* **Worth the Fight** http://lookingglass.thelightgetsin.com/square01.jpg
* By lightgetsin

NOTE: This is set post season 3, as certain details insist on it. However, I've made a slight modification or two. Mel and Lindsay don't have a second child in this story, for one thing. No reason aside from my own convenience. Everything else will become obvious in its own time.

http://lookingglass.thelightgetsin.com/bar01.gif

Justin got home very late, just shy of midnight. The streets grew steadily quieter and more vacant as he drove, and the stillness of the deserted sidewalks, the darkened windows and regular, sentinel street lights somehow imbued his mood with the same abandoned occupancy. He drove mechanically, his mind a thousand miles away and nowhere at all, a pleasant haze of exhaustion, the deep, satisfied tired of a long day’s work loosening the knots in his shoulders and easing the tension from his elbows to his fingertips.

It wasn’t a suburb—Brian would never live in a suburb where the white picket fence was unnecessary because the idea was so blatantly assumed. It was instead an oasis in the city, an island of tranquility and affluent comfort, sweeping manicured lawns setting the specially designed houses in patches of perhaps the greatest luxury of all—space. Somehow the eternal sounds of the city could not penetrate the privacy hedges. Justin found himself marveling at it sometimes at night when sleep eluded him and he slipped out onto the master balcony so as not to disturb Brian. The lights and dazzle and forever life of Pittsburg were only a handful of blocks away, yet their house seemed cocooned in a bubble of pristine order and quiet.

And then he would go back to bed and Brian would roll over and mutter something like, “Where’ve you been—fucking the pool boy again?” and Justin would say, “We don’t have a pool boy. Or a pool,” and Brian would say, “Well then fuck me instead,” and it wouldn’t be quiet or orderly anymore at all.

The light in the master bedroom was on, Justin saw as he turned into the driveway. He took as little time as possible in the garage and downstairs, dropping keys and jacket and briefcase in a careless heap on the foyer table and heading straight for the steps. He hadn’t seen Brian all day, which was a little unusual.

He paused in the doorway of the master bedroom, a bit surprised. Brian was sitting up in bed, propped against a mountain of pillows, the reading lamp Justin used sometimes when he sketched early in the morning pulled over to his side so he could read the papers spread out around him. Seeing Brian working at night was hardly unusual. He’d once told Justin that the sheer bulk of idiot paperwork expanded by several orders of magnitude from exec to chief, and Justin could believe it from the thick, intimidating reports Brian was always buried in. But as he cast his mind back, searching for the source of his surprise, Justin realized that he had never seen Brian work in bed. It was always at the desk downstairs in the study, while Justin drew or screwed around on the internet from the chair beside him, or sometimes on the dining room table when he really wanted to spread out. Beds were for sleeping and fucking, not work. Though, now that he really thought about it, the dining room table was for fucking, too, so perhaps it wasn’t as strange as he was making it out.

“Get lost on your way home?” Brian asked, glancing up.

“Vasquez called,” Justin said, heading straight for the bathroom. “He had a problem with the latest design and wanted a rework tonight.”

“He’s a fucking pain in the ass,” Brian returned over the sound of the running water as Justin got ready for bed. “You shouldn’t let him order you around like that.”

“It’s a big account,” Justin said, dropping his suit in the dry clean basket. “You spent enough time haggling the contract. Besides, if I’d told him to fuck off until tomorrow he would have just called you and you would have ordered me to stay and rework it.” He came back into the bedroom in only his boxers, and he paused a moment before the half-open balcony doors. The late spring air ran warm, gentle fingers down his spine, and Brian’s lips curved appreciatively at the sight of him outlined there against the glass and the moon.

“Maybe,” Brian said, beginning to stack his reports on the nightstand, “but if I’d ordered you to do it it’d be a lot more fun.”

“You like being my boss way too much,” Justin observed, crawling up onto the bed. It was an old complaint dating back to his intern days, oft repeated and reflexive, white noise neither of them really heard. But for some reason it registered more profoundly that night, and Justin had a moment of surreal disbelief, a folding of time and space across a decade, Jesus fuck an entire fucking decade, between himself here on this ornately carved, sinfully comfortable bed in this million dollar house, and a boy who owned one suit and that reluctantly, who waited tables and didn’t really live anywhere, officially. The divide was a chasm, seemingly unbridgeable, and Justin hung suspended over it, nearly swallowed up in the surprise of self-awareness. Things had changed so much.

Then suddenly Brian was tired of waiting for him and he was there, coming across the expanse of the mattress and bearing Justin down to it in one quick, sinewy motion. He swept his hands from Justin’s shoulders to the waistband of his boxers, his mouth fastened on the notch of Justin’s collarbone, and suddenly the spring breeze wasn’t the only thing that could prickle his spine. This, Justin thought as his thighs fell open, this hadn’t changed at all, this ignition, this fusion, the faint tinge of disbelief because surely something this good couldn’t be allowed, surely something this good couldn’t be so natural, so easy. The grind of their hips was thoughtless, the slide of their cocks instinctive, their slow writhe not unlike a cat arching its back in pleasure for just that spot to be scratched. They kissed for long moments, Brian’s hands in his hair, Justin’s walking down his back to grab his ass. Then Brian pulled away, rose on hands and knees, turned around while still crouching over him, plucked at the boxers, and sank his mouth over Justin’s cock. Justin sighed and stretched his neck to return the favor. He felt surrounded by Brian as they found a rhythm, covered and cocooned and engulfed, filling and filled as he pulled Brian into his throat. The pleasure from his cock and the way he worked his jaw were one and the same thing, and Justin knew exactly when to slide his hand up Brian’s thigh, when to press his fingers behind the heavy balls, when to let his own orgasm free so that they finished together.

That hadn’t changed at all, and if it had, it was only better.

They curled up afterwards, and Brian flipped off the lamp in silence. Justin tucked his head in the comfortable intersection of Brian’s arm and the pillow and fell asleep with the taste still in his mouth.

The bed was empty when he woke the next morning, the stack of reports missing from the nightstand. The sun sparkled almost painfully off the east-facing balcony doors, and Justin indulged himself with an extra five minutes with the pillow over his head. Finally he stretched out, pointing his toes and reaching as far over his head as possible, then rolled out of bed. He could faintly smell coffee and something breakfasty. Maybe he and Brian could share a ride to work today. As far as he knew they could both be out of there at a reasonable hour tonight.

He dressed quickly and padded downstairs in his socks, tie draped over his shoulder. Whenever he did it himself Brian would just mock his knot and redo it, so he’d finally decided to skip the bother and let Brian take care of the whole thing, even though it made him feel like he was Gus’s age again and Brian knew it and mocked him for that, too. His feet skidded a little on the hardwood floor as he crossed the dining room, and Justin almost slipped when he paused suddenly, surprised by the sound of an extra voice in the kitchen. He caught himself and picked up his pace, smiling in a slightly confused welcome as he rounded the corner.

“Morning, Gus.”

“Hey,” Gus said, waving a piece of toast at him, then stuffing it whole into his mouth. Justin grinned, thinking not for the first time how entertaining it was to watch this shadow of Brian growing up. He had a hard time imagining Brian eating anything and everything and lots of it like Gus, though, even when he was Gus’s age and working his way through the opening rounds of some serious puberty. But aside from the breadth of Brian’s shoulders next to the still bony ones of his son, and forgetting the contrast of a designer suit and a Patriots sweatshirt, the two figures framed by the warm morning sun were eerily similar, down to the golden highlights in their hair and the angles of their heads.

Justin got himself some coffee, contemplated toast, then discarded the thought. The days when he could eat like Gus with no consequences were slipping away.

“Um,” he began, leaning against the counter and sipping at his mug.

“Mom let me stay the night,” Gus said, saving him from the question.

Justin nodded, deciding not to comment on the fact that it was a school day and Gus usually only slept over on the weekends. Lindsay and Mel had both been looking a bit worn around the edges lately, and to judge by the things both Mom and Deb said, having a teenaged boy around the house could do that to a person. Oddly, Gus never seemed to have problems with them. Brian said it was because he respected him. Justin said it was a healthy dose of fear because Gus knew Brian wouldn’t hesitate to punish him in any way he saw fit. Brian said that was one and the same thing, and Justin gave it up for lack of an entirely logical response.

“Do you have your homework?” he asked after a moment.

Gus threw him an utterly disgusted look, but nodded. Brian lowered the newspaper he had been studying and stood up.

“Come on,” he said, tugging at Gus’s collar as he crossed to the sink to leave his dishes. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll go get my shoes,” Justin started, straightening up. He wasn’t done with his coffee, and Brian had very strict rules about liquids in the BMW (all liquids, much to Justin’s astonishment and dismay) but he could get another cup at work.

“Naw, we’ve got to go,” Brian said, smoothing down the front of his jacket. “Take your time.”

“…Okay,” Justin said, subsiding. He watched Brian as he cleaned up, throwing away the newspaper and chivying Gus into doing his own dishes. He looked completely normal, perfectly put together and sexy as hell in his dark gray suit, a calmly satisfied, even contented look on his face, the ‘Gus look’ Justin had privately labeled it. But there was something in the way he carried himself, a line of tension running down the straightness of his spine that lodged in Justin’s consciousness like a splinter. If Gus weren’t there he would have asked if something was wrong, but as it was he contented himself with messing up Gus’s hair and telling both of them to have a good day. Not that asking Brian would have netted him an answer, anyway. Things were never that easy.

He drank the rest of his coffee at the kitchen sink, watching the birds at the feeder Mom had gotten them. Brian had rolled his eyes and acted properly horrified, but it had been he, not Justin, sweating and swearing the thing together and mounted the very next Saturday. Justin had found him standing in the exact place he stood now, watching with fascination as an imperious blue jay battered the rest of the birds away with possessive flips of the wing, observing the occasional robin-led revolts with interest that bordered on the freakish. Which side he rooted for changed on a daily basis, and Justin had stopped trying to keep track.

It wasn’t until he was heading out the door that Justin realized his tie was still draped loosely around his neck.

Gus’s school was quite a drive from the house, which was one of the reasons he rarely stayed over during the week, and Justin arrived at work only a few moments after Brian. He caught a glimpse of the gray-clad back at the far end of the lobby, but Brian was heading away at a steady clip and didn’t notice him. They didn’t run into each other again until mid-afternoon, when Vasquez called to say that, after sleeping on it, he didn’t like the revised logo, either.

“Fax him a picture of your ass,” Brian said from behind his desk. “That ought to satisfy.”

Justin lifted an eyebrow. “I thought no one past the eighth grade actually did that.” Brian’s lips twitched. “Oh, God, Gus didn’t…”

Brian leaned over and retrieved a sheet of paper from the corner of his desk. Justin took a quick peek and winced.

“I’m thinking of having it framed, putting it up,” Brian said, flicking his fingers at the small selection of pictures, shots of Gus and Justin and Michael and Deb, all of them tucked away in the far corner of the room, where the casual visitor was unlikely to see them.

“You wouldn’t,” Justin said, a bit worriedly.

“Would teach him not to mess with Mel’s fax machine,” Brian said, dropping the paper. “He sent it to a few of her clients, too.”

Justin’s lips twitched despite himself. “All the same,” he said, “I think I’ll just add a blue filter and change the font on the logo. It’ll look different enough so he won’t know the difference but it’ll only take a few minutes.”

“He’s just dicking around,” Brian said. “He’s never had enough money for a campaign of this size before and he’s feeling quite important about it.”

“I’m just glad he won’t be my problem much longer,” Justin said, turning for the door. “Emily can deal with him and the commercial.”

“Actually,” Brian said, and Justin could hear the smirk, “she said this morning they want to do an animated one.”

“Fuck,” Justin muttered, and stomped out. Brian always had him and Emily collaborate on those.

It wasn’t until he was halfway to his own office that he remembered the strangeness from that morning. He paused a moment at the end of the hall, glancing out the nearest window onto a spectacular view of downtown Pittsburg. The business district bristled all around, a forest of fingers flipping off the great beyond. Things seemed perfectly fine now. Faxing his ass. Fuck, Lindsay and Mel must’ve had fits.

Emily did, indeed, propose an animated commercial. Justin wasn’t too sure at first—he’d assumed they would go for the traditional sweeping, exotic vistas with a voice-over enumerating the advantages of planning your perfect vacation through Vasquez Travel (and yeah, Brian was right on the feeling important thing)—but Emily’s idea was new and interesting, and the next few weeks sped by as they planned, then storyboarded, then began creating mock-ups. Sometime in late May or early June, spring became summer, the transition from warm to hot and rainy to muggy so gradual Justin didn’t even notice it until Brian turned on the air conditioner for the first time.

“Do you remember when summer used to mean freedom?” Justin asked him as they closed all the windows in the house.

“Feeling trapped?” Brian asked, arching an eyebrow.

“No,” Justin said hastily, “I was just saying—“

“Hey.” Gus appeared at the top of the stairs. Justin lost his train of thought as he frowned at him. When the hell had baggy jeans come back into style? And how were those staying up? “I’m hungry,” Gus said, looking hopefully at Justin.

“We have pasta—“ Justin started. Gus pouted, an astounding contortion of features that, though his face was a near mirror of his father’s, Brian himself would not be able to pull off. “Fine,” Justin capitulated, knowing he probably should have protested more. Gus’ addiction to Liberty Diner food couldn’t be healthy for a growing boy. Justin carefully didn’t think about the literal tons of questionable burgers and strange breakfast combos he’d consumed in his misspent youth. And when exactly was it that he acquired a youth to have misspent?

“Take-out,” Brian said. “I don’t feel like clogging my pores with the air in that place when it’s so hot.”

Justin and Gus exchanged a look, and Justin had to work hard to swallow his laugh when Gus clearly mouthed the word, “freak.”

“I’ll get it,” Justin said, turning to go downstairs. “Gus? Wanna come with?”

“He has to finish his math homework,” Brian said.

“How do you know I haven’t already?” Gus asked. “I could have finished it an hour ago for all you know.”

“Because Justin was using your book as a weight to hold down the edge of the Southington poster enlargement,” Brian said.

Justin escaped down the stairs before he could get pulled into the impending, and nearly daily, homework argument. That had surprised Justin when Gus started school, and even more so as he grew. Brian’s nearly tyrannical insistence that all homework be completed before anything vaguely resembling fun could even be considered had been both out of character and out of place in Brian’s otherwise laissez-fair approach to parenting.

“He can do whatever the fuck he wants after he’s done with his homework,” Brian had said when Justin finally asked about it. “And he can do whatever the fuck he wants when he’s done with school, for that matter. But no kid of mine is going to enter the world without the brains to get himself into and out of anything he wants, and to say a big ‘fuck you’ to anyone stupider than him at the same time.”

“You know, eighty percent of Americans say education is their number one priority,” Justin had observed, oddly touched. “You’re so mainstream.”

“Fuck off,” Brian had muttered, and Justin had felt the sudden urge to give him a ‘you’re a good father,’ blow job. He rarely ignored those impulses.

The air conditioner had been making a real difference, Justin realized as he stepped outside and took his first lungful of heavy, humid air. It was going to be a very hot summer.

The diner was mostly empty this early in the evening, and Justin was pleasantly surprised to find Deb at the front counter. She didn’t work anything even resembling full-time anymore, and it was more luck than anything that let him catch her there. She beamed and kissed his cheek as if she hadn’t seen him that very weekend.

“Food for you and Brian?” she asked, turning towards the kitchen to shout.

“Gus, too,” Justin said. “So dinner for half a dozen.”

Deb laughed and, somewhat to Justin’s surprise, leaned across the counter for a second time to kiss his cheek. “You’re good for him,” she said, and walked away before Justin could muster an answer.

Shrugging, he turned away, scanning the diner for familiar faces. He exchanged smiles with a few Liberty regulars, feeling an uneasy nostalgia as he always did when he came back here. It was so easy to feel at home here, and yet he found it hard to entirely trust that, or even believe it. It had been a long time, and he was a far cry from the kid who used to let the guys pinch his ass for better tips.

Michael sat in a booth off to the side, his back to Justin, hunched over a cup of coffee and a stack of comic books with the listless, dogged air of someone going through the motions. Looking at him sometimes made Justin feel a little sick, the way the sight of Ben’s wasted body had made him feel towards the end. But he couldn’t not go over and say hi, and he didn’t really want to avoid Michael, anyway.

“Hey.”

Michael looked up, and there was a barely noticeable half-beat while he found a smile from somewhere. “Hi. Picking up dinner?”

“Yeah.” Justin slid into the other side of the booth, leaning his elbows on the table and cupping his chin in both hands. The flash of his watch caught the sun and reflected into his eyes, and he was suddenly, strangely conscious of the weight of the Rolex on his wrist, and the way the cuffs of Michael’s shirt were a little frayed.

“You’d think we’d get tired of the food here,” Michael said, sitting forward and mirroring Justin’s pose.

“We did like ten years ago,” Justin said, laughing a little. “But that’s part of the…charm. Or something.”

“Or something,” Michael agreed, the smile starting to slide as the absent look returned to his eyes. He wasn’t there a lot now, Justin thought. It’d been seven months, and still, and of course still, a lot of the time he could sit next to Michael and have an entire conversation with him and Michael wouldn’t be there at all.

“Listen,” Justin said, struck with a thought. “We’re having an office party tomorrow night. It’s the launch for a campaign, and thank God it’s finished. Fucking Vasquez. It’ll be mostly suits and stuff, but it should be fun anyway. Gus and the Munchers are coming, and you should, too.”

That last seemed to catch Michael’s interest, and Justin found himself being really looked at again. “The client was an asshole?” he asked.

Justin rolled his eyes. “He’s very impressed with himself,” he said.

“I bet Brian loves that,” Michael said dryly. “I mean, there’s only so much self-love you can fit into one room.”

“I’m sort of worried, actually,” Justin admitted, grinning. “About what he’ll say if Vasquez asks him to speak at the party.”

Michael’s eyes widened a little. “Oh, God, he wouldn’t.”

“You’re right to thank me,” Justin said, sitting back and adopting the closest approximation of Brian’s tones he could manage. “After all, I’m the only person on the planet who could possibly convince people to buy a product as man, woman, child, monkey, dog, and breeder repellant as its maker, and miracles really do deserve praise.”

Michael laughed outright, and Justin did too. It had been five years, but the look of sheer disbelief on the client’s face and the shocked, awed silence that had swept the party upon Brian’s pronouncement would never fade from his memory. At the time he’d been furious—it was the first campaign launched since Brian took the helm of the company, and Justin had ranted about image and reputation and fucking professionalism for weeks. Brian had just shrugged, said that the fucker had signed on the dotted line and couldn’t back out now, his shit was selling, and Brian could do what he liked.

“He won’t pull that tomorrow,” Michael said, his laughter subsiding.

“I don’t know,” Justin said. “The guy is really getting to him. And I don’t think I’d mind so much, this time.”

“Naw,” Michael said, waving a dismissive hand. “Brian’s not like that anymore.”

Justin blinked, utterly caught off guard. “Not like what?” he asked a little blankly.

“Brian’s changed,” Michael said, shrugging. “Not every goddamn thing is a battle anymore. He doesn’t make himself fight back to the world just because he can.”

“Brian hasn’t changed,” Justin said, oddly aghast at the very idea.

Michael stared at him, opened his mouth, then shut it again. “I wouldn’t worry about tomorrow night,” he said finally.

“Okay,” Justin said. He stood up a bit awkwardly, edging out of the booth and sticking his hands in his pockets. “My food is ready so I think I’m gonna…”

“See you,” Michael said, looking down at his comic book.

“You’ll, uh, you’ll come tomorrow?” Justin asked, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

Michael shrugged again. “Maybe. If I feel like dragging out the monkey suit. Dunno.”

“Okay,” Justin said, taking a step back. “Okay, I’ll see you there. Or, you know, not.” He would be very surprised if Michael actually did show.

He turned away and headed for the counter at a near jog. Luckily, his food actually was ready, and he was able to pay and gather up the small mountain of bags with a minimum of chit chat from Deb.

In the car on the way home, the smells of the food nearly overpowering in the heat, Justin kept fiddling with the radio, turning it on, then off, then on again. The music grated on his nerves, yet he wanted the irritation, the distraction. He felt unsettled, sort of derailed. But then again, Michael could do that to him nowadays. And it wasn’t even just recently, either. Justin didn’t think he would ever forget that awful night, the desperate, uncaring denial in Michael’s words, the way they’d had to corner him and practically hold him down and all tell him that it was over, that Ben wasn’t getting better and all they had was time. It had been so clear to all of them, from the oddly silent Gus to Ben himself, and only Michael had been unable to see it, had insisted until the moment the first wrenching sob of impending loss took him that Ben was getting better, that he was stronger every day.

Justin turned the radio up and opened the windows, letting the hot air batter the side of his face as he stepped on the gas.

Gus was at the dining room table when he got home, glaring into his math book.

“I come bearing food,” Justin said, dropping the bags on the table. “Where’s Brian?”

“Talking to mom,” Gus said, glancing almost disinterestedly at the food.

“Lindsay’s here?” Justin asked, surprised. “Well, don’t eat everything, then, or there won’t be enough for the rest of us.”

He left Gus unpacking the food with that same, uncharacteristic indifference, and followed the faint sound of voices to the study. Brian liked to call it the home office, and it was one, really, fully equipped with computer and printer and fax and multiple phone lines. But there was something in the ambiance of the word study, something about high shelves packed with books, reading by oil lamp or perhaps just by firelight that appealed to Justin, and they’d agreed to disagree on the name.

Brian and Lindsay were on the couch, leaning at opposite ends, their voices low. Justin paused in the doorway before they noticed him, glancing from one to the other. Lindsay wasn’t looking at Brian. Instead, she stared fixedly at the purse she clutched with tense hands in her lap. Brian watched her steadily, and Justin couldn’t entirely blame her for wanting to avoid a look that was meant to strip a person bare.

It was only then, with the shadows under Lindsay’s eyes highlighted by the setting sun, with the tense, enraged line of Brian’s mouth, that all the little wrong things coalesced into one big wrong thing.

Justin inhaled, taking a step forward, and they both looked up at him.

“Oh,” Lindsay said, glancing worriedly behind him. “Is Gus still doing his homework?”

“Yeah,” Justin said, frowning. “Is there—“

“You got dinner?” Brian rose, extending a hand to pull Lindsay up.

“Yeah,” Justin said, stepping back again as they both came towards the door. “Yeah, uh, I think I got enough, Lindsay and of course you’re welcome to stay.”

“Thanks.” Her smile was brittle around the edges as if it might shatter at any moment, and looking at the way her skin stretched over suddenly fragile bones, Justin thought maybe it would take her whole face with it.

They swept by him arm in arm, and Justin stood a moment in their wake, feeling sick unease knot his stomach. They’d only just recovered from Ben, as much as some of them would ever recover. What else could possibly be happening?

Dinner reminded him of home, the last few weeks before he left. Lindsay was mom, smiling charmingly, trying valiantly to carry the conversation all on her own. Brian was dad, silent and impenetrable, looking at them all with narrowed, almost suspicious eyes. Gus was Molly, not understanding the tension but definitely feeling it. And Justin was himself, of course, thinking he understood what was ahead and having no idea of the rollercoaster his life was about to become, the choices he would make. Justin reached for another chicken sandwich and told himself to stop being such a fucking drama princess. He was hardly about to flee the home he’d known for so long for a life full of uncertainties. Whatever it was, they’d deal.

Lindsay stayed long after dinner, curled up on the couch in front of the TV with Gus on one side and Brian on the other. Justin stayed in the dining room, doing the final checks on the Vasquez campaign, peripherally aware that there was very little talking happening in the living room. But he spent most of the night on the phone with Emily, who had stayed in the office for just that reason, and he didn’t even notice when Lindsay finally took Gus home, or when Brian went upstairs.

“It’s nearly one,” Emily said finally, “and this is as good as we’re going to get it.”

“Yeah.” Justin sat back, rolling his shoulders. He clicked play on the laptop one more time, watching the commercial role with the sound off. It was new and eye-catching, animation so perfect it was clearly super real. They could have easily produced something that looked like real people in real surroundings, but Emily had been right about this. There was an otherworldly quality to the scenes of Tahiti and Fuji and parts even more exotic, a sense that there was something extraordinary to be found if one just called the 1-800 number scrolling across the bottom. It was good work. Even Brian had said so, and he wasn’t in the habit of complimenting campaigns he didn’t have a direct hand in. Which, Justin thought a bit morosely, were the vast majority of them nowadays. Brian just didn’t have the time to design and implement campaigns like he used to.

“This is good stuff,” he said to Emily. “Brian likes it, too.”

“High praise indeed,” Emily said dryly, though he knew she was pleased. Brian scared her a little, he thought. She’d been head of the audiovisual design department for nearly a year, but she still got a little wide-eyed around Brian. She needed to get over that, Justin thought, beginning to gather up his work. She had real talent, and a lot of it. She just needed to remember it more often.

“I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow,” he said, shutting down the laptop. “You bringing anyone to the party?”

She laughed. “Hardly. Like I have time for romance in this job. Not all of us came in happily married like you.”

“I’m not married,” Justin said automatically.

“Close enough not to count,” she said. “Anyway, good night.”

“Night,” Justin said, trying not to laugh himself. It was close enough, he supposed, though not as close as she might think. And the difference definitely did count.

Brian was asleep when he got upstairs, and Justin slid in beside him carefully. If he weren’t so tired he’d not have cared, he’d have pulled the covers back and sucked Brian’s dick until he stopped complaining and started moaning. But sleep was disturbingly more appealing than sex, and Justin decided to surrender to it rather than stay awake and contemplate how depressing that was.

Brian was gone the next morning, from the house as well as the bed. Justin grumbled to himself and the birds as he gulped his coffee. Brian could have woken him, it wasn’t like he couldn’t always find something to do at work.

The day was a tedium of frustration. They were done with the campaign, dotted every I, crossed every T, and yet Vasquez felt the need to call every twenty minutes and recount each dot and each cross yet again. The only thing Justin had to be grateful for was that the man wouldn’t physically be in Pittsburg until later that night for the launch party, and so he couldn’t come and hover over Justin’s shoulder.

He got out of work a little later than he’d been expecting, and Brian’s car was already in the garage when he got home. Justin jogged up the stairs, stripping as he went. The bathroom was all steamed up, and he stepped into the shower as Brian was stepping out.

“Half an hour,” Brian said, copping a feel in passing.

Justin slapped his hands away and ducked under the water. When he emerged a few minutes later Brian was standing in the doorway to the walk-in closet, a shirt in either hand, contemplating them with a frown. They were nearly identical aside from the depth of the shade of cream.

“That one,” Justin said, pointing to the lighter one.

Brian’s frown deepened, but he rehung the darker shirt without a word. Justin stood, dripping a little, disconcerted. The darker one would have been better, and when the fuck had Brian started doing exactly what he said? He shouldn’t be changing the rules like that on Justin, not after nearly thirteen years of reverse psychology. Bastard.

Justin reached for a towel and turned to the mirror to deal with his hair. He saw Brian re-emerge from the closet in the reflection, the shirt still unbuttoned, jacket and tie draped over his arm. As he crossed the room the shirt moved, flashing a quick glimpse of nipple, then concealing it again. Brian caught him looking in the mirror, and Justin’s breath hitched as their eyes locked for a long moment.

Then Brian crossed the room in two long strides, dropping his armful carelessly on the counter as he stepped up close behind Justin. He slid his hands around Justin’s waist, stroked his palms up his ribs, then brushed his fingertips over his nipples. Justin sighed and leaned back into him. He started to lower his hands from his hair, but Brian made a soft, negative sound, not even a real word, and Justin paused. He felt a little silly with his arms upraised, his fingers laced through the sides of his hair, but Brian seemed to like the way it bared his torso for eyes and hands. He stroked Justin from waist to shoulders, then down and up again, the palms of his hands just a little pleasantly rough on the skin of Justin’s chest. Brian’s eyes followed his hands in the mirror, and he leaned forward, sucking lightly at the side of Justin’s throat as he reached the nipples again. He took them delicately between his fingers, rolled them slowly, flicked the tips with the flats of his nails. Justin breathed out, swaying back into him, thinking that he should say they didn’t have time, that they were going to be late. Brian insinuated a thigh between his, spreading Justin’s legs a bit as Brian still plucked delicately at his nipples. The towel at his waist began to slide.

“Brian—“

Brian pinched hard, and Justin broke off in a soft moan. The towel fell away as he ground backwards, wanting the feel of Brian’s hard-on even through his pants. The texture of the slacks on his bare ass was a low bass note of pleasure accompanying the sharp, urgent, almost painful descant as Brian pinched tighter, then slowly released his nipples.

“We’re leaving the party early,” Brian said into his ear, then stepped back.

Justin glared at him in the mirror, holding the edge of the counter for a moment to regain his equilibrium. Brian watched, buttoning his shirt with fingers that trembled only a little, smirk reaching unbearable proportions of smugness when Justin bent to retrieve the towel.

“Fuck off,” Justin said grumpily. Hard-ons and dress pants did not go well together. He glanced up after a moment when Brian hadn’t answered. He had moved up to the counter next to Justin and was leaning over, squinting into the mirror, tilting his head this way and that. “Are you getting a pimple?” Justin asked, amused.

“No.” Brian finally seemed to settle on an angle, and he leaned even closer, running his fingers through the hair at his right temple. “Oh my God,” he said slowly, and Justin had never heard him sound quite so shocked. “Oh my God.”

“What?” Justin dropped the towel again and pushed close next to him, squinting. “If you have lice or some shit like that—“

“Don’t even joke about live…things in my hair,” Brian said, shuddering a little. The retort was quick, entirely Brian, but he still didn’t tear his eyes away from the mirror.

“What?” Justin repeated impatiently.

“I may have to drink heavily for the rest of my life,” Brian said slowly, then paused a moment. “Such as it is.”

Justin leaned in closer, a suspicion beginning to form. “Oh my God, are you serious? You have gray hair?”

Brian flinched as if struck. “Christ, can you see it from there?”

“No, no,” Justin said hastily, controlling his laughter with a Herculean effort. “I just—lucky guess. But seriously, you have—“

“One,” Brian said sharply. “One. Singular.”

“Well, everyone has to start somewhere,” Justin said. He pushed Brian’s hand aside and squinted. “I don’t see it.”

“Really? You’re not just saying that?”

“If I could see it, don’t you think I’d be mocking you a lot more right about now?”

“I’m going to pluck it,” Brian said, baring his teeth in a somewhat frightening manner.

“Okay,” Justin said, still contemplating the side of Brian’s head. “But you know it’ll just grow back, right? And it’ll probably bring friends.”

Brian finally looked away from the mirror, though it was only to glare at him. “You know this is entirely your fault, right?” he said. “I lay the blame for my premature…graying,” he stumbled a bit over the word, “on you and your antics.”

“My antics?” They were already standing very close, and Justin had only to move an inch to press against Brian’s side. He stretched up and propped his chin on Brian’s shoulder, then leaned up more and kissed the offending temple.

“Careful,” Brian said sharply, “it might be contagious.”

“Maybe,” Justin said, nuzzling his ear, “but I’m a blond. It’ll take a lot longer to really show.”

“Get off,” Brian said, pushing at him. “I need to get rid of the thing.”

“I promise to still fuck you,” Justin said, dancing a step back. “Even when you’ve gone entirely gray and you can’t even get it up anymore.”

Brian opened his mouth, and Justin could see half a dozen withering retorts primed at the ready. But then the mouth closed again and Brian contented himself with one appalled look before turning his back and starting to dig through the vanity.

Justin would have liked to stay and watch, for the few glimpses he caught of Brian, hunched over the sink and wielding one of those eyebrow thingies like a surgeon’s scalpel were downright fascinating in an Animal Planet Brian Kinney special sort of way. But they were definitely going to be late now, and by the time he was dressed and ready to go, Brian seemed to have completed his operation.

“What’d you do with it?” Justin asked when they met up in the bedroom.

“I flushed it down the toilet,” Brian said, adjusting his cufflinks.

“Pity,” Justin said as they headed for the stairs. “I was thinking of getting it bronzed, putting it on the mantle.”

“Your balls would be next,” Brian said, and stomped off for the garage. Justin grinned and followed far enough behind to enjoy the view.

They were, in fact, late, though the only person who seemed to mind was Vasquez, and Justin counted that in the plus column. Brian had apparently forgiven him sometime on the silent drive, because when they entered the party his arm had somehow found its way around Justin’s waist and his thumb had hooked itself into the watch pocket of Justin’s pants. The gesture somehow reminded Justin of the post-Ethan days, when Brian had been utterly incapable of keeping a hand off Justin’s shoulder or back or ass when they were in public, and equally as incapable of admitting it. Justin shrugged off the odd comparison and simply enjoyed the brush of their hips as they walked.

He stayed at Brian’s side as they made the rounds, exchanging greetings and congratulations. Justin had to do all the handshaking for both Brian’s hands were occupied; one with a glass of champagne and the other warm and intimate at the top of his thigh, dangerously close to his crotch. Cynthia, stunning in red silk, sent a pointed eyebrow at it, but Brian just got another glass and said he was the boss and he could fondle his employees whenever he liked.

“This is the only company I’ve ever worked for where I was absolutely sure my boss didn’t want to fondle me,” Cynthia said dryly.

“There’s Lindsay,” Justin said, before Brian could come up with anything too spectacularly politically incorrect. He was pretty sure he’d seen Brooke Montrel from the Gazette somewhere around here.

Lindsay approached, towing a Gus who looked supremely uncomfortable in his tux.

“Where’s Mel?” Justin asked, glancing behind them. He hadn’t seen Mel in some time, and he would have liked to catch up.

“Uh, she didn’t come,” Lindsay said, looking at Brian, not him.

“Lucky,” Gus muttered.

“Damn it,” Brian said, glancing over Justin’s head. “Vasquez. He probably wants a toast or something.”

“Be good,” Justin said, jabbing a warning elbow into his side. “We’ll still have to deal with him while the campaign is running.”

“You mean you will,” Brian said, smirking. “I can just make you deal with everything.”

“Don’t you dare,” Justin warned.

He waited for the snappy retort, or at the very least for a Brian Kinney classic ‘this is the closest I can get to saying fuck you right now’ look. But instead, Brian studied him a moment, then caught his chin between two fingers and placed a quick, hard kiss on his mouth. Justin started, clutching at Brian’s shoulders as he felt the swift, possessive flick of Brian’s tongue. Then Brian straightened, smirk oddly absent, and stepped away to intercept the rapidly approaching Vasquez.

Justin’s hand went up to touch his lips without thought, and he heard a soft laugh.

“He can still make you go completely starry-eyed,” Lindsay said softly. Justin glanced at her, then looked again, caught by the sadness in the line of her mouth.

“Oh, God,” Gus said. “You’re going to talk about love and…stuff. I’m going to go get some food.”

Justin laughed as they watched him walk away. Lindsay did too, a little, the lines of fatigue around her eyes easing for a moment. Justin studied her, the alarm from the night before returning.

“What’s going on?” he asked softly, taking her arm.

All mirth vanished, and she looked down at her glass. “Brian didn’t tell you, I guess,” she said with a sigh. “I assumed he would.”

“Tell me what?”

“Mel…left me,” she said, her voice catching only the slightest bit.

Justin’s hand clenched, and she made a small, pained sound. “Sorry,” he said, snatching his hand back. “Sorry I—I don’t understand. When—what happened?”

“Yesterday,” she said. “And it wasn’t sudden. Well, I mean, it was sudden. Really sudden. But she, uh, she told me three weeks ago.” She laughed, a small, bitter cough of a sound. “Like giving notice on a lease.”

“My God,” Justin said hollowly. “I had no idea. Is there…is there someone else?”

“No.” She shook her head. “She says not, and I believe her.”

“Then why…” Justin floundered, utterly lost.

Lindsay looked away into the crowd. She turned her glass slowly in her fingers, round and round and round, and the wine inside it swirled almost mesmerically. “She fell out of love with me,” she said finally, looking back at him.

“Oh,” Justin said. He realized that he was clasping his hands so tightly together that they were beginning to ache, and he unclenched them with difficulty. “Oh, uh. I don’t…you were so happy.”

“I was happy,” Lindsay said, shrugging. “And she was, too, for a while. Then she stopped being happy.”

“What about Gus?” Justin asked. He glanced over to where Gus stood, hovering proprietarily over a tray of cheeses at the buffet.

“Gus is very much Brian’s child,” Lindsay said. “You never know how he’s going to react to something until it happens, and even then most of the time you still don’t know.” She glanced back at Justin and dug up a smile from somewhere. “Thank you for taking him so much lately. I didn’t want him around for…you know.”

“Of course,” Justin said automatically. “And if, you know, you need some time we can…”

“Thanks.” She squeezed his arm and sipped her drink. “Brian already offered, and I appreciate it. But I think it would be best if Gus and I stick close for a while. I don’t want him feeling like I’m going away, too.”

“You’re a good parent,” Justin said. “You’re…an amazing parent.”

“Just not a good wife, it seems.” He reached for her, but she sidestepped, shaking her head. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. Sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Justin said, catching her hand with a little effort. “Mel’s…I don’t understand this at all, but Mel’s an idiot.”

“You’re sweet.” She squeezed his hand then pulled hers away. “Brian offered to specially design a national ad campaign to that effect.”

“You, uh, you told him right away?” Justin asked, hoping his voice was casual.

“Within a few days, yeah. I thought I could, you know, talk her out of it.”

“Yeah,” Justin said slowly. “Yeah.” He glanced around the room, searching for Brian, and realized to his surprise that everyone around them was applauding. Brian stepped away from the front of the room, lowering his glass and smirking at all and sundry. He’d made the toast while they talked, and Justin hadn’t heard a word. “Listen,” he said, turning back to Lindsay, “Brian and I were planning on getting out of here early tonight. But if you need—“

“No, no.” She waved dismissively at him. “Go on. I’m tired. Gus and I’ll be heading out, too, I think.”

“Okay.” He hugged her suddenly, impulsively, pressing his cheek into her soft hair and squeezing her shoulders. “I’m so sorry,” he said, because there was nothing else to say.

She sniffed, but when they parted there were no tears. “Thanks. Night, kiddo.”

“Good night.” He kissed her cheek and turned away, making a beeline for Brian. “Come on,” he said, catching Brian’s arm before he could get sucked into conversation. “We’re leaving.”

“Just can’t wait for it, can you?” Brian asked, reaching for his ass.

“Oh yeah,” Justin said through clenched teeth, sidestepping him. He took a quick, hard look at Brian, then leaned in for an even quicker sniff. “You’re fucking drunk,” he said, disbelieving.

“Well, yeah,” Brian said, reaching for him again. “It’s a party.”

“Whatever,” Justin said, catching his wrist and pulling him towards the door. Except that this was an office party, and Brian never got really drunk at those, especially not on Beam.

“I’m coming,” Brian said, struggling to keep up. “At least I will be.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Justin said. “Plans have changed a bit.”

There was a small pause as they wove through the crowd, Justin nodding terse goodbyes when necessary. Then, as they stepped through the door, Brian spoke again, sounding not nearly as drunk. “Thought they might,” he said, and when Justin glanced back at him Brian’s mouth was tight, his eyes hard.

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Justin held it in all the way home. Brian sat slumped in the passenger seat, arms crossed almost defensively over his chest, sullen and uncommunicative. That was fine with Justin. He didn’t want to have this conversation, this fight, in the car.

He had been planning to let Brian sober up a bit first, too, get some water into him and give his rather extraordinary metabolism a chance to assert itself. But they’d taken only three steps into the house when Justin decided to hell with it and spun on Brian with all the fury that had built up over the past half hour.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?” he demanded.

Brian was stil a moment, and Justin could see him about to play dumb, about to blink with infuriating innocence and ask what he was talking about and make Justin want to scream. But then Brian just shrugged and sneered. “Why didn’t you ask?”

Justin ground his teeth, threw his keys on the foyer table, and headed for the kitchen. He stood before the refrigerator for a moment, not quite seeing the shopping list magnetted to the front, entries in both their handwriting, the little notes they made to each other for reminders. He let out a sharp, angry breath and jerked the door open, reaching for the water.

He hadn’t heard Brian follow him, and so he jumped when he turned to see Brian behind him, hovering by the island, an indiscernible expression on his face. Justin shoved the water bottle at him then went back into the fridge for one of his own. He crossed to the window, staring out into the night as he drank.

“You knew for nearly three weeks,” he said finally. “You knew and you didn’t tell me.”

“Wow,” Brian said, the mockery fairly dripping, “you’re really pissed about this.”

“Yeah,” Justin said. “I’m really fucking pissed. First that you didn’t tell me for all this time, and second that you made Lindsay do it in the middle of a fucking party with Gus ten feet away. Do you really think she needs that?”

“So I’m an inconsiderate asshole,” Brian said. “This is long established.”

“Jesus.” Justin squeezed the water bottle tightly, listening to the plastic creaking as it compressed. “You’re really fucking something, you know that?” he said finally. “We…” He floundered a moment, stumped as he always was, as he always had been and probably always would be for the words to say what exactly they were. “…fucking live together, Brian. You’re supposed to tell me these things.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t,” Brian said, and Justin heard the thunk of his water being set down on the counter. “So if the tantrum is over, I want to go to bed.”

“Have you even talked to Gus?” Justin asked. “Because, let me tell you, if this is how you’re going to be handling things, it really fucking sucks.”

“Gus and I talked,” Brian said. “And he has Linds and Deb and even Mikey.”

“Fuck!” Justin said explosively, spinning around to face him. “Does everyone know but me?”

Brian was still standing at the island, his hands braced at the edge. His lip curled and he watched Justin through drunken, cold eyes. “Maybe everyone else is just a lot fucking better at noticing the obvious,” he said. “And maybe the reason I didn’t tell you was I was trying to avoid you taking it personally. Because if I’m an inconsiderate asshole, then you’re a selfish brat, and maybe I didn’t want to deal with that.”

“What the—I’m not taking this personally,” Justin shouted.

“Sure you’re not,” Brian said, straightening up and dropping his hands to his sides. “Whatever. I’m going to bed.”

He turned on his heel and walked out, and Justin had to work very hard not to hurl his water bottle after him, let it break open on the ceramic tiles and spray everywhere. It had been a long time since he’d felt like this, a long time since they’d fought over anything more important than where to get dinner, and the anger burned strangely in his veins. It used to be like this a lot, he remembered, the outrage that could spark between them like tinder. He’d forgotten that, somehow.

Justin turned back to the window, squinting into the night. The bird-feeder was a vague shape, distinguishable only because he knew where to look. He leaned against the window and laid his cheek on it. The glass was warm on his skin, heated with the coming of summer.

“Fucking inconsiderate asshole,” he muttered to the bird feeder, then turned away and headed upstairs.

Brian was in bed when he climbed in, lying on his back, arms tucked neatly up to his chest, breathing evenly. Justin watched him a moment, then rolled away. They could talk in the morning. Or not talk in the morning, he really didn’t care which right then.

He slept fitfully, not dreaming, but not resting, either. He woke deep into the night, knowing before he opened his eyes to check the clock that it was not morning by the aching exhaustion of his body. But this had happened enough for him to know it was no use staying in bed, so he slipped out from under the covers and went out onto the balcony.

He stood at the rail, looking out over the backyard and not seeing it. This happened to him sometimes. He would go for months and be fine, and then suddenly, with no warning, he would wake in the night, full of a restless, unchanneled energy, tired but wired, thoughts like fireflies, incandescent and eye-catching, but ultimately formless and unclaimable. It had been happening a little more often in recent months, Justin realized as he leaned over the railing, letting the slight breeze brush gentle fingers over his bare chest. Sometimes he would draw, and that would satisfy him, allow him to sleep again. He considered the pad of paper waiting for him on his nightstand, and realized to his surprise that he couldn’t remember the last time he’d used it. It’d been weeks at least, probably more like months.

He stood there a long time, mind following a thousand paths of association and easy, rambling thought. He wondered if the Vasquez Travel commercial would win any awards this year, if Brian would finally snap and kill himself with a letter opener rather than deal with anymore bureaucratic tangles, how Gus was doing with the changes in his life, if Mel and Lindsay had fought a lot before Mel made her announcement or if there had been a numb sort of peace. The anger faded, siphoned off and carried away on the summer wind, and he wondered if Brian were right. Well, not entirely right, but maybe just a teeny-tiny bit right.

He turned finally when his legs were tired from standing for so long. He didn’t feel sleepy exactly, but the idea of lying in bed was appealing. He stepped back inside and stopped.

“Come here.” Brian beckoned to him, lifting the covers.

Justin complied, slipping beneath them and into Brian’s arms. Brian held him tightly for a moment, almost too tight, then loosened his hold so his hands could slide up Justin’s chest.

“I think we left off right about here,” he said, taking Justin’s nipples in his fingers again.

“Aren’t we supposed to actually make up before we have make up sex?” Justin asked, arching his back a little.

“We rarely do what we’re supposed to,” Brian said. “Besides, this is the fun part.”

They kissed, and Justin’s objections, such as they were, melted away in the slide of their tongues. Brian’s hands were gentle on his skin, stroking his chest and his belly, tracing the grooves of his ribs, pulling off his boxers. Brian was wearing nothing, and they threw off the covers, needing the marginally cooler air from the open balcony doors.

“How do you want me?” Justin asked, coming up for air.

“Any way,” Brian said, and his hands became more insistent, more desperate. Justin lay on his back beneath him and let himself cry out when Brian pushed two fingers hard into him.

“You like it?” Brian asked, his breath rushing on Justin’s shoulder as he bent his head to watch his hand working between Justin’s thighs.

“I love it,” Justin said, scissoring his legs a little. “Come on.”

“Gonna fuck you so hard,” Brian breathed, dropping hard, fervent kisses all over Justin’s face.

“Please,” Justin said, tilting his head back as if catching raindrops. The words were familiar, almost rote, but they ignited that thing between them, the thing that was all about the fucking and how good their bodies were together and how no one else could ever make it that good and just what that meant.

Brian pushed into him, and Justin lifted his legs, hooking them over Brian’s arms. Brian braced himself over him, watching Justin as he thrust. He paused a moment, hitching Justin up a little, the slap of his hips on skin the only sound aside from their breathing. Justin curled up more, arching his back and pushing into Brian, letting Brian support the weight of his lower body as he tossed his head back and breathed through his clenched teeth. A warm breeze wafted in through the open balcony doors. Justin moaned as Brian moved and it snuck in to caress his ass, to whisper over the place where they were so intimately joined. Brian made a low, appreciative sound, and Justin knew it must feel good on his balls.

“Turn over,” Brian said finally, pulling out. Justin did, scrambling in his haste to comply, to get Brian back inside him. He went up on all fours, then let his shoulders drop to the bed when Brian seized his hips and thrust back into him.

“Thought you said you were going to fuck me hard,” Justin taunted.

“This isn’t hard enough for you?” Brian asked, and Justin keened as he moved faster, then faster still.

“No,” he said when he could talk again. “Not fast enough.”

“You want more?” Brian held his hips tighter, moved forward, settled over Justin’s back.

“Yes,” Justin said. “I want more. Please.”

Brian gave him more. Justin held onto the sheets and shouted, then had to move fast to grab the headboard and hold himself steady so he wouldn’t be pushed face first in to it. Brian was hot and hard and unforgiving inside him, and Justin arched his back, seeking even more. Brian released his hip with one hand, and hooked it under Justin’s thigh, lifting it and him. Justin went up onto his hands, following the motion, and it was as if Brian were holding his whole body up as he fucked him. Justin felt cradled, engulfed, possessed, and he didn’t have to twist his body anymore, to search for it with every cell of his being because now it was coming for him in a great, towering wave. He was sure he screamed when he came, though Brian’s accompanying cry didn’t register until much later.

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He woke to the sun high in the sky, a dry mouth, and an aching body. Justin lay still a moment, trying to remember just what the fuck he’d done last night. Oh. Yes. What the fuck, indeed.

He rolled over experimentally, groaning pitifully. His ass hurt and his leg and arm muscles were limp and almost useless. He felt disconnected, groggy, like waking from a sedative or a very deep, badly needed sleep. He wanted some water.

Brian was in the bathroom, considering himself in the mirror when Justin stumbled in. Brian wasn’t particularly one for mirrors; he preferred the reflection of himself in other people’s eyes. But Justin really had to piss before he thought about that, so he only mumbled something and headed for the toilet.

“What’re you doing?” he asked, after he’d relieved himself and taken a few sips from the tap. Brian hadn’t even commented on the sheer grossness of that, which was also weird.

“It came back,” Brian said tonelessly.

“It?” Justin said blankly. “Oh, your…thing. Uh, I don’t think it’s the same one, Brian.”

“It brought friends,” Brian said.

Justin approached him and leaned over. “Wow,” he said, blinking at the small constellation of unmistakably gray hairs visible against a darker patch of brown on Brian’s temple. “I didn’t really believe you yesterday.”

“It’s true,” Brian said, in that same, mechanical tone.

They stood there a moment, both contemplating the hairs.

“Maybe it’s sex,” Justin said after a moment. “Maybe sex makes them grow in. Maybe you’re just not up to the exertion anymore.”

“I think your ass would say otherwise,” Brian said, a spark of his usual self returning.

“If your doctor told you, I don’t know, that if you didn’t stop having sex you’d die, what would you do?” Justin asked curiously.

“Die fucking and happy,” Brian said immediately.

“Hmm,” Justin said. “How’d I know?” He shifted against the vanity counter and winced as his hip protested. Brian glanced down, then ran a finger from Justin’s thigh to his ribs. Justin followed the look, surprised to see the vivid bruising showing up on his skin. He was alarmed for a moment, unsure where all that had come from, before he remembered Brian’s hands on him, gripping fiercely, moving him as he pleased. It had been a long time since they’d fucked like that, left souvenirs on each other to remind them for days.

“Let me see,” Brian said huskily.

Justin nodded, feeling the heat rise in his face. This, too, they hadn’t done in a while, but no matter how often they’d done it in the past it always got to him. He turned and bent at the waist, resting his head in his crossed arms on the countertop. He peeked through his lashes, watching Brian in the mirror as he moved to stand behind him.

“You’re pretty red and swollen,” Brian said, spreading his cheeks and leaning over.

“Yeah,” Justin said. “It hurts.”

“I bet,” Brian said. He ran a single finger down the crack of his ass, and Justin twitched when it rasped over his sensitive hole. “You got it real good,” Brian continued, sounding perfectly satisfied. He stroked the finger over the hole once more, then leaned in and licked just once, long and wet, the roughness of his tongue almost agonizing. Justin shook all over and squeezed his eyes shut tight. There was no way he could have sex again right now, but fuck that was good.

Brian straightened and dug through the cabinet, looking for the antiseptic cream they liked. Justin waited, then sighed as Brian began working it into him. It was the intimacy of this that always stuck with him. Which, really, was sort of silly considering Brian had had much more intimate parts than his fingers in Justin’s ass, and for much more interesting purposes than soothing an ache. But even so, there was always a thrill in this, a sense of completion and rightness, as if it were part of the sex, too.

“Brian?” he asked, keeping his eyes closed. “Do you really think I missed it all this time? Was it really obvious?”

“No,” Brian said, and dropped a single, almost shy kiss at the nape of his neck. “It wasn’t obvious at all.” He withdrew his fingers, and Justin straightened slowly.

“Okay,” he said, smiling tentatively at Brian in the mirror. “Sorry.” Brian nodded, but didn’t speak. Justin didn’t mind—the kiss had been more than enough.

Brian moved to the sink to wash his hands, and now that Justin knew where to look the gray hairs jumped right out at him.

“What’re you going to do about those?” he asked, hooking a thumb at them.

Brian considered. “Nothing,” he said finally, and turned to dry his hands.

“Nothing?” Justin repeated, surprised. “No drinking binge? No twenty-one-year-old twinks? No new sports car? No *dye*?”

“No,” Brian said. “Seems an awful lot of effort.” He smiled a little at Justin’s bafflement, then shrugged. “Besides, no dye could match the natural beauty of my hair.”

“It’s a fucking national monument, it is,” Justin said, going for his toothbrush.

“Damn right,” Brian said, and went back into the bedroom. It was Saturday, but they usually worked at least the afternoon most weekends.

Justin considered himself in the mirror as he brushed. The bruises were quite extensive, and he found himself being continually startled by them, almost frightened. He wondered if Brian would really stick to the no dye thing. The idea of Brian not doing anything about it, not even wanting to, bothered Justin, and he regarded his own perplexed face with sympathy. The things that man put him through.

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The next few weeks crawled by, seeming to slow as the temperature rose. There was plenty to occupy his time at work, as always, and Justin spent long hours there, arriving before dawn and leaving after dark several times a week. The house was a little awkward, a little uneasy, because apologies couldn’t erase the fact that there had been a fight, and Justin couldn’t shake the feeling that they had been fighting about the wrong thing, anyway.

It was dangerous, he reflected late one night in the third week of June as he stood once more out on the balcony. Dangerous because no matter what was happening, whether they were fighting or blissfully happy or whatever it was in between that they were now, being with Brian was still the best thing to happen in Justin’s day. It was only when they were apart, when Brian was sleeping or holed up in his office that the unease could really come and not be soothed away simply by Brian’s presence.

Gus and Lindsay came to dinner perhaps a bit more than usual, though Justin only knew this from a few comments Lindsay dropped when they ran into each other at the diner late one Saturday. He found himself eating dinner alone in his office most nights, or with Emily if she was around. Gus was his usual self, as far as Justin had been able to see, and none of them had heard anything from Mel aside from the fact that she’d found an apartment for herself. She wasn’t only leaving Lindsay, Justin thought. She was leaving all of them, really, because he didn’t think any one of them could quite look her in the eye right now.

He lost track of time as the days blurred into each other, like a watercolor portrait left out in the rain, the picture running into itself until it was indistinguishable. Justin went to work, came home, slept, didn’t sleep. He tried to draw a few times, but his hands were empty, lifeless, and he crumpled up the half-formed, jerky attempts more frustrated than when he had started. He was uneasy yet groggy, worried and not sure of what, angry and not sure at whom, questioning things he had once held unquestionable.

Brian was a moody ghost in his life, a warm body beside him at night and a cool smile across the conference table at work. Justin noticed the distance growing between them, cared and didn’t care, wanted to fix it and didn’t know how. Brian hadn’t dyed his hair, and every time Justin caught sight of the tiny, barely visible speckles of gray he was more irritated, more unsettled. He wished Brian would flip out, have a minor melt-down, create drama like a storm around them both. But Brian didn’t, and Michael’s words taunted Justin when he woke in the middle of the night.

His mom called on the summer solstice, bubbling over with pleasure. She’d been having a serious case of empty nest that hadn’t subsided in the four years Molly had been away at school. But now Molly was back, the ink mostly dry on her diploma, dusty and road weary from her post-graduation cross-country road trip.

“This Friday,” Mom said. “I mean, most of her friends aren’t in Pittsburg anymore, but we can have a good enough party just family. You guys can come, right?”

Justin told Brian that night as they were getting into bed.

“Remind me,” Brian said absently, reaching for him. “Come here.”

Justin nodded and went. He couldn’t remember a time when they were talking less and having more sex. Well, he could, but he’d also been seventeen then. The comparison was oddly comforting.

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It wasn’t until he’d changed shirts twice that Justin realized what he was doing and laughed at himself. She was just his dorky kid sister, but he’d missed her and he wanted to show her that he’d really done good while she was away. They were both email people, but words on the computer screen and the tinny distortion of voices over a cross-country cell connection just weren’t enough sometimes. Justin considered the current shirt and nodded decisively.

“Hot stuff,” he said, because Brian was already departed for the office and couldn’t say it for him. “You don’t look a day over twenty.”

He spent the day annoying the fuck out of everyone who crossed his path, telling them about his sister, how she’d graduated with honors, all the guys she had begging at her feet.

“God, I’m glad you’ll never have children,” Emily said during lunch. She paused, flushing a little. “Uh, I didn’t mean—you can adopt or whatever but—“

“No, no,” Justin said hastily. “Not one of those fags, thank you. We’ve got Gus, anyway.”

“He’s lucky,” Emily said, stealing a French fry off his plate and dipping it in his ranch. “He’s got two sets of parents and it’s not something out of a Jerry Springer episode. Or, well, not usually.”

“Yeah,” Justin said, his smile fading.

“Something wrong?”

“No,” he said, surprising himself. There was no reason to be concealing the news. Emily knew Mel and Lindsay pretty well at this point, and she was hardly a gossip. But just the thought of discussing it soured Justin’s appetite, and he pushed his plate towards her. “Here. Knock yourself out. I’ve got to go to a party.”

“Bastard,” she said, cheerfully waving a fry. “Have fun.”

Cynthia had long since been promoted beyond the personal assistant level, though Brian had fought it tooth and nail up until she told him about the offer of an exec position with their chief rival.

“I was waiting for her to show some real balls about it,” was all he would say on the subject of his reluctance.

“You mean you just need her too much and didn’t want to replace her,” Justin had returned. “Admit it, she’s the only one crazy enough to deal with you.” Brian had stared at him, utterly blank faced. “Shut up,” Justin muttered.

Linda, the current (ninth? Justin wasn’t sure anymore) occupant of Cynthia’s former desk smiled warmly at him as he entered. Justin liked her. She looked harmless enough, but he’d seen her put Brian in his place more than once. They might just finally have found themselves a match. And about time, too—the position of Brian Kinney’s personal assistant was spoken of in hushed tones of mingled awe and terror among those in line for it.

“Go right on in,” Linda said. “Though be warned, he’s in a bit of a…”

“Temper?” Justin suggested.

“Snit,” Linda said. “Yes, snit covers it quite nicely.”

“Anything in particular?” Justin asked, pausing before her desk. Whatever it was it would doubtless get back to him eventually, but it was nice to be forewarned. And really, he thought with an echo of anger, things had a habit of not actually getting to him when they should, lately.

Linda shrugged. “Not sure. Just general stuff, I think.”

“Yeah,” Justin said. That was certainly enough, lately, for both of them. “Thanks.”

He knocked once, then entered the sanctum sanctorum, shutting the door behind him. Brian sat, completely negating the value of the fancy, and very expensive, ergonomic chair by hunching forward over his desk. He was scowling fiercely into an open folder while his fingers tapped restlessly on the desk’s surface. Justin cleared his throat and Brian jumped.

“What?” he asked, scowl remaining firmly in place as he glanced up.

“It’s after lunch,” Justin said significantly.

Brian blinked vaguely. “Is it naptime?”

“On Friday,” Justin persisted patiently, suppressing the comment that wanted very badly to emerge. “We’ve got somewhere to be.”

Brian blinked again, then the light dawned. “Oh,” he said with little enthusiasm. “Family reunion.”

“Mom’s cooking and lots of alcohol,” Justin countered. He’d been with Brian long enough to learn a thing or two about advertising.

“As captivating as that sounds, I’m not so afraid I’m going to have to take a rain check,” Brian said, glancing back down at that damned folder. “I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Like I don’t? Come on, Molly wants to see you. She’ll be devastated if you don’t come.”

“My heart bleeds,” Brian snapped. “I hate to tell you this, Sunshine, but contrary to popular belief my soul purpose in existing is not to make you and your endless pack of friends and relations happy.”

“Whatever,” Justin snapped, throwing Brian’s desk a disdainful look. “I’ll tell her you would rather do something you hate and avoid at all costs than see her. That’ll go over real well.”

Brian inhaled through his teeth, and Justin could see the retorts forming. He waited, rocking forward almost eagerly. He wanted to fight, he realized, needed the energy, needed an outlet for the sourceless, channelless frustration that had powered him for weeks. He was annoyed and unsettled and downright pissed, and fuck if he knew why, but Brian was as good a person as any to work it out on. Not like he didn’t return the favor on a regular basis.

But then Brian looked away, shrugged almost dismissively. “You do that,” he said, and for a moment he looked supremely weary, reduced, almost small there behind his desk. There were lines around Brian’s eyes, Justin realized with a sick lurch, and not all the good kind. He thought Brian would say more, tell him how much he hated paperwork, the familiar excuse for everything from snappishness to a particularly messy drunken exploit. But Brian only sighed once, very quietly, and returned to the folder.

Justin stared, disbelieving. He wanted to stamp his feet, to shout, “fight with me!” in high three-year-old fashion. Instead, he turned silently on his heel and stomped out. Fucking prick. Fucking Michael and his whacko fucking insights.

http://lookingglass.thelightgetsin.com/bar01.gif

Molly was disappointed not to see Brian, so much so that Justin play pouted at her and pretended great wounded dignity until she laughed and told him to knock it off. The presents he’d brought didn’t hurt, either.

“So,” he said, watching her preening in a new sweater, “you’re probably really tired of hearing this, but what’re you going to do with your degree?”

She shrugged carelessly. “Hell if I know.”

“You know,” Justin said thoughtfully, “I’m sort of jealous. I never finished mine.”

“Well, you didn’t need to,” she said, looking a little strangely at him. “You had the job at Vanguard after the internship, and then Brian did his Lex Luthor impression and took over and what did you need a degree for?”

“I guess,” Justin said, shrugging. “It didn’t bother me at the time what with everything else, but, I mean, it’s not just a piece of paper. There’s stuff I missed learning.”

Molly sniffed. “As someone who lived through senior year of college, I can honestly tell you there’s really not. Besides, you were totally right not to apologize to those assholes.”

“I guess,” Justin said again. “I’d almost forgotten that part.”

“I just need to find a hot hunk of man to do stupid things for and I’ll be all set,” Molly said, and sailed off to the buffet with a flip of her hair.

“She’s a lot like you, you know,” his mom said, appearing at his side. “That man, whoever he will be, won’t know what hit him.”

“I’m not so sure that’s such a good thing,” Justin said lightly.

Mom looked at him, then reached out a gentle finger and touched his cheek, just below his eye. “Is something wrong, sweetheart? You look tired.”

“It’s nothing,” Justin said. “Just haven’t been sleeping as much as I should.”

Mom grinned knowingly. “Glad to know you guys still have it in you.”

“Mom!” He blushed despite himself, thinking for the hundredth time that the alliance of his mother and Deb was a truly unholy thing.

“So it is Brian?” she asked, laughing. “There’s not something else?”

“Yeah,” Justin said. “It’s Brian. He’s being, you know, Brian.”

“Your life is so hard,” Mom said dryly.

“You have no idea,” Justin said. “Look.” He glanced around, checking to see if anyone would overhear. His father was across the backyard, talking with Molly and a few of her friends, a proud, almost relieved smile on his face. It was his ‘the good kid’ smile, and Justin looked away.

“Justin?” Mom touched his arm and he looked back at her.

“Why did you and Dad get divorced?” he asked suddenly.

She started a little, then nodded as if in comprehension. “Deb told me about Mel and Lindsay,” she said.

“I…” Justin said, feeling as if he had been caught doing something naughty.

“It’s fine to ask,” Mom said. “It’s natural to be curious.” She took a deep breath, glancing across the yard to Molly and their father. “We just grew apart. I mean, we were together for a very long time, and people change. That’s just how the world is. And the ways he changed and the ways I changed were different, and suddenly we were two people who were married to each other and that’s the only thing that kept us together. The habit of it. And that’s not enough to sustain a marriage.”

“Oh,” Justin said stupidly. “Uh, I guess that makes sense.”

“But don’t think for a minute that I regret it,” she said, squeezing his arm. “I never could when I got you and Molly out of it. I’ve got two kids with brains and guts and good hearts, and that’s more than enough to make me be glad your father and I married, no matter how it turned out.”

“Molly and I sure are anatomically correct,” Justin said, smiling a little and thinking privately that he didn’t really feel like he had guts, lately.

She swatted at him, and they both laughed. She looked good, Justin thought. She was in her fifties, and she was still slender and elegant, beautiful in the late afternoon sunlight. She was amazing, and he just didn’t understand how people changing could mean not wanting an amazing person anymore.

“You’ll like this,” he said, sliding his arm through hers as they walked away from the buffet. “Brian got his first gray hair.”

“Oh my.” Her eyes sparkled. “That’s a real moment of truth right there. How’d he take it?”

“Really well, actually,” Justin said. “Almost too well. He freaked out for a few minutes, but once he realized they were there and there to stay he seemed to just take it in stride.”

“That’s the best way to go,” Mom said, touching her own hair. “With the amount of money I spend on dyes.”

“I suppose,” Justin said, unconvinced. “I guess I’m just waiting for the fall-out or something. I mean, this is a guy whose turning thirty neuroses could fill a textbook.”

“Well, he did turn thirty quite a while ago,” Mom said.

“Exactly,” Justin returned,. “That’s why it’s so weird.”

“Maybe he’s figured out a different way of dealing with these things,” Mom said, not unreasonably.

“I guess,” Justin said morosely. “I liked the old ways, though. I know how to deal with those.”

http://lookingglass.thelightgetsin.com/bar01.gif

The party wore down in the late afternoon. Justin offered to stay and help with the clean-up, but Mom and Molly both told him to get lost. Sensing impending ‘girl time,’ Justin retreated.

His father was getting into his car as Justin stepped out of the house and headed for his. They exchanged quick, silent nods across the few feet of distance, and Justin had to restrain the impulse to noticeably skirt a perimeter around the man. He couldn’t remember the last time they’d had an actual, civil conversation, and that suited him just fine. It was an uneasy, distrustful peace, but it was a peace.

He drove in silence, turning back towards the business district as a matter of course. It was Friday, but he had a great many things waiting on his desk. The thought was deeply unappealing, almost repugnant, and Justin found himself flexing his hands on the steering wheel as he drove, then looking down at them. They seemed a stranger’s hands, remote and disconnected, the keyboard calluses on someone else’s skin. He glanced up again, the thought occurring that he really should watch where he was driving. The sun was still high in the sky, poised just shy of the brink of rushing descent, and it flashed almost painfully off the window-encrusted sides of the buildings before him, turning them into brightly luminous spears rending the sky. Work was to the left, not the tallest building around, but probably the most elegant. And to the right…

The light turned green and Justin heard horns blaring behind him as he abruptly switched his signal and made a very illegal right turn. Well, he told himself as he gunned the motor, it was only illegal to keep him from killing an oncoming car, and there wasn’t one right now, so really it wasn’t all that illegal.

He didn’t want to deal with the private parking garage, and luck was in his favor. He parked on the street, sliding in against the curb with a neat parallel park that at any other time would have been something to be quite proud of. But just then he had other things on his mind.

The receptionist looked at him dubiously, and Justin couldn’t entirely blame her. His suit was nice enough, but a long day first at work then at the party had left him more than a little disheveled.

“Look,” he said, wondering if he was supposed to bribe her or something. “Just tell her my name. I know she’ll see me. And if she won’t, I’ll go away, no hassle or anything, promise.” He tried a charming smile on her, and she relented.

“Go on up,” she said a minute later, obviously surprised. “Ms. Marcus will see you.”

“Thanks,” he said, and took off for the elevator.

The offices were past plush and right into opulent. Justin had been there a few times before, for office parties and occasionally business meetings. He’d seen Mel’s corner office, too, with its view that rivaled Brian’s, and imposing oak desk. She’d done very well for herself, and unlike Brian, Justin got the feeling that she’d been promoted into the job she wanted, rather than away from it.

She met him as he came off the elevator.

“Justin?” she stopped before him, panting a little, and Justin was startled to see the fear on her face. “Justin, is something wrong? Lindsay? Gus?”

“Oh, God, no,” he said quickly, appalled. “They’re both fine.”

She sagged. “Sorry. I just thought—“

“No, I’m sorry,” he said. “I should have called you directly or something. I really didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s okay.” She straightened, visibly pulling herself together. “Don’t worry about it. Come on back, then.”

He followed her to her office, and accepted the offered seat as she resettled herself.

“I’m really sorry,” he said again, feeling a surge of guilt as he watched her straighten the papers she’d obviously left in quite a hurry.

“It’s alright,” she said, smiling almost genuinely at him. “Just call next time, okay?”

“Sure.”

There was a pause that lengthened past conversational and slipped into uncomfortable. Mel coughed a little, straightening in her chair.

“Was there something I could help you with, Justin?”

“Uh,” he said, suddenly tongue-tied. He’d had a purpose in coming here, still had one, but he couldn’t for the life of him put the proper words to it. “I sort of *am* here about Linds and Gus,” he said finally. “And you.”

“What about us?” she asked evenly.

Justin studied his hands again, plucking uneasily at his nails. “You hurt Lindsay a lot, leaving like that,” he said abruptly.

Mel flinched, barely there but he saw it. “I know,” she said.

“Why’d you do it?”

She sat very still and straight, her face impassive. Justin watched her, feeling his hands twisting around each other in his lap. “You really want to know?” she asked finally. “You want to know all of it?”

“Yes,” Justin said. “That’s what I’m here for.”

“Okay.” She moved then, shifting the papers on her desk and not looking at him. “I was staying late to work on something one night. It was pretty late and I wasn’t quite finished, and the people I was working with were getting ready to go home. And I realized, for no reason that I know of, I realized that I would rather be here than at home.”

Justin blinked. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting, but that wasn’t it. “That’s all?” he asked a bit incredulously.

“No,” she said, laughing a little. “That was just the beginning. I kept thinking about it more and more, and I mean, I should want to go home. That should be the place where I’m happiest. But it wasn’t, and being happy there was something I had to fight for. So I thought about it some more and decided that it would be best to make a clean break.” She shrugged, an economical gesture that somehow communicated a great deal more.

“A clean break,” Justin repeated.

“Well, as much as I could,” she said. “There’s always Gus to think about. But do you really think I’d be doing Gus or…Lindsay any favors if I stayed when I didn’t want to?”

“You don’t have to defend yourself to me,” Justin said.

“I don’t?” she looked at him then, searchingly. “You’re not here to tell me what a selfish bitch I am?”

“No,” Justin said. “It makes perfect sense to me. You weren’t happy anymore and it was better for everyone if you just ended it.”

“Yes,” she said, her face relaxing. “You really understand.”

“I really do,” Justin said, standing. “Look, thanks for seeing me like this. I know you’re busy.”

“Oh,” she said, standing as well. “You, uh, you don’t need anything else?”

“No,” Justin said, taking a few steps back. His heart was pounding, he realized almost absently. “I need to get back to work. No, don’t worry, I can walk myself out. Thanks, again.”

He turned and almost jogged out, not looking back. He’d probably just confused the hell out of her, but he didn’t care. People’s heads turned as he shot down the hall and into the elevator, and then as he flew through the lobby and ducked under the doorman’s arm because the door just wasn’t opening fast enough. He slowed only momentarily by his car, then sped up again. It would take too long to get back out into traffic and drive and find a new place to park. It was only a few blocks, and he could get there faster on foot.

It was a hot day, and the sweat was rolling down his back after just one block. Justin didn’t slow down, though. He was galvanized, almost possessed with sudden, fervent energy. He felt like laughing as people jumped out of his way, as the walk signs flashed on the moment he reached each intersection. The gods of traffic were with him, he thought, and nearly lost his breath laughing. He caught a glimpse of a mother yanking her little girl close as he passed, giving him a frightened, distrustful stare, and he imagined he must look insane running like this. But he didn’t care about that, didn’t care about anything but getting to Brian and…and…and doing what he didn’t know, but it would be gutsy if it were the last fucking thing he ever did. They weren’t going to end up like other people. They were never like other people.

Standing still in the elevator on the way up to Brian’s office was agonizing, but faster than the stairs. Justin leaned against the back wall, panting, but he was the first out the doors as they slid open. Coworkers called bemused greetings as he shot past them, and he literally skidded as he swung around the doorjamb into Brian’s outer office. Linda stood up, asking a question, then calling something to his back as he ignored her and went straight for the inner door. Justin barely noticed as he strode into Brian’s office, opening his mouth to say something, anything, to make it all right.

Brian’s desk was empty, the surface cleaned of papers, even of stray pens and paperclips. Brian’s briefcase was gone, too, Justin saw as he took two more steps into the room.

“Justin?” Linda stood hesitantly in the doorway, frowning worriedly. “Brian isn’t here. Is there something I can help you with?”

“Where is he?” Justin asked. He felt winded, like he’d taken a blow to the gut, like all his momentum had been suddenly and precipitously reversed. “He was supposed to be here all afternoon.”

“I think he went home,” Linda said slowly. “I don’t know what happened—he just came barreling out about an hour ago and told me he was leaving. He looked upset, I think. It’s hard to tell sometimes, you know? Is there something wrong? You look awful.”

“No,” Justin said. “Everything’s fine. I’ve got to go.” He brushed past her and broke into a run again, pretending not to hear her as she called after him.

The journey back to the car was an inverse of emotion, as well as space. A sick dread had settled in Justin’s stomach, a heavy weight that slowed his steps no matter how much the panic growing in his mind urged them to hurry. Brian never left work like that, and he would have called Justin’s cell phone if something was wrong. Depending on what that something was.

He arrived back at the car and had to wait a maddening few minutes for his heart to settle down and to get the sweat out of his eyes so he could drive. He was getting a little out of shape, he thought distantly as he pulled out into traffic. Something to think about later.

The drive was agonizing, too fast and too slow. Justin desperately wanted to get home, wanted to know where Brian was, what he was doing, what he was thinking. Then again, maybe he really didn’t want to know.

The garage door would have taken too long, so he left the car parked a little crookedly in the driveway and went for the front door. Brian’s car wasn’t in the drive or on the street, but the door knob turned easily in Justin’s hand without the use of his key. He took a breath, pushed it open, stepped into the foyer, and promptly lost the breath again. For the second time he was stricken, like a gut punch, and this time it was even worse.

A single suitcase sat at the foot of the stairs, one of the smaller ones Brian had gotten the last time he was in New York. There was a matching one, Justin’s mind noted as his eyes rose from the damning thing to find Brian coming down the stairs, the second one in his hand. Their eyes met and Brian stopped, several steps above the floor. Brian was wearing jeans, Justin saw, with a black T-shirt and casual shoes. Justin thought he might throw up.

“Going somewhere?” he asked.

“Yes,” Brian said.

“Where?” Justin said, feeling the blood pounding in his ears. God damn him.

“Surprise vacation,” Brian said, shrugging almost casually and taking the last few steps so they were standing on a level. He put the second suitcase down next to the first and then seemed at a loss for what to do with his hands.

“Yeah,” Justin said, realizing suddenly that he was still holding the partially open front door. He stepped forward and let it swing shut behind him. The percussion of it rolled through him, the sound fitting enough to make him grit his teeth. “Surprise.”

Brian shrugged again, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Just decided this afternoon,” he said.

“Typical,” Justin said. “Once you decide on something, you really don’t hesitate.”

“Is there a reason I should?” Brian asked.

Justin was silent for a long moment, reaching for that something, the one thing that would be right to say now. Nothing came, and he found his mouth opening with the worst answer on his tongue. “I guess not,” he said, hearing the banked rage in his own voice. “It’s not like I should be surprised. I mean, this is you, after all.”

“Fuck,” Brian said, yanking his hands out of his pockets. “Don’t you pull that shit.”

“What?” Justin said, feeling a thrill course through him. At least they could still fight about it. At least they had that.

“We’re fucking miserable, Sunshine,” Brian said. “I have no idea when it happened, but I don’t remember the last time I felt…” he trailed off, waving vaguely but expressively.

“We’re happy,” Justin protested, hearing his own shrillness, knowing the ridiculousness of the words as he spoke them. “We are.”

“I’m not,” Brian said. “And I didn’t think you were either. We should be, but we’re really not.”

“So, what,” Justin said, deciding not to argue the point. Brian was right, after all. “You think taking off is the answer?”

“Yeah,” Brian said. “I do.” There was a moment of thick silence, and Brian glanced down at his watch. “You better get a move on,” he said, his voice quieter. “Our flight leaves in an hour and a half.”

“…Our?”

“Tahiti,” Brian said, looking at him through his lashes. “Vasquez is so happy with us right now, he found us an amazing place on the beach.”

“For how long?” Justin asked. Quiet explosions were going off inside him, leaving sparkly lights behind his eyes and an ache in his chest.

Brian shrugged again, carelessly. “Dunno. However long we want. Until we’re ready to come back. We don’t have to stay in Tahiti, either—there are lots of places we can go.”

“Oh,” Justin said, on a long exhale. “Oh. I…I don’t know what to say.”

“I packed some things for you,” Brian said, indicating the bag he had carried down the stairs. “We’re not taking much, but we can buy whatever we need.” There was something in his voice and face, a wistful hopefulness well concealed but still apparent to Justin, who knew him so well.

“What about…things?” he asked finally. “Work and…things?”

“Fuck it,” Brian said succinctly. “Cynthia and Emily can handle things. And if they can’t then they can’t. Fuck if I care anymore.”

“Okay,” Justin said a little shakily. “Yeah, okay. I knew you didn’t like—but I had no idea—okay. But what about—“

“Forget about it,” Brian said sharply. “Jesus, Justin, I’m trying to—it’s everything else that’s fucked up. Let’s get out of here.”

“Okay,” Justin said, and this time he meant it. A huge, disbelieving laugh bubbled up from inside him and burst out. Brian watched him, one eyebrow cocked, a smirk growing. “God,” Justin said as the laugh subsided. “We’re really going to…does anyone know we’re leaving?”

The smirk deepened, straddled the line between smugness and real pleasure. “We can call in a few days. Give them the news,” Brian said.

“That’s really fucking rude,” Justin said, grinning madly.

“Your point?”

Justin took a step forward, then another. “You’re insane. That’s my point.”

“But you’re coming with me,” Brian said.

“Yes,” Justin agreed, taking the last few steps and pressing their bodies close. Brian hadn’t been sure of that, he realized as they kissed.

“This is really stupid,” Justin said, pulling back reluctantly. He was dizzy again, but it was entirely different now.

“Makes perfect sense to me,” Brian said. “It’s separating the shit that’s fucked-up from the shit that’s…not.” He cupped Justin’s waist and slid a hand up his side, then around to curve over his shoulder blade.

They kissed again, and Justin luxuriated in it, the friction of their mouths sparking the want like tinder to kindling.

“Sit down,” Justin murmured, pushing at Brian’s shoulders. “Sit down and let me suck your cock.”

Brian sat with pleasing alacrity, settling on the third stair from the bottom and stretching his legs out in front of him. Justin dropped to his knees on the hard tile floor and went for Brian’s zipper with a will.

“I should decide to spirit you away more often,” Brian said, his voice shaking a little as Justin cupped him with one hand and worked the button and zipper loose with the other.

Justin had plenty of things he could have said, but he didn’t want to waste the breath, and sliding his mouth down over Brian’s cock was pretty eloquent anyway. Brian hissed and clutched his shoulders, and Justin didn’t bother with anything but the heart of it, didn’t mess around, not here, not now. He swallowed Brian down his throat, sucking strongly, rolling his tongue sinuously along the bottom and swallowing continuously. He stayed there as long as physically possible, his jaw stretched wide, not even bobbing his head, just working his lips and tongue and throat with everything he knew, sucking hard and then releasing and sucking again in strong pulses that matched his thundering heart. He drew all the way off for just a moment, took a deep breath, and then plunged down again, wanting the emersion of this, the way it filled his senses as well as his mouth. He caught a glimpse of Brian’s face as he came up for the second time, reveled in the abandoned ecstasy there, renewed his efforts to make it even better. He was hard, too, but he didn’t want to do anything about it yet. He liked doing this to himself, winding himself up tight with Brian in his mouth, getting hard and hot and ready simply on the taste and the smell and the sound. This hadn’t changed, not at all, but everything else had. For the first time the thought didn’t unsettle Justin in his skin. He was even grateful for it, almost pitifully so, for a twenty-nine-year-old Brian would only have bought one ticket today. He’d changed and Justin had changed, and somehow, miraculously, there was a symmetry in it, in the way they’d both been so afraid of this. But something had to be done, and Brian had done it, was doing it as he slid his fingers into Justin’s hair and held him down for a long moment, almost too long. Justin came up gasping, but didn’t let himself catch his breath before reaching again with his mouth. Brian shook hard and touched his cheek. Justin breathed through his nose and sucked continuously, swallowing again and again, feeling the muscles of his throat working around the head of Brian’s cock.

Brian shouted and came, and his fingers stroked again, from Justin’s jaw to his eyebrow, the touch strangely tender.

“I think you should do that every day,” Brian said as Justin unhurriedly pulled off. “Every day at this time.”

“Okay,” Justin said, shifting back to sit on his heels. His own cock was hard and aching, and sitting like that stretched his slacks painfully over it. Brian glanced down, smiled, then tilted an eyebrow as they locked eyes again.

“There’s lube in the outer pocket of the suitcase nearest you,” he said.

Justin snorted. “Of course there is.” He went digging for it, watching out of the corner of his eye as Brian stood, not bothering to pull off the jeans and his boxers but letting them fall to the stairs as he kicked off his shoes. Justin had rooted around in the dark in too many nightstands not to know a bottle of lube by feel, but he glanced at the suitcase anyway, intrigued by something in the pocket. He reached in with two hands, pulling out the lube with one and his sketch pad with the other. He sat still a moment, glancing back and forth, feeling the goofy grin melt into something gentler.

“Thought you might want that,” Brian said softly.

Justin glanced up at him standing on the stairs in only his T-shirt. “Yeah,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Thankful enough to fuck me?” Brian asked.

Justin tilted his head, pretending to contemplate. “Maybe,” he said, drawing the word out. “Come on and let’s see.”

They went into the living room because going up the stairs was just too long to wait. Brian settled on his back on the couch, legs hooked over the arm, a few cushions propping up his head and shoulders. Justin stood between his knees, working his hole first with his fingers, then with his cock. He pushed in quickly, too impatient to go slow, and Brian tossed his head, mouth gaping a little as he breathed harshly.

It was a funny thing, Justin thought, gritting his teeth on a near snarl as he thrust quick and hard. Sometimes with them it was all about the taking, about Justin on his hands and knees or his belly, letting Brian in, letting Brian have him. But then again, sometimes, like now, it was about being taken in, about Brian swallowing him up whole, about being contained and nurtured and not afraid because of that thing they were to each other.

He leaned over Brian, braced his hands on Brian’s shoulders, created leverage with the opposition of their bodies. They watched each other through it all, and Justin didn’t close his eyes when he came.

“We’re going to be late,” he said a few minutes later. He was bent awkwardly over the arm of the couch, half-sprawled on Brian’s chest, sweat and come drying unpleasantly between them. “We have to shower, and when did you say the flight was?”

“Can get another flight,” Brian said lazily.

Justin poked him. “But I want to go now.”

Brian lifted his head, considered him a moment through inscrutable eyes. “Let’s go then,” he said. “Come on.”

Justin rose unsteadily, turned for the stairs. They needed to hurry, they were going to miss their flight, and no matter what Brian said, flights to Tahiti weren’t a dime a dozen. They needed to get out of here, needed it badly, and no matter how stupid it was, it was the right thing to do. Brian climbed the stairs behind him, his hand coming to rest almost habitually on Justin’s ass. A quick shower, Justin thought a little giddily. A quick shower so they could go to a place where they’d never have to rush one again.