms. Marcus, other than the night Gus was born?”

“No. I saw her and Lindsay a few weeks after that. I went over and re-introduced myself to them and offered to help them out with their packages. I also told them that if they ever needed a sitter for Gus to call me and I would be glad to do it.”

“And what did they say to that?”

“Melanie told me not to say it if I didn’t mean it because they would take me up on the offer.”

“So neither you nor Mr. Kinney thought that Ms. Marcus or Ms. Peterson would have a problem with you keeping an eye on Gus.”

“Correct.”

“And even after the incident the night of the Leather Ball, did they take you up on your offer to baby-sit?”

“Yes. I often watched Gus when Melanie or Lindsay’s usual sitter couldn’t do it.”

“And how often would you say they asked you to watch him?”

“Usually once or twice a week, but like I said, it was when their usual sitter was busy.”

“Justin, earlier you stated that you were Mr. Kinney’s partner. What would be your role in Gus’s life if my client were to receive full custody of his son? I mean, you are only twenty-one and suddenly you would be helping raise your partner’s son. Not many men, let alone gay men, would be willing to accept that kind of responsibility.”

“I’m not like most men my age, as Brian would be more the able to tell you. I don’t my role in Gus’s life changing that much. Gus already calls me his Daddy Justin. I spend as much time as possible with him. While I didn’t officially live with Brian at the loft, I was still there almost every time that Gus was over. Like I said before, I often watched Gus at his mothers’ home. I’ve even taken him to my studio at the school. He loves to draw and often will sit and color while I’m working on a project. He does the same thing at Kinnetik, Brian’s company.”

“So you support Mr. Kinney’s petition for custody?”

“Of course. I’ve seen the way Gus has been treated since his sister was born, and even before that. Don’t get me wrong, I love Melanie and Lindsay, but I believe that they love that little boy, but I think that they could be better parents.”

“What do you mean? Are they abusive?”

“No, not abusive exactly. It’s just that they don’t seem to want to spend a lot of time with him. They leave him with friends or sitters all the time, even if they are taking Annie out with them. If they left Annie with him, I would say it was just that they didn’t want to be tied down by the kids, but since it’s only with Gus I have to wonder if it’s because he’s Brian’s son.”

“So you think that Brian being Gus’s father might be a factor in the way they treat Gus?”

“Yeah, I do. Melanie has never made it a secret that she doesn’t like Brian or his role in Gus’s life. She’s the one that harped on Brian about him signing over his parental rights.”

“Did either Ms. Peterson or Ms. Marcus badmouth my client in front of his son?”

“All the time. I was surprised that Gus’s first word wasn’t asshole considering how many times they would call Brian that in front of him.”

“Thank you, Mr. Taylor.”

“Your witness, Mr. Stevenson.”

“Mr. Taylor, it sounds like you think you and Mr. Kinney can provide Gus with the perfect little family.”

“No family is perfect, Mr. Stevenson, no matter what the outside appearance might be.”

“Right. You stated that Mr. Kinney had taken you in after your father kicked you out of his home. But didn’t you run away from Mr. Kinney’s home just a few days after because he had brought home someone else for sex?”

“Yes, but that was before Brian picked me up from school and took me over to my parents, so I hadn’t officially moved in yet.”

“Isn’t it true that you met Mr. Kinney when you were seventeen?”

“Yes.”

“And how did the two of you meet?”

“I was on Liberty Avenue, looking to meet someone and luckily that someone was Brian.”

“Did Mr. Kinney know how old you were when he took you home?”

“Not at first. I didn’t tell him I was only seventeen until we were getting ready to go to the hospital to see Lindsay and Gus. He thought I was older.”

“But even after he found out your true age he still had sex with you?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Taylor, isn’t it true that you and Mr. Kinney have often brought home other people in order to have sex with them?”

“Yes, but never when Gus was there.”

“And didn’t my clients walk in while you and Mr. Kinney were playing some kind of sex game?”

“We were joking around and they walked in without even knocking. And Gus wasn’t with them at the time.”

“Why did you leave Mr. Kinney two years ago, Mr. Taylor?”

“I already said that it was because Brian and I were getting along. We weren’t communicating and I didn’t think that Brian was willing to give me what I was looking for and I had found someone that was. But that doesn’t mean that I loved Brian any less. And that doesn’t matter now. Brian and I have worked through our problems and we’re stronger than we have ever been.”

“Justin, why were you kicked out of the Pittsburgh Institute of Fine Arts?” Justin looked over at Mark and Brian, not sure why he was being asked about that.

“Your Honor, I fail to see what any of this has to do with this hearing,” Mark interjected.

“I’m just trying to show the kind of influence that Gus will have in his life if he is given to his father.”

“Answer the question, Mr. Taylor.”

“I was suspended because of some posters that I had done while interning at Vanguard Advertising.”

“Isn’t it true that these posters where ridiculing then Police Chief James Stockwell, who was running for mayor and was being represented by Vanguard and your lover.”

“Yes.”

“So, basically, you actively went against your lover and his professional partner, while being employed by said partnership.”

“Yes, but Brian knew what I was doing. That’s how Stockwell found out. He came over while I had the posters out around the loft.”

“That’s right. So not only did your rebellion cause you to get fired from Vanguard and suspended from school, you also caused Mr. Kinney to be fired also.”

“Yes.”

“And do you think that this is a good example to give to Gus?”

“I was standing up for what I believe in. In fact, what Melanie and Lindsay believe in also. So, to answer your question, yes I do think it’s a good example to Gus. He needs to have people to look up to, who are willing to do what it is right, no matter the consequences.”

“Were you also standing up for what was right when you joined a vigilante group called the Pink Posse?”

“Yes. The original goals of the Pink Posse were good ones. To protect gay men and women when the police department and judicial system wouldn’t.”

“Then why did you stop being a member?” Justin looked over at Brian, who gave him an encouraging nod.

“Cody, the leader of the Posse, wanted to force straight people into accepting us. He had us take our cause off of Liberty Avenue and into where straight people hung out. It stopped being out protecting ourselves and began to be about forcing others to accept us. That’s not what I wanted. Then he had me confront Chris Hobbs, the boy who bashed me at my prom, I knew it was time to leave. I didn’t need what I was getting by hanging out with Cody. I walked away that night and never looked back.”

“And where was Mr. Kinney during all of this? Did he support this violent group that you belonged to?”

“No, he didn’t like my joining the Posse. He confronted me about it a few times and tried to talk me out of going out on our patrols.”

“But you ignored him about that because you were doing what you felt was right.” Stevenson didn’t even bother hiding the sarcasm in his words.

“Yes.”

“And what will happen the next time the two of you disagree on something? What if that something involves Gus? Will you still ignore Mr. Kinney?”

“I don’t know. I guess it would all depend on the situation.”

“Thank you, Mr. Taylor. No further questions.”

Part 19c

“Call your next witness Mr. Cavanaugh.”

“I have no other witnesses at this time.”

“Alright. You may call your first witness, Mr. Stevenson.”

“Thank you, your Honor. At this time I would like to call Melanie Marcus to the stand.” Melanie made her way up to the front of the courtroom, shooting Brian a venomous look as she passed him.

“Ms. Marcus, please state your relationship to Lindsay and Gus Peterson.”

“Lindsay is my wife and Gus is our son.”

“Are you the biological mother or is Ms. Peterson?”

“Lindsay had Gus using Brian’s sperm, but I’m his mother also. That was always part of the arrangement.”

“And what was the original part Mr. Kinney was supposed to play in Gus’ life?”

“He was just supposed to be a sperm donor. It was never anyone’s intention that he have an actual role in Gus’ life.”

“If that was the case, why did it take so long for Mr. Kinney to sign over his parental rights? I would have assumed that if he wasn’t to have anything to do with Gus he would have been more than happy to sign the papers.”

“We hadn’t gotten around to having him sign the papers; we didn’t see the need to rush, knowing that Brian didn’t want to be a big part of his son’s life.”

“What changed your mind?”

“Gus got sick and we had to take him to the hospital. The admitting nurse refused to let me go back with Lindsay and Gus because I wasn’t related to him legally or biologically. It made us realize that we needed to get Brian to sign the papers if I wanted any claim to Gus.”

“And what happened when you asked Mr. Kinney to sign over those rights?”

“He refused to. He said that he was Gus’ father and that he wasn’t willing to give up his son.” The anger she still felt over Brian’s refusal was apparent to everyone in the courtroom.

“But you don’t believe that?”

“Brian Kinney doesn’t do anything for anyone other than himself. I admit it, we don’t get along. I don’t like him and he doesn’t like me. If it wasn’t for Lindsay and Gus, we would have nothing to do with each other. Brian didn’t sign over his rights because he didn’t want me to be an official parent to Gus.”

“So you’re saying that Brian didn’t sign over his parental rights just to annoy you? That sounds a little extreme.”

“That’s Brian for you. He doesn’t do anything halfway. He pushes people until he gets the results that he wants, no matter the consequences.”

“Can you give the court an example?”

“The Bris is an example. He just came barging into our home, interrupting the ceremony. He caused a big scene until he forced Lindsay into saying that we wouldn’t go through with it. I had never been so embarrassed. Lindsay knew how important it was for me, as the non-biological parent, to have this ceremony. Of cementing my bond with Gus.”

“And Mr. Kinney prevented you from having this bond?”

“Yes, and because of that my family does not fully acknowledge him as my son.”

“Okay. Now Justin Taylor and Brian Kinney have both testified that you removed Gus from Mr. Kinney’s care without his approval when Gus was only a few months old. Can you tell us your side of that story?”

“Lindsay and I were having some problems and I had moved out. I was living with my sister at the time but had to go out of town for business. I had returned home to find a message on my answering machine telling me that Lindsay had to go out of town for a conference and that she had left Gus in Brian’s care. I immediately went over there to make sure that Gus was okay because I didn’t trust Brian to take care of him.”

“Did you think that Brian was going to hurt Gus?”

“Not intentionally, but I knew that he had never cared for a child before.”

“What happened when you got there?”

“I walked into the loft and found Justin about to give Gus a bottle, without testing it first. I grabbed the bottle out of his hand and that’s when Brian walked in. I told him that he couldn’t be a part time father and that fatherhood meant putting aside his needs and taking care of his son. I then told him to give me his keys so that I could get Gus’s car seat. I refused to leave my son there.”

“Did you threaten to break into Mr. Kinney’s car?”

“I might have. I really don’t remember what I said.”

“Okay, getting back to the issue of Mr. Kinney’s parental rights, when did he finally sign them over?”

“It was a couple of weeks after the incident at the loft. Lindsay and I were still apart and she was having trouble paying the bills so she and a friend of hers, who was also gay, decided to get married. Brian and I didn’t like that idea and had tried to talk Lindsay out of it, but she wouldn’t budge. One day Brian had called and told me to meet him at the house, that there was a problem with Gus. When I got there, it turned out that there was no problem. He said that, if Lindsay and I would get back together, he would sign over his rights to Gus.”

“So that reinforced your opinion that he was just holding back his signing as a way to hurt you.”

“Yes. Even thought we did get back together, and Brian did sign over his rights, he did it to make sure he got his way, which was to make sure that Lindsay didn’t do something that he didn’t like.”

“Now, Mr. Kinney has insinuated that since your daughter Annie Novotny-Marcus was born, you have pushed Gus aside and begun to ignore him.”

“That isn’t true. Yes, we have paid more attention to Annie, but that’s just because she’s still an infant and needs Lindsay and me more than Gus does. He’s older and more independent. Gus just doesn’t understand that he has to share our affections now with his little sister.”

“So it’s just sibling jealousy that is making Gus act out?”

“Yes. It doesn’t help that Brian is encouraging Gus’ actions.”

“And why would Mr. Kinney do that?”

“Because he likes the fact that it’s causing problems between Lindsay and me. Brian’s permissive attitude towards Gus’ tantrums only provides Gus with proof that if he misbehaves, he will be rewarded.”

“What about the assertions that you and Ms. Peterson often leave Gus with baby-sitters whenever you go do something, while at the same time taking Annie with you?”

“We leave Gus with friends because that’s what he wants. He would only get bored when we’re out since there are usually no other children. We take Annie with us because she is still young and we can easily distract her with toys. She doesn’t cry and is usually well behaved.”

“What happened the day of Gus’ birthday? When Mr. Kinney and Mr. Taylor removed him from your home?”

“Lindsay was in the kitchen getting the food together. I was in the backyard with our friends who had already arrived. Gus was seated next to me. Everyone was relaxing and having a good time. Everyone was fighting for a chance to hold Annie. When Gus got up and walked away I just assumed that he had gone inside with Lindsay. The children that we had invited for the party wouldn’t be arriving for awhile and I figured he was just going inside to play. I didn’t think anything of it when he didn’t come back outside, thinking he was just playing with his toys. It wasn’t until Lindsay went inside to get him because the kids were showing up that we realized he was gone. We looked everywhere for him. Someone suggested we call Brian, I can’t remember who, because he and Justin hadn’t arrived yet either. That’s when we found out that Brian had him.”

“What was your reaction to finding out that Mr. Kinney had taken your son?”

“I went ballistic. I couldn’t believe that he had the nerve to take Gus without even telling anyone. He told us that he had found Gus wandering around out front, but that couldn’t have been true. Gus knows better than to go out that way without one of us present.”

“What do you think happened?”

“I think Brian came and found Gus inside playing and instead of joining the party, he just decided to take Gus with him then. Gus loves his father so he would have had no problem going with him.”

“Ms. Marcus, what is your opinion of Brian Kinney?”

“I think he’s a narcissistic person who wants nothing more than to have everyone cater to him. He does nothing for anyone unless he can get something out of it. I don’t think he’s capable of loving anyone other than himself. He uses people for his own pleasure. Even those people closest to him have been hurt by his thoughtless actions. He uses sex, drugs and alcohol as if they were a recreational pastime. I don’t think there is a gay man in Pittsburgh that he hasn’t had sex with and quite a few straight ones also. He used his home to have orgies after the backrooms in the clubs along Liberty Avenue were closed down. He’s had tricks coming at all times of the day and night. He even tricks at work, so much so that he got sued for sexual harassment. I still don’t know how he got out of that one. Lindsay has walked in on him when he is with one of his tricks and his not ashamed of them. In fact, Brian takes great pride in the fact that he could, and has gotten, any man that he wants. He doesn’t believe in monogamy, no matter what he says now and I don’t think he even understands the word commitment.”

“Are you afraid of the influence Mr. Kinney has over his son?”

“I’m very afraid of his influence. Gus looks up to his father. He wants to imitate him. I’m also scared of what one of Brian’s tricks might do to Gus if he’s in the house. Brian isn’t known for his safe choices in sex partners.”

“What about Mr. Kinney’s assertion that he is now monogamous, having only Mr. Taylor as a sex partner?”

“Like I said a minute ago, that might be true for now, but I don’t see it as a long term thing. Brian isn’t capable of that kind of commitment. If anything, if he is truly monogamous, it’s only so that the courts might rule in his favor.”

“What do you think will happen if Mr. Kinney gains full custody of his son?”

“I think that once the novelty of having his son around full-time wears off, Brian will try and give that responsibility to someone else. Whether it is Justin, Lindsay or I.”

“Thank you Ms. Marcus.”

“Your witness, Mr. Cavanaugh.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” Mark looked down at his notes quickly before turning his attention to Melanie. “Ms. Marcus, how long have you and Ms. Peterson been together?”

“We’ve been together for about ten years.”

“And when the two of you decided to have children, why did you choose Brian Kinney to be the father?”

“I wasn’t able to have children at that time so it would have to have been Lindsay that would carry the baby and she insisted that Brian be the father.”

“And what did you want?”

“I wanted an anonymous donor from the sperm bank.”

“So it must have angered you when Ms. Peterson insisted on my client being the donor?”

“We fought about it, but in the end I decided that having a child with Lindsay was more important than who the father would be. It helped that everyone agreed that Brian would sign over his parental rights to the child as soon as he was born.”

“What role was my client to have in his son’s life?”

“He wasn’t going to have any role. He was only supposed to be the donor, but he couldn’t even do that right.”

“Ms. Marcus, if Mr. Kinney was only supposed to be a donor and have no part in his son’s life, why did you insist he make out a life insurance policy for a million dollars?”

“Considering his lifestyle, I wanted to make sure that Gus would be protected if something would ever happen to Brian.”

“But you just said that Mr. Kinney was supposed to sign over his parental rights and wasn’t going to be a parent to his son. Why should he then be held responsible for his financial security? If he had signed over his parental rights, no court in this country would have made him financially responsible for Gus, so why did you expect him to take care of his son?” Melanie looked over at Lindsay who frowned at her wife. She didn’t know what to say to the question. “Ms. Marcus, would you like me to restate the question?”

“Even though Brian was signing over his rights, Lindsay and I both thought it would be a good idea to make sure that Gus would be taken care of in case something happened to Brian. Like I said, with his lifestyle we didn’t want to take any chances.”

“Is this because you and Ms. Peterson knew that, no matter what the three of you had agreed to prior to Gus’ birth, my client would want to help make sure that Gus wanted for nothing. That he was taken care of, even if it meant giving you and Ms. Peterson money?”

“Of course not. We never asked Brian for any money. He gave it to us willingly?”

“What about when you asked for him to pay for Gus’ schooling over the summer?”

“I had to take extra time off of work because of the problems with my pregnancy and we couldn’t afford the tuition for Gus’ preschool. We figured that, since Brian wanted to become more involved with Gus’ life, that he should help pay for Gus’ school, but he refused.”

“Mr. Kinney testified earlier that he only refused to give you and Ms. Peterson a check. That he, in fact, asked for the information and he would send the school a check. Information that you refused to give him. Why was this?”

“We looked over our finances and decided that we didn’t need his help after all, especially since he didn’t seem to be too willing to give it.”

“I see. Ms. Marcus, you stated that you didn’t think that my client’s promiscuous lifestyle would be a good influence on his son. As far as you know, other than the times that he has already stated in his own testimony, has Mr. Kinney ever subjected Gus to his sexual partners?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Ms. Marcus, you and Ms. Peterson take pride in the fact that the two of you are in a committed relationship. You even had a ceremony stating that, correct?”

“Yes. Lindsay and I love each and have no problem letting others know that. We don’t need someone else in our beds. That’s something that Brian has never been able to say.”

“Ms. Marcus, who is Marianne MacDonald?” Again, Melanie looked over at Lindsay, who paled. Without turning to face Mark, Melanie answered.

“She’s a woman I met at a baby shower that Lindsay and I had thrown for some friends of ours.”

“And isn’t it true that after that party ended, you got together with Ms. MacDonald and had sex with her?”

“Yes, but it didn’t mean anything. I realized right away that I had messed up and went back to Lindsay. I had never meant for anything to happen.”

“Then how did you end up in bed with her?”

“Lindsay and I had had an argument and I needed to talk to someone. Marianne had given me her number so I called her to see if she wanted to meet up and get a drink. Things just got out of hand. I never meant for it to go as far as it did.”

“What was Ms. Peterson’s reaction when she discovered your infidelity?”

“She wasn’t happy about it. We tried to work things out but couldn’t. I ended up moving in with my sister.”

“During your separation, how much time did you spend with Gus? Other than the time you took him from his father’s custody?”

“That was the only time I saw him. Things were tense between Lindsay and I and we couldn’t really be in the same room together.”

“Isn’t it true that, when you moved out of the home that you shared with Ms. Peterson, you gave her no help financially, even though at that time she was not employed?” Melanie squirmed in her seat.

“Yes, but that was because I couldn’t afford it. I had to give my sister money for letting me stay with her, plus my own living expenses. I just didn’t have anything else. Besides, Lindsay told me that Brian was helping her with some of the bills, like Gus’s baby-sitter, so I didn’t worry about it.”

“Even though you knew that Mr. Kinney was suspended from work for part of that time and not drawing a salary?”

“Yes.”

“Ms. Marcus, you stated earlier that Mr. Kinney did everything he could to get between you and Lindsay, but isn’t it true that he signed over his parental rights to get you and Ms. Peterson back together?”

“Yes.”

“And why did he do that?”

“He said he wanted his son raised in a home with two loving parents.”

“At the time, isn’t it true that Ms. Peterson was engaged to a fellow teacher by the name of Gui DePruie and that one of the conditions for Brian to sign over his rights was for that engagement to be called off?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me then, Ms. Marcus, if Ms. Peterson was so ready to move on with her life with someone new, why would my client be so willing to sign over his parental rights to someone you say he hates? Could it have been the fact that the marriage was to be nothing more than a sham? That Ms. Peterson was marrying Mr. DePruie so that he could obtain his green card and stay in this country?” Melanie looked between Brian and Lindsay, the blonde wearing a guilty look upon her face. Their attorney didn’t look too happy either, the two women having not told him about what had happened with Gui, not thinking that Brian would bring it up.

“Yes.”

“Ms. Marcus, how did you discover the relationship between Ms. Peterson and Mr. DePruie?”

“I had called her house to talk to her about getting some things that I had left there and got the answering machine. It had both of them on it.”

“And what did you do then?”

“I went looking for Brian to see if he knew what was going on?”

“Isn’t it true that you tracked my client down to the Liberty Gym, an all-male gym, and confronted him in the locker room, having no concern not only for my client’s privacy but also the other men that were changing there.”

“Yes, but I was angry and hurt and I wasn’t thinking.”

“So you felt you had the right to barge in on my client when he was in no position to defend himself. Ms. Marcus, the night of the Leather Ball, when you removed Gus from his father’s care, did you call his home before you arrived to see how things were going?”

“No. I wanted to see for myself that things were okay. I wasn’t going to just take his word for it.”

“Is that why you didn’t even have the courtesy of knocking on the front door? Why you just barged into his home, because you wanted to make sure things were okay? Even though it was after midnight?”

“Yes. And I’m glad I did.”

“Because Mr. Taylor was about to feed Gus a bottle that he hadn’t tested, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me Ms. Marcus, how did you know that Mr. Taylor hadn’t tested it? Did you see him heat it up? Take it out of the microwave or anything?”

“No.”

“Did you test it yourself to see if it was too hot?”

“No.”

“So for all you knew at the time, the bottle could have been just fine and you were overreacting?”

“But I wasn’t. Justin hadn’t tested the bottle. He even admitted it.”

“But this was after Mr. Kinney had arrived home and you had already yelled at Mr. Taylor for not testing the bottle, correct.”

“Yes.”

“Why did you insist that Mr. Kinney allow you to remove his son from his care?”

“Because I didn’t think he was the right person to care for Gus. He had already proven that he was more than willing to put his desire to have sex above his son.”

“That’s interesting, considering you just told us that the reason you and Ms. Peterson weren’t together at that time was because you had sex with someone else. It appears that there isn’t much difference between you and Mr. Kinney in regards to that.”

“What I did was a mistake. A one time thing. Brian has sex with anyone he can.”

“Ms. Marcus, you’re a lawyer correct? Do you consider yourself a good one?”

“Yes.”

“Then why is it that, when it comes to Mr. Kinney, you feel the need to break the law?”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“What I mean, Ms. Marcus, is that when you removed Gus from my client’s care without his or Ms. Peterson’s permission, you committed a felony. Namely kidnapping.”

“Gus is my son. I can’t kidnap my own son.”

“But the truth of the matter was that you had no rights to Gus. Mr. Kinney had not signed over his parental rights to you at that time, nor were you and Ms. Peterson together. Combine that with the threat of breaking into my client’s jeep and that is a felony.”

“I was just looking out for Gus.”

“And the reason you threatened bodily injury to Robert Blasdale at the Tremont Avenue Hollywood Tans so that he would tell you which tanning booth Mr. Kinney was in? Whose interest was that for?”

“I was upset. Lindsay had just told me that she wanted to call off our wedding because things were going wrong. I went to Brian because I thought he could help.”

“So because your partner was going to break off your wedding, you went to the one person who you have admitted to hating, wanting his help, threatening someone until you could find him? Ms. Marcus, you certainly seem to go to extremes when you’re upset. How can the court be sure that you wouldn’t do something extreme if Gus does something to upset you?”

“Objection your Honor. There is no proof that either of my clients have done anything to harm their son.”

“Sustained. Your next question, Mr. Cavanaugh.”

“All right. Ms. Marcus, can you please tell the courts who Leda Davidson is?”

“An ex-lover of mine.”

“Isn’t it true that shortly after your commitment ceremony with Ms. Peterson that Ms. Davidson joined the two of you in your bed?”

“Yes, but that only happened a few times and then Lindsay and I realized that we didn’t want Leda in our bed with us. It got to be too much.”

“And where exactly was your son at this time?”

“In his room.”

“So unlike Mr. Kinney, who limited his sexual activities and partners for times when his son was not present, you and Ms. Peterson had no problem in bringing someone else into your bed when he was home. Tell me, Ms. Marcus, just who exactly was the bad influence over your son?”

“Gus wasn’t present when we were together. He had his own room, which he didn’t have at Brian’s loft. There was no influence over Gus.”

“How convenient for you. Ms. Marcus, how do you refer to Mr. Kinney?”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is, what do you normally call him? Do you insult him often, that kind of thing?”

“Usually I call him an asshole or something along those lines.”

“And have you done this in your son’s presence?”

“Yes. Occasionally.”

“And how do you think that might have affected Gus? How do you think he might have felt hearing one of his mothers calling his father names?”

“Gus is too young to think anything of it. Besides, he knows how much I love him and that the way I feel about his father has no reflection on how I feel about him.”

“Then I guess it would surprise you that Gus has asked several people why his momma didn’t like him or his daddy?” Melanie looked stricken. “That Gus had, in fact, overhead you any number of times calling his father names.”

“I love my son and I’m sorry if I hurt him by calling Brian what I had. I didn’t mean it, well the hurting Gus part, and I promise to do better. I’m getting help and am working on the problems I have with Brian. I swear, if we get Gus back, things will be better.”

“A case of too little, too late wouldn’t you say?” Melanie didn’t say anything when it became obvious that it wasn’t really a question.

“Ms. Marcus, why do you leave your son so often in the care of others while taking your daughter out with you and Ms. Peterson?”

“I already said, because we can keep Annie busy while Gus likes to run around.”

“Has he always been like that? I mean, when he was Annie’s age?”

“No, he was a quiet baby.”

“So why didn’t you have him at your wedding to Ms. Peterson? Wasn’t he about the same age as Annie is now?”

“Lindsay and I knew we would be too busy to keep an eye on Gus and, with the crowd, we weren’t sure how he would react.”

“Even though both Mr. Taylor and Debbie Novotny volunteered to watch him for you?”

“Yes. Like I said, we didn’t know how he would react to the crowds.”

“If you didn’t know how Gus would react to crowds why did you and Ms. Peterson, over my clients wishes, bring him to a party when he was only a few months old. A party his father was holding for Michael Novotny’s birthday where you both knew that heavy drinking and drugs, as well as sex, would be taking place?”

“Gus was only a few months old and we didn’t feel comfortable leaving him alone, but it only shows how Brian can act around his son.”

“Didn’t Mr. Kinney ask you to leave Gus with a sitter? Even when you showed up at his home with his son, didn’t my client ask you to take him home, even if it meant that you would miss the party, thus not exposing him to the things that would be taking place in his home?”

“I don’t remember, it was a long time ago.”

“How convenient for you. Your honor, I have no further questions at this time for this witness.”

Part 19d

“Your Honor, at this time, I would like to call Lindsay Peterson to the stand.” Lindsay made her way, wearily, to the stand.

“Lindsay, Gus is your biological child, correct?”

“Yes. Mine and Brian’s.”

“Your partner, Melanie Marcus, stated that you insisted on Mr. Kinney being the father, even above her objections. Why is that?”

“Brian and I have known each other since college. He was one of my best friends. He’s intelligent. Handsome. He’s always been there when I needed him. He was everything that I wanted for the father of my child.”

“But the only role you wanted him to have was for Mr. Kinney to be a sperm donor, correct? “

“Yes.”

“Why did you wait until after Gus was born before having Mr. Kinney sign over his parental rights?”

“We didn’t think it would be a problem, having him sign it. Brian had never shown any interest in being a father to our child so Melanie and I didn’t think there would be a problem.”

“What finally prompted you and Ms. Marcus to have the papers drawn up negating Mr. Kinney’s parental rights?”

“Like Melanie said, Gus had gotten sick and we had taken him to the hospital. The nurse in the emergency room wouldn’t let Melanie come back with us because she wasn’t related to him. We decided at that point that it was time that we went ahead with the paperwork, but Brian refused to sign.”

“What was your reaction to Mr. Kinney’s refusal?”

“I wasn’t happy about it, but I wasn’t as angry as Melanie was. She felt like I betrayed her when I didn’t push Brian into signing the papers, while I just wanted everyone to get along for Gus’ sake.”

“Why weren’t you as angry as Ms. Marcus? Didn’t you want Ms. Marcus to have rights to your son?”

“Of course I did, but I also could see how torn Brian was at that point in regards to his feelings towards Gus. I could see how much he loved him and I understood why he didn’t sign, but that didn’t mean that I was happy about him refusing to do what he had promised. Melanie and I had asked Brian to father our child with the intention of being his parents. Brian was only to have a small role in raising his son. His refusal to sign over his parental rights meant that Melanie wouldn’t be able to have a say in treating Gus is something happened to him.”

“Do you believe that Ms. Kinney’s refusal to sign over his parental rights lead to the troubles you and Ms. Marcus had? The problems that eventually lead her to moving out?”

“Yes, I think they were the main problem between us. Melanie was angry that Brian had reneged on our deal and we fought over it a lot. I think that was one of the reasons she slept with that other woman.”

“In previous testimony it was stated that Mr. Kinney eventually signed over his parental rights to prevent you from marrying a man by the name of Gui DePruie. Can you tell the court your version of events?”

“Melanie and I were living apart and I had to go back to work so that I could support Gus and myself. Gui agreed to move into our house to help me out with the bills and taking care of Gus. I decided to help him out of a problem he was having by marrying him. I knew Brian and Mel, along with our other friends, wouldn’t approve of the marriage so I didn’t tell them about it. When they found out about Gui they tried to talk me out of going through with the marriage.”

“Is the previous testimony stating that you were marrying Mr. DePruie to allow him to obtain his green card accurate?”

“Yes. Gui was going to be deported so we thought that if we got married that it would allow him to stay. I needed the help with the bills and I wanted to help my friend. He even loved Gus so I didn’t see a problem with it. We didn’t mean to harm anyone.”

“Why didn’t you go through with the arrangements?”

“Brian told Melanie and me that he would sign over his rights to Gus if we would get back together. He said that he wanted Gus to be raised in a household with two loving parents. I had never stopped loving Melanie and Brian was offering us everything that we wanted so I took him up on his offer.”

“During the time you and Ms. Marcus were apart you had left your son with Mr. Kinney. During that time, Ms. Marcus removed him from his father’s care saying that Mr. Kinney was unfit to take care of his son. Did you agree with Ms. Marcus’ removal of your son?”

“When she told me what happened, about how Brian had left Gus with Justin while he went to the Leather Ball, yes I agreed with her taking Gus. I couldn’t believe that Brian had left his son with someone he barely knew.”

“Mr. Taylor testified that he had offered to baby-sit Gus and that both you and Ms. Marcus told him that you would probably take him up on that offer. If that was the case, why did you have a problem with Mr. Kinney asking Mr. Taylor to do just that?”

“Yes, we did tell Justin not to make the offer if he didn’t mean it and Melanie and I had talked about having Justin watch Gus eventually, but we also knew that Justin was inexperienced with infants and planned on talking to him about what needed to be done if Gus got hungry or something. Brian didn’t do that. Instead he left Justin alone with Gus with no instructions and Gus almost got hurt because of that.”

“After that, how often did you leave Gus alone with his father?”

“I didn’t. Not until Melanie was pregnant with Annie. He wanted to become more involved with his son and Melanie and I were having problems so it worked out for all of us.”

“Your son stayed with Mr. Kinney for a couple of weeks after your daughter was born. Why was this?”

“Melanie had had problems with her pregnancy and had been told to take it easy. To limit her stress. Like I said, Mel and I were having some problems. After Annie was born, I thought it might be easier if Gus stayed with Brian so that I could concentrate on making sure that Mel and Annie were okay.”

“Mr. Kinney is saying that you and Ms. Marcus have been ignoring Gus and his needs in favor of Annie. Do you think this is true?”

“Brian kept trying to tell me that Gus was feeling like we didn’t love him. Melanie and I thought it was sibling rivalry at first. That Gus just didn’t like the fact that he had to now share his mothers’ attentions with someone else. Then, after Gus’ birthday party, and seeing how he acted towards us, I knew something was going on and I began to make sure that Gus knew how much I loved him.”

“What about Ms. Marcus?”

“I’ll admit it, Mel still does favor Annie a bit, just like I might favor Gus, but that’s just because she’s her natural daughter, but we are taking steps to work everything out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Melanie and I have been going to counseling to work out our problems, hoping to figure out what to do to make sure that what has happened in the past doesn’t reoccur.”

“Ms. Peterson, what happened the afternoon you and Ms. Marcus had a luncheon for your parents? To show them that you were just as much a couple as your sister?”

“My parents told me that they decided not to come. They don’t feel that my relationship with Melanie is as acceptable as my sister’s marriage. I was upstairs, crying, when Brian joined me. We were talking for awhile and he had brought up something that had happened when we were in college.”

“And what was that incident?”

“We had been at a party that wasn’t that much fun and he had spiked the punch with drugs.”

“And why did Mr. Kinney bring up this particular incident?”

“Because he had just done the same thing to the punch at the luncheon.”

“Isn’t it true that as that because of the drugs that Mr. Kinney had giving to the guests, without their knowledge, that the party became to include nudity?”

“Yes.”

“And isn’t it also true that your parents arrived at this point?”

“Yes.”

“And what was their reaction to what was going on at your home?”

“They left immediately and didn’t speak to me for a month. They refused my calls and wouldn’t open the door when I went to their home.”

“So because of Mr. Kinney’s spiking the drinks with an illegal substance, your relationship with your parents became even more stressed than it had been before?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think of Mr. Kinney’s claims that he has been monogamous the past six months? Do you believe him?”

“I’m not sure if I believe him or not. Brian has never made it a secret to anyone who knew him how he felt about monogamy. He always said that monogamy was only for straight people and lesbians. He has never believed in marriage, especially for gay people because, he says, it doesn’t mean anything.”

“So you don’t think that Mr. Kinney and Mr. Taylor’s relationship is monogamous? That Mr. Kinney is still having sex with other men?”

“I believe that Justin is probably monogamous. I know that’s what he’s always wanted. I also believe that Brian may be trying to be monogamous. How successful he has actually been, on the other hand, I can’t say.”

“You said that Mr. Kinney doesn’t believe in marriage in gay people, can you provide an example?”

“When Melanie and I were planning our wedding, Brian made no secret of the fact that he thought we were making a mistake. He asked me why we even bothered planning a wedding ceremony when it wouldn’t be legal in anyone’s eyes. He said that we were already living together, why did we need anything else.”

“Did Mr. Kinney come to your wedding?”

“No. He won tickets to the White Party in Miami and he went there instead.”

“And what did he do at the White Party?”

“Your Honor, Ms. Peterson wasn’t with Mr. Kinney in Miami,” Mark interrupted, “how can she testify to what my client did there?”

“Let me rephrase my question. Ms. Peterson, what do you think Mr. Kinney did in Miami?”

“The same thing he does here. He had sex with as many men as he possibly could.”

“And did Mr. Taylor join his partner in Miami?”

“He had originally planned to, but changed his mind. Justin told me that he wanted to be with the family to celebrate our wedding.”

“Ms. Peterson, what outcome would you like to see come from today’s proceedings?”

“I want to see Gus come home with Melanie and me. I want us to be a family again. I want everyone to get along like we used to.”

“And what of Mr. Kinney’s role in his son’s life?”

“I wouldn’t mind Brian and Justin being in Gus’ life. Gus loves his father and I know Brian loves Gus. I just don’t think it would be the right thing for anyone if Gus went to live with Brian full time.”

“What do you think would happen if Mr. Kinney was given full custody of his son?”

“I think that Brian will do the best that he can but that eventually having to take care of Gus will become harder and harder for him. Brian’s business is taking off and Justin will be going to Los Angeles for a month next summer to work on a movie. Later Justin will have to be gone for a couple of months once they decide where they are going to film it and I’m afraid that Gus will get pushed aside because of their work commitments. If anything, Brian will have Mel and I or Debbie Novotny take care of Gus while they take care of things.”

“Thanks you, Ms. Peterson. I have no further questions, you honor.”

“Your witness, Mr. Cavanaugh.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. Mr. Peterson, why did you insist on Mr. Kinney being the father of your child?”

“I already said. It was because he’s intelligent and handsome. He’s everything that I would want for Gus’ father.”

“And it had nothing to do with the fact that you had feelings for my client?”

“Of course I had feelings for Brian. I consider him one of my best friends.”

“Isn’t it true that you told Mr. Kinney that you often thought of what it might have been like if the two of you had gotten married and raised a family?”

“I might have,” Lindsay squirmed, looking over at Melanie who did not appear to be happy.

“Ms. Peterson, if my client was only going to be a sperm donor, why were you and Ms. Marcus so upset that you couldn’t contact him when you went into labor?”

“I wanted Brian to be there for the birth of his son.”

“And the life insurance policy? Why did you ask him to sign that if he wasn’t to be involved with Gus?”

“Melanie and I thought it would be a good idea if we made sure that Gus would be taken care of if something happened to Brian.”

“So you expected Mr. Kinney to help care for your son, including giving you money to help raise Gus.”

“Of course not. I never expected Brian to help us pay for the things we would need for Gus.”

“Then why the life insurance policy?”

“I already answered that. Melanie and I just wanted to make sure that Gus would be okay if something happened to Brian.”

“Now, Ms. Peterson, you stated earlier that the reason you were so upset with my client for leaving his son in Mr. Taylor’s care was because Mr. Kinney didn’t know Mr. Taylor that well, correct?”

“Yes, I said that.”

“But isn’t it true that, at that time, my client and Mr. Taylor had been involved for quite a few months? That Mr. Taylor had, in fact, lived with Mr. Kinney for a short time before going to live with Ms. Novotny? That the two of them had spent quite a bit of time together and knew each other well?”

“They were only together for the sex. The only difference between Justin and any one of Brian’s other tricks back then was the frequency they were together.”

“How do you know what their relationship was at that time, Ms. Peterson? Did my client or Mr. Taylor confide in you what was happening between the two of them?”

“No, but I know how Brian is and there was no way that he and Justin were that close back then.”

“So it would surprise you to know that Mr. Taylor spent, on average, three to four nights a week at my client’s home. That my client and Mr. Taylor often talked to each other.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“So it’s possible that Misterrs. Taylor and Kinney did know each other and well? That it was you and Ms. Marcus that didn’t know Mr. Taylor that well?”

“Yes, I guess you could say that.”

“In that case, would it seem strange for Mr. Kinney to ask Mr. Taylor to watch his son?”

“No.”

“Now you also said that, at the time, you didn’t want to leave Gus with Mr. Taylor because you didn’t believe that he had much experience with young children, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And what did you base this assumption on?”

“Justin was only teenager at the time and I didn’t think that he had been around a lot of young children.”

“What about his sister, Molly? Isn’t it true that Mr. Taylor often helped his mother take care of his younger sister, even when she was an infant?”

“I didn’t know he had a sister at the time, so I had no idea that Justin had helped his mom with Molly.”

“Is this something that my client might have known?”

“Anything’s possible I guess.”

“Ms. Peterson, you stated that when you and Ms. Marcus were apart you were planning on marrying Gui DePruie in order to help him obtain his green card, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Even though it broke state and federal laws and you could have faced jail time if you were caught?” Lindsay squirmed in her seat.

“Yes.”

“Is that why you failed to inform Mr. Kinney of the new living arrangements in the home that his son was at?”

“I didn’t tell Brian or anyone else about what Gui and I had been planning because I didn’t think it concerned them. They didn’t have to be involved.”

“Even though Gus is Mr. Kinney’s son?”

“Yes.”

“You stated that you had agreed to marry Gui because you needed help with the bills. Was this because Ms. Marcus was no longer contributing since she was no longer living at the house?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t it true that you had already gone to Mr. Kinney and asked him for money even though he wasn’t working at the time?”

“Yes.”

“And how much money did Mr. Kinney give you at that time?”

“Two-thousand dollars.”

“Was that the first time Mr. Kinney had given you money to help out with Gus?”

“No.”

“Nor was it the last time, was it?”

“No.”

“How much money would you say Mr. Kinney has given you and Ms. Marcus to help raise his son?”

“I’m not sure. I’d say something along the lines of twenty to twenty-five thousand dollars since Gus was born.”

“And before that?”

“I don’t know what you mean?”

“Ms. Peterson, isn’t it true that Mr. Kinney helped pay the costs for the insemination?” Lindsay shot a look over to Melanie whose eyes were wide open. “Ms. Peterson?”

“Yes.”

“What about Michael Novotny?”

“What about him?”

“Well, if Mr. Kinney helped with the costs of the artificial insemination for you to have your son, did Mr. Novotny do the same when it came time for Ms. Marcus to have your daughter?”

“No. We didn’t go through the clinic to when it came time for Melanie to get pregnant. We took a chance and did it ourselves.”

“You didn’t go through a clinic, which would have tested Mr. Novotny’s sperm to make sure it was safe, where under sterile conditions your partner would have been impregnated? Why was this? Weren’t you concerned about health issues?”

“No. We knew Michael was safe. Besides we didn’t have the money to go to the clinic. Artificial insemination wasn’t covered by our insurance.”

“You said that you knew Mr. Novotny was safe when his partner, Benjamin Bruckner, is HIV positive. How did you know this without going through the clinic to have them test the sperm?”

“Michael assured us that he was. He assured both Melanie and I that he and Ben were safe. We didn’t feel that there was any worry. We knew they wouldn’t do anything that would risk the baby.”

“So you’re saying that if my client hadn’t helped with the money to help cover the costs, you wouldn’t have gone through the clinic that time either? Tell me, Ms. Peterson, if my client was only to be a sperm donor, why did you allow him to help with those costs?”

“Brian insisted on it. He said he didn’t want to take any chances that the insemination wouldn’t take on the first try”

“I see. Moving on. Ms. Peterson, you stated that Mr. Kinney does not believe in marriage, correct? That when you and Ms. Marcus were planning your wedding that he told you what a mistake you were making?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t it true that he was the one that had actually gotten your wedding to go off without a hitch after all of your own plans fell through?”

“Yes, but all he did was get the rest of our friends to help.”

“And the reason he didn’t attend was because he went to Miami, isn’t that what you said? Because he wanted to go have sex with as many people as he could?”

“Yes.”

“Ms. Peterson, isn’t it true that my client had offered you his tickets to Miami, stating he wanted to give you and Ms. Marcus a honeymoon, and you turned him down saying you didn’t want him doing something that went against his nature?”

“Yes.”

“So the truth is that you were the one that encouraged Mr. Kinney to go to Miami instead of staying at your wedding.”

“I guess so.”

“Ms. Peterson, you stated that you had Gus stay with my client after your daughter was born because you and Ms. Marcus were having problems. Wasn’t the problem the fact that you cheated on Ms. Marcus with a man by the name of Sam Auerbach, an artist whose work your gallery was showing?”

“Yes.”

“You moved out of your home because of this correct?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you take Gus with you at the time? Why did you prefer to leave him with his father?”

“I didn’t know what I was going to do. I was trying to make things work with Melanie plus work, and I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to give Gus the attention that he needed.”

“So once again, because of one of his mothers cheating on her spouse, Gus’ home life was upturned. Do you think this is the kind of nurturing environment that he needs?”

“No.”

“Now, Ms. Peterson, you and Ms. Marcus are currently going to counseling because of the problems the two of you have been having in regards to raising Gus. Can you please tell the court what finally led the two of you to seek counseling?”

“There was an incident involving Gus that made us realize that what Brian had been telling us was the truth.”

“Can you please tell the court about the incident?”

“Umm..about a month ago I had arrived home from work and told Melanie about a major sale I had made at the gallery. We decided to go away for the evening and had made arrangements to leave Annie with a neighbor of ours.”

“What about arrangements for Gus?”

“Gus was supposed to be staying at a friend’s house so we didn’t think we had to do anything about that.”

“But isn’t it true that Gus had come home earlier in the day and was upstairs in his room asleep? That Ms. Marcus had, in fact, completely forgotten that he was there so the two of you left him alone?”

“Yes.”

“And when did you realize that you had your son at home alone?”

“We didn’t realize what had happened until we were on the road. As soon as we did, we turned around at the next exit.”

“And what did you find when you had arrived home?”

“We found Brian and Justin with you and the social worker already at our home. We found out that Gus had called Brian’s cell phone when he woke up and realized he was by himself.”

“And this is why you now only have limited, supervised visitation with your son at this time, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Ms. Peterson, you said that you believed that if my client was given full custody of your son, he would eventually end up ignoring him in favor of his business, correct? That he and Mr. Taylor would end up having you or Debbie Novotny watch over Gus while they did whatever might come up?”

“Yes, that’s what I think will eventually happen. Brian isn’t capable of thinking of someone else for an extended period.”

“Really. If that was the case, then why did you feel that you could trust him to take care of Gus for the weeks it took Ms. Marcus to recover from the pregnancy and for the two of you to work out the problems in your relationship?”

“Brian volunteered to take care of Gus. Apparently he had decided that he wanted to be more of a hands on father. And Gus loves Brian so I thought that it would work out for everyone.”

“So you trusted that my client would put his son’s needs above his own, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And Mr. Kinney did put his son’s needs ahead of his own. In fact, wouldn’t you say that Gus actually thrived during the time he was living at my client’s home?”

“I don’t know that I would go so far as to say that Gus thrived, but he was happy there. He loved spending so much time with his father and Justin.”

“And during this period, how much time did you spend with Gus?”

“I don’t know. I was so busy taking care of Melanie, and then Annie. Plus we were trying to work things out.”

“Could you give the court an estimate?”

“I tried to see Gus at least two or three times a week, but there were some weeks where I could only get there once a week.”

“And how long would you visit at those times?”

“As much as I could, but sometimes I could only be there for a couple of minutes, but I still had work and I was trying to work out things with Melanie and we were both taking care of Annie, but there have been some evening where we would go over to Debbie’s while she was watching Gus and spend time with him there.”

“And how many times has Ms. Marcus seen Gus?”

“I’m not sure. I think she’s only had a chance to see him on those nights at Debbie’s.”

“So, what you are saying is, if it wasn’t for my client giving you and Ms. Marcus to spend the time with your son while Ms. Debbie Novotny was watching, Ms. Marcus wouldn’t have seen him at all since he was taken from your home? Tell me, Ms. Peterson, whose idea was it for you to spend the time with Gus at Ms. Novotny’s home?”

“Brian’s. He told Melanie and me that he thought that it might be a good idea that Gus spend some time with us outside of their home. It turned out that was one of the reasons that Brian had Debbie watching Gus when he and Justin went out.”

“And other than those times at Ms. Novotny’s, how often had Ms. Marcus seen Gus?”

“I think those were the only times.”

“So, with Gus out of your home, it became out of sight, out of mind. That doesn’t sound like something a good parent does.”

“I love my son and I would do anything for him.”

“Except let him interfere in your social life. I have no more questions for this witness, Your Honor.”

Part 19e

“Do you have any more witnesses to call, Mr. Stevenson?” Judge Fox asked.

“Not at this time, Your Honor.”

“Okay at this time the court will hear from Dana Parker, the social worker that was assigned to this case.” Te woman in question made her way to the stand, not glancing at either party, although both attorneys and their clients already knew what her report said. They had received a copy of the previous week.”

“Ms. Parker, before I have Misters Cavanaugh and Stevenson ask you anything, I would like you to give your report so that it can be entered into the court’s records.”

“Certainly, your honor. I was assigned by the Department of Child Welfare in order to discern what would be in the best interests of the minor child, Gus Kinney-Peterson because of a custodial suit between his biological parents, Brian Kinney and Lindsay Peterson. At that time, Ms. Peterson and her partner, Melanie Marcus, had custody of Gus during the week while Mr. Kinney would take him from Friday evening to Monday morning. I made one home visit to both parties while they had Gus to determine the situation prior to the events of October 23rd. I also made another visit to each home after that incident. Both of those visits were unscheduled. When I visited the home of Misses Peterson and Marcus, I found both women in their backyard, playing with their young daughter. Gus was upstairs alone. I saw that the Marcus-Peterson home was nicely furnished and clean. Gus had his own room on the second floor opposite his mothers.

"I observed the interaction between the family members and noticed tenseness between Ms. Marcus and Gus. He was withdrawn and quiet, only speaking when asked questions and then only saying as little as possible. I questioned Ms. Marcus and Ms. Peterson about their home and the relationship they had with Mr. Kinney. I noticed that, while Ms. Peterson tried to take care in what she was saying, Ms. Marcus had no such problem. She stated in quite a bit of detail what she thought of Mr. Kinney and his bid for custody of his son, the entire time while Gus was in the room.

“After the incident of October 23rd, when Gus was left alone because Ms. Peterson and Ms. Marcus forgot he was home, the tension I had noticed on my previous visit had magnified, even with Gus no longer living at the home, although both women did make a point of telling me that they loved both of their children equally.

“I questioned both Ms. Marcus and Ms. Peterson on their home and the way they were treating Gus while he was home. They both stated that they were doing their best to be more attentive to Gus and his needs and to make sure that he knew how much they loved him. I inquired about Ms. Marcus bringing home work from her office, which had been stated as being one of the reasons behind what had happened in October. She stated that she still brought home work from the office, choosing to do it home so that she could be with her family. She told me that, during that time, Ms. Peterson, if she was home, would take care of both children or that Gus would often play in his room when he was living with them. I also asked Ms. Peterson about her work habits when at home, where I was informed that because of the nature of her work Ms. Peterson was required to do it on site. She said that she cut back her hours where she could but that there were times where she had to work into the night and wouldn’t get home until after Gus was in bed. I also made inquiries about the children’s daycare. I was told that their daughter often spent the day with her father, Michael Novotny, at his store while Gus spent the day at the daycare center provided by the Gay and Lesbian Center.

“Now in regards to my visitations with Mr. Kinney. The first time I visited was at Mr. Kinney’s former home. At that time, Mr. Kinney owned a loft with only one bedroom, an open one at that. I mention this because I had read in the case files that Misses Peterson and Marcus were stating that they believed it to be a place unfit for a child. What I found instead was that Mr. Kinney had made a small room for his son to sleep in. He and Mr. Taylor had set up a grouping of silk screens that walled off a section of Mr. Kinney’s home and furnished it into a comfortable room for Gus. When I arrived I found Misters Kinney and Taylor playing a game with Gus on the computer. Unlike the times when I visited him with his mothers, I found Gus to be very animated around his father and Mr. Taylor. He was smiling and laughing.

“The next time I visited, Mr. Kinney had moved into his new home and Mr. Taylor was now living with him. In this home, Gus had his own room. The room was filled with toys and had been decorated with various murals that Mr. Taylor had done on the walls. When I asked Gus how he liked living with his father and Mr. Taylor, he said that he liked living with his daddy because ‘he wants him around and he loves him.’

“Like I had done with Misses Marcus and Peterson, I inquired about their jobs and if they brought home work from their offices. They both admitted that they did but that they waited until after Gus went to bed to actually do any work, preferring to spend the time making sure that Gus knew that he was more important than their jobs. Mr. Taylor also informed me that, on the occasions that he had to leave town for his job in California, he made sure to always call Gus so that he knew that he was thinking about him. Gus confirmed that his fathers didn’t work while he was up.

“I also inquired about where Gus spent his days while his father was working. Mr. Kinney informed me that he didn’t want to disrupt Gus’ routine anymore than it already was so he had decided to keep Gus at the daycare center that Misses Peterson and Marcus had had him in. I also inquired about the hours that Mr. Kinney put in at his advertising agency, he informed me that he made sure that he was out of his office no later than 5:30 and that he had cut back on his out of town meetings.

“At this time, Ms. Parker, I would like you to inform the court at your recommendation as to who should gain custody of the minor child, Gus Peterson-Kinney.” Judge Fox asked the social worker.

“Your Honor, the Department of Social Services recommends that custody of the minor child, Gus Peterson-Kinney be given to his father, Brian Kinney with visitation rights for Lindsay Peterson and Melanie Marcus to be up to the discretion of the court.”

“Thank you, Ms. Parker. Council may now ask questions of this witness. Mr. Cavanaugh, you may proceed.”

“Your Honor, I have no questions at this time,” Mark said, believing that the social worker’s report already stated everything that needed to be said for his case. He wanted to wait to see what Melanie and Lindsay’s attorney would try before deciding if he needed to ask anything else.

“Alright. Then Mr. Stevenson, you may proceed with any questions you may have.”

“Ms. Parker, you said that you believed it would be in the best interests of the child that custody be given to Mr. Kinney. Given Ms. Kinney’s sexual past and history of drug usage, why is that?”

“I saw no evidence supporting those things. What I saw was a man who wanted nothing more than to take care of his son.”

“Ms. Parker, have you ever recommended someone is granted custody of their child only to find out later that they were the abusive parent?”

“Not that I have been made aware of. I like to think that I can read people accurately.”

“Have you ever heard of any cases where the Department of Social Services was incorrect in their reports?”

“There have been cases, I’m sure.”

“Is it not possible that the reason that you didn’t see the evidence of Mr. Kinney’s drug use was because he knew that you were coming to do your required visit, so didn’t want to take the chance? That he wanted you to believe that the care of his child had made him give up what, until that point, have been a major point of his life?”

“It’s possible, I guess, although…”

“Now, Ms. Parker, you stated that when you made your visit to my clients’ home, that Gus was alone in his room while they were playing with their daughters, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Did you find this unusual?”

“Not really, although I did find the way that Gus seemed to insulate himself from his mothers when he did join us in their living room troubling.”

“Did you witness my clients abusing their son? Ignore him as Mr. Kinney has asserted?”

“No, I saw no evidence of abuse in the household. And no, when I was present neither Ms. Peterson or Ms. Marcus seemed to ignore Gus.”

“Now, in regards to the events of October 23rd, the night that Gus was left alone at his home, were you present at the home when my clients returned home?”

“No, I had already left the home after giving Mr. Kinney permission to take Gus home with him instead of placing him in temporary foster care.”

“At that time, yes, but I thought the situation was obvious.”

“But if you hadn’t talk to my clients before making the decision to allow Gus to go home with Mr. Kinney, how was the situation obvious?”

“The fact that Gus was home alone made the situation obvious.” Stevenson looked down at his notes, realizing that he couldn’t rattle the social worker. He silently cursed his clients, once again, for their lack of honesty in regards to the facts behind the case. He understood, finally, what had made their previous lawyer drop them as clients, even with him being a co-worker of Melanie Marcus. He knew, that considering what had been disclosed in the courtroom that day, their was a good chance that the only thing he could fight for was a liberal visitation schedule for his clients.

“I have no more questions for this witness, your Honor.”

“Mr. Cavanaugh, did you want to cross-examine the witness?’

“No, your Honor.” Mark sat down, positive that he had stated his case. He felt that the only thing that could work against them would be if the judge wanted to talk to Gus and the young boy said something that would make her question his relationship with his father. That was a scenario that Mark didn’t envision happening, though, so he wasn’t that worried about it. Brian had already told him that he spoken to Gus about living with him and Justin and he told Mark that Gus wanted to do just that.

“All, right,” Judge Fox stated, “at this time, with the permission from council, I would like to speak to Gus.”

“Your Honor, Gus is just across the street with an associate of my clients. She is just waiting for a call and she can bring him right over.”

“I think this would be a good time to call for lunch. Court will resume in an hour, at which time I would like council to be present in my chambers with Gus.”

“All rise,” the bailiff called. The people in the courtroom watched as Judge Fox left the courtroom. Justin joined Brian and Mark, wrapping his arms around his lover’s waist. The couple saw Melanie and Lindsay talking with their own attorney and could see by the looks on their faces that they were not happy.

“Well, that was the easy part,” Mark commented, shutting his briefcase. Brian stifled a laugh while Justin just looked at him in disbelief.

“Easy?” Justin repeated. “That was easy?”

“As opposed to waiting for the judge to actually make her decision, yes,” Mark told both of them. “Trust me that can be nerve-wracking.”

“I’m just glad that it’s almost over,” Justin said.

“What do you think our chances are?” Brian wanted to know. “What are the odds that the judge will give us custody?”

“I think we made our case, not to mention that social services recommended that you gain custody of Gus. That’s going to go a long way in our favor,” Mark explained. “At this point, the only thing that could go wrong, in my mind, is if Gus says something to the judge but I don’t see that happening. That little boy loves you, and Justin, and, in my opinion, is flourishing under your care. You’ve turned into a damn good father, Brian.”

“Brian,” Lindsay said, interrupting the three men’s conversation, “I was wondering if it would be alright if Mel and I went with you to get Gus. We would really love to see him.”

“Who’s taking care of Annie?” Brian asked, not answering her.

“We left her with Debbie,” Lindsay answered. “We didn’t want to bring her to the courthouse. We weren’t sure how she would behave, especially since we wouldn’t be able to take care of her. Besides, Debbie loves spending time with her granddaughter.”

“She feels the same way about spending time with Gus,” Brian agreed. He looked over at Melanie and had to fight back a flinch at the look she was shooting his way. ‘If looks could kill, I’d be six feet under right now, if not cremated.’

“About lunch, Brian?” Lindsay drew his attention away from the brunette woman.

“Does your wife promise to be on her best behavior?”

“”She doesn’t want to fight in front of Gus,” Lindsay told him. “He’s already been through so much; we don’t want to hurt him anymore than we already have.”

“I’m sure Gus would love to spend some time with his mommies,” Brian said. Lindsay smiled at the brunet. “Why don’t you meet us outside? He’s over in the park with Cynthia. We can all go over and get him.”

“Thanks Brian.” Lindsay gave him a quick hug before returning to Melanie’s side. He watched as Lindsay said something to her and saw Melanie shoot him a small nod. He turned his attention back to Justin and Mark.

“So, Mark, what do you say? Want to join us for what will probably be an interesting lunch?”

“Not today, Brian. I’m going to go see if I can talk Tonya into going to lunch with me. Take advantage of being in the same building with my wife.” Brian and Justin laughed and watched as Mark made his way out of the courtroom. Melanie and Lindsay, along with their lawyer, had already left the room and the men were pretty sure that the women were making their way to the park across the street to see Gus. It would be the first time that all four people would be together with Gus since shortly after Gus had moved in with Brian and Justin.

Brian and Justin made their way out of the courtroom, taking the elevator down to the ground floor. They walked out of the courthouse itself and saw Melanie and Lindsay waiting for them.

“Thanks for this, Brian,” Lindsay said again. “I hate the fact that I’m missing him grow up.”

“Well, we all know who you can blame for that, don’t we?” Melanie sneered, saying something for the first time since the court went on a break.

“Mel, please,” Lindsay pleaded with her wife. “Please don’t start. Why can’t we all just get along, for Gus’ sake?”

“I still don’t see why we even need to answer to this asshole,” Melanie said. “Fuck, Linds, how can you even think of being so nice to the bastard? He’s fucking trying to take away our son. Shit, he already conned the social worker so that she thinks he walks on water and our own god damn attorney says that there’s a damn good chance that that judge will actually give custody of Gus to the son of a bitch. Tell me, why the fuck should we be nice to him?”

“Because he’s the one who gets to decide whether or not we get to have lunch with our son,” Lindsay told her. “Do you really want Gus to see you fighting with his father? Let him see that nothing’s changed since this whole thing started? Is that the impression you want to give him?”

“Fine,” Melanie said, although the expression on her face showed everyone that she was anything but happy with having to deal with Brian.

“Daddy, Jussin,” a small voice shouted, stopping any arguing that might have gone on. The two couples turned towards the park where they watched Gus, with Cynthia’s help, carefully cross the street. Brian smiled as he bent down and picked up the little boy. He thought again of how much things had changed since the night when Lindsay and Melanie had first asked him to be the sperm donor for their child. Back then, he didn’t think there would be any way that he would want to be a part of his son’s life but now he wouldn’t change a thing. He just hoped that he would be able to keep his family together.

Part 19f

Brian and Justin watched Mark as he took the young boy to Judge Fox’s chambers. The youngster turned back once, waving and smiling back at his daddies before they lost sight of him. Brian sat down and leaned his head against the wall behind him. He closed his eyes and took a deep breathe, trying to control his emotions and not think about what his son was about to go through. Even though Mark assured him that Judge Fox would be careful and not try to upset Gus, Brian was still afraid. He thought that Gus had been through enough already and wished, once again, that he didn’t have to put his son through everything he had.

“I didn’t think it would ever get this far,” Brian said suddenly, startling Justin who looked down at him. The blond joined his lover on the bench and began rubbing Brian’s back; trying to help ease some of the tension he could feel coursing through Brian’s body. “I didn’t think they would make me take it this far. I mean, Linds is Gus’ fucking mother and Mel always made a point of telling everyone that she was Gus’ mother too. I knew that having Annie would change some things, but I honestly thought that once I showed them what the fuck was going on, that they would fix it. That they would do everything they could to make sure that they let Gus know that they loved him just as much as they did Annie.”

“Brian, you had every right to expect that the girls would treat Gus the same as they did Annie,” Justin assured his lover. “Gus is their son. They’ve been the ones raising him and they always made sure that you knew that they were the ones responsible for Gus, not you. It’s not your fault that they couldn’t do that.”

“I know,” Brian said. “It’s just that Gus deserves better than this. He deserves to have a stable home and people that love him. He shouldn’t have to be question by strangers about his home life.” Brian looked towards the doorway that Gus had disappeared behind, his thoughts going back to what was happening back there. He wished he could be back there with his son, but understood the reasons why he couldn’t. “I think I’m just afraid of what the judge is going to decide. There’s a good chance, even with what has happened, that she’ll give Gus to his mothers. A lot of people think that children should be with their mother when it comes to custody.”

“Well, not in this case,” Justin stated. “Mark told us that this judge is fair and we made our case. We proved that Gus is better off with you than with them, at least for now.” Brian nodded his head, not sure what else to say. Justin went quiet beside him and son both men’s thoughts drifted to the little boy that was currently being questioned about his parents.

In the chambers of Judge Patricia Fox, the young boy in question was busy fidgeting in the chair he had been asked to sit in. His father had told him that he was going to be asked some questions and that he wanted Gus to answer truthfully, no matter what. Gus looked around at the people in the room with him, afraid that he had done something wrong, even though he was told he hadn’t.

“Gus, do you know why you’re here?” the Judge asked the boy, her voice calm in her hopes of no scaring him.

“My daddy told me that I was s’posed to answer questions,” Gus answered. “He told me to tell the truth.”

“That’s right, Gus,” Judge Fox said. “I want to talk to you about what it’s like living with your father and Justin.”

“I loves living with Daddy and Daddy Jussin,” the boy stated happily. “They spend lots of time with me. Daddy Jussin painted pictures on my walls and Daddy reads to me at night and we watch movies and Daddy and Jussin are going to take me to the zoo.” Judge Fox smiled at the happiness that was evident in the little boy’s voice.

“So you like living with your father?” Gus nodded his head.

“Don’t you miss your mommies though?” Gus’ smile disappeared and the Judge was surprised by the difference.

“They don’t love me anymore,” Gus said quietly. “They love Annie now.”

“Gus, what makes you think that your mothers don’t love you now that Annie is living there?”

“Mommy never home and Mama ignores me.” The Judge looked over at the two attorneys in the room, silently asking for clarification as to which woman was Mommy and Mama.

“Gus refers to Miss Peterson as mommy while Ms. Marcus is mama,” Mark told her.

“Gus, what do mean that your Mama ignores you? What does she do?”

“She just plays with Annie or works. She yells at me if I make noise. She forgets I’m there.” The Judge watched as Gus sniffled, a couple of tears falling down his face as he thought about the women who raised him. “They left me alone.”

“Gus, are you talking about when you called your father? The night you started living with him?” Gus nodded his head.

“Daddy come get me and told Mommy and Mama that he was taking me home with him and Daddy Jussin. He showed me my new room and told me that he would make sure that I would be safe.”

“Gus, how did you know to call your Daddy? How did you know his number?”

“Daddy showed me how to call him. He told me he wanted me to know case I wanted to talk to him or Daddy Jussin. Told me to use in case of emer..emerg…in case I got in trouble.”

“That’s very smart of him, and you must be a very smart boy to remember how to do that. Did your mommies teach you how to call them if you needed to?” Gus shook his head.

“No.”

“Gus, is Annie the only reason you don’t think your mommies love you?”

“Mama doesn’t like Daddy. She keeps calling him names and saying how I just like him. If Mama hate Daddy, she hate me.”

“What makes you think your Mama hates your Daddy?”

“I heard her say it,” Gus said simply. “Mama said she hated Daddy and she wished she never heard his name.”

“What about your Daddy, Gus? Does he call your Mama bad names?”

“I heard him a couple of times, but he says he’s sorry when he sees me,” the little boy answered. “He doesn’t yell like Mama though. Her and Mommy fight lots.”

“They do? Do you know what they fight about?”

“Lots of times they fight about Daddy. Mama says Mommy loves Daddy more than her.”

“Gus, if you had your choice, who would you rather live with. Your father or your mommies?”

“I miss Mommy and Mama but I like living with Daddy and Daddy Jussin. They love me and do things with me. And I love my room there.”

“Okay, thank you Gus for talking to me. It was really nice meeting you. You seem like a bright little boy and I can see why your parents love you.” Judge Fox turned her attention to the two attorneys. “Mr. Cavanaugh you may take Gus back out to his father. This court will be in recess for fifteen minutes while I go over everything. My decision will come when we go back in session.”

Mark took Gus’s hand and led him down the hallway, back to his father. As soon as Brian and Justin were in his sight, Gus ran to them. Brian smiled as he bent down to pick his son up, swinging the little boy in his arms. Justin looked over at Melanie and Lindsay, who were watching from the opposite side of the hallway. He could see how much they wanted to come join the men but didn’t want to call them over. After the near disaster that was the lunch break, Justin didn’t think either man could handle any more stress. The blond couldn’t believe the way Melanie was acting towards both of them. He had thought, like Brian, that once both women saw what their attitudes towards Brian was doing to Gus, they would do what they could to correct their behavior, but Melanie still refused to change her attitude. Justin did give her credit for trying, but knew that it still wasn’t enough and he wasn’t positive that it would last. Justin turned his attention back to Brian and Gus in time to hear the brunet ask his son how things went.

“I told the truth like you told me too, Daddy,” Gus told his father. “I told her I like living with you and Daddy Justin and about the pictures in my room.”

“That’s good, Gus,” Brian said, smiling at his son. Hearing Gus say that he liked living with him pleased Brian. To him, it let him know that he must be doing something right and that maybe he wouldn’t turn out to be like his own father. Brian turned to Mark. “So what happens now?”

“Well, in a few minutes you’ll be finding out it you get to take Gus home with you for good.”

“Okay. That’s good,” Brian said, his nerves coming back tenfold. “Is it okay for us to bring Gus into the courtroom? I told Cynthia that she could go home for the day.”

“It should be fine,” Mark assured Brian. “In fact, why don’t we head in now? The judge should be on the bench soon.” Brian picked Gus up, holding him to the side while Justin moved to join him. Brian held Gus tightly for a minute, knowing that there could be a good chance that he wouldn’t be taking his son home with him.

“It’ll be okay, Brian,” Justin told the brunet. “You’ll see.”

“I hope so, Justin.” Brian handed Gus over to Justin so that he could take his seat at the attorney’s table. The two men tried to entertain Gus for the few minutes it would be until the hearing resumed. Before they knew it the bailiff was calling for everyone to rise. Brian took one last look back at his son being held in his lover’s arms before taking a deep breath and turning his attention towards the judge.

“Be seated. First off, I want to say that I have never had to judge a case like. The fact that the petitioner had actually signed over his paternity rights, whether that had been followed through with or not, is usually enough to make my decision for me. In this case, that is not what happened. All parties stated that the reason Mr. Kinney had signed over his parental rights to his son was to help the relationship between Ms. Marcus and Ms. Peterson, for whatever reason. I believe that Mr. Kinney did this, not because he didn’t care for his son, but because he loved him and wanted to make sure that his son grew up in a house filled with love, not because he didn’t want to be a father to him.

“Now, Ms. Peterson and Ms. Marcus have both stated that they were afraid of the kind of influence Mr. Kinney’s lifestyle would have on Gus. Mr. Kinney’s excessive drug use and multiple sexual partners, they said, would put Gus in danger. To that, I have to say, despite Mr. Kinney’s past with those things is questionable; there is no indication that it is still a part of his life. He and Mr. Taylor appear to be in a healthy relationship now and I feel that Mr. Kinney should not be penalized for things he did in his past that does not have an impact on his son.

“Mr. Kinney, on the other hand, stated that he was afraid for his son’s safety, both physically and emotionally, if Gus was to remain with his mothers. After reviewing the facts, including both the testimony given today as well as the Department of Social Services report, I have to say that he has reason to worry.” With that said, Judge Fox faced Melanie and Lindsay.

“Ms. Marcus, I have to say, while I do not doubt that you love Gus, I believe that the ill feelings you have towards Mr. Kinney are affecting the way that you are treating him, especially now that you have your own child. You stated that you are going to counseling to try and work on the problems you seem to be having in raising Gus; I would be lying if I didn’t say the events of October 23rd don’t bother me greatly. Ms. Marcus, I can understand you caring for your daughter, but that does not excuse you for the treatment that you have been giving Gus. It is your job as a parent to make sure that you child knows that he, and she, is loved and that is a job that, by everything I see, you are falling down on. It does not help that you have found it necessary to belittle Mr. Kinney in Gus’ presence shows that you care little for his feelings. How do you expect a little boy to believe that you love him when you go to great lengths to let everyone know what you think of his father? The father that he loves.

“Ms. Peterson, for your part, it is also your job to make your children feel loved, even more so since Gus is your biological child as much as Mr. Kinney’s. Instead of doing what you could to reassure your son of your and your partner’s love, it appears as if you decided to do nothing, hence encouraging Gus’ lack of self-assurance in regards to his mother’s love. I understand that you felt the need to support Ms. Marcus because you didn’t want to cause more damage to your relationship with her, but the fact remains that your main responsibility should have been your son. You have taken steps to rectify that mistake but it still seems to me that there is a lot of room for improvement.

“Now, Mr. Kinney,” Judge Fox said, turning her attention to Brian, “you and Mr. Taylor both stated that you noticed what was happening in the Marcus-Peterson home when it came to their treatment of Gus. You stated that you told both women that there was a problem. You’ve also admitted that your past does include multiple bed partners and drug use. And while that is not an atmosphere that I feel a child should be exposed to, I am also certain that it is something that you haven’t exposed to Gus. You stated that your drug use has decreased significantly and that your only sexual partner is your partner Justin Taylor and I have to say, that everything points to that being the truth. You’ve also gone out of your way to make sure that Gus knows that you love him and will do what it takes to make him feel safe.” Judge Fox looks down at her notes making sure that she hadn’t forgotten anything. Justin reached forward, holding Gus in his lap, resting his hand on Brian’s shoulder in a show of support. Brian grabbed the hand on his shoulder, squeezing it as he waited to hear the decision.

“Now, after saying all of that, it is the decision of this court that full custody of Gus Peterson-Kinney is awarded to Brian Kinney.” A cry rose up from Lindsay as she heard that. Melanie held her wife while the blonde buried her head in Melanie’s shoulder. On the other side of the courtroom, Brian turned and grabbed Gus from Justin, giving his lover a quick kiss. Judge Fox waited a minute before gaining everyone’s attention again. “Now, in regards to visitation rights for Ms. Peterson. It is the order of the court that Ms. Peterson will be able to see Gus, unsupervised, once a week. What day will be determined between the parties? In regards to Ms. Marcus.” The Judge turned her attention to Melanie once more and saw the anger on the brunette woman’s face. "Ms. Marcus, as I stated, the denial you have in any wrong doing on your part in regards to your treatment of Gus troubles me greatly and until it is proven that your attitude has changed I can not, in all good conscience, allow Gus to be left in your care. I am not disallowing you visitation rights with Gus, but those visits will be supervised, whether by Ms. Peterson or another person. That decision will be opened for review in six months, hopefully in that time, Ms. Marcus, you will get the help that you need.

“This court is adjourned.”

Part 20

Brian carried Gus into the house, the little boy having fallen asleep on the drive home. Because of the hearing, Gus hadn’t been able to take his usual afternoon nap and he couldn’t stay awake any longer. While his lover put Gus to bed, Justin went into the kitchen to fix them something to eat. He knew that Brian had to be hungry since the only person to actually eat something during the lunch break was Gus. Both men were too nervous about what was going to happen but now that they knew that they were going to keep Gus, Justin’s appetite had returned with a vengeance. Justin had just decided to make some pasta when the phone began to ring. He moved quickly to pick it up, not wanting it to wake Gus up.

“Hello.”

“Justin, where is he?” The blond moaned when he heard the voice on the other end of the phone. He knew it would only be a matter of time before the rest of their little family heard about the judge’s decision, he had just hoped that they would give them a little time before calling or coming over. The phone call proved that wasn’t going to happen.

“Hi Debbie. I’m fine. Things are going well. And how are you?” Justin said, not able to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. He rolled his eyes at Brian, who had just walked into the kitchen to hear Justin’s greeting.

“Don’t fuck with me, Sunshine,” Debbie told him and he knew instantly that, even if she had gotten over her initial anger at Brian for suing for custody of Gus she was still upset with the two men. “Let me talk to that asshole.” Before Justin could say anything else Brian took the phone from him. The brunet kissed his lover quickly.

“What’s for dinner?” Brian asked, giving himself a minute. He knew that his ignoring Debbie would only anger the woman more but he didn’t care. He had already put up with two months of her yelling at him and didn’t think one more time would be that big of a deal.

“I was thinking about cooking up those ravioli we picked up the other day. I still have some of the sauce and meatballs that my mom gave us.”

“Sounds good.” Debbie’s voice could be heard screaming through the phone and Brian took a deep breath to prepare himself. “Hello, Debbie. To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?”

“Cut the shit, asshole,” Debbie shouted. “I can’t believe you actually went through with it. How dare you fucking take Gus away from those two girls?”

“They didn’t leave me much of a fucking choice, Debbie,” Brian said, wanting to raise his voice but knowing that he couldn’t because of the little boy that was sleeping upstairs. “They knew that things couldn’t stay the same. That I wasn’t going to let them treat Gus the way they seem to think they can treat me. Nothing changed.”

“You didn’t give them enough fucking time to change,” Debbie continued to shout. “You took Gus away from his own damn birthday party and the next thing anyone knew, you were suing for custody. You didn’t even have the fucking nerve to talk to them before hand. That’s low, even for you.”

“I gave them plenty of fucking time. Gus’ birthday was just the final straw. None of you wanted to see what was going on until I made it so you had no choice so don’t you dare come yelling at me because you don’t like what I did to make sure my son knew he had someone that loved him.”

“We all love Gus. Don’t you dare fucking say that we don’t.” Brian rubbed the bridge of his nose. He could feel a headache coming on and knew that if he continued the conversation with Debbie there was a better than good chance that one, if not both of them, would say something that they wouldn’t be able to take back.

“Debbie, I am not having this conversation with you. Not again,” he told her. “Justin and I have both told you why we felt we had to do this. If you still can’t agree with it, or at least be willing to see why we had to do it, I don’t know what else I can say. Now if that’s all, I have a blond waiting for me.” Justin smiled at Brian from the stove.

“Don’t you hang up on me you asshole,” Justin could hear Debbie yell as Brian did exactly that. The brunet walked over to his lover wrapping his arms around the smaller man and putting his head on his shoulder.

“She’s going to be pissed at you for doing that.”

“It won’t be the first time she’s been pissed at me and I know that it sure as shit it isn’t going to be for the last time,” Brian assured him. “And it isn’t as if we didn’t expect it. No matter what Debbie and the rest of that little band of merry makers may say, they are not going to be happy that Gus is going to be living with us instead of the munchers.”

“I know,” Justin sighed, “but that doesn’t mean that I have to like it. I don’t understand why they can’t see that you were only doing what you think is right. It’s not your fault that Melanie and Lindsay didn’t leave you any choice.”

“You know that and I know that. The thing is, we’re the only ones that know that,” Brian reminded Justin.

“Vic, Ben and Emmett support you,” Justin pointed out. “They’ve supported you since the very beginning. Shit, they were willing to put with Debbie kicking them out of the damn diner for you so at least we know they won’t treat you like shit because you did what you had to.”

“I know,” Brian said. “And I appreciate everything that you, and they, have done do make sure that Gus has gotten through all of this without losing everyone. I know Ben is the reason that Mikey even started talking to me again, even if it wasn’t to support me necessarily. Fuck, Vic even moved out of the house, although I know that he and Rodney were looking into getting a place together before all this had happened.”

“And Emmett even gave up any chance of him and Ted becoming as close as friends as they had been, especially since Blake is out of the picture now.” The ending of that relationship had surprised only a few people, although the reason for the breakup did. Blake had contacted his parents again, after five years, at the insistence of Ted, only to find out that his mother was sick. The blond had gone to see her and was welcomed back into the family with open arms. Blake decided that, as much as he loved Ted and wanted his relationship with the accountant to work out; Blake wanted his family more and decided to stay with them.

“He’s better off without him,” Brian stated.

“Who? Ted or Emmett?”

“Surprisingly, both of them, although I was talking about Emmett,” Brian said. “But I know what you’re trying to tell me, Sunshine. I know what those guys had to deal with because they supported me and there’s no way I can repay them for it.”

“Brian, do you think things will ever be the same as they were before all this started?”

“I doubt it,” Brian told him. “Considering this family’s history, even if things calmed down to the point where we could all be in the same room without killing each other, things won’t ever be the same. There’s no way things can ever be the same. Now what about dinner?” Justin laughed at the way Brian could just change the subject, no matter what it was or how serious.

“Coming right up,” he told him, moving to put the ravioli in the now boiling water. It didn’t take long for the pasta to cook and Justin added the sauce to it. Just as he was carrying it to the table, they heard someone ringing the doorbell. “Why do I think I really don’t want to know who that is?”

“Because you know our family and their history of having bad timing.” When neither man made a move to answer the door, the bell rang again and was promptly followed by banging on the door.

“We better get that before whoever it is wakes up Gus,” Justin said. “You’d think that, after the hearing, we would be persona non gratis when it comes to our friends.”

“We are, but that doesn’t mean they won’t take the opportunity to yell at me if they can,” Brian told him over his shoulder as he went to get the door, opening just as the person on the other side was about to start banging again.

“Mikey, what a surprise,” Brian said, greeting his old friend, returning to go back to the kitchen. “Let me guess, you’ve come to tell me how horrible I am because I took Gus away from his mommies.”

“I heard what happened in court,” the store owner told him.

“What did they do, announce it on the early news?” Brian asked, sarcastically. “We’ve only been out of court for a little over an hour and somehow everyone knows what’s happened.”

“Melanie called,” he told him. “She wanted to know if I could take Annie for the night. She and Lindsay wanted to spend the night together without having to worry about upsetting her.”

“Probably so they could argue about who thinks I’m a bigger asshole,” Brian quipped.

“I thought Mel didn’t want Ben around Annie since he told her that he thought Brian was right,” Justin said.

“She doesn’t,” Michael told him, “but I told her she didn’t have a choice. That I wasn’t going to give up my family because she wasn’t happy with what they thought about her.”

“I can only imagine her reaction to that,” Brian stated, motioning for Michael to sit down.

“It wasn’t pretty,” Michael affirmed. “She threatened to keep Annie away from me but I think the judge’s decision today scared her.”

“Probably afraid you might decide to try and take Annie away from her,” Justin said. “She’s not going to want to do anything to get you so angry that you’ll do that to her.”

“I have no intentions of trying to take Annie away. The only reason I would even think about it would be if she started treating Annie they way that she had been treating Gus,” Michael told them. “Mel loves Annie and I know that.”

“Mikey, I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” Brian assured. “Mel’s problems with Gus were because of how she feels about me. She likes you, even if she’s not happy with you right now, so I don’t think you have anything to worry about. Just give her time to cool down and I’m sure things will get better, but Mikey, I gotta ask. What are you doing here? I’m sure you didn’t just come to tell me that you were taking Annie for the night.”

“Actually no,” Michael admitted. “I just wanted to let you know that Ben and I are here if you need anything, even if it’s just someone to vent at.”

“Michael…”

“No, Brian. It’s okay. I know that I haven’t been as supportive of you as I could have been. I knew what was happening but I was afraid of what might happen if I went against Mel and it didn’t help that Ma was bitching about you the entire time. I didn’t want them to take their anger out on me.”

“It’s not going to get any better just because the judge said that Gus could stay with me and Justin,” Brian told his friend. “If anything, it may get worse because Melanie and Lindsay are going to do everything they can to prove that being with me isn’t good for Gus. Shit, you’re mother has already called to bitch me out.”

“I can only imagine what she had to say,” Michael groaned. “I’ll work on her, don’t worry.” Michael looked down at his watch and grimaced when he noticed the time. “I better get going. I told Mel that I would be right over and that was a half hour ago.” Michael walked towards the front door, Brian and Justin following him. “Maybe we can get together soon. We never have given you a good housewarming party.”

“And you have no idea how grateful I am about that, but you’re right. Maybe this weekend you and the rest of those still talking to me can come over,” Brian offered.

“Sounds good. I’ll give you a call.” Michael gave Brian a kiss good-bye. “See ya, Boy Wonder.”

“Bye, Mikey.” The two men watched Michael leave, their arms wrapped around each other. They couldn’t believe what the other man had just offered. They knew the position that Michael was in, being pulled in two different directions and it was the reason that they didn’t try to force him to make a decision. Brian and Justin were just glad that Michael had managed to get his family back after he had kicked Ben out. The couple had worked hard to get their relationship back on track and now they were happy. Brian hoped that they would stay that way, his friend deserved it.

“Do you think that Melanie will take out her anger at us on Michael and Ben?” Justin asked, pulling Brian out of his thoughts.

“When it comes to her, I have no idea of what she’ll do,” Brian answered. “I just don’t want her to hurt Gus anymore and unless she gets some more help, that’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

“She’s going to counseling now, though,” Justin pointed out. “She knows that she fucked up and that’s a step in the right direction, right?”

“I hope so, Sunshine.”

Part 21

Saturday came entirely too quickly for Brian. He could hear Justin busy himself in the kitchen while he went around and picked up some of Gus’ toys that were lying around the living room. His son was upstairs taking his nap, even though the four year old had protested vehemently that he wasn’t tired. Brian shook his head as he contemplated how domestic his life had become in the past few months. If someone had told him just last year that he would be the owner of a home in the suburbs and a full-time father to his son, he would have laughed in his face, but that’s exactly what he had become. And, to his own surprise, Brian wouldn’t change a thing, except for the circumstances that lead to those changes.

He still couldn’t believe that things had gotten so far out of control. That he had to resort to going to court in order to retain custody of his son. Brian had been sure that, once things were put out into the open where they could be no longer denied, that Lindsay and Melanie would work with him to make sure that Gus was happy. He hadn’t wanted to take Gus away from his mothers, he knew how much the little boy loved the two women. Brian had hoped to work things out with the two women that would make everyone happy, but instead, the only thing that happened that the group of friends that were like a family to him was so divided that one half wasn’t even talking to the other. And now he was expecting the half that was still talking to him and Justin in a little over an hour.

Earlier in the day, Lindsay had come over to the house to see Gus. She had hoped that she would be able to take the little boy back to the home she shared with Melanie and Annie and had been upset when Brian told her no. Brian had told her that she could take Gus for a couple of hours that afternoon, wanting her to promise to have him home before his and Justin’s guests would arrive. Lindsay had been unable to promise that, having wanted to have Gus stay for the weekend, saying that she would take their son to school on Monday. Once she realized that Brian wouldn’t budge on his refusal, she stayed for a few more minutes, visiting Gus, before making her excuses and leaving in a huff. Gus was so upset by his mother’s visit, and abrupt exit, that it had taken Brian and Justin almost thirty minutes to calm him down.

“Are you okay?” A gentle voice asked from behind at the same time that Brian felt his lover’s arm wrap themselves around his waist.

“Fine,” Brian told him. “Just thinking.”

“About what?”

“Things.” Justin smiled at Brian’s answer. He was used to his lover’s tendency to downplay what was going on in his head.

“Anything in particular? Just wondering when things will go back to normal.” Justin knew instantly what Brian was thinking about. He also knew that as long as he stayed quiet that there was a good chance that Brian would eventually tell him what was wrong. His patience was rewarded a few minutes later when Brian finally answered his question.

“I thought things would be different now,” Brian said. “That once they saw what was happening with Gus that things would change. Get better. That the munchers would realize that things couldn’t continue the way they have been, but it’s still the same. They’ll admit that they fucked up but somehow it’s still my fault. I’m the one to blame because they can’t treat my son the way he should be treated. And, for some reason, it’s okay for them to treat Gus like shit just because he’s my son and I’m just supposed to sit back and take it. Not do anything to make it better because I’m just the heartless shit that doesn’t care about anyone or anything other than getting my dick sucked.”

“Not everyone thinks that,” Justin corrected. “Emmett and Ben certainly don’t. They supported you through out this whole thing. So have Vic and Rodney. Even Michael did the best he could although we could all tell that Mel was trying to get him to choose her and Lindsay because of Annie. They were holding that little girl over his head to the point that I wouldn’t be surprised if he had decided to take them to court to make sure that they don’t keep Annie away from him.”

“That will never happen,” Brian told him. “No matter what happens, Mikey is too nice of a guy to do that to the girls, especially considering what Debbie’s reaction would likely be.”

“Speaking of Debbie, do you know if she’s coming tonight? You sent her an invitation, didn’t you?”

“Yes, dear,” the brunet drawled, “I sent her an invitation. Even called and left a message on her machine like a good little boy but she never replied. Other than her saying that I was a complete asshole for taking Gus away from his mothers, I haven’t heard from her since the trial ended.”

“So that’s one person that probably won’t be showing up tonight.”

“Who knows with her. She might show up just to make sure that I haven’t done anything too evil to Gus yet. Make sure that he’s still alive and healthy.” Justin tightened his arms around his lover.

“Bri, no mater what she might say, Debbie knows that you would never do anything to hurt Gus.” Anything else that Justin might have said was interrupted by someone ringing the doorbell.

“Ten dollars says that’s Mikey,” Brian groaned. “Probably wanting to make sure everything was okay before anyone else showed up.”

“I’m not taking that bet,” Justin said, heading for the front door. “Especially because I know you’re probably right.” Justin opened the door to find Michael, Ben and Hunter standing there. “Hey guys, come on in.”

“Hey Boy Wonder,” Michael said, walking into the house, followed closely by his lover and their foster son, both looking around the house in wonder. While Michael had been by the house once before, to talk to Justin about Rage, it was the first time that Ben and Hunter had seen the home.

“Nice place,” Hunter said, leering when he noticed Brian join the group. “I wouldn’t mind living here.”

“Not happening, Mikey Junior,” Brian stated, accepting the hug his best friend offered him. “I already have one child living with me, I don’t need another.”

“I wasn’t thinking of living here as a child,” the teen said, causing everyone to laugh. The men were all used to Hunter’s flirting with Brian and they all took it in stride since he no longer took it to the extremes that he had when Hunter had first met the advertising executive. Hunter had even begun to form a friendship with Justin, the blond man being the closest in the group to his own age, and had stopped insulting the man that had won Brian’s heart. It had made the get togethers among the family easier to deal with, that was until the custody case.

“Speaking of children,” Michael said, smacking his foster son on the side of his head, “where is Gus?”

“Upstairs taking a nap,” Brian told him as he led the men into the kitchen where Justin went back to setting up some of the snacks they were going to put out for their guests. “He had a visitor earlier and it didn’t go as good as it could have.”

“What do you mean? Who came over?”

“Lindsay,” the brunet answered bluntly. “She wanted to take Gus for the weekend, even though it meant that there was a good chance that she would end up living him alone with Mel. She wasn’t too happy when I told her no.”

“I can imagine,” Michael said, having a good idea of exactly how the blonde woman had reacted. In the time since the Judge’s decision, the two women had taken it upon themselves to vent about it to the store owner whenever he stopped to visit his daughter. Justin looked between the two friends and could tell that they needed to talk about something.

“Guys, why don’t I show you the house,” Justin offered to Ben and Hunter, both of whom took him up on it and left the two friends alone in the kitchen.

“Seems the Boy Wonder decided to give us some alone time,” Michael joked.

“Yeah, he does seem to know what I need without my having to tell him anything,” Brian observed. “I’m sorry, Mikey.” The brunet looked at his oldest friend in shock, confused. He had no idea why Brian was apologizing to him.

“For what?”

“I know this hasn’t been easy on you,” the ad exec explained. “You were put in the middle of this whole thing and that was something that I didn’t mean to happen. I’m sure that your mother and the girls didn’t make things easy for you. I know they wanted you to basically tell me to go to hell because of what a bastard I am.”

“True, but I do have a mind of my own, even if it doesn’t seem that way sometimes,” Michael stated. “I knew that you were only doing what you had to do to make sure that Gus was okay. And you did what you could to make sure that you didn’t put me in the middle.”

“But you still got put there,” Brian pointed out. “Hunter told Justin about how Melanie tried to keep Annie away from you if you didn’t say you would testify for them.”

“And she backed down as soon as I told her that I wouldn’t,” he rebuked. “They know that I wasn’t going to get involved in this thing because I didn’t want to risk my own family, and that’s exactly what I did. I stayed out of it. But I do have to tell you, Ma hasn’t made it easy, especially since Uncle Vic moved in with Rodney.”

“I can only imagine,” Brian snorted. “We invited her. For tonight.”

“I know. She told me today when I was in the diner,” Michael explained. “She told me how surprised she was that you wanted her to come. She figured that you wouldn’t want her anywhere near your new place, especially now that Gus is living here.”

“I take it that means that she isn’t coming.”

“Actually,” Michael began just as the door bell rang. “I wouldn’t go that far.

Part 22

“I’ll get it, Brian,” Justin shouted, heading towards the front door only to stop dead in his tracks when it opened before he could reach it. He stared in shock at who was standing in front of him, having assumed, like Brian, that the red-wigged waitress wouldn’t come to the house warming party. “Debbie, this is a surprise.”

“I did receive an invitation to this little shin dig, Sunshine, so why shouldn’t I be here,” Debbie said, looking around the entranceway. She saw Brian and Michael come from the kitchen and turned to greet them. “Nice home you have here, Brian. How many guys did Justin say you could fuck so you would agree to buy it?” Both Brian and Justin growled at the comment, the younger man joining his lover.

“Ma,” Michael shouted. “You know Brian is tricking anymore. I can’t believe you said that.”

“Debbie, if the only reason you’re here is to insult Brian, than feel free to leave,” Justin stated, his voice hard as he looked at his second mother. “We’ve been through too much lately and this party is for our family and friends that want to support us, not for those who want to tear us apart.”

“Sunshine, I’ve always thought you and Brian made a good couple, even when the asshole refused to admit it,” the waitress defended herself. “But I also know how he is and that’s someone who cannot commit himself to only one person.” Debbie walked over to the blond, who only backed away from her and wrapped his arms around his lover.

“I think it would be better if you left, Deb,” Brian finally said. “Since it’s apparent that you aren’t willing to admit that things have changed, I don’t want you in my home.”

“Not until I see Gus,” she stated firmly. “I haven’t seen him since just before the judge made her horrible decision and I want to make sure he’s okay.”

“Told you so,” Brian whispered into Justin’s ear. Justin looked over at the brunet, upset that the woman who was like a second mother to both of them was acting the way she was. He honestly couldn’t believe that Debbie was acting the way she was. He had thought that once the trial was over, and everyone had a chance to calm down, things could start to go back to normal but that wasn’t what was happening.

Debbie looked around at the group of friends that now included Emmett, Vic and Rodney who had arrived a few minutes after the waitress. “So, where is he? Where’s my little guy?”

“He’s upstairs taking a nap,” Brian informed her. “Lindsay upset him earlier and it took us awhile to calm him down. And, before you ask, no I am not going to wake him up just so you can do the same. I didn’t go to court to make sure he was taken care of just to have you and the munchers come over here to upset my son.”

“I would never do anything to hurt that little boy and you damn well know it,” Debbie stated and then began to make her way towards the staircase, only to have Hunter and Ben stand in her way. “Now listen here you two. Just because you’re part of my family, that doesn’t mean that I’ll let you get in my way. Now move so I can go find Gus.”

“Brian already told you that Gus is sleeping,” Ben said, not allowing her to pass. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go up there and wake him up.”

Debbie looked around and saw the stares everyone was giving her and realized that everyone present actually believed her capable of upsetting the little boy that had come to be like a grandson to her. She loved Gus and she thought everyone knew that but, seeing the people around her and their reactions to her comments, she began to wonder if maybe it wasn’t time for her to think about things without the biasness of motherhood and the belief that she had that all children belong with their mothers. And she had to admit, if only to herself, she knew that Brian was going to do everything he could to make sure that Gus was taken care of. She knew how much he loved his son. Maybe there was something to what the ad exec said if he was willing to disrupt his life with the introduction of an active four year old child.

“Sis, I know you don’t like hearing this,” Vic said softly, going over to the waitress and guiding her from the stairs. “But Brian loves his son and is doing what’s best for him. And, right now, what’s best for Gus is to be here, with his father and Justin. You know I love the girls, just as much as you do, but maybe because I’m not a parent, but I do see their flaws. They aren’t perfect and, right now, they have too much going on to give Gus the kind of attention that he needs. They’re still trying to make their relationship work, not to mention having Annie there now. Add that to the fact that Melanie makes no secret of the fact that she doesn’t like Brian, that’s not an environment that Gus needs to be exposed to right now.”

“I can’t just turn my back on the girls, Vic,” she said, her focus on her brother instead of the home she was in and the owners of said home. “There the closest things to daughters I have, and Melanie is the mother of my grandchild.”

“I know that but that doesn’t mean that you should give them your unwavering loyalty.” Vic could tell that he was getting through to his sister but knew her well enough to know that he could only push her so far. He leaned over and kissed his sister’s cheek. “Just think about it, Sis. That’s all I ask.” Debbie didn’t say anything, just nodding her head before turning around leaving the home. Vic watched her leave, only turning when her car had finished pulling out of the driveway. The older man closed the door behind him, lifting his head and looking at the family gathered. “Well, that went well, didn’t it?”

Meanwhile at the home of Melanie Marcus and Lindsay Peterson, things were quiet between the two women. At first, when Lindsay had come home and told her wife that Brian refused to let her have Gus for the weekend, Melanie allowed her to vent out her anger, interspersing her own comments here and there. After an hour of that, though, Melanie had had enough and told the blonde to be quiet. That Brian had every right to tell her no and that she couldn’t believe that Lindsay hadn’t even bothered to ask her if it was okay that Gus comes over for the weekend.

“You say that like you don’t want to see our son,” Lindsay shouted. “That you’re glad that Brian has Gus now.”

“Of course I’m not happy that Brian has custody of Gus,” Melanie argued. “I miss that little boy so much sometimes it feels as if my heart is breaking. Gus is our son. We raised him. We’re the ones that stayed up at night when he was sick. We’re the ones that got up for midnight feedings and to change his diapers or hold him when he had a nightmare. We were the ones who heard his first words or watched him take his first steps so don’t you dare accuse me of not wanting our son.”

“Then why aren’t you as angry as I am about what Brian did?”

“Who says I’m not,” Melanie countered. “I just don’t see what getting upset about it will do. It’s not like it’s going to get the son of a bitch to change his mind. It still won’t get him to let us have Gus for a weekend.” Melanie watched as her wife seemed to deflate in front of her, the anger leaving her in one fell swoop.

“I just miss him so much,” Lindsay admitted. “Gus should be here, with us. It’s where he belongs.”

“I know, baby. I know. But there’s nothing we can do about it for now.”

“Did you talk to that lawyer?” Lindsay asked, out of the blue. “Is there any chance of appealing the Judge’s decision?”

“Yes I talked to her,” the brunette told her, “but she told me that there wasn’t a whole lot that we could do. She said that we could try and take it to a higher court but, based on the evidence, she didn’t sound like it would be hopeful.”

“So that’s it. We just give up and hope for the best?”

“Of course not,” Melanie assured Lindsay. “We try and work on our problems, even if we don’t think they’re problems. Then we prove that we can be trusted with Gus and hoped that Brian will let us see him more often. We have to do it, Linds. For Gus.”

Part 23

One year had passed since the Judge’s decision that had Gus coming to live with Brian and Justin. A year in which had seen some things remain the same while other things changed, some for the better and some for the worse. Lindsay and Melanie continued with their counseling, working through the issues they had both between themselves and the way they interacted with the rest of their family, especially their children.

Gus’ relationship with his mothers improved, although observers could tell that there was still a hint of tension between the family. Melanie took great care to let her son know how much she loved him. She stopped insulting Brian, at least in Gus’ hearing and made sure to spend time with the little boy when he was visiting. Lindsay made sure that Gus knew how important he was to her and that, just because he now had a little sister, that it didn’t mean they didn’t love him any less.

When it came time for the judge’s six month review, things had improved enough that, while still giving Brian full custody, she allowed more liberal visitation right for the two women, including unsupervised visitation for Melanie. The girls would have Gus two weekends a month, and once every other week depending on everyone’s schedule. Brian had no problem making sure that Lindsay and Melanie had access to their son, knowing how much Gus missed having his mothers. The little boy loved living with his fathers, but Brian understood how much one wanted his mother’s love.

Brian’s relationship with Debbie improved in the year since he had been granted custody of his son, also. While she still believed that Brian hadn’t needed to go to court to resolve all the issues that needed to be resolved, she would admit that Gus was much happier living with his father. That he was, in fact, thriving in Brian and Justin’s care. She also couldn’t deny that Brian was a great father, making sure that his son knew that he loved him and would always be there for him, no matter what.

The only downside that came from Brian gaining custody of his son was that his mother and sister finally found out about his son. It had happened when Claire had come over to Brian’s home to ask for some money. It seemed that her son John, the same little bastard that had once accused Brian of sexually molesting him, had gotten into more trouble with the law and Clair needed some funds to obtain a lawyer to help him out. Brian refused, thinking that the boy deserved anything and everything that happened to him, but before he could get his sister to leave, Justin had arrived home with Gus in tow. Joan Kinney showed up on his doorstep two days later. Both Brian and Justin shivered at the memory of that meeting and both were thankful that it had been Gus’ weekend with his mothers allowing him to miss the argument that ensued.

Eight Months Earlier

“Mrs. Kinney, what a surprise,” Justin said, shocked at the appearance of his lover’s mother at their door. “Did Brian know that you were going to be here?”

“Of course he didn’t,” she said coldly, entering the home without being invited in. “I knew that if I told him when I was coming that he would make sure not to be here just to spite me.” The older woman looked around the home, seeing the child’s toys mixed in among the expensive furniture. She turned to look at the blond that had opened the door. She remembered seeing him once, when visiting Brian’s home. “This is my son’s home correct? Do you often answer the door to other people’s home when you’re visiting?”

“Justin lives here, Mother,” Brian said, coming from the living room to see who had been at the door. “He has every right to answer the door, although it appears I still need to teach him when to slam the door on certain visitors.” The blond couldn’t help himself and stuck his tongue out at his lover who only smirked at him before turning his attention back to his mother. “Why are you here Mother and how did you find out where I lived? I know I certainly didn’t give you the address.”

“Your sister came to see me yesterday,” Joan began only to be stopped by Brian rolling his eyes and walking into the kitchen. It was the closest room to the front door and as far as he wanted his mother in his home.

“And let me guess,” the brunet said. “Dear sweet Claire couldn’t wait to tell you that the family pervert has a son.”

“Yes, she mentioned that you had a child,” Joan told him, following Brian into the kitchen, Justin right behind. She watched as her son made himself a cup of coffee, not offering her any, and frowned in disapproval. “How could you not tell me that I had another grandson? Where is his mother?”

“His mother lives with her wife and has visitation with Gus. That’s where he is right now and I just have to say that I’m glad. The last thing I want is for my son to have to deal with any of your sanctimonious bullshit. I don’t want him scarred by you the way I was.”

“How dare you speak to me like that, you ungrateful man. I did the best I could considering what little help I had from your father. I had no one to turn to. No one that would help me and the lord knows you weren’t an easy child to raise. Always thinking you were so much better than the rest of us. Always testing my patience. Provoking your father. Nothing I did was good enough for you. I don’t know why I should have expected anything to change. You’re still the selfish boy you have always been.”

“Well, I’m glad I could live up to your expectations,” Brian drawled. “Now is that all you had to say because Justin and I had some plans for this weekend and your being here makes them kind of hard to do.” Brian looked over at his lover who was blushing, knowing exactly what kind of plans Brian was talking about.

“Don’t be so disgusting, Brian,” Joan said, knowing what her son was talking about. “You’re my son, Brian, as much as you might wish otherwise and now I find out that you are a father yourself. Yet, here you are, obviously still practicing your sinful life. You’re only condemning yourself to a lifetime of pain and an eternity in hell. And what about your son? What kind of life are you condemning him to live? What kind of influence are you on that little boy? The lord only knows what kind of things he has to see. What kind of disgusting things you do in front of him.”

“You mean like showing him that I love him and want to make sure that he’s happy growing up? Those kinds of disgusting things?” Brian stalked over and stood towering over his mother. “My son, and how I raise him, is none of your damn business, Mother. You have never been a part of his life and you will never have anything to do with him. In fact”, Brian walked over towards the front door, both Joan and Justin following him, “after today, I don’t want anything to do with you either.” Brain opened the door. “Good-bye Mrs. Kinney. Please don’t darken this doorstep again. And make sure you stay away from my son.”

Joan looked at Brian and could see how serious he was. She raised her head proudly and walked out the door, turning at the last minute. “Brian, it isn’t too late. You have a son that must mean that somewhere inside you is a good man. Go back to the Church. Let Jesus help you.”

“Good-bye Mother.”

Present Day

The Taylor-Kinney household never heard from Joan Kinney again and, after being told to fuck off numerous times, Claire also took the hint and left her brother and his family alone and both men were happy about that. As much as Brian would have liked having his family’s love and support, he knew that he didn’t need the Kinney’s to make him happy. He had the family he wanted in Justin, Gus and their friends. And now Brian Kinney was preparing himself for something he never thought he would be doing. Going on a family vacation with his lover and son to Florida so Gus could meet Mickey Mouse.

“Christ, when did I become so fucking domesticated?” Brian growled, looking around the bedroom he shared with his lover.

“About the same time you finally were willing to admit that you loved me and Gus and let us all the way in,” a voice said from behind him. Brian turned to see Justin leaning against the doorframe, smiling at the brunet.

“Is that what happened? Damn Anita, must have given me some bad shit to make that happen,” he drawled, causing Justin to laugh. He knew that no matter how much Brian might moan and bitch, the older man wouldn’t change his life for anything.

“Yeah, that must be the reason.” Justin walked over to his lover, who wrapped his arms around the smaller man. The two men kissed gently, just relishing the closeness between them.

“Is Gus asleep?” Brian asked as he slowly began to undress his lover.

“Finally,” Justin answered, helping Brian take off his own shirt. “I didn’t think he would ever go down considering how excited he is about tomorrow. He can’t wait to go.”

“Just like his Daddy Justin,” the brunet teased the younger man. “You’re just as excited to go as he is.”

“I am,” Justin admitted as he and Brian made their way over to their bed. “It’s Gus’ first real vacation anywhere and I’m glad that we’re the ones that get to be there to experience everything with him.”

“Yeah, so am I,” Brian admitted, he and Justin lying down on the bed, holding each other tightly. It was a ritual the two men enjoyed and did as often as possible. They had some of their best conversations in bed, and not just sexually. “My parents were never ones to take us on vacation, especially someplace like Disney World. That would have meant spending way too much money.”

“Their loss,” Justin said, kissing Brian softly. “And now I’m even happier that we are going on this trip, just so that I can watch father and son experience something different.”

“Christ, could you even get any cornier?” Justin grinned as he shook his head. “Fuck, what have I gotten myself into?”

“Don’t even try it,” Justin told him. “You love everything that’s happened to you. To both of us, just like I do.”

“I never thought I would ever have a life like this,” Brian said. “The whole partner, kid and house thing. I thought that was something for dykes and breeders and dickless fags and I wasn’t going to be any of those things.”

“And yet, here you are. You have a son you loves you. A partner who adores you,” Justin leaned over and kissed Brian. “And a beautiful house and I have to say, you are most definitely,” Justin cupped Brian’s growing erection, “a dickless fag.”

“And all because I picked up an annoying blond boy under a street lamp four years ago.”

The two men began kissing softly, allowing the passion that was always there between them to slowly build up until they could no longer hold it in. When they both came down from their high, they wrapped their arms tightly around each other and fell asleep together, both with a content smile on their face. Both knowing that, no matter what else might happen, they would be able to see it through, together.

**Prodigal Son Returns**

Crossover with Harry Potter

Harry comes asking former Hogwart's student Brian for help against Voldemort

“But the boy has great potential to be one of the strongest wizards ever known,” the old man tried to convince the pair of stern looking Muggles he was facing. The couple was dressed in what appeared to be their Sunday best, complete with the woman wearing a set of pearls. The old man, on the other hands, had a long gray beard and was dressed in what appeared to be a cloak of the deepest purple known to man. “It doesn’t make any sense that you would refuse to allow him to return to the school.”

“With everything that is going on with You-Know-Who, you have the nerve to try and insist that we send our son to that school of freaks,” the man shouted, allowing the older man to smell the abundance of alcohol on his breath.

“Voldemort’s power is one reason that you should allow him to continue his lessons. How else can your son protect himself if he isn’t trained properly?”

“And if he takes an interest in him? What are we to do then? No, You-Know-Who will not have a chance to hurt us because he will never know that our son even exists.”

“You’re fools if you think that Voldemort doesn’t already know about your son and the kind of potential he has. He is exactly the kind of person that he is trying to control.”

“Then why hasn’t he done anything yet?”

“Because he has no power over the school and knows that I will protect any and all of my students.”

“And when he’s here?”

“Voldemort doesn’t have the power base yet to come to the United States, but he is getting stronger. It’s only a matter of time until he is strong enough and then no witch or wizard will be able to defeat him.”

“But we won’t have a witch or a wizard in this house,” the woman finally joined in the conversation. “There is only a God-fearing family here.”

“Voldemort hates Muggles,” the old man replied. “How long do you think it will be after he takes over that he will come after the so-called normal people? If anything, you’re fates are sealed no matter what you do, so why not allow your son to continue his education where he will, at least, be giving a fighting chance to succeed in defeating him.”

“No. He’s not going back to that school. He’s going to be starting high school here in two weeks at the local public school. He will meet people his own age. Normal people. And he will put this nonsense far behind him.”

“So you’re going to deny your son his life. His inheritance. You’re going to make him deny who he is. What he is. And you call that love? Sounds more like hate to me.”

“Get out of my house and don’t come back.” The old man look between the couple and realized that there would be no reprieve for the young boy that had seemed so lost when he had first arrived at Hogwart’s Academy of Witchcraft and Sorcery, but who had flourished within the three years he had been there. His parents were too set in their ways. He nodded his head and left the house. He had walked about a block from the house when he heard someone calling to him.

“Professor, wait,” a young boy of fourteen called after him. The man stopped and waited for him to catch up to him. “Take me with you.”

“I fear I can not. Your parents have made their wishes quite clear.”

“I don’t care what my parents want. They don’t care about me. They don’t even want me here. They just don’t want to spend the money for me to go to school.”

“Be that as it may...”

“Please, Professor, take me to Hogwarts. It’s the only home I’ve ever really had.” The man was startled to see tears begin to stream down the boy’s face. “It’s the only place I ever felt like I really belonged. I love the classes and I’m good at them. And I get along with everyone there. I have some really good friends. The Weasleys were even going to let me stay with them for Christmas this year. Please, I don’t want to give up my magic. It’s the only thing I have.”

“There’s nothing I want more than to take you with me, dear boy, but alas, I can’t.” The Professor wiped away the tears that continued to pour down the face across from him. Suddenly he got a look upon his face as if he had made a great decision and looked around to make sure that no one was paying any attention to the pair. “I may not be able to take you with me, but I’ll tell you what I will do. I will make sure that you receive all of the books and supplies that you would need to complete your studies, including the lesson plans, and you can do your work from home.”

“Really?” A shy smile played upon the boys lips. “You’d do that for me?”

“Yes, really,” the Professor returned the smile with one of his own. “But don’t think that because you won’t have your Professors right there with you that it will mean that you will be able to slack off. If anything, you will have to be extra vigilant because of the secrecy.”

“But what about my tests and the stuff the teachers have to be here for?”

“I will have to discuss it with Professor McGonnigal but I think between the two of us we should be able to come up with something. It will probably mean that one, or both, of us will just have to come for a visit.” The boy jumped into the old man’s arms.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, dear boy. Now, you better be hurrying home. I don’t want you to get into any trouble.”

“Okay, Professor. And thanks.” The boy turned and ran back towards his house, not noticing the concerned look that followed him. For the first time in a long time, Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts wished that he could just break the rules because he didn’t think that it was in the best interest of anyone to let the young man that had just left stay with his parents, but he had to have hope. Hope that what he feared happened when the boy was away from Hogwart’s didn’t really happen. And hope that he had done the right thing in insisting that he stay with his parents, because Brian Kinney was the closest thing to a son Albus Dumbledore had ever had and he wanted to make sure that he had a chance to live up to his fullest potential as a wizard of the highest class.

Part 2

17 years later

“So, Baby, are you all ready for your little trip to paradise?” Emmett cooed as Justin and Brian made their way over to the both the group of friends usually sat in while visiting the Liberty Diner. Emmett was joined by their other friend Michael, Ted and Ben.

“Oh I’m more than ready,” Justin beamed as he slid into the space next to Emmett and Brian moved to the seat by Michael so that the two lovers were facing each other. “All that’s left is the packing.”

“Gee, you and Brian in Hawaii,” Ted said. “Somehow I don’t think that the two of you are going to have that much to pack.”

“Really,” Michael joined in. “Do the two of you even need clothes? I didn’t think you guys were even planning on leaving the hotel room.”

“Well, we did plan on that wedding while we were there,” Brian replied thoughtfully, not surprised to hear the gasps from the group. He rolled his eyes at how easy they were.

“Damn it, Brian,” Michael whined. “Don’t do that to me. I almost believed you were serious. There’s no limit to what things Boy Wonder could convince you to do.”

“Relax, Mikey,” Justin told him, using the familiar nickname his lover called his best friend. “Brian and I are nowhere near ready to get married. Please, I’m only nineteen.”

“Spoken like a true disciple of the Brian Kinney Institute of Fags,” Ted stated, sarcasm dripping in his voice. “Don’t settle down when the next fuck is just around the corner.” Justin shot the former accountant the finger, showing the older man exactly what he thought of his observation. Justin knew how much the group of friends meant to Brian, they were his family, but there were times when he wondered why it was that Brian hung out with them when they all seemed to demean him in some way, either subtle or not. Justin opened up his backpack and took out a folder, handing it to Michael and changing the subject.

“Here are the drawings for the next issue of Rage,” he watched as Michael opened the folder and looked over its contents. ‘They should be everything that we talked about. If there needs to be any changes, let me know and I’ll work on them as soon as we get back.”

“They look good,” the older man commented, flipping through the pages. “I don’t think there will be any problem but if there are, I’ll try and take care of it so you don’t have to worry about anything.” Justin just nodded his acceptance at Michael’s offer. Brian’s best friend had been doing everything he could to go out of his way proving to Justin that he was accepting Justin’s role in Brian’s life and the apparent permanence of said role.

“Hopefully the two of you will be able to actually go on this trip,” Ben said, reminding everyone of the aborted trip to Vermont that Brian and Justin had planned for over Justin’s spring break, only to have it interrupted by Brian’s new boss, Gardner Vance, telling him he had to use that week to try and convince him that Brian shouldn’t be fired. Justin had been visibly upset when he was told that instead of going to Vermont for their romantic getaway, Brian had to go to Chicago but then Brian surprised the teen by asking him to go with him. In the end, Brian got the account, was made partner at his advertising firm, and he and Justin had spent a memorable three days in Chicago, enjoying themselves in an atmosphere other than Pittsburgh but everyone knew how close Brian had come to fucking up his relationship with his young lover.

“Hey Brian, there’s some kid here looking for you,” Debbie’s voice broke through the uncomfortable silence that had threatened to take over the group of friends over Ben’s innocent statement. Brian looked over towards where the red wigged woman was standing to see a young boy with her. He was dressed as any typical teen would be, although to Brian’s fashion conscious eyes it appeared that he was wearing hand me downs. He looked to be about fourteen or fifteen years old, with dark hair and black glasses that did nothing for him. The boy started to walk over to where Debbie had pointed to Brian until he reached the confused man.

“Are you Brian Kinney?” Brian nodded his head. “I was sent here to get you.”

“What do you mean to get him?”

“Who sent you here?”

“Who are you?” Came flying at the youth from various parts of the table.

“Professor Dumbledore sent me,” the boys said, his eyes never leaving Brian’s own shocked ones at the reminder of his old head master’s name. Forgotten memories slammed into his brain as he thought about the kindly man that had helped him so many years ago when he had attended Hogwart’s. He remembered the letters of encouragement he had received from him, making sure that Brian kept up with his magical studies. The secret visits by Professor’s Dumbledore and McGonnigal so that he could take the tests required to pass his classes.

“Dumbledore,” Brian whispered the name, emotions in his voice that none of the others had ever heard, including Justin. “There’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time. Not since…”

Jack and Joan Kinney were not happy when they discovered that their son had gone against there wishes and continued his studies. They were waiting for Dumbledore to show up for Brian’s final test before he could take his N.E.W.T.S. They had threatened Dumbledore with going before his superiors if he didn’t break all contact with Brian, leaving the head master with no choice. He left that night, leaving Brian to the fury of his parents. The elder Kinney’s destroyed all of Brian’s books and his broom. The kept a close reign on their son, making sure that he adhered to all of their rules. The only thing Brian had left was his owl (which they had yet to get rid of) and his wand, which he had carefully hidden so that his parents couldn’t find it. Brian used his owls to try and contact his friends at school and Professor Dumbledore, only to have his letters returned, unopened. It seemed that Brian had become persona non gratis to the wizarding community because of his parents’ edict. It was also what taught him that he couldn’t depend on anyone other than himself.

“He told me that he had to break contact with you,” the young boy broke into Brian’s thoughts, taking a letter out of his backpack and handing it to Brian. “He gave me this to give to you. He said it was his way of trying to explain about why he had to break contact with you. He told me to tell you, for what it’s worth, that he’s sorry that he couldn’t have done more for you when he had the chance.”

“Brian, who’s this Professor Dumbledore?” Justin asked his lover, worried about the silence of the normally unflappable man.

“He’s my old head master from Hogwart’s,” Brian answered, absently, his eyes never leaving the letter in is hand. “I haven’t heard from him since I was seventeen.”

“You went to Hogwart’s,” Ben asked, his voice filled with awe, causing everyone to stare at him. “I didn’t know you were a wizard.”

“I’m not,” Brian replied. “Not anymore.” Brian looked up at the young man in front of him.

“Why did Dumbledore send you to me? Who are you?”

“I’m sorry. I’m Harry Potter and the reason Professor Dumbledore sent me here was so that I could tell you that Voldemort is back.”

Part 3

Brian stared at the young boy that stood in front of him. Brian had heard of Harry Potter. The defeat of the evil wizard Voldemort had occurred before Brian’s parents had discovered that he had been continuing his lessons. He had been amazed that a child, a boy of only a year old, had been able to do what no one else had been able to manage. And now, after all this time, here he was, standing in front of him telling him that Voldemort was back.

“He can’t be,” Brian said in a small voice, one that no one had ever heard come from him before. “That’s impossible. You killed him.” Justin and the rest of Brian’s friends looked at the ad exec, wondering what was going on between him and the young teen. They had never seen Brian look as rattled as he appeared now. Not even Michael had seen Brian so quiet, even after his father beat him.

“He didn’t die,” Harry explained, feeling the uncomfortable weight of Brian’s friends on him. “Ummm, look. It’s a long story. Is there some place we can go so we can talk?” Brian nodded his head, seeming to regain his composure. His usual mask of indifference fell upon his face, although the others could tell that it wasn’t as strong as it usually was. He stood up and signaled for Harry to follow him, completely forgetting the others in the booth.

“Brian,” Justin said, getting up and going to his lover when Brian stopped and turned to face him.

“Brian, what’s going on? Who is this boy? Whose this Voldemort?”

“It’s a long story, Justin,” Brian answered, leaning down and giving his lover a kiss. “Give me about an hour and then come to the loft. I’ll explain it then.” Justin looked between Brian and Harry, feeling the tension rolling off the younger boy, and the nervousness in his lover. He leaned up and kissed Brian again.

“Are you sure?” Brian nodded his head. “An hour, Brian, and then I’m coming home and I want to know what’s going on.”

“An hour.” And with that, Justin watched as Brian and Harry left the diner, leaving behind a confused and stunned group of friends. That is, until Justin remembered what Ben had said a few minutes ago.

“Okay, Ben, what was all that about?” Justin asked as soon as he lost sight of Brian. “What was all that about Brian being a wizard?”

“Shit,” Ben softly swore.

“Ben,” Michael asked, turning to face his lover, his worry over what had just happened with Brian evident in his voice and on his face. “Do you know what’s going on?”

“I don’t know what exactly is going on,” Ben hedged, not sure exactly how the group of friends would take any of the information he had in regards to wizards, Hogwart’s, Harry Potter and Voldemort.

“Well then, tell us what you do know, honey,” Emmett demanded, “and don’t leave a single thing out.” Brian took a deep breath, not surprised to see Debbie take a seat at the booth, curious about what was going on after over hearing the conversation between Brian and the young boy that had come in looking for him.

“Brian’s right,” Ben started, not exactly sure where to begin, “it is a long story. And I don’t know Brian’s part of it, but I do know if he went to Hogwart’s, Brian is more special than any of us knew.”

“What do you mean, Ben?” Justin asked. “Does this have something to do with you asking Brian if he was a wizard?”

“Hogwart’s, the school that Brian said he went to, is a school for witches and wizards,” Ben explained.

“There’s no such thing as witches or wizards,” Ted snorted.

“Hush, Ted,” Debbie admonished, although she understood Ted’s sentiments. She shared them, although she didn’t want Ben to know that. “Go on, Ben honey.”

“Look, guys, I know it seems like what I’m saying is only so much bullshit, but it’s the truth,” he continued. “Witches and wizards, as well as a lot of other things that everyone believes to be make believe, do exist. It’s just that the ones in charge have made it so secretive that non-magical people don’t know of their existence. In fact, there’s a whole other society out there that no one knows about.”

“And Brian was a part of that,” Justin commented, his voice soft at the discovery of yet another secret from his lover’s past.

“If he went to Hogwart’s, then yeah, I would say he was a part of it. But it’s very rare for a wizard to basically spend all of his time in the Muggle world, as they would call it. They tend to stick to themselves.”

“But Brian went to school here,” Michael reminded everyone. “Trust me, I know. I wouldn’t have passed high school if it wasn’t for him.”

“Well, I can’t say why Brian left Hogwart’s, its unheard of from what I understand,” Ben continued. “That will have to come from Brian. But I can tell you, from what little I just heard, things may be about to change. And not necessarily for the better.”

“What do you mean?” Debbie asked, not liking the idea of one of her adopted sons possibly being in trouble, even if she did think he was an asshole half the time.

“That young boy that was in, Harry Potter, he’s famous in the wizarding community,” Ben explained. “I haven’t had anything to do with any wizards in over twelve years and even I know who he is.”

“How can a little boy like that be so famous? What did he do that was so special?” This came from Ted, still refusing to truly believe what he was being told.

“Thirteen years ago he saved the wizarding community from what some called their worst nightmare.”

“That guy Voldemort that he was talking about,” Justin stated, looking to Ben for confirmation. “But he couldn’t have been more than a baby.”

“From what I remember, I believe he had just turned one.”

“ONE,” Debbie shouted, trying to picture young Gus at that age doing something that could cause someone’s death. “How in the world could he have done anything when he was that small?”

“No one knows. All they knew was that Voldemort had killed Harry’s parents before trying to kill him. It didn’t work. Voldemort’s powers couldn’t harm him.”

“Why did this Voldemort kill this kid’s parents?”

“Power,” Ben answered. “Voldemort wanted it and killed anyone that dared stand in his way. And there were a lot of good witches and wizards that died in Voldemort’s quest for it.” There was something in Ben’s voice that drew Michael’s attention and made him realize that there was more to what Ben was saying.

“Who else?” He asked his lover. Ben smiled slightly at him.

“My aunt and uncle.” Michael gave a quick hug to his lover, encouraging him.

“I didn’t know you had a wizard in your family.”

“Are you a wizard?”

“No, I’m not a wizard,” Ben shook his head. “It runs in my mother’s family. It was her brother that I was talking about. She’s actually the first non-magical person in her family in four generations. Doesn’t exactly make for egret family reunions. She’s considered the black sheep of the family. Then again, it also saved her from Voldemort going after her. She was the only one in the family that didn’t have to go into hiding.”

“So this Voldemort, if he’s back like that kid said, is going to be trouble?” Justin questioned, wanting nothing more than to run back to the loft and check on Brian. “But what does the Dumbledore want with Brian?”

“If Voldemort is back, then yes, it can mean nothing but trouble. As for what Dumbledore wants with Brian, I can’t say. But Dumbledore was always known as a wise wizard, if not a little strange, and if he thinks that Brian may be in danger, than I can only say that we had all better be on the lookout.”

“Shit,” Justin silently swore his and Brian’s perfect vacation to Hawaii forgotten. Now, the only thing on his mind was getting home and making sure that his lover was okay.

Part 4

The ride over to the loft was quiet as neither Harry nor Brian knew exactly what to say to each other. They were both lost in their own thoughts. Harry was thinking about the strange sights that he had seen on his first trip abroad, especially the group at Liberty Diner. He had never seen two men kiss the way Brian and Justin had. It wasn’t that it bothered the young teen, it was just something unexpected. His aunt and uncle had raised him in an atmosphere where something that was considered different was wrong and he knew in their views that love between two men would be almost as wrong as his being a wizard. Even in the wizarding community he had had any exposure to homosexuals. He wasn’t even sure if there were any gay witches or wizards. Well other than the man next to him that is.

Brian, for his part, was thinking about what he considered some of the happiest days of his life. Hogwart’s was the closest thing to a home that Brian had ever had, until he met Michael and Debbie Novatny. And Albus Dumbledore was the father that he had always wanted. He had friends at the school. Friends that he had thought cared about him, until they turned their backs on him. It had hurt the seventeen year old boy to realize that he no longer had the option of losing himself in the wizarding community and was forced to continue living in a household full of anger and hate.

Eventually they arrived at the building that housed Brian’s loft and the older man led the teen upstairs to the home he shared with Justin.

“Do you want something to drink?” Brian asked, going over to the refrigerator.

“Ummm, I’ll just take some water, please, if that’s okay,” Harry answered, looking around Brian’s loft in awe. The young wizard had never seen anything like it in his young life. Brian grabbed two bottles of water, although he would have preferred something stronger, and walked over to Harry, handing him one of the bottles. Harry nodded his thanks before remembering the letter that he had tried to give Brian in the diner. “Here’s that letter that the Professor wanted me to give you.” Harry held out the envelope, which Brian tentatively took and opened, unsure if he wanted to know what it said.

My dearest Brian,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am only sorry that I could not deliver it in person but I hope the messenger I have sent it with will show you how much I believe in you, even after all this time. Then again, it is you who has probably lost faith in I after the way I had abandoned you, as did the rest of the wizarding community and for that I am truly sorry. The only excuse that I can give you is that I only did what I thought was best at the time. The Ministry had ordered all contact with you to be broken and not just by myself and the other teachers here at Hogwart’s, but by all those in the wizarding community. In essence, you no longer existed. I did argue against there decision but there was nothing I could do, so I failed you and for that I am truly sorry.

Brian, I have sent Harry to you for a specific reason. I don’t know if has told you yet but Voldemort has come back and I believe your help is necessary in defeating him for good. The Ministry has decided to ignore the warnings and continue to believe that Voldemort is gone for good but I know better. I can’t go into details in this letter but Harry can tell you how it came to be since he was present at the time.

Brian, I will understand if you refuse to come to Hogwart’s and help us but I hope that you will. I still believe that you have the makings to be a powerful wizard, even after so many years with no training. Please send an owl letting me know your answer. For the future of all wizards, including your son, I hope you will consider your answer carefully and I hope to see you at the start of the next term.

Yours truly

Professor Albus Dumbledore

Brian stared in shock at the letter in his hands, unable to believe what he was reading. ‘How dare he? After all these years, without as much as a word. Not a letter. Nothing to explain why he wouldn’t talk to me. All of my letter being returned and now he wants me to help him.’ “Fuck this,” Brian swore, going over and grabbing the Jim Beam, pouring himself a shot and downing it quickly before pouring himself another and turning to face his guest.

“So, Harry,” Brian began, “Dumbledore said you could tell me how it came that Voldemort returned. What happened?” Brian could tell that his question made Harry uncomfortable. ‘Hell how could it not. We are talking about the return of a wizard that killed his parents and tried to kill him. Why wouldn’t he be nervous?’

“We were having a competition at school. A Tri-Wizards Tournament and one of Voldemort’s followers managed to get me entered, so that instead of three champions we had four. The final obstacle was a maze that the champion’s had to get through. The first person to get to the middle won the cup, but it turned out that the trophy was actually a port key.”

“And let me guess, you were the first one to get to the cup.”

“Actually there were two of us who made it to the middle. Me and Cedric Diggory.” At Brian’s look of confusion, Harry continued. “Cedric was the true Hogwart’s champion. He was captain of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team.”

“So what happened?” Brian asked, irritably, finishing off his drink and wanting to grab another but having a feeling that he would need to actually stay sober for this conversation.

“Cedric and I decided to grab the cup together. We thought it was the only fair thing to do, but it turned out to be one of the worst. Like I said, the trophy was actually a port key and it took both of us to where Voldemort and his followers were gathered. Actually it was more like Voldemort’s spirit than him.”

“Then what happened?” Brian watched as Harry tried to compose himself and knew that whatever he was about to be told would not be pretty but he had to know. The wizarding community might have turned their back on him but he still had a soft spot for those that had been his family once.

“Voldemort did a spell. He tried to kill me but he killed Cedric instead and then he got his body back.” Brian could tell that there was more to the story than what Harry was telling him but he was willing to give the boy the space that he seemed to need. Brian understood that there were some things that you just couldn’t share with anyone, no matter what.

“And now Dumbledore has decided that he wants me to come back and help you in the fight against Voldemort.” Brian walked up to Harry and looked down upon him. “What makes him think that I’ll give a damn about helping any of you? He turned his back on me when I needed him most. Every wizard and witch ignored me, including those that said they wanted me to be a part of their family. Why the hell should I care what happens to you?” Harry looked up at the angry man standing in front of him, not sure of how to answer him. He didn’t even know why Dumbledore had sent him to get Brian in the first place.

“I don’t know,” Harry finally said, looking down. “All I know is that the Professor asked me to bring you that letter and see if you would be willing to come back with me to Hogwart’s. He said that he made arrangements to stay with some friends of mine until then, if you said yes.”

“Dumbledore always did seem sure of himself,” Brian muttered, although it was loud enough from Harry to hear. “Where are you staying anyway, Harry?”

“Ummm.”

“Let me guess. Dumbledore wants you to stay with me,” Brian said. Harry nodded his head. “So where’s your stuff?”

“I’ve got some clothes in my back pack and I can always get my friend Ron to send me some stuff by owl.”

“Whatever, but you’ll have to take the couch. There’s only one bed in here, and there’s not enough room for a third person on it. Well at least not for sleep.”

“Who else lives here?”

“Justin.” Brian saw the look of shock that had appeared on Harry’s face. “Is that going to be a problem because if it is, you might as well leave now?”

“Is Justin your boyfriend?” Brian nodded his head. “I’ve never met a gay person before.”

“Well, you were just in a room full of them and if you’re going to hang around here, you might as well get used to it.” Just then Harry yawned.

“Sorry.”

“How long have you been traveling anyway?”

“A little over twenty four hours. First on the Hogwart’s train and then to the airport and then here and then I had to find you.”

“Well, if you want the bathroom’s through there and I can get you some sheets. Justin’s going to be home soon and I’m going to have to talk to him before I make any decision, but you can crash if you want.” Harry nodded his head, grabbing his bag and heading in the direction that Brian pointed, leaving behind a very conflicted man, unsure of what he was going to do now or how he was going to explain everything to his lover.

Part 5

Justin entered the loft quietly, not sure of what he would be walking into. He was still trying to process the information that Ben had given him in regards to Hogwarts, wizards and Voldemort, and the teen could honestly say that he had no idea what to do to help his lover. That is, if Brian would even let him help him in whatever it is that Harry came to Pittsburgh to get him to do.

Justin noticed a book bag laying on the floor by the couch, and one of the extra blankets laying over the edge. He walked over to the couch and saw Harry asleep on the cushions. He took a moment to look over the young boy that had brought quite a surprise into his life, trying to see what it was that made him so special that the wizarding community held him in such high regard, according to Ben. Justin noticed the jagged scar that was on Harry’s forehead and felt for the youngster who had lost so much at such a young age. Even with the way his father was treating him since he had come out, Justin still had the memories of the previous seventeen years to cherish, and that was more that Harry would ever have of his parents.

Justin looked around the darkened loft, finally spotting his lover lying on the bed that they shared. He went to join Brian, both men remaining silent. Justin spooned up behind the older man, wrapping his arms around Brian’s waist, willing to wait however long it would take until he was ready to talk about whatever it was that was bothering him. He didn’t have to wait long.

“The only time I was ever truly happy growing up was when I was at Hogwart’s,” Brian began, his voice soft and sounding younger than Justin had ever heard it. “I started there when I was eleven. I was so surprised when I got the letter saying that I had been accepted. I had no idea that wizards existed, let alone that I was one. Jack and Joanie weren’t exactly thrilled with the idea of me going there, especially considering Joanie was just getting back into her religion thing again, but I kept at them until they finally relented. I think in the long run they were just glad to see me gone.”

“I’m sure that’s not true, Brian,” Justin objected, although his heart wasn’t in it and Brian didn’t bother to correct him.

“I had no idea what to expect when I got there,” Brian continued. “I didn’t have any real experience with any witches or wizards other than for when I had gone to Diagon Alley to get my books.”

“Diagon Alley?”

“It’s where you can get anything you need if you’re a wizard. Wands, brooms, ingredients for spells, anything.”

“It sounds cool.”

“It is.” Justin could tell that Brian was losing himself in his memories and, if the expression on his face was anything to go by, for once they weren’t bad ones. “I was only eleven the first time I was there, and I was by myself, well at least my parents weren’t there. Jack and Joanie couldn’t even be bothered to make sure that their son made it to England okay. They had just put me on the plane and left me. Professor Dumbledore arranged to have a family whose first child was about to start Hogwart’s at the same time as me meet me there. It was about a week before school started and they had agreed to help me adjust to my new world. They took me in and for the first time in my life I actually felt as if I belonged to a real family. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t really theirs, or that I was an American, all they saw was a lost little boy and they gave me their love.”

“They sound like a very special family.”

“They were. Their son Bill and I became best friends over that week I was staying there and so by the time we got to Hogwart’s, we were both afraid that we would be put in different houses.”

“Different houses?”

“Hogwart’s divides its students into four houses that basically are your home while you’re there. Luckily Bill and I both got into Gryffindor, so we didn’t have anything to really worry about. Over the next three years, we became like brothers. I went to visit his family during the holidays and spent as much of the summer as possible together, although my folks did insist I come home sometimes.”

“Then what happened? Why did you stop going to the school?”

“Jack and Joanie decided that they didn’t want me going anymore. I’m not sure why, they never bothered letting me in on their reasoning. I think it had something to do with the fact that my mom had found religion again and Jack just couldn’t be bothered with dealing with the fact that his son was a wizard. They told Professor Dumbledore that I wouldn’t be returning for my fourth year, that I would be staying in Pittsburgh and going to school here. Dumbledore tried to convince them that I should be allowed to go back to school, but they refused. When he left the house, I followed him and begged him to take me with him, but he couldn’t. I knew that but I juts didn’t want to be left at home. The wizarding community had taken me in and I felt comfortable there for the first time in my life. I knew that Bill’s parents would be willing to take me in, even if they had three other mouths to feed with his younger brothers, but that was impossible.

“But, Professor Dumbledore knew how much my lessons meant to me so he secretly helped me keep them up and for the next three and a half years I was studying to be a wizard, as well as going to public school and putting on the pretense that I’m the same as everyone else, but eventually my parents found out and went ballistic. They told him that he was to have no contact with me. I thought Dumbledore would do what he did before, and just keep teaching me in secret, but this time he cut off all communication with me. Even Bill and his family stopped writing me and all of my letters to them were returned unopened, so what little contact I had been allowed to keep with my previous life was completely cut off and I immersed myself in getting rid of the pain the only way I knew how.” Brian didn’t bother to elaborate, knowing that Justin understood completely what he was saying.

“You never told anybody any of this, have you?” Brian shook his head. “Why not?”

“I’ve never told anybody about my past. Shit, the only reason Mikey and Lindsay know as much about me as they do is because they’ve known me for so long. Even Mikey doesn’t know about what my life was like before he met me and this just,” Brian didn’t continue and Justin didn’t press him. He was just glad that his lover had opened up as much as he had to him. Brian wasn’t one to talk about himself, and especially his feelings, and Justin was glad that the older man felt comfortable enough to let him in.

“Brian, what does this Dumbledore want with you now?”

“He says he needs my help,” Brian went on. “Says that, even though I never completed my training, that I still have the makings of being a powerful wizard and he wants me to go back to Hogwart’s.” Justin swallowed hard.

“Does this have to do with Voldemort?” Brian looked over at the artist, a silent question in his eyes. “Ben told us about him. Seems his family has wizarding blood in it.”

“That explains a lot about the Professor,” Brian observed. “And yes, it does have to do with Voldemort. It seems that he somehow came back and Dumbledore says he wants me to come back to Hogwart’s and help him out.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but….”

“But you want to go.” Brian looked in surprise at Justin. “It only makes sense. Hogwart’s was a big part of your life. It helped shape who you are and then you were suddenly taken away from it. If anything, I would think you would want to go just to get some closure. And I would like to see your old school.” Brian looked away from Justin. “Brian?”

“Justin, I’m not sure that you should…”

“Don’t even think of finishing that sentence, Brian Andrew Kinney,” Justin admonished. “I’m going with you to Hogwart’s and there’s nothing you can say or do that will stop me.” Brian looked as if he was about to argue and then stopped. He knew his lover well and he knew that there was nothing that Justin was right.

“I’ll have Harry let Dumbledore know we’re coming.” Justin smiled and gave his lover a kiss. The two men were content with kissing and groping, not wanting to do too much more with the young boy in the other room, but needing the connection that only the other could give them. They both had a feeling that the upcoming months were not going to be easy.

Part 6

Brian awoke the next morning feeling much calmer then he had the night before when he had gone to bed. He credited his young lover for his mood and reached over to Justin’s side of the bed, only to find it empty. Brian only had a moment to wonder where Justin was before said blonde exited the bathroom.

“Hey,” Brian greeted the teen, who came over and lay back on the bed, on top of the covers. The two men kissed tenderly, a smile on both of their lips when they parted.

“Morning.” They kissed again, this time the kiss becoming more passionate. Much too quickly, though, they separated. “As much as I would like to continue this, and boy would I love to continue this, I better go make something for our young guest to eat.” Justin stood up and grinned down at his lover. “So, what exactly to up and coming wizards like to eat?” Justin laughed as he ran; avoiding the pillow that Brian tossed at him.

“Twat,” Brian shouted.

“But you love me anyway,” Justin retorted, heading towards the kitchen area. He wasn’t sure what their young guest likes to eat, but he figured that he couldn’t go wrong with blueberry pancakes. Brian had always told him how much he liked his pancakes and he wanted to treat his lover to something special, knowing that whatever was about to happen with Harry’s entrance into their lives wasn’t going to be easy on Brian.

“I’ve never seen two men together,” a shy voice said from the direction of the couch, causing Justin to jump.

“Shit,” Justin turned to face the teen. “I didn’t think you were up yet.”

“Sorry,” Harry said, sheepishly, standing and stretching.

“Don’t worry about it,” Justin brushed it off. Justin turned back to the counter. “How did you sleep? I know the couch isn’t the exactly all that comfortable.”

“It was okay. I’ve slept in worse. Actually until I was eleven, my aunt and uncle made me sleep in a closet under the stairs.”

“Are you serious?” Justin asked, horrified that anyone would do that to a child. “Why did they do that?”

“They didn’t like me,” Harry replied, matter of fatedly. He had long grown out of needing his blood family’s approval. He was happy with the extended family that he had found during his time at Hogwart’s. “My Aunt Petunia is my mum’s sister. Her and my Uncle Vernon didn’t want me with them. They hate the fact that I’m a wizard. Actually when I first found out about the whole thing, my uncle said that they had vowed they would rid me of the whole thing. How they intended on doing that, though, I have no idea.”

“With a family like that, no wonder you were sent here. You fit in perfectly.”

“What do you mean?”

“What Justin is trying to say is that, with the exception of Mikey, none of our little group has the ideal family life,” Brian commented, coming out of the bedroom and joining the other two men. He grabbed an apple from the bowl of fruit that was sitting on the counter separating the kitchen from the rest of the loft. Justin grabbed it out of his hand before Brian had been able to so much as take a bite out of it.

“I’m making pancakes and I expect you to eat some,” Justin admonished.

“Whatever,” Brian rolled his eyes. He accepted the glass of juice that Justin handed him. “Now, Sunshine, don’t forget to offer our guest anything.”

“Can I get you something, Harry? Orange juice, milk, water?”

“I’ll take some juice, please,” Harry answered. Justin poured the juice and handed it to him. “So how long have the two of you been together?”

“Two damn long,” Brian muttered, earning himself a smack from his lover. “Watch it.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. We’ve been together off and on for three years.”

“Cool.” Just then the phone rang and Brian went to get it, leaving Justin and Harry to talk. He had a feeling that Harry would be asking questions about the couple that he would just as soon as have Justin answer.

“Hi Mikey,” Brian said, already knowing it would be his best friend on the other end. Justin had told him about what Ben had said to everyone, so he had been expecting the phone call.

“Brian, how are you?”

“I’m fine, Mikey. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“What do you mean? Some strange kid comes looking for you. Telling you that some guy named Dumbledore sent him to you because another guy named Voldemort was back. And Ben told us about that guy. About Hogwarts. Why didn’t you tell me you were a wizard?”

“I’m not a wizard, Mikey,” Brian said patiently. He knew that his friend was only worried about him, and he did appreciate it, but he also didn’t really want to get into his past over the phone. Especially with Michael. It was going to be hard enough to tell him that he was leaving because he knew Michael wouldn’t understand why.

“But Ben said that Hogwart’s was a school for witches and wizards.”

“Right.”

“And you went to Hogwarts, right.”

“Right,” Brian drawled out.

“Well then why wouldn’t you be a wizard? You were always a good student so there’s no way you didn’t learn anything while you were there,” Michael reasoned.

“Mikey, Mikey, Mikey, have you ever seen me do anything even remotely magical?”

“You mean other than at the baths or in the backroom?”

“I said magical, not legendary,” Brian rolled his eyes, his attention drawn towards the kitchen where Justin and Harry were now eating the pancakes that his lover had made for breakfast. The two boys were laughing at something that Justin had said and Brian wanted nothing more than to go over to them and join them. “Look, Mikey, the reason I didn’t tell you about my going to Hogwarts was because you didn’t need to know.”

“What do you mean, I didn’t need to know? Of course I needed to know. I’m your best friend.”

“I know that, but this didn’t have anything to do with that. I had to keep it a secret from everyone in case Jack and Joanie found out I was still taking my lessons. And then, after they did find out, I didn’t want anyone to know what had happened. All I wanted was to graduate and get the hell out of the Pitts.”

“Brian,” Michael continued to whine but Brian had had enough.

“Not another word, Mikey. Look, I’m sure we’ll talk more about this at Linds and Mel’s tonight. Right now, I’ve got things to do.”

“But Brian,” Michael tried to talk more but Brian hung up the phone, not wanting to listen to it anymore. The ad exec knew there was no way his friend would let him get away with what little he had told him, but Brian also knew that he wasn’t in the mood to get into anything over the phone. He went over to Justin, wrapping his arms around the younger man and kissing him.

“Everything okay?”

“It will be.” Brian grabbed a piece of bacon off of Justin’s plate and turned to face Harry.

“So, Harry, what does Dumbledore want from us?” Part 7

The gang was gathered at the home of Melanie and Lindsay, anxiously awaiting the arrival of Brian, Justin and Harry. The guys had told Mel and Lindsay what had gone on the night before at the diner, and Michael had relayed what little he had gotten out of Brian earlier in the day when he had spoken to Brian. Other than that, no one had been able to talk to the other man, Brian having not bothered to pick up the phone when any of them had called to talk to him. The gang had once again turned to Ben for answers to questions they had about Hogwarts, witches, and wizards. Unfortunately Ben couldn’t give them answers to their most important questions. How could Brian have been a wizard and not tell them, and what was it that Harry Potter wanted Brian for.

“I’m sorry, but you can’t tell me I’m the only one that is having a problem with the idea that Brian is a wizard,” Melanie said, her dislike of anything having to do with Brian Kinney evident in her voice. “I’m not saying you’re lying Ben, but there are no such things as witches or wizards.”

“Mel, be nice,” Lindsay admonished the brunette.

“It’s alright, Lindsay,” Ben told her. “I can understand Melanie’s point of view. If it wasn’t for my family, I would probably feel the same way. If it wasn’t for the fact of who it was that had sent young Harry to Brian, or who Harry is, I would have trouble believing that Brian is a wizard also. But Albus Dumbledore is one of the most powerful wizards right now. And Harry Potter has been known since he was born. If he’s here saying Dumbledore needs Brian’s help, then I have to think that something very serious is happening.”

“What did your grandmother say when you talked to her?” Debbie asked him, knowing from an earlier discussion with Michael that Ben was going to ask his family if they had heard anything about why Harry might be coming to Pittsburgh.

“I didn’t talk to my grandmother but I did manage to get in touch with my aunt.” At a look from Michael, he clarified. “A different one.”

“What did she say?” Michael questioned. “Does she have any idea of what’s going on?”

“She said some strange things have been going on over there. And when I say strange, I don’t mean a good kind. At the Quidditch World Cup last year, the mark of Voldemort showed up, and the Death Eaters ended up harassing the Muggles that lived on the land.”

“Quidditch?’

“Death Eaters?”

“Oh, sorry. Quidditch is the big sport in the wizarding world. Think of it as full contact basketball on broomsticks. They had their big game in England last year. And Death Eaters are followers of Voldemort and extremely hateful towards Muggles and those wizards that they felt were inferior, especially those that come from Muggle families.”

“Ahhh, prejudice. It knows no bounds,” Ted commented softly.

“True. And in this case it led to the deaths of a lot of good people.” Ben was quiet for a moment thinking of the family members that he had lost during Voldemort’s rise to power. “Anyway, for the past 12 years or so, ever since Voldemort was thought killed, the Death Eaters were quiet. A lot of Voldemort’s followers either turned on each other or claimed to have been brainwashed into following him and since then, they’ve been quiet, trying their best to not have any attention focused on them.”

“And now that’s changed?” Ben nodded his head in answer to Lindsay’s question.

“Well, she said that for the past couple of years, there have been some strange rumors going around. Rumors about strange disappearances, deaths, that kind of thing. And a lot of them, she says, focus around Hogwarts. Coinciding with the admittance of Harry. My cousin went to school with him.”

“That little kid?” Debbie exclaimed, still not able to believe that the young boy that had come into the diner looking for Brian the day before could have anything to do with the things that Ben was describing.

“That kid has been through a lot more than most,” Ben continued. “His parents were killed in front of him. One of the most powerful wizards, not to mention on of the most evil, tried to kill him. Numerous times from what my aunt tells me.”

“But I thought you said that Voldemort was killed when Harry was one,” Melanie said, sounding like the lawyer that she was.

“That’s what a lot of people thought, but my aunt says that only his body was killed, not the essence that made him up. She says that he was only biding his time until he was powerful enough to come back.”

“And this kid Harry is saying that’s happened now?”

“Exactly. No one’s really sure of the hows or whys, but there are rumblings that he’s come back.”

“He has,” came a small voice near the door. Everyone turned to see Brian, Justin and Harry standing there. The group that was there before noticed the serious expressions that were own the newcomers faces and knew that whatever was going on, it wasn’t just going to go away quietly.

“You must be Harry,” Lindsay said, trying to break the tension that had suddenly engulfed the room. She went over to the young man, holding out her hand. “I’m Lindsay and I’m glad to meet you.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Harry replied, shaking the offered hand. “Thank you for welcoming me to your home.”

“Nice to know some people have manners,” Melanie shot, looking over at Brian who only smirked at her. She joined Lindsay. “I’m Melanie. Won’t you please come in?”

“Thank you.” Harry walked into the living room and noticed the same group of people that had been in the diner the day before.

“Everyone, this is Harry Potter,” Justin stated, going to introduce everyone. “That’s Debbie. Next to her is her son, Michael and then his boyfriend Ben. And over there is Emmett and Ted.”

“Hello,” Harry said quietly, unsure of how to act. He wasn’t used to being around a lot of strangers, his own Aunt and Uncle never really giving him the kind of freedom he needed to meet people. And he had never met any gay people before. He didn’t even think they existed in the wizarding community. Or at least, not to the point where it was discussed openly. Silence threatened to descend upon the household until Ben broke spoke up. He stood and went over to Harry, shaking the young boy’s hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Harry Potter. My aunt has told me a lot about you. You’ve made quite an impression on her. It doesn’t hurt that my cousin says you’re the best Seeker the school has seen in a century.”

“Your aunt and cousin?”

“My Aunt Winnie and my cousin Oliver.”

“Oliver Wood?”

“You know him, Harry?”

“Yeah, he was team Captain for Gryffindor before he graduated. He was our keeper. He taught me how to play Quidditch. He’s pretty cool.”

“He said the same thing about you.”

“I didn’t realize that Oliver knew about what had happened at the tournament,” Harry said confused. He still couldn’t believe that it had only been a little over a week and a half since the Tri-Wizards Tournament that had taken a school mate’s life and gave Voldemort back his. “I didn’t see him at any of the competitions.”

“Some of your fellow Gryffindors told him what happened,” Ben explained.

“Hey, guys, while this is all really interesting,” Melanie finally interrupted impatiently, “it still doesn’t explain what this kid is doing here and why Brian never bothered to inform any of us that he was a wizard. Well supposedly a wizard.” There was no mistaking how she felt towards Brian. Even Harry, who didn’t know her, could tell that she harbored no good feelings toward the man he had been sent for. Brian went over to Gus, picking his son up, before turning to face everyone.

“Harry came here for me. Professor Dumbledore has asked for my help,” Brian explained, “and I’ve agreed.”

“Agreed to do what?”

“To go back to Hogwarts.” And with that announcement, Brian sat down and waited for the inevitable explosion.

Part 8

“What do you mean, go back to Hogwart’s?”

“Are you crazy?”

“This has to be a joke, right?”

“Brian, do you have any idea of what you’re saying?” Came from all sides of the man in question after Brian’s announcement of returning to his old school. And they hadn’t even heard that Justin would be going with him. He was sure that would set off another round of exclamations.

“In order, yes I’m going back to Hogwart’s, no I’m not crazy, although I know you believe that is debatable, no this isn’t a joke, and of course I know what I’m saying,” Brian said, patience in his voice, but Justin could tell that it was wavering. The young blonde wanted nothing more than to take his lover away from everything. Away from whatever it was that Harry was trying to get him to do. Away from the people that insisted that Brian was nothing more than a sucking and fucking machine. Away from the friends that swore they wanted what was best for Brian, but never were willing to see that he had changed. That never supported him.

“Brian, honey, what exactly do you mean when you say you’re going to Hogwart’s?” Debbie asked, talking to Brian almost like he was a skittish colt and she was afraid that he was going to hurt himself, or someone else. Justin winced when he saw Brian’s features darken in anger.

“It means exactly that, Deb,” Brian said. “Justin and I talked about it and, we both agreed that we need to go to England and help Harry and Professor Dumbledore.”

“Wait a minute,” Lindsay interrupted. “You and Justin?” She turned to the young artist. “Justin, you aren’t seriously considering going with Brian are you?”

“Of course I’m going with Brian,” Justin answered as if it was the most obvious answer. He couldn’t believe there was any doubt that he would be joining Brian during his trip. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“What about school?” Melanie stated. “The new semester starts soon.”

“And don’t you have to work on the next issue of Rage?” This came from Debbie.

“And the art show at the GLC,” Lindsay chimed in. “I know how much you were looking forward to that. I’ve seen some of the drawings you have for it. You deserve to be in it.”

“So, I can still be in it, whether I’m there or not,” Justin pointed out. “I can just leave the drawings with you and you can put them up for me, couldn’t you? As for school, Brian and I have already talked about it and, while he isn’t exactly happy about it,” Justin ignored the snort that came from his lover, “and we agreed that this was more important. I want to be there for him. Actually, I need to be there for him.”

“So once again, Brian Kinney’s fucked up life screws up someone else’s,” Melanie sneered. Lindsay walked over to the blonde.

“Justin, you’ve got your whole life ahead of you,” Lindsay added, going over to him. “You have so much potential. It’s just that we don’t want to see you waste it.”

“Which you think I’ll be doing if I go to England with Brian and Harry,” Justin stated.

“You have to admit that you would be putting your life on hold for something that has nothing to do with you,” Melanie continued, oblivious to the anger emanating from Justin. “Just because Brian says he’s a wizard, and let me tell you I have some serious reservations about that and am beginning to question his sanity after hearing that statement, whatever is going on at his old school has nothing to do with you.”

“Why, because Voldemort’s a wizard, same as Brian and Harry, and I’m not?” Justin almost shouted. He hated the way everyone always told he and Brian how to work their relationship. If anything, the advice Brian and Justin were constantly being giving hurt them more than helped them because none of their friends understood what went on between the two men. “Do you have any idea of what could happen if this guy isn’t stopped? Do you even care?”

“Justin, sweetie,” Debbie tried to placate him, “of course we care. All we’re trying to say is that we don’t think it would its fair that you put your life on hold, your art on hold, just because Brian asked you to.”

“Christ, don’t any of you people ever listen?” Justin broke in. “Brian didn’t ask me to go with him. He isn’t making me do anything that I don’t want to do. I told him I was going with him. I didn’t give him a choice.”

“I’m sure he made you think that,” Melanie continued her tirade. “Brian’s great at making people believe he actually cares for them, but its all bullshit. Come on, we’re talking about a man who is trying to convince us all that he is a wizard.”

“Felinucus transfomigaration,” Brian ordered his voice strong. Suddenly there was a flash and when it was gone, there was a black cat standing where Melanie had been only a moment before.

“What the hell was that?”

“Where did that cat come from?”

“What happened to Melanie?”

“Meow.” Justin looked over at a smirking Brian, then down at the cat.

“Brian, you didn’t.”

“Wicked,” exclaimed Harry. “I’ve only seen people turn themselves into animals, not someone else. My friends would be so psyched to see that. I bet you could even rival Professor McGonnigal.”

“Professor McGonnigal said I was her best student,” Brian said proudly. “I never had a problem in her class. It was one of the main reasons she was so willing to help Professor Dumbledore teach me after my parents took me out of school.”

“Wait a minute,” Ted interrupted, “are you trying to tell us that that….that cat is supposed to be Melanie.” A loud meow answered Ted’s question. Lindsay bent down and picked up the animal.

“Mel?” She quietly asked, earning herself a gentle lick and purr from the cat. “Brian, what have you done?”

“Just gave you a different kind of pussy to play with,” Brian said, tongue in cheek, earning him a multitude of groans.

“Wow, Brian, what else can you do?” Michael asked, going over and investigating the cat in Lindsay’s arms. He was quickly joined by the rest of the group, all petting the animal.

“Don’t know,” Brian shrugged. “Surprised I could do that really. Been a long time since I’ve really thought about magic, let alone actually doing it. Although I have to admit, it is a lot like riding a bike.”

“That’s all well and good, Brian, but can you please turn Melanie back to normal,” Lindsay cried.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Brian said. “I think I like her better this way. She’s a lot quieter and actually kind of cute.”

“Fuck you Brian.”

“Brian, turn Melanie back to normal,” Debbie ordered.

“Fine,” he acquiesced. “You might want to put her back on the ground, Linds.” Lindsay did as she was told. “Returnas Felinucus.”

“You fucking asshole,” Melanie screamed from where she sat on the floor.

“So Melanie, still think I’m insane for thinking I’m a wizard?”

“I think you’re a fucking prick who needs someone to kick his ass.”

“Language, language,” Brian continued to taunt. He looked around the group. “Now that I think I’ve proven that I am a wizard, can we please continue with this conversation, and that does not mean you get to continue hassling Justin about his decision to come with me. If this had happened to any of you, there would be no question if your partner decided to go with you.” All at once, the room filled with noise again.

“Quiet,” Brian shouted and waited for the noise to die down. “Thank you. And I don’t know why you are bothering to deny it because you know it’s true. Mel, if Lindsay came to you and told you that she was a witch, or whatever, and said that she had to go help out, tell me that you wouldn’t be more than willing to set aside everything and help her.”

“I can’t,” she answered quietly.

“Right and neither can the rest of you. But when it’s Justin who says he’s going with me, suddenly he’s in the wrong and I’m a bastard because I want my lover to be with me. What the fuck kind of double standard is that?”

“Brian, it’s just that Justin is so young, we don’t want him to do anything that might screw up his future,” Debbie said. “It’s nothing against you.”

“Bullshit,” Brian swore. “It’s got everything to do with me. Have I ever given you people a reason to think I’m stupid?” Everyone shook their heads. “And yet you all think I am. Don’t you think I know that, no matter what you say, the whole lot of you would rather see Justin with anyone but me? Did you think I wouldn’t find out about your little matchmaking scheme Linds?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Brian?”

“I’m talking about Ethan "he’s so wonderful" Gold.” Lindsay and Melanie’s indrawn breath was enough to prove that Brian was correct. “That’s the real reason you took Justin to that concert on his birthday, right? You were hoping the Justin would see this young, aspiring musician and fall instantly in love.”

“Brian, you don’t understand,” Melanie tried to explain. “It had nothing to do with you. We just thought that Justin needed to meet some boys his own age.”

“Is that why you gave him our phone number,” Justin questioned, joining Brian and taking a hold of his hand. “I never even told him my last name.”

“Justin.”

“No, Lindsay,” Justin shook his head. “I don’t know why you did that, and I was willing to forgive and forget, but after this I can’t. Why can’t any of you just accept that I love Brian?”

“Fuck this,” Brian said, signaling to Harry to head towards the front door. Brian and Justin followed him. “You know, I’ve known you all for a lot of years. I’ve forgiven a lot of shit. Shit that you wouldn’t have dared pull on anyone else. I had hoped that you would have been supportive of us doing this. Hell maybe even proud, especially you Linds considering the fact that wizardry is hereditary and there’s a good chance that Gus is a wizard too, so this will affect him too.”

“Brian, let’s go,” Justin pulled Brian towards the door, wanting nothing more than to get his lover home and help him forget the way his friends had treated him. He hated the way that everyone was so willing to only see the Brian Kinney that they had known, instead of the man that he had become. Brian allowed himself to be led out of the house, leaving behind a stunned group of friends who began to question the way that they had been treating one of their own.

Part 9

“Well that could have gone better,” Justin muttered as he, Brian, and Harry entered the loft. It was the first time any of them had spoken since they had left Lindsay and Melanie’s. Justin watched in despair as his lover made his way to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. The blonde sighed at the misery he could feel coming from the older man and cursed their so-called friends for putting Brian through that scene at the house.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said quietly, blaming himself for the scene that had just taken place.

“It’s not your fault,” Justin told him, his gaze finally breaking away from the door his lover had disappeared behind. “If anything, that confrontation has been coming for a long time. Your arrival was just a convenient trigger for the shit to finally hit that fan.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how come?”

“I can’t really say,” Justin answered. “I don’t know that they even realize what they’re doing. Well, maybe Mel does and I think her big problem is that she and Brian are a lot alike. That and Brian is Gus’s father, which means that he will always be a part of her and Lindsay’s lives.”

“But what about the others?”

“I think the main problem is that none of them are willing to admit that Brian has changed,” Justin explained. “I think they want to continue seeing him as the same unfeeling, uncaring, selfish bastard that he used to be.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Harry protested, not understanding how someone’s supposed friends could be so unsupportive. Harry remembered how hurt he had been when Ron had stopped talking to him because he had believed that Harry was purposely going after the spotlight during the Tri-Wizards Tournament, and the relief he felt when Ron finally started talking to him again.

“I never said that it made any sense,” Justin countered. “I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that, as long as Brian stayed the same, they could blame everything on him. I know Debbie does that a lot when something goes wrong in Michael’s life and Mel is constantly doing that whenever problems happen between her and Lindsay. And I know my parents blame Brian for a lot of the shit that’s happened to me since I met him. Hell my Dad swears that Brian seduced me and caused me to be gay. One night my father went so far as to attack Brian when we were leaving a club with the gang and Debbie yelled at Brian about it.”

“If Brian was the one attacked, why did he get yelled at?”

“Because everything is Brian’s fault, at least in their world. It’s why I think they don’t want to admit he changed, because then they will have to admit that whatever happens in their lives that they don’t like is their own fault.” Justin shook himself. “Sorry, I don’t mean to make it sound like they’re a bunch of assholes or something. It’s just that I get so sick and tired of listening to them jump on Brian’s back for everything, especially when it comes to me. It’s almost like they would rather see him as a child molester or something instead of admitting that I’m actually someone who can make up his own mind.”

“You mean like them yelling because you want to go with us to Hogwart’s?” Harry asked, remembering the anger he had felt when they had announced that Justin would be joining them on the trip to England.

“Exactly. Like I said. It was just the final straw. What happened tonight has been coming for a long time.” Justin tilted his head towards the bathroom as he heard the shower start. “Look, Harry, if you don’t mind, I think I better go check on Brian. I need to make sure that he’s okay after all of this.”

“Okay,” Harry said, watching Justin go towards the bathroom. Harry might be only fourteen, but he had a good idea of what exactly was going to happen behind the closed door, so he settled down and decided to write a letter to his two friends Ron and Hermoine and let them know what his summer has been like so far.

“Hey,” Justin said, joining his lover in the shower. He wrapped his arms around Brian’s waist, offering him the comfort that he knew Brian wouldn’t ask for.

“Hey yourself,” Brian returned, turning around and wrapping his own arms around Justin, pulling the younger man against him. Brian leaned down, his lips brushing Justin’s and the two men contented themselves with soft, sweet kisses over the next following few minutes. Where normally their kissing would lead to more playful and active, water activities, neither man felt inclined to move forward. Eventually the pulled apart and began to wash each other off.

“Justin.”

“Hmmm?”

“Are you sure you want to go to England with me?” Justin turned to face Brian, who had been washing the teen’s back. He looked up into the hazel eyes of his lover and could see the insecurity that Brian allowed only a few people to know resided in him. “You know there’s no set time period for how long I’m going to be needed at Hogwart’s. Hell, for all we know, I could be there for a year, if not more.”

“So?”

“What about your school? You’ve worked so hard to be where you are now.”

“You’re starting to sound like the rest of the band of merry trouble makers,” Justin countered, not liking what he was hearing come from his lover’s mouth and he cursed their friends once more for the way they treated Brian earlier that day. Justin kissed Brian, trying to show how much he loved the older man. “Brian, I’m going to Hogwart’s with you. I’m not having second thoughts. I’m not going to reconsider, no matter what everyone else, including you, say. This is something that I want to do, and you know me. I always get what I want.”

‘Twat,” Brian said, holding Justin close to him.

“True, but I’m your twat. And I’m never letting you go.”

“Tell me about it,” Brian smirked, rubbing against the younger man, feeling their hardening lengths rubbing against each other, moaning at the sensation. “No matter what I do, you keep coming back.”

“And I always will.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Part 10

“Dada,” Gus yelled as soon as he saw his father. He ran as fast as his little legs could carry him, flinging himself into Brian’s arms, which caught him easily.

“Hey Sonnyboy, “Brian greeted the excited two year old. He held the small boy close to him, knowing that there was a good chance that it would be the last time he would be able to do so for a long time. “Hey Linds,” he said in greeting to the blonde that had brought his son for the surprise visit.

“Brian.”

“You just missed Justin,” Brian informed her, bouncing his son in his arms, causing Gus to giggle. “He took Harry over to PIFA so he could see where he goes to school. And he wanted to grab a couple of things from there for him to take with him to England.”

“I know. I saw the two of them leave as I was pulling up,” Lindsay said. There was something in her voice that made Brian think that Lindsay was glad that the two teens weren’t at the loft and he resigned himself to the lecture that he was sure he was about to receive from the mother of his son.

“Ahh, so is this where you try to convince me that I shouldn’t go to England and help Harry and the rest of Hogwart’s defect Voldemort? Or is it that you don’t care whether or not I go, its just that you would prefer that I leave Justin out of it because he’s so young and has his whole life to lead without my interference?”

“Brian, don’t be like that,” Lindsay sighed.

“Be like what, Linds? You and the rest of the little zoo crew made no secret of how you felt about my going back to Hogwart’s,” Brian said, reminding her of the disastorous meeting of only a few nights before. “And that was before you knew Justin would be going with me. After that announcement, you guys made sure to tell Justin that he was making the biggest mistake of his life by coming with me.”

“Its just that we’re concerned about him. About both of you,” Lindsay quickly amended upon seeing the glare that Brian sent her way. “Ben told us how dangerous this Voldemort was. How no one in the wizarding community will even say his name, afraid of drawing attention to themselves. And Justin is so young and he has his classes to worry about. Classes that you are paying for, might I remind you. How fair is it for you to expect him to just dump everything and go off to England with you. Did you even think about that before you decided to go on your grand adventure?”

“Believe it or not, Lind, I did,” Brian cut her off. “That’s why I didn’t ask him.”

“But…”

“He told me he was coming,” Brian broke in again. “He said there was no way I was going to leave him behind, especially since we have no idea how long I’m going to have to be gone. Besides, like he said, he can do his art anywhere and I can’t think of a more interesting place to get some inspiration than Hogwart’s. In fact, Justin will probably learn more there and PIFA. Did you know that if you draw a living object, like a person or an animal, it moves..”

“Bullshit. Pictures can’t move, Brian. You know that.:

“Maybe here they can’t but in the magickal community pictures, whether painted or photographed, do move.” Brian went over to the small area that was currently housing Harry’s belongings. He picked up a deck of trading cards and brought them over to Lindsay. “Take a look at these.”

The blonde woman looked at what Brian had handed her and was shocked when a picture of Albus Dumbledore stared back at her. She looked up at Brian for a moment, only to look back at the card to see that the card was now empty. She let out a startled gasp that made Gus jump. Brian went over to his son to pick him up and let him know that there was nothing wrong.

“What the hell?”

“They would be wizarding cards. They kids collect them like baseball cards. They come with chocolate frogs.” At Lindsay’s startled look, Brian continued. “Relax, Linds, they aren’t real frogs. They’re just chocolate that’s enchanted. I’ll see about sending some back to you guys to see what I mean. I used to eat them a lot when I went to Hogwart’s. Those and Bernie Bott’s Every Flavor Bean, and let me tell you, they seriously mean every flavor.” Lindsay continued staring at the card for a few more minutes before her concern for Justin returned.

“Brian, as interesting, hell fascinating, as trying to paint something like is, I still don’t think that Justin should go with you. It’s too dangerous and he’s already been through enough.”

“You’re telling me what he’s been through?” Brian scoffed. “Don’t forget, I was there for most of it. I’m the one that’s been to help him get through everything.”

“I know Brian,” Lindsay agreed. “And that’s all the more reason for you to want him to stay here. You can’t even promise his family that he’ll stay safe. That he won’t get hurt.”

“Of course I can’t make that promise,” Brian agreed. “Then again, its not like being in the Pitts has been all that safe for him. Christ he almost got killed at his Prom, not exactly a usual place for life endangerment.”

“So that gives you an excuse to take to someplace where his life will be in even more danger,” Lindsay countered, going over to where Gus was investigating his father’s DVDs. She picked up the young boy and headed towards the front door. “I’m sorry, Brian, but I can’t condone that.”

“I’m not asking you to condone it. I’m not asking you to do anything except understand that this is Justin’s decision. And that’s it’ s a decision that any of you would make too if the person involved was your significant other.” Lindsay looked over at Brian, and he could see that no matter what he said, he would never change her mind. He walked over and gave his son a kiss on the cheek, returning the smile that Gus gave him. “You know, we’re doing this for Gus too. There’s a good chance that he’s a wizard too. Or do you plan on doing what my parents did and deny him that part of himself?” Lindsay didn’t say anything and Brian knew the answer. He had known the blonde woman too long to not recognize what she was trying so hard not to say and that was that she would be more than willing to deny Gus’s heritage if it suited her needs. He opened the loft door. “I see. Linds, just out of curiosity, when did you become your mother?”

“What the hell do you mean by that?” Lindsay demanded, offended at even the thought of resembling the cold woman who was her mother. The same mother that basically denied Lindsay right to love whomever she chooses.

“What I mean is that if it turns out that Gus is a wizard, you’ re going to do what my parents did and deny him that chance, aren’ t you?” Lindsay could hear the venom in Brian’s voice, but was unable to deny what he was implying. “Deny what he is because it doesn’t fit in with what you find acceptable, like you’re parents did when you told them you were gay.”

“Brian, there’s a bit of a difference between being gay and being a wizard,” Lindsay argued.

“Like Justin would say, duh. But it’s still something that would be an essential part of who Gus is,” Brian told her. “Just like being gay is part of who we are.”

“I’m not going to have this conversation,” Lindsay said, heading to the door.

“Of course not, why should not be any different?” Brian replied, watching her slid open the door and making no move to help her. “Just like always, little Lindsay Peterson will go hiding her head and ignoring anything that doesn’t fit into her perfect little world. For Gus’s sake, I hope he doesn’t do anything that makes you see him as something less than perfect.”

“Fuck you,” Lindsay said, before slamming the door to the loft closed, leaving Brian behind to wonder if that might have been the last time he would see his son.

Part 11

“So this is the young man that is causing everyone is talking about,” Jennifer Taylor said when Justin introduced Harry to her. She already had heard of the young wizard, having had a long conversation with Debbie the day before when the older woman told her about Justin’s plans to go to England with Harry and Brian to help them defeat Voldemort. Debbie had hoped that Jennifer would have more success in talking Justin out of his plans than the others did.

“Do I even want to know what they’ve been saying?” Justin asked, looking over at Harry and giving him a reassuring look. He knew the teen was already feeling uncomfortable after the confrontation at Melanie and Lindsay and he hoped that his mother wasn’t going to add to Harry’s feelings of guilt at causing trouble for Brian and Justin.

“They just told me about Brian’s plan to go to England to his old school to help them defeat Voldemort. And that you planned on going with him.” Justin waited for his mother to try and convince him that he was making a mistake. He was surprised when, instead, she handed him a photo album. He opened it and gasped when he saw the pictures moved.

“Mom?”

“You remember my friend Michelle and her husband Paul?” Justin had to think hard before he remembered the two people that used to bring him the most interesting treats when they used to visit his family.

“They used to bring me those weird jelly beans that had all those funky flavors.”

“Bernie Bott’s...”

“Every Flavor Bean,” Harry finished. He blushed when both Jennifer and Justin looked at him. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, Harry,” Jennifer assured him, leading both boys into the living room and sitting them down. She turned her attention back to Justin. “They were wizards. In fact, they had met each other when they were attending Hogwarts. They moved to New York after they had graduated. They had relatives here that wanted them away from Europe because they were afraid of what was going on over there.”

“I remember when Michelle used to baby-sit me. She would tell the best stories about dragons and magickal beasts,” Justin reminisced. “It was why I was always drawing that kind of stuff when I was a kid. I always thought they had the best stories.”

“That because they weren’t just make-believe. They were usually real,” Justin informed the stunned teen.

“Whatever happened to them anyway?”

“They moved to Brazil, wanting to do work with some of the local tribes down there and we lost contact with each other,” Jennifer told them. “But because of them I know all about Voldemort and the evil that he can create.”

“Tell me about it.” Jennifer looked over at Harry, taking in the young boy’s quiet demeanor. She remembered the story that her friends had told her how it was Harry that had stopped Voldemort all those years ago.

“I’m sorry about what happened to you parents, Harry,” Jennifer told him, taking him into her arms. There was just something about the young teen that called out to the mother in her. “I only know a little about the wizarding community from Michelle and Paul, but even here what happened between you and Voldemort is known, although probably not as well as it is over in Europe.”

“If you know about Voldemort, then you have to understand why I have to go with Brian,” Justin said. “I can’t let him face whatever he’s going to face alone.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Jennifer assured him. “I know how much you care about Brian and that, no matter what anyone says, that you won’t let him go to England alone, especially since I’m guessing you know why he isn’t a working wizard.” Justin nodded his head.

“His parents took him out of school,” he explained. “They didn’t want him practicing magic. Probably didn’t fit in with their religious beliefs. Mom, you should have seen his face when he was talking about his time at Hogwart’s and what happened after he left. Even the friends that he had made there didn’t contact him. He was all alone. I can’t let him go back to that world by himself. I don’t even want to think about what might happen to him.”

“Brian’s a big boy, Justin, but,” Jennifer held up her hand when she saw that Justin was going to interrupt her, “you love him and you want to do everything you can to protect him and I understand that. As much as I wish you wouldn’t go, I know you will and I’ll support your decision. The only thing I ask is that you be careful and that you’ll keep in touch. You’re my son and, no matter how old you are or how grown up, I’m always going to worry about you.”

“Thanks Mom,” Justin gave his mom a quick hug, glad that he hadn’t lost her when he chose to leave home instead of giving in to his parents’ demands to leave Brian. Even with all of the trouble the couple had gone through over the past two and a half years, there was nothing that he would have done differently. He and Brian loved each other, and even if their relationship wasn’t what one that their friends approved of, it worked for them and Justin was happy about that.

“Well, enough of this,” Jennifer said, pulling away from her son, discretely wiping the tears that were threatening to fall. She hated that Justin was going to Hogwart’s but, as she told him, she would support his decision. “Well, I’m not sure about the two of you, but I’m starving. Would either of you like anything to eat?”

“Thanks Mom,” Justin said, realizing that his appetite had returned now that he knew his mother wasn’t going to try and get him to stay.

“Harry, what about you? Can I get you something to eat?”

“Yes, please. I’d like that,” the brunet boy answered.

“Then come on. I made lasagna the other night and I still have the leftovers.”

“Grandma’s lasagna?” Jennifer nodded her head. “Excellent. Harry you haven’t had anything as good as my grandma’s recipe for lasagna. It’s the best.”

“I can’t wait to try it,” Harry told him, following Justin and Jennifer into the kitchen. While Jennifer went about heating up the lasagna, Justin and Harry made a small salad for the three of them. All through lunch, both Taylor’s made a point of including Harry into their conversation, not wanting him to feel left out. Jennifer asked Harry about his childhood and was disheartened when she heard about how Harry’s family, the Dursleys, had treated the orphaned boy. She had heard similar stories of neglect from Justin when he talked about his lover’s childhood, except that Harry’s neglect had only been in terms of emotional abuse whereas Brian’s father had also included physical abuse. It made her understand why Justin wanted to protect Brian as much as he could and she vowed that she would do what she could to make sure that the others in Brian’s circle of friends didn’t hurt him anymore than they may already have.

Back at the loft, Brian was busy trying to figure out everything that he would need to bring for him and Justin. He looked over at his laptop, wondering if he should even bother bringing the electrical device, knowing that it wouldn’t work on the grounds of Hogwarts itself. It was the same reason why he was unsure if he should bring his cell phone, but he hated the idea of him and Justin being so out of touch with everyone. Especially if there was an emergency. He wasn’t sure how comfortable his friends would be using the usual forms of communication in the wizarding world. In the end, Brian decided to take both items, knowing that if they needed to, Brian and Justin would go into Hogsmeade, the closest town to Hogwarts, where they would be able to use those things. Justin as Brian began packing everything in the suitcases; he heard the door to the loft opening and wondered who was coming to see him now, knowing that Justin and Harry were still with Jennifer Taylor. He sighed when he saw who his visitor was.

“Mikey, why am I not surprised?” Brian went back to his packing.

“Where’s the boy wonder?”

“If you’re talking about Justin, he took Harry over to meet Jennifer,” Brian explained. “He wanted to see her before we left.”

“So you’re still intending to actually go through with it?” Michael asked. “You’re still going to England?”

“Of course I am. Nothing’s changed since I saw you at the munchers’.” Brian looked over his suits, deciding to only take three. He wasn’t sure what Dumbledore would be having him do at Hogwarts, but he didn’t think he would be in need of anything that fancy.

“Brian, I don’t think it’s a good idea.” Brian looked over at his friend, his eyebrow cocked in a silent question. “Ben told me about this guy Voldemort and he doesn’t sound like someone you should be messing with. This guy has killed people. People that went up against him and you said it yourself. You aren’t a wizard. You haven’t practiced magic in a long time. What makes you think that you can protect yourself against this guy?”

“I don’t know, Mikey,” Brian shouted, his patience at an end. He knew he should have been used to his friends’ lack of support towards him, but he just didn’t want to deal with it right then. He knew that he needed to keep his focus on what was to be expected of him when he got to London, even though he didn’t know what that was going to be. “I don’t even know what Dumbledore expects from me. I haven’t had any fucking contact with the man since I was seventeen. Until Harry showed, I hadn’t heard from anyone with that damn community since my fucking parents pulled me out of school, so I don’t have a fucking clue what I’m supposed to do against Voldemort.”

“Then why are you going?” Michael yelled back. “What the fuck do you owe them that you’re willing to give up everything you’ve worked for to go running to help this bastard? What the hell do they have on you to make you go?”

“I need to know why,” Brian told him. “I want him to tell me why he left me with those assholes who call themselves my parents when he knew what was going on. I told him. I begged him to take me with him back to Hogwarts and he fucking left me. He fucking left me here and there was not one of my so-called friends even bothered to contact me. Didn’t bother to tell me what was going on. I was left on my fucking own and I want to know why.”

“You weren’t alone, Bri,” Michael said, his voice going back to a normal volume. “You had me. And ma.”

“I know, Mikey,” Brian said, shutting his eyes as he sat on an empty space on the bed. Michael walked over to his friend, wrapping his arms around Brian as he waited for Brian to get his emotions under control again.

“Bri?”

“I’m fine,” Brian insisted, pulling himself together.

“You know that, no matter what, you’ll always have family here,” Mikey told the brunet. “That’s never going to change.”

“I know, and I appreciate that,” Brian said. “So does Justin. It’s just that, when I was Hogwarts that was the first time I ever felt like I had people that cared about me. There was this one family, the Weasleys that practically took me into their home and made me an adopted member of their home. Their son Bill was my best friend and we did everything together, including getting into a lot of trouble. Dumbledore had us in his office on more than one occasion for pulling some kind of practical joke. His family sent me gifts for Christmas and on my birthday and they welcomed me into their homes when I went there for a vacation. They even told me that they would have no problem taking me into their home if I didn’t want to go back to my parents and I really wanted that. Christ, they already had three kids of their own, Bill and his two younger brothers Charley and Percy, who was only a year old, and they still said I could stay with them. Fuck Mrs. Weasley was even pregnant at the time and they wanted me there. When I never heard from them again, no matter how much I tried contacting them, I didn’t know what I was going to do. I don’t think I ever felt more betrayed than I did then and I want to know why they did it.”

“Then I think you should go and I think that it’s right that Justin go with you,” Michael finally stated. He was still worried about his friend but he would support Brian in his decision. He knew that it was something that Brian had to do for his own piece of mind. “You’ll keep in touch, right?”

“Yeah, but it might not be in the usual way,” Brian smirked, thinking of the owls that were normally used for delivering letters. “The wizarding community is a bit different.”

“So I’ve been told but as long as I know that you’re okay, I’ll deal with it.”

“Thanks, Mikey.” Brian said, glad that his friend was supporting him and wondering what was going to happen when he got to England and was finally able to confront the past that had abandoned him.

Part 12

“Brian, we’re back,” Justin called as he and Harry entered the loft, only to stop short when he saw that his lover wasn’t alone. Sitting on the sofa, looking for all the world as if he belonged there, was someone that Justin had never met. “Umm, hello. I didn’t expect Brian to have company.” Unspoken was Justin’s question as to who, exactly, was the person.

“Justin, Harry, this is Vince Masters,” Brian informed them, introducing the black-haired man who stood up. “He’s the Headmaster of Cornwalt. It’s the East Coast version of Hogwart’s.”

“You’re a wizard?” Harry asked, surprised. He hadn’t expected to meet and American wizard, other than Harry, and he didn’t know what to expect. He had only heard a little about American wizards, and not all of it was good, although it wasn’t completely bad either. It had just seemed to him that, when it came to American wizards, Europe had little or no respect for their abilities and it was one of the reasons that Harry had been so surprised when Professor Dumbledore had asked him to come to Pittsburgh and get Brian.

“That’s right, I’m a wizard. And you’re Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived,” Vince said, not missing Harry’s squirm at the mention of his fame. He put it away in the back of his mind to be analyzed later. “I’ve heard about you and I must say I was surprised when I heard that you had been spotted in Pittsburgh.”

“Don’t tell me everyone know about me over here too,” Harry sighed. The raven-haired boy hated the fact that he was so well known within the wizarding community for something that happened when he was only a year old. It made him feel as if he had to live up to people’s expectations that he was some kind of hero, instead of just a normal young man that was just trying to get through life. Even his best friends, Ron and Hermoine, seemed to forget that Harry didn’t want to be different. Didn’t want to be known only as the “Boy Who Lived.” That Harry wanted nothing more than to get through school with as little trouble as possible, find someone to fall in love with, and have a family of his own.

“Yes, Harry, I will admit that most people do know about you. At least, know who you are and what happened to you,” Vince told him, “although probably not to the degree that they do back in Europe. Voldemort was never really a threat that we took seriously. We knew who he was and what was happening in Europe, mainly from those that still have family in the Old Country. There were also quite a few witches and wizards that came to America hoping to get away from what was happening, but we were never concerned for our own safety here. We knew enough that we did offer our help to defeat him, but the Ministry turned us down so we stayed out of the war.

“As for people knowing you here, well, like I said, you are known, but you are not the most famous person around. I don’t think most witches and wizards would recognize you.”

“So you’re saying that I could walk around and no one would bother me?” Harry asked, and there was no mistaking the excitement he had about that. After being told about his past, and seeing the reactions he got from people, both in Diagon Alley and at Hogwart’s, it had never occurred to him that there might be somewhere in the wizarding world where he could be left alone to be himself.

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you,” Vince said. “In fact, I was just telling Brian that the three of you should go down to New Hope. The town has a population made of both magickal and non-magickal people. It’s actually known for its acceptance of those who practice magic, as well as being very gay friendly. I think it would be a nice place for you to see what we have to offer young wizards and I believe that all of you, especially young Justin here, will find it quite interesting.” Vince turned his attention to the blond. “It’s my understanding that you haven’t been exposed to the wizarding world yet, correct?”

“Yeah,” Justin nodded, finally finding his voice since he had entered the loft. “I didn’t even know that witched and wizards existed until Harry showed up.”

“Then I definitely think it would be a good idea to go to New Hope,” Vince told him. “Especially considering the Old World’s view on non-magickal people being involved in the wizarding community.”

“I didn’t think there were Muggles involved in the wizarding community,” Harry said. “I mean, I know that we have Muggle Studies at Hogwart’s and that the Ministry has a division that makes sure people don’t charm Muggle things, but I didn’t know that they actually worked with Muggles.”

“As far as I know, the Ministry of Magic doesn’t have a lot to do with Muggles in the Old World,” Vince explained. “Even those that say they don’t have a problem with children from what they call Muggle families want as little to do with non-magickal people. It’s one of the reasons that they try and encourage those children to either stay within the magickal community completely or to leave to live in the Muggle world and never practice magick again. We don’t do that here.”

“What do you mean?” Justin asked. The blond had joined his lover by the couch, sitting as close to him as he could and taking Brian’s hand in his own. As fascinated as he was about the whole witch and wizarding thing that he was being told about, he was worried about how this was affecting the brunet. After working so hard to make something of his life and putting the past behind him, having something from that past come out of nowhere had to be bothering Brian. Justin just wished that the two of them could get a moment alone so that they could talk about it. “How are things different here than over in Europe?”

“We’re a bit more modern here in the Colonies, as they still call us,” Vince explained. “Included among the Colonies is the US, Canada, Mexico and all of South and Central America. When I speak about the Old World, I am basically speaking about Europe, although there are parts of Russia and Africa that can be included. The Old World is called that for the main reason that they are doing things the same way that they have for centuries. The people in charge over there don’t want things to change because they don’t want to admit that maybe there is a better way of getting along. They way they look at Muggles, and their technology, are a good example. Yes, hundreds of years ago, magick did make life easier for wizards. Our way of living was a step up from non-magickal beings because we didn’t have to do things manually. It didn’t take us hours, days or months to travel places because of the floo network and port keys, not to mention apparating from place to place. Our pictures moved and our mail arrived within days of being sent. Magickal beings were at a more advanced stage, but that is no longer the case.

“In today’s society, technology has made it so that magickal and non-magickal people are almost equal. In fact, there are many things in the non-magickal society that make life even easier than magick does. Telephones and computers make keeping in touch quicker than ever. Automobiles and planes make traveling faster, and slightly easier if there is baggage included. Computers make gathering information easier than anything that the magickal community has to offer. There is so much that the non-magickal community has to offer us, but those in charge in the Old World want nothing to do with it. In fact, if a family is pureblooded, they are considered almost akin to royalty, no matter what that family is like.

“We don’t have that distinction here. We can’t,” Vince continued, taking a sip of water from the glass that had been sitting in front of him. He looked over at his audience, seeing that he had their full attention, which is what he wanted. After speaking to Brian and hearing what had happened to the man so many years ago, about the way the magickal community in Europe had turned their back on him knowing what they did about his home life, made Vince sick to his stomach. The willingness of Headmaster Dumbledore to simply leave Brian in a situation he knew was dangerous to the youth because of some supposed order coming from the Ministry of Magick was just one of the many reasons that Vince hated the government of the Old World and it made him question what those same people in charge had planned for Brian and Harry.

“What do you mean, you can’t?” Harry inquired, intrigued by the idea that things might be that different between the US and England. “Is it the same reason that Voldemort wasn’t a threat over here?”

“In a way, I guess it was,” Vince admitted. “You see, because this country is so young, especially when it comes to any magickal history like that in the Old World, we don’t have any real pureblooded families. Most magickal families only go back about ten generations and almost all of them have some kind of non-magickal blood in them and we encourage that. We don’t want our community to grow stagnant because only a limited number of families are in charge.”

“So you’ve accepted Muggles, and their way of living, into your society,” Brian stated. “That makes sense. Considering the amount of technology available, I’m sure it’s getting harder and harder to keep the fact that witches and wizards are real a secret from them.”

“That’s one of the reasons,” Vince agreed. “We didn’t want to waste our resources on casting forget spells on anyone who witnessed someone doing magick or who saw something they shouldn’t have. But accepting non-magickal people into our society is only one of the reasons the Old World government doesn’t think much of our way of life.”

“What other reasons are there?” Harry questioned.

“Harry, let me ask you something. And you can answer this also Brian. While at Hogwart’s, how many other forms of magick did you learn?”

“What do you mean,” the young teen asked. “What other forms of magick are there?”

“There are many forms of magick out there, young Harry, including many that do not require the use of your wand,” Vince explained. “Some of it so old that the only remaining knowledge about it is what has been passed down generation upon generation from medicine man to medicine man. The Native Americans that had once ruled this continent revered those that had knowledge of the spirit world. The slaves that were brought here by traders also brought over their religion of Santeria. Even those that practice the religion of Wicca have their own special form of magic, even if it isn’t one that we would recognize.”

“They never told us any of that at Hogwart’s,” Harry observed, intrigued by that notion. “Why?”

“They probably don’t want to acknowledge that they aren’t the end all and be all,” Brian wryly commented. “Dumbledore doesn’t like to acknowledge the fact that there may be wizards and witches out there that don’t do things the acceptable way. He doesn’t like the idea that he might not be the expert on everything.”

“But Dumbledore’s one of the strongest wizards there are,” Harry defended his Headmaster. “I mean, he’s the reason that Voldemort never went after Hogwart’s. Everyone’s told me that was because that he was afraid of Dumbledore.”

“Bullshit,” Brian said, not surprised at the anger he felt towards his old teacher. He could still remember the feelings of abandonment he had as he watched Dumbledore walk away from him. “Why would Voldemort go after Hogwart’s? For what reason? Hogwart’s housed nothing but children, including those of his supporters. How many of those do you think would have been willing to attack someplace where their own children could be injured? No, Dumbledore was not the reason that Voldemort left Hogwart’s alone.”

Harry down to the floor, taking in what Brian had just said. While he didn’t want to admit it, the brunet did make sense. There were a number of Death Eater’s children going to the school. Why would those parents risks their kids’ lives? It would have made sense if they removed them first, but that had never happened. Instead, Hogwart’s was considered a safe place because of Dumbledore, a fact that the wizarding world made sure that people knew. Ron, Hermoine, and the entire Weasley family made sure to tell Harry that he was safe at Hogwart’s because Dumbledore would protect him. That Voldemort would never make a move to attack him as long as he was under Dumbledore’s care, but that hadn’t been the case. In fact, that had never been the case. If anything, Harry was in more danger during his school year than when he was living at his aunt and uncle’s home on Privet Drive.

“But then why did everyone tell me that I was safe as long as Dumbledore was around?” Vince looked over at the young teen, sympathy in his eyes as he had a good idea of what Dumbledore and the rest of those in charge had in mind for young Harry Potter. It was the reason why he had taken it upon himself to visit Brian Kinney’s home while the Boy Who Lived was there. He went over and knelt in front of the raven-haired boy.

“I can’t tell you why those around you have told you the things they have,” he told the young man. “Like I said before, when it comes to dealing with Voldemort, our side has had very little contact. What we have learned, we have learned from those that have sought refuge within our own borders and from what our agents have managed to find out.”

“You mean your spies,” Brian corrected causing Vince to smile slightly.

“All right, yes, spies,” he agreed.

“If you don’t mind my asking, especially since I’m not a wizard or anything, but if you don’t think that this guy Voldemort is any real threat to the States, why do you need spies?” Justin asked. “What do you hope to learn?” Brian, Justin and Harry all watched as Vince moved back to his seat, his eyes moving from one person to another.

“We’ve been hearing rumors over the past few years. Rumors about some of the Ministry of Magic’s plans to aid in the defeat of Voldemort and those that support him,” Vince explained. “And what we’ve heard we don’t like and we are doing what we can to at help as many of those that will be affected by those plans.”

“Why? Who are these people? What does the Ministry plan on doing with them?”

“Sacrificing them, basically,” Vince told them, his voice completely serious. “And the reason we want to help them is because they are nothing but children.”

Part 13

“What do you mean, they’re sacrificing children?” Justin asked softly, voicing the question that neither Brian nor Harry could. “What children? How are they sacrificing them?” Vince looked over at the only non-magickal person in the room, sadness in his eyes that hadn’t been there before.

“Brian, Harry, what can you tell me about the various houses at Hogwart’s? How do they get along? How do others view certain house?””

“I…I d..don’t understand?” Harry stuttered.

“I know there are four houses,” Vince explained. “What I’m asking is, do they all get along, other than the basic rivalries that would come from being in different houses? Is there a house that the others avoid? That the students who are in it are more likely to be considered supporters of Voldemort?”

“Slytherin,” Brian and Harry both said. Harry continued though, “A lot of the students in Slytherin are children of Death Eaters, if not soon to be Death Eaters themselves. They all act as if they’re better than everyone else. Especially Muggle-born wizards. There’s one, Draco Malfoy, who has gone out of his way to make my life, as well as my friends’ lives, a complete hell and I know his father’s a Death Eater. He was there when Voldemort came back.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of the Malfoy’s, both senior and junior,” Vince stated. “The people we have within the Ministry have mention Lucious Malfoy to our government when he tried to gain a foothold within our community, possibly so that Voldemort would gain support on this side of the ocean. He was not successful. As for Draco, I think you would be surprised at some of the things that I know of him. In fact, he is one of the main reasons that I’m here right now.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry asked. “What does Malfoy have to do with you being here? He’s nothing but an obnoxious git. He’s done nothing but try to get me and my friends in trouble. He takes pleasure in making our lives miserable. He insults anyone who isn’t a pureblood or those who aren’t as rich as him. There’s nothing I would like better than to not have to deal with him when I go back to school and I can think of quite a number of people who think the same way.”

“I’m sure he is an obnoxious git, as you put it,” Vince said. “Then again, considering who his father is, I think he doesn’t really have much of a choice in acting that way. Lucious Malfoy isn’t known to be all that tolerant of those he thinks are of a lesser station than he and his family.”

“That’s the truth.”

“As for not having to deal with Draco when you go back to Hogwart’s, I am working on making that happen, but I may need your help to get him out of there.” Harry looked at the Headmaster, confused at what he was being told. While the thought of not having to deal with the blond Slytherin that had tormented he and his friends over the course of the past four years made him happy, there was something in Masters’ voice that made him wonder if there was something more to Draco Malfoy than he thought.

“I don’t understand,” Harry finally said. “How do you know about Malfoy and what do you mean that you are working on getting him out of Hogwart’s?”

“Harry, what I’m about to tell you is something that very few people know, especially people at Hogwart’s, and it must stay that way for now. There are people whose safety depends on you not telling a soul, not even your friends and especially not your Headmaster.” Harry, Justin and Brian could see how serious the wizard was and all three nodded their heads, even though Masters’ attention was only on Harry at the moment.

“I promise, I won’t tell anyone,” Harry swore, curious as to what all the secrecy was about. He hated the fact that he wouldn’t be able to tell Ron and Hermoine, his two best friends, but if it was as serious as Vince was making it, he knew there was a good reason.

“Did you know that two years ago Draco Malfoy, along with many of his fellow classmates, went to Professor Dumbledore and offered him information on Voldemort and his plans,” Masters told the trio, much to their surprise, especially Harry’s. The raven-haired teen found it difficult to believe that his school nemesis would do something like that.

“But Malfoy’s father is a Death Eater. He was there when Voldemort killed Cedric,” Harry said, his confusion evident in his voice. “And he’s never made a secret that he hates Muggles and muggle-born wizards. And Professor Dumbledore never said anything about him offering any information.”

“That would be because he didn’t take young Mr. Malfoy up on his offer,” Vince explained.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Justin said. “I mean, sure I just found out about this whole wizarding thing but from what I’ve heard, Voldemort isn’t anyone to take lightly and I would think that any information that this Draco guy could give would be accepted happily.”

“You would think that, wouldn’t you?” Masters’ said. “And if it had been anyone other than Draco giving that information, than I’m pretty sure that Dumbledore would have gladly listened. Unfortunately for this particular young man, the very fact that he was able to gain the information because of who his father was is also the same reason his offer was declined.”

“You’re talking in riddles, Masters,” Brian growled, wanting the Headmaster to get to the point. The brunet wanted as much information as possible before he took his lover to Hogwart’s, just so he had an idea of what he might be walking into. “Get to the point. Why didn’t Dumbledore take the Malfoy brat up on his offer?”

“Sorry,” Vince said, not taking any offense at the harsh tone in which Brian has spoken. “And to answer that question, the reason Professor Dumbledore didn’t take Draco up on his offer was because he didn’t want to lose the protection the children offered the school.” At the trio of confused faces looking back at him, Masters continued. “Dumbledore didn’t want it to become common knowledge that the Slytherin children were turning against Voldemort, knowing that if that was the case, Voldemort would no longer have a reason to not attack the school.”

“Because their parents would no longer be able to use the excuse of protecting the future generations of Death Eaters,” Brian stated, understanding suddenly coming to him. “Voldemort would be able to force them to follow his plans because it would prove their loyalty to him if they went along with the attack.”

“Exactly. Instead, Dumbledore refused their offer, stating that he didn’t believe their offer was sincere, knowing that even if their offer ever came to light, because the children in question were Slytherin, no one would argue with his reasoning. It’s why he encourages the belief that that particular house if full of nothing but those wishing to follow Voldemort, even if that wasn’t the case. He doesn’t want the other Houses realizing that what they believe about Slytherin and what that House represents isn’t the truth. I’m not saying that there aren’t students in that house planning to join Voldemort, but there are even more that would rather stay out of the upcoming war as much as possible, and the US Ministry of Magic, along with myself, are doing everything that we can to make that happen.”

“I can’t believe it,” Harry said, leaning back into the chair that he had been sitting in. “I can’t believe that Professor Dumbledore would use his students that way. He isn’t like that.”

“Harry,” Justin broke in, “you told me yourself how this guy sent you your father’s invisibility robe and practically encourages you to break the school’s rules. And from what you’ve said, he only gives you enough information to get your curiosity peaked, or makes sure you overhear things that get you interested, but he never tells you the full story until its too late. Doesn’t exactly sound like someone who had the students’ best interests in mind when making decisions.” Harry looked down, knowing in the back of his mind that what he was being told was right. He had even questioned some of his Headmaster’s decisions, at least to himself. It was just that he wanted to believe that Professor Dumbledore wouldn’t use a student like that.

Vince looked at the young man, having a good idea what was going through Harry’s mind. He wished that there was something that he could say that would make things better, but Vince knew that Harry had to find out the truth about what was going on at Hogwart’s. Had to know what was happening to some of his classmates, even if those classmates where ones that no one cared about.

“Harry, I want you to know, there is a reason that I am telling you this,” Vince continued. “And I’ll admit it; the reason is because I need your help. I need you to do something for me.”

“What?”

“I need you to help me make sure that the students that need will be protected and that includes Draco Malfoy and the other Slytherins. Protected against their parents who would have them bow down to Voldemort and protected from a Headmaster that wants to use them all, even if it means their deaths.

Part 14

“Brian,” Justin called his lover softly. Justin had come out of the bathroom only to find his lover sitting on the bed, in the dark. The blond walked over to the bed and sat down next to Brian. “Brian, are you okay?” Still no answer came from the brunet and Justin knew that his lover was anything but okay. It had been two weeks since the American Headmaster Masters had come by the loft and in that time he had watched as both his lover and their young guest withdrew more and more. Justin knew it was because the two men were trying to understand everything they had been told. The blond understood the betrayal they were feeling after hearing about Dumbledore’s plans for the young Slytherins in his charge, but he was sure what he could do to help. He just knew that he was going to do everything he could to make sure that not only Brian, but also Harry knew that he was there for them. Justin recalled the conversation he and the brunet had shortly after Masters had left the loft.

Two weeks before

“This is so fucked,” Brian finally said. “If what Master’s said is true, then us going to Hogwart’s is just walking into some kind of a trap. Then again, if what he said is true, we have no choice but to try and help those kids. No child should be used as a pawn, especially in the middle of a war.”

“Brian, you know that, no matter what you decide, that I’m going to be with you all the way,” Justin assured his lover.

“Maybe it will be better if you stay here,” Brian told the blond, already knowing that there was no way he was going to stop Justin from following him. He had yet to win a real battle against the younger man and he had a good idea that he would win this one either.

“You know there is no fucking way that I’m going to stay here and let you go back there to fight whatever it is you’re going to have to fight,” Justin said. “We’re partners, Brian, even if you still have trouble admitting it, and that means that where you go, I go.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say something like that.” Justin huffed a little laugh, hitting Brian’s shoulder with his own. The two men stayed quiet a little longer before looking towards the living room and the young teen that was restlessly trying to sleep on the couch. “It’s not going to be easy when we get there, especially if we want to look out for Harry too. Somehow I don’t think that Dumbledore had been too honest about what he wants from him either. I was talking to Harry when we were out and he told me about his home life. About the people that Dumbledore left him with.”

“And?”

“From what I heard, it sounds like he and you had a very similar childhood,” Justin said. “Harry’s aunt and uncle treated him like a slave and his cousin, Dudley, apparently like to use Harry as his favorite punching bag. It was one of the reasons Harry was so grateful when he found out that he was a wizard and that he could go to Hogwart’s. It gave him that chance to get away from a family that treated him like shit and maybe have a chance to actually make some friends.”

“Speaking of friends,” Brian interrupted, “doesn’t it seem odd that Harry has been here for close to two weeks and he hasn’t heard so much as one word from anyone, even though you and I both know he’s sent them letters? From everything Harry has told us about his friends Ron and Hermoine, I would have thought they would have written to him at least once, or even called him since Hermoine is from a Muggle family.”

“Maybe they don’t know how to contact him,” Justin suggested. “I mean, it’s not like Harry’s still in England. Hell, he isn’t even on the same side of the ocean.”

“Harry told me that they know where he is,” Brian reminded his lover. “And being on the other side of an ocean isn’t that big of a deal, even when I was younger. I still got letters from my supposed friends during the summer, just like they got mine. It took no time at all for the letters to get through. In fact, it was usually faster sending them over the ocean than cross country because of what was involved. And we know that owls know where he is, remember. That’s how we got the newest addition to our growing family.” Both men looked towards the snow white owl that had arrived a couple of days before, without a letter much to Harry’s disappointment.

“So, what are you thinking then?”

“What I’m thinking is that, maybe Harry’s friends aren’t as good of friends as he thinks.” Justin turned to look out at the younger man, his heart going out to the boy.

“Shit I hope not. That kid has been through too fucking much, he shouldn’t have to go through it alone. Nobody should have too,” and suddenly Brian knew that his lover wasn’t just talking about Harry, but Brian also. Justin had told him that he couldn’t wait to get to Hogwart’s so that he could give Dumbledore a piece of his mind for what he had done to a hurting teenage Brian.

“You know, Harry’s birthday is coming up,” Justin brought up, not sure if Brian knew that fact or not. “And I know for a fact that he’s never done anything special for it before so I was thinking that maybe we could do something for him ourselves. Especially since we have to go to England right after.”

“Why do I think you have something planned already?”

“Because you know me so well,” Justin smirked, giving Brian a look he was used to seeing on his lover’s own face.

Present time

Justin couldn’t help but smile at the excitement he saw on Harry’s face as the young wizard took in the town around him. Brian and he had surprised the youth with a trip to New Hope, giving all three men a chance to see an American wizarding town in action, even if it was one that was also popular with non-magical folk. It was, in Harry’s opinion, the best birthday present he had ever gotten, tied only with Hagrid’s gift of Hedwig, his snowy owl.

“This place is great,” Harry said, his enthusiasm overflowing. “I can’t believe things are so laid back here when it comes to Muggles knowing about this place. I don’t understand why Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley aren’t more like this.”

“Probably because they people in charge refuse to admit that the times are changing and that the old ways aren’t necessarily the best way for things to get done,” Brian replied, disdain for the magical community that had willingly thrown him away without so much as a backward glance apparent in the tone of his voice. “Hogwart’s even let the ghost of a former teacher continue holding the position he held in life because they didn’t want to force him to leave.”

“You’re kidding right,” Justin asked. “You had a ghost for a teacher?”

“Professor Binns, History of Magic,” Harry answered. “His class was nothing more than an excuse to take a nap. All he ever taught about was Goblin wars or something equally as stupid.”

“That’s just….just completely fucked. It makes no sense.”

“Your point being what, Sunshine,” Brian asked, wrapping his arm around his lover. Justin smiled at the public display, knowing that just a year before Brian would have killed someone if they had told him he would show affection to a lover. Before anything else could be said though, a voice called from behind them.

“I can’t believe it, Harry Potter here in America.” Harry groaned, recognizing the voice instantly. “I heard you were here, but I didn’t think I would actually see you.”

“Blaise Zabini, what a not so pleasant surprise,” Harry said, turning to face the dark haired Slytherin only to see he wasn’t alone. With Blaise were two young girls that Harry knew had to be his sisters that were in their second year at Hogwart’s and an older couple who didn’t appear to be any relation to the Zabini family. Harry felt, rather than saw, Brian and Justin move closer to him and felt glad that they were there to support him. “What are you doing here?”

Blaise looked at the two men behind Harry and the protective air they had about them. “Something tells me that you already know what I’m doing here.” Harry only nodded his head. “Let’s just say that my sisters and I didn’t like that idea of being bait.”

“I can understand that,” Harry agreed, looking around New Hope, and finally realizing that everything that he had been told about Dumbledore and his plan for using the Slytherins to protect Hogwarts was true. Even though he had no reason to suspect Masters of lying to him, there had been a small part of him that didn’t want to believe it. But now, seeing Zabini and his sisters in New Hope, looking more carefree than he had ever appeared at school, showed him that there was a lot more to what was going on back in Britain than he had been told.

“Is there anyone else here with you?”

“Do you mean here in town or in America in general.”

“Both.”

“In town, I haven’t seen anyone else today but I can’t be too sure. In general, about half of the students that were going into second, third and fourth year,” Blaise answered. “Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis from our year and a couple of sixth and seventh years, although because they’re older they have a little more freedom to choose where they wanted to go. Theodore Nott also left but he’s with family down in Australia.” A clearing of the throat behind Blaise drew his attention to the people he was with.

“Forgive my manners, Potter. Let me introduce you to my sisters, Maria and Calia, Slytherin second years and these are our foster parents, Patricia and Robert Morgan. This is Harry Potter.”

“It’s a pleasure Mister Potter,” Patricia said, shaking his hand. “We’ve heard quite a lot about you. And who are your friends.”

“Oh this is Brian Kinney and his partner Justin Taylor.” Harry waited to see if there would be any reaction to Brian and Justin being a couple, like he knew would happen back in the British wizarding world, and was pleasantly surprised when none came.

“Nice to meet you,” The Robert Morgan said, before turning towards the children. “Blaise, girls, we have to leave soon if we want to make it to Sea Isle before dinner.”

“Okay,” Blaise turned his attention back to Harry. “Look, Potter, I know we’ve never been friends and that you have no reason to trust me, but Draco needs your help. He can’t get everyone out without you, especially when Dumbledore figures out what is going on. He’s got a lot of convincing to do still, especially when the new school year starts and he has more first years he has to protect.”

“I’ll do what I can, Zabini,” Harry promised, finally admitting how much things had changed and suddenly very glad that both Brian and Justin were going to be going back to Hogwarts with him because he had a feeling he was going to need them.

Part 15

August 13

“Well, here we are in sunny London,” Brian quipped as he, Justin, and Harry made their way through Heathrow Airport. Outside the windows they could see the steady downpour of rain. They had just gone through customs and were on their way to get a cab to the hotel that Brian had booked for them. Originally the trio had planned on arriving only a day or two before Harry had to catch the Hogwarts’ Express to school, but Brian changed the plans when he found out that Harry had never really had the opportunity to travel and see London, even though he had lived in England his whole life.

“Well, what say we get checked into the hotel, get something to eat and some sleep and then tomorrow we can see the sights,” Brian suggested, to the agreement of the two men with him. The three had finally reached the taxi stand and signaled for a car. Just before they got into the one that stopped for them, they were cut off by a trio of strangely dressed people, two men and a woman. Harry recognized one of them.

“You won’t be needing that cab, young man,” the oldest of the trio said. “We’ve got your car waiting for you right over there.” Harry looked up, recognizing that voice. Alastor Moody, the real one, stood in front of him, looking extremely uncomfortable at being surrounded by so many Muggles.

“I don’t think so,” Brian told the man as he stepped between Harry and the trio. “Harry’s not going anywhere other than our hotel.”

“Alastor, don’t cause a scene,” a younger man, a wizard the trio figured, turned towards the three. “You must be Brian Kinney. Professor Dumbledore told us that you would be bringing Harry back with you. Let me introduce out group. My name is Kingsley Shacklebolt. This is Alastor Moody and the young lady over there is Nymphadora Tonks, but she prefers to go by just her last name. We were sent to pick you and Harry up”

“That’s okay, we’re good,” Brian insisted, pulling both Justin and Harry to him. He began to lead the two teens towards another waiting cab.

“Really, Mr. Kinney, we insist,” Moody stopped him. “It’s been requested that both you and Harry come with us.”

“Ummm, excuse me, but whose the third member of your party,” Tonks asked, looking at Justin. “The Headmaster didn’t say anything about someone else coming.”

“That’s probably because he didn’t know,” Brian barked, wondering what was going on through the Headmaster’s mind. He didn’t question the fact that Dumbledore knew when the trio was arriving, knowing that he had his ways, but he was glad to know that there were still some things that the old man couldn’t see ahead too. It meant, to Brian at least, that Dumbledore wasn’t as omnipresent as he liked everyone to believe he was.

“This is my partner, Justin Taylor and, before anyone asks, he’s a Muggle,” Brian informed the now shocked trio of wizards. They all looked over the blond, wondering what to do about him. There hadn’t been any thought given that Brian might bring someone with him. Sure, Dumbledore and the others figured that Brian had probably settled down by this time, they just didn’t believe he would bring that person with him to Britain. And they certainly didn’t think that person would be another man. Moody decided that he had to set everyone straight.

“Your partner can’t come with us,” Moody informed the trio. “Not to where we’re going now and, most certainly, not to Hogwarts.”

“Well then,” Brian said, grabbing his bags again, “looks like we’ll just go book the next flight home. Grab your stuff Justin. You too, Harry.” Harry looked shocked at that. He hadn’t thought Brian meant it when he told him that he wouldn’t let Harry go back to Hogwarts by himself. He quickly grabbed his things and Brian and the two teens made their way back into the airport. They were almost at the door before Tonks and Shacklebolt stopped them.

“Please, Mr. Kinney, is there really a need for all of this,” Kingsley asked. “I’m sure Alastor was just surprised that you brought a Muggle with you. Like we said, we weren’t informed that a third person would be joining you. Although there isn’t precedence for a Muggle going where we’re going, or even spending time at Hogwarts, I’m sure we can all make some kind of concessions to make it work.” Brian looked at Justin, as if a silent conversation was going on between the two men. Harry had become used to it, having seen it numerous times while staying with the couple. Finally, when it appeared as if a decision had been made, Brian turned towards the three wizards.

“That’s fine. But,” He said, raising his finger to make his point, “I want it known that I’m not going anywhere without Justin. Wizard or not, he’s my partner and if anyone says that he can’t come with me when its time to go to Hogwarts, then we’re on the first plane to the States. And, this is not negotiable; Harry will be coming with us.” Moody looked as if he wanted to say something about that but seemed to think better of that. ‘Better to let Albus deal with this. He’ll make sure everything is done as it should be.’

“Fine, now if you’ll follow us, we’ll take you to your destination.”

“Actually,” Justin finally said, “we have plans for the next two weeks. This is my first time in London and we promised Harry that we would take him around and basically sightsee. I really would prefer doing that then going anywhere with you guys. No offense.”

“That is not the plan,” Moody insisted. “Mr. Kinney and Mr. Potter have to come with us. You may do whatever you wish.”

“I thought I told you, that the three of us are sticking together,” Brian stepped between Moody and Justin. “And Justin’s right. We’ve already made plans for this week and they don’t include going anywhere with you.” Brian didn’t see Moody’s wand until he felt it digging into his side. Before Moody could utter a word, Brian grabbed the wand in his hand and Moody’s arm behind his back.

“I don’t take kindly to threats, Mr. Moody, and it would be a good idea that you remember that,” Brian growled. When he saw security approaching them, Brian let Moody go and walked over towards Justin and Harry.

“Is there a problem here, gentlemen?”

“Everything’s fine, sir,” Brian assured the security man. “We just had a disagreement that got a little out of hand. We’re just going to be on our way now.” Before anyone could stop them, and under the watchful eye of airport security, Brian, Justin and Harry jumped in a cab and were off.

One week later

Brian, Justin and Harry were in Harrods shopping when the peace they had had for the past week finally ended. The trio had successfully evaded any wizards that might have been looking for them. Brian had even had them change hotels when Harry saw Professor McGonagall in the lobby of the first hotel they had been in. The boys had enjoyed their time alone until, Brian couldn’t believe he was even going to say it, it felt as if they were some kind of family. Harry had even become the little brother that Brian felt he needed to look out for.

“Hello Mr. Potter,” Severus Snape drawled as he came up behind the trio. “Shopping for some things that are actually presentable finally?”

“Hello, Professor,” Harry said, turning to face the Potions master. Harry felt Brian and Justin join him and was grateful for their support.

“Mr. Potter, I hope you had fun wasting everyone’s time looking for you while you did who knows what,” Snape sneered at his young pupil. “Now I believe it is time for you and Mr. Kinney to come with me. Headmaster Dumbledore wants to talk to the both of you. And before you object, Mr. Kinney, we are fully aware that you will not go anywhere without your partner.” Snape had to stop himself from sneering even more when saying the word partner. “Arrangements have already been made.” Seeing something out of the corner of his eye, Justin moved closer to his lover.

“Brian, I think we better do what he wants.” Brian looked down at his young lover who pointed towards something to their right. Brian looked over and saw that the Professor didn’t appear to be alone.

“What about our things at the hotel?”

“They will be taken care of,” Snape informed him. “Now if the three of you will follow me.”

“Like we really have a fucking choice,” Justin and Brian muttered together. Brian, Justin and Harry followed Snape out of the store, where they were joined by Professor McGonagall, Tonks and Shacklebolt.

“Oh look, the whole damn gang is here,” Brian drawled. “Does anyone else feel loved?” Once everyone got settled in the car, Harry asked the question that was on everyone’s mind.

“So, just where are we going?”

“Here,” Snape thrust a piece of paper at Harry. “You three need to read that and memorize it. That’s the only way you’ll be able to see where we’re going.”

“The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix is located at 12 Grimmauld Place?” Harry said out loud, handing the paper over to Brian.

“What is the Order of the Phoenix?” Brian asked.

“Everything will be explained when we get to Headquarters,” Moody growled.

“And who else will be at this Headquarters?” Harry questioned.

“The Headmaster will be there, of course, as will your friends Ron and Hermione. The other Weasleys will also be there.”

“Did you say Weasleys?” Brian asked, his face going paler than Justin had ever seen. “As in Arthur and Molly Weasley?”

“That’s them.”

“Brian? What is it?” Justin asked his lover, concerned over how upset Brian seemed to get all of a sudden.

“Remember that family I told you about? The one that basically took me in and then totally forgot about me?” Both Justin and Harry nodded their heads. “They were the Weasleys.”

Part 16

“Brian,” Justin wrapped his arm around his lover, pulling him closer. Harry also leaned in, giving Brian his own support, remembering the story that he had been told about when Brian had been forced away from Hogwarts. Harry tried to justify, at least to himself, how the Weasleys would have left a 15 year old boy alone, to live in an abusive home, even if the Ministry told them to. This was a family that had taken him in and made him feel as if he was another son. Mrs. Weasley knitted him jumpers, just like she did for her children, and would send him food over the summer because she knew that he wasn’t getting enough from his real family.

“I’m fine,” Brian told the two teens.

“Bullshit,” Justin countered. “Don’t try that shit with me. You know it doesn’t work on me. Remember, I’m on to you.” Justin leaned in and gave his lover a deep kiss while Harry moved a bit, turning away to give the men some modicum of privacy. Professor McGonagall and Auror Shacklebolt didn’t bother.

“It would be appreciated it the two of you would keep any displays like that to the privacy of your rooms,” McGonagall told them, disgust in her voice. “It is not appropriate behavior, especially around young children.” Harry had turned back around at McGonagall’s admonishment and saw the way both Brian and Justin tensed at her words. The two men broke apart and turned stony expressions towards the Deputy Headmistress.

“Really,” Brian said his voice deceptively calm. “And what, exactly, kind of behavior do you find inappropriate?”

“Brian,” McGonagall began, “I’m not sure how they do things in the United States but, over here, in the wizarding world, it is not acceptable for a couple of the same sex to show public displays of affection. As it is, the Headmaster is already unhappy about the fact that you felt the need to bring a Muggle with you; he would prefer it if the two of you would keep any touching you might do behind closed doors. With locking and silencing charms safely in place.”

“And how exactly is our esteemed Headmaster going to explain the fact that I brought a Muggle to Hogwarts?” Brian drawled his voice low. Justin winced when he heard it and Harry, even having only known Brian for a little over a month, knew that it wasn’t a good sign. McGonagall and Shacklebolt completely missed the danger signs.

“The Headmaster plans on telling everyone that Justin is a relative of yours, a younger brother of yours,” McGonagall told them. “That would also explain why you are sharing a room.”

“You’ve got to be fucking joking,” Brian said.

“Brian, that kind of language is also not appropriate,” McGonagall admonished him. “Remember these are impressionable children you’ll be around.”

“Professor, I don’t think it’s all that bad that Brian and Justin are together,” Harry said. “I spent the past month and a half with them and never had a problem with the way they acted.” Before anyone else could say anything, the car stopped. The three men in the back got out, not sure of what they were supposed to be seeing.

“Where the fuck are we?” Justin muttered.

“Gentlemen, if you would recall what I gave you to read,” McGonagall told them. As soon as the three had, they watched in amazement as a house appeared where before there was nothing but an alley. With McGonagall in front and Shacklebolt behind them, Brian, Harry and Justin made their way into 12 Grimmauld Place, although if anyone asked them, they would have told you it felt like they were walking to their doom.

12 Grimmauld Place (same time Harry, Brian and Justin were being picked up)

“Are they here yet?” Sirius Black asked, for what seemed like the tenth time in the past twenty minutes.

“The answer hasn’t changed since the last time you asked, Padfoot,” Remus Lupin told his excited friend, a smile on his face. Despite his calm exterior, Lupin was just as excited as his friend to see Harry again. He had missed his adopted godson almost as much as Sirius had. “Severus said that he would take awhile before Minerva returned with Harry and the others.”

“I still can’t believe Albus sent Harry all the way to America, by himself,” Sirius said. “What was that old man thinking?”

“I can’t tell you, but it worked,” Remus replied. “And, if Harry’s last letter was any indication, this Brian Kinney person took care of Harry. He sounded happy.”

“That he did,” Sirius agreed. “And the uproar he caused when he wrote about the kind of lifestyle Kinney led, I thought Dumbledore and McGonagall were going to freak out, especially when Moody came back and told everyone that Kinney brought his Muggle lover with him.” Lupin laughed as he recalled the Headmaster being speechless for once in his life.

“Well, I’m sure Kinney being gay, and having a Muggle lover, didn’t fit into whatever plans the old man had for him,” Lupin pointed out. “You know that man can’t help but interfere in other people’s lives.”

“Trust me, I know,” spat Sirius. “I overheard the old coot saying something to Molly about wanting to set Kinney up with Tonks. Seemed to think it would be a perfect match and convince Kinney to stay here and help in the fight with Voldemort. He’s still convinced that all it would take is a little bit of prodding to get him to drop this Justin Taylor guy and become a normal wizard.” There was no disguising the disgust in his voice when he said that. “And do you know what Molly and Arthur said? They agreed with him. Turns out they know Kinney, he was friends with Bill it seems, and feel bad about not keeping in touch with him all those years ago. They actually seem to think this guy will forgive them for leaving him on his own back them.”

“As much as I like Molly and Arthur, they do seem to think positively much too often and, a lot of times, about the wrong things and people,” the werewolf stated. “They can never see that, if you hurt someone badly enough, they just might not forgive you. And, from the way Albus was talking, no matter how much he said it needed to be done, they had to have hurt that young boy by not keeping in touch with him. And from what I’ve seen, and what Harry has told us in the past, it seems they’ve passed that onto Ron and Ginny.”

“I know. Harry told me what happened between him and Ron during the Tri-Wizard Tournament,” Sirius said. “I don’t think anyone truly realizes how hurt Harry was when Ron refused to talk to him. Not to mention what that Skeeter woman had said about him. And I’m not even going to say anything about those horrible people that call themselves his family. I’m surprised that Harry has turned out as good as he had considering the way he’s been treated by them.”

“It’s his nature. Its not in him to hate anyone, he inherited it from Lily,” Lupin reminded him. “But, like his mother before him, even Harry has his limits and, if something doesn’t change soon, I think he’s going to reach that limit soon.” The two men heard footsteps getting closer and interrupted their conversation. Remus and Sirius knew that the other people in residence at Order Headquarters did not share their views on the way Harry was being treated and, most especially, not their views on Brian Kinney and his lover.

The two men watched as a pair of red heads and a bushy haired brunette entered the room, all talking excitedly, barely noticing the two men that were already in the room. Lupin and Sirius listened as the group of teens discussed the upcoming school year and the imminent arrival of Harry and the others.

“I can’t wait until Harry gets here,” the youngest of the trio, Ginny Weasley, said. “It will be great to see him again and I’m sure that he’ll be happy to be back here instead of all the way over in America.”

“I still can’t believe that the Headmaster sent him all the way over there by himself,” Hermione stated. “And for so long too.”

“I don’t think Harry was supposed to be there for so long,” Ron, the only boy in the group told them. “Harry was probably just supposed to go over and talk to that Kinney guy and then they were both supposed to come back before this. Remember how upset my parents were when Harry didn’t come back in July.”

“Well, did anyone ask Harry why he didn’t come back then?” Lupin asked, surprising the teens and causing them to jump. “When you wrote to him, did you inquire as to why he didn’t return before this?”

“I didn’t write Harry,” Ginny stated simply.

“I didn’t either.”

“I didn’t send him anything.” Lupin and Sirius looked at the trio, surprised. They couldn’t believe that none of them, all of whom called themselves Harry’s friends, had written to the boy while he was away. Hermione seemed to sense the feelings of the two adults and tried to explain the teens’ reasons for their silence. “I know it sounds bad but, if you think about it, do you really think Harry would have wanted to hear about what we were doing over the summer while he was being forced to stay with a stranger. After everything that Harry went through this year with the tournament and Cedric, I’m sure the last thing he wanted to know was that the Weasleys took all of us to France and that Ron and I are now together.”

“So, instead, you thought it would be better for him to think that his friends forgot about him?” Sirius spat, angry on his godson’s behalf. It was bad enough that he hadn’t been able to write to Harry to make sure the teen was doing alright, knowing that because he was still a wanted criminal it was too dangerous, but to hear that even Harry’s friends didn’t contact him upset him even more. “Didn’t you think that after everything that had happened, especially because of what had happened that Harry might need his friends around him more than ever? That he might like to know that his friends were there for him if he needed to talk?”

Ron and the girls looked down at the floor, ashamed. It had never occurred to them that their silence would hurt Harry. In fact, they hadn’t even thought what his reaction might be when they didn’t write him. It was almost as if it was ‘out of sight, out of mind’ in regards to their friend. None of them meant to be cruel; it just seemed, at times, almost easier to forget about Harry. It was easier, that way, to have a normal childhood, something Harry hadn’t had, ever.

“Harry knows we’re here for him if he needs us,” Ron countered. “Anyway, what does any of that matter? Harry will be here soon, so everything will be like normal.” Lupin and Sirius looked at each other; somehow both of them knowing that there was a good chance that Dumbledore might have caused Harry to look at life a little differently by sending the boy to America. If Brian Kinney’s reaction towards those that had met them at the airport when they first arrived in London was any indication, and the way that he had stated Harry was basically under his protection, the man might not be too happy with the way Harry’s friends treat him.

“They’re here,” the group heard from somewhere in the house.” Ron, Ginny and Hermione ran out of the room, leaving behind the original two occupants.

“Why is it, I think, that things are just about to get really interesting, Mister Padfoot?” Lupin asked.

“Because, my dear Mister Moony,” answered Sirius, “when it comes to this group, how can things be any different.”

Part 17

“Could this place be anymore depressing?” Justin asked as he, Brian and Harry were ushered into the front hallway of 12 Grimmauld Place. The house had an eerie, unlived in feeling to it that made all three men shiver and wishing they had all stayed in Pittsburgh. “I would even take Debbie’s ugly decorations over this.”

“It does have that certain, want to kill yourself feeling about,” Brian added. “Makes me glad we came.” Before anything else could be said, a trio of excited voices was heard.

“Harry, you’re finally here.”

“Harry, I’m so glad you finally got here.”

“Harry, mate, it’s about time you showed up,” Hermione, Ginny and Ron exclaimed, surrounding their friend with Ron slapping him on the back as Ginny and Hermione alternately gave him hugs. They didn’t seem to notice Brian and Justin standing nearby.

“I bet you’re glad to finally be back, huh mate?” Ron stated, as the teens finally separated to give Harry some much needed air. “Was it that bad over there? We overheard Mum and Dad saying that that guy that Dumbledore sent you to was a poofter and that he lived with some guy. I can’t believe that he sent you there.”

“But you’re back now,” Hermione interrupted Ron, “so things can go back to normal and you can forget whatever happened over there.” None of Harry’s friends seemed to notice his expression at it darkened at their comments. Where as once he might have let their comments slip, the time he had spent in the company of Brian and Justin, as well as their friends, made him angry on his new friends’ behalf. He moved closer to Brian and Justin, both of whom moved nearer as if to protect him. This was when the teens finally noticed the other two newcomers and realized they had heard everything that had been said, if the expressions on their faces meant anything.

“Suddenly I’m in the mood to go back to the Pitts, Sunshine,” Brian drawled, wrapping his arm around his lover’s waist while resting his free hand on Harry’s shoulder. “What about you?”

“I say book the first flight home,” Justin agreed. “Harry? Care to join us?”

“Of course he isn’t,” Ginny answered for him, reaching for the teen in question’s arm. “Harry’s back where he belongs. This is his home. Why would he want to go anywhere with you?” Brian smirked at the tiny girl’s outburst, recognizing her as a Weasley just from her hair and temper. ‘Looks like Bill got his little sister after all,’ he thought.

“Wouldn’t that be his decision?” Justin asked. “After all, it is his life, right? He should have a choice about how he lives it, and where.”

“There’s no need for all this fuss,” a voice said, coming from a side door. Everyone turned to see a group of adults enter the room. Upon seeing two of the people coming in, Brian and Justin saw Harry give his first real smile since entering the home.

“Sirius, you’re here,” Harry said, going over to the man and giving him a big hug, then doing the same to the man next to him. “Moony. I didn’t know you two were here. I thought you were out of the country.”

“We were, Harry,” Sirius said, releasing his godson. “We just got back earlier this week, only to find out that you had gone on a little trip of your own. I will admit that I wasn’t too happy with Albus for sending you to Pittsburgh all on your own.” Harry blushed at the concern Sirius was showing him. It was something he was still getting used to. “How was it?”

“Actually it was really great,” Harry told him, excitement showing in his voice. “I had a lot of fun. Brian and Justin took me to the beach, an amusement park and New Hope. That’s a wizarding and Muggle community. Oh,” Harry stopped and went back over to the couple that he had spent the past two months with. “Sirius, Remus, this is Brian Kinney and his partner, Justin Taylor. Brian, Justin, this is my godfather, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin.”

“Hi,” Justin greeted the two men. “Justin has told us a lot about you two. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you both.”

“The same here,” Remus said, as Sirius went quiet next to him, watching the two men that had caused so much uproar in his home. “I want to thank you for taking such good care of Harry while he was with you.”

“It was no problem,” Justin assured him, ignoring the snort his lover gave.

“Justin liked having someone his almost his own age to play with,” Brian drawled. “Isn’t that right, Sunshine?”

“Bite me.”

“Not right now but I’ll be sure to remember later,” Brian quickly replied, causing more than a few disgusted looks from the other teens in the room and a surprised laugh to come from Sirius and causing heads to turn in his direction.

“I have a feeling I may get to like you, Mr. Kinney,” the escaped convict said. “And not just because you took such good care of my godson here.”

“Mr. Kinney is my father,” Brian replied, a sneer on his face. “Call me Brian.”

“Brian is that really you,” a soft female voice called from the side. Everyone turned to face whoever had entered the, already over-crowded, entryway. There stood a couple and Justin knew instantly, both because of their red hair and the way Brian tensed up that they were the Weasleys. “We couldn’t believe it when Albus told us he had sent Harry for you.” Mrs. Weasley moved towards the brunet and wrapped her arms around him, ignoring the way he held himself stiff in her arms.

“It’s good to see you again, son,” Mr. Weasley said, joining his wife in her hug of Brian. After another few seconds, Brian was finally able to free himself from the stranglehold the two Weasleys had on him and moved back towards Justin, his face showing no emotion.

“Mr. and Mrs. Weasley,” Brian nodded towards them, “let me introduce you to my partner, Justin Taylor. Justin, these are the people I told you about. You know, the ones who treated me as a son and then dumped me without so much as a word as to the reason why.” The two Weasley adults blanched at the introduction, having never realized how much they must have hurt the young boy they had once treated as a son.

“Brian,” Mrs. Weasley started, “you know how much we loved you. You were like another son to us. You and Bill were inseparable. It broke our hearts not being able to contact you.”

“And yet you still manage to move on with your lives and forget all about me,” Brian spat. “Am I just supposed to forgive and forget, because that is just not happening?”

“Now Brian, really, there’s no need to be so angry.”

“And now the gang’s all here,” Brian drawled facing the last newcomer. “Justin meet our esteemed Headmaster. Albus Dumbledore.”

**Everything Changes**

Based on a plot bunny over at QAFfanfictionprojects....basically what if something different happened when Justin went to see Ethan at the end of 218

Part 1

Justin looked down at the murky of the Monongahela River from his perch on the Liberty Bridge. Tear tracks made their way down his face unhindered as he sat thinking about what had happened earlier that evening. He couldn’t believe that he had been so wrong about Ethan. The musician had seemed so nice, so gentle, and so romantic every time the two students had talked, but it was all a lie and Justin didn’t know what he was going to do now. He didn’t know how he was supposed to act, especially towards Brian. How was he going to tell his lover what happened with the other boy? What explanation could he give for going over to there without making it sound like he had been looking for something to happen with the musician? And, most importantly, what would Brian’s reaction be? Would the older man even care what had happened? Would he say that Justin must have wanted something to happen with Ethan, even if he wasn’t willing to admit it to himself?

“Fuck,” Justin screamed, throwing the beer bottle he had been drinking from into the river. “Fucking bastard, I didn’t want him like that. Not like that.” Justin’s screams turned into sobs as the memories from earlier invaded his thoughts.

Earlier that night

Justin had been hurt and upset when Brian spurned his efforts at having a picnic on the floor, instead choosing to go to Babylon to fuck some anonymous trick. After cleaning up the romantic dinner he had lovingly prepared, Justin had to leave the loft, his emotions in upheaval. He decided to go and visit the musician he had become friends with earlier. Ethan had made no secret in his admiration of Justin and the artist found himself attracted to the other man. Ethan seemed to be everything that Brian wasn’t. The two students seemed to have so much in common, including both having older lovers. Ethan talked about how he had partied with his former lover, going to the clubs and the baths, even though he had grown tired of it just so he could share something with his lover, but now the musician was looking for just the special someone. The one that he could be with alone and Justin understood what he meant because he felt the same way. While he still tricked, it was only with Brian because that’s what he knew the other man expected from him, but Justin didn’t get the same thrill from it as Brian did. The blond enjoyed just spending time at the loft with his lover, as much as he did going to Babylon and Woodys. But the days of lazy evenings at home had become less and less over the past few weeks, until they were almost gone.

Their friends knew the two men were having problems. Even Michael, the one person who had the hardest time admitting that Justin and Brian were in a relationship, had made comments to Justin that he could tell that something was going on. The store owner had told Justin that he could see the growing distance between the two men and was worried about it. And, surprising to Justin, Michael admitted that it wasn’t only Brian that he was worried about. He didn’t want to see Justin hurt either, the two men having grown closer as they worked on their comic book. Michael had tried to encourage Justin to talk to Brian, to tell him what was bothering him, but Justin just hadn’t been able to do it. He was so afraid of angering his lover that, instead, he just kept quiet. And now Justin didn’t know what to do.

It had all started so innocently. He wasn’t looking for anything special. He just couldn’t stay in the loft and he didn’t want to go to Diner or Woodys or Babylon, not wanting to run into any of the gang. Daphne was out of the question. She had already told Justin that she had planned on spending the night with her boyfriend. He knew he could go over to the Munchers, Mel and Lindsay had told them that he was welcome whenever he wanted to come over, but he didn’t want to listen to them tell him how Brian was an asshole and would never change. He hadn’t made many friends at the Institute, between his classes, his physical therapy from the bashing, his job and his hanging out with Brian and the others didn’t give him a whole lot of time to meet new people. That left Ethan.

Justin listened to the violin music that was coming from the apartment, before knocking on the door. When the door opened, Ethan looked so happy to see him. It had been so long since someone had looked at Justin like that. Like just his presence made them happy.

‘Brian used to look at me like that. When did he stop? Maybe he didn’t stop. Maybe I just stopped noticing.’

“What are you doing here?”

“I came for my song,” Justin had replied. Ethan smiled at him, playing a song that made Justin’s insides feel as if they were melting.

‘When was the last time I felt happy? Felt so carefree, like I didn’t have a care in the world. Oh yeah, that’s right. Before the prom. Before Chris Hobbs decided to take a bat to my head and ruin what had to have been the best night of my life. Fucking bastard. Even after all this time, I can still see the look of pain and anguish in Brian’s eyes whenever I try and talk about what happened that night.’

So lost in his thoughts Justin hadn’t noticed when Ethan had stopped playing. It wasn’t until he felt soft lips on his own that he brought himself back to what was happening. He pushed the other boy away, getting up from the chair he had been sitting in.

“What are you doing?”

“What I’ve been wanting to do since I first saw you at my concert,” Ethan replied, leaning in to kiss Justin again. Justin put his hands up, against Ethan’s chest trying to hold the other man off.

“I told you I already have a boyfriend,” Justin tried to keep space between himself and the musician, but Ethan pushed past Justin’s defenses. “Ethan stop.”

“Come on, Justin. You know you want it,” Ethan insisted. “It’s why you came over here.”

“No,” Justin denied. “I just came over to talk.”

“Right,” Ethan sneered. “Talk. I don’t think so.”

“Ethan stop,” Justin tried to push Ethan away but the other boy was stronger. A lot stronger than he looked and before he knew what was going on; Ethan’s had him on the bed, looming over him. Tears streamed down Justin’s face as he looked up at the cold face of the boy he had thought was so nice. He continued to try and break free but he had no luck. In fact, it seemed that the more he struggled the more Ethan seemed to like it.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Ethan murmured. “Fight me. I knew you liked it rough, no matter what you say.”

“No, please, stop,” Justin begged. He felt Ethan open his pants, his hands clammy on his cock as the musician tugged at it painfully.

Present time

“Why didn’t he stop?” Justin asked aloud. “What did I do to make him think I wanted that?” Justin swiped the tears that continued to fall. His mind and body felt numb, a condition that he swore was the only reason that he was able to still sit on the edge of the bridge, instead of taking a swan dive into the chilly water below.

A few hours before

Justin’s mind had shut down during the attack, going to a place that he hadn’t felt the need to visit since he had first been recovering from the bashing. While Ethan was violating his body, Justin’s mind was adrift, not coming back to the present until the blond had felt Ethan finally get off of him.

It had taken a few minutes before Justin realized that Ethan was finished. He slowly got off the bed, trying not to draw anymore attention to himself, wary of what else Ethan might do to him. He found his pants, which Ethan had thrown over the couch after he pulled them off his reluctant lover, pulling them on as quickly, and quietly, as he could. Justin couldn’t look over at the other boy, afraid of what he might find.

“Justin,” the blond stopped at the door, not turning around as he felt the musician approach him. He stiffened as Ethan’s arms wrapped around his midsection, his hands clasping over his stomach. Justin’s breathing came in harsh pants as Ethan placed a gentle kiss on his shoulder. Justin didn’t know what was going on.

“I’ve got to go, Ethan,” Justin whispered, hoping that the other boy wouldn’t push the issue any further. Visions of Jason Kemp’s dead body sprang to his mind, and Justin became even more afraid of the young man behind him. “I have to get home before Brian gets there.”

“I know,” Ethan told him, his voice soft and gentle. The tenderness in which he was treating Justin reminded the blond of how Ethan had been acting when they had first met. “I just wanted to tell you how happy I am that you came over tonight. I had a really good time with you and I hope we can do it again sometime.” Justin barely prevented the hysterical laugh that was welling up deep inside him at the thought of ever allowing Ethan the opportunity to repeat what had happened that night. “I really think we could be good together.”

“I already told you, Ethan, I’m already involved with someone and, no matter what he might say, I don’t think Brian would be too happy if I got involved with you,” Justin said, allowing Ethan to turn him around, his head down, unable to meet Ethan’s eyes.

“Then we’ll just have to make sure that he doesn’t find out,” and there was something in the musician’s voice that made Justin look up and he gasped at what he saw. While Ethan’s voice was soft and gentle, his eyes were cold and angry and just was afraid of what the other boy might do if Justin didn’t meet him again.

“Ethan?”

“Relax sweetheart,” Ethan kissed Justin softly on the lips. “I promise everything will be fine.” Justin looked at Ethan confused as the other boy reached around him and opened the door. “Call me later this week and let me know when we can get together.”

“I…I…I’m not sure if I can meet you,” Justin stuttered. “With the comic and working and everything, my schedule is pretty full. Especially with finals coming up. I have a bunch of projects due within the next couple of weeks.

“Well, if you don’t get in touch with me, I’ll just have to search you out,” Ethan replied, the implied threat of what would happen to Justin if that became the case. Ethan leaned in once more, taking Justin’s lips in a possessive kiss before allowing the blond the opportunity to finally escape.

Present Time

“What am I going to do?”

“Well the first thing I would suggest is coming down from there,” a voice said, startling Justin who almost lost his balance. He turned to see who had approached him and was surprised to find a young girl, no older than fifteen standing beside him. The girl had long blonde hair and violet eyes that stood out, even in the lousy lighting that surrounded them on the bridge. She was thin and the clothes she was wearing indicted that, wherever she was living, it certainly wasn’t the better side of town.

“Who are you?” Justin asked, curious about her, despite the numbness that pervaded his body.

“Names Patti,” the girl smiled, holding her hand out for Justin who, despite feeling like shit, couldn’t help but take it in his. When Justin still didn’t say anything, even after the two had released hands, Patti jumped up and sat on the railing next to him. “So, do you come here often because I gotta tell ya, a nice boy like you, sitting here looking like death done over, people might actually get the impression that you were thinking about doing a nice little swan dive.”

“Might make things easier,” Justin said so softly that Patti had barely heard him. “Finish what should have happened before.”

“Nah let me tell ya, taking a dive, never a good idea. Especially in this kind of weather.” At Justin’s raised eyebrow, Patti continued. “Well think about it. It’s been pretty fucking cold lately and there a whole shitload of ice on that river, so you stand a damn good chance of hitting that instead of water. Fucking painful, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t.”

“True, you didn’t ask me, but I’ve always been told that I could never help but stick my nose in other people’s business,” the blonde said. “I’ve been told it’s my worst trait.”

“And yet you keep doing it,” Justin said, looking back out at the water. “I don’t even know you, why should I listen to anything you have to say?”

“True you don’t know me, and I can’t think of one reason why you should listen to me,” Patti admitted. “Except for the fact that I’ve been where you are and I gotta tell ya. Offing yourself, so not the right fucking answer.” The hysterical laughter that Justin held in back at Ethan’s apartment finally bubbled out and he found himself holding his sides as he shook. Patti sat there quietly, allowing Justin the time he needed to gain control of his emotions before she continued.

“Look..?”

“Justin.”

“Okay. Look, Justin, you’re right. I don’t know you and I don’t know why you’re sitting here looking as if you have no reason not to jump, but I have been there,” Patti said. “Trust me, despite my glamorous appearance; my life hasn’t exactly been all wine and roses.” Justin smiled at that, not able to help himself. “I’ve seen a lot of shit in the time I’ve been living on my own, a lot of shit that most people wouldn’t think possible and I’ve sat where you are, thinking that the best thing for me, the best thing for everyone really, would be for me to just take myself out of life’s equation.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I can’t say,” Patti admitted. “It’s not like I’ve had a whole lot going for me, but I realized that what I did have was mine. I might not have friends or a family, well at least not ones that I can really rely on, but I did have some people counting on me. People that needed me, even if they were too damn stubborn to admit it.”

“Sounds familiar,” Justin sighed.

“I’m sure. But Justin, by the looks of you, I think you do have a few things going for you,” Patti said. “You don’t look like your life is too bad. You don’t have the look of a street rat or hustler, although I have to admit, you probably would make a killing if that’s what you wanted to do.”

“Not really.”

“Yeah that’s what I thought. In fact, if your clothes are any indication, I bet you’ve got yourself a nice little set up.” Justin looked over at her. “Hey, I might live on the streets but I can still tell nice labels when I see them. I grew up in a house where that was a requirement.”

“Why?” Justin didn’t know how to ask the question that was on the tip of his tongue, not wanting to offend the strange girl that had befriended him.

“Why am I on the streets?” Justin nodded. “Well it’s certainly not because it’s what I’ve always wanted. It was just safer for me to take my chances living on the streets than living in the nice suburban home with a mother who didn’t like having sex and a father that did. Especially with young girls.”

“I’m sorry,” Justin said, meaning it. “Ummm, how long?”

“What? How long did it go on or how long have I been on the streets?”

“Both?”

“Well, the first was from when I was six till I left when I was twelve, and I’ve been on my own for seven years.” Justin did the math realizing Patti was actually closer to his age than he had originally thought.

“Why didn’t you call the cops on him?”

“My father is a cop which didn’t leave me with a whole lot of options, if you know what I mean.” Justin nodded his head. “It was just easier for me to leave.”

“Have you seen your family since you left?”

“I’ve been by the house, although I never let them know I was there. Nothing’s changed there except now I seem to have a younger sister and all I can do is hope that somehow my father has changed.” Justin sat quietly as he thought about the story that he had just heard, unable to imagine what it must have been like for the blonde to have lived like that. Ethan had only raped Justin once and already the artist wished that he had the nerve to end his life.

“Look, Justin, I’m not asking you to tell me why you think it might be better if you take a dive. It’s not really any of my business, but I can tell you that, no matter how bad it looks right now, things will get better,” Patti assured him, moving to jump back onto the pavement. Justin followed her, without even thinking about it, until both teens were standing on the street

“What did you do to get over what your father did to you?” Justin had to ask.

“Who said I got over it?” Patti answered. “What happened to me isn’t something that is all that easy to get over. The only thing I could do, and it’s something that I’m still doing, is to just take life one day at a time. That’s all anyone can do.” Justin watched as Patti turned and began walking away from him, the darkness swallowing her until Justin was once more alone. He turned the other direction, ready to begin the long walk to the loft when he heard a voice call out to him.

“Don’t let it win, Justin. Remember you have to live one day at a time and eventually it will get better.” Justin shook his head, heading towards his home, suddenly needing to feel Brian’s arms around him. While he wasn’t sure if he would be able to tell his lover what had happened with Ethan, he knew that if he wanted to deal with what had happened earlier, he needed Brian’s support. He just hoped he was strong enough to let Brian be there for him.

Part 2

Justin let himself into the loft as quietly as possible, hoping against hope that Brian was either still out or already asleep in their bed. When he found that the loft was empty and dark, the blond breathed in a sign of relief. Justin stripped off his clothes, stuffing them into the trash, knowing that he would never be able to wear them again without being reminded of what Ethan had done to him. Justin made his way to the bathroom, needing desperately to wash away the feeling of Ethan’s hands on him, of his dick inside of him. Justin turned the water on, making it so hot that it almost scalded his skin. He grabbed the loofah and furiously scrubbed his skin until it was raw and yet he could still feel Ethan’s body on him. He never heard the shower door open behind him; he was so lost in his thoughts and memories. It wasn’t until he felt Brian’s arms slide around him that Justin even realized he was crying. As it was, the only thing that stopped him from screaming out at his lover’s touch was the familiar scent of Brian’s cologne wafting over him.

“Justin?” Brian’s voice was soft, full of concern, and it was also Justin’s undoing. He turned in his lover’s arms and wrapped his own around Brian needing to feel the safety that Brian had given him after the bashing. Uncontrollable sobbing poured forth from Justin, the pain, anger and humiliation that Ethan had caused in him finally finding a release. Brian pulled Justin close to him, whispering soothing words to the teen even though he had no idea what had set him off. It had been a few months since Justin had had a panic attack and Brian had thought that they had gotten through that phase.

‘Maybe working on the comic with Mikey isn’t suck a good idea of this is what’s going to happen,’ Brian thought. He reached over to turn off the water, his skin having turned red just in the short time that he had been in the shower. ‘How the hell has he been able to stay under water this hot?’

Brian let a still crying Justin out of the shower and had him lean up against the bathroom sink. Brian moved to get a towel so he could dry Justin off but was stopped when the blond only held on to him tighter. It began to remind Brian of how Justin would be after he had one of his nightmares of Chris Hobbs.

“Justin, what’s wrong?” Brian asked softly. “What happened?” Brian felt Justin answering him, he could feel the movement of his lips against his bare chest, but Justin was speaking so softly he couldn’t make out what his lover was trying to tell him. “Justin, baby, you have to speak up. I can’t hear you.”

Justin was quiet for a few minutes and began to wonder if he would find out what was going on. Although if he was truthful with himself, considering the way Justin was acting, Brian wasn’t sure that he wanted to know. More time passed, with Justin clutching the way Justin was acting, Brian wasn’t sure that he wanted to know. More time passed with Justin clutching Brian, before he felt Justin take a deep breathe and pull away slightly, although he made sure to stay in contact with the older man.

“Remember the concert Lindsay and Mel took me to for my birthday?”

“The violinist?”

“Ethan Gold,” Justin said. “He goes to PIFA and he’s considered a genius.” Brian wanted to ask what that had to do with why Justin was so upset, but he didn’t want to interrupt him. “I ran into him a few times and he seemed really nice. And he’s not half bad looking. And he never made it a secret that he was attracted to me, but I made sure he knew that I had someone in my life and that I wasn’t looking for anyone else.

“Well, while Daphne and I were out earlier today we ran into him and, after Daphne left, I helped him carry a sofa to his apartment. He has this little studio that’s seen better days, but he’s tried to make it nice, ya know. We got to talking and discovered that we had a lot in common, and I liked having someone my age that I could talk to.

“Tonight, after you walked out on the picnic, I decided to go back over to his place. I had given him one of my paintings and told him that he could pay me for it with a song. When he asked why I went there tonight, that’s what I told him. That I was there to collect.” Justin looked up meeting Brian’s eyes for the first time since Brian had entered the shower and Brian didn’t like what he saw. There was fear in Justin’s eyes. A fear that Brian couldn’t recall ever having seen there.

“Justin?”

“I swear Brian, I only went over there because I needed to be with a friend. I didn’t want to do anything. God, I just wanted someone to talk to. Someone who might understand some of the things I was feeling. I didn’t want anything to happen. I didn’t…” Justin broke down.

“Oh fuck, Justin,” Brian said, pulling the teen close to him again. He had a feeling he knew what had happened when his young lover had gone to see his friend. Sure, Brian and Justin had played a bit, occasionally they both liked it rough, but it was always mutual. He knew hurt the teen.

“I told him no. I said it so many times but he wouldn’t stop. He just kept on saying how much I wanted it. How much would love it. I kept telling him to stop. Told him I didn’t want him like that but he just laughed. He said that if I didn’t want it, why did I go over there. That my being there with him instead of out with you was proof that I did want him. But that’s not why I went over there. I swear it isn’t. I never wanted that. You have to believe me, Brian. Tell me you believe me.”

“Shh, baby, I believe you,” Brian assured his lover, all the while thinking of the various ways he could hurt the sorry son of a bitch that had dared to hurt the man in his arms. Brian held Justin against him, listening as he cried and wishing there was something that he could do to have never had what happened to Justin actually happen. Unfortunately for all concerned, there was nothing he could do except what he was. Making sure that Justin knew that Brian would be there for him and give Justin the sense of safety that the two men had fought so hard for after the events of the prom.

When it appeared that Justin had finally cried himself to sleep, Brian picked him up and carried his lover to the bed, laying him down and covering him with the duvet. When Brian tried to move away from the bed, Justin whimpered in his sleep, automatically reaching for Brian, who moved back to him. Brian cradled Justin in his arms, gently humming a song that he used the few times that the two men had Gus over for the night, knowing that it would sooth the younger man. About thirty minutes later, Brian tried to move away again, hoping that Justin had fallen into a deep sleep. When he moved off the bed, the only thing that Justin did was move into the warm spot that Brian’s body heat had left.

Brian immediately headed for the bar; needing a drink desperately as he finally began to let his emotions get the better of him. He grabbed the bottle of Beam, not even bothering with the glass, knowing that he was going to need his tried and true method of pain management.

‘Fuck, how much is Justin supposed to take before he breaks,’ Brian thought to himself, even though everything in him wanted to scream. ‘First his homophobic prick of a father kicks him out, then that bastard Hobbs bashes him over the head and the cops let him get away with it, and now this. If I ever get my hands on the son of a bitch that did this to Justin I…’ Brian didn’t want to finish that thought. As much as he wanted nothing more that to go and find Ethan Gold and hurt as badly, if not worse that, he did Justin, he knew he could do it. He couldn’t take that chance on leaving Justin alone to deal with what had happened by himself.

‘Christ, how am I supposed to help him with this?’ Brian wondered. ‘I don’t have any experience in dealing with anyone whose been raped and I know Justin. There’s no way in hell that he’ll be willing to talk to anyone about it. Well, at least, he’s never wanted to do that with the bashing.’ Brian snorted bitterly after that thought. He knew that Justin had wanted to talk about what had happened at the prom. Had tried to bring it up a few times only to be shot down by Brian. Brian was the one who couldn’t talk about what had happened that night, blaming himself for what had happened. ‘Now this. Fuck, why didn’t I just stick around and eat the damn cheese? He doesn’t ask me for a lot and I couldn’t even give him a picnic, so instead he felt he needed someone else and looked what happened. Fuck, maybe everyone is right and I’m not the right person for Justin but god damn it, I would never hurt him like he was tonight. I would never do that to him.’

Brian threw the now empty bottle of liquor in frustration, waking Justin who cried out. “Shit,” Brian said, jumping up and running in to comfort the teen. He went over to his lover, taking him in his arms and calming him down. “I’m sorry, baby, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Are you mad at me?” Justin asked, still half asleep.

“Mad at you? Why the fuck would I be mad at you?”

“Because I went over to Ethan’s,” Justin answered. Brian kissed the top of Justin’s head, holding him tight.

“Justin, all you did was go over to someone’s home that you thought of as your friend,” Brian said. “You said you didn’t plan on anything happen with this guy, and I believe you. And I understand that you needed someone to talk to. That’s what friends are for. The fact that the bastard took advantage of your trust and did this to you is not your fault. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“God, Brian, why did this have to happen?” Justin cried. “We’ve already been through so much, why can’t we ever just be happy? Is that too much to ask for?”

“No, Justin, if anyone deserves to be happy, it’s you,” Brian told his lover. “I don’t know why this shit keeps happening but I promise to make sure that it never happens again. And I will make the fucker pay for hurting you.”

“No, Brian, you can’t,” Justin begged, facing him. “He threatened to hurt you if I even told you about what had happened. He even made it clear that he expected me to be with him again.”

“Son of a bitch,” Brian hugged Justin closer to him. “That fucker will never get near you again. I don’t care if I have to take you from class to class, I’ll make damn sure of that.”

“Brian, you can’t take off of work,” Justin said. “It’s not like there aren’t people around all the time. I even share my studio space with other people.”

“But they aren’t there all the time,” Brian pointed out. “I just don’t want to take the chance that he can get you alone again. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“I’m going to drive you to school, if not me I’m sure Daphne would be more than willing to take you, and one of us will pick you up,” Brian told him. “As for studio space, if you know you’re going to be alone, I would rather you work here at the loft.”

“Are you sure? You know I’m not the neatest person when I’m in the middle of a project. It’s why I do so much at the studio.”

“If it’s a choice between your safety and a mess in the loft, there’s no choice. You’re more important.” Brian watched as Justin tried to stifle a yawn. He lay down on the bed, pulling Justin down with him. Justin snuggled into Brian’s side, needing the security the older man offered and the two men drifted off into an uneasy sleep, both wondering what the coming weeks would offer.

Part 3

Saturday morning found Brian awake, leaning against the headboard of the bed he shared with Justin, his gaze fixed upon the body asleep next to him. The blond had spent a restless night, battling with the demons that threatened his dreams, until Brian was ready to calm him down. It had reminded the older man of the time right after the bashing, when Justin had moved in with him. It had taken weeks for Justin to feel comfortable enough to resume what had been his normal routine, but now Brian was afraid that all that hard work had been for naught. Even after the bashing, there was still an innocent about Justin that Brian had always liked and he wasn’t sure how that innocence would survive the bitter betrayal of a friend. Especially considering the depths of said betrayal. When Justin began to show signs of waking, Brian got up to get his young lover something to eat.

Brian moved around his kitchen on automatic. He set up the coffee maker and as it began to drip, filling the loft with the fresh brewed aroma of his favorite kona blend, he went to the refrigerator and pulled out some of the fruit that Justin’s mother had brought over a couple of days before hand. Jennifer Taylor had taken it upon herself to make sure the two men had a full fridge and freezer, knowing that neither man liked shopping, and for once Brian was thankful for her thoughtfulness.

Brian looked up at the bedroom, hearing a noise and saw Justin stretching as he awoke. He watched Justin as he made his way to the bathroom. Before his lover returned, Brian sitting on the bed, glass of juice in his hand. ‘Fuck if the others could see me now. They’d think I’d turned into a fucking dyke,’ Brian thought, then deciding that it wasn’t important what his friends thought of him. ‘Justin’s what’s important right now.’

“How are you feeling?” Brian asked, waiting for Justin to finish the juice before leaning over and kissing him gently. He felt Justin shift his body to mold it into Brian’s own, needing to feel the safety of his lover and wondered at what else Justin would have to go through in his young life.

“Like shit,” Justin replied. “Tired. I just kept tossing and turning all night.”

“I know, I was the one you kept kicking in the shin,” Brian joked, earning himself a small chuckle from Justin, which had been his intention.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Trust me, I don’t bruise easily.”

“I just kept seeing his face, feeling his hands,” Justin said, almost as if he was in a trance. “And I couldn’t get away no matter what I did, what I said. And there was no one there to help me.” Brian took an indrawn breath. He remembered when Justin had told him what was going on when he was as senior, but Brian had just told him to suck it up and get through his last year of school. Even after Justin had confronted Hobbs in front of Woodys, other than telling him that he had just made himself an enemy, Brian did nothing to make sure that Justin would be safe. And now this rape, after Brian had rebuffed Justin’s attempts to have a romantic picnic. Brian cursed himself for not having the courage to do what his lover wanted.

Justin felt Brian tense behind him and knew instantly what was going through his head. “Brian what happened wasn’t your fault, no matter how much you might want to think otherwise. You didn’t make me go over to Ethan’s. Fuck, even if I had told you about going over there, you still couldn’t have done anything. You would have thought the same thing I had, that I was going to visit a friend and you’ve never discouraged me from doing that, even if you had other plans for me.” Brian couldn’t help himself, he barked out his laughter. “I just can’t believe I trusted him.”

“Justin, you’ve always been a trusting person,” Brian said. “Hell, I think I’ve known that since the first night I met you. And from what you told me last night, this guy never gave you any indication that he was going to do this. And I said it before; you did nothing wrong in going over there. You thought you had found a friend, someone that you could talk to and that had things in common with. The fact that he turned into a fucking bastard had nothing to do with you. You had no way of knowing what was going to happen.”

“So what do I do now?”

“Now you prove to the bastard that he can’t win,” Brian answered, wishing there was something else he could say. “You already told me last night that you didn’t want to report what the fiddler did to the cops, so we can’t get him like that.”

“Like they would have done anything anyway,” Justin snorted. “They didn’t give a shit when Chris Hobbs almost killed me.”

“Whatever. What would you say if I suggested that maybe you should talk to someone about what has happened?” Brian suggested, knowing it was something he was normally against.

“You mean like a psychiatrist or something?” Justin asked, surprised at Brian’s suggestion He knew how the older man felt about the whole psychiatric profession, remembering Brian’s comments when he told him about the therapist that his mother had tried to get him to see.

“Believe it or not, that’s exactly what I’m saying,” Brian said. “As much as it pains me to admit it, but I think that, this time, maybe it would be for the best if you talk to someone. You’ve gone through a lot of shit over the past year. The shit you’re homophobic prick of a father had done to you. The bashing. And now this. No one can be expected to go through what you’ve had to and not have to talk to someone.” When Justin didn’t say anything, Brian went on. “If you want, I’d be willing to go with you.” Justin looked up at Brian in surprise.

“Really,” he asked. “But you’ve always told me how the only person that could help you was yourself. Why would you be willing to go see some shrink to talk about stuff that you don’t even want to talk to me about?”

“Because I think its something that might do you some good,” Brian admitted, even willing to go one step further. “And, it might even do me some good too.”

“But how would I even go about finding someone to talk to,” Justin asked. “I wouldn’t even know where to start looking.”

“I know someone.” Justin looked up at Brian in surprise. “I talked to him a bit when you first moved into the loft after the bashing. He helped me understand what you were going through and gave me a couple of suggestions about helping you.” Justin didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t believe that Brian had cared enough for him to actually go against his own beliefs and seek out help with something. Cared enough to be willing to admit that he wasn’t able to do something.

“Do you think he would be willing to help? Even though he knows you personally?” Justin didn’t even bother asking how Brian knew the guy. He figured he had a damn good idea of the relationship they had had.

“If he can’t, I’m sure he’d be more than willing to suggest someone who can.” Brian looked down at the blond head that was leaning against his chest. “Does this mean that you want me to see about getting an appointment with him?” Justin was silent for a moment before slowly nodding his head.

“I…I think that might be a good idea,” Justin said.

“Do you have a shift today?”

“I have the dinner shift,” Justin told Brian. “I’m supposed to work five to ten. Why?”

“Do you think you’ll be up to it or do you want me to call Deb and get her to cover your shift? I can tell her that you have an assignment that you have to work on, that way she won’t worry.” Justin shook his head.

“As much as I would rather stay here and not face the world, I’m afraid that if I did I would never go back outside,” he answered. “Just, he knows I work at the diner. What if he shows up?”

“As stupid as I think this asshole is,” Brian said, “he can’t be stupid enough to try something in public, especially the diner.”

“I don’t know,” Justin stammered.

“Look, Justin, how about this. I was already planning on meeting the boys at the diner anyway before going to Woody’s. How about I just stick around after I drop you off? It wouldn’t look too unusual anyway. The diner is practically my second home anyway.”

“After the backroom and the baths.” Brian smiled as he listened to Justin’s laugh. He was glad that the teen still had that ability after everything he had been though, even if it was at his expense.

“Come on, little boy,” Brian said, moving both of them until they were standing. “Time to get some food into you before you shrink away into nothing.” The two men made their way into the kitchen, where Justin grabbed some cereal while Brian spooned some fruit into two bowls. He looked over at Justin, smiling at the enthusiasm that the blond dug into his breakfast, wondering at the strength that he held. He hoped that strength would be enough to get Justin through whatever else might happen because, Brian knew, that things with Ethan Gold weren’t over yet. Brian promised himself, though, that he would be there for Justin to make sure that he would get hurt as little as possible.

Part 4

Brian watched as Justin avoided yet another customer reaching for him. Where as before Friday, Justin would have flirted back with most of the guys that frequented the Liberty Diner, the two shifts he had worked since the rape had the blond doing his best to keep distant from his customers, without making it appear as if anything was wrong. He had a smile on his face, a laugh when called for, but to anyone who knew him, they could tell that it wasn’t genuine. His eyes appeared dead, the smile and laughter never reaching them. If it wasn’t for the fact that Brian sat in the back of the diner, offering his silent support to his lover, Justin wasn’t even sure he would have been able to survive working.

“What the fuck are you doing here still?” Debbie said, coming in and taking her coat off on the way to the break room.

“I thought you had off tonight,” Brian replied, looking up at the red-wigged woman. “At least that’s what you promised when you left here earlier.”

“Kiki called out,” she told him, going into the back. She came right back out. “And that still doesn’t tell me why you’re in the same damn place you were when I left here five hours ago. Have you even left?”

“Is that any of your fucking business?” Brian retorted turning his attention back to Justin when he saw him avoiding an especially grabby customer. He was just about to get up and confront the bastard when said bastard’s friends said something to make him back down. Unfortunately Debbie had noticed Brian’s reaction.

“You know, Brian, Sunshine has been getting hit on since he started here and he’s always been able to handle himself.”

“So?”

“So, what’s with the protection thing you’ve got going?” The waitress asked. “You’ve never seemed to care before and now you haven’t left that fucking booth for two days. I meant while Sunshine’s working,” she continued before Brian could interrupt her. “And I want to fucking know why.”

“And again I ask if it’s any of your fucking business?” Debbie slapped Brian upside his head. “Ow. What the fuck was that for?”

“For being an asshole,” she said, sitting down opposite Brian. “Now what the fuck did you do this time?”

“What makes you think I did something? I’m not always the bad guy you know,” Brian pointed out; already knowing it was a lost cause. He knew that most, if not all of his friends, always blamed him when something went wrong, especially in reference to Justin.

“Just usually,” Debbie shot back. “Now spill. What did you do that upset Justin? And before you give me some bullshit that Justin isn’t upset, let me just say that I can see how Justin has been putting on a happy face the past couple of days. He hasn’t been our Sunshine this weekend even if he hasn’t said anything.”

“He’s just been going through some things, Deb,” Brian told her, not wanting to tell her what happened with Ethan. The decision to tell their friends what had happened with the violinist was up to Justin and, so far, the blond didn’t want any of them to know. The only concession he had made with Brian, other than agreeing to see a counselor, was making sure that Daphne could pick up or drop off Justin on those days that Brian couldn’t.

“What things?”

“Leave it Deb,” Brian sighed, wishing that the older woman would just go away. All he wanted to do was take his lover home and help soothe the younger man’s nerves. The night before, after Justin’s shift, he had been so tense, it had taken every skill Brian had, other than sexual, to calm his lover and he knew that tonight would be no different. It reminded Brian once more of the time after the bashing when Justin couldn’t stand to be around crowds.

“Don’t tell me to leave it,” she almost shouted, for once caring about drawing a crowd. “I care about that kid and I can tell he’s hurting and I want to know why.”

“If Justin wants you to know, he’ll tell you,” Brian said. “And since he hasn’t, I guess that means it’s none of your fucking business so back off.”

“Listen asshole, I don’t know what you did…”

“Ready to go,” Brian asked, cutting Debbie off when he saw Justin over her shoulder. At Justin’s nod, he got up and grabbed his and Justin’s coats. He handed it over to his lover.”

“Sunshine,” Debbie turned her attention to the blond, figuring if she couldn’t get her answers from Brian she would just have to go to the younger of the two. “What’s going on with you?

“Hey Deb, thanks for coming in,” Justin ignored her question. “I know you were planning on having the night off.”

“It wasn’t a problem,” she waved him off. “I’m just worried about you.” She made a move to hug him but stopped when she saw Justin flinch. It was something she hadn’t seen since he came home from the hospital after the bashing and it made her curiosity increase.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” he told her. “Just been busy with school and everything. You know how it is.”

“Sure, baby, whatever you say,” she said, knowing somehow not to push him any further. “You just take care of yourself okay.”

“I will.”

“Let’s go,” Brian said, leaning over and kissing Debbie’s cheek, silently thanking her for not pushing Justin. He knew that eventually the gang would have to know what had happened between Justin and Ethan, if anything just for Justin’s protection. Brian knew that he couldn’t be around Justin all the time, especially when he was working at the diner or with Mikey on the comic, and Brian would need the others help in making sure the bastard that had hurt Justin couldn’t get near him. And making sure that Ethan couldn’t hurt Justin again was just the beginning. Brian also knew that he would need some help if he wanted to make the bastard pay for daring to touch what was his.

Part 4

Brian sat at his desk, staring at his computer and not seeing what it was that he was supposed to be paying attention to. He looked over at the clock, trying to remember where Justin was supposed to be just then. The younger man had decided to go to his classes that day, even though he wasn’t sure that he would be able to handle it. The blond was afraid that he might run into Ethan and didn’t know what the other man would do. Justin was also leery of dealing with people, much like he had been after his bashing. Justin jumped whenever someone tried to touch him, which was one of the main reasons that Brian had stayed with Justin while he was working at the diner. To make things somewhat easier for the teen, Brian and Justin had talked to Daphne, the only other person that Justin had told so far about the rape, and the girl had agreed to go wit Justin to class that morning anyway.

Brian noticed that it was getting close to one and knew that Justin’s last class had just let out. Daphne had told him that she would drive Justin back to the loft before she headed out for her classes. He had made her promise him that she would call after she left Justin to let him know what had happened at PIFA, wanting to make sure that his lover was okay. Brian had already cleared his schedule for the afternoon just in case he was needed at home. Luckily for him, he hadn’t had anything serious on his schedule since the summer push had just ended and Vance had taken that opportunity to go to Hawaii with his wife.

Brian tried to concentrate on his work, wanting to get a head start on some of the new campaigns that his accounts wanted but his mind refused to focus. All he wanted to do was find that bastard that had hurt his lover and make him regret the day he had ever thought of touching Justin. He understood Justin’s aversion to going to the police to file a report about the rape, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t want Ethan Gold paying for what he had done. Brian’s thoughts of revenge were interrupted by Cynthia buzzing his phone.

“Brian, you have a Daphne Chanders calling for you on line one.”

“Thank you,” Brian said. He took a deep breath and picked up the phone. “Daphne, how did it go today?”

“I’m fine, Brian. And how are you?” Brian chuckled at Daphne’s comment.

“Sorry about that.”

“That’s okay, I understand. I’m worried about him too,” Justin assured the girl. “It’s not something I ever thought he would have to go through. You don’t think of a guy having to deal with rape. I just don’t know how he’s going to deal with this.”

“He’s going to deal with this one day at a time,” Brian told her, although he was asking himself that same question. “And we’ll be there to help him get back his life.”

“I don’t think its going to be as easy as all that, Brian. Not if what I saw today is any indication.”

“What happened?”

“Justin was okay on the way to PIFA. I mean, he was quiet but it wasn’t that bad.”

“What about when you two got to the campus?”

“Well…I don’t know….I mean…I guess the easiest way to describe it was that Justin just seemed to shrink into himself. A few people called out to him but he just ignored them. He shrank back from everyone that came near him. His teachers let me sit in on his classes, but it was obvious that he wasn’t concentrating on what was being said. I don’t think he heard a word of what he was supposed to be learning.”

“Shit.”

“But that wasn’t the worst part, Brian.” Brian sat up straight, almost afraid of what else had happened to his lover. As it was, he was already packing his briefcase up, knowing that there was no way he was going to actually be able to get any work done at the office and wanting to get back to his loft to offer what comfort he could to Justin.

“He was there, Brian. Waiting for Justin after one of his classes.”

“Who?” Brian asked, already knowing the answer but wanting it confirmed.

“That asshole, Ethan Gold. When Justin came out of his art history class, Ethan was waiting for him. I don’t know how he knew where Justin would be or what time the class was letting out.”

“Son of a bitch. I’m going to kill the fucker if I ever get my hands on him. Did he do anything?”

“He just told Justin that he wanted to know when they could get back together. That he really enjoyed the other night and he was looking forward to getting to know Justin better. Luckily it was Justin’s last class so I could get him out of there quickly.”

“Fucker. Where’s Justin now?”

“He’s at the loft. I left him just before I called you and that was only because he insisted I do so. Brian he didn’t look good. We need to do something or else I’m afraid what might happen to Justin.”

“I’ve already got him set up for an appointment with a therapist for tomorrow. I told Justin that I would go with him.”

“And what about that asshole Gold? I don’t think he’s going to leave Justin alone and you know we can’t always follow Justin to his classes. There are going to be times when Justin is going to be on campus by himself.”

“I don’t know what we’re going to do but I’ll tell you one thing. That fucker is going to pay for what he did to Justin.”

“Take care of him, Brian. And let me know what you need me to do.”

“Thanks Daphne. You take too.” Brian hung up the phone, grabbing his briefcase and leaving his office. “Cynthia, I’m taking the rest of the day off. I only want you to call me if there’s an emergency and by that I mean that this building is on fire and there are people trapped inside. Other than that, forget my phone number.”

“What’s wrong, Brian?”

“I’ve got something to take care of.” And with no further explanation Brian went home to try and help his lover deal with what had happened with him, even though he had no idea of what to do. The best he could do was try and make sure Justin knew that he wasn’t alone. That Brian would always be with him.

**Distant Relatives**

Crossover with Buffy the Vampire Slayer....it takes place somewhere in the fifth season of BtVS which means that SPike has his chip, but ANya and Xander never happened....the two of them were only friends....as for the QaF timeline, I want to place it around 202/203....Mikey lovers beware...I am not going to be nice to him in this fic...why..because at the time this fic is taking place, Mikey was still the whiny selfish bastard that I first met in 101...also know that the beginning focuses more on Spike/Xander than Brian/Justin, but that will change...in this story Xander Harris and his lover Spike go to Pittsburgh to visit his aunt and uncle...and for those wondering...hey I'm sticking with the original, Debbie and Vic have a sister out there somewhere...why can't she be in Sunnydale...

Part 1

“Tell me again, luv, why I agreed to come to Pittsburgh with you,” Spike grumbled as he and Xander made their way off of the plane. The two men had taken a flight that, while leaving in the daytime in Los Angeles, had insured that they would arrive in Pennsylvania when it had darkened into night. Luckily, the stangeness that inhabited the City of Angels didn’t even bother to notice a vampire huddled under a blanket, making its way into LAX.

“Because you wanted to get out of Sunnydale as much as I have ever since Farmboy came back from wherever good little soldiers go when they want to blow off steam,” Xander offered as explanation.

“I could have dealt with those two being all kissy-kissy, even if it did make me want to hurl,” Spike threw out.

“You also can’t forget about the price on your head since you killed those vampires that had been using the old candy factory as a headquarters.”

“I could have handled them,” Spike stated, petutualantly. Xander stopped in front of the smaller man, turning to face Spike and wrap his arms around the blonde vampire.

“In that case, you came because you love me and wanted to meet the only family that I have that actually cares about me. You know the ones that wouldn’t rather see me dead that in love with a man.”

“Oh yeah,” Spike grinned, kissing his mate, neither man caring about the disapproving looks they were getting from some of the other people in the airport, they were used to them because of the way their relationship was treated among their group of friends. When air started to become an issue with the mortal half of the pair, they reluctantly broke apart and were surprised to hear clapping coming from behind them.

“Now that’s a sight to see,” a woman’s voice said. Xander blushed, easily recognizing the woman’s voice and turned to face their audience.

“Hi Aunt Debbie,” Xander greeted the red-headed woman who was standing there, two young men with her.

“Just hi, sweetheart? Is that all I get after not seeing you for so long? Where’s my Xander hug?” Xander smiled as he walked into Deb’s outstretched arms, picking her up easily in a bear hug, causing her to laugh. ‘Sometimes,’ he thought, ‘working construction and fighting demons came in handy when it comes to my strength.’

“Damn, but you’ve gotten big, sweetie.”

“So I’ve been told,” the Sunnydale man grinned at his aunt.

“Yeah, working construction during the day and battling dell-spawned demons at night has a tendency to do that to a person,” Spike mumbled, just loud enough for the others to hear him and give the blonde a strange look. Xander saw it but decided not to say anything in regards to the oddness of the statement.

“You have to be Spike,” Debbie said, checking out her nephew’s choice in men. She noted the bleached blond hair and long leather duster that was Spike’s trademark, but considering some of the things she had seen working in the Liberty Diner, didn’t make any big deal about it. As long as the man in front of her made sure her favorite nephew was happy, she wouldn’t complain. “Well, can’t say that Xander doesn’t have good taste when it comes to men.”

“I like your aunt, pet,” Spike grinned, causing Xander to groan.

“Thanks, Aunt Debbie. Just what he needed to boast his already over inflated ego.” Xander turned his attention to the older of the two men. “Mikey, you’re looking good,” he greeted his cousin who finally walked over and joined the trio, the teen beside him coming also. Michael had a smile on his face; although anyone who bothered to look close enough could tell it was forced. Xander sighed silently, realizing that his cousin still held some kind of strange grudge against him. He didn’t know what he had done to anger his cousin and, at this point in his life, he didn’t care. Xander had had it with people who didn’t approve of him for one reason or the other, including those that he had called his friends, and refused to worry about Michael’s problems with him. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Well, you know how it is,” Michael replied. “Nothing changes here in the Pitts. Looks like time’s been pretty good to you too.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t complain.” Xander then turned his attention to the teen. “And you have to be Justin.” The blonde’s smile got wider and, unlike Michael’s, it didn’t have to be forced.

“Hey Xander. Good to finally see you in person,” Justin said. Over the past year, while Justin had been staying with Debbie, the two had talked often over the phone and had emailed each other constantly. In fact, Justin had been one of the first people Xander had told about his relationship with Spike, although he had left out a few details about the man he was in love with. Like the fact that Spike was a vampire, albeit one who couldn’t’ hurt humans, and that he had tried to kill Xander and his friends. Repeatedly. Justin, for his part, liked the fact that he could talk to Xander about the difficulties he was having at school because of his homosexuality, not to mention what it was like to be in love with someone so much older than himself.

“Same here.” Justin and Xander stared at each other for another minute, each thinking to themselves that the other one was extremely attractive, before they gave into their youthful exuberance and smiling, hugged the other. “Damn, but after seeing you, I can tell why Brian Kinney fell in love with a twink. If it wasn’t for Spike, I would be tempted to try and steal you away from him.” A growl from the vampire caused Xander to break away from Justin and go over to his mate. “I said, if it wasn’t for you Spike. You’re more than enough for me.”

“Bloody right I am,” Spike said. “Bad enough you’re drooling over Peaches, but now I have to compete with some poofy teen.”

“Now, Spike,” Xander purred, wrapping his arms around the smaller man’s neck and kissing him, “you know full well that the only reason I flirt with Deadboy is because I know it gets you all hot and bothered. It turns you on seeing Angel get all flustered.”

“True, pet. Just like it does to you when I flirt with Slutty, especially when that damn Farmboy is in the same room.”

“Mmmmhmmmmmmmm,” Xander agreed as the two men began to kiss again, once more oblivious to everyone else. After it became apparent that the two weren’t going to stop soon if they didn’t have help, Deb coughed to gain their attention. Xander and Spike separated, although slowly, the younger man blushing again.

“Come on, boys,” Deb ordered them. “Let’s go grab your things and head back to the house. Your Uncle Vic can’t wait to see you again, Xander.”

“I can’t wait to see him, too,” Xander said. The young man loved his uncle. He used to love listening to Vic’s stories of living in New York and Vic made sure to let Xander know that if he ever needed to get away from the horrors that were his parents, that Vic would gladly take him in.

The five people made their way through the airport, heading towards the luggage carousels. Debbie, Spike and Justin walked slightly ahead of Michael and Xander, the two Pittsburgh natives wanting to grill Spike on himself and his relationship with Xander. Michael, on the other hand, felt the need to try and correct a misconception of Xander’s.

“You’re wrong, you know,” Michael suddenly blurted out, causing Xander to look at him.

“Wrong about what?”

“Brian being in love with Justin,” Michael explained. “He’s not.”

“That not what I’ve been told.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Michael said, shaking his head. “I know that Justin, and even my mom, believe that Brian loves the Boy Wonder, and I’m sure he does care for him on some level, but this is Brian Kinney we’re talking about. The epitome of the carefree, no ties to anyone man. How many times have we all heard him say, “I don’t do relationships? I don’t do boyfriends.”

“So? Anyone can change,” Xander pointed out. “Trust me on that one. I’ve seen plenty of examples of that.”

“Not Brian. He enjoys his life way too much. And even if he was ready to change, which I don’t think he is, he’s certainly not going to do it for the Boy Wonder.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that,” Xander finished as they arrived where their bags were coming out. He watched as Spike grabbed their bags, remembering when he had thought the same thing about the vampire. Spike had done his best to shove Xander away, going so far as to offer the teen to former lover Drusilla, but the vampiress had seen right through Spike’s charade. She told Xander the he would be good to “her Spikey” and had left, making sure to extract a promise from the mortal to not give up on Spike. And he hadn’t. And, eventually, he got Spike to admit that he was in love with Xander and the two had been together ever since.

“I am and the sooner Justin realizes it, the better we all will be,” Michael reiterated. “He needs to let Brian live his own life and find someone his own age to be with.” That’s when it hit Xander. He could stand there and talk to Michael until he was blue in the face, but it wouldn’t change a thing because Michael Novatny was still in love with his best friend and jealous of the young boy who, in his opinion, stole Brian away from him. Xander knew that until his cousin was willing to face the fact that Brian would never want him in that way, Michael would continue to live in the land of denial. Before Xander could say anything else though, he saw Spike heading their way, lifting their bags in the air, a triumphant grin on his face. He watched as the other three people made their way to them.

“Told ya we didn’t have to worry about the airlines losing our bags, luv,” Spike smiled. “Things like that only happen to other people, not the big, bad.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Xander muttered,” let’s hear you say that after you find out that everything you brought with you was shipped to Auckland, New Zealand instead of Oakland, California.” Everyone laughed at Xander’s comments, including Michael.

“As long as its me and you, pet, I don’t’ care whether we have clothes or not.” Spike kissed his mate, this time causing Deb and Michael to roll their eyes and Justin to grab their bags from the blonde.

“I don’t know about anyone else, but I have this sudden need to get home,” the teen said.

“Why is it, I have a feeling that Brian is about to get jumped,” Xander chuckled, causing Justin to grin.”

“Because it’s true.” The five laughed, although Xander saw that Michael’s heart wasn’t in it. While Xander felt bad about Michael’s situation, he knew that there was nothing that he would be able to do about it. It was something that only Michael would be able to handle.

“Good thing Brian takes care of himself,” Deb chimed in. “He’s going to need plenty of energy to keep up with you, Sunshine.”

“Trust me, that’s one thing Brian has no trouble doing and I’m quite happy about that.”

“I know the feeling,” Xander smiled at his lover.

“It’s great, isn’t it?”

“You know it.”

“Can we please get out of here,” Michael whined, tired of the whole conversation. The others nodded their heads, heading towards the exit, laughing and joking with each other. Xander and Spike were glad that they had taken Debbie up on her offer to stay with her and her brother Vic. It was exactly what they needed. Some time with people that wouldn’t judge them on their past but accept them for whom and what they were.

Part 2

Xander and Spike were laying on the bed that they would be sharing while staying with the Novatny’s, exhaustion from the long trip finally getting to them. Xander’s Uncle Vic had given up his bedroom so that the couple would be more comfortable while the older man stayed in Michael’s old room. They had begged off Justin’s invitation to join him and Michael’s friends at Babylon, promising to meet up with everyone the following evening. The two men lie on the bed quietly, content to just be together. It wasn’t often that they found themselves not having to worry about vampires and demons and the other things that liked to go bump in the night. Or, considering Sunnydale, the day as the case may be.

“Your Aunt and Uncle are certainly…” Spike finally said, breaking the silence.

“Interesting?” Xander supplied.

“Different,” Spike finished. “I can see why you wanted to come out here and see them. They’re definitely a step up from the White Hats that you’ve been hanging around with.”

“You’re just saying that because you think Justin’s hot,” Xander teased his lover.

“He’s not bad,” Spike said, nonchalantly. “I wouldn’t kick him out of our bed if he cared to join us. Especially if he brought that Brian bloke with him that you’ve been telling me about. That is, if that description you gave is accurate.”

“Trust me, it is,” Xander assured him. “There’s a reason that Brian Kinney is known as the Stud of Liberty Avenue.”

“Is that why that cousin of yours has such a hard-on for him?”

“Noticed that, did you?’ Xander asked his lover, who only gave him a look that clearly said ‘Duh.’ “Yeah, I think Michael has had a crush on Brian since they first met when they were fourteen, but Brian’s never done anything with him. I think he sees Michael as a brother and doesn’t want to risk fucking up their friendship. Hell, Brian sees Debbie as his mom and Vic as something like a surrogate father. He used to come here as an escape.”

“What kind of escape?” Spike felt his lover tense up a bit and waited for Xander to answer him.

“Remember what I told you about my parents and the way they treated me as I was growing up?” Spike nodded his head, growling at the same time as he remembered the things that the elder Harris’ said to their son when they found out about his relationship with Spike. When Xander told his parents that he was gay, their yelling could be heard down the street. When it was finally over, Xander found himself homeless and with his parents telling him that they no longer had a son. Luckily for Xander, he and Spike had already found an apartment, which was why they were telling the Harris’s about their relationship. Spike swore that the first thing he would do when he finally got the chip out of his head would be to make Xander’s parents regret ever raising a hand to their son.

“What about those sorry excuses for humans?”

Well, remember how I told you that one of the only reasons I actually managed to survive the hellhole that was Casa De Harris?” Spike nodded.

“You said that you had a friend that was older than you who had gone through the same thing as you were,” Spike said, remembering the stories that his lover had told him about his childhood. “That he told you that whenever things got to hard for you that you could call him and he would do what he could to help you out.”

“That person was Brian,” Xander said flatly. “He’s the one that helped me deal with the shit that was my life at that time. One time, right before I was supposed to come out here and visit, my dad lost his job. It wasn’t a good time for my family. I don’t even know what I had done that one night, if I had actually done anything at all. All I remember is him coming into my room screaming and yelling like a fucking banshee and by the end of it all, I had a black eye and a broken arm. I got here and Brian took one look at me, I think I must have only been twelve or so and he was twenty-two or twenty-three and he knew what had happened because he had lived through the same thing. He took me aside, even though he didn’t have to, and made sure that I was okay and he spent that summer making sure that what was going on with my parents wasn’t my fault.” Xander sat up and Spike recognized the look. It was the look that his lover often held when he suddenly thought of something that had been bothering him.

“What is it, luv?”

“I think I finally figured out why Michael doesn’t like me,” Xander told the blond vampire. “I never put two and two together until now. Probably because I always hated thinking about my childhood.”

“Well, out with it pet,” Spike demanded. “What bug crawled up your cousin’s arse?”

“Michael has had a huge crush on Brian ever since the two of them met,” Xander said. “I mean, huge. It’s the main reason why he refuses to admit that there might be some actual feelings between Brian and Justin. Well, at least on Brian’s side. I don’t think Mikey wants to admit that Brian can actually fall in love with someone and that someone not be Mikey himself.”

“Has this Brian bloke ever given your cousin any indication that his feelings might be returned.” Xander looked over at his lover and kissed him deeply and the two men lost themselves in that passion for a moment. Finally they had to pull apart so that Xander could breathe. “Fuck, luv, what was that for?”

“Do you have any idea how sexy you are when you start sounding like Giles?” Spike raised his eyebrows.

“Something you’d like to tell me about you and the Watcher, pet? Some fantasies that you haven’t shared with me?” Xander visibly shivered from that thought.

“Ewww, gross. That’s my father figure you’re talking about there,” Xander admonished the vampire. “I just meant, I love it when you show me your softer side.”

“Oy, I don’t have a softer side. I’m the bid, bad after all.”

“I know, I know,” Xander said, smiling at his lover.

“So, answer my question already.” Xander had to think a minute so that he could actually remember what he and Spike had been talking about.

“Oh, yeah. Not as far as I know, but that never stopped Michael from believing that he and Brian were meant to be together.”

“So what does that have to do with your cousin being a wanker about the way he treats you.”

“It all started that summer that Brian let me hang out with him even though I was so much younger,” Xander explained. “Ever since then, Mikey has made it clear that he doesn’t like me. Maybe he was jealous that Brian did that.”

“If that’s the case, then you’re cousin is a bigger idiot that I was already giving him credit for,” Spike grumbled, hating anyone treating his lover with anything less than the respect that he thought Xander deserved. It was why he hated the way Xander’s friends back in Sunnydale treated him and why he suggested that Xander come to Pittsburgh and see his aunt and uncle. “It sounds like Mikey’s problem is exactly that. Mikey’s problem.”

“Well, I’m certainly not going to worry about it. Especially considering that now that we don’t have to worry about Buffy or Willow or anyone seeing, I can see you in the sun. I love spending time with you during the day.” Spike grinned at the thought of spending the day with his lover outside. It was a luxury that the other White Hats didn’t know about. As far as they knew, Angel had destroyed the Gem of Amara, not realizing that, at the last minute, Spike had actually switched the ring with a fake. Xander and Spike had taken great care in keeping that fact a secret, knowing that their friends would try and take the ring from Spike, not wanting him to have the power the ring gave him.

“I still can’t believe the poof hasn’t realized that the ring he got was a fake,” Spike chuckled. “Like he would have been able to destroy something that powerful by smashing it with a brick.”

“And since when did we ever give Deadboy credit for using his brains?”

“Good point. I’m just glad that we’re finally away from slutty and the rest of your so-called friends,” Spike said. Xander didn’t bother to say anything to his lover, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to change his mind. Spike had made it clear that he did not like Buffy and company treated Xander. He stated on numerous occasions that he thought they were taking advantage of Xander, including the way that they had dumped Spike on him when Giles had company. Not that either man actually minded, but Xander thought that it would have been nice if he had been asked if he could take Spike in. Especially since he was living in the basement of his parents’ home at the time.

“Spike, you know. We’re finally away from the Hellmouth. We don’t have to worry about patrolling or prophecies or dealing with research. And we are in a great bed. The last thing I want to do with talk about Buffy.”

“Really, pet. And just what did you have in mind?” Xander just smiled before launching himself at his lover. ‘What a way to spend a vacation,’ both men thought, before they weren’t able to think anymore.

Part 3

Xander and Spike looked around the Liberty Diner, trying to find some place that they could sit. The Saturday morning crowd had filled the place up and they weren’t sure if they wanted to wait for an available seat. Just as they were about to turn around and find someplace else to eat, two men got up from the counter and Xander and Spike quickly grabbed their seats. They smiled at Justin who had come over with some water for the two men.

“Someone looks like he got some,” Xander teased the blond teen, whose smile got even larger than usual. “I don’t think I even have to ask if you had a good night.”

“No you don’t,” Justin said.” Just like I’m sure I don’t have to ask you if you enjoyed your evening either.”

“Bloody right he had a good night,” Spike stated, leaning over and kissing his lover. It was a kiss full of love and passion and want and had almost every man in the diner panting. And Spike knew it. Unlike Xander, who had no idea of how beautiful he was, Spike hadn’t missed the looks he and the brunet had gotten ever since they had stepped into the diner and Spike wanted them all to know that Xander was his.

“Fuck, if you two are planning on doing that it public, you might want to think about charging,” Debbie joked, coming up behind the two men. Spike’s grin got even larger when he saw his lover blush. He loved that with everything else that Xander had seen and had been through in his life, he still had that innocence about him. “And I thought Sunshine and Brian were bad.”

“Talking about me again, Deb,” Brian said, joining the group. “I swear I could feel my ears burning.” Brian moved closer to the counter, getting between Spike and the man next to him. He leaned over the counter and he kissed Justin. “So who do I have to fuck to get a cup of coffee in this place?”

“Luckily for you, that would be me,” Justin quipped, going to get his lover his coffee. While he was at the pot, he held it ask in question to Xander and Spike if they wanted some. Both nodded their heads. While they were waiting for the coffee, Debbie went to pick up food for one of her tables and Brian took the time to look over the two men that had just been the focus of so much attention. It took him a minute, since it had been a few years since he had seen him, but Brian finally recognized Xander.

“I’ll be damned,” he drawled. “My Alexander, you’ve certainly grown since the last time I’ve seen you. Debbie said you were coming for a visit, although she seemed to have neglected to mention the fact that you were bringing a friend.”

“That would be because I didn’t tell her,” Xander said. “I decided to surprise her. I didn’t want to have to deal with all her questions over the phone. Better to get them in person.”

“Especially when you knew I’d be the one she was bloody well asking all the questions, eh whelp?” Spike asked, knowing exactly how his lover thought.

“Now, Spike, would I do something like that?” Xander asked, trying to look innocent but knowing he wasn’t pulling it off. “I just didn’t want to deal with Debbie’ giving me the third degree after all the shit that Giles and Buffy put me through when they found out about us.” Spike growled when he thought about his love’s supposed friends and the way that they treated Xander after they had caught him and Spike kissing in the basement of the Magic Box. The two made him feel as if he had created a major crime by falling in love with the blond vampire. It made Xander afraid of what Willow’s reaction would be when she found out. Luckily for him, the red headed witch was out of contact with the group with Sunnydale, having gone to LA to help Angel with something that required her witchy skills. Xander wasn’t sure what the vampire had his best friend doing, but he was glad that for now, he could still think of her as a friend.

“Still don’t know why you won’t let me kill Slutty and the Watcher,” Spike grumbled, wanting nothing more than to punish the people responsible for hurting his lover.

“You know why and we aren’t getting into that again,” Xander said, doing his best to ignore the two men listening in on their conversation. Brian, for his part, could tell that whatever was going on was something that he and Justin were familiar with. Both of them had experience with losing people who couldn’t accept them for who they were.

“Justin, you’ve got food up,” Debbie shouted, drawing the blond teen’s attention from whatever was happening between Spike and Xander. He left the two men with Brian, who watched as Spiked gently kissed his lover.

“I take it you’re friends don’t approve of your relationship?” Brian said when the two men finally pulled apart.

“You could say that,” Xander answered. “Although I don’t think it was the gay thing so much as the being involved with Spike thing. Buffy and Giles don’t like the idea of the two of us together.”

“Now what did I tell you about what you should do about other people’s opinions,” the brunet asked.

“You told me to tell them to fuck off,” Xander smiled, remembering the advice he had been given. “And that’s exactly what I told them, if not in those exact words.”

“And I was never prouder of you, whelp,” Spike said. The blond vampire groaned as he saw someone enter the diner. “Bloody hell, looks like your loving cousin has arrived, Pet.”

“Hey, Brian, the guys should be here in a minute,” Michael greeted his friend, giving the other man a kiss on the lips. Spike could tell it was a casual greeting, one between best friends, even though he could also see the look of desire in Michael’s eyes. “Did you manage to get us a booth yet?”

“There wasn’t one open,” Brian told him.

“Well, I’ll grab us one now,” Michael volunteered, the diner having become significantly emptier in the time that Brian had arrived.

“I’m not staying, Mikey,” Brian stated, downing the last of his coffee.”

“But Brian, I thought we were going to have breakfast,” Michael whined, causing everyone to cringe, including Justin who had rejoined the group. “I’ve barely seen you since I’ve gotten back.”

“You know how it is, Mikey. Things to see and people to do.” Brian looked over at Xander and Spike. “You two coming?”

“I don’t see why not, mate,” Spike said, wanting to get to know the other man. After hearing how Brian had helped Xander when his lover was younger, Spike knew that Brian was someone he would get along with.

“Sure, maybe you can catch me up on the gossip,” Xander agreed. Brian nodded, leaning over to give Justin another kiss.

“What time does your shift end?”

“Three. Pick me up?”

“Maybe,” Brian answered in a way that Justin knew was really his way of saying he would be there.

“Brian, what about breakfast?” Michael continued to complain, not willing to believe his friend was really going to leave. “Ted and Emmett are going to be here any minute.”

“Another time, Mikey. How about Babylon tonight?” Michael could tell that he was not going to convince Brian to change his mind and got angry. He had moved back to Pittsburgh, leaving behind his lover, because he had missed the brunet too much and had realized that he would never be happy away from his best friend. He had been in love with Brian for too many years to be able to live somewhere so far away from him, even if it was with a man that loved him the way David Cameron did. Michael had hoped that he and Brian could just pick up where they had left off, maybe become even closer now that David was out of the picture, but Brian was quick to make it clear that some things had changed. One of the biggest changes, much to Michael’s disappointment, was the fact that Justin was now living with Brian.

Michael knew that it was Justin’s mother’s idea for Brian to take in her son. Justin’s inability to be in crowds or fear of anyone touching him other than Brian, making it obvious that Brian was the best one to help the blond. Michael also believed that the main reason that Brian allowed Justin to live with him again was the guilt that his friend was feeling over Brian being attacked at his senior prom. He understood that and was willing to give Brian kudos for helping the teen but, in Michael’s mind, now that Justin was okay and, his being back to work proved that to him, Michael believed it was time for Justin to either move back into either Jennifer Taylor’s home or his old room at Debbie’s. Michael thought it was time for Justin to allow Brian to get back to his own life.

‘And now my damn cousin had to come into town and ruin that,’ Michael thought. ‘Xander is just like Justin. Always acting like a little puppy, chasing Brian down for any attention he’s willing to give him. And he’s decided to bring that Spike guy and I know Brian. Since he doesn’t believe in relationships, I know he’s going to try and fuck one if not both of them. Maybe even get Justin involved. Fuck. Between the two of them, I’ll never get to see Brian. They’ll make sure of that. I can’t have that. There’s got to be something I can do to get Brian away from them.’

Just as he thought that, Michael remembered something that one of his fellow co-workers at the Q-Mart had told him. She said that she had read something about some form of black magick that called a vengeance demon. ‘Demons and magick are bullshit,’ Michael admitted to himself, ‘but she swore that it worked. That she had tried it and wished that he ex-boyfriend would go impotent and he had. Maybe it could work for me. Maybe if I can find this demon I can make it so that Justin never entered Brian’s life.’ And with that thought, Michael smiled to himself, thinking of what his life would be like if Justin had never entered it that fateful night and wondering how he could contact that vengeance demon that he had heard about. A demon by the name of Anyanka.

**STAND-ALONE**

**End of an Era**

Originally posted as the Punch..based on the 301 teaser that had Brian popping Mikey a well deserved on

“He’s nothing but a selfish, little prick.”

“Shut the fuck up, Michael,” Brian growled, trying to reign in his temper.

“Why Brian,” Michael continued. “Why can’t you just see the truth?”

“And what truth would that be, Mikey?”

“That you would have been better off if you had just left him on the ground.” Michael never saw the punch coming. It was something that he had never thought would happen.

“Brian, what the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Debbie yelled, coming over to her son, examining his jaw at the same time as she glared at the other man. “What the fuck is going on over here?”

“Nothing ma,” Michael answered, looking over at his best friend, who was unable to meet his eyes. Michael knew that he had pushed the other man too far and he wished that he could take the words back, but he knew it was too late for that. Brian’s own actions were proof of that.

“It didn’t look like nothing from where I was standing.” By now a crowd had gathered around. Ben appeared, attempting to go after Brian for the attack, only to be held back by his lover.

“Ben, stop,” Michael ordered, concerned to see the anger coming from his peace loving boyfriend. When Ben looked down at Michael, he continued. “It’s not like it would do any good.”

“What happened?” Melanie demanded, looking between the two men, although it was obvious to everyone whom she was truly angry with. When it became apparent that Brian wasn’t going to say anything, Michael spoke.

“It was nothing, really. It was just a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding,” Melanie choked. “Brian hauls off and hits you over a misunderstanding?” Michael shook his head, suddenly unable to meet his best friend’s eyes. “I don’t fucking believe this.” Melanie turned to Brian, eyes blazing. “Get out.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I said get the fuck out of here.”

“Melanie, don’t,” Michael pleaded, not wanting everyone to turn against Brian, but seeing that was exactly was happening. He knew that he should say something, explain that Brian hadn’t meant to hit him, that it was Michael’s fault that he had said something he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t face the disappointment and anger that he was sure he would face, so he stayed quiet.

“Jesus Christ, Michael, I know he’s your best friend, but how the hell can you defend what he did.” Michael didn’t say anything and everyone gathered took his silence as his own way of saying that he was angry also. Brian looked at his friend, the anger in his features disappearing into a sadness that appeared to be soul deep. Brian turned and began to make his way out of the party, everyone moving out of his way as if they were afraid he would strike out at them.

“That’s right, Brian. Leave,” Melanie yelled after him. “And don’t ever fucking come back.”

Over the course of the following week, Brian found himself on the outside looking in when it came to his family of friends. It seemed that everyone was blaming him for what had transpired at the party the week before and, no matter what he said, he couldn’t get them to change their minds. It didn’t help that Michael wouldn’t say what had actually transpired before Brian had hit him, and that made Brian question his entire friendship with the store owner. Debbie had come over, telling Brian that he was no longer welcome in his home, or the diner. He wanted to argue that she had no right to ban him from the restaurant, but he didn’t have the will to fight anymore. Than to finish off what had the makings of being the worst week ever in his life, he received notice that Melanie had managed to convince Lindsay that he should no longer have any access to Gus. Brian had lost everyone that he cared about and he didn’t know what he could do to make it better. The only thing he did know was that he had to somehow start his life over, and he couldn’t do that if he stayed in Pittsburgh. Brian had already loaded his jeep with the things that he had considered essential for whatever he wanted to do, mainly clothes, a couple of CDs, his laptop and a sketchbook that Justin had left behind when he moved out of the loft.

Brian took one last look around the loft, noticing how cold it looked and trying to remember a time when it actually felt like a home. The only time he could remember were the months that Justin had lived with him. Brian shook his head and slid the door open, only to be confronted by a sight he never thought he would see again.

“Going somewhere, Brian?” Justin asked softly, not sure of the reception he would receive from his former lover.

“What are you doing here, Justin?” Brian asked, moving aside and allowing the blonde to enter the loft. “Aren’t you afraid that people will say something about you being seen with me? I’m not exactly mister popularity.”

“When have I ever been concerned about what people say about me and you?” Brian didn’t say what he wanted to, not wanting to ruin what was probably going to be the last time he saw the young man that had stolen his heart.

“Justin,” Brian sighed, “what do you want?”

“I heard about what happened at the party last week. About why you hit Michael.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Please, Brian, don’t,” Justin pleaded, going over to the older man, who had turned so that his back faced Justin. “My friend Sean told me what Michael had said. He told me how Michael said that you would have been better off if you had left…if you had..if you had left me on the ground.” Brian turned when he heard the hitch in Justin’s voice. He saw the tears that were threatening to fall from the teen’s face and reached out, pulling him into a hug.

“Justin, don’t,” Brian pleaded with the blonde. “Don’t do this to yourself.”

“Sorry,” Justin sniffed, pulling away and looking up at Brian, who couldn’t help himself and gently kissed Justin’s lips, savoring the taste of the young man.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. It’s Mikey’s problem, not yours.”

“Why didn’t you tell anybody what he said?” Justin asked, although he already had a good idea of why Brian kept his silence. “Why let everyone think that he’s the injured party? For the past week Michael’s been playing the injured party, gaining everyone’s sympathy.”

“Trust me, I know. Debbie came by the day after the party and made sure that I knew I was persona non gratis around the diner and most of Liberty Avenue,” Brian told him. “And I’ve been ordered to stay away from Gus by the munchers.”

“But he’s your son,” Justin argued, upset on his ex-lover’s behalf. “They can’t keep you away from him.”

“Actually they can,” Brian reminded Justin, “especially since I signed over parental rights. Pretty much means they can do whatever they want when it comes to Gus and I have no say.”

“That’s so fucked,” Justin swore. “You didn’t do anything. It’s all Michael’s fault.”

“But they don’t know that, now do they Sunshine?” Brian pointed out. “As far as anyone knows, Michael did nothing wrong. It was all the big, bad Brian’s fault. Then again, that’s not exactly anything new, is it?”

“But that doesn’t make it right,” Justin argued. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I don’t know why you just don’t tell them what really happened. Why are you protecting Michael?”

“It doesn’t matter what I say, Justin,” Brian wearily replied. “They’ll all believe what they want, and that’s that I’m in the wrong. It’s how it’s always been and that’s how it will always be. And I’ve finally accepted that.”

“Is that why you’re leaving?” Brian looked at Justin in surprise. “I saw the suitcases and boxes in the jeep. You’re going away, aren’t you?”

“It’s for the best, don’t you think? A friend of mine offered me a job with his corporation and I decided to take it.”

“So you’re just going to run away? Let them win?”

“They’ve already won Justin,” Brian yelled. “Don’t you get it? I never had a chance; I just refused to believe that. I wanted to think that I actually deserved my chance at happiness. My chance at being loved.” Brian’s voice quieted to a whisper at his last sentence and Justin couldn’t help but take his former lover in his arms.

“You do deserve to be happy, Bri. And I don’t know anyone who deserves more love than you, even if your friends are too selfish to realize that. Hell even if you refuse to admit it.” Brian allowed himself to find some comfort in his former lover’s arms. He had missed the feeling of the younger man’s hold, not even knowing it until it was too late.

“I don’t know how to love anyone,” Brian sighed, holding Justin closer to him. He didn’t know how long he had with him, but Brian didn’t want to waste a minute of it. “I don’t even know what love is.”

“Yes you do,” Justin countered. “You love Michael and Lindsay.” Justin ignored the snort from the other man. “And you love Gus. I’ve seen that.” Brian stayed quiet. “And you loved me.”

“Justin..” Justin stopped Brian before he could say anything more.

“Brian, you might not be able to say it, or hell even admit it, but you did love me. You told me with every touch. With every gesture. It was all there for me but I just didn’t see it.”

“If you believed that, why did you leave? Why did you think that I didn’t care?” Justin couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He had never heard such a desolate tone in the older man’s voice.

“The only thing I can say is that I forgot how to read you,” Justin said, not sure how to word what he was feeling the past few months. “I didn’t remember that, when it came to you, you’re actions sometimes spoke louder than your words.”

“My actions weren’t exactly encouraging,” Brian reminded him.

“Well, it’s not like mine were any better,” Justin replied. “We just stopped reading each other.”

“And now?”

Justin entered the diner, his attention quickly going to the group of friends that were gathered at one of the booths. They were all laughing about something, causing him to bristle at the easy way they seemed to be, not even caring about the fact that one of their own was being punished for something that wasn’t even his fault. He marched over there, intent on giving them all a piece of his mind, starting with a certain store owner.

“You two faced son of a bitch,” Justin swore as soon as he got close enough to Michael, not even caring if he caused a scene or not.

“Sunshine?” Debbie said, wondering what had caused the teen to swear at her son. She knew that things between the two men weren’t good but she had never seen Justin as angry as he appeared to be now.

“How could you?” Justin continued, ignoring Debbie. “He’s your best friend. How could you say that to him?”

“Brian,” Ted and Emmett whispered to each other, not surprised to see that somehow the ad exec was still causing trouble, even when not present.

“Justin honey, I don’t know what’s going on,” Debbie tried to placate the blonde, to no avail. He just pulled away from her.

“Of course you don’t know what’s going on,” he went on. “None of you do. Because none of you bothered to find out the truth. All of you were too content to go on believing that Brian was some big bad evil and that little Mikey here was just some innocent caught in the crossfire.”

“If this is about what happened at the party, hun, we all saw Brian hit Michael,” Emmett said, not sure what was going on but wanting to calm the teen down.

“How can you even defend that asshole now,” Melanie demanded, causing Justin to turn his attention towards her, giving his anger another outlet. “He finally showed his true colors for everyone to see.”

“Christ are all of you people blind as well as stupid.” Everyone’s attention in the diner was focused on the drama that was taking place. Many of them had been a witness to the break up of Liberty Avenue’s favorite couple, especially considering the fact that Justin had left in the arms of another man, and were curious to see him defending his former lover. Especially against the tight knit group of friends that considered themselves family.

“Don’t you dare take that tone with me, young man,” Debbie ordered, anger entering her voice. “Now I don’t know what you think happened. Heaven knows what shit Brian has fed you, but that’s no excuse to come in here the way you did.”

“Justin, hun, why don’t you sit down and tell us what has you so upset,” Lindsay offered. “Why do you think we’re being so unfair to Brian?”

“Don’t patronize me, Lindsay,” Justin said. “You’re just as bad as the rest of them, if not worse. You know how much Brian loves Gus and now you won’t even let him see his own son.”

“After what he did?” Melanie countered, defending her and Lindsay’s actions. “He hit Michael, with no provocation, and we’re supposed to just sit there and let him spend time alone with Gus. If he can do that to his best friend, for no reason, what’s to stop him from doing that to Gus?”

“Especially considering his history with his own family,” Lindsay concluded.

“All the more reason for you to trust Brian with Gus,” Justin replied. “Brian knows what its like to be raised in an abusive household and there’s no way that he would want that for Gus. But you two don’t care about that. None of you care. If you did you would have asked Brian his side of the story.”

“Oh like you did,” Ben finally spoke up. “Justin, I’m sorry if the way we are treating Brian bothers you, but you have to understand. There is no way any of us can condone his actions against Michael.”

“It was just one fuck up too many,” Ted finished. “And considering how many chances we’ve given Brian, I’d say it’s about time that he is finally called on his shit.”

“Amen, hun,” Emmett joined in.

“What about Michael’s fuck ups or is he too good to actually make any?”

“Fine, Sunshine,” Debbie broke in. “What is it that Michael supposedly did that warranted getting sucker punched?”

“He told Brian that I was an ungrateful shit and that he should have just left me lying on the ground.” A gasp was heard from the entire diner, many recalling the incident that had left Justin in the hospital for two months.

“No, no way,” Debbie denied, unable to believe her son was capable of something like that. Everyone turned to face Michael, who had remained silent through out the entire argument.

“Michael?” Ben called his lover, who had a guilty expression on his face.

“Is this true hun,” Emmett asked his roommate. Michael continued to remain silent.

“Who told you what happened?” Lindsay asked Justin, still not able to believe that Michael would do what he was being accused of. “Did Brian tell you what was supposedly said?”

“A friend of mine was there and he overheard the whole thing,” Justin explained, suddenly tired of dealing with everyone. “Brian just confirmed it for me.”

“Christ,” Debbie swore, sitting down.

“I didn’t mean it,” Michael finally spoke up, although his voice was barely above a whisper. “I was angry that you brought your little violinist to the party. And then Brian was defending you, like you hadn’t walked out on him in the first place. It made me sick but that doesn’t mean I mean to say what I did. I know I was wrong.”

“Then why didn’t you tell anyone the real reason Brian hit you?”

“I couldn’t,” Michael cried out. “I knew they would blame me, and they would have been right. But this is Brian we’re talking about. I figured he would be able to handle whatever anyone said to him. He always had before.”

“So that excuses what you said?”

“I didn’t mean to say it. It just came out.”

“Something like that doesn’t just come out,” Justin spat. “You never made a secret of how you felt about me and my relationship with Brian. You’ve always resented me. And the rest of you. You’re all just as bad as Michael. So willing to blame Brian on everything that’s gone wrong in your lives, even when it’s had nothing to do with him and yet whose the first person that all of you run to when you have a problem? The fact that you were so willing to believe the worst of Brian, that you actually thought that he just hit someone for no reason at all, makes me sick. No matter how angry Brian is, I’ve always seen him hold back on hitting someone else, and that’s including my father who attacked him. Twice.”

“What do you want from us, Justin?” Melanie asked, now wanting to admit that she, as well as the others, had done exactly what Justin was accusing them of. He looked at them, a sadness coming over him as he realized that no matter what he said, no matter how much they tried, they wouldn’t change. That they would always see Brian as being the reason anything bad that happens to them and he shook his head.

“Nothing. There’s nothing I expect you to do.”

“Justin, you ready?” A voice called to him from the door way of the diner. All heads turned to face the new arrival, knowing instantly who it was. The blonde walked over to him, giving him a kiss and surprising everyone there. Brian wrapped his arms around the younger man. “Did you get your check?”

“I’ll get them to mail it when we get to Metropolis,” Justin said.

“You’re leaving?” Debbie asked, having overheard Justin’s comment. Justin and Brian looked at each other and then turned back to the group.

“Why not? There’s nothing left for us here.” And with that, the couple walked out of the diner, without looking back, leaving behind a stunned group of friend who were left to try and pick up the pieces of their lives.

**Love Lost**

Crossover with Smallville...be warned...**more Smallville than QaF**. Lex leaves Smallville after Clark breaks his heart

"So, did anything interesting happen at school today?? Lex casually asked Clark as he led him into the study. Well, as casually as you could ask someone whose ass you were currently massaging though the blue jeans his lover was wearing.

?Not really,? Clark answered. ?Just the usual kind of thing.? There was a pause that Lex knew instantly meant that something had to have actually happened. In the six months that he and Clark had known each other, and especially the two that he and Clark had been lovers, the multi-billionaire had learned how to read his lover.

?What happened??

?Hmmm,? Clark murmured, turning to kiss Lex. ?Nothing really.? At Lex?s continued look, he sighed. ?Well, turns out that Whitney and Lana broke up.?

?Again??

?Actually I think this time it?s for good,? Clark replied. ?According to Lana, they both decided that they were getting entirely too serious and that they didn?t really have a future together. And she said they both were ready to move on.?

?Really?? Clark shook his head.

?Yeah. Turns out that Whitney?s already asked Michelle Peterson out.?

?And Lana?? Lex watched, uneasily as Clark began to squirm in front of him. ?Clark??

?Well?..umm?she kind of asked me out.?

?On a date?? Another nod. ?And what did you tell her??

?I said yes.? Clark could see Lex shut down in front on him. It was something that he hadn?t seen in a long time. Even before they had become lovers, Lex had stopped putting up his masks, and now it appeared that Clark had managed to bring them back.

?I see.? Lex turned away from Clark, refusing to give into the emotions that were threatening to erupt from him. ?So you?re finally going to get that date with your dream girl. I?m happy for you. You?ve been in love with Lana for a long time. It?s about time that she started showing some sign of feelings back for you.?

?Lex, I had to say yes,? the teen protested.

?Don?t Clark,? Lex ordered, stopping Clark?s apology instantly. ?You don?t have to explain why you said yes to Lana. Least of all to me. I know how you feel about her.? Lex looked up at Clark and the teen winced when he saw the sadness that met his eyes before the mask was back in place.

?Lex, just because I?m going out with Lana, it doesn?t have to mean that we can?t still be together. It doesn?t have to be the end of us too, does it?? Clark was nearly begging, knowing that he was hurting his lover but not sure of what he could do to make it better. When Lana had asked him out, Clark couldn?t believe it. He knew it should have made him the happiest person in Smallville, but he wasn?t. Sure, he had said yes automatically, but he knew in his heart it wasn?t what he truly wanted. He had that already in his relationship with Lex. A relationship that no one other than Chloe and Pete knew about. Clark had been trying to figure out a way to get out of his date with Lana but then his parents had found out about it. They had both been so happy for him, telling him how they were so pleased that his life was finally heading in the right direction and he hadn?t the heart to tell them that he didn?t feel the same way as he once had. That he didn?t want a relationship with the girl of his dreams.

?Once I would have said it didn?t matter,? Lex broke into Clark?s memories. ?But that was before you became such an important part of my life. Before I found myself wanting more than just to piss my father off. You made me want to be someone different. Someone better. And I don?t think I?ll be able to go back to who I once was. I can?t share you Clark. I won?t.?

?So that?s it we?re over.? Tears sprang from blue eyes and Lex had to physically stop himself from going over and trying to comfort his lover. ?Correction, ex-lover.?

?Isn?t that what you want? Isn?t that why you said yes to Lana??

?God, no, Lex,? Clark stated. ?Lex, you?re everything to me. You know that. It?s just that my parents?.everyone?they all expect me to be something and I?ve disappointed them so many times I didn?t want to do that this time. I want them to be proud of me for once.?

?And for them to be proud of you, that means that you need the perfect little girlfriend,? Lex said bitterly, ?not some bald headed freak with a bastard for a father as a lover?

?You know how my father feels about you, Lex.? The older boy nodded his head.

?He?s made his feelings about me common knowledge. I don?t think there?s one person in this town who doesn?t know that Jonathon Kent despises me and hates the fact that his son is friends with me. I?m sure he?s deliriously happy about you and Lana getting together.? Clark shuffled his feet letting Lex know that he was right. ?So, where are you and the cheerleader going for your date??

?Ummmm, we haven?t really talked about it, although she has dropped a few hints.? Lex watched as Clark looked anywhere but at him. A feeling of dread crept into him and he wondered at what point he had become so human. So un-Luthorlike.

?And what does Miss Lang want to do??

?Well?she kind of hinted that she wanted to go to Metropolis and that maybe?wecouldborrowyourlimoagainforourdate.? Lex nodded his head, his mind processing what Clark had just said.

?So basically, you?re asking me, your soon to be ex-lover, if you can borrow my limousine to take your, soon to be girlfriend, on a date?? Clark merely looked on at Lex, sadness in his eyes. The younger man hated the way Lex was making it sound as if Clark was enjoying himself, having to leave him in favor of Lana, but he had no choice. At least, none that he could see. ?And can you tell me exactly when my life became a WB teen drama??

?Lex?.?

?And when exactly will your dream date be taking place??

?This Friday.? Lex?s head snapped up so quickly that Clark thought the other man would get whip lash.

?Friday??

?Yeah.?

?Oh this just keeps getting better and better, doesn?t it??

?Lex, please.?

?We had plans for Friday, remember Clark. I thought that day meant something to you. It does for me.?

?I?m sorry, Lex. Really I am, but its Lana and my parents.?

?What time did you need the car?? And just like that, Clark saw Lex completely shut done. No mask this time. No emotions. Nothing. It was like Lex had been replaced by someone else. Someone that would refuse any overtures from Clark to continue their relationship. That is, if that was even possible now and Clark wasn?t sure if he wasn?t about to make the biggest mistake of his life.

?Five or so,? he answered. Lex nodded his head.

?Fine. I?ll make sure that Paul picks you up at that time.? Lex turned away from Clark and the younger boy got the feeling that he was being dismissed.

?I thought I could meet him here.?

?I don?t think that would be a good idea, Clark.?

?Why?? Lex let out a bark of laughter.

?Because I don?t think I could handle seeing you and knowing that, instead of coming to spend that night with me, you were going to Metropolis with you dream girl.?

?I really am sorry, Lex.?

?So am I, Clark.? Silence descended upon the two lovers. A thick silence that threatened to strangle them in its hold. Finally, when he couldn?t take it any longer, Clark left, feeling as if he had left a big piece of his heart behind with the quiet man standing by the window but knowing that he could do nothing about it without hurting the other people he loved.

Lex didn?t turn from his place in the window until he heard Clark leave. He didn?t think he could. Lex had a precarious hold over his emotions and it had taken every ounce of strength he had to not plead with Clark to not leave him, knowing that if he truly tried hard enough, he would probably win. But that?s not what he wanted. He wanted Clark to chose him because he loved him, not because Lex guilted him into it. Lex turned and went over to his desk, opening the top draw and pulling out a small jeweler?s box. He opened the velvet box, revealing a small gold ring on a thick chain. It was the gift he was going to give to Clark on their Friday night date. A date that was never going to happen.

?I love you, Clark Kent. Happy Anniversary.? Lex promptly drop the box and made his way over to his liquor cabinet, wondering just how much alcohol it would take to make him forget that he even existed.

?Two months,? thought Lex. ?Two months since Clark told me that he was going out with Lana Lang, in effect breaking up with me. Two months in which I had hoped and waited for him to come to his senses and realize that we were meant to be together. Two months for Clark to remember what it had been like to be in love with me. Two months for me to find out that I?m not worth the effort to be remembered.?

There were times that Lex Luthor wished he didn?t have such a good memory. If he didn?t, maybe he would be able to forget how much his life had changed before he had come to Smallville. He would be able to forget the car crash that had led to that first meeting with Clark, when the boy had saved his life, in more than one way. He would be able to forget risking his life, just so that Clark could live, something that he would never had done for anyone before. He could forget how much he had wanted to earn the respect of people that he would have once considered beneath him. He could forget about Bug Boys and kids who sucked up body warmth and all of the other weird shit that had happened in the small town. He could forget about his partnership with Lana Lang over the Talon theatre. About the first time he and Clark had kissed after the party for the reopening of said theatre. And, most importantly, Lex could forget how, two months before hand, Clark Kent had decided that he didn?t want him anymore. If Lex could forget all of those things, than maybe he would have been able to go back to his old way of life and lose himself in the sex, drugs and booze that had been so much a part of his past. But he couldn?t do any of those things, so instead he sat in his castle, remembering what it had been like to be loved by Clark Kent.

Lex couldn?t believe how much one Farmboy could change his life. Before he had met Clark, Lex couldn?t believe that there were actually people out there that could care about him without wanting something in return. Power. Money. Greed. Those were all things he could understand and he thrived in that knowledge. Lex knew that he could get anyone to do anything that he wanted with the right inventive and Lex had been well on his way to becoming just like his father, even though it was something that he would vehemently deny if asked. Clark Kent had changed all that. Clark offered Lex something that he had never had before. Friendship for the sake of friendship. Lex hadn?t known what to make of the small town boy that had decided that his friendship was something that was worth fighting for. That Lex was something worth fighting for and Lex knew that Clark did have to fight. Hell, between their fathers alone, the hostility was enough to start a small war. Lex didn?t know what had happened between Lionel Luthor and Jonathon Kent for the two men to hate each other the way they did, and he was beyond really caring, except for the fact that it was one of the reasons that Clark was now keeping his distance from Lex. Instead of seeing each other daily, which had been habit from even before they had become a couple, Lex was lucky to see Clark once a week, when the younger man delivered his weekly produce order, staying with Lex for a few extra hours, talking about everything and nothing at all. It had become the only bright spot in the months that had seen Clark become even more heavily involved with Lana Lang and slowly pushed Lex Luthor out of his life.

Lex smiled wearily and shook his head. Who would believe that he, of all people, would be upset over the fact that a sixteen, soon to be seventeen, year old boy would have such an impact on his life? But Clark had given him something that Lex had never had before. Friendship. And not just his. Clark had brought Lex into his inner circle of friends, the two of them often hanging out with Chloe and Pete, the only other people to know about the couple. Sure, Lex and Pete had some problems in the beginning, once again thanks to Daddy Lionel?s questionable business practices, but they had overcome it as they got to know each other. The two teens accepted Lex as a new member of their group, including him on outings and allowing Lex to finally have some semblance of a normal life.

Lex snorted. ?Luthors don?t do normal, Lex,? he could almost hear his father say. ?We aren?t like other people.? ?No dad, we aren?t, but for once I would like to be happy life other people.? But happiness came with a price. A price that would be paid today. Today was delivery day and Lex made his way to the kitchen, knowing that Clark should have just arrived with his order. He couldn?t wait to see Clark. Lex had made some excellent breakthroughs in discovering why the meteor rocks affected Clark the way they did and he wanted to share it with the boy, but when he entered the kitchen, his face paled. Standing there, talking with Kathryn, his housekeeper and would be mother, was Martha Kent.

?Mrs. Kent, this is a surprise,? Lex said, greeting the woman who was one of the reasons he no longer had his lover. ?I wasn?t expecting to see you. I hope Clark is all right.?

?He?s fine,? the farmer?s wife replied, looking over at Lex with, what he could only describe as pity. Pity for who though, he couldn?t tell.

?If everything?s fine, than why are you making his deliveries?? Martha suddenly looked uncomfortable, glancing between Kathryn and Lex. Lex knew that the two women had become friends somehow, and was glad that his housekeeper had someone she could talk to. Lex had known her his entire life, she had worked for his mother when she had been alive and so had taken over for her when she had died. She had been the only caring influence he had growing up.

?Well, it seems that the Talon is doing really well now,? Lex nodded his head, already knowing this. It was one of the only reasons his father had shut up about the deal. ?And so he asked if it would be all right if he helped Lana on Wednesdays during the matinees. His father didn?t see any harm in it since they?re going out so he said yes.?

?So you?ll be taking over Clark?s deliveries?? Lex hoped that the disappointment and hurt he felt at the news didn?t come through. He knew the masks that he used to wear around people in regards to his emotions weren?t nearly as strong as they had once been. Martha nodded her head. ?Well, at least that means Clark and Lana will be able to spend more time together.? Lex turned and made to leave the kitchen.

?Lex,? Martha called after the retreating man, who stopped but didn?t turn around. ?For what it?s worth. I?m sorry.?

?For what??

?For my son hurting you.? And that?s when Lex realized that Martha Kent knew and the pity that had been in her eyes had been for him.

?I?m used to people judging me and finding me lacking. It?s something that I?ve learned to expect now.? Then, before she could say anything else, Lex left, leaving behind two very worried women.

?Lex,? Kathryn called, slowly opening the door that lead to Lex?s bedroom. When she saw what her charge was in the middle of doing, she wished nothing more than to be able to take him in her arms and hold him, much like she did when he was still a small boy. ?What are you doing??

?What does it look like?? He replied wearily, continuing with his chores. Kathryn looked over the suitcase that was opened on the bed, and at the other two that had apparently already been filled and stood next to the doorway.

?It looks like you?re running away.?

?Astute as always, Kath.? Lex continued packing until the third suitcase was full. He then picked up a smaller bag and made his way into the bathroom, Kathryn following close behind.

?Planning on picking up where you left off in Metropolis,? Kathryn couldn?t keep the scorn she felt at the thought of Lex losing himself in the hedonistic atmosphere that had once been his life. ?Drinking yourself stupid, screwing anything and everything that walks by and generally doing everything possible to piss your father off?? Lex stopped his packing and looked down at something only he could see. His hands fiddled with the handles of the bag as he considered Kathryn?s question before he shook his head.

?Actually, no, that?s not what I had in mind,? he finally said. ?The Lex that would be more than willing to do that no longer exists. That?s not who I am now.?

?Then what are you going to do?? Kathryn couldn?t help herself, she went over and took the young man in her arms. The pain that she could hear in his voice, and see in his eyes broke her heart and she cursed the Farmboy that held such power over Lex. She couldn?t understand how Clark could have been willing to throw aside his relationship with Lex over in favor of the Lang girl. She had thought the two men were perfect together. Lex made Clark feel like a real person, someone grown up, while Clark made Lex human. When Lex had told her that Clark was with Lana, it had taken everything she had to not go after him and make him pay for hurting her boy, but she knew that it wasn?t what Lex would want. So instead, she played the waiting game, wondering what would happen first. Whether Lex would recover and revert to his old ways, becoming more and more like his father, or would he self destruct first. Then, when Martha had shown up that afternoon, delivering the final blow, Kathryn knew that the time had come. That Lex would be forced to do something about the failed relationship and it looked like she was right.

?Away,? he answered, pulling away from her gentle embrace. ?I?m not sure where. Certainly not Metropolis. Probably not even Kansas.?

?Maybe you could go to Gotham. I know Bruce would be more than willing to let you stay with him.? Lex shook his head.

?No, it would be too easy for my father to find me and that?s not what I want.?

?What do you want??

?To forget.? Lex put up his hand, forestalling any comment that Kathryn was going to give him. ?But, since I know that?s not possible, I?m going to try and find out who I am. Who I could be without being a Luthor.?

?You?re going to disappear completely, aren?t you?? She knew it was possible. Lex had enough contacts, contacts that hated his father and would be more than willing to help him do whatever would be necessary to make himself a new life.

?It?s the only way.?

?You could always stay here.? Even as she said it, she knew it wasn?t even a remote possibility. There was too much hurt in Smallville for Lex to remain.

?No I can?t and you know it. Everywhere I go, even in the Castle, I?ll only be reminded of him. And whenever I go anywhere other than the plant, I?ll always run the risk of seeing the two of them together. Maybe, eventually I?ll be able to deal with that. Just not right now.? Lex finished packing up his toiletries and went back into the bedroom. He picked up two of the suitcases while Kathryn grabbed the third and the two made their way down to the garage.

Kathryn wasn?t surprised to see Lex head over to the truck that had sat in a forgotten corner of the garage. It had been intended to be a gift for Clark for saving his life, except the elder Kent had refused to allow his son to keep it. Lex had refused to return it, hoping that one day; Clark would be able to drive it. Now, instead, Lex was going to use it to make his getaway. They put the suitcases into the bed of the truck and Kathryn once again took him into her arms.

?Promise me that?ll you?ll be careful.? She didn?t even bother to try and hide the tears that fell down her cheeks. Losing Lex felt like she was losing her own son.

?I promise,? he swore. ?And don?t worry about my father or your future. I?ve taken care of everything. I?ve already contacted my attorney so you should be hearing from him within a day or two.?

?You?ve had this planned out, haven?t you??

?I knew that this was a possibility,? he admitted, getting into the truck. ?I just had hoped that he would come back to me. That he would think I was worth loving.?

?You are worth loving, Lex.? He shook his head, negating her comment. ?Just because Clark couldn?t love you, doesn?t meant that there isn?t someone else out there for you. You will find someone.?

?Thank you for saying that, but you and I both know that?s not true,? he replied, his voice accepting of his fate. ?Luthors weren?t meant to love and, even if I?m leaving behind everything else, that is one thing that will follow me.? When he saw the worry on the older woman?s face, he rested a hand on her cheek. ?Don?t worry about me, Kathryn. I?m resigned to my fate. I just can?t do that here and be reminded of it all the time. Take care.? Lex started up the truck and Kathryn watched as he back up out of the garage, pulling away from the castle that had become his home over the past year and she said a small prayer that somehow, somewhere, Lex Luthor would find the love that he so deserved.

Chloe had just left the Beanery, tired of the constant Lana and Clark love fest that she had been treated to for the past two months. Sure, Lana was an okay kind of girl, she guessed, but she really didn?t know what Clark saw in the other girl. She couldn?t figure out what made Clark leave Lex in favor of the selfish, whiny little girl that had been his childhood crush. Hell, when pressed, even Pete admitted that it didn?t make any sense to him. Both of them could have sworn that what Lex and Clark had had been the real thing. That they had what it took to make it work. That?s why, when Clark had told her that he had a date with Lana Lang to go to Metropolis, in Lex?s limo no less, she didn?t know what to say. She did ask him about his relationship with Lex and got the standard line that they were just meant to be friends and that was it. Except Chloe didn?t think that was it. At least, not to Lex.

She had seen the older man on the few occasions that he had come into town and knew that he was not taking the break up nearly as well as Clark. She couldn?t believe that Clark couldn?t see how much he was hurting Lex by practically throwing his relationship with Lana in the older man?s face. Hell, like it wasn?t bad enough that Lex had to deal with her in regards to their partnership over the Talon, but everywhere that Lex went, he was confronted by the sight of Lana and Clark, together. Chloe had been tempted to try and draw Lex out but didn?t think it would be overly appreciated After all, she was Clark?s friend first and she was sure that it would only be another reminder of what Lex had lost because, while Clark had Lana and Chloe and Pete and everyone else to back him up, Lex had no one.

Chloe was brought of her thoughts by the squeal of tires to her side. She blinked her eyes, not even noticing that she had begun crossing the street and had almost been hit by a car. She turned to see the driver and was surprised to find that Lex had been behind the wheel, in a truck she was sure she had never seen him drive. It was so different than anything else he owned.

?You should really keep an eye out for where you?re walking,? Lex said, smiling as he leaned out the window of the truck. ?You never know who may run into you.?

?Maybe I?ll meet a gorgeous stranger who will sweep me off my feet,? she bantered back.

?Sorry that didn?t happen this time.? Chloe walked over to the cab of the truck, noticing the luggage that sat in the back.

?You?re leaving.? Lex nodded his head, even though he knew it wasn?t exactly a question.

?It?s time, don?t you think??

?You don?t have to go, you know?? Chloe didn?t know why, but she knew that Lex leaving town wasn?t the best thing for anyone, certainly not for him. ?He?ll get over this little infatuation with her and come back. He loves you.? The billionaire shook his head.

?He might have once, but not now. He doesn?t want anything to do with me anymore. Hell,? he snorted, ?the only thing I had left to hold onto was our delivery dates and he?s even blown them off in favor of Lana. He couldn?t even tell me himself. Instead I had to find out from his mother.? Chloe was shocked. Clark hadn?t told her that he wasn?t delivering the produce anymore. He had always told her how much he had enjoyed spending his Wednesday afternoons with Lex. Hearing that he wasn?t doing that anymore and that he didn?t even tell Lex about it caused her to become angry on the other man?s behalf.

?I?m sorry, Lex.?

?You don?t have anything to be sorry about,? he told her. ?It was my own fault anyway.?

?How do you figure that??

?I was the one who was stupid enough to believe I was worthy of having someone love me. I forgot that Luthors don?t do love.? Chloe couldn?t believe she was hearing these words come out of Lex Luthor?s mouth. If someone had told her a year ago that the arrogant son of one of the country?s richest men?s would be running out of town because Clark Kent didn?t love him, she would have called Arkham herself.

?Yes you do, Lex, even if Clark is too stupid to realize it.? Silence loomed between the two people, becoming uncomfortable. Finally Lex fidgeted and Chloe could tell that he wanted to go. She saw that he was facing away from her and followed his line of sight and her heart broke again as she realized that he was watching Lana and Clark kissing.

?Where will you go??

?I don?t know. Somewhere where Lex Luthor isn?t known. Someplace where I can get a fresh start.?

?What will you do for money?? Lex snorted.

?Just because I don?t want anything to do with Daddy, it doesn?t mean that I don?t have money of my own and ways to make sure I can get to it without being tracked. I?ll be fine.?

?I?m not so sure of that,? she countered, but Lex didn?t argue with her. Chloe grabbed a piece of paper out of her notebook and quickly wrote something on it. ?Here, take this.? Lex looked down at the paper and then back up at Chloe, questioningly. ?It?s my email address. In case you ever want to talk to someone who knows who Lex Luthor is. Or just to let me know that you?re okay.?

?Chloe??

?I won?t tell Clark. I promise.? Lex nodded his head and moved to put the truck back in Drive. ?Be careful, Lex.?

?You too, Chloe. You?ll make a hell of a reporter one day.? And with that, Lex Luthor left Smallville, Chloe watching him go and wondering if she would ever see the young man that she had come to care for again.

The following Monday found Chloe and Pete sitting together in the Beanery, working on their homework, when Clark Kent came running in, stopping next to them. The two teens looked up and noticed that he had a look of stunned disbelief on his face and they wondered what had happened.

?What?s wrong, Kent?? Pete asked, indicating for Clark to join them.

?Lex is gone,? Clark said, sitting down and joining his friends. ?Apparently Lionel Luthor called Nell asking her if she had seen Lex because no one has seen him since last Wednesday after he left the plant. Then when I went by the castle, Kathryn said that Lex left and wasn?t expected to return.? Clark conveniently left out the part where she then slammed the door in his face so hard he expected the walls were still shaking.

?Didn?t your mother see him when she made your deliveries,? Chloe asked, surprised at the anger that was in her voice. She couldn?t believe that it had taken Clark five days to notice the Lex was gone and even then it was because someone else had mentioned it to him. She remembered a time when Clark would have known something had happened to Lex within minutes of it occurring.

?She didn?t say,? Clark told them before looking up at Chloe. ?Wait a minute. How did you know my mom did the deliveries last week?? Chloe looked between Pete and Clark, not sure what she should say but then her anger on Lex?s behalf got the better of her.

?Lex told me.?

?When did you see Lex??

?Was he okay?? Clark and Pete asked at the same time.

?I saw him Wednesday,? the reporter admitted. ?After I left the Beanery. He was on his way out of town.?

?What do you mean, on his way out of town? Where was he going?? Clark noticed people beginning to look over at their table and forced himself to calm down. ?Why didn?t you tell me he was going out of town? Did Lex say how long he would be gone??

?Well, Lex didn?t say where he was going,? Chloe told the two boys. ?All he said was that he was going to go someplace where no one knew who Lex Luthor was. And from the way he was talking he wasn?t planning on coming back anytime soon, if ever. And the reason I didn?t tell you about it was because I had promised Lex I wouldn?t and I didn?t really think you would have cared.? Chloe watched as the information she was giving to Clark sank into her friend.

?But why did he leave? I don?t understand.? Clark didn?t even have the energy to argue with Chloe over the last part of her statement. He was more concerned with Lex?s departure than anything else.

?Why would he stay, Clark?? Chloe said her anger and disbelief over Clark?s naivet? apparent in her voice even though she was keeping her tone low. ?You made it apparent that you wanted nothing to do with him, which meant that the only ally he had in this town basically turned his back on him. Not to mention the fact that everywhere he went, there was some reminder of the two of you together or he was faced with you and Lana as a couple. Hell I?m surprised that he stayed around this long. I would have been long gone if I were Lex.?

?But he said that he would be happy if we at least stayed friends,? Clark tried to deny the truth of Chloe?s words. He knew that his younger friend was right, but Clark didn?t want to think that he had been the reason for Lex?s disappearance.

?And I?m sure he would have been, if you were still offering your friendship.? When Clark went to argue, Chloe continued. ?Clark, all of your time is spent with Lana. She never lets you leave her side. I?m surprised she isn?t here right now with you.?

?She?s supposed to be meeting me here,? he said sheepishly.

?Why does that not shock me?? Chloe asked sarcastically. ?The point is, you never went to see Lex anymore and on those occasions that he came here or the Talon to see you, you avoided him or completely ignored him. Then, and here?s the kicker, the only day the two of you would talk, your delivery dates, you decide that your help is needed more at the Talon, so once again, Lex is on the outside looking in. And you?re surprised that he left.?

?I didn?t mean to hurt him.?

?I know you didn?t Clark, but you did.? Chloe stood up, Pete going with her.

?What am I supposed to do?? Clark asked the two people. ?I need to find him. To talk to him.?

?Clark, you just don?t get it, do you?? Chloe questioned, turning once more to the heartbroken boy. ?You?ve already destroyed him once. What will you going to look for him do? Unless you finally come to your senses and break up with Lana.? When Clark didn?t answer, Chloe nodded her head sadly. ?That?s what I thought. Clark, you know I care for you. You and I have been best friends for years. And I know you care about Lex. You might even still love him, but I?m going to ask you to do something for me. For him.?

?What??

?Leave him be.? At Clark?s questioning glance, Chloe explained. ?Don?t look for Lex, Clark. Let him go. Let Lex have a chance to find happiness the same way that you have. He deserves it. In fact, I?m willing to believe that he deserves it more than anyone else because, until you, he never even knew what it felt like. Let Lex go and find someone who is willing to give him the kind of love that you couldn?t give to him. That you wouldn?t give him.?

?Lana,? Pete whispered to his girlfriend as the other girl came over to him.

?Hey guys, what?s up?? The perky teen said, not noticing the tension between the three friends.

?Nothing. We were just leaving. Come on, Pete.? Chloe said, dragging Pete away before Lana or Clark could say anything. The brunette watched them go before turning to her boyfriend.

?Was it something I said??

Three Months Later

Pittsburgh, PA

?Hurry up, Alex,? the red-wigged waitress shouted to the other server. ?You?ve got hungry customers out here.?

?Coming, Debbie,? Alex said, coming from the kitchen, carrying a heavy tray. As usual, the handsome boy drew more than his fair share of stares from the patrons. Even with his bald head, there was something about Alex that made other men want him and yet not one of them had been successful in getting so much as one date out of the boy. In the three months that Alex Kent had been in Pittsburgh and working at the Liberty Diner, he had yet to hook up with anyone. Alex walked over to one of the tables, serving out the dishes that held eggs, pancakes and various other breakfast foods. ?Here you go guys. Enjoy.?

?Hey, Alex, you?re coming over tonight, aren?t you?? Justin Taylor asked.

?Yeah, you know how my mom has been dying to get your over to her house and feed you,? Michael Novatny added. ?Besides, my Uncle Vic is dying to meet you.?

?I don?t think so,? Alex begged off. ?I was planning on making it an early night.?

?Like that?s a surprise,? Brian Kinney muttered.

?Brian,? Justin warned his lover.

?Oh please,? Brian said. ?How many times do we have to try and include Lex into our plans and be told he wasn?t interested??

?Alex,? the waiter said, causing everyone to look at him. ?You called me Lex. I don?t go by that name. If you are going to talk about me, call me Alex.? Alex finished serving the food to the remaining occupants of the booth before heading over to another table.

?What was that all about?? Ted Schmidt asked after Alex had left. ?I think that?s the first time he had ever asserted himself since we?ve known him.?

?Yeah but over his name?? Emmett Honeycutt replied. ?Anyway, what?s so wrong with calling him Lex??

?Who knows, who cares,? Brian shrugged, although the others could see that there was something going on in Brian?s head. ?He?s just some fucked up little twink who would rather stay home at jerk off than go out and fuck some hot little ass.?

?I don?t know,? Justin argued.

?What, are you interested in getting him to come out and play,? Brian teased his lover. ?Don?t tell me the honeymoon?s over already.? Justin leaned over and gave Brian a deep kiss, making sure that the older man knew exactly where his heart was. When they pulled apart both were breathing deeply.

?It?s not that,? he told him. ?It?s just that I get the feeling that he?s been hurt. Big time. I recognize the signs. He?s how I was when you and I had fought after the loft had gotten robbed.? This shut Brian up fast. He hated being reminded of how much of a prick he had been after his home had been robbed, going so far as to kick Justin out. When he had heard that Justin had run away to New York, Brian couldn?t remember being as scared for someone else has he had been at that point, even if he refused to admit it to the others. Luckily for him, the two men had worked out their differences, which had lead to them surprising their friends by actually becoming completely monogamous, something that no one ever expected of Brian.

?But you and Alex are nothing alike, Justin,? Emmett countered. ?I don?t remember you ever being the quiet, shy type.?

?But that?s just it. I don?t think Alex?s like that either,? Justin explained. ?I think that maybe whatever happened before he came here really hurt him and he doesn?t know how to deal with it.?

?Let me guess, you?ve decided to make him your new project,? Brian said, not even questioning his lover on it. Brian had long ago given up any hope of changing Justin?s mind about certain things.

?Did you guys want anything else,? Alex asked, coming over to the table again and stopping the conversation. The five men at the booth looked at each other not sure how much the server had heard.

?Alex, won?t you come over tonight. We would really like you to join us,? Justin once again asked. Alex looked around the table, seeing the earnestness of the group.

?I?ll think about it, okay??

?That?s all we ask,? Michael said. ?But Mom really would like you to come over.?

?I said I?ll think about it,? Alex repeated, a bit of his old personality showing itself.

?Come on, Alex. Food?s up.? Alex looked over at the table once more before heading back to the kitchen.

?You know, I?m beginning to wonder if we?ll ever find out what makes that boy tick,? Emmett commented after Alex left. ?I certainly wouldn?t mind helping him get over whatever has him so shy.?

?Somehow I don?t think you?re his type,? Brian joked, indicating for Justin to move so he could get out. After Brian stood up, he gave Justin a quick kiss. ?See you at home. And I?ll see the rest of you at Deb?s for dinner.?

?I?m telling you guys, Jamaica was fantastic,? Michael finished saying, listening as his friends and family continued laughing around him. He and his lover Ben had been telling everyone about the trip the two had taken to the island the previous week. Everyone as sitting around Deb?s living room, enjoying some pasta and wine and sharing a lot of laughs.

?I?m just glad that we don?t have to sit through another slide show like we did the last time you went out of the country Mikey,? Brian teased his friend, reminding all of them about the horrible evening they had spent listening to Michael and his ex David talk about their trip to Paris.

Alex watched the people around him, knowing that they wanted for him to feel comfortable, and yet he still felt on the fringes of the group. They all had such a history between them. They?ve known each other long enough that they didn?t have to play games. Didn?t have to hide who they really were. Alex couldn?t remember the last time he had felt that comfortable with someone. No, if he was honest with himself, he could remember exactly the last time he had felt that comfortable with someone. It was right before Clark Kent had destroyed his heart. Now Lex was trying to put himself back together, but he wasn?t succeeding He knew Debbie meant well but Alex couldn?t find himself letting go. The men and women that made up Debbie?s extended family were such a tight knit bunch and Alex didn?t think he could handle being the outside again because he knew it would only be a matter of time before they would decide that he wasn?t worth the trouble of trying to draw him out and tell him to leave. He didn?t think he would be able to survive the pain of caring for someone again only to have them leave him.

Alex continued to watch the people surrounding him, smiling in all the right places. The lessons he had been taught at such a young age by his father coming in handy once more. It was one of the few things he was grateful to the old man for. While Lionel Luthor might not have been the most loving of parents, he had at least taught his son how to behave even in the most uncomfortable of settings. Alex took another mouthful of the pasta he was eating, barely tasting the ziti. After another round of stories and laughter, he couldn?t take it anymore. Alex stood and quietly made his way out of the room, leaving the sounds of the people behind him. He made his way to the back yard, intending to go home, maybe write an email to Chloe telling her once again that he was fine, and then go to bed. The same thing that he has done every night since leaving Smallville.

?You know, leaving the party without saying goodbye to the hostess is considered bad form, in almost all societies,? a deep voice said from behind Alex. ?And trust me when I say that you do not want to piss off Debbie.? Alex couldn?t help himself and chuckled.

?I can imagine.? Lex held his coat shut. ?I don?t think it?s something I really want to see first hand though.?

?I don?t know,? Brian replied, thoughtfully. ?I would figure that there wouldn?t be much out there that Lex Luthor wouldn?t be able to handle.? Brian watched to see if the man in front of him would react to that last comment. He wasn?t disappointed.

?How did you know??

?I?m in advertising and I?m successful. I make it my business to know everything there is to know about the most powerful people out there,? Brian told him. ?And I would say the son of Lionel Luthor would definitely count in that equation.? Alex snorted at that information.

?I believe he would be more than willing to argue that with you,? Alex said simply. ?My father and I never really did see eye to eye on anything.?

?Is that why you decided to disappear into the bowels of hell also known as glorious Pittsburgh??

?I guess you could say he was one of the reasons,? Alex finally replied.

?But not the only one,? Brian finished. ?You know, Justin would tell you that if you talk about whatever it is that?s bothering you, you would feel better.?

?And would he be right?? Brian shrugged his shoulders.

?The others say it works for them, but me, talking has never been my strong point,? the older man admitted. ?I?ve always been more of an action kind of guy, if you know what I mean.?

?Yeah I know what you mean.? Alex looked over at Brian. ?I?ve heard about your reputation. About how you were before you got involved with Justin.?

?And such wonderful stories they must have been,? Brian commented. ?The perfect bedtime story for all good little fags.? Alex smiled.

?Yeah you could say that.? Alex was silent for a minute. ?I used to be like that. Used to live for the moment and whoever or whatever I was enjoying at the time. And then I met him.?

?The reason you?re here.? Alex nodded his head.

?Clark Kent. He saved my life. In more ways than one.?

?What happened?? Brian inquired.

?Unlike your Justin, my Clark, like everyone else in my life, decided that I wasn?t worth the effort,? Alex said, this time the bitterness at Clark?s rejection not as noticeable in his voice, which surprised him. ?He left me for his high school crush, which was only appropriate since he is in high school. Bitch of it is that when we had first met, I had actually tried to help him get Lana to notice him.?

?He became a breeder.? Alex nodded. ?That sucks.?

?That?s one word for it.? Alex stopped for a minute, regaining control of his rising emotions. ?We tried to stay friends but, eventually, even that became too much to ask for. When it became apparent that the one person that wouldn?t judge me on my past or who my father was wanted nothing more to do with me I left.?

?Never to return,? Brian smirked, earning himself one from Alex as well.

?Something like that,? the younger man admitted.

?And, let me go out on a limb here,? Brian began. ?Because of this Clark, and his untimely turn to the straight, you?ve decided that you don?t want to be a part of the human race anymore.? Alex didn?t say anything, so Brian continued. ?You?re only letting the asshole win; you know that, don?t you??

?I?m not going to let myself open up to others anymore,? Alex said simply. ?My father had it drilled into me that Luthors didn?t do friendships. We didn?t do love. It just took me a little longer to learn that lesson. Just because I don?t want to be like him, it doesn?t mean that I?ll let myself forget what he taught me.?

?So why didn?t you just go back to your glorious past instead of lose yourself in the pleasures of Liberty Avenue??

?Because Clark showed me that I could be something other than that bastard who wanted nothing more than to fuck with his father?s mind,? Alex answered, a little more of his Lex personality coming out. ?And, trust me; I did know how to fuck with my father?s mind. I did it long enough. But Clark taught me that there were more important things to life other than trying to figure out how to screw over other people. He taught me how to care.?

?And, because of that, you couldn?t go back to pleasures of fucking whoever you wanted,? Brian concluded. Alex nodded his head. ?Yeah I know that story.?

?Justin??

?Justin,? Brian agreed. ?You had your little twink teach you how to be human and I had mine.?

?Difference is, your twink loved you enough to stick by your side, even after everyone told him that you weren?t any good for you. And they were judging you on your actions. I didn?t even get that luxury. All anyone ever saw when they looked at me was Lionel Luthor?s son.?

?And since Lionel Luthor was evil incarnate, you had to be just like him,? Brian reasoned. ?Assholes like that aren?t worth worrying about. They?ll never be happy no matter how much you prove them wrong. All they?ll do is think that you being different from your father is your own personal way of fucking with them.?

?Tell me about it,? Lex said, remembering the many times that Jonathon Kent had accused him of that very same thing. ?Fuck, I don?t know why I even bothered thinking I had any right to be happy. My father drilled it into my head enough times that if I wanted something, or someone, it was mine for the taking, no matter what. To him, it was happiness that counted. It was the possession.?

?What is it with our little group and our asshole fathers,? Brian chuckled. ?I don?t think any of us has one that we would actually be willing to admit to.?

?Good thing you have Vic there as a substitute,? Alex stated.

?True,? Brian agreed, going over to Lex and putting his arm over the younger boy?s shoulder. ?You know, Vic would be more than willing to help you out to. In fact, I would be willing to lay odds on him being more than happy to have another psuedo-son to look out for.? Lex shook his head, looking up at the starry sky, an unwanted flashback of him and Clark lying in a cornfield doing the same thing coming to his mind before he could quash it.

?I don?t think so,? Lex finally said. ?You and your friends are so close. You?re a family. Hell, you even have a kid with Lindsay, and one of these days I would love to hear that story. I don?t have a part in there.?

?Yes you do,? Brian told him. ?It?s right there for the taking. If you?re not to chicken shit to accept.? Alex snorted. ?Come on, we really aren?t that bad of a group. Sure, we get a bit overprotective at times, but we do have cause. And, once you?re a member, we don?t let you go. No matter how many times you fuck up. Hell, I?m proof enough of that.?

?I don?t know how to be a part of that kind of group.? Brian steered Alex towards the house, where they could hear laughter once again ringing out.

?Well, the first thing you want to do is be honest,? Brian told them. Alex looked over at the advertising exec with wariness in his eyes. ?Don?t worry. If anything, it?ll probably just make Vic and Deb, not to mention the munchers, wants to protect you even more than they already do.? Before either man could say something else, they were in the house.

?There you are,? Debbie loudly exclaimed when she saw them come in. The matriarch could tell that something had happened between the two of them and hoped that everything was okay. ?We were wondering where you two had gotten off to.?

?Well you know me, Deb. Can?t have a fag in Pittsburgh that I haven?t tried to fuck yet,? Brian quipped, moving over to his lover and kissing him.

?Brian,? the red wigged woman admonished. She looked over at Alex with concern. ?Are you okay, honey?? Alex looked at Debbie, and then took in the rest of the group, seeing the concern they all held. Concern for him and Alex decided that maybe it was time for him to take a chance.

?I?ll be fine. But I have something to tell you guys,? he began. ?I haven?t exactly been honest with all of you.?

?About what?? Michael asked.

?About anything.? Alex took a deep breath and began his story. ?First off, my real name isn?t Alex. It?s Lex. Alexander Luthor, to be exact,? and off he went, explaining to his new family about his old one.

?So you just told them all,? Chloe said, excitedly, over the head set that she wore. It had been two nights since Alex had gone over to Debbie?s and taken his new life in his hands and told everyone his story. He and Chloe, his only link to the past, were currently logged into the computer and talking via ICQ phone. ?How did they take it??

?Surprisingly well,? Lex admitted. Only with Chloe was he still Lex, although that was slowly changing. ?Apparently they don?t have an opinion about Lionel Luthor here, so they are more than willing to judge me on me, instead of my father. I find it kind of thrilling.?

?I?m sure,? Chloe teased. ?They weren?t upset that you?ve been lying to them for the past couple of months??

?Actually, they said they understood why I did what I did,? he told her. ?Debbie said that the fact that I was so willing to go to the lengths I have to escape my past just proves how completely unlike my father I am. And she told me that anytime I decided that I needed a parental figure that I was more than welcome to call on her or Vic.?

?I like her,? Chloe stated. ?She sounds like a good person. They all do. I?m glad that they?ve accepted you, Lex. You deserve to be happy.?

?I?ve only been truly happy once in my life, Chloe.?

?I know,? she said. ?If it?s any comfort to you, he hasn?t been himself since he found out you left. He keeps asking Lana and Nell if your father has heard from you. Hell, he asks me if I?ve been able to locate you, even though I?ve told him repeatedly that even if I knew where you were, I wouldn?t tell him.?

?You told him that,? Lex said, surprised. As much as he valued the friendship that he had formed with the high school sophomore, he didn?t think she would go out of her way to protect her from his former lover.

?Of course I did, Lex,? she answered. ?Why does that surprise you??

?I would have figured that you would have used every resource you had to find me if Clark asked you to,? he told her. ?He is your and Pete?s best friend after all.?

?A friend you treated you like shit and expected you to accept it,? Chloe spit out. Lex didn?t know what to say to that. Once again, he was surprised by someone wanting to protect him. ?Look, Lex, I?m not saying I wouldn?t like to know where you are. If anything, just so maybe I can come and visit you or something. But, unless you told me I could, I wouldn?t tell Clark where you were. I wouldn?t betray your trust like that. Besides, he hasn?t done anything to prove to me that things would change if he knew where you were.? A knock at his front door prevented Lex from replying.

?Hold on, Chloe. Someone?s at the front door.?

?Kay.? Lex got up and walked over, opening the door and surprised to find Brian, Justin, Emmett, Michael, Ted and Ben standing there.

?Ummm, hello. What are you all doing here?? Lex stammered out, shock apparent on his face. No one had ever visited him in his home before.

?Can we come in,? Brian asked, as he pushed his way past Lex, leading the others in. The group looked around the condo, taking in the tastefully decorated home. ?Nice place you have here.?

?Its home.? A noise by his computer drew their attention to it.

?What?s that?? Emmett asked, going over and picking up the headset. ?Hello,? he said into it.

?Who?s this?? Chloe demanded. ?Where?s Lex??

?This is Emmett,? he answered, looking over at the uncomfortable owner of the home he was in. ?And this must be Chloe. It?s so good to talk to you. Alex was telling us all about how good of a friend you?ve been to him.?

?Really?? Chloe stuttered, pleased that Lex actually considered her a friend. Then it sank in who she was talking to. This was one of Lex?s new friends. The ones that weren?t judging him on his past or his family. ?Emmett, can I thank you guys??

?Thank us? For what?? When it became apparent that Emmett was talking to the one other person who knew the truth about Lex, the gang slowly made their way to standing behind the computer. Emmett turned up the volume to the headset and held it out for the others to hear.

?For accepting Lex,? they heard Chloe say. ?For not turning your backs on him like some others that I can think of.?

?Chloe,? Lex growled. ?Don?t you have some homework or something??

?Not really.? Another growl. ?Well, I do have to go check out this report about someone flooding the school library. Damndest thing too. The place was soaked clear through but no one can figure out how they did it. Go figure.?

?It is Smallville, after all,? Lex pointed out. ?Meteor capital of the world.?

?Good point.? Chloe paused for a minute, before they could hear her take a deep breath. ?Lex, I?m not sure if you heard or not, but Clark did tell me something I thought you should know. It hasn?t made the news yet.?

?What?? Lex asked a feeling of dread in his voice.

?Your father and Nell Lang are getting married. Tomorrow.?

?Shit,? Justin and Brian whispered together, looking over at their new friend.

?This is,? Lex looked for the right word, ?surprising.?

?Nell?s pregnant.?

?Shit,? this time it came from everyone.

?My father must be very happy,? Lex stated, his voice sounding older and more tired than it had any right to. ?He?ll finally have the heir he always wanted.

?Lex,? Lex interrupted Chloe before she could continue.

?Its okay, Chloe,? he assured her. ?Really. I?ll be fine.?

?Are you sure??

?I promise,? he told her again.

?Fine, then,? she said. ?I guess I better get going. Especially since you have company, who I look forward to talking to. Give them my email address, that way they can tell me what?s going on with you even if you won?t tell me.?

?He will,? Michael promised her.

?Good. I?ll talk to you later than.?

?Bye Chloe.?

?Nice talking to you,? everyone said.

?I?ll talk to you later, Chloe,? Lex finally ended, then had a second though. ?Oh, and Chloe.?

?Yeah??

?Pittsburgh.?

?Thanks. Take care, Lex,? she ended her smile apparent in her voice.

?You too.? Lex disconnected his connection and turned to face the people that had invaded his home. ?So what do I owe the honor of this visit? Somehow I don?t think you came here to talk to a high school sophomore reporter.?

?Well, as much fun as that might have been,? Brian said, putting his arm around Lex?s shoulders and leading him towards what they assumed was his bedroom. ?That?s not what we came here for. Get dressed, Lex. We?re taking you out.?

?Where??

?Where you are long overdue on visiting. Babylon.?

One Year Later

Chloe Sullivan loved Clark Kent. She really did. Next to her boyfriend Pete, Clark was her best friend, but there were times where she would love to kill him. Take today for instance. Hell, if she was honest with herself, take the last year and a half. A year and a half that had seen Clark become moodier and moodier, his usual cheerful self having become absent. Even Lana, the very epitome of happiness and light, had admitted that she didn?t know what to do about her boyfriend. The former cheerleader had no idea what to do to get through to Clark, but Chloe did. Unfortunately, she also knew that she could do nothing to help him. She knew that, until Clark Kent was willing to admit that he had screwed up when he had chosen Lana Lang over Lex Luthor, the older boy would never be happy.

Chloe went over to the computer that sat on the desk that she used to oversee the Torch. There was only two more days left of school and she wanted to make sure that there were no problems with the final issue of the school?s paper. And Chloe also wanted to make sure everything was locked up tight for the summer since she didn?t plan on being around for the summer. Surprisingly, she and her friends had all gotten permission to go on a major road trip that was going to start the weekend after classes let out. She, Pete, Clark and Lana planned on seeing the country, border to border, ocean to ocean. She couldn?t wait to get out of Smallville. She hoped that maybe, if he was away from the memories that everything held for him, Clark would finally make a decision as to what he wanted to do. Did he want to get Lex back, in which case, Chloe would do whatever she could to help her two friends find their way back to each other, or did Clark want to stay with Lana, in which case, Chloe hoped he would finally return to some semblance of his old self.

Chloe powered up her PC, logging onto the internet as quickly as possible and updating the Torch?s web site. She added a quick story about the Christening of Michael Luthor, the new heir of Lionel Luthor and the replacement of Lex. Chloe had been present at the Christening, more for Lana and Clark who had to be there since Nell was the mother and, after meeting Lionel, was glad that Lex had finally gotten away from the bastard that had once been his father. The soon to be junior opened up her emails and smiled when she saw what had become a familiar address over the past year and she quickly opened it.

\\\\To: ReporterGirl@SmallvilleHigh.Edu

From: Briansboy@hotmail.com

Hey Chloe, how goes things in the mutant capital of the world? Any strange occurrences since the last time we talked? Are you all set for your trip around the country? I bet you can?t wait to get out that small town and see the rest you and your little group are missing, although I?m sure you have a good idea of what?s out there since you?ve been hanging out with Lionel Luthor so much lately. How does Smallville feel about having the devil incarnate living in their small hamlet? I bet they?re wishing that they had been a little nicer to Lex if it meant it kept Lionel away from them. Speaking of Lionel, we all saw the article on the Christening that People did. You and the gang looked good. We could all see what Lex sees in Clark. It was the first picture we?ve ever seen of him (for some reason, all the pictures you?ve sent us have never had him or Lana in. I wonder why.) He?s a good looking kid. And he and Lana look like the perfect corn fed couple, for a bunch of breeders. ////

Chloe couldn?t prevent her snort of amusement at Justin?s description of Clark and Lana. It was eerily similar to her own sentiments when it came to the couple. It was only one of the reasons that she and the other boy had become friends over the past year. A year that had seen Chloe surprise herself, and Lex, by showing up at his doorstep over her Spring Break. It had been the most freeing week of her life. Lex, or Alex as he was known in Pittsburgh, had shown her his new business.

Chloe had been shocked when Lex had told her that, with encouragement from Debbie and the rest of the gang, Lex had decided to open his own clothing store. Chloe actually thought it made sense. She had always thought that Lex had a good sense of style and lord knew that he knew how to run a business. And, Chloe had to admit, Lex?s store was great. Emmett had helped with the displays and Brian had contributed some of his advertising know how and Lex had a hit on his hands. It was one of the hottest new stores in Pennsylvania and he already had clients coming from all over to shop there.

While she was in Pittsburgh, Lex had also introduced Chloe to all of the people that had become his new family and Chloe fell in love with all of them. And the way that they had just accepted her, because of Lex, meant the world to her. These people, these strangers, accept Chloe for no other reason than the fact that she was important to Lex and Lex was important to them. It had made her decision about where she was going to college a whole lot easier. Besides, she had always had a secret desire to live on the East Coast.

One of the best things that had happened while Chloe was in Pittsburgh was her friendship with Justin was strengthened with their meeting. The two young people had gotten to know each other via email before she had even gotten to Pittsburgh, him needing friends closer to his own age as everyone was so quick to point out, and her using him as a conduit for information on Lex?s new life. Justin had never let her down and that looked like it included this email.

\\\\Daphne got that information you wanted about Carnegie-Mellon, but Brian thinks you?ll be much happier at Penn State. According to him, the boys are much more fuckable there, and we both know that?s always a good thing to look for in a college. Who needs an education anyway? It?s highly overrated. \*BG\* Anyway, we?ll give you the information when you get here in August. BTW, be careful. I don?t think Debbie is going to let you leave. Seems you?re the daughter that she always wanted.

Thought you would like to know, Brian and I set a date. June 25, can you believe it? I caught the others placing bets on whether or not the ceremony will actually take place. So far the odds are five to one against us, but they don?t know Brian like I do. I think they?re all still waiting for him to revert back to his old sucking and fucking routine even though we?ve been together for over two years. I don?t even think wearing matching rings will prevent them from thinking that and I hate it. We?ve gone through so much to be together and everyone is still so willing to think that there is no way that Brian can stay faithful but he has. You know, I think that?s one of the reasons that Brian and Lex get along so well. They know where the other one is coming from. They?ve shared the same past, if only in varying degrees.

And now, what I know you?ve been waiting for. News on the Lex front. Well, it looks like one good thing came out of his little brother being born. Seeing Clark and Lana in that picture in People made him give up on Clark. Well, as much as he can give up on Clark. It made him realize that Clark had truly moved on and that it was time for him to do the same. A week after the article appeared, Lex finally accepted a date with that guy who?s been after him for the past couple of months. Needless to say, it surprised all of us, but Jimmy?s a good guy. I think he may be good for Lex, but he knows that there?s some serious baggage coming with him, and he doesn?t even know who Lex really is. Its surprising that, as well known as Lionel Luthor is, people have seem to have forgotten that he had another son, but I guess that?s good for Lex. It means that he can finally live his life the way he wants to.

Well I guess that?s it. Let me know how your trip is going. I know you?re going to be taking your laptop with you. There?s no way you would be willing to be out of touch that long. Drop me a line sometime, or hell, even call. I know how much you love sparing with Brian and I know he likes it too, even if he refuses to admit it. And don?t worry about not being able to make it to the ceremony, I promise to take a lot of pictures and send them to you.

Take care

Justin////

Chloe sat back in her chair, stunned. She couldn?t believe it was finally happening. Lex Luthor was dating again. Allowing himself to live. She didn?t think it would ever happen again. Sure, he had come a long way since he had left Smallville, even picking up a trick here and there, but she knew that he hadn?t allowed himself to grow to close to someone. Close enough to make them a lover, despite his new friends, and Chloe?s, urging him to do so. She had known about the People article, having received her own copy a couple of days before it had hit the newsstands. It had killed her to see that there had been absolutely no mention of Lex at all. It was almost as if he no longer existed except in the minds of those people that remembered him. She had wanted nothing more than to tear the magazine into tiny little pieces that she could use in her fireplace, but Clark?s timely arrival had prevented it. Instead, her copy of the magazine lay in a box in her attic, where she planned on keeping it without ever looking at it again. Chloe reached for her cell phone and hit her speed dial.

?Hello.?

?Hey Justin. Just got your email,? Chloe greeted him. ?So you?ve finally set a date, huh??

?Yeah. Just wish you were going to be here for it,? he told her. ?Stop it Brian,? she could hear him say to his lover and it made her curious as to what she might have interrupted.

?Back off, Bri,? Chloe threatened over the phone, knowing that Justin would be more than willing to pass along whatever message she had to give the older man. ?Don?t forget. This town might be small but it does have a way of fucking up people. I wouldn?t want to be forced to see what some meteor rocks would do to you and your libido.?

?Hey, don?t even go there,? Justin growled, laughing at the same time, telling Brian what she had said.

?Fuck off, Chloe,? Brian shouted into the phone.

?Name the time and place Brian and I?ll gladly meet you there.?

?Jeez, would the two of you like some alone time,? Justin grumbled. Chloe heard Brian say something to his lover, which was quickly followed by the sounds of kissing.

?Hello, boys, still on the phone here.?

?Sorry, Chloe,? Justin replied, sounding anything but apologetic. ?I take it you got my email then.?

?Yeah I got it. Interesting news you had for me there.?

?Which part??

?Pretty much all of it. So the odds are five to one against, huh??

?Yeah. Ted?s figuring he can make pretty good cash.?

?Tell him, put me down for five hundred for you and Brian to go through with it,? Chloe told Justin. ?The two of you have fought to hard to be together to not go through with it. And I just know its going to be fantastic.?

?Thanks, Chloe. My mother is totally freaking out over it though. She keeps saying that she can?t believe her baby is getting married,? Justin laughed. ?She told me that she guesses she finally had to accept my relationship with Brian if he was going to be her son-in-law.?

?Oh I bet she?s just so happy about that.?

?Actually, she?s a lot better than she would have been a year ago. Hell, even a few months ago.?

?Well, you just do what you promised and send me lots of pictures. I want to see everyone in their finest. Especially Emmett.?

?You know, it?s a shame you can?t be here. You and Em could wear matching outfits.? This time, both laughed. Emmett and Chloe had instantly fallen in love with the other?s sense of style and often discussed the latest in fashion do?s and don?ts.

?Yeah, well, he and I will have to have a phone consultation before the big day.? Justin could tell that there was something on Chloe?s mind and had a pretty good idea of what it was, but he wanted to wait until she brought it up. He didn?t have to wait long. ?Umm, so you?re message said something about Lex finally meeting someone.?

?Yeah. Actually Jimmy?s been trying to get Lex to notice him for the last couple of months but Lex kept turning him down,? Justin told her. ?He?s a really nice guy. He?s Ben?s teaching assistant. He?s graduating this year with a degree in Social Sciences. He?s thinking of going for his Master?s but wants to take a year off of school and see the world. At least that?s what he said.?

?And Lex likes him?

?As much as he?s willing to like anyone,? Justin explained. ?I mean, you know Lex probably better than any of us. You know how he is now, but you also know his past and his relationship with Clark. It?s been over a year and he?s still mooning over the Farmboy.?

?You?ve been hanging with Lex too much,? Chloe teased.

?Yeah well, he is the closest one to my age,? Justin pointed out. ?But like I was saying, I know Lex wants to move forward and I think that if he gives Jimmy a chance, he can be really happy, but I don?t think he can until he gets closure. Things ended all fucked up between him and Clark and until he resolves all of those issues I don?t think he can move forward.?

?Same with Clark but I don?t see how they can resolve anything,? Chloe said. ?Lex is there and Clark is here and it?s not like they?re talking anymore. I don?t know what we can do about it.? Chloe jumped when the door to the Torch office opened and laughter could be heard. She looked over and saw Pete, Clark and Lana entering the room. ?Look, Justin, I would love to talk to you more about this, but??

?You?ve got company all of a sudden,? Justin supplied helpfully having heard the voices enter the room.

?Yeah, Pete, Lana, and Clark all just showed up. We?re going to talk about our trip,? she told him.

?Have fun. Talk to you later.?

?Kay. Give Brian my love and remember lots of pictures. Los and lots of pictures, and not just of the ceremony.?

?No pictures from the honeymoon for you missy,? Justin laughed.

?Damn but you?re no fun,? Chloe mock pouted. ?Fine, I?ll just have to use my imagination.?

?And you do have a good one. Bye Chloe.?

?Bye, Justin.? Chloe hung up the phone and turned to face her friends. ?Hey guys.?

?Hey, Chloe,? Pete greeted, going over to his girlfriend and kissing her lightly. ?Who was that on the phone??

?Oh, just a friend of mine,? Chloe answered vaguely. She had never told her friends in Smallville about the group in Pittsburgh, having no way of explaining why or how she got to know them without letting it out that Lex was there. ?He was just giving me some news that I?ve been waiting a long time to hear.?

?Good news, I hope,? Clark stated.

?Depends on who?s doing the listening I guess,? she replied. ?So, have you guys figured out where we?re going to start this wonderful trip of ours??

Two Months Later

?Damn it, I can?t believe this,? Clark swore as he looked over at the steam coming out from the hood of the car.

?What are we going to do?? Lana asked, looking worried. It was all Chloe could do to not hit the other girl. Over the course of their road trip, a trip that was supposed to cement their friendship, Chloe had found herself wanting to hit Lana more and more, the other girl?s incessant whining getting to her. She truly did not know what Clark saw in Lana.

?Looks like we?re going to have to stay here for a bit until we can get the car fixed,? Pete answered automatically. ?We?ll just get to Philadelphia a little later than we thought.?

?But here,? Lana whined, again. ?This isn?t exactly what I had in mind for a place to spend any time in.?

?Lana, it will be fine. I?m sure we?ll find something to do,? Clark told her, watching as the tow truck lifted up the car. ?Why don?t we just go to the repair shop and make arrangement to get the car fixed and then find someplace to stay. I?m sure we won?t be here that long.?

?I hope not,? Chloe whispered to herself, looking over at the skyline of the city in front of her, before climbing into the taxi that was going to follow the tow truck.

?Hey, look at it this way. Maybe we can go catch a Pirates game.?

?I hate baseball,? Lana said.

?Yeah but when in Pittsburgh?.?

?Well, at least this doesn?t look too bad,? Lana observed as she and the others made their way into their hotel room.

?Hell, I?m just grateful that we could get a room at all,? Chloe muttered, depositing her suitcase on one of the king size beds. ?Who would have figured that it would have been so difficult getting a hotel room in Pittsburgh?? The Smallville group had been surprised that it had taken them five attempts before they found a hotel that had two rooms that they could have. Apparently there was some kind of convention going on in the city and most of the hotels were booked solid.

?I can?t believe that it?s going to take the mechanic three days to fix the car,? Pete complained, going over and flipping on the TV. ?This just sucks.? Pete begins to channel surf, looking for something to cheer him up and comes across a program that looks like it is showing some kind of parade. ?What in the world is this? Pittsburgh Gay Pride Parade. You have got to be kidding me.?

?Did you see what that one guy was wearing?? Lana exclaimed, watching a man walk by in nothing but a white thong that clearly showed the crowd what he was offering. ?Is this going on now?? Clark asked. ?Maybe we could go check it out.?

?Why would you want to do that?? Chloe questioned, hoping her voice didn?t betray the nervousness she was suddenly feeling. ?Crap, they can?t go down to Liberty Ave. What if they meet up with Lex? Shit??

?Oh come on, Chloe. You, of all people have to ask that question,? Pete joked, turning to his girlfriend. ?Think of the story you could write for the Torch on it when we get back. Smallville would freak out.?

?It?s only a Gay Pride Parade, Pete,? Chloe replied, hoping that she could talk her friends out of their plan. ?A lot of big cities have them nowadays. There?s nothing wrong with them.?

?We didn?t say there was anything wrong with them,? Lana countered. ?All we?re saying is that it should be interesting to watch. I?ve seen footage from some of these parades and I?ve always wondered about the freaks that march in them.?

?So you?re saying you want to go to make fun of them.?

?Well, no, not make fun of them.? Chloe could tell that Lana was beginning to look uncomfortable.

?Look, Chloe, if you don?t want to come with us, stay here,? Clark told her, coming to Lana?s defense. ?But I really would like to go.?

?Well, then, lets go. I?m sure a cab would be able to get us there,? Pete said, switching the TV off and heading towards the door, Clark and Lana right behind them. ?Are you in or out, Chloe??

?In, but I?ll be right down. I have to hit the bathroom first.? The others nodded and headed out of the room. As soon as they left she grabbed her cell phone and hit the speed dial.

?Hello.?

?Thank God, Lex. It?s Chloe.?

?Chloe, this is a surprise. What?s up? How?s the trip??

?Not good. Our car broke down and we?re stranded here.? There was something in her voice that made Lex leery.

?Where??

?Pittsburgh.?

?Shit.? Chloe listened as Lex relayed the information to someone and heard a few more curses echo through the phone.

?That?s not all.?

?What else??

?The others want to see the parade. We?re headed there now. I tried to talk them out of it.?

?Mother Fucker,? this time the curse was louder and Chloe listened as someone else grabbed the phone.

?Chloe, it?s me, Justin.?

?Is Lex okay??

?Not really. What did you tell him??

?That we?re headed towards the parade. I know he was planning on going there with you guys and I wanted him to have a head?s up,? she explained. ?Look, I have to go or else the others will come looking for me. I?ll try and call back. Do you think Lex will be okay??

?We?ll take care of him, don?t worry.?

?Thanks, Justin.? Chloe shut the phone just as Clark walked back into the room. ?Everything all right, Chloe,? Clark said as she walked over to him and they left the hotel room. Clark could see that there was something bothering his friend.

?I?m not sure, Clark. I?m just not sure.?

?Something I can help you with??

?I don?t think so. I don?t think anyone can help.?

At the Liberty Diner, Brian and Justin were trying to calm down a potentially hysterical Lex. Lex had not handle the news that his former lover and his new girlfriend were in Pittsburgh and, apparently, heading to Liberty Avenue well and they were worried that this might push back all of the success that Lex had made in the time since he had arrived in the city. They were still there, trying to figure out what to do when Ted, Emmett, Michael and Ben entered the diner and walked over to them. The foursome quickly noticed that something was wrong.

?What happened??

?What?s going on??

?Clark. Here. Parade.? Lex managed to gasp out, only confusing the others.

?What?s he talking about?? Michael asked, looking over at Brian and Justin for an explanation.

?Chloe called,? Justin began. ?Appears their car broke down here in Pittsburgh and that they heard about the parade. They?re going to it.?

?Oh shit,? chorused Ted, Ben and Michael.

?Oh, baby, are you okay?? Emmett questioned, going over and taking Lex into his arms. Lex leaned into the other man?s embrace. Everyone looked on in concern. None of them had ever seen Lex as emotional as he was then.

?Why now? Why did he have to show up now?? Emmett looked up at his friends, all of them sharing the same worried look. ?Why now??

?I don?t know, baby,? Emmett crooned. ?But just because he?s here, it doesn?t mean that you have to see him. Pittsburgh is a big place and there are so many queers on Liberty Ave right now that the odds of you running into them have to be a hundred to one.?

?Emmett?s right,? Justin joined in. ?If you?re that worried about running into them, why don?t you go back to your place? You were planning on watching Gus anyway and you know he loves hanging out at the condo. I don?t think Mel and Linds will mind you watching him there instead of at the parade.?

?Maybe it would be better if you went to the parade, Lex,? Michael said. ?Even if it means that you run into Clark. You know Jimmy was planning on meeting you there.?

?And what about Clark and the others?? Justin asked.

?So what. Lex is moving on with his life, maybe its time that he put the past behind him.?

?Yeah, Lex is moving on with his life,? Brian replied. ?That?s why he?s having a panic attack in the middle of the diner.? Brian looked up just as Lindsay was making her way into the diner, Gus in tow. He went over to mother of his child, picking up Gus as he went and kissing him on the cheek, then doing the same for her.

?What?s going on?? She asked, looking over at their group of friends.

?Lex just found out that Clark and company are in town and heading to the parade,? Brian explained. ?He?s not taking it well.?

?Oh God, is he okay??

?Yeah, he?s just acting like the drama princess that we all know he is,? Brian shrugged. ?I think he?ll be fine as soon as he gets home, which is where we?re sending him.?

?Are you going to watch Gus then??

?No, Lex is still watching him. It?s just going to be at his place,? Brian replied. ?As much as it pains me, I promised Justin that I would march in the parade with him and his mommy so I guess that?s what I?ll be doing. At least until I can get out of it.?

?You?re going to love it, even if you won?t admit it,? Lindsay teased, handing over Gus?s things. ?Tell Lex to take care and that if he has any problems that Mel has her phone on her.?

?I will. I?m sure he?ll have lots of fun with Sonny Boy and not even miss us.?

?So do I.? Linds leaned over and gave her son a kiss. ?Bye Gus. Be good for Uncle Lex.? Then she leaned over and kissed Brian. ?And you be good for Justin.? Brian rolled his eyes.

?Will you just get out of here already?? Lindsay left and Brian carried his son over to the table. Lex had calmed down considerably and actually managed a smile when he saw Gus. ?Here you go, Lex. Your date for the day.?

?And I couldn?t think of someone I would rather spend it with.? Lex took Gus out of Brian?s arms, making faces at the toddler. The group couldn?t believe the change that had come over the newest member of their group. It was just one of the many things that still surprised them about Lex, although considering what they knew of his background growing up; they knew that Lex had to have been a master at controlling his emotions when he needed to. ?How do you feel about spending the day at your Uncle Lex?s??

?Cool,? Gus replied, smiling wide and causing everyone to laugh. Lex stood up and grabbed Gus?s bag from Brian.

?Cool.? Lex looked over at his friends and they could tell that, while he might have been smiling, that it didn?t quite reach his eyes.

?Are you going to be all right?? Justin inquired. ?Do you want one of us to go with you??

?No,? Lex shook his head, his voice cracking. ?You guys should go have some fun. I just?I just can?t deal with seeing him right now. Especially not with her. It?s too hard.?

?You want us to give Jimmy a message? Maybe have him stop by??

?I don?t think that would be a good idea,? he replied. ?Tell him that I?ll give him a call later.? Lex headed out of the diner, the gang watching him leave.

?That poor kid. How much more does he have to go through before life stops kicking his ass,? Ben asked no one in particular.

?I don?t know but I sure hope he finds some happiness soon.? The others nodded at Ted?s assessment before also making their way out of the diner and to the parade.

?I wish I could look that good in that dress,? Lana commented, looking over as the drag queen walked by her. ?To have those legs.? Lana noticed the looks she got from her friends. ?What? It?s a Vera Wang.?

?You are so strange,? Pete shook his head. ?Sometimes I wonder where the Pod is.?

?Huh.?

?Never mind,? Pete muttered, smiling. He noticed that Chloe appeared to be lost in her own little world, looking around at the crowd. ?Hey, Chloe.? Pete waved his hand up and down in front of her face, causing her to look at him.

?What??

?Where did you disappear to??

?Nowhere,? she replied. ?I?m right here.?

?You weren?t a minute ago,? Clark added. ?You seemed as if you were lost in your own little world.?

?Did I?? She questioned, once again looking out over the crowd. ?Sorry. Didn?t mean to be.?

?Aren?t you having a good time,? Clark asked.

?No it?s great,? Chloe replied. ?Really.?

?If it?s so great why does it look like you would rather be anywhere than here??

?Maybe she just hasn?t been offered the right incentive to enjoy herself yet,? an aloof voice said from behind the group. The Smallville group watched as a sarcastic grin crossed Chloe?s face. A grin that they very rarely saw.

?And what exactly do I need to be offered??

?Oh something, long and thick and about ten inches.?

?Nah, I?m not much in the mood for a hot dog, but thanks for the offer.? A burst of laughter sprang up and Chloe finally turned around to face her new audience.

?I wasn?t talking about a hot dog.?

?Ahhh, but see, I prefer pure beef.?

?It?s definitely pure,? the older man promised. ?That?s for sure.?

?Shame I?ll never be able to find out,? Chloe smiled sweetly.

?That?s for sure,? a younger man said, joining into the conversation and wrapping his arms around the older one. ?But I?ll be glad to give you details if you want.?

?You already have,? Chloe teased back, earning herself a quirked eyebrow from the older man. ?And in great detail might I add.?

?Really,? the man said, looking between the two young people. ?Should I be worried??

?Hell yes,? they both said in unison before dissolving into laughter and hugging each other.

?Hey Chloe.?

?Hey Justin.? Chloe and Justin broke apart and she turned her attention to the older man who leaned over and kissed her. ?Looking good Brian. I?d fuck ya.?

?You and everybody else,? Justin quipped.

?Jealous?? Brian grinned.

?Should I be?? Justin asked his face semi-serious.

?Of course not, baby. I only have eyes for you,? Brian leaned over and kissed Justin. It was a kiss so full of love that even those that didn?t know them could tell that they were together. Finally, they broke apart and turned back to Chloe. ?I see that the summer has been good to you.?

?Yeah, well, getting out of Smallville has a habit of making anyone look good.?

?I can only imagine,? Brian drawled. ?I don?t know how you can stand living in such a small town.?

?It?s not so bad. Granted there isn?t a Babylon, but its home.?

?Chloe,? Emmett screamed as he came up behind Brian and Justin, running over to the girl and giving her a huge hug. ?Oh my God. I?ve missed you so much.?

?I could never tell, Em.?

?Yeah well, you know, Emmett,? Michael said, joining the growing crowd, all of which were ignoring the confused glances from the other teens.

?Once he takes a shine to someone, look out,? Ted finished. A throat clearing finally drew Chloe?s attention away from the guys and back to her friends from Smallville.

?Oh, I?m sorry. Guys I totally forgot. Everyone I would like you to meet Clark, Lana and Pete. Gang, these are my other friends, Brian, Justin, Michael, Ben, Ted, and Emmett. I?ll leave it up to you to decide who?s with who, although when it comes to Brian and Justin, it?s pretty damn easy to tell they?re together.?

?That?s just because they?re honeymooners,? Michael joked, earning himself a glare from his best friend.

?Yeah, it?s not like they haven?t been fucking for two years or anything,? Ted joined in.

?You?re just jealous,? Chloe shot back, defending the two in question. ?You?d probably be the same way if you had someone.?

?Gee, Brian, another teen you?re rubbing off on,? Ted rolled his eyes at the other man while Brian just gave him the classic ?who me? look.

?Chloe, who are these people?? Lana whispered, trying not to draw any attention to herself. ?Where did you meet them? Why are they your friends??

?It?s a long story but yeah, I would definitely say they are my friends,? Chloe told her.

?Thank you, hun,? Emmett said, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. ?And you know we consider you are friend too.?

?Geez, the only way this could get any mushier is if the munchers decided to show up,? Brian muttered. He noticed Chloe looking around, her face carrying a worried expression on it and he knew instantly who she was looking for. ?He?s not here. He took Gus back to his place.?

?Is he okay??

?He?s been better,? Brian answered. ?Maybe you should go over and see him since you?re in town.? Chloe glanced back at her friends from Smallville, her eyes catching Clark?s.

?I don?t think that?s such a good idea,? she replied, turning back to face Brian. ?But tell, Alex,? Chloe used the name that Lex had chosen for himself, ?that I?ll call him.? Brian and Justin shared a look before grabbing Chloe and forcefully moving her away from her other friends. ?Brian, Justin, what are you doing??

?We?re getting you away from the bad influences that are your Smallville friends,? Brian told her. ?Apparently when you?re with them, they have a way of fucking up your way of thinking.?

?And what brought you to that conclusion??

?Because otherwise you would have agreed to go visit Alex, and maybe bring one of your friends with you,? he concluded.

?And what purpose would that serve other than upsetting both of them??

?Maybe it would allow Alex to move on with his life,? Justin joined in.

?I thought you told me that he was seeing someone finally,? Chloe reminded Justin. ?What was his name again? Jimmy??

?Yeah that?s his name,? Justin admitted. ?But I agree with Brian. They need to see each other.? Chloe looked back at Clark, and could see the confusion on his face. As much as she hated to admit it, she knew Brian and Justin were right. Clark and Lex needed to see each other, at least once more. She knew how unhappy Lex was since he had left, let alone since after the break up, and no matter how much Clark might deny it, and deny it he had, she knew that the younger boy wasn?t much happier. Sure, Clark was dating his dream girl, but that was a dream that had died a natural death when Lex Luthor had come into Smallville and changed everyone?s lives.

Chloe had watched her friend Clark go from being a shy young man who could barely string two sentences together when in the presence of Lana Lang, into a self assured young adult in love with his older, male best friend, and finally, into a quiet, outwardly happy, inwardly unhappy teenager. She had tried to get Clark to talk about her about whatever it was that was bothering him, and she had a pretty good idea of what it was, but he always refused her overtures. He just sank further and further into himself until he became nothing more than an extension of Lana Lane and his relationship with her. It was one of the reasons she had suggested this trip. It was her last ditch effort to rescue her friend from whatever hell he was putting himself through.

?Maybe you?re right. Maybe they do need to see each other again,? Chloe finally agreed. ?I?ll just have to figure out how to do it without bringing Pete and Lana into it.?

?I?m sure you?ll think of something,? Justin assured her.

?And he?ll be home all day with Gus.? Chloe nodded her head.

?Fine. Give me some time and I?ll get him there,? she promised them.

?Good. And on that note, I believe we have a parade to march in,? Brian announced. ?Come on boys, why should the munchers be the only ones to have all the fun.? Brian and Justin made there way into the parade where they had seen Jenn and Deb marching, the others following and saying the goodbyes to Chloe.

?Okay, Chloe, what was that all about?? Pete asked as soon as the others had gone. ?Who were those people??

?Just a couple of friends of mine that I met when I came out here to go check out schools,? she answered. ?Pretty cool, huh??

?They?re interesting, that?s for sure,? Pete replied, his voice full of doubt. ?Not exactly the kind of friends that I would have expected you to hang out with, though.?

?Why would you want to hang out with them, anyway?? Lana asked, her voice full of something Chloe wanted to term as hatred, but for what she didn?t know. ?Don?t you have any idea of what news of something like this could do to you back in Smallville? Hell, what if could do to any of us just because we were here.?

?You were the ones that wanted to come to the parade,? Chloe pointed out. ?Besides, it?s not like I plan on spending the rest of my life in Smallville so why should I care about what they think of me for being friends with a bunch of queers. I?m proud to say that some of my best friends are queer, even if a few of them had problems admitting it.? Chloe watched as Clark turned his head. She knew he didn?t miss that last comment being about him.

?But you still have at least two years there, though, so I would think that you wouldn?t want to have something like the fact that you?re friends with a bunch of freaks get out.? For some reason, Chloe took Lana?s words as a threat and said as much.

?Is that a threat, Lana?? Lana shook her head.

?Not a threat, its reality. Why do you think the town was so happy to see Lex Luthor leave?? Clark and Chloe were both surprised that the cheerleader brought up the former heir?s name. Since Lex had disappeared, and especially since Nell married Lionel Luthor, Lana had never mentioned Lex?s name.

?What do you mean?? Clark asked his girlfriend. ?What about Lex??

?Come on, Clark, you know what I mean,? Lana said. ?Why do you think Lionel even refused to look for Lex after he disappeared? Oh sure, he said all the right things, even made it appear as if he had detectives out searching for his son, but it was all for show. He told Nell that he was glad that Lex had taken off. It saved him the embarrassment of having to deal with a fag for a kid. And I agree with him. I?m glad that Lex finally got the message that you would never be interested in him and left. It took him long enough.?

?Hold on, Lana,? Chloe broke in, Clark unable to say anything. ?Are you saying that you knew that Lex was interested in Clark??

?Of course,? Lana answered. ?It?s why I finally asked Clark out. I wanted to make sure that Lex knew that he couldn?t have him.?

?I?m not a fucking possession, Lana,? Clark finally shouted, not even caring about the crowd that was passing by and staring. ?Maybe I was glad that Lex wanted me like that. Maybe I wanted him the same way.? Lana looked between Clark and Chloe, not understanding why they were so upset with her. She had only done what she had thought was right. She tried to wrap her arms around Clark, but he only stepped away from her.

?Clark??

?I don?t even know you,? Clark stated. ?I?m beginning to wonder if I ever did.? Clark turned away and began to make his way through the crowd.

?Clark,? Lana called out after him and trying to go to him.

?Don?t,? Chloe stopped her. Lana looked at the reporter with something like contempt in her eyes. ?You?ve hurt him enough, don?t you think??

?I did it for his own good,? Lana defended herself. ?He?ll see that as soon as he calms down.?

?You really are delusional aren?t you,? Chloe told her before turning away herself and heading after her friend.

?What Clark ever saw in you, I guess I?ll never know,? Pete finally said. ?He would have done anything to make you happy and this is how you treat him. You are one self ?absorbed bitch, you know that.? Pete ran after his girlfriend and Clark, leaving Lana by herself. She looked around at the crowd that was staring at her and tried to figure out what had happened. One minute, she had a boyfriend that was devoted to her, even if he wasn?t completely happy, and now she was by herself. It made no sense to the cheerleader who decided that maybe it would be best if she just went back to the hotel and waited for the others to come back and they could all talk calmly and rationally. She was sure, once they did that, that she could make them see that what she did, she did for the best reasons.

?Clark,? Chloe called out to her friend. ?Clark wait up. Come on, wait for me.? Clark finally stopped, allowing first Chloe and then Pete to catch up with him.

?It was all a lie,? Clark finally said as they joined him. ?Everything. She never cared for me. It was all because she wanted to make sure that I stayed hers and didn?t go to Lex. And I fell for it. I broke the heart of the one man that meant the most to me and made it so he couldn?t even stay in Smallville, all because of Lana and her need to control me.?

?Clark, man,? Pete began only to stop when Clark turned to face him, tears running down his face.

?Lex was everything to me,? his voice broke. ?He was my best friend. My confidante. My lover. I could tell him things that I couldn?t tell anyone else. Not you. Not my parents. No one. And I made him love me, promising that we would always be together, only to screw him over when Lana asked me out. I know he chose me over his father, I knew it, but I couldn?t give him that same kind of trust. What kind of person does that??

?Someone who was afraid of disappointing his parents,? Chloe gently told him. ?And Lex knew that. It was why he was so willing to just be your friend, even if that didn?t make him happy.?

?And then I stomped on that friendship because my father told me he didn?t want me hanging out with Lex at all,? Clark spat out, never even noticing that Chloe was leading the three of them in a certain direction. ?It was his idea that I help out Lana and let my mother make my deliveries. He made me promise not to say anything to her though and I didn?t. He knew that was the only time I got to see Lex and he took it away from me.? Chloe stopped a minute, causing Clark and Pete to do the same. She turned around, taking Clark?s big frame into her arms and holding him close to her, allowing him to cry out all of the hurt that had been building for the last year and a half.

?Clark, it?s going to be all right,? she assured him. ?We can fix this, I promise.?

?How? Lex is gone and I don?t even have an idea of where to find him,? he reminded her. Chloe looked up at the building they were standing in front of, steering a willing Clark into the entryway. She hit the entrance buzzer for one of the apartments, ignoring the confused looks she was receiving from her friends.

?Yes??

?It?s Chloe. Let me in.?

?Chloe,? the voice, which Clark could swear he recognized even after so many months.

?I have someone here who wants, no needs, to see you.? Chloe gave Clark a reassuring smile and squeezed his shoulder. ?I think it?s time the two of you talk.? No answer came over the intercom and, for a minute, Chloe began to think that they wouldn?t be allowed in. A minute later, a buzz sounded, unlocking the door and Chloe led Clark and Pete in.

Chloe smiled as she watched Clark shift from one foot to the other as the elevator ascended. When the doors opened, she could see that it was only by sheer force of will, and a little patience that prevented him from running right out. That, and the fact that he didn?t know which apartment they were going to. Chloe led them over to condo 303 and knocked on the door. They could hear someone running around the apartment and a voice shouting.

?No, Gus, leave that alone.? Clark raised his eyebrows and looks at Chloe.

?Gus??

?You?ll see.? Suddenly the door opened, revealing Lex who was holding a very wiggly three year old Gus. Lex stared at guests, his eyes continually returning to Clark.

?Chloe, what are you doing here?? He finally asked, moving back and allowing the others to come into his home. Clark and Pete looked around, trying to place the Lex that they remembered in the home that they were in. There were signs of the wealth that Lex had grown up with, including the state of the art entertainment center, but instead of the antiques and the medieval look that had been present in the Luthor castle, there was a more homey feel to the condo.

?The two of you need to talk,? she told him, indicating Lex and Clark.

?Chloe, I think everything?s been said,? Lex tried to interject. ?What else is there??

?How about the fact that the two of you are still in love with each other,? she pointed out. Lex shot Chloe a look. ?Look, Lex, you and I both know that you and Clark need to talk. You haven?t moved on, even if you?ve met someone. Yes, I know all about Jimmy, even if you didn?t tell me about him.?

?Who?s Jimmy?? Clark asked, coming over to Lex, standing in front of the shorter man.

?A friend.?

?How close of a friend?? If Lex wasn?t so sure that Clark no longer cared about him, he would have sworn that the younger boy was jealous.

?What business is it of yours?? He countered. ?You made it perfectly clear before I left Smallville that you and I were over. You were with Lana, speaking of which. Where is the lovely Miss Lang??

?Don?t know. Don?t care,? Clark answered.

?I see,? Lex acknowledged, finally moving away from Clark, forcibly not looking at him. He went over to Chloe, depositing Gus into her waiting arms. ?Can you feed Gus? His food is in the microwave.? Chloe could see the silent request in Lex?s eyes to give him some privacy with Clark.

?Sure. Come on, Pete. I?m sure you have some questions for me,? she led Pete out of the room.

?Some questions??

Finally Clark and Lex were alone again, for the first time in over a year. A year that had seen both of them attempt to move on, one a bit more successfully than the other. The silence between them became uncomfortable, where once it would have been easy. Clark looked around Lex?s home again, not sure what he was looking for.

?Whose baby??

?A friend?s,? Lex shrugged off. ?They?re marching in the parade so I told them I would watch him. I like helping my friends out.? Clark winced at the implication that he wasn?t like that. ?So how are you and Lana doing? Still the happy couple?? Clark couldn?t answer that question. He didn?t know what to say. Finally, when Lex was beginning to think that Clark wasn?t going to answer, he did.

?I?m sorry, Lex,? he finally said.

?About what, Clark? You didn?t do anything except do what you always wanted to do. Date Lana Lang.? Even though Lex was being flip, Clark could still hear the hurt in his former lover?s voice.

?About hurting you,? Clark explained. ?About allowing my fear of letting my parents down influencing out relationship. About letting my father force me to give up even our friendship. It was selfish of me and wrong and you didn?t deserve it and if you want me to leave right now I will, but I love you and I?m sorry and I wish there was a way I could take back the last year and a half because I would do so many things differently, beginning with having the nerve to turn Lana down when she asked me out.? Clark couldn?t believe the way he was babbling. He never did that. Clark went over to Lex, standing in his personal space and the older man could see the tears running down his face.

?Clark,? Lex said, raising his arm and using his hand to wipe away the moisture.

?Oh God, Lex, I?m so sorry,? Clark continued. ?Please tell me what I have to do to make it up to you. I?ll do anything, anything, you want.?

?What about Lana??

?I don?t care about Lana. I haven?t in a long time. I only went out with her because it was what my parents wanted for me. It?s what everyone expected from me and I didn?t have the same kind of courage you did. The kind that it took to simply tell them no, that I already had someone in my life. Someone that made me happier than I ever had the right to be. Someone that made me whole. Lana never did that. All she ever did for me was make me miserable because she wasn?t what I wanted. If I?m honest with myself, she?s never been what I wanted.? Clark lowered his face until Lex and his mouths were mere centimeters apart. ?You?re all I want. I love you. Can you ever give me a second chance??

?Clark,? Lex wasn?t sure what he was pleading for. Clark to stop, or for him to continue.

?Please, Lex.? And then they were kissing and it was like the time that had past never happened. The two of them seemed to flow into each other, their kiss intensifying as it progressed. After a few minutes, Clark felt Lex push him away and he allowed it. ?Lex??

?Clark, we can?t,? Lex told him. At Clark?s downtrodden look, Lex hurried to explain. ?No, Clark. That?s not what I meant. If this is what you truly want, I mean, you?re absolutely sure about this, than yes, I think I might be willing to give you another chance. But we have to talk first. About a lot of things. And you have to come to some serious and hard decisions, including whether or not you can handle being in a long distance relationship.?

?What do you mean long distance??

?Clark, what did you think would happen if we got back together?? Lex asked, putting some distance between he and Clark, but not making it appear as if he was pushing the other man away. ?That I would go back to Smallville and things would go back to normal. You know that can?t happen. I don?t have a home there anymore. A job. Nothing. I have that here.?

?I guess I didn?t think about that,? Clark admitted. ?I guess you can?t go back to Smallville.?

?Exactly,? Lex said, cupping Clark?s cheek with his hand. ?And as much as I still love you, I don?t think I could handle being with you and then not being with you again. It would be too difficult. If I let you back into my heart again I have to know that I can trust you with it. That you won?t leave after the first sign of trouble.? Tears began to fall down Clark?s cheek again at the raw emotion in Lex?s eyes.

?Lex, I love you, please, don?t push me away,? Clark pleaded. ?Please.?

?Clark, I?m not pushing you away, I?m just trying to make you see that, at least for now, it won?t work. It can?t. Your father still hates me, Chloe?s told me that much.?

?And I?m going to have to talk to her about the fact that she?s known about you and never told me,? Clark interrupted.

?She?s been a good friend,? Lex told him. ?She?s helped me a lot. Try not to get on her too much.?

?I?ll try.?

?But like I was saying, your father still hates me, my father wants nothing to do with me, and he has a new heir. I have my life here, which includes my own business.?

?Really?? Clark perked up. ?What do you do??

?I run a clothing store with some help from a friend of mine named Emmett.?

?Emmett? Tall, skinny guy? Really effeminate? We ran into him and some others at the parade.?

?You?ve met him,? Lex chuckled. ?Yeah, Em is definitely a character. And he?s been a big help at the store.?

?So you finally have the life that your father denied you growing up,? Clark observed. ?Everything that you always wanted.?

?Not everything,? Lex said, leaning over and kissing Clark once more. This time they were interrupted by someone clearing their throat. Clark and Lex turned and faced Chloe and Pete, both of their faces turning red.

?Are we interrupting anything?? Chloe asked, smiling at the two men.

?We were just talking,? Clark answered.

?Is that what they?re calling it nowadays,? Pete grinned. ?Damn Chloe, we need to talk more.?

?I don?t think so,? she jabbed him in the ribs. ?How about me and Pete leave you two to talk some more.? Chloe grabbed her boyfriend?s hand and dragged him towards the door. ?Call us if you need anything.?

?Nice seeing you again, Lex,? Pete called out as he was dragged out of the condo. ?Glad to see you?re okay.?

?You too, Pete,? Lex said, going over to close the door. ?And Chloe.? Chloe turned to face Lex. ?Thank you.?

?You?re welcome,? she smiled at Lex and turned to the elevator. Lex closed the door behind the two of them and turned back to Clark, who appeared right at his side.

?So, Lex, what should we talk about first??

Three days later found Brian, Justin and Michael at the Liberty Diner for breakfast. ?Has anyone heard from Lex since he dropped off Gus during Pride?? Michael asked, worried about his friend.

?I tried calling him but I only got his machine,? Justin told him. ?And Chloe wasn?t telling me anything when I talked to her, only saying that she left him with Clark and that was it.?

?I hope the kid didn?t hurt Lex,? Michael said. ?He was just getting back on his feet.?

?Oh, I don?t think we have to worry about Clark hurting Lex,? Brian stated, looking towards the entrance. Standing there, looking happier than they had ever seen him stood Lex. Beside him, looking as if he belonged there was Clark. ?I believe that we may have to take Lex off the market for good now. Seems another one bites the dust.? Lex spotted the trio and led Clark over to them.

?Hey guys, I believe you?ve all met Clark already.?

?Hey Clark.?

?Hi.?

?How are you doing??

?I?m fine now,? Clark answered, looking over at Lex, clearly indicating that Lex was the reason he was so happy.

?I?m surprised to see you here, Clark,? Justin began. ?I could have sworn Chloe said something about you guys leaving yesterday.?

?Yeah her and Pete headed towards Philly last night,? Clark answered.

?What about Lana?? Clark looked over at Lex, smiling at the older man.

?Lana went back to Smallville.?

?I?m sorry,? Justin said, his voice saying he was anything but.

?I?m not. It was for the best,? Clark told them.

?Well, now that the niceties are over,? Brian broke in. ?How long do you plan on staying in Pittsburgh, Clark??

?I?m here for good,? Clark answered, surprising everyone. Clark and Lex smiled at each other.

?Clark and I are going to give it a go,? Lex continued. Brian raised his eyebrow while Justin and Michael sat there stunned.

?Really? And how do mommy and daddy feel about this change of plans,? Brian asked.

?My dad wasn?t too happy but my mom said she understood,? Clark explained. ?They?re planning on coming out here next week to make a final decision but I already told them that I?m not planning on leaving Lex. Not again.?

?And I?m not going to let him go, either.? Lex said. The two men continued to hold hands. ?I made that mistake once and I?ll be damned if I do it again.?

Clark and Lex then joined the other three at the table and they began to discuss the various places they were going to take Clark, while also teasing Justin that he was no longer the baby of the group, something he was quite happy about. Clark quickly warmed up to the group from Pittsburgh, finding them extremely easy going. The only tense moment came when the man that had hoped to replace Clark in Lex?s affections, Jimmy, came into the diner, but the other man made it clear that he didn?t hold any hard feelings, wishing both men well in their relationship.

Later that day, Clark and Lex found themselves lying in Lex?s bed, now their bed, relaxing and enjoying the kind of intimacy that they had missed in their months apart. A platter of fruit and cheese sat on a tray next to them and they took turns feeding each other.

?Lex, have I told you thank you yet.?

?For what, love.?

?For loving me. For giving me a second chance even though I know I didn?t deserve it. I would have completely understood it if you slammed the door in my face and told me to get lost.?

?I could never do that to you, Clark. You?re my heart. My soul. You?ve made me into who I am. Without you, I would probably be like my father, not letting anyone in and using everyone that I met, wondering what they could do for me.?

?You could never be like your father, Lex.?

?I could have,? Lex corrected him, ?but you saved my life once again. And for that, I thank you.? Clark and Lex leaned over, kissing passionately again, grateful for their second chance and not wanting to waste another minute of it.

?I love you, Clark.?

?And I love you, Lex. Always.?

?Always.?