**Paeansong**

**Sparring Partners**

Chapter 1 – The Phone Call

Brian had just left the Kinnetik conference room, where the meeting had gone particularly well. His mood was so upbeat that he considered the prospect of a few days off. He was about to check his calendar, when his cell phone rang. Since he recognized that it wasn't one of the special, programmed ring tones, his first instinct was to let the call rollover into voice mail. However, when he recognized the area code for Toronto in the caller ID, he decided to answer.

"Kinney," he said.

"Brian, it's Melanie."

Brian sighed thinking that it had been such a good day. He knew that was about to change.

"Melanie! What's wrong? Are Lindsay and Gus ok?"

Brian settled into his chair as he braced himself for the answer.

"Yes, everybody's fine. Nothing's wrong."

Brian breathed a sigh of relief.

"Then why are you calling me, Melanie?" he asked more sharply than he intended.

"How are you doing, Brian?" she asked, ignoring his question.

"Cut the bullshit, Melanie! What do you want? You never call me, and you sure as hell never ask how I'm doing. So, tell me what's going on?"

"All right Brian!" she sighed in exasperation, knowing she'd at least tried to be civil; it obviously hadn't worked. "I need you to come to Toronto?"

There it was. She'd said it.

"Melanie, you're extending an invitation...to me...to visit you...on the sacred mountain...in Toronto...what's the occasion?" he asked haltingly.

She knew this wasn't going to be easy. After all it was Brian Kinney she was talking to.

"I have something that I need you to see," Melanie explained. "It's here at my office. I thought maybe you'd take me to lunch tomorrow, without mentioning anything about it to Lindsay. "

"It's awfully short notice Melanie. I take it this must be really important?"

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't," she answered. "And...I was thinking...maybe you'd like... to spend a few days... with Gus...while you're here?" she added haltingly.

That's it; that's all Brian needed to hear. He quickly said, "I'll see you tomorrow."

As Brian closed the cell phone he realized that Melanie had never before encouraged him to see his son without Lindsay's insistence or the threat of legal action.

Brian stared at the cell phone wishing it would morph into a crystal ball to reveal what was going on in Toronto. The answers would have to wait until tomorrow.

Chapter 2 – The Next Day...in Toronto

Melanie looked up once again at the recently arrived painting. In fact every time that she glanced over at it, she smiled. The painting reminded her of Justin's wicked sense of humor, and she realized that he probably needed it to put up with Brian Kinney. She also thought about how much she missed Justin.

Her thoughts were interrupted as Brian walked into her office with panther like grace. Rather than take the seat she motioned to, he preferred instead to assume a standing pose of intimidation with arms folded and one shoulder leaned slightly against the wall.

"What's so important that I had to drop everything to come here to Toronto?" Brian asked without even saying hello.

One glance at her Armani clad opponent and she began to sharpen her claws.

"It's good to see you too, Brian." she smiled sweetly. "How's Justin?"

"Let's leave Justin out of this, shall we? So what do you need me to look at?" he asked gently stroking his chin.

Melanie noticed that there was no time for pleasantries. Well, if he was ready, then so was she.

"I've made a new addition to the my office. Everyone else has complimented me on it. But you have such discriminating tastes that I wanted you to take a look at it and give me your opinion."

"What is it?"

"My new painting!" she said calmly and waited for his reaction.

"I don't believe you Melanie. You had me drop everything. Get on a plane. Fly from Pittsburgh to Toronto because you wanted me to look at a painting? I have an ad agency to run! Have you forgotten you're married to art critic? By the way why don't you want Lindsay to know about this meeting? Melanie what the fuck is going on?" he barked.

Melanie thought that the initial reaction was just about what she'd expected, so she continued.

"Will you calm down and just look at the painting?" She said pointing in its direction. "I haven't shown it to Lindsay yet because I wanted you and I to share this moment together. So now will you look at it?"

As he looked across the room at the painting, his whole demeanor changed. He smiled.

"Well Melanie, I see someone's tastes have definitely improved, a Justin Taylor Original," he said knowingly.

"You can tell that it's a Justin Taylor Original from across the room?" she asked.

"Of course," Brian said his voice cracking a bit with pride. "He is good isn't he?" he whispered.

He started to move toward the painting.

"Better than good," Melanie acknowledged. "Maybe you'd better take a closer look."

And she waited patiently while he took it all in.

Brian called upon all that Justin had taught him and began his examination of the painting. This was a Justin Taylor painting after all, which meant your eyes would experience the beauty of the painting, while your soul experienced its raw emotion. This painting did not disappoint.

He immediately noticed the title, "Sparring Partners" and of course, the artist, JTaylor. Brian spent some time carefully examining the elements of the painting: Two dark haired figures wearing boxing gloves, one male and one female. They're sitting on the edge of the boxing ring exhausted. Their legs were dangling over the side of the ring. In their exhaustion they each had one armed draped over the shoulder of the other.

"He didn't?" Brian remarked with a smile as soon as he got the imagery.

"Oh yes he did!" Melanie confirmed with a knowing smile.

"Where did you get this?"

"Justin sent it me from Santa Barbara."

"I'm going to have to see that he's severely punished. You know he can't be allowed to get away with this. He's a real smart ass isn't he?"

"Brian, he really gets us. Everybody else seems to thinks we just simply hate each other. When in truth our relationship is so much more complex than that. Only Justin figured it out and immortalized it on canvass. I gather from your reaction you hadn't seen this painting. Somehow I thought that was the case, that's why I called you. I wanted you see it."

"They say you can feel the raw emotion in one of Justin's paintings. Here the fighters are so exhausted they have to lean on each other for support," Brian said with a smile. "You can just feel the total exhaustion in the fighters. You and I...we haven't quite gotten there yet...have we?"

And, at that moment, Melanie realized she had missed him. She'd never tell anyone, but at least she knew it. And for a moment she questioned the wisdom of her move to Toronto.

Rather than admit the truth Melanie continued, "Justin really does have a wicked sense of humor, doesn't he? There's more. Take a look at this. Justin attached this note to the picture frame." She handed the note to Brian.

Mel,

Sometimes you go on fighting even after you've already won...

Maybe you've been fighting so long because you no longer remember why...

Or, maybe you've been fighting for something that simply transcends time...

And can't be won.

Justin

"Well, that's Justin for you," he said with a smile after reading the note. Brian understood what Justin was trying to say. "So?"

"I had you come here so you could tell me what this means," she demanded waving the note at him.

"Are you telling me you don't know? You're a lesbian Melanie. Lesbians and Justin understand these things. Isn't the meaning obvious?"

"Which is?"

"I'm waiting for you to enlighten me, " he smirked.

"What?"

"You know Melanie chatting with you like this really works up an appetite. What do you say we go to lunch?"

"Asshole!"

"Melanie."

She put aside all thoughts of murder for the moment and looked at the painting once more. Melanie wondered if she and Brian would even stop sparring; she shook her head and figured, probably not. Then she smiled and decided that was all right, for Brian was her favorite sparring partner. And with that thought, she came out swinging again.

"So Brian, since I knew you were paying I've made a reservations for us at the most expensive restaurant I could find. I'll call Lindsay later and tell her you're here. I know Gus will be glad to see you." Melanie rattled on. "By the way Brian, lunch is probably going to be so expensive I'm not sure you'll be able to afford that hotel room you reserved. So you might want to plan on staying in our guest room for the next few days while you visit Gus."

"Oh no!" he protested.

"I insist," she said with a smirk.

"I'm looking forward to it," he finally conceded.

"And Brian, be sure tell Justin how much I loved the painting."

Chapter 3 – During Lunch That Same Day

"You realize that we'll have to call some sort of a truce during lunch?" Brian suggested.

"I don't see why. We're just getting started." Melanie responded.

"Melanie, you have to be reasonable. We have to at least be civil during the meal."

"I'm not sure I like that idea."

"I know that you're a good attorney, but I'm not sure you want to be the one to explain to Lindsay why we spent the afternoon in a Canadian holding cell."

"Good point."

"Plus, we still have things to discuss."

"Like what?"

"Like a plausible explanation for why I'm in Toronto?"

"Oh that."

"That's pretty big, Melanie. You're not ready to show her the painting. How were you planning to explain me at dinner tonight."

"I figured you'd come up with something. You're good at things like that."

"You mean like I'm suppose to tell Lindsay something like I had sudden business in Toronto. My business took me so close to your office that I couldn't resist the urge to drop in and see you. You invited me over for dinner. And, oh by the way, Melanie suggested that since I was here, I was invited to stay in your guest room for while I visit my son. Is that what you had in mind?"

"You can sell anything. You're so good at bullshit. You'll be able to pull it off."

"Ah huh"

"I was thinking you'd call Lindsay and tell her you're in town on business. Since you're here, you can ask to see Gus. She'll suggest it to me, and we'll argue about it. Eventually we'll work out the 'you'll see Gus part'. I'll know nothing about your visit. In fact, I'll even resist a bit, when she suggests that you stay for dinner. During the evening, you'll be so preoccupied with Gus and Jenny. The evening will fade into the night. Then I'll nonchalantly invite you to stay overnight in our guest room because of the lateness of the hour." Melanie gleefully suggested.

"And they say that I'm the master of bullshit."

"You've rubbed off on me."

"OK that takes care of tonight, and tomorrow, I'll move back to my hotel. "

"Oh no! I want to keep you close. I don't trust you."

"If I stay more than one night, things will look suspicious."

"You're just looking for a way to escape me."

"Melanie, how can you say that? We're such warm personal friends. Notice how I rushed here to be by your side. I dropped everything the moment you called. You forget to take note of the things I do for you." He teased.

"Asshole, so are we ready?"

"Let's do it!"

Chapter 4 - Later That Day, Toronto

After lunch, Brian called Lindsay and arranged to meet her later in the day. He held to the script about being in town on business. Lindsay's call to Melanie went as predicted.

Although it had been almost a year since Gus and Brian had spent any time together, it was evident that they'd both missed each other. Brian spent the evening playing with Gus and Jenny until their bedtime.

The sparring between Melanie and Brian during the evening did not require a script, in fact that turned out to be as easy as breathing for both of them. The wine consumed during the evening became the perfect excuse. As planned, Melanie suggested that Brian stay overnight in the guest room. Lindsay was surprised but pleased with Melanie for the suggestion that Brian stay overnight.

Brian noticed how good Melanie was at getting at improvising.

The next morning Gus heard that Brian had stayed overnight. Gus put his spoon in his bowl of cereal, looked over to his mothers with a grin and asked, "Can I wake him up?" Since neither mother minded, Gus took off to the guest room and hurled himself onto Brian's chest. Once Brian could breath again, he retaliated by tickling Gus. Leaving the bedroom a few minutes later, Brian and Gus both were still laughing.

Gus and Brian spent the day together at the park and the zoo. Brian coached Gus on the basics of soccer, using the newly purchased soccer ball. After a phone call to Lindsay, Gus got to have dinner and sleep over at the hotel with Brian.

The next day they visited Castle Loma, where Gus pretended he was a little prince and his daddy was the king. Brian wondered what Lindsay had been reading to Gus as a bedtime story. After returning Gus to his house, Brian kissed him goodbye and left to go to the airport.

"A most excellent adventure!" Brian said to himself with a smile, as the plane finally landed in Pittsburgh. "Now, how do I deal with Justin?"

Chapter 5 – One Week Later, New York

Justin returned to his loft in New York City to find that he was not alone. Waiting in one of the more uncomfortable chairs was Brian, already dressed in jeans and a tank top, with his bare feet comfortably propped up on the edge the coffee table.

"Brian!" Justin remarked with a smile as he opened the door.

"It's a good thing I have a key, or I would have been stranded outside indefinitely." Brian commented as he held Justin's cell phone in his outstretched hand. "Why do you even have a cell phone if you're not going to carry it with you or turn it on? How do you expect people to reach you?"

"I don't. You know I hate cell phones. I only have it so I can call you."

"Well that does seem like a good purpose, I suppose." Brian conceded after reflecting on the stated cell phone purpose.

Justin took the cell phone and placed it on the table. Then Justin quickly placed himself in Brian's lap. They kissed each other gently, and then the kiss deepened. When they finally came up for air, Justin snuggled into Brian's arms.

"I'm surprised to see you," Justin commented. How come you didn't let me know you were coming?"

"I wanted to surprise you, Sunshine."

"I'm definitely surprised," Justin said as he let out a laugh and then leaned up to give Brian another kiss. "What's the occasion?"

"I wanted to tell you about my latest adventure," Brian said innocently.

"It must have been some adventure for you to fly all the way here to tell me about it in person. You usually tell me about those sort of things by phone."

"Not this time, Sunshine. I just had to tell you about this one in person."

"Wow! It must have been exciting. I'm listening. Tell me!"

"You know Melanie's really loved this new painting she received." Brian whispered in his ear. "She couldn't wait to show it to me. I had to drop everything and fly to Toronto...by the way, Gus says hi."

"Fuck!" Justin responded. He'd secretly planned that with Melanie in Toronto, Brian would never see that painting. Now that Brian had seen it, Justin knew that his punishment would be swift. Justin also knew that Brian was about to enjoy every minute of his impending torment.

"It was a fascinating concept. I'd just love to hear the back-story to that painting, Mr. Taylor. Why don't you enlighten me? MMmmmm?" Brian teased. "Or maybe you would like to explain that note? Now where would you like to start?"

"Brian!"

"No, No. I want to hear this."

"Brian!"

"Please put your 1500 SATs to work. I'm listening." Brian continued to torture Justin, as he held him tightly so he couldn't escape. "I'm waiting, Sunshine."

"Brian, it was just a painting."

"Justin, you never do 'it's just a painting' paintings," Brian pointed out, using his fingers to make the quotation marks in the air. "I'm waiting."

"Well, did you like the painting?"

"Justin!"

"Ok, first let me say that you and Melanie have a complex relationship. You guys always fight, but whenever one of you needs the other, you're there. Look at how she defended you during the Kip Thomas lawsuit, and look how hard you worked to get Melanie and Lindsay back together. So I know you don't actually hate each other. But, you'll never really be pals either. She has Ted to fulfill that role. You tolerate each other because of Lindsay and now because of Gus." Justin began.

"Maybe."

"I think Melanie spars with you because you two are a lot alike, you're both smart, you're both driven, you're both caring, and you're both successful. Both of you don't believe in a lot of bullshit. Both of you have childhood memories you're trying to escape. But even though the two of you are a lot alike, she can't compete with your success, and that must bug the hell out of her. You are now and always will be the more successful one because of Kinnetik, and she can't compete with that."

"Ah huh."

"She also can't compete with your relationship with Lindsay nor your relationship with Gus. Sometimes I think this makes her bitter and jealous. But at some point she has to realize that trying to keep Gus and Lindsay away from you won't make either of them love her more. Neither of Gus nor Lindsay is going to ever forget about you. Neither Gus nor Lindsay is going to suddenly transfer to Melanie all the love and affection they feel for you, just because they don't see you. Out of sight...out of mind definitely does not apply here. Neither Melanie nor Time can change how Lindsay and Gus feel about you. That's all there is to it!"

"You're sure about this?"

"Absolutely! Justin continued. "You know I have a theory that once upon a time when Lindsay realized that you and she weren't going to ride off into the sunset, she then went out and found the closest female version of you that she could find and that would be Melanie. I think originally the reason that you and Melanie sparred was because you're so much alike. It became the way you two dealt with each other. But now you and Melanie seem to be locked in some ancient struggle where no one wins."

"That's an interesting theory Mr. Taylor. Is this your artist's eye looking at the canvas of life?" Brian asked.

"No, just the random musing of a long time observer." Justin said with a shrug of his shoulders and a smile. Then he snuggled closer into Brian's chest and mumbled, "But, don't any pay attention to me, I've been inhaling paint fumes too long."

Brian started to run his fingers through Justin's hair and kissed the top of his head and said with a laugh, "Yes, the paint fumes may be causing you to hallucinate. We're definitely going to have to limit your studio time."

"You're kidding? Right?"

"No. I've never been more serious. We're just going to have to find some other creative outlet for your inscrutable talent." Brian said, nudging Justin from his lap and starting to stand up.

"Well, now that you've mentioned it, I do have a few ideas." Justin responded with a smile, as he leaned in to give Brian a kiss. "Of course we should probably move this discussion to a more comfortable venue," he continued as he led Brian toward the bedroom.

Brian gently pushed Justin onto the bed and allowed himself to be pulled down beside him. Brian's tank top disappeared and Justin began to kiss a path down his chest.

Brian reached out and held Justin for a moment, just long enough to speak in a whisper, "And Justin, thank you."

"For what?" Justin asked.

"They've agreed to let me visit Gus more often." Brian said, as he shifted his position rolling Justin onto his back.

They managed to rid themselves of their clothes while kissing each other deeply; their clothes ended up strewn beside the bed.

And, after several hours of lovemaking plus fucking in the shower, they were both thoroughly exhausted. So they wrapped in towels and again resumed resting on the bed.

Justin turned toward Brian, propping himself on one arm, and finally said, "You know I love the way you show your gratitude, but of course you realize I had nothing whatsoever to do with them letting you visit Gus more often."

Brian simply turned his face toward Justin and said, "Now, you tell me! You realize that means that I just spent hours fucking you unnecessarily?"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far." Justin remarked with a smile as he snuggled onto Brian's chest.

"You know Justin, we all could have argued a lifetime with Melanie. We could have all told her about the importance of family. We could have told her how important it was that I spend time with Gus. We could have told her that running away to fucking Canada was not the solution to whatever problems there were in Pittsburgh. But she wouldn't have listened to anyone; she would have only become more entrenched in her position."

"And now?"

"Let's just say, your painting was worth a thousand words." Brian remarked kissing the top of Justin's head. "At least now she's starting to question some of the decisions she made."

"Well, it seems the press was right. Remember they said during the Stockwell campaign, that they thought I had a promising career making political statements with propaganda posters? MMmmmm!"

"So it would seem"

"Does this mean you liked the painting?" Justin asked still fishing for that ever, illusive compliment.

"Yes, I liked the painting."

"Gee, I wonder what will happen when the others are delivered."

"Others? Delivered? Justin? How many? Justin, what's going on?"

"Huh?"

"How many, Justin?"

"What?"

"Justin, how many paintings did you ship from Santa Barbara?"

'Three."

"Melanie got one, where are the other two?"

"Don't worry," Justin leaned up to kiss Brian. "I'm sure they'll turn up eventually."

"Justin, I though we were partners. Don't you think you should tell me as you partner about the paintings you do? Do you know what it's like to be called at your office and invited over to see a painting that your partner has done for someone, a painting that you've never seen, a painting you didn't even know existed. Were you ever going to tell me about any of them?" Brian asked trying to concentrate on the situation at hand, instead of focusing on his developing hard cock.

"No. Not really," Justin responded nipping his way down Brian's chest.

"Well now...that you know... I'm interested... shouldn't we ...talk about them?" Brian tried to utter in between groans as Justin's tongue moved below Brian's waist.

"I don't think so," Justin whispered as he kneaded Brian's cock with his hand, while he continued to explore Brian's balls with his tongue.

Justin's talented mouth covered Brian's cock completely, and Brian began to writhe beneath him. As Brian arched his back and entwined his fingers in Justin's hair, the only sounds that were heard with the gasping for breaths and the groans of pleasure, while Brian received one of his guilty pleasures. And, as Brian came down the back of Justin's throat, "Justin" was all that Brian was able to whisper.

Discussion for the moment had proved impossible, so any questions about the remaining two paintings would have to wait for another time. After all, Justin did say that the other two paintings would turn up eventually.

**Superheroes**

Prologue

Justin shipped three paintings from the art exhibit in Santa Barbara. The paintings were shipped within a few days of each other.

Melanie received her painting first, as described in Sparring Partner. So Brian spent a few days in Toronto and then briefly returned to Pittsburgh for some scheduled meetings at Kinnetik. Brian then left Pittsburgh a second time to visit Justin in New York, where he also stayed for several days.

During Brian's travels only Cynthia knew where he was. If Michael or anyone called Kinnetik, Cynthia simply told them that Brian was out of town on business. So Michael and the gang have been unable to talk to Brian or keep track of his whereabouts for almost two weeks.

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Timeline Information

About one week after Melanie received her painting, the second painting was delivered to its intended recipient.

Some of this story occurred, while the events of "Sparring Partners" was still taking place.

After the arrival of the second painting, approximately another week will pass, before Brian's adventures in "Sparring Partners" ended, and he returned to Pittsburgh from New York.

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Chapter 1 – So It Begins

Morning...(Day 1)

While Brian was out of town, Michael received a delivery at Red Cape Comics. It obviously wasn't comic books. From the shape of the package, it looked like it might be a picture or a poster. From the return address on the package, Michael already knew that the package was from Justin, and it was shipped from Santa Barbara, California.

Michael immediately picked up his cell phone and once again tried to reach Brian. Trying all the numbers he knew, Michael was frustrated that he still could not reach his best friend. Michael's repeated calls to Kinnetik were also frustrating because Cynthia kept repeating that Brian was out of town on business. Michael even tried to convince Cynthia that this was now an emergency and since he was Brian's best friend, Michael needed to talk to Brian and that she should give him the number where Brian could be reached. Cynthia was resolute and simply kept repeating that Brian was out of town on business. Michael slammed the cell phone shut in total frustration.

So Michael then called Ben at Carnegie Mellon.

"Ben, can you come over to the store?" Michael almost begged, "Maybe we could have lunch together?"

"Sure, is anything wrong?" Ben asked cautiously. He was already aware that Michael was on edge because Brian had been out of contact for over a week.

"No, it's just kind of important." Michael said with lowered voice.

"Then I'll see you for lunch," Ben confirmed.

Michael experienced a sense of relief when he got off the phone with Ben.

Michael eyed the unopened package every time he passed by it during the morning. He went about his normal duties of unpacking shipments of comic books, restocking the comics, and waiting on customers. The unopened package continued to hold him spellbound.

As lunchtime approached Michael began to look up each time the bell over the door sounded, indicating someone new was about to enter the store. One of those times that the bell sounded, the person actually walking through the door was Ben.

Michael stood up from his seated-position behind the counter as Ben entered the store. Ben walked behind the counter and hugged Michael, giving him a kiss on the side of his cheek. Ben could feel Michael relax in his embrace. And as they separated so Ben could make himself comfortable on one of the stools in the store, Michael showed Ben the unopened package.

"You could've opened it Michael," Ben said gently shaking his head, "I can't believe you've sat here all morning with this unopened package. How come?" he asked. "It's only a package."

"Justin sent me the package!" Michael said. "I have been wondering what it is. I just wanted you to be here when I opened it."

Ben shook his head again in continued amazement at the antics of his husband. He leaned forward onto the counter resting his chin on his hand, as he watched Michael ceremoniously use the utility knife to cut away the packaging and unwrap the package. What Michael found inside the package was not a picture or a poster as he had anticipated, what he found inside was a painting.

The bottom right-hand corner of the painting revealed the signature of the artist, "JTaylor" indicating that this painting was done by Justin himself. Michael also smiled as he noticed the title of the painting was "Superheroes". He looked up and beamed as he repeated the title aloud for Ben.

"Justin knows you sooooooooo well," Ben said jokingly.

Michael gasped for air, and all he could say was, "Wow!"

Ben sat there watching the drama unfold, as Michael continued to examine the remainder of the painting. Ben smiled, as the term 'drama queen' came to his mind. Ben secretly wished that Emmett were here to help him savor this moment and provide suitable running commentary. Michael then positioned the painting so that both he and Ben could examine it together. Michael began to run his finger over painting.

Justin had included in the painting all of Michael's favorite superheroes. All his favorites were there: Superman, Aqua Man, Captain Astro, and all the others. All of them were there dressed in full superhero regalia. It looked like a gathering. All the superheroes seemed to be in the process of receiving some sort of instruction.

Michael ran his fingers across the painted figures, as if to feel there some life force rising from the canvas. It was then that his eyes drifted to the left-foreground of the painting. There stood Rage!

"Look Ben, there's Rage!" Michael exclaimed finally finding his voice.

"Well, so it is. Isn't that amazing." Ben responded.

Rage also was clearly properly dressed for action and pointing to a map of Gayopolis. It appeared that Rage was giving explicit instructions to all the other superheroes about their next assignment to probably save the city.

Michael began to wipe his eyes to be sure that he wasn't seeing things. He took another look at the painting. There, on one knee, down on the ground inspecting the map more closely, was Zephyr. Rage and Zephyr were there, the fantastic duo together again.

Michael was transported back to a time when a 14-year-old Brian and a 14-year-old Mikey lay together on the bed talking about superheroes on a Saturday afternoon in Michael's bedroom at Debbie's house. And they dreamed of the day when there would be a gay superhero. Then Michael remembered the moment five years ago when the artistic skill of Justin Taylor helped to make that dream come alive. Once again Michael let his finger travel over the painted surfaces while he remembered it all.

Ben moved in and put his arm around Michael offering gentle support for his husband as he too gently ran his fingers over the painting and once again kissed Michael on the cheek.

Then to lighten the mood, Ben started to tease, "Well Michael, since it has all the themes of gay imagery, you should probably let me put it in my office at the University. My students would love seeing this symbolism. It vividly demonstrates artistically all the things that I've been trying to get across in my lectures."

"Not a chance. Justin sent this to ME. I'm going to keep it here at the store, so everyone can see it. Justin's amazing isn't he? I can't believe I own a Justin Taylor Original painting. Wait until Ted sees this, he's going to be so jealous." Michael rambled on.

"Well, I take it you are now too excited to go to lunch? So I'll stop at the Diner and have Deb send something over for you. Meanwhile, I'm going to leave, so you and your painting can get better acquainted," Ben teased.

As Ben leaned in to give Michael a kiss goodbye, his hand bushed against the note taped to the frame. Each of them read the note; then they exchanged puzzled glances with one another about its meaning.

Michael,

Sometimes our dreams are

The only things that keep us alive!

Sometimes our dreams are a mist that

Makes it impossible to breathe!

Sometimes it's a delicate balancing act

Between our dreams and reality

To find happiness.

Here's to dreams!

Love,

Justin

"What does it mean?" Ben asked not really taking time to give the note a lot of thought for he wanted Michael to have the chance to form his own opinions about the message.

"I have no idea," Michael responded with a smile. "Leave it to Justin to be cryptic!"

"We'll try to figure this out over dinner tonight," Ben said smiling as he left the store.

Michael pushed the note aside and once again became lost in the painting.

Chapter 2 - Lessons

Later that afternoon...(Day 1)

Ben stopped by the Diner and asked Deb to send lunch to Michael at the store. Ben also casually mentioned that Michael had just received a painting from Justin. Somehow the words 'painting' and 'Justin' in the same sentence put Debbie into full mother-mode. So this delivery to Red Cape Comics was not a task to be left to underlings. Debbie made it a point to deliver food to Michael personally. This way she would have the perfect excuse to see the painting and to gauge Michael's reaction for herself.

"Michael," she announced, as she pushed open the door to the comic book store. She used her hip to shut the door, so that she could quickly proceed to the counter.

"Ma. You didn't have to make a special trip," Michael pointed out as he started to dig into the bags to examine his lunch with a smile. "I guess Ben mentioned the painting from Justin. Huh?"

Deb was no longer listening to Michael. Her attention had already moved to the painting, and she spent a few minutes looking at it. Deb had to touch it. She let her fingers glide across the painting much the same way she had let them glide across Justin's forehead to gently away lift blond hairs that had fallen over his eyes. Deb caressed the frame in way that let you know, for her at that moment, no distinction existed between the painter and his creation. Finally, she took a deep breath and turned her attention back to her son, who was leisurely munching on his lunch.

"How do you like the painting?" Deb finally asked.

"It's really great isn't it?" Michael said finally.

"Sunshine really knew what to paint to make you happy didn't he?" Debbie asked, after once again glancing at the painting. "I know these are all superheroes, but I can't tell which is which."

"Ma, let me help you, " Michael said. He stood up and walked over to painting, as he started to explain things to his mother.

Michael really enjoyed giving Deb her review lesson in the superheroes. It reminded him once again when he was a child, and had similar conversations with Deb about each new comic. He was quick to remind her who each one was, what they're wearing, what superpowers they each had, and how to tell them apart. As Michael was giving Debbie her lesson in superheroes, he remembered going over the same material with Ben, when they had first met. Michael smiled. He then leaned down and kissed Deb on her cheek, before returning again to his lunch.

"Ok Ma, you're on your own," he said, feeling a sense of pride in the success of his newest student.

Armed with this new information, Debbie took one more look at the painting.

"I see that Sunshine painted Rage and Zephyr together again. That must make you so happy. Rage and his trusty sidekick with all their superhero friends, it's almost like a day at the office, isn't it?" she asked with a laugh. "Off to save Gayopolis! That's a beautiful painting. Have you decided where you are going to hang it?"

"Ben tried to persuade to me to let him hang it in his office at the University, but I told him Justin sent it to me, so I'm going to put in my office here at the store. But first I want all the fans to see what Justin created," Michael said beaming. "So I'm going to display it in the store for a while."

Deb thought that was a great idea and agreed to help spread the word, as if she needed any encouragement to tell the world about a Justin Taylor painting. Deb hugged Michael goodbye, as she left to the Diner. She took one last look over her shoulder at the image of Michael spellbound by the painting, and she whispered, "Sunshine" to herself as she closed the door.

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After school that day a few of Red Cape Comics' best customers stopped by the store and were excited to see the painting. These were some of Rage and Zephyr's biggest fans. Many of them had been readers of the comic book since the first issue. Here were also some of Justin's biggest fans, as well. Word of mouth was creating quite a buzz on Liberty Avenue about the painting.

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After work, Michael, Ted and Emmett met for a drink before heading off for the evening. Of course the new painting was the major topic conversation. Ted and Emmett made plans with Michael to see the masterpiece the next morning. Michael showed them the note Justin had sent to see if they had any ideas about what it might mean.

Ted and Emmett looked at the note, carefully reading over Michael shoulders. As expected, Ted was the first to comment.

"Justin just wanted to remind you to keep on dreaming, see he says 'sometimes our dreams are the only thing that keep us alive'. Remember when he was bashed and he wasn't sure if he would ever draw again, he kept on dreaming that he would be an artist. And look what he was able to achieve." Ted said, letting his respect for Justin show through.

"But Sweetie, Justin is also saying if you're so lost in your dreams, you could forget how to live in reality. I think that's what he means by 'the mist that makes it impossible to breathe'. He's trying to tell you that to only live in your dreams isn't good either." Emmett added.

"But, this is Justin we're talking about, he's also saying keep on forming new dreams, while you keep on living your life. He did and look where he is now." Ted continued.

"Wow! How did you figure that out so quickly?" Michael asked. "Ben and I tried this morning, and we had no idea. We have plans to try and figure out the note over dinner tonight. Leave it to boy wonder to make things difficult. Why didn't he just say what he meant?"

Ted and Emmett looked at each other and laughed at the remembrance of Justin.

"Honey, are you kidding?" Emmett said still laughing. "We've all spent the at last five years listening to Justin talk nonstop about one thing or another. The one thing you can say about him is that he is easy to understand. You, on the other hand have probably been listening to Kinney-speak for so long that you no longer recognize when someone is being perfectly clear. Justin is nothing, if not absolutely clear, believe me."

Once again Ted and Emmett laughed at the remembrance of Justin.

They noticed that Michael wasn't laughing.

"Don't tell me you still think Brian should have kept on going that night? You still think Brian should never have looked under that street light?" Ted asked. "You can't still wish that Brian had never found Justin?"

"Sometimes." Michael admitted. "You've got to admit boy wonder has sure been a awful lot of trouble."

"But you know Brian's life wasn't the only one changed when Justin came along. He was so fearless...so eager, and at times we all felt that we had to look out for him. He was so wise sometimes too; it was funny that we all seemed to have to grow up a bit to keep up with a 17 year old. But you know, it seemed to make us all a little better somehow as we tried to let him in our lives," Ted continued.

"Mainly because we knew that Brian would kill us if we let anything happen to him," Emmett interjected.

"That's for sure," Michael said with a smile.

"But you know, Justin didn't just fight to create a place for himself at Brian's side. He found a place beside each of us. And, we all feel the emptiness with him in New York, Ted admitted. "I miss him."

"Me too," echoed Emmett.

Michael took that at his cue to get ready to leave. In spite of the painting, Michael knew that he certainly was not ready to admit to missing Justin; he would definitely leave those feelings to Ted and Emmett.

"Well, I'd better get going," Michael finally said, standing up to leave. "I should really be getting home."

As Michael was leaving, he watched Ted and Emmett talking about dreams and about Justin. This made Michael realize that he had a lot to think about.

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That night at dinner Michael and Ben never got around to talking about Justin's note. Hunter had an English assignment relating to contrasting American, Elizabethan and Greek tragedies that Ben was most eager to help him with and that Michael was most eager to escape.

So while Ben helped Hunter with his homework, Michael did the dishes and thought about what Ted and Emmett had said about dreams and about Justin. Here in the quiet recesses of his own home, Michael finally smiled and admitted, only to himself, that he missed Justin.

Michael knew he didn't have answers yet, but he knew he'd be glad when tomorrow came so he could get back to that special painting in his store. And even though there wasn't time to go over it tonight with Ben, Michael made sure that the note was very carefully tucked away in his pocket, so it could be taken with him to the store tomorrow.

Chapter 3 – The Gay Grapevine

The Next Morning...(Day 2)

The gay grapevine was working perfectly. Ben told Debbie. Debbie told of the patrons of Liberty Avenue that stopped by the Diner. Michael had already told Emmett and Ted. The customers of Red Cape Comics help spread the word among their friends. So by the next day people knew about Michael's new painting.

"Hi, Em. You look frazzled," Deb commented as Emmett came into the Diner.

"Did you see the crowd around the Red Cape? Do you know what's going on?" Emmett asked.

It would be unusual for something to be happening on Liberty Avenue that Emmett, the queen of gossip, wouldn't have all the details. And in the rare event that Emmett was uninformed, Deb could be relied upon the supply any missing information.

"What's going on that the comic book store?" Deb asked, indicating that she had less information than Emmett.

Emmett immediately began sliding back out of the booth. He saw this as his opportunity to have the first crack at any new gossip.

"I'm going back to the comic book store to find out what's going on. I'll be right back," Emmett said as he left with a swish on his appointed errand.

He then walked into the comic book store where the crowd had gathered in one location in the middle of the store. No one seemed to be buying anything; instead the crowd of about 20 people had congregated together, mumbling to each other while staring at a painting, which was now properly displayed on an easel.

Ted was already in the store shouting instructions to a distracted Michael, who was trying to handle a phone call.

"Teddy, what's going on?" Emmett asked interrupting Ted's antics.

"I'm trying to help Michael increase his insurance coverage. I'm trying to stress with the agent that the increased coverage needs to be effective immediately. Judging by the size of this crowd, Michael can't afford to wait," Ted explained as he sighed and took the phone from Michael. The next thing anyone knew, Ted was talking to the insurance agent directly, showing his total frustration with the entire situation.

"Michael, why does Teddy think your insurance coverage needs to be increased? What happened?" Emmett asked with growing concern.

"It's because I have a Justin Taylor Original painting!" Michael said proudly. "It's very valuable."

"I've heard that someplace before!" Emmett responded with a smile.

"Ted just wants to be sure it's added to my policy," Michael explained.

Eventually the telephone conversation ended, and Ted walked over to rejoin Michael and Emmett.

"Well that's all taken care of, you're now insured," Ted said with a sigh of relief.

"Pray tell me what was the urgency?" Emmett wanted to know.

"Do you see the crowds that are coming in to look at the painting? I would recommend that the painting be put under lock and key, but I know there's not a chance in hell of that happening. So I just want to be sure that Michael is protected." Ted elaborated. "Well now that everything is taken care of here, Em and I had better grab a quick breakfast. I do have to get to the office."

"But not before I see the painting that everyone will be talking about." Emmett insisted.

So Emmett and Ted spent a few moments, joining the crowd looking at the painting.

Emmett commented on the fact that all the superheroes were in full regalia and how Justin had managed to accentuate their bulging muscles. Then Emmett had to fan himself with his hand because he felt the images were so hot.

Ted, on the other hand, took the more practical approach, since he considered himself a bit of an authority of JTaylor art. He commented that this particular painting was significant departure from the artist's usual painting style. Even though it was well known that Justin illustrated the comic, the fact that he created an actual painting of otherwise comic book characters, was going to make this very valuable as a collector's item. This was probably going to be a one-of-a- kind creation.

After Ted and Emmett had a chance to see the painting and discuss it among themselves, they finally made their way over to the counter so they could say goodbye to Michael before they left the store.

Just before they left, Ted said, "You know Michael, Justin must think you're pretty special. Not only is this a fantastic painting, but also it's going to be worth a fortune someday. If collectors ever find out you have it, they're going to be beating down your door to buy it from you. You thought that the first issue of Captain Astro was worth a fortune. You remember the one Brian gave you for your birthday. Well, that first edition is going to pale in comparison to what this painting is going to be worth someday."

"I wonder if Brian had anything to do with this?" Michael thought.

"Why would he? Justin's been in New York," Emmett added. "Justin probably decided to do this all on his own. You how strong minded he is."

"That's for sure," Ted added. "Well, we better get going."

And with that, Emmett and Ted left Michael and steady stream of customers behind, all intent on viewing Justin's painting of the Superheroes.

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Emmett and Ted returned to the Diner and settled into the booth as Debbie came over to take their order.

They each ordered their usual breakfast. Emmett couldn't resist the opportunity to bring Debbie up to date about the reason for the crowds in Red Cape Comics.

"Justin's painting seems to be quite a crowd pleaser," Emmett began. "Everyone seems to want to see the picture."

"Yes, that was why I made sure Michael increased his insurance coverage to handle the painting. It's really going to be quite valuable someday, especially as Justin keeps getting more and more famous." Ted added. "But even more, Michael really loves the painting."

"Sunshine knew what to paint to make him happy." Deb added. "I'm just surprised that so many people are stopping by to see it. A painting is not the usual crowd pleaser for Liberty Avenue."

"No, but Justin is. You know how everybody feels about him. Because it's Justin's painting, everyone wants to be able to said that they've seen it." Ted pointed out. "I wonder if Brian knows about this."

"Well he's been traveling on business so long that it'll probably be old news by the time he gets back." Deb added with a smile, as she left to place their orders.

Chapter 4 – Revelations

The Next Day...(Day 3)

Early in the afternoon, Emmett passed by the comic book store and noticed that it was closed, but he could see Michael inside the store, just sitting in the vicinity of the painting. Emmett knocked several times on the door. Eventually Michael opened the door and greeted his friend.

"Emmett, what are you doing here?" Michael asked, looking as if he was coming out of a trance.

"Sweetie, why are you closed so early?" Emmett asked with concern as he entered the store. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine Em. There usually isn't much business this time of day, and I just wanted to spend a few minutes alone with my painting. There's so much there. There's so much to see. Justin's really smart, isn't he?" Michael rambled. "Brian says that Justin always keeps him thinking. I think I'm beginning to see what he means. I can't stop looking at the painting. I can't stop thinking about the note."

Emmett noticed the note in Michael hand. Emmett made himself comfortable on one of the stools, while Michael resumed his vigil at the painting.

"You want to talk about it, Sweetie? You know I'm a good listener," Emmett reminded him.

Michael was actually troubled enough to want to talk and confide in his former roommate, who Michael knew would understand what he was feeling.

"You know Em, I've loved Brian...been in love with Brian since I was 14 years old. I always figured he and I would be together, you know as a couple. I thought that he would get tired of tricking and be ready to settle down someday, and I would be there. You know how he always says that he always loved me and that he always would? Well, I always thought that was like some future promise. So I guess I watched him fuck all those people, but you know I felt he belonged to me. We were best friends. His fuck partners would come and go, one night at a time, but I would always be there," Michael started to explain.

"Well you and Brian have been like brothers. You have spent a lifetime together. You have a real history. No one can take that away from you. No one can take your place. Brian does love you," Emmett acknowledged.

"Then Brian and Lindsay had Gus together. Brian suddenly didn't belong to just me anymore. He now had this special bond with Lindsay because of Gus. We all tried to talk him out of fathering Gus. I didn't want him to do it, because I knew it would change things. I knew that I would lose a part of him," Michael confessed.

"Michael, you're not jealous of Gus are you?" Emmett asked in amazement with what he just heard. Since Gus and Justin showed up at the same time, Emmett had never considered that Michael had issues with Gus being in Brian's life too.

"No, Gus is a part of Brian. That's not what I mean. I just liked things when I was the most important thing in Brian's life," Michael confessed.

"Is this why you didn't seem to have a problem when Lindsay and Melanie took Gus and JR to Toronto? Because with them out of the way, you thought you would have a clearer path to Brian. Did you think that there'd less distractions on his time?" Emmett asked with concern.

"No, the real reason I didn't object was because of the safety and security issues that Melanie had convinced me of. But there was also this part of me that felt, you know that there would be less distractions for Brian's time; that was a side benefit," Michael confessed with a smile. "However, I did figure I would become more important to Brian with them gone."

"But you forgot about Justin?" Emmett pointed out.

"I knew Justin would eventually leave Brian. Justin always leaves, and Brian's always sad. Brian always turns to me to help him through the sadness of Justin leaving. So once again, I would be the most important thing to Brian," Michael explained.

"Oh, Honey don't you see ... ?" Emmett started to say, but was interrupted as Michael continued.

"You know I always teased Brian about being an 'over the hill club boy'. I knew that as long as he was...as long as he fucked anything that moved...as long as he just fucked someone once and sent them on their way...he would always belong to me in any way that mattered. It was like I could stay 14, and Brian would always be mine."

"Michael we all have to grow up some time. It's painful, but it has to be done. Look you have Ben and Hunter and Jenny Rebecca. You have all these things in your life that you never had before. Things you wouldn't have had if you'd just stayed focused on Brian."

"I know."

"So?"

"Then I met Ben. When Ben asked me to marry him, I had to talk to Brian first. I guess I hoped that Brian would say that I shouldn't marry Ben, but that I should wait for him. Or that he would have talked me out of marrying Ben, I don't know. But he didn't because he knew that I loved Ben, and Brian wanted me to be happy.

"And are you?"

"Yes, I love Ben. We're good together. And, I still get to have Brian."

"Oh my god, but Michael something's wrong with the picture you just painted. Brian makes sure that we're all happy. He's really there for us, he's always been. You have a family with Ben and Hunter and JR; Ted has Blake; I sort of have Drew or at least we're working on it; even Lindsay has Mel and a family. Right?"

"Yes."

"Everybody seems to have what they've wanted to be make them happy, but who wants Brian to be happy? Nobody seems to be tying to make sure he's happy. Listen to yourself! You just told me...you just admitted that you have you own life and family that you're focused on...and THEN you have Brian. When you have time, you want Brian to available for you. It's like you want Brian's life on hold, waiting for you to have time for him. You want to know where he is every moment so whenever YOU WANT HIM, he can be available for you. We all fit Brian into our lives. No one really makes room for Brian...no one makes Brian a priority except...except...."

"Except for Justin!"

"Sweetie, you have got to get a grip on this once and for all, because Michael even though Justin's in New York, Justin still makes room for Brian. And you HAVE to come to terms with this. Brian and Justin are IN LOVE with each other, that isn't EVER going to change."

"But Brian changed, Em."

"Michael, Brian could stay 14 and be with you. But he couldn't stay 14 and be a father to Gus. And, he couldn't stay 14 and be a part of Justin's life. Justin was never a little kid. Brian had to change, to grow up just to try to keep up with Justin. Brian wanted both Gus and Justin in his life, so he grew up. And as Brian grew up, whole new vistas opened up to him. Brian started to like the person was becoming. He had Justin. And, Brian is strongest with Justin by his side. So make no mistake this separation is hard on Brian, whether he admits or not. Justin didn't leave Brian when he went to New York. Brian agreed to let him go. But Michael, Brian doesn't belong to you. Brian STILL belongs to Justin, even now, and Sweetie, you've got to accept that!"

"I'm not sure I can."

"You have to!" Emmett said, shaking Michael trying to bring him to reality. "If you don't change the way you think about Brian, it's going to destroy you. It's going to destroy your relationship with Ben. And, Brian's going to eventually get tired of it, and you'll lose him, too. So you think about that."

"Ah huh," Michael said, and then once again he became all dreamy eyed so that Emmett wondered if he gotten through to Michael at all.

"Michael!"

"You know Emmett, whenever Justin draws Rage and Zephyr and JT, JT always stands by Rage's side. Even though JT has no superpowers. Zephyr's always drawn below Rage, like in this picture. See how elevated Rage is, while Zephyr's down on the ground. Zephyr is always looking up at Rage. Always! Rage takes care of Zephyr, and Zephyr tries to take care of Rage. But it's still always JT that actually fights by Rage's side. Even the readers see it, and they clamor for more Rage and JT together."

"You've got to admit they're hot together," Emmett pointed out with a guilty smile.

"Yeah, they are." Michael conceded; then he got wistful for a moment. "You know Brian, Lindsay, and I are the same age, but I always seem to be whining about something like I'm this little kid, so I always seem younger."

"I keep forgetting that you're the same age. You're right. Brian and Lindsay seem much older. Even Justin seems older than you, now that I think about it." Emmett laughed.

"Emmett, I want Brian to love me the way he loves Justin." Michael finally cried out, with tears starting to stream down his cheeks.

Emmett rushed over and held Michael, trying to comfort him in his obvious grief. Emmett knew Michael kept clinging to this impossible dream, and Emmett feared this would eventually eat Michael alive. So once again Emmett tried to find the right words to help his friend.

"Sweetie, even if Justin died tomorrow, and you and Brian were best friends until the end time, he'll always love you...but he's never going to feel about you the way he feels about Justin. Even if you get your secret wish and he finally fucks you, he's still not going to feel about you the way he feels about Justin. You just have to accept that. He's going to always be IN LOVE with Justin. Look! Justin's been in New York for about a year. We've all been here in Pittsburgh. We've all seen less of Brian with Justin gone than we did when Justin was here. Justin made Brian more open. Justin made Brian want to be available to the rest of us."

"I know I was always the one who wished that Justin would go away. I thought with Justin gone, and Lindsay and Gus in Toronto, I would pretty much have Brian all to myself. But it didn't work out that way. Now I just wish that Justin would come back. Justin and I use to talk...just he and I; so of course, I do miss him. And you're right, Brian's not the same with him gone."

"Wow! That's quite an admission for you, Sweetie! Do you mean it?" Emmett asked hopefully.

"Yes." Michael said, shaking his head with some resignation.

"You know Michael it's going to take some time for it all to sink in," Emmett continued.

"I know."

"Michael, I don't think Justin sent you the painting to make you unhappy."

"No, no, I love the painting. I guess I just miss talking to Brian; he's been gone for two weeks, traveling on business."

And that's when Emmett knew that all that had been said had not really sunk in. So he tried again to warn Michael once again of impending dangers in his way of thinking.

"Sweetie you've got to change how you think about Brian. You two will always be best friends, brothers even. But just because he's your best friend doesn't mean you own him or that he's required to check in with you. I once heard you ream Justin out because you said that he was never satisfied with what Brian was prepared to give. Maybe you suffer from the same problem. You should think about that sometimes."

"Yeah. I probably need to. "

The ringing cell phone interrupted their talk. Emmett decided to sneak out while the phone conversation was in progress, waving a quick bye-bye as he left. Emmett wondered if their talk had done any good; Emmett was now definitely concerned about Michael.

Chapter 5 – Welcome Back Brian

Several Days Later...(Day 9)

It's been several days since Michael and Emmett had their talk about things. Michael spent a lot of time alone with his painting of the Superheroes, while awaiting Brian's return. The streams of people were continuing to visit the store to look at the painting, keeping Michael rather busy.

Finally Brian returns.

Brian and Michael arrived for breakfast at about the same time, Deb took their orders almost before they were seated since they both voiced that they wanted their usual breakfast.

"Where have you been?" Michael asked. "I've been trying to call you for weeks. You haven't been returning my phone calls."

"I was out of town, Mikey," Brian explained hoping there would be no further inquiries about his travels or his whereabouts. Just to be sure, Brian added a look that indicated he would tolerate no further discussion on this topic. "So what's been going on?"

Michael immediately recognized the expression and moved on to more pressing matters. "We have to go to New York," Michael whispered hoping that Debbie wouldn't overhear.

"Mikey, what are you talking about? Why do we have to go to New York?" Brian asked.

"Something's wrong with Justin." Michael declared simply.

Brian immediately stood up and tried to keep the panic he felt from creeping into his voice. He forced himself to remain calm. After all Justin was ok when he had left him 24 hours ago. "What happened?" he asked trying to contain his dread. "Have you talked to him?"

"I just got off the phone with him. He says he's all right. But...I don't know." Michael rambled on completely oblivious to Brian's reactions.

"Well, if you talked to him, and he said that everything's ok, so what's the problem?" Brian asked, as he once again remembered to breathe and slowly sat back down.

"Will you just call him?"

"Call who?" Debbie asked, as she brought their coffee and juice. She stood there and waited for the answer that she knew no one wanted to give her.

"You might as well tell me. I'll find out anyway," she pointed out. Deb waited to see what sort of a response she would get. Seeing that none was forthcoming, she placed one hand on her hip and extended the other hand, with the palm facing up and said, "Well? I'm waiting!"

Knowing he had no alternative, Brian finally answered, "Justin".

"How is Sunshine? Has anyone talked to him?" She asked with a smile, as her posture became more relaxed.

"He's fine Deb, Mikey just talked to him," Brian added.

"Oh!" she said, feeling satisfied that her Sunshine was ok, and she left to pick up the rest of the order.

Once Deb had left the table Michael and Brian resumed their conversation.

"Now you know of course that Justin forgets his cell phone half the time and leaves it turned off the rest of the time." Brian informed him. "I'm surprised that you got through to him at all. So why do you think I can reach him now?"

"Brian."

"Besides, when did you become so concerned about Justin?" Brian asked suspiciously. Although Michael and Justin were getting along better, this level of concern seemed a little out of character, especially for Michael.

"He and I talk all the time, you know that," Michael pointed out proudly. " Don't act so surprised! How do you think the comic gets done?" Michael cajoled, "Now will you call him?"

Brian placed a call to Justin in New York. As expected, his cell phone rolled over into voice mail. Brian left a message for Justin to call him back. Brian remained unconcerned, and shrugged his shoulders as if to make a point.

"Now are you happy? So why do you think that something is wrong with Justin?" Brian asked. "Especially when you just talked to him, and he said everything is all right?"

"It's just a feeling?"

"Need I remind you what happens when we simply act on YOUR feelings? So do you have any facts?"

"No, not yet."

"I see...so tell me what's been going on while I've been gone?" Brian asked, feeling his point had been made and trying to quickly change the subject.

Before Michael could answer that question, Ted and Emmett joined them in the booth.

"So Theodore, is my office still standing?" Brian asked never failing to torture his favorite target.

"Standing and thriving, Bri, but we're glad you're finally back," Ted answered hoping that would satisfy his boss.

"Ok Emmett... now I know I'm going to be sorry I asked...but what's the latest gossip?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"Well, with that attitude, I'm not sure I want to share with you," Emmett told him in no uncertain terms. "A lot happens on Liberty Avenue in two weeks, even when you're not around. But just let me start..."

Before Emmett could bring Brian up-to-date on the latest news, Deb was back with their food.

"Did you see it?" Deb asked. "Did he tell you about it?"

"Ma! We're trying to have a conversation here!" Michael exclaimed. "Brian, stop by the comic book store when you get a chance, I have something to show you," Michael finally said quietly.

Brian stopped and thought for a minute feeling a sense of déjà vu with the 'stop by...I have something to show you' comment. The last time he heard those words he ended up on a plane to Toronto and an encounter with Melanie. Brian stared at Michael; then shook his head realizing it couldn't be happening again. Brian cast aside the thought that he was about to deal with the impact of another one of Justin's paintings. Michael, on the other hand, was continuing to ramble on about something that Brian had already tuned out.

"How about I stop past the store later today?" Brian suggested.

"Perfect."

Since Michael had offered no further information about the reason to stop by the store, Emmett and Ted decided they weren't going to spoil Michael's surprise. So the talk drifted to happenings at Babylon and the fact that Brian had been missed.

With breakfast over, the four friends departed with Ted and Brian walking together to Kinnetik.

That afternoon and evening Brian was swamped with work, especially in view of his long absence from the office. So he was still unable to get over to Red Cape Comics to see whatever Michael wanted to show him. Brian decided it could probably wait another day with no problem.

Chapter 6 – Red Cape Comics

The Next Day...(Day10)

Brian decided to have lunch at the Diner.

"Hi Deb, I'll have my usual," Brian ordered casually, anticipating a leisurely lunch and his usual turkey sandwich.

"Are you on your way to see Sunshine?" Deb inquired.

"Deb, Justin is fine. I see you've been talking to Michael." Brian was really starting to get annoyed. Then Brian remembered this was Justin, and everyone was even more hypersensitive about him since his move to New York.

"My son has the biggest heart, and he ..." Deb started to get dreamy eyed as she talked about Michael.

Her musings were interrupted when Emmett entered the Diner and joined Brian in the booth for lunch.

"Hi, Em." Brian said.

"There're still crowds at Red Cape Comics," Emmett commented.

"What do you mean still?"

"You do know what's going on? Don't you?" Emmett asked after noticing Brian's expression. "Well for the last few days..."

Ted interrupted the explanation, as he joined them in the booth. "Did you see the people near the comic book store? It's a good thing I insisted that Michael get that extra insurance."

"What's happening at comic book store?" Deb asked overhearing the conversation.

"Just the same thing that been happening for the last few days, you know," Ted said glancing his eyes toward Brian and then back to her.

"Oh! Is that still going on?" Debbie asked catching Ted glances and understanding the meaning.

Brian realized that if he had any hope of eating his lunch in peace, he needed to find out what was going on. So he pulled out his cell phone and called Michael.

"Mikey. What's going on?" Brian asked.

"I'm a little busy right now, Brian. Can I call you back later?" Michael said.

Brian and Michael said goodbye to each other. Brian closed his cell phone, and then turned to his lunch companions to recount the brief phone call.

"He's too busy to talk to me," Brian explained. "Wait a minute, since when is he too busy to talk to ME? C'mon were going to find out what's going on. Deb, we'll be right back."

They all then walked to the comic book store, where once again there was a small group gathered at one location within the store, and a few people were also waiting outside.

Into this scene walked Brian with Emmett and Ted in tow.

"What the fuck is going on?" Brian demanded.

The group parted to let Brian in the door; after all it was still Brian Kinney and this was still Liberty Avenue. As they entered the door, Michael saw them and immediately came out from behind the counter.

"Come with me!" Michael said as he took Brian by the hand and led him through the maze of people, who were inside the store. Once again everyone made a path.

There it was, still displayed on an easel, the Superheroes.

As Brian walked over to the painting he felt tightness in his chest and his fists began to clench. Now that he had a clear view, he knew once again he was face to face with another Justin Taylor Original painting. All he could do was whisper, "Justin".

For Brian, everything else in the store suddenly disappeared. All he could see was the painting. All he could hear was a discussion he just had with Justin in New York just a few days ago:

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Beginning of Flashback

"Justin, how many paintings did you ship from Santa Barbara?"

'Three."

"Melanie got one, where are the other two?"

"Don't worry," Justin leaned up to kiss Brian. "I'm sure they'll turn up eventually."

End of Flashback

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Brian shook his head to clear the memory and tried to return to the present. Brian slowly moved closer to the painting.

"I have a Justin Taylor Original painting." Michael said, proudly gesturing with his arms.

"I can see that," Brian remarked with a smile.

"Brian, THIS is a Justin Taylor Original painting. Don't you get it?" Michael again pointed out, realizing that Brian didn't understand the significance.

"Mikey, you've been handling Justin's art for the comic book for the last five years, why are you reacting like this?" Brian said, proving he understood nothing.

"The comic book is different. This is a real oil painting. This is special. Justin did this just for me. This is going to a collector's item. This is like the first issue of Captain Astro that you gave me for my birthday. I love this painting. Someday it's going to be worth a fortune." Michael said, feeling that now he had explained everything.

"Well I'm happy for you," Brian said with a shrug, still not getting the point.

"But Brian, look at the painting," Michael demanded.

Brian was used to going to galleries with Justin, so he was used to the phrase 'look at the painting', but he never expected to hear the words coming from Michael. This twist of fate was disturbing to Brian somehow.

This was the second time in less than two weeks that he was required to analyze a painting. On his recent trip to Toronto, he had been pressed into service to analyze Melanie's painting. Now here again, Michael was requiring his skills. Brian was already starting to plan his next round of torture for Justin. But, he had to put those plans aside for the moment; his skills were in demand. After all he was the resident authority on JTaylor.

Brian called upon all the techniques Justin had explained about how to examine a Justin Taylor painting. After a few moments he still found it necessary to ask, "I'm looking Mikey, what am I suppose to see? It's a beautiful painting. Justin knew the subject matter that would make you happy. All your favorite superheroes are there. Rage is even there, so is Zephyr. Their new adventure is about to begin. Once again Mikey, what am I supposed to see?"

"That's the problem. He's not there. We have to go rescue him," Michael said as if everything should now be perfectly clear. He wondered why no one was moving toward their car. "Now!"

"What?" Brian exclaimed with total confusion.

"JT!" Michael answered.

"What about JT?" Brian asked.

"Rage and Zephyr are there, so are all the other superheroes. JT is missing from the painting."

"So?"

"Justin would never put Rage and Zephyr in a painting without JT unless something was wrong. So JT must be in danger, and the superheroes have to go rescue him. We have to go to New York City and save JT."

"Well that would make sense," Emmett said following Michael's logic as if it was rational. "After all, Justin has been gone for a long time. He could be in trouble. Don't you think it's time he came back from New York City? Maybe we should all go to New York City and make sure he's ok?"

"You're just looking for another 'road trip' Emmett," Ted said using his finger to make the air quotations marks. "I really don't think that's necessary."

"Theodore, how much did you say you insured the painting for?" Brian asked.

"Twenty five thousand dollars." Ted remarked, as if it were perfectly normal.

"And you arrived at that number... how?" Brian asked, trying to remain calm, yet realizing that he had lost track of the sale prices for Justin's paintings.

Ted began to explain, "Justin's paintings have been selling for significant sums of money recently. Remember I handle his accounts. Well this painting is probably going to be one of a kind. Justin doesn't usually do this style of painting. So it's going to be worth more. I've scheduled an appraiser to come in next week. In the meantime this should cover things until then. You really need to put the painting under lock and key, Michael."

"No. I want everyone to see it. Justin would want it seen," Michael explained.

"Since when do you care what Justin wants?" Brian asked, again questioning Michael's newly found caring status. Brian realized that something very peculiar was happening.

"Since we have to go to New York to rescue JT and bring him back to Gayopolis," Michael explained

"Michael, look at me. Justin is fine. Trust me. Now will you give it a rest?" Brian demanded trying to take control of the situation, since it was obvious that Michael had completely lost it.

"But Brian!" Michael tried to protest, but at this point Brian silenced all arguments.

"Well if you're all finished queening out, I'm going back to the diner to have lunch. I still have an agency to run. I also have to plan the appropriate punishment for Justin for all the chaos that he created yet again with one of his paintings. Will the repercussions ever end from his Santa Barbara exhibit?" Brian wondered aloud, with total frustration.

Brian left the store shaking his head. As everyone left the store, Michael changed the signed to "closed". Michael grabbed a stool and sat in front of his painting and just stared into it once again, still looking for answers.

Chapter 7 – A World Gone Mad

A Few Moments Later that Same Day...(Day10)

Just after leaving the comic book store, Brian returned to the Diner. He collapsed into the booth and waited for his order. While he waited, he rested his head on the palm of one hand. He was so engrossed in thought he missed Deb turkey sandwich.

"I know that look. What's Justin done now?" Deb asked.

"Did you see the painting Justin sent to Michael?" Brian asked Deb.

"Michael loves that painting. It was nice of Sunshine to send it to him. Everybody has been talking about it. All of Liberty Avenue has been stopping in to see it. Sunshine is famous." Deb rattled on.

"Deb, because Justin didn't put JT in the painting Mikey thinks there's something wrong. He thinks Justin's in some kind of trouble. He thinks it's time I ask Justin to move back to Pittsburgh. Mikey thinks that Justin's lost in New York City. Do you believe this?" Brian continued.

"Well?" Deb responded by placing her hands on her hips and staring down at Brian. "When are you going to bring him back?" At that moment Brian threw up his hands and knew that all sanity was missing from the Novotny family.

"Considering how Mikey feels about Justin, this whole thing is surreal." Brian explained. "Usually when he acts this way, there's some potential threat to not getting out the next issue of Rage. But I know for a fact they're ahead of schedule, so Mikey isn't making any sense."

"Once you proposed to Sunshine, that changed everything for Michael. He's seemed more accepting of things between you and Justin. Now no one understands exactly why you didn't marry Justin. No one even understands your relationship with Justin now. But then no one needs to understand but you and Sunshine. So if Michael thinks something is wrong, you should listen to him," Deb explained.

"Michael doesn't THINK something is wrong. He has a feeling. Need I remind you how much trouble follows whenever we simply follow one of Michael's feelings? Deb, since the moment I first met Justin, Michael has wanted nothing more than for the earth to open up and swallow Justin, to make him disappear. So Justin creates a painting and leaves his alter ego out of it. I'm sure Justin thought he would be making Michael happy with this omission. Instead Michael goes into panic mode. I would think this is what he'd been waiting for...a universe where no forms of Justin exist! I'm just at a loss to understand him on this. I just don't understand, and you want me to listen to Michael?" Brian questioned.

While Debbie and Brian had been talking, Ted and Emmett joined Brian in the booth. Ted took this moment to decide to enter into the conversation.

"The painting's been here for days, Bri. Michael has spent every spare minute staring at it. This is the first I've heard that he a problem about JT not being included in the painting. He showed us the note that was attached. But this is the first we've all heard about any sort of problem. So I guess you'd better talk to Justin." Ted commented.

"So what was in the note?" Brian asked.

"It was just Justin being Justin, talking about dreams and living," Ted explained.

"So are we going to New York? Are we going to check on Justin? Are we bringing Justin back?" Emmett asked. "When are we leaving?"

"Emmett, are we here again. Let me see try again to see if I follow the logic that you and Mikey are proposing. Justin made a painting as a gift to Mikey. Just because JT was omitted from the painting, this means that Justin's lost in New York City. So even though the painting could have been done weeks or even months ago, we're all suppose to drop everything and effect a rescue to find JT and bring him back to Gayopolis...or in his case Pittsburgh. Did I leave anything out?"

"That sounds about right to me," Ted answered. "Good job Bri."

"Ah huh," Emmett agreed.

Brian looked at the two of them and shook his head. He asked Deb to wrap his sandwich to go. He made some comment about needing to return to the sanity of the real world, so he was going back to his office, where he could have lunch in peace.

Brian picked up his to go order and immediately left the Diner.

Ted and Emmett looked at each other in total disbelief. In their view Brian overreacted to Michael being Michael, something he's been acutely aware of for well over 20 years. Ted will admit Michael's inability to separate Justin from his alter ego JT might seem a bit immature, but this was Michael we're talking about. This was Michael, who was upset because Captain Astro was cancelled. This was Michael, who had cartoon characters and superheroes decorating the walls of his home. So why was Brian reacting this way?

Nevertheless, Ted and Emmett followed Brian's lead and got their respective lunches to go. Ted left for the office, while Emmett walked back to the comic book store.

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"Michael, I just had lunch with Brian. He's pretty upset." Emmett began.

"I don't know why." Michael responded.

"Well, that was surely a new wrinkle," Emmett said as he and Michael walked together towards the painting. "What's with the 'JT is lost in New York City, we have to rescue him angle before' where did that come from Sweetie?"

"Emmett, I thought through the things we talked about, and I've been looking at the painting. I'm really starting to understand things now."

"What do you mean?"

"I've really made some big mistakes. I can't believe some of the things that I've done. You're right, Em. I have to make some real changes or I'll lose everything."

"I just wanted to be sure that you're ok, Sweetie," Emmett said.

"I'm fine. Really. I'll be better as soon as I make Brian understand," Michael finally said.

Emmett shook his head, but realized that there was nothing more he could do.

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Brian returned to his office and greeted Cynthia, as she was hanging up the phone.

"Brian, I'm glad you're back. We have a new potential account. We need Justin to come back and work on a project for us," she stated, turning around to face Brian to explain the reason.

By the time she had completed her turn, she heard a door slam and lock. Brian was gone.

"I'm living in a world gone mad!" Brian said to himself out loud from behind the locked door. "And right here in this room is the only area of sanity," he said making a sweeping motion of with arms. "And I'm talking to myself," he suddenly realized.

Brian shook his head, sat down, and finally tried to finish his lunch.

Chapter 8 – Surprise...Surprise

Later that same day...(Day10)

Cynthia was sitting at her desk. She had long ago given up trying to understand Brian and his moods, especially when Justin wasn't around. This had been a really difficult year for the Kinnetik staff with Justin in New York. It was obvious that Brian missed Justin, but he would never admit it. Cynthia noticed that Brian's moods seemed to lift for a few days after each return from New York.

Cynthia had important news for Brian, if he would ever emerge from his self-imposed exile within his office. She continued to wish that Justin were here, because he was so much more adept at handling Brian's moods than anyone else. Justin was in New York that was a fact, but Cynthia believed that her news could change everything. She had done her research, and now she needed to talk to Brian.

Finally Cynthia decided on an alternate way to communicate through Brian's wall of silence. Cynthia determined that Brian was probably ignoring company email, so she used a more direct approach. She sent the following text message to his cell phone.

Bri,

Belluss Occhiali

Cynthia

She heard the door unlock. Cynthia waited with a smile to see what would happen. Finally, she heard Brian call her name.

"So you want to explain the text message?" Brian asked, showing he was at least mildly curious. "You might also want to explain why we need Justin? Now where would you like to start? By the way I'm having a miserable day, so this had better be good," he said, showing that he had very little patience at the moment.

"Do you remember Belluss Occhiali?"

"Yeah, I vaguely remember that it was one of the Vanguard accounts; I think Vance handled it, if I remember. So?"

"They want to talk to us," Cynthia said, letting some excitement show through.

"Why?"

"Lots of reasons."

"Enlighten me."

"Belluss Occhiali is one of the largest manufacturers of eyewear in Italy. At the time they were a Vanguard account, they were small but growing firm. This was an unusual account for Vance to even consider taking on. I think Vance only took the account as a favor to his wife at the time. It seems that the then Mrs. Vance and one of the owners' wives were childhood friends. Nevertheless, once Vance divorced her, the account became less important to the firm. Anyway there was this talented intern at Vanguard, who understood what the client wanted, and this intern had a love and an appreciation for Italian art so he made a lot of suggestions for the campaign that Vanguard created for them. The intern was allowed to work extensively on the campaign, even had several meetings the owners. The intern met the Chairman, Rudolpho Silvestri and even met his two daughters, Maria and Cristina, who are now very active in the firm. The ad exec used many of the intern's ideas and suggestions. Nevertheless when the intern left Vanguard to pursue other interests, the ad campaigns deteriorated. Now it seems that Belluss Occhiali and Eyeconics are working on a joint venture together. They're looking for an agency to handle the joint campaign for the European and American markets. This is going to be big, Brian. If you can impress the Italian firm on the joint venture's campaign, Kinnetik could also become their international ad agency."

"Is that all?" Brian said, thinking of the challenge with a smirk.

"You should expect a call from Eyeconics later today. You know I've been researching Belluss Occhiali ever since I got the call. From what I can tell, the Italian eyewear company has grown quite a bit since their days with Vanguard. They've had several ad agencies over the last 3 years. The big agencies have never been able to make the Italian firm happy. It seems Rudolpho Silvestri is demanding and impossible to please. Because of the Eyeconics tie-in, we have an inside track. We have a good chance to win this Brian. Wouldn't it be a real coup for us if we could land the joint account? Can you imagine what would happen if we landed Belluss Occhiali as a client? Shall I call Justin?"

"That would really put Kinnetik on the map both here and abroad. Wow!" Brian took a minute to visualize the idea of Kinnetik International. "Leave it to Vanguard to fuck up an account." Then he turned to Cynthia and asked in complete innocence, "So what does this have to do with Justin?"

"The name of the former Vanguard intern was... Justin Taylor."

"Fuck!"

"Shall I get Justin on the phone?"

"No!"

"No? What do you mean, no?"

"Justin lives in New York. His art career is just taking off. He's got a life in New York. C'mon Cynthia, I'm the best at what I do. Kinnetik can do this. We can do this without Justin. We have to...I'm not sure I have a right to disrupt his life every time I think I have a potential problem."

"It's just one campaign, Brian. You could ask him, and let him make the decision."

"What about 'no' do you not understand?"

"You need him, Brian. Sure, Kinnetik could do the work, that's not the issue. But to figure out what the client wants when he appears not to have an idea, that's something entirely different. Justin is so good at this. Brian, he could save us a lot of time. I bet he'd come. And besides, he also could probably use the money. New York is expensive. Think about it!"

"That's just it, Cynthia, he doesn't need the money. His paintings sell out at every exhibit he does. Theodore, just insured one of his paintings for $25,000, so I'm sure Justin probably doesn't need the money."

"Will you at least think about it?"

"Fuck!"

"Brian, you become so hard to live with on one of these major campaigns. Something this big...I don't even want to think about it. You'll work yourself to death. The staff will never be able to satisfy you. You'll fire everyone. I've seen Justin's work, remember. I wouldn't want to be the one to have to match one of his artistic campaigns. So will you please call Justin? If not for your sake, for the sake of the staff?" Cynthia insisted. "Please?"

Brian just looked at her. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

"Are you still here?" Brian asked finally.

"I'm going. But you know I'm right. I'm leaving," Cynthia said resolutely.

Cynthia turned back one more time and grinned before leaving Brian's office.

"Oh, by the way, would you like to see the ads that Belluss Occhiali has had over the last three years from some of the top ad agencies? You should see them. I was able to also locate a copy of the original campaign Vanguard created. Well, I sent you the file. I'm going back to my desk now," she smirked, as she finally left Brian alone.

Brian immediately turned to his computer and began scanning the files.

"Fuck!" was the only comment Brian could make.

Chapter 9 - Reflections

That Evening...(Day 10)

At Red Cape Comics the bell sounded just before closing, indicating a visitor. So Michael looked up and came face to face with his husband.

"Michael, are you ok?" Ben asked, closing the door and entering the store.

"Ben, what are you doing here?" Michael asked.

"Everybody's worried about you, Michael. They think that you're acting a little strange. I've noticed it too, but I wanted to give you a few days before I said anything. I wanted to give you some time, hoping you would come to me. So, now you're going to tell me what's going on Michael!"

Ben walked over to Michael and hugged him from behind. Michael leaned into Ben's chest for support. Michael sighed and then tried to gather his thoughts.

"I just don't know, Ben," Michael said, finally

"Sure you do. Whatever it is we can handle it, but you're going to have to talk to me. But, clearly you have been upset ever since Justin's painting and note arrived. So I want you to tell me what's going on, Michael."

Ben was basically a patient, understanding person. But, every now and then, he adopted this stern tone that let Michael know that Ben wanted answers, and he wanted them now.

"I've been sitting here looking at the painting and reading the note, over and over. You know sometimes I realize that I'm not as smart as everyone else. Sometimes it takes me longer to see what everyone else sees," Michael sighed.

"What do you mean?" Ben asked, as he settled down on a stool facing Michael. Ben gently touched Michael's cheek encouraging him to go on.

"When I first got the painting from Justin, I was so excited. I was excited first of all that Justin sent it to me, and of course, I loved the subject matter. It's a wonderful painting."

"And now?"

"The longer I look at the painting, the more I see. This must be what it's like when you meditate."

"In meditation, once you can still the mind and get centered, you can get in touch with the truth. You can start to see within. That's very important Michael."

"What if you don't like what you see within?"

"Seeing whatever is within and acknowledging it are the first steps. Then you can figure out how to change it if you really want to."

"Ben, how do you put up with me?"

"I love you, Michael. I don't always like some of the things you do, but I do always love you."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. It's just painful sometimes."

Michael reached out to touch Ben's cheek with genuine love and affection.

"You mean Brian."

"I mean Brian and Justin."

"I know you saw the note that Justin sent. Have you had a chance to think about its meaning?" Michael asked.

"Michael, Justin wasn't being deep or cryptic. Justin was just reminding you to dream...and to keep on dreaming no matter what. You know it's really important to have dreams and goals. He wants you to keep on dreaming, even if some of the dreams that you dream can't come true. We all remember how upset you were after the movie was cancelled, for example. You have to form new dreams to go on living. It was a very loving thing for Justin to say. But Justin is also saying, don't get so lost in your dreams that you forget to look at life and live it to the fullest."

"You know Ben, I love the painting. But Justin made the painting without putting JT in it. Justin only included Rage and Zephyr and the superheroes. Brian said that I should be happy that Justin gave me a painting that showed a world without any traces of Justin in it. That I should see the painting as perfect, like a dream come true. A world without JT...a world without Justin! He's right. It's what I've been aiming for since that night, the night Brian met Justin. And so, Justin gave that to me, in a painting. But Ben, if it's what I've always wanted, how come I'm so miserable?" Michael asked.

"Why do you think that is, Michael?"

"I don't know."

"I don't think you want a world without Justin or JT. But I do think you're very glad that Justin's in New York. And since Justin's been gone, you have tried everything you could to return Brian to 'the old Brian you knew before Justin came along'. No, I don't think you want a world without Justin, but you definitely want Brian's world without Justin in it."

"But..."

"Please don't start with the but 'he's my best friend and I need to protect him' stuff, because it's bullshit, and you know it. You made a decision to go forward, to grow up, and to have a life with me. But, you want Brian to stay the same and always be there for you. Brian wanted Justin in his life, and he had to change in ways you don't understand to make that happen. But you've been the last the see the changes Brian decided to make, and you blame Justin for any changes you do see. So you've done everything you could to Justin, supposedly in the name of protecting Brian. Don't bother to deny it."

"I wasn't going to deny it. You're right! I have. I always felt that Justin was wrong for Brian. I always thought that Brian was happy the way things had always been."

"When you and Brian did everything together? And there was no one else?"

"Yes."

"You have other priorities now... at least I hope you do. I hope that Hunter and JR and I are more important to you than Brian. I think we are, but sometimes I'm not sure."

"You ARE most important Ben. Don't ever doubt it. I love you. I'm married to you. I want a life with you. Hunter and JR are important too. Some habits are just hard to break."

"Michael, I know that you and Brian love each other. I know that you two have a history. I really do understand."

"Emmett said that all our lives changed when Justin came along. I know I wouldn't have the comic if Justin hadn't come along, it would still be just a dream. And, I would probably still be working at the Big Q. Justin sort of showed me how to make my dreams come true; I learned a lot by watching him after the bashing, as he fought his way back and got into PIFA. He let me know what was possible, so I took the plunge and bought Buzzy's store and made it mine. You know Ben, without the store I probably wouldn't have met you, and I would still be all alone. So I do see what Emmett was trying to say to me."

"And let's not forget that a 17 year-old kid managed to conquer the King of Liberty Avenue. Look at how much Brian's life has changed. Brian was even ready to marry Justin. I never thought I'd live to see that." Ben elaborated with a smile. "Justin understands things about Brian that no one else even sees, and Brian is at his strongest when Justin stands by his side. Surely you see that by now."

"I just get so mad at Brian sometimes. I was mad that he supported Lindsay over me, when it came to JR's custody. I was mad about his proposal to Justin. So I guess when Lindsay and Melanie wanted to take the kids to Toronto, I didn't try to stop them, even though Brian tried to tell everyone it was a mistake. And when Justin was planning to go to New York, I didn't try to encourage Brian to rethink that decision and try to stop Justin from going. And once everyone had gone, I didn't just try to be a real friend to Brian. Instead I'd tried to get the old Brian back as quickly as I could. I thought I'd get to have Brian all to myself again. It would be like old times. However, what I got was less of Brian than I ever had before, and I don't know what to do now."

"Michael for starters, you need to focus on something else beside Brian and Justin."

"Ben, I'm really worried that Justin is lost New York City. It's just a feeling. Brian thinks I'm crazy. I just don't think Justin's happy."

"And you know this because ...?"

"He left JT out of the painting."

"Michael, this is where we started."

"I know. I know."

"Michael, you know how Brian feels about Justin, don't you? Do you honestly believe that Brian would allow Justin to be LOST in New York City without mounting a rescue mission? C'mon this is Brian Kinney we're talking about...and the person he's in love with. You're just going to have to have some faith in the fact that Brian and Justin DO take care of each other. You don't have to fulfill that role anymore. They look out for each other, the way you and I take care of each other."

"I know... I love you, Ben."

"I love you too, Michael. I also think it's sweet that after all these years, you're finally worried about Justin."

"I know...it's funny isn't it?"

"But Michael be sure to examine your own motives. Your reaction to the painting may be out of proportion to what Justin really painted. This may really be an issue between you and your conscience. Don't try to make this into something to do with you and Brian."

"I'm not. It's just that ..."

Ben took Michael in his arms and silenced him with a firm kiss on the lips.

"We'll give it a bit of time. We'll see how it goes. Maybe you and I will go to New York for a few days. Hunter can either come with us, or he can stay and watch the store. While we're there, maybe we could check on Justin to put your mind at rest. How does that sound? We should check with Brian to see how he feels about it."

"Ok, I'll call Brian."

"No! Careful Michael! Did nothing we just talked about get through to you?" Ben said with a sigh. Michael knew this was a stern warning. "I'm a patient man, but I have limits Michael."

"I'm sorry. I just get carried away sometimes. I think it has do with being part Italian and part drag queen," Michael said, trying to lighten the moment.

"You getting carried away may present a danger to us all, so be careful Michael!" Ben warned solemnly. "I'll talk to Brian," Ben said emphatically. "You need to really process about what we've been talking about. You've got to decide what you want in your life."

"Ok," Michael whimpered.

Ben finally stood up and wrapped Michael in his arms again. "We're going to get through this," he said. "But you've got to work with me, Michael."

Michael looked at the painting once more and decided the time had come to simply put it in his office. So he folded the easel, and placed the painting in his office and locked the door. He then securely locked the store and set the alarm. It was time for him go home and focus on Ben.

Chapter 10 – Visitor Unexpected

The Next Day, early afternoon (Day 11)

"Brian, Ben Bruckner is here to see you." Cynthia said, while standing in Brian's office.

"Send him in." Brian instructed, realizing that something must be up, because Ben rarely visited him at the office. "Professor, what brings you here? Is Mikey ok?"

"Michael is fine," Ben reassured him.

"Then to what do I owe this visit?" Brian asked, still really surprised by his visitor. Brian contained his curiosity and motioned for Ben to take one of the more comfortable chairs.

"So, how's Justin?" Ben asked, trying to start things out on a lighter tone.

"Things seem to be going well for him in New York. He has been getting a few exhibits at the smaller galleries. His paintings are selling. Justin was fine when I saw him a couple of weeks ago. He was fine when I last talked to him."

"How about you Brian, are you ok?" Ben asked with genuine concern.

"Yes Professor, I'm fine. I've just been really busy," Brian said with some amusement.

"That's good!"

Then there was a long silence. Brian waited patiently without interruption. He knew that Ben was a thoughtful man, who didn't take any action lightly. The fact that Ben ventured into Brian's office meant that Ben thought that THIS was IMPORTANT. And therefore, in this case, so did Brian.

"Let me get right to the point," Ben finally said. "You know the painting that Justin sent to Michael?"

"All of Liberty Avenue knows about that painting at this point," Brian said with a smile.

"Well Michael really loves the painting! Justin created the perfect painting to give to Michael as a gift. That was really thoughtful of him. But Brian, in spite of the fact that Michael loves the painting, he has nevertheless been disturbed by it, even obsessed by it, ever since it arrived. It seems that Justin left JT out of the painting, but he included Rage and Zephyr with the superheroes. Michael has got it in his head that Justin is somehow lost in New York, and it's time you bring him home. I know the argument that Michael should be happy to have finally gotten a universe without Justin in it, especially knowing how he feels about Justin. But for some reason, this is all making Michael more and more miserable."

"Professor, please tell me you're not buying this bullshit about Justin being lost in New York, and it's time for us to go rescue him, to bring him back to Pittsburgh? Tell me that's not why you're here in the middle of the day visiting me?"

"Brian, my reaction was the same as yours. I roll my eyes each time Michael starts with the 'JT is missing from the picture'. But, he won't let this go. I know Michael has done some pretty awful things in the past, in the name of you being his best friend. And it may be that Michael is finally starting to feel guilty about a lot of things that he's done. He definitely has a lot of reasons to feel guilty about how he's treated Justin. But Brian, he's worked with Justin for five years on the comic book, so if Michael says that Justin would never paint Rage and Zephyr without JT... as ridiculous as it sounds, I think we have to listen him."

"Ben, I was just in New York less than two weeks ago. And except for Justin's annoying qualities of not carrying his cell phone and his unique ability to take an otherwise peaceful day and turn into complete chaos for me, I would say that Justin seemed fine. I just don't think there's anything to worry about."

"How can you say that?" Ben asked.

"Justin has this annoying tendency to paint and sketch from some link with the cosmic universe. Justin believes he merely presents a story that he wants to tell. The interpretation of Justin's art is in the eyes of the beholder. Justin painted a simple piece. Michael thinks Justin is lost. It may simply be that Michael in some way, is lost without Justin, as strange as that may sound."

"Brian is it possible that Justin is hiding the truth from you? Could he hate New York and want to return to Pittsburgh, but he can't tell you because he doesn't want to let you down? He doesn't want to disappoint you. So he stays in New York, when he wants to be here with you."

"Ben trust me, Justin would tell me."

"Would he Brian? Maybe he thinks you're happy with the way things are. Look Brian, I'm not trying to pry. I don't know why you two decided not to get married. I don't know why the two of you made the decision that Justin should move to New York. These are things between you and Justin. But Brian, just because he moved to New York, there was no reason on earth for him to do this starving artist bullshit, and there was no reason for the two of you to be in two different cities. We live in the age of the Internet, so I just don't believe it was really necessary. I believe someone had a lifelong fantasy, and maybe some ulterior motives, and they had Justin go to New York to live out their dreams. The problem is, I don't believe this particular dream belongs to either you or Justin."

"Well Professor, you don't talk often, but when you speak you say a mouthful don't you."

"Look Brian, Michael's worried about Justin. I know you were just there in New York. But for some reason, right now Michael is channeling Debbie when it comes to Justin. It probably won't last...but right now he won't let this go. And Brian, just so you know, it's really hard making love to someone channeling Debbie," Ben said with a laugh.

Brian joined him in that laugh and said, "Professor, it wasn't necessary to share that image?"

"So you get my point. If we don't resolve this, Debbie and Jennifer will get involved. Oh! And let's not forget Daphne."

"Ok Professor, I've got the picture."

"I want to get Michael back! And he's not going to rest until he sees Justin and talks to him. So we're thinking of going to New York, maybe this weekend, and while we're there we'll see Justin. And hopefully that will put everything to rest. But Brian, I just want you to know that I can't live with Michael when he has this level of worry about Justin. So if Michael is right, that Justin is lost, and he's just not telling you, then Michael and I will pack up Justin and bring him home. He can stay with us until you think you're ready to deal with him."

"Hold it Professor! The last time Justin stayed with you and Mikey, I had to buy a fucking mansion to get him back. No, No. No. No. You and your husband just keep your paws off Justin." Brian said laughing. "I'm glad that you care about Justin. I really am touched. I'm just not sure I can afford it."

"Well you're at least smart enough to know Justin's worth every penny, so I guess there's hope for you yet," Ben teased.

"Professor, if you and Mikey want to go New York for a weekend that's fine. Enjoy yourselves. I don't want Justin caught up in the middle of Michael's obsession. Justin has a lot going on in New York. I don't want him disturbed, not with this nonsense, anyway. You need to take care of Michael on this. Leave Justin and his happiness to me," Brian demanded.

"See I knew talking to you was a good idea," Ben suggested with a smile.

"As I've said before, Professor, we should do this more often," Brian smirked.

Ben nodded as he stood up to leave the office. Brian moved back to his desk, indicating the meeting was over and that he was about to pretend to resume work.

Ben suddenly stopped and said, "You know, Brian, you've really changed."

"Oh!" Brian remarked, looking up quite surprised.

"Yes, I just want you to know that I noticed." Ben said with a smile.

And with that Ben was gone.

As Brian leaned back in his chair and pondered for a moment, "Fuck!" was all he could finally utter, as he reached for his cell phone.

Chapter 11 – Late Night Phone Call

Late that Night...(Day 11)

Even though the clock said it was 3AM, Justin had just gotten out to shower and was about to stretch out on the bed to relax for a moment. He'd been painting nonstop for the last few weeks, so he was really tired. Justin had fallen asleep on the floor of his studio, thinking a nap would be refreshing. He had learned the hard way that this was not one of his better ideas. He immediately made a mental note: 'buy futon'. He now knew this would be a welcome addition to his studio space. In spite of the body aches, Justin was pleased with the amount of work he had accomplished.

His ringing cell phone interrupted his self-congratulations. Justin glanced at the clock, and he once again noted the 3AM time. He smiled, as he listened to the distinctive ring tone, which told him who was calling.

"Briiiiiiiiiiiiiian!" Justin said, as he answered the call.

"Sunshine!" Brian responded.

"Is everything all right?" Justin asked, sitting up to wait for the answer.

"Everything's fine. Don't worry. Just wanted to talk," Brian said quietly, still having trouble saying a simple 'I miss you' to Justin. "It doesn't sound like you were asleep. Are you just getting in?"

"Yeah. I found out that sleeping at my studio is not a good idea. Well, at least until I get a futon, anyway. Anyway, I just got out of the shower."

Brian began to have images of the just showered Justin. He felt his cock twitch at the remembrance. As Brian closed his eyes he could even remember the distinctive fragrance of Justin's shampoo, and Brian's fingers ached to be entangled in the soft blond locks. Brian knew at that moment he was so fucked, but he managed to find his voice to cover his reality.

"So are you dripping all over everything?" Brian asked laughing. "Do I need to hold on?"

"No, I'm still slightly damp, but it's ok." Justin answered smiling.

"I see," Brian whispered, having a difficult time remembering all the important reasons for this particular phone call.

"I'm sorry about the rustling noises, I only have a towel on. You have to give me a minute to cover up," Justin explained, while scrambling to find a comfortable position.

"Cover up?" Brian asked, knowing his mind was stuck on the image of a freshly showered Justin, but suddenly couldn't remember why the image was there.

"Brian, I don't have any clothes on...you know...the shower."

"God Justin, you had to tell me that," Brian commented. "Now how am I supposed to concentrate on this phone call? "

"I just wanted you to understand my predicament," Justin responded innocently.

"I see."

"Are you at the loft?"

"Yeah. I just finished my shower too." Brian explained.

There was a pause as Justin visualized the just showered Brian, with damp and tussled hair. He too was getting hard from the verbal exchange.

"I see," Justin whispered.

"This is an odd hour for you to call. Did you call for phone sex?" Justin teased, trying to lighten the conversation.

"Of course, so I'll need your undivided attention. Now, I'll give you a moment to send away any unwanted guests. Just tell them they have to leave. Go ahead. I'll wait!" Brian said, returning Justin teasing tone and secretly hoping that no one else was there.

"Brian!"

When Justin simply said his name that way, Brian knew Justin still loved him, and he could breathe. Brian leaned his head onto his own shoulder for just a moment to take it all in. Then he began to speak again.

"Everybody has been trying to reach you forever," Brian explained. "Including me, I might add."

"I told you, 'forever is a lot shorter than it used to be'. I can see that I was right all along," Justin commented with a smile.

"Justin, what's the use of having a cell phone if you're not going to have it with you. You've got to carry the damn thing."

"Brian, we've already talked about my cell phone the last time you were here."

"I remember."

"Besides, I temporarily misplaced my cell phone. So it has only been a few days. I told everyone that email is best anyway!"

"Justin, have you checked your messages?"

"Brian, I just found my phone tonight just before I got in the shower. If I started returning calls this time of the night, I wouldn't have any friends left. A lesson you might think about, I might add."

"If you don't start carrying and answering your cell phone, you're not going to have any friends left either. How are things going?"

"I have a few more painting to do for Santa Barbara."

"Justin, why are you doing paintings for Santa Barbara?" Brian asked shuddering at the mention of the beautiful California city that had become the bane of his existence.

"When I did the exhibit there a few weeks ago, some people really liked my work. They even wanted to buy the paintings, you know the three we talked about?" Justin said cautiously.

"Yes I remember. Now is probably not a really good time to mention those three paintings. Go ahead!"

"Well, I accepted commissions to paint several paintings for gallery customers, who were disappointed that those three paintings weren't for sale. So except for the few days when you were here, I've pretty much been painting nonstop."

"When do you sleep?"

"I fell asleep in the studio a couple of times, and when phones aren't ringing in the middle of the night, I usually get a good night's rest. But things should get better now because I finally have an agent. So now I can actually spend my days in the studio, instead of traipsing all over New York with my portfolio, knocking on gallery doors. Now my agent will do the work of getting me into the gallery shows. I did finally get my website finished, so my work is now all catalogued and archived. Justin Taylor Artist feels like it's finally a reality. I'm also doing some freelance work in website design. So I'm keeping pretty busy."

"I can hear that. The things that you're working on, do you have to be in New York to handle them?"

"Not necessarily. As long as I have a computer I can handle the freelance work. I guess if I actually did turn my cell phone on, it wouldn't matter where I was. My studio is here though, but I have always been able to paint anywhere that I'm allowed to make a mess. I have the gallery show coming up in three months that I have to get ready for, but I guess I could work on that anywhere. So what did you have in mind? Are you coming this weekend?"

"I can't. I'm buried with work. I may have a potential big account, if I can come up with a spectacular campaign."

"Of course you will come up with a spectacular campaign; spectacular campaigns are your specialty."

"Are you sure you're not just a little biased?"

"Nope, I know what you're capable of. So I guess I'll have to wait another two weeks before I see you then, huh? I miss you."

"Well...I don't know how to ask you this...I need a favor."

"Just ask. Go ahead."

"I was wondering if you could come back to Pittsburgh for a few days."

"It's short notice. Getting a flight is going to be tricky. So, don't tell me you miss me sooooooooooooo much that you can't wait two more weeks to see me? Huh? Admit it!"

"Justin!" Brian said, hoping to short circuit any further suggestions. "Can you fly home in the morning? "

"Brian, it's already morning. What you mean is get up, get dressed, pack, and go to the airport. Now! Do not pass go...do not collect $200. Wow! You really do miss me! I knew it!"

"Justin, I've been laying here with a hard on ever since you told me you just got out of the shower. Stop making this any more difficult."

"Let me see if I have this straight. You want me to drop everything and fly back to Pittsburgh so we can fuck? Brian, it's a lovely idea. Ever the romantic!" Justin teased. "That's crazy even for you. Are you going to tell me, what's going on?"

"It wouldn't be so crazy if you had picked up your messages earlier in the day. It would have been a more like an orderly, planned request."

"I see. So now this is my fault?" Justin asked, as he started to grumble in protest.

At this point Brian asked himself, why he was in love with this man, who could be the most exasperating person to deal with, when you just wanted him do something so simple, as get on a plane and come home. Any normal person would have jumped at the chance. But Justin had to go into full drama princess mode and to make everything difficult.

After Brian let out another sigh of frustration, he realized something. If Justin wasn't jumping at the chance to hop a flight and comeback to Pittsburgh, then Michael's theory that Justin was 'lost and needed to be rescued' was as ridiculous, just as Brian had always suspected it was.

Brian continued to listen to Justin ramble in protest for a few more minutes. Then he interrupted.

"Justin. Will you just calm down? It was a simple request. Are you going to fly here?"

"Brian, are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"I'll tell you when you get here. Trust me?"

"Brian, give me some sort of clue!"

"All Right! Cynthia thinks that I may need to talk to you to see if you might possibly want to come back to consider maybe working on a project for Kinnetik," Brian said as fast as he could without taking a breath.

"I see, Cynthia thinks so, huh? Go on," Justin acknowledged, fully recognizing the implied Kinney-speak. "Cynthia is very smart about these things."

"I thought you might feel that way," Brian said, being very glad that there were no arguments to the bullshit he was saying. At this moment, Brian loved Justin simply for going with the flow and for not making this any harder for him to deal with. "By the way does the name Belluss Occhiali ring a bell?"

"The Italian company? I own a few shares of their stock? Why?"

"What do you mean you own a few shares of their stock?" Brian asked quite surprised by the turn of events.

"When I was an intern at Vanguard, I worked on a campaign for them. They liked my work. The ad exec got a big bonus. Because I was intern I couldn't get a bonus. Belluss Occhiali's company president found out about it and arranged for me to get a few shares of stock. I think I still own them. At the time the shares were pretty much deemed to be almost worthless, since it was a little tiny, but growing company. It was a nice gesture. The president took me to dinner, and I met his two daughters, who insisted on flirting with me all evening, even though they knew I was gay. His daughters were about my age. I think one was a design student; and I think the other was a business major, so we had stuff in common. They presented me the shares during dinner. I always held on to them for sentimental reason. Why?" Justin asked.

This was not the explanation that Brian had gotten earlier from Cynthia. So Justin was a shareholder in Belluss Occhiali; that was an interesting turn of events. Brian couldn't believe Justin was holding the shares 'for sentimental reasons'. This was now one of the largest eyewear manufacturers in Italy, and Justin was holding the shares for sentimental reasons! Brian suddenly wondered if he had taught Justin anything about business in their years together.

"Justin, what did you do with the shares?" Brian asked with a sigh of frustration.

"I think they're in my mother's safety deposit box. The company didn't have ADRs at the time so I just held onto the paper as a souvenir. Brian why are you bringing this up now?" Justin asked curious about the turn of this conversation.

"Have you been following the company?" Brian asked, already knowing the answer after the 'sentimental reason' comment, but he figured it didn't hurt to ask.

"Not really!" Justin was thinking that between getting back with Brian, sabotaging the Stockwell campaign, the Pink Posse, Brian's cancer scare, Rage the movie fiasco, the bombing of Babylon, almost getting married, and the move to New York, he'd been a tad bit busy since his days as a Vanguard intern. "Why?" he asked.

"I see," Brian said, finding things as he expected. "Never mind. It's not important."

"So should I call Cynthia about the project?" Justin asked innocently.

"No, can you just take a few days off and fly here. We'll talk about things when you get here, I promise."

"I have one painting that I need finish tomorrow, then I can leave. Is that ok? Reservations are going to be tricky."

"Use the credit card. Call me with your flight information. I'll pick you up at the airport."

"No, I'll take a limo from the airport. That way you'll be able to keep working until I get there."

"Well then, call me when you get in."

Brian finally let out a sigh of relief that everything was settled. He felt a sense of joy that Justin was coming home.

"Brian, do you suppose that I could stay with you at the loft?" Justin asked sheepishly.

Brian issued a silent prayer of thank you, because he hadn't figured out how he could make the request to Justin without betraying all that he was feeling at the moment.

"Sunshine, I wouldn't let you stay anywhere else," Brian said with a smile. "And Justin, I don't want you to tell anyone that you're coming here until we have talked. Promise me!"

"Ok. Now let me go so I can get started."

"Justin, haven't you forgotten something."

"Nothing comes to mind."

"You offered me phone sex. Have you forgotten?"

"Brian, can't you do it without me? I have an awful lot to do. I'll make it up to you when I see you."

"Justin! You're kidding, right?"

"Of course Brian."

"That's better!"

After several rounds of phone sex, they finally said "Later" to each other.

Brian drifted off into the sleep of contentment. For Justin there would be no rest.

Chapter 12 - Preparations

The Next Day...(Day 12)

Justin got an early start on the day by deciding that an early start was easiest if you just didn't go to bed. Using his sketchpad as a recording device, Justin made lists:

1) Things to do before leaving;

2) Things to take to Pittsburgh.

Brian had been rather vague about the reason for his trip home. The 'Cynthia has a project for you to work on' explanation didn't give Justin a clue as to what he needed to take. So Justin created a third list:

3) Things to take just in case

He checked with Liberty Air to verify the flights available to Pittsburgh for the entire day, so he would have some idea of his options. He made initial reservations, and was told that he could change these reservations online, if necessary. Justin thought to himself that online changes would be good and would save a lot of time...time he didn't expect to have a lot of during this particular day.

He finished the required painting and set it aside to dry. He cleaned up his brushes and cleaned up his studio.

He had several completed paintings for the gallery in Santa Barbara. Justin sent an email to the gallery owner there, advising her of his progress. He knew that the patrons were all most eager to receive their paintings; yet, all were willing to wait for the artist to have just the right inspiration for THEIR particular painting. Justin decided to send the completed paintings ahead, with the remaining paintings to be shipped, as they were ready. So he spent a part of day wrapping and packaging the paintings for shipment. He was even able to arrange for the freight company to pick the shipment later in the day.

Justin went back to his tiny loft and started to pack. He checked in with his agent to insure that everything was on track for the exhibit. He verified his voice mail contained no calls that needed to be returned and did a quick scan at all his emails. He would return those calls and emails when he was in Pittsburgh. With all tasks complete and all packing done, Justin showered and was still amused at how he always managed to get paint in the most unusual places on his body.

Justin looked at the items he was taking to Pittsburgh. Justin knew it was only a short visit, but the pile of stuff he intended to take made it look as he if was moving back to Pittsburgh. Justin flashed on the image of Brian picking him up at the airport and trying to fit all of Justin's stuff in Brian's classic car. After a fit of hysteria over that image, Justin repacked using the criteria that he would take only what couldn't be repurchased in Pittsburgh if needed.

Why was he being so nervous? He was only going to Pittsburgh. He hadn't been back in almost a year. It wasn't supposed to be that way. It's just that Brian found it easier to visit periodically to allow Justin maximum time to work on his art. Yet Brian had specifically asked him to come home. Justin tried to imagine what could possibly be going on. He looked at his watch and decided he would know in a few hours.

He went back to the studio to wait for the freight company; meanwhile he confirmed his flight reservations and limo pick up time. The freight company arrived and then left with the required paintings. Justin scanned his studio one more time. Something told Justin it might be awhile before he returned. Justin wondered where that thought came from, as he locked the studio door and set the alarm.

Justin was unable to reach Brian on his cell phone, so he called the office and talked to Cynthia. He told her his flight and estimated arrival time, but he mentioned he was trying to stand by for an earlier flight. As Justin closed the cell phone, he realized he had never heard Cynthia sound so happy.

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First thing in the morning Brian called his housekeeper and requested extra service today. When he explained that Justin was coming for a visit, the housekeeper volunteered to grocery shop and pick up all Justin favorite things.

His housekeeper made some comment about gremlins having moved into the apartment. She based this on the fact that Justin had been gone for such a long period of time, yet she continually found in the loft, opened packages of snacks that only Justin would eat. She was convinced that gremlins were the only explanation, and Brian should look into the matter. His housekeeper made some comment that she was sure the gremlin problem would disappear with Justin's return. Brian made a note to himself to be sure that the sizeable tip that he planned for his housekeeper for all her extra services was large enough to insure that the gremlin problem at the loft was never mentioned to Justin. Brian couldn't admit that Justin had addicted him to the occasional bag of chips with his sandwich and to the occasional Oreo cookie and milk at bedtime. Brian also never mentioned the extra hours he spent on the treadmill to work off the potential pounds from his guilty indulgences...indulgences all courtesy of Justin.

But none of that mattered now. Justin was coming home, at least for a visit. Although Brian had been most diligent over the last year with his periodic visits, the idea of having Justin back at the loft seemed right somehow. And though Brian knew it was only for a few days, he intended to make the most of this visit.

Brian got a call from Michael indicating that he and Ben were on their way to New York for the weekend. They were leaving early in the afternoon so they could enjoy the long weekend. Hunter had decided to stay and watch the store. Emmett had agreed to keep an eye on things. Michael called Brian to ask him to keep an eye on Emmett.

As Brian hung up the phone, he realized that his plan would probably work perfectly. Brian's conversation with the Professor had been enlightening. Brian was certain that the last thing Justin needed, was to deal with Michael's issues about ' JT not being included in the painting' and 'Justin being lost and needing to be rescued'. Brian also questioned how rational Ben was under circumstances where Michael was 'channeling Debbie'. As Brian thought about that image, he actually felt sorry for Ben. Brian knew that Justin could take care of himself; he had already demonstrated his ability to hold his own on many occasions. It was simply that Brian felt, in spite of all that he knew, that Justin was His. And being HIS, Brian intended to try to protect Justin from the Ben and Michael onslaught.

Brian had a flash back to the first time he claimed Justin as HIS. He remembered a 17 year-old Justin dancing with two partners at Babylon... two partners, who were originally dancing with Brian, by the way, until Justin danced by. Brian always felt he did what he had to do. I wasn't planned. It just happened. Brian took back Justin, who he believed was HIS, whether he could admit it or not.

Realizing that he wasn't getting anything done so far today, Brian went to the Diner. He passed Red Cape Comics and was reassured to find out that Michael wasn't there. Brian picked up his to go order from the Diner and walked back to the Kinnetik office, where he found a beaming Cynthia sitting at her desk.

Brian was almost terrified by her smile. As he walked by, Cynthia got up from her desk and threw her arms around him, letting her head come to rest for a moment on his chest. Brian realized he had just left the Diner, but this hug was just like Debbie's. Brian realized that it was indeed rare for him to be on the receiving end of one of Cynthia's hugs, and as he struggled to breathe, he was grateful that it was a rare occurrence.

"Cynthia, this is sexual harassment." Brian commented. "What are you doing?"

"Thank you" was all she said, immediately returning to her desk and totaling ignoring his sexual harassment comment.

"For what?"

"Justin."

Brian simply smiled.

Brian continued walking back to his desk to eat his lunch.

Brian placed a call to Jennifer and listened to her joy as he told her Justin was coming back for a brief visit. After swearing her to secrecy, Brian promised Justin would call her tomorrow after he arrived. Brian listened with complete understanding, for Jennifer's feelings mirrored his own feelings.

Brian asked her to retrieve the stock certificates for the Belluss Occhiali stock from her safe deposit box. She agreed to pick them up later today.

Brian asked Jennifer about the availability of temporary loft space for Justin, just in case the need should arise. Jennifer forgot her country club manners and squealed in his ear at the mere prospect. She then regained her composure and said she would look into it for him.

Brian had a disturbing telephone call from Eyeconics, as they complained about the unreasonableness of their Italian partner. Susan Weaver wondered what on earth had possessed her to talk Eyeconics into considering this joint venture with Belluss Occhiali in the first place. Sure it made business sense and was an interesting deal, but Rudolpho Silvestri was impossible to work with. The products the joint company produced were amazing. But everything else was a disaster. Susan Weaver mentioned that early retirement was beginning to look better and better. Brian reminded her that she wasn't an employee, but rather that she owned the company, so retirement was not an option. She was not amused by his revelation.

Susan also warned that they had looked at ad campaign ideas from six companies both in the U. S. and abroad, Rudolpho Silvestri had liked nothing. She indicated that if the Italian had only been displeased with parts of the suggested campaigns, but liked other parts, then she would at least have some idea into the complex mind of Rudolph Silvestri. But he hated everything. Susan reminded Brian that Eyeconics was counting on Kinnetik to come through with the winning campaign. Brian could feel the pressure. He also had a creative block, so he was getting nowhere.

It was Friday and Brian decided to call it a day. He walked out to tell Cynthia that he was going home, and once again he was greeted by her frightening smile. Brian hoped that by Monday, life at the office might once again be normal. Then Brian smiled as he realized that Justin might still be here, and with Justin around, chaos was the most likely option. Brian knew that even for a few days life was about to get interesting.

Brian ran a few errands and headed home to the loft to wait for Justin's arrival.

Chapter 13 – Welcome Home

Early that Evening...(Day 12)

Brian struggled to open the door to the loft, laden with the packages from his many errands. He placed his packages on the kitchen counter while he closed the door.

Brian felt a tingling sensation on the back of his neck. The tingling was enough to make him do a visual sweep of the open area of the loft looking for anything out of place, but everything seemed to be neat and in order. Brian tried to shake off the feeling as nothing.

He put the Beam in its cabinet and put away the cigarettes and other items he'd bought. Brian then moved in the direction of the bedroom to change his clothes. He carried with him the things he'd picked up from the cleaners, which needed to be hung in his closet, and he also grabbed his cell phone, just in case Justin called while he was changing clothes.

As he was about to take the first step up to the bedroom, he felt his heart skip a beat. The reason became apparent as he looked into the bedroom and saw Justin already curled up, asleep on the left side of the bed.

At that moment Brian envisioned 20 simultaneous things he wanted to do, yet his body wouldn't move to cooperate in any of them. Brian just stood there transfixed.

At first Brian thought that he might be over reacting; after all he had just been with Justin three weeks ago in New York City. Brian wondered why he was overcome with so much emotion. Then it hit him. He saw the truth. Brian realized THIS MOMENT was different somehow.

When he was in New York, he was merely a visitor in Justin's space. It was almost like a vacation of sorts. Now, with Justin back in Pittsburgh...back in the loft...back in his bed, it felt like this was how life was supposed to be, and the flood of emotions that he was feeling overwhelmed Brian. He knew that this was what was missing. Brian knew his heart ached for something...so simple...as having Justin... back...here.

The enormity of the feelings Brian was experiencing from just a glimpse of Justin, made Brian began to wonder if he'd be consumed by these feelings if he actually touched Justin.

Brian knew he needed some time to deal with all he was feeling.

Finally he mustered his courage to simply retrace his steps and back up into the front area of the loft. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He waited for the calming effects.

He steadied himself as he turned off the ringer on the regular phone in the loft. He then turned off his cell phone. Brian made sure the door was locked, and alarm was set. Those tasks being done, he felt assured that his reunion with Justin would not now be interrupted.

Brian returned to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of Beam to calm his racing heart.

He took another deep breath and finally allowed himself to whisper, "He's here."

Brian took another swig of the Beam for courage, for Brian realized he was scared to death. Brian wondered for a moment if this was what hell was like, a place where everything you've ever wanted was right within reach, but for all eternity you're too scared to reach out and touch it.

He took another swig of Beam. Now he knew was ready.

He pulled two bottles of water from the refrigerator. He arranged things in his arms so that he could carry both his clothes from the cleaners and the bottles of water. He returned to be bedroom.

Justin was still sound asleep, and Brian was still overwhelmed by Justin's presence.

Brian quickly hung his clothes in the closet and placed the bottles of water on the nightstand. With his hands now free, Brian quickly removed his clothes and slid his nude body under the covers to occupy the right side of the bed.

For the first time in a year, everything finally felt right the moment Brian simply got into bed next to a sleeping Justin, and in that moment, Brian could relax.

Without waking up, Justin felt Brian's presence and automatically rolled into Brian's arms, curling up onto his chest.

Brian smiled and kissed the top of Justin's head and whispered, "I love you," as Brian too snuggled-in for greater comfort with the man he loved.

And in peaceful tranquility, Brian joined Justin in sleep.

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Several hours later Brian heard a rumbling, and he slowly opened one eye. It took him a moment to figure out what was happening. Then he felt the rumbling against his own body, and he knew exactly what this was.

Brian shook his head and opened the other eye. He was now fully awake.

"Justin, wake up, I have to feed you," Brian said, gently nudging Justin.

"Hmmm?" Justin asked, as he slowly awakened and started to snuggle into that certain spot on Brian's neck.

"Justin, don't start that. You're just going to get me all excited, and you know we can't ... Justin...we're just going to have to stop so you can eat," Brian explained, with some difficulty for Justin was very effective with his nudging.

"Brian!"

"No. No. We can't fuck! Your stomach is making too much noise. It'll just spoil the mood."

"So what do you suggest?" Justin finally asked.

"Let's solve the food problem first, then I can fuck your brains out," Brian replied.

"Ever the romantic!" Justin remarked with a smile, as he propped himself up on one elbow.

"Here," Brian remarked, handing a bottle of water to Justin and taking the other for himself.

Justin reached for his bottle of water and took a sip, before resuming his original position, propped up on one arm. He finally said, "Thanks".

"When did you get in?" Brian asked, as he leaned in, gently brushing Justin's lips. "You forgot to call me."

Leaning into the kiss, Justin responded, "No, I didn't forget. I called the office, but Cynthia said you were on your way home. So I put my stuff away and took a nap to wait for you. I didn't get any sleep last night."

"Did you get everything done that you needed to do before you left New York?" Brian asked, propping himself up in bed and taking another sip of water.

"Yeah. I even got paintings shipped to that place I can't mention," Justin said with a smile.

"You mean Santa Barbara?"

"Ah huh. Though, I still have a few paintings left to do for there. Then I can start working on the paintings for my show."

"Fuck, Justin. How many paintings did you have to do for Santa Barbara? It seems like you've been painting on those commissions for weeks ever since you got back."

"Let's just say, I don't have to wait tables for a while. You know, you once told me that there's a well-known saying in advertising that if you 'tell the people they can't have something, they'll do almost anything to get it'. I just found out it works in the art world as well. When I shipped the paintings to the exhibit, I had originally planned to sell them at the exhibit. Then, I don't know, I just changed my mind. Something told me not to sell the paintings. You wouldn't believe how much buzz that simple decision created. The press showed up at the gallery. The press said it was a phenomenon, because my paintings were primarily meant to be seen and enjoyed. It seems the idea was practically unheard of, so of course everyone wanted to buy my stuff. I arranged to take on commissions from the disappointed customers and to send them their paintings later. When I got back to New York, I sent them a computerized image of what I was thinking of painting, before I started to put paint to canvas. The customers are thrilled and can hardly wait for their paintings. Everything sold at a premium. The gallery got deposits in advance for each commission. They'll collect the money and see that I'm paid. Even with expenses and the galleries percentage, I won't have to wait tables for a while. My work got exposure it wouldn't have had otherwise. The gallery got a lot of press and a lot of new customers. It was a win-win for everyone."

"I see," Brian said with a laugh. "By the way, Michael loved his painting of the Superheroes."

"That's what I'd hope for, I know how he feels about them. You know Brett Keller and Connor James showed up at the gallery. I have commissions from both of them for paintings."

"Really! You know, Theodore insured Michael's painting for $25,000."

"Brett and Conner are paying almost twice that for their special orders."

"Holy Shit, Sunshine!" Brian exclaimed. At just that moment, Justin's stomach rumbled again. "Look your stomach is still making noises. What are we going to do about dinner?"

"Your housekeeper obviously went shopping. Let's see what I can whip up. You're probably as tired of take out as I am. Just let me get a quick shower, and I'll see what I can do about dinner."

"Are you sure?" Brian asked.

"Yeah. Just let me get a shower," Justin said, as he started moving toward the bathroom.

A few minutes later, Justin turned on the water in the shower. Brian listened for a second, and then decided the running water was obviously his cue to join Justin into the shower.

"Brian, what are you doing here?" Justin asked, as he felt Brian's arms slide around his waist.

"I'm helping you with your shower. Surely you remember?" Brian responded, as he started to kiss Justin's neck.

"This will never be a quick shower if you're in here with me," Justin said, half-heartedly trying to protest.

"I think I can be of immeasurable help to you," Brian suggested as he started kissing Justin's shoulder.

"Oh, you do, do you? How's that?"

"Sunshine, let me make this easier for you," Brian responded as he started soaping Justin's back and continued letting his hands slide down below Justin's waist.

"Hmmmmm."

An hour later when the shower actually ran out of hot water, Brian and Justin emerged from the shower both thoroughly fucked.

As they had finally dried off, Brian pulled out his phone and made reservations at Popagano's. He then suggested that Justin get dressed, as he indicated where they were going for dinner.

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At dinner, Brian ordered Champagne and toasted the success of Justin Taylor Artist.

Brian was extremely proud of Justin's accomplishments, and he wanted Justin to know it. But even more, Brian was just glad to have Justin back, even if for only a moment.

They continued gently touching each other as they talked during dinner, and they lingered over dinner for several hours.

With dinner finally over, they started the drive back to the loft from the restaurant. While riding in the car, Justin turned toward Brian and asked, "So you want to tell me what's going on? Brian, why am I here?"

"Sunshine, you remember what I told you about your mommy and daddy wanting to make a baby...?" Brian started to say in a singsong voice.

"Brian, will you cut the bullshit and tell me what's going on?"

"Can't you be content with the fact that you're here because I needed you?"

Those last three words silenced Justin in his tracks. After a few moments he regained his voice.

"You need me?" Justin asked sheepishly.

"Yes," Brian responded in a no nonsense manner.

"You've never needed me before," Justin whispered.

"I've always needed you, Sunshine. I just won't always admit it." Brian whispered, as he reached over to take Justin's hand and entwine their fingers together.

"Really?" Justin said, squeezing his hand tighter.

"Absolutely!" Brian said, lifting their joined hands to kiss Justin's wrist.

"See this goes to show you how truly desperate I must be?" Brian said with a laugh, trying to lighten the mood.

At the last remark, Justin hit Brian on the shoulder. With the last remark, Justin knew they were back to Kinney-speak.

"So let's see...how about I take a look at the project files when we get back to the loft."

"See Sunshine, I knew feeding you would garner your complete cooperation."

"I should have gotten a clue about how hard I was going to have to work when you said that we were going to Popagano's for dinner. But nooooooooo, I fell for the 'I'm proud of you Justin speech'. I should have known you planned to work my ass off all along." Justin continued on his verbal roll. "I had the right idea...I just knew it. We should have stayed home, and I should have prepared dinner just like I planned. Then what were you going to do? Huh?"

"Sunshine, I had no idea. That's why I took you out to dinner to the most expensive place I could find," Brian smirked. "That way I knew I would never have to answer that question."

They both laughed.

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A few minutes later Brian parked the car in the allotted space. Then he walked around to the other side of the car. As Justin exited the car, Brian took Justin in his arms and kissed him passionately.

When Brian finally broke the kiss he said, "Look, I know I don't tell you often enough, but I just don't want you to ever doubt it...I love you."

"I love you too."

And with that they kissed each other again. When the need for air caused them to break apart, Brian found his voice once again.

"Let's get inside," Brian whispered.

And with that, they wrapped their arms around each other's waist and slowly walked from the car to the loft. And as they walked, Brian whispered in Justin's ear, "I'm glad you came home."

Chapter 14 – The Project

The Next Day...(Day 13)

"All right, Brian, I'm looking at the file. Now what would you like me to see?" Justin said as he scrolled through several files on Brian's computer.

"Just tell me what you think," Brian suggested, waiting patiently for Justin to respond.

"They're just a bunch of ads. Whoever did these campaigns for Belluss Occhiali doesn't understand their product line, and they sure don't understand Eyeconics. The ads are boring. They're not sexy. They're not edgy. But you didn't need me to tell you that," Justin responded with a laugh.

"No I didn't." Brian said quietly.

"So do you want to tell me what's going on? Why am I here?" Justin asked and then sat quietly, waiting for Brian to explain.

Brian tried to gather his thoughts.

"All right. All right. Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali have formed a joint venture. They need an ad campaign for both the domestic and foreign advertising. If Kinnetik can produce the winning campaign, we stand to win not only the ad campaign for the joint venture...but Belluss Occhiali as a client as well. The problem is Rudolpho Silvestri and Susan Weaver can't communicate about what they want in the campaign. Signor Silvestri is furious. Susan is thinking of retiring. This is really bad, Justin. To make matter worst Rudolpho Silvestri hasn't been happy with an ad agency since Vanguard three years ago when you worked on their account. This account would be huge for the Kinnetik if we could get it. It would put Kinnetik on the map both in the U. S. and internationally. So I'm asking for your help on this." Brian said and finally let out a sigh that it had all been said.

"Brian, you don't want this account." Justin responded.

"What do you mean, I don't want this account?" Brian asked incredulously. "Of course I do."

"No you don't!" Justin insisted.

Brian was starting to worry about Justin's sanity at this moment.

"What are you talking about, Justin? Why wouldn't I want this account?" Brian asked just in case there was some reasonable explanation for Justin's reaction that had not been taken into consideration.

"Did you do the research?" Justin asked.

Brian tried not to be insulted by the question.

"Of course. I know about the Silvestri Family and its involvement in Belluss Occhiali."

"Rudolpho Silvestri is the majority stockholder in Belluss Occhiali, yes! But that's the least of his holdings. He has major interest in several of the largest companies in Milan.

"How do you know this? It didn't come up in any of my research."

"Brian, three years ago I was an intern at Vanguard. Remember the Silvestri family took me to dinner. We talked. They were so pleased with my work that they offered me a job. Rudolpho Silvestri rattled off at least five major Italian firms that he has controlling interests in. I know because he offered me my choice of work assignment with the company of my choice."

"But, he doesn't show up on any of the other companies."

"I know. Italian business operates differently than here in the U.S. He also has multinational operations in Paris, Milan, and Switzerland too. If you create the campaign that will make Signor Silvestri happy, then you'd better be ready to move to Europe to operate Kinnetik International from there. Trust me on this one."

"Eyeconics is counting on us to wow Signor Silvestri with our ad campaign. Susan is desperate. I'm out of ideas."

"What do you mean, you're out of ideas? Brian you're the best in the business. So again I ask, why am I here?"

"First of all Cynthia won't let me ask any of my existing staff to work on this one with me. She mentioned something about how I drive everybody so hard that they all would threaten to quit. She keeps mumbling something about me being a perfectionist and a demanding boss. But, she said that you understood me, so she demanded that if I wanted to go after this account, I had to call you to see if you'd work on this with me. "

"I see. And of course you are totally terrified of Cynthia? Right? Brian, this is crazy. You had me come all the way back to Pittsburgh to work on a project you're perfectly capable of doing without me. I'm waiting for you to tell me the real reason why I'm here?"

"You're the only one who has any hope of figuring out what Rudolpho Silvestri wants. Nobody else can get through to him. Justin, six of the top ad agencies in the world have tired. Think of the staffs involved! Justin, I want to win this."

"Ok! If it's that important to you! What do you want me to do?"

"Can you do a series of quick sketches so I can get some kind of a campaign idea? I know I usually work the other way, but I'm creatively blocked right now. Maybe you can come up with a fresh approach for me to think about. Or, maybe you will just brainstorm with me."

"Thank goodness, I brought all that stuff from my 'just in case' list," Justin said with a smile.

"Justin, what are you talking about?" Brian asked, completely puzzled by the last statement.

"Never mind. Just stay out of the storage room. You'll scare yourself if you go in there," Justin commented with a smile but didn't bother to explain further.

Justin knew that if Brian saw how much stuff he brought with him from New York, that Brian would pitch a fit, and there would be arguments. So Justin knew it was best that Brian didn't have any ideas about what was in the storage room. Justin figured he would bring things into the loft, one item at a time.

"I'm not even going to ask," Brian responded.

"Brian, I've been thinking. From what I remember about Signor Silvestri, you can go in to the meeting with a planned campaign, but you need to be prepared to create a new campaign from scratch, instantaneously during the meeting. He likes sketches based on his thoughts as of the moment. He does come to the meetings prepared, but he's very flexible. He mentally readjusts his thinking based on discussions at meetings. He's very opened to suggestions. His persona terrifies most people, so they don't usually try to persuade him of anything. So, he just mows them down. That's probably why Eyeconics is having so much trouble, I bet. So as I see it, you need to prepare a few draft campaigns, but you should go to the meeting willing to listen. Then all you have to do is just not get flustered if we have to do it all over again DURING the meeting."

"What?"

"Unless he has changed his style of working with an agency, which I doubt, that's the way Rudolpho Silvestri works. Part of the reason I got to work on the account when I was an intern, was they needed someone with the ability to sketch on the fly. So they allowed me to participate. Also, Vanguard really didn't care about the account, so they figured this would keep me occupied until they found something useful for me to do. My suggestion is that you don't take written notes during meetings with Signor Silvestri; he's a very visual person. All you have to do is have one of the artists from your office sketch the ideas exchanged during meeting."

"That's why I need YOU on this project."

"Brian, you have an entire art department at Kinnetik. What do you need me for?"

"First of all, I like having you around...but more than that you're the only one, who can sketch a campaign DURING a meeting. I have a whole staff of people who can take notes during a meeting, and several days later produce rough sketches, maybe. But to do sketches like you are describing, on the fly, that requires an artist. I need someone who can multi-task...someone who can suggest while they sketch. I know you can do this; you do it all the time. I can always have my art department try to finish things if you get pressed for time because of your exhibit. I know you have a show coming up. But to get the campaign right, I really do need you to work with me on this."

"Well, I do like being needed," Justin said with a smile.

Brian and Justin spent several hours just batting ideas back and forth. If an outside observer had been there, their discussion would have felt like a championship tennis game between two well-matched equals. The verbal ideas were converted to imagery, while the graphic ideas were reformed as words.

Cynthia was right, Brian would have probably driven Kinnetik's art department to the breaking point, working under these conditions. But Brian and Justin knew each other so well that the exchange of ideas just flowed naturally. They managed to entertain and challenge one another during the brainstorming process. Brian couldn't remember when he had so much fun while working on a campaign.

Chapter 15 – Interruptions, Part 1 of 4

A few hours later...(Day 13)

This creative sparring match was interrupted when Brian cell phone rang, and he noted the Toronto caller ID. He answered the phone immediately.

"Lindsay?" he asked, as he answered the phone. Brian held his breath and waited.

"No Brian, it's me," came the disembodied voice on the other end of the line. And Brian knew to prepare for the worst.

"Is Gus ok? Is Lindsay ok?" Brian asked, trying not to panic.

"Of course, they're fine, Asshole. I need to talk to you."

"Why are you calling me, Melanie? I'm really quite busy, so make it quick."

"First of all, where have you hidden Justin?" she demanded.

"Melanie, why would you assume that I've done anything with Justin."

"Because no one can reach him on his cell phone."

"So? What's so unusual about that? Melanie, you know he forgets to carry the damn thing most of the time. I hope you have better evidence than that! Cause if you don't, I think I'm beginning to see why you lose all those cases."

"Look Brian, nobody cares about you. But Justin is another matter. We're all just concerned about him. Now tell us where he is?"

"Melanie, why are you and Lindsay suddenly so interested in Justin?" Brian asked. Then he wasn't sure he was ready for the answer.

"Well Michael and Ben are here visiting Jenny Rebecca. And ..." she tried to explain before she was interrupted.

"Melanie, don't tell me Michael's still talking about his painting?"

"Well I was talking about the one I received. Then he started talking about the painting he received. So we just started talking," Melanie explained, trying to understand Brian's reaction. "What's the problem?"

"You tell me Melanie?"

"Michael's concerned. He doesn't think that you care about Justin anymore. And..."

"Well isn't that what Michael has always wanted?"

"That may be true. But Michael and Ben are worried about Justin. They think he's lost in New York City. They're determined to see him to make sure he's all right. They're planning on camping out on his apartment steps if they have to until he comes home."

"Melanie, Justin is fine. I've talked to him. I know for a fact that he's fine."

"Brian, this is just the kind of stunt you would pull to keep Justin all to yourself."

"Melanie, you wound me," Brian said mockingly. "Of course Melanie, if I didn't care about Justin any more, why would I want to keep him all to myself? Melanie this is crazy even for you. You're not even making sense."

"Michael and Lindsay were talking about the painting he got from Justin. Then he started with his theory that Justin is lost, and we all need to go to New York and rescue him. Michael's really concerned Brian. Lindsay said that she's never seen him like this. You have to do something!"

"Me? Why me?"

" Because YOUR SON ..."

"All right, Melanie. What's Gus done now? It must be pretty awful, because that's the only time he becomes my son."

"Gus overheard Michael and Lindsay talking. Now he's mad at Lindsay and me because we won't go to New York with Michael and Ben to find Justin. In his six year-old mind, we're mean and cruel and willing to leave HIS Justin all lost and alone in New York, rather than find him and take him home to YOU. Gus is talking about Justin being hungry and all alone. He's even worried that he'll never see Justin again unless we all do something fast."

Brian burst out laughing, while thinking at the same time that he was going to kill Michael.

"This isn't funny, Asshole. I'm dealing with a very upset six year old. Your son won't talk to me. Gus won't even talk to Lindsay. What are YOU going to do about this?"

"Melanie, let me talk to Gus."

"Don't you mean let you talk to Michael? He's the problem!"

"Michael is Ben's problem. You let me talk to my son."

There were muffled voices on the other end of the line. He could hear Melanie and Lindsay in the background. He could also hear Michael and Ben. Brian waited patiently, while envisioning an episode of the three stooges. Finally Gus came to the phone.

"Gus?"

"Dad?"

"I understand that you're worried about Justin."

"He's lost and hungry and alone. We have to find him. They won't do anything, Dad. You have to do something."

"Gus, Justin is fine."

"No he isn't!"

"Yes he is, Gus. Honest. Trust me on this."

"How do you know?"

"I always know how Justin is. You remember?"

"Because you love him?"

"Right."

"But Dad, Uncle Michael said he's lost?"

"No Gus. He's not lost. Do you want to talk to him?"

"You found him. Is he all right? Can I talk to him?" Gus asked excitedly.

Justin had been patiently listening to Brian's half of the conversation. Brian could tell from the expression on Justin's face, that he would eventually have a lot of explaining to do. But Brian knew that for now, all that would be put aside as Gus talked to Justin.

Brian handed the phone to Justin.

"Gus?"

"Jus? Are you ok? I was so worried."

"Gus. Yes, I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me. Your Dad is taking good care of me."

"Really? Are you sure you're all right?"

"Absolutely. I'm fine Gus. There's no need to worry."

"Ok. Bye Jus."

"Bye, Gus. Here's your Dad."

"Gus, are you ok now?" Brian asked reassuringly.

"Ah huh. Dad, I want to see Justin," Gus demanded.

"OK Gus, we'll work something out."

"Promise?

"Yes, Gus. I promise. Now, let me speak to your mother again."

"You promise Dad? Right? Bye Dad! Here's mama."

"Now what do you want, Asshole?"

"Is Gus ok?" Brian asked still being a bit concerned.

"Yes, he's smiling. What did you say to him?"

"That doesn't matter. He wants to see Justin."

"We can arrange it, just as soon as we can FIND Justin."

"Melanie, no one needs to look for Justin. I know exactly where he is. Justin is fine."

"Where is he, Brian?"

"He's where he's suppose to be, Melanie." And then Brian whispered, " He's home".

There was a pause and Brian finally said, " Look, I have to go. I'll talk to you later."

Brian hung up the phone. He could feel Justin's glare on the back of his neck. Brian turned around and came face to face with a puzzled Justin, standing there with his arms folded across his chest. Brian knew this discussion was not going to be pretty, yet he couldn't see any way to weasel out of it.

"So are you going to tell me what that's all about?" Justin demanded.

"Do I have to?" Brian asked, still trying to figure out a way to avoid this discussion.

"Only if you ever want fuck me again?" Justin said with a sinister smile. Brian recognized the stance and the tone of voice and decided it was time to come clean.

"Fuck! All right, I'll tell you. No wonder my son's a drama princess. He's spent so much time with you growing up, he really had no choice."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Justin asked.

"Never mind." Brian said with a smile.

"I'm waiting Brian!"

"All right. You know the painting you sent to Michael. He loves the painting. He has spend hours just sitting and looking at it, every spare minute that he's had, in fact. He even put it on display in the store, so all of Liberty Avenue could see your painting. He's so proud to have it. It means a lot to him that you sent it to him."

"I thought he might enjoy the painting. That was the general idea. So, what's the problem?"

"Well according to Mikey, you would never paint Rage and Zephyr in a painting without JT. So since JT was not in the painting, according to Michael, JT is lost and the superheroes need to mount a campaign to find you... sorry JT...and bring you...sorry him back to Gayopolis...or this case Pittsburgh."

"You're kidding? Right?"

"No, I've never been more serious."

"Wow! Brian, I knew that Michael was some writer by the stories he created for the comic, but he has truly surpassed himself with this one."

"The problem is that Emmett and Ben agree with him. It's scary I know, but somehow they understand his logic. Ben threatened to pack you up and bring you back to Pittsburgh."

"So that's why you had me come home so suddenly."

"That was only part of the reason. I really did need you for this project. I didn't want Mikey or the Professor interfering with your life. I thought this would have blown over by now. I should have told you. I'm sorry."

"Brian, you know Michael pretty well. What do you think is really going on?"

"Strange as it may sound, I think this is about Michael. I think he misses you. I also think he's living with a lot of guilt. And, I think his little mind can't cope. After all the lengths he's gone to just to rid you from my life, I think these feelings must be too much for him, and he just snapped."

"So what do we do now?"

"Well when he and the Professor get back, maybe I'll let them see you. They've probably talked to Gus by now. It will take them a while to figure out he's telling them the truth when he said he talked to you. So I figure Michael and Ben will show up here on the way back from the airport. Michael will use his key, of course. He'll see it as legit this time, because he'll see this as an emergency. Just thought I'd warn you."

"So you think Michael misses me? Well, we did start to get close just before I left for New York. But I agree with you that would be too weird. Let's just wait and see. Maybe there's another explanation." Justin said in amazement. Then he just laughed.

Chapter 16 – Interruptions, Part 2 of 4

Same day...(Day 13)

After a few minutes Justin's stomach rumbled, so he walked into the kitchen to prepare a snack. He came back with a sandwich and iced green tea for Brian. On the plate with the sandwich was a small pile of chips. Justin went back into the kitchen to retrieve his own sandwich.

"Justin what is this?" Brian asked, looking at the pile of chips on his plate.

"It seems you've picked up a few bad habits while I've been away. I found one opened bag of chips. Your housekeeper must have forgotten to throw them away before I got home. Really Brian! How could you?" Justin teased.

"Can we not talk about this? Brian responded. Then he found the perfect distraction. "Can't you hear someone knocking on our door?"

"No problem, but Brian, you're so busted!" Justin said, as he walked toward the door to open it.

"Mom!" Justin said, as he opened the door and recognized the stylishly dressed woman on the other side. They leaned in and hugged each other.

"Brian called me and told me you were coming for a visit. I thought I would get a phone call from you. But.... How are you, Honey?" Jennifer asked as she breezed in. Then with a serious voice she said, " Hello Brian."

"Mother Taylor!"

"Don't start that 'Mother Taylor' stuff with me Brian. You were supposed to have him call me. You can't keep him all to yourself. You should know that by now," she said speaking lovingly, but still rather sternly to Brian. The she turned her attention back to Justin. "Well let me look at you," she said, running her fingers through Justin's hair and pulling him into another hug." Jennifer took a step back so that she could take in a full view of him. Once her mother-eyes had determined that Justin was ok. She released him.

"Can I fix you a sandwich? Would you like some ice tea?" Justin asked.

"Ice tea sounds good, dear?" she responded.

While Justin poured her glass of ice tea, Jennifer then turned her attention once again to Brian. "Brian, here are the stock certificates you asked for."

Brian took the shares from Jennifer. Jennifer took her glass of ice tea from Justin and started to sip, while Brian handed the certificates to Justin.

"Oh, my Belluss Occhiali shares. Now I can frame the shares. Thanks mom."

"Justin. After all we talked about. Are you still on this 'they're a nice souvenir' thing? Justin, have I taught you nothing?"

Justin simply smiled while he proceeded to examine the stock certificates more closely. Brian decided it was best to change the subject. Jennifer just smiled as she witnessed the conversation between the two men.

"Justin, have you told your mother about the Santa Barbara exhibit?" Brian said sweetly.

"I thought you didn't want that exhibit mentioned?" Justin answered with total surprise.

"It seems, Mother Taylor, our little Picasso here, is making so much money from his exhibits that he no longer has to sell his paintings. He can now just exhibit them for the viewing public to appreciate," Brian said sarcastically taking up the explanation.

"That's wonderful, Sweetheart!" she responded, listening to the words but not paying attention to Brian's delivery and obviously teasingly tone.

"Because by not selling the paintings he's already done, he gets to go home and paint many times more paintings. In fact he's so busy painting commissions from that particular show, he has no time to sleep or eat or anything," Brian tried to continue, but it was obvious he had lost his audience. It was also obvious that Brian was very proud of Justin.

"Well, I did hear that Michael got a painting, and he put it on display for all of Liberty Avenue. Debbie was really thrilled. I'm so proud of you Honey!" Jennifer said showing to Brian that no one was paying any attention to him.

"Did you have any luck finding temporary loft space for Justin?" Brian casually asked, knowing that with this question he would definitely regain her attention.

And with that question, Jennifer smiled the sunshine smile that was the twin to her son's. "They're all amicable to short term leases. I have a list for you. We can check out a few places together Sweetheart, whenever you're ready." Then Jennifer smiled again at Brian.

"Justin has agreed to help me with a project, but I don't want him to get behind. I know he has an exhibit coming up."

"When Honey?"

"In about three months. I finally got an agent just before I left. So I don't have to spend my days traipsing to galleries lugging my portfolio anymore. My agent will get me shown at exhibits for various galleries, leaving me time to paint. Things should be so much easier now. I finally even got my website finished. So all my work is now catalogued and everything."

"That's great!" Jennifer commented. Then she asked the question that Brian was afraid to ask. "So how long are you going to be here?"

Brian held his breath, waiting for the answer.

"Well, I'm here to work on a project with Brian. I want to stay to see the project through. After that we'll see. I guess as long as I have studio space, I maybe could paint here for a while. I hadn't really thought about it."

But Brian had. He'd given it lots of thought. And with Justin's explanation, he knew he could now breathe again. There was a chance that Justin would stay awhile.

"Are you going to Sunday dinner at Debbie's tomorrow?" Jennifer innocently asked.

"Jennifer, no one even knows that Justin's back. We've been really busy on this project. You know once anybody finds out that he's here, everyone will try to take up all his time. I'm not sure I'm ready to lose him just yet. He and I still have a lot of work to do."

"Get over it Brian! Unless you agree to dinner tomorrow, I'll tell Debbie that he's been here for several days, and you didn't tell her. I'm not sure I'd want to be YOU when she finds out all the gory details of how you tried to keep her Sunshine from her. Do you get the picture, Brian?" Jennifer said, making it clear she knew that she held the upper hand.

"But Mother Taylor..." Brian said, kissing Jennifer gently on the cheek.

"That's not going to work, Brian," she said teasingly. "Now, what's it going to be?"

"All right!" Brian finally conceded, and Jennifer knew she had won.

"That's better. Well, I'd better be going. I'll see you tomorrow, dear! Right, Brian?"

"Yes, Mother Taylor."

And with that Jennifer smiled and left Brian and Justin smiling at each other.

"Well since my mother has required us to be at Debs tomorrow, we may as well go to Babylon tonight. What do you say?"

"Justin, we have an awful lot of work to do. Can't we just stay in?"

"No the dancing will do us good. But if you think you'll be too busy, I'm call Emmett to see if he's available."

"There's no way I'm going to turn you and Emmett loose on Babylon without adult supervision. We can go to Babylon tonight if you want to."

"Thanks, I'll make it worth your while."

"I was counting on that," Brian said with smile

"Oh, I had better return some calls while you finish eating you lunch. Then I'll be ready to get back to work on the project."

While Justin out of the room, Brian picked up his cell phone. Without saying hello, Brian just began speaking. "Can you come over to the loft?" There was a pause. "Of course, now." There was another pause. "I'll be waiting."

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door to the loft.

"Theodore!" Brian said, as he opened the door to loft in response to the knock.

"Brian, it's Saturday. Of course, when you're a workaholic, you can't keep track of the days of the week."

"Of course I know it Saturday."

"Now that you've dragged me here, what do you want?" Ted asked.

Brian handed him the stock certificates. Ted looked at the certificates, then back at Brian.

"Where did you get these? These are the equivalent of founders stock. These are sellable now, Brian. They're worth a fucking mint." Ted pointed out, starting to get excited at the prospect.

"Unfortunately the owner has an emotional attachment to the paper itself, so a sale is highly unlikely. I need you to lock them in the safe at the office."

"Brian, these shares have Justin's name on them," Ted pointed out.

"Who else! Can you think of any other person, who is so romantic that he becomes sentimental over stock certificates? Even if they are Italian?"

"I don't expect you to understand, Bri," Ted remarked, indicating that he thoroughly understood Justin's reasoning.

Brian just shook his head. First Michael and Emmett and now Justin and Ted. The things friends understand between them. Brian felt like he had entered an episode of the Twilight Zone.

"By the way, you need to increase the insurance on Michael's painting." Brian said with a smirk.

"What!"

"Justin has orders for two more similar paintings, one for Brett Keller and one for Connor James. The selling price for each of those paintings was almost $50,000. So Mr. Financial Wizard, you appear to be lagging behind the information curve."

"How do you know all this?"

At that moment, Justin came into the room, about to relay a message to Brian. Justin stopped almost mid-sentence when he realized Brian was not alone. Then he smiled when he saw who the visitor was. Justin was about to walk over and hug Ted, when Brian intercepted Justin mid-stride into a hug.

Brian raised one eyebrow and looked at Ted. Then said, "It's not really necessary to do all that."

Ted and Justin shared knowing smiles with each other.

"Well, I'll take care of these. Is there anything else?" There was a pause as Ted waited for an answer. "I didn't think so!" Ted said with a smile. "I'll be going now."

"Will I see you later at Babylon?" Justin asked.

"Justin!" Brian exclaimed.

"Blake and I will see you there, Justin. Bye Bri," Ted said, laughing as he was leaving the loft. "I'll call Emmett."

When Ted finally left, Brian and Justin went back to their brainstorming.

Chapter 17 – Interruptions, Part 3 of 4

Same Day...(Day 13)

A few hours later, Brian's cell phone rang. Again the caller ID was Toronto.

"Lindsay?" Brian asked, as he answered the phone.

"Brian, it's me. I used Lindsay's cell phone, because I figured you wouldn't answer if you knew it was me," Michael said quietly, with his voice was almost a whisper.

"Good thinking Mikey," Brian answered. "Now, what do you want?"

"I want to talk to Justin."

"After what you did to Gus, do you really think I'm going to let you talk to Justin?"

"I'm sorry about Gus. I can't help it if he overheard Lindsay and me talking. I said that I was sorry. Now will you let me talk to Justin?"

"Not going to happen Mikey! You know how Gus feels about Justin. You and Lindsay should have been more careful. You should have known that Gus doesn't understand subtlety and innuendo; he takes everything literally. It's time for you to get a handle on whatever is bothering you, Michael. "

Michael made careful notice of the use of his full name, so he knew that Brian was pissed.

"Look Brian, I said I was sorry. Will you let me talk to Justin?"

"He has a cell phone, Michael. Why didn't you call him on his cell phone?"

"I did. He's not answering. Brian, will you let me talk to him? You let Gus talk to him, why not me?"

"Gus needed to talk to Justin. I'm not sure about you. Let's just say I'm protecting Justin."

"You don't need to protect Justin from me," Michael insisted. "Besides, Justin can take care of himself," Michael said with a laugh.

"That's true, he can. But he shouldn't have to."

"No he shouldn't. Please let me talk to him Brian," Michael pleaded.

"Michael, I'll let you talk to him...but no craziness. Ok?" Brian demanded.

"Ok." Michael agreed.

Justin took the cell phone.

"Michael?" Justin said upon receiving the phone.

"Justin, are you ok?" Michael eagerly asked.

"Michael, I'm fine. Brian told me that my painting was disturbing to you. I'm so sorry," Justin commented.

"No. No. I love the painting. It just that JT was missing," Michael explained.

"JT didn't seem to fit in this painting, Michael, so I left him out. If it upsets you so much I guess I could probably add him. But I thought the painting was complete just as it was."

"Are you really all right, Justin?"

"I'm fine. As I told Gus, Brian is taking really good care of me. He even took me to Popagano's last night," Justin explained with a smile.

"Well, at least he came to his senses and brought you home. He missed you, really missed you, you know," Michael almost whispered.

"Well, I missed him too. He asked me to come back to work on a project. So I'll be here for a few days."

"That's good."

"So you can relax and enjoy your time with Jenny Rebecca. Believe me, Michael. I'm fine. I'll see you and Ben when you get back."

"Ok."

"Bye Michael. Here's Brian." Justin said, handing the phone back to Brian.

"So are you satisfied now, Mikey?" Brian asked, once he regained the cell phone.

"Justin seems to be ok. At least he's there with you. So at least I know I can stop worrying about him being lost in New York."

"Thank goodness, Michael. You had everyone worried about you."

"I'm sorry. I feel much better now," Michael confessed.

"I'll see you when you get back. Bye Mikey!" Brian hung up the phone, shaking his head.

Brian turned to Justin and said, "Michael seems to be ok now. But somehow I know this isn't over. For Michael this is probably just the tip of the iceberg. It's like now he's trying to grow up, and somehow he can't make all the pieces fit."

Justin shrugged his shoulders and started to clear away the dishes. Brian decided to help. While they were in the kitchen there was a knock at the door.

Brian commented with a smile, as he went to answer the door, "You know Sunshine, I've been here in the loft for a year while you were gone, and I didn't have this many interruptions. You come back for less than 24 hours, and look at what happens. So whom haven't we heard from today?"

Brian opened the door and refused to let this visitor inside.

"What do you want?" Brian asked, as he blocked the entrance.

Emmett pushed past Brian, pretending he didn't exist.

"I didn't come to see you. Where's Justin?" Emmett demanded.

"Em, I'm right here," Justin said, as he was drying his hands.

"Sweetie, are you all right?" Emmett asked, as he walked over to give Justin a hug. "Michael's been so worried about you."

"I just talked to Michael. He's in Toronto. Everything is ok. Do you have any idea what's going on?" Justin asked.

"All I can tell you is that Michael has been doing some serious soul searching ever since he got your painting. He realizes that he's done some really awful things. He has regrets. Now I think he has to find a way to live with them," Emmett explained, trying not to betray any confidences. " But at least you're home. How long are you staying?"

"You can let go of him, Emmett. I promise you don't have to keep your arm around Justin to be sure he's not going anywhere," Brian insisted teasingly. "I'm keeping my eyes on you, Em."

"Oh you!" Emmett responded playfully, as he finally released his hold on Justin.

"Brian asked me to come home to help him on a project. So it looks like I'll be here for a while," Justin explained. "Did Ted call you about Babylon tonight?"

"Yes. As soon as he told me you were here, I came right over. I couldn't wait for tonight."

"Now that you've seen him. I suppose you'll be leaving so Justin and I can get back to work," Brian suggested, hoping that Emmett would take a hint.

"Is that what you call it?" Emmett asked, not believing for a moment that Brian and Justin were working. "Brian, you can't keep Justin all to yourself. So get over it!"

"I can see that Emmett. But we do have to get back to work. So you can see Justin tonight. Goodbye Em." Brian remarked, as he continuously motioned toward the opened door.

"I'll see you tonight, Em." Justin said with a smile.

Emmett finally decided to take the hint and finally leave. As Brian shut the door, he wondered what other interruptions there were going to be this afternoon. He realized that because of the brainstorming with Justin he had a lot of ideas that he wanted to experiment with. Brian was really eager to get back to work on those ideas.

So while Brian resumed work on the computer, Justin grabbed his sketchbook and began to sketch. Brian became deeply engrossed in his work. The ideas for the campaign were coming to life.

Justin went to the storage area and retrieved his computer.

As he was setting it up, Brian looked up from his work and noticed the additional hardware. He asked, "Where did that come from?"

Justin simply smiled and said, "Remember, I told you not to go in the storage area?"

They set up the second computer, which allowed them to work simultaneously. During the entire time they were working together they were continually touching each other. A hand, a leg, a foot...it didn't matter. Their touching happened without disturbing the rhythm of the work. At one point when Brian was completely absorbed in the project, Justin leaned in to kiss him gently on the lips.

Justin went into the kitchen to assemble the ingredients for dinner. Brian smiled to himself, as he thought about of having one of Justin's home cooked meals.

After a bit, Justin announced he had a craving for lemon squares, so he was going to walk to the Diner to pick some up. Brian merely shrugged at this remark and commented that he would just continue working. Brian had no problem working while Justin rambled around the loft getting ready to leave.

But when Justin was gone and the loft was quiet, Brian could no longer concentrate. He felt the immediate shift in the aura of the loft. Brian stood up and walked to the window. Brian watched until Justin disappeared from sight.

Somehow, Brian knew he wasn't going to get any work done until Justin returned.

Chapter 18 – Interruptions, part 4 of 4

A little Later...(Day 13)

Justin made his way slowly to the Diner, taking in the sights of Liberty Avenue on his way. When he arrived, he looked around for Debbie. Seeing that she wasn't there, he ordered a lemon bar and a glass of milk and took a seat to wait for his order.

He tried to process all the happenings of the day so far. The brainstorming with Brian was a highly charged, highly creative process. Justin realized that he hadn't had that much fun since the days of the Stockwell campaign. Justin liked the fact that Brian needed him. Justin also liked the fact that he and Brian were working as equals, as partners. Justin had a fleeting moment where he wished he and Brian could work together again.

Justin thought about the conversation with Gus. He was touched that Gus missed him and was really concerned about him. Justin always thought that Gus just liked him just because he was with Brian. Now he knew that Gus really loved him, in his own right. The conversation with Gus also showed Justin how careful you have to be when you said anything around kids, for they just pick up on everything. Justin laughed to himself.

Justin replayed his mother's visit. He had been too busy for the details of the conversations to register at the time, but he loved the interplay between his mother and Brian. It had been a long time in coming, but now Brian and his mother seemed so comfortable with each other, like family. They teased each other really badly, but they also kissed each other a lot. Justin loved the way his mother manipulated Brian to Sunday dinner at Debs. Justin started to realize that he probably inherited his wicked sense of humor from Jennifer.

He loved seeing Ted and Emmett and watching Brian decide that he didn't need to get too close to either of them. Justin chuckled, as he realized that Brian might actually be little jealous, although Brian would definitely never admit it. Justin was looking forward to dancing at Babylon tonight.

While Justin was playing back his day, his milk and lemon square was delivered, but not by Kiki. Justin tried to say thank you, but before he could get it out, a pair of loving arms engulfed him, and his breathing became difficult, as a red wig tickled his nose. The hug and the red wig were all too familiar.

"Debbie!" Justin finally gasped, when air returned to his lungs, and he was finally released.

"Well Sunshine, when were you planning to call me and tell me you were here?" she asked, adding the tone that was guaranteed to elicit guilt. "In fact I bet that you've probably seen everyone else but me."

"Debbie, I knew I'd see you at dinner tomorrow. Didn't my mother tell you?" Justin tried to offer as an explanation, knowing it wouldn't really work.

"Jennifer and I don't keep secrets from each other where you're concerned. So I knew you were here. I also knew that Brian would try to keep you all to himself. He just can't seem to understand that you belong to all of us, not just him. That's ok, he really missed you, you know," Debbie explained

"Michael told me," Justin whispered.

"You talked to Michael? I thought he went to New York to see you."

"Well I guess since they couldn't reach me there, he and Ben must have decided to go Toronto instead to see Jenny Rebecca. I just got off the phone with him."

"Then you know what's been going on?" Debbie asked, hoping that Justin had answers.

"I know what's been happening. I just don't know what it means. Do you have any ideas?"

"First of all I think he missed you, like we all have. But Michael has a lot of guilt where you're concerned. You've got to admit he's tried everything he could think of to separate you and Brian. But once you went to New York, Brian got very busy at work. Everything changed. Brian just didn't have the time to cater to Michael's childish fantasies anymore. Brian still loves him and everything, that's never going to change. But it just seemed like Brian got tired of it all. So Michael had a lot of time to think. I believe the painting has caused him to rethink everything," Debbie explained.

"So that's what you think, huh?" Justin teased with a smile.

"You know Sunshine, maybe Michael should have gone away to college like Brian. I love my son, but there are times when he seems like he's still 14 years old. But then so did Brian until you came along," Debbie said with smile. " Brian decided he had to grow up to deal with you, and he also had to grow up for Gus. You know how much he loves that little boy. Michael, on the other hand, has just stayed child-like. Even Jenny Rebecca hasn't helped him grow up yet."

"Michael tried to change when he was with David. Don't you remember? He had a new image of himself after his trip to Paris."

"Then he became a snob. He became ashamed of who he was and where he came from. He became ashamed of all his friends," Debbie said remorsefully.

"Yes, that was when he became more of a pain than he usually was," Justin laughed. "He became an ..."

"Asshole. You can say it, " Debbie quickly interrupted. "He became ashamed of what he had done. After that he seemed to never try to grow up again."

"That's not true. Remember when I came back from LA and Brian and I separated, Michael and Ben let me stay with them. Michael even helped me get settled in that awful loft. He and I were developing a relationship apart from Brian. Things were good between us, even when he found out that Brian and I were getting married. He was even going to be Brian's best man. Then Brian and I didn't get married, and I went off to New York. Michael didn't' understand our decision. He started to whine on the phone again. And now ..."

"Sunshine, this is not your problem. Michael will have to work through this for himself."

"If I'd known the painting would cause so much trouble I would have just sold the damn thing to Brett Keller for a lot of money," Justin said laughing.

"Michael loves the painting. Ben wanted to take it and hang it in his office at Carnegie-Mellon. You should have heard Michael get totally possessive and everything about the painting. You should have heard how he told everyone how you sent it to HIM. So no matter what happens, know that Michael loves the painting. Whatever is going on with him, it was just time for it to happen."

Debbie leaned over and gave Justin a kiss on the cheek. She tried to be reassuring. Debbie and Justin chatted a bit longer; then Debbie said goodbye, reminding Justin that she would see him tomorrow at dinner.

Justin finished his snack and picked up a few extra lemon bars to go.

Justin then made his way back to the loft...and Brian.

Chapter 19 – Waiting For You

Later that day...(Day 13)

Justin returned to the loft and slid open the door. As he entered the loft he didn't see Brian at the computer, so he called out, "Brian!" There was no answer so Justin called again, "Brian, where are you?"

"I'm right here," Brian whispered from his spot by the window.

Justin dropped his package, containing the lemon bars on the kitchen counter. He walked quickly over to Brian and slipped into his arms.

"What are you watching so intensely?" Justin asked, leaning up to gently kiss Brian.

"I was waiting for you to come back," Brian said, leaning down to kiss Justin, allowing the kiss to deepen.

"Oh, any particular reason?" Justin asked, now completely engulfed in Brian's arms and feeling himself being gently walked backward.

"No particular reason," Brian uttered, as he continued to walk Justin backward toward the bedroom. They both started to undress along the way, with kissing and touching, leaving a trail of clothes behind them as they reached the bedroom.

When they finally did break apart, because of the need for oxygen, Justin felt himself being gently pushed onto the bed.

Brian quickly slid on top of him, and started kissing on a certain spot behind Justin's ear.

"Brian, what are you doing?" Justin asked, barely able to get the question out.

"Sunshine, if you have to ask, you've been gone much too long," Brian said with a smile, as he started to run his fingers through the silky blond locks that he had missed so much.

Brian kissed Justin again as he let his hands roam over the accessible skin of Justin's body.

Justin reached up and kissed Brian passionately, holding him in place with his hand placed at the back of Brian's neck.

As the kiss was released, Brian gently turned Justin over on his stomach, as he continued nipping and kissing Justin's neck.

Brian started to work his way down Justin shoulders, and then to his back. As Brian nipped his way down Justin's body, Justin started to groan and writhe beneath him.

Brian applied his efforts to rimming until Justin finally cried out, "God, Brian will you just fuck me?"

Brian smiled at the request and reached for the condom and lube. Brian took extra pleasure in squeezing the cheek mounds that he loved to touch.

Justin's groans were getting louder as he clutched the pillows. In his want, he cried out once again to Brian, "Will you stop screwing around and just fuck me?"

Brian finally found his voice and asked with a smile, "What's the rush, you always liked to be rimmed?"

"I've wanted you all day, but we had to work. So right now all I want is you inside me, so will you fuck me?"

"Only if you're sure," Brian said with a smile.

Brian quickly tore open the condom package and lube. And he started to gently finger fuck Justin. Justin started to writhe beneath Brian again.

"Now, Brian!" Justin demanded.

Brian placed his cock at Justin's hole to enter him slowly, but Justin pushed himself up to meet Brian's move. Brian found his cock completely engulfed within Justin, and Brian's groans joined the chorus of groans that were Justin's. Brian waited while Justin adjusted.

When Brian could feel Justin start to move again, he resumed his thrusts into Justin's ass. Justin continued to thrust back to meet his every move. As their rhythm was established their hands unconsciously reached for each other and their fingers entwined.

"You're so tight...you feel so good," Brian uttered, as he continued his thrusts, completely lost inside Justin.

Brian felt Justin's muscles clamp down on his cock and he knew that Justin was close. Brian slid his free hand around to begin to fist Justin's cock, letting his strokes match the rhythm of his thrusts.

A few more strokes aimed at Justin's sweet spot, and Brian felt the wetness of Justin's release against his hand. A few seconds later, Brian had his own release into the condom.

Brian collapsed onto Justin and they lay there together for a few moments.

Brian gradually crawled off Justin and removed the condom, tying it off and disposing of it.

Then Brian spooned in behind Justin for closeness. They continued to lie there snuggled together.

Each of them knew it was time for their living separately to end. The picture was getting clearer and clearer.

Brian and Justin now knew that the problem with the separation was not just the missed opportunities for fucking each other. Their problem was so much bigger than that. This weekend had shown both of them that the problem with this separation was the absence of the simple closeness and intimacy that IS them...that makes them...who they ARE.

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Brian and Justin lingered in extended lovemaking until the room grew dark, and they both realized it was time to shower. They decided to shower together to save time.

An hour later their shower ended. Their shower ended because the water suddenly turned cold. It seemed that their fucking in the shower used up all the hot water, as usual. However for the first time in almost six years, Justin had a suggestion to offer.

"You know Brian, we could really use a bigger hot water supply here at the loft," Justin suggested with a smile.

"Really? Well we do what we can Sunshine to conserve our limited resources. We do shower together," Brian said, with a smirk as he leaned over gently and kissed Justin.

"I'm sure it helps. But Brian a bigger tank could do so much more."

"Sunshine, if we had more hot water we would never leave the shower, you know that. The only thing that makes us venture out into the outside world now...you know to like see people and to earn a living...is that neither of us like cold showers," Brian continued to tease.

"Good point."

"Don't worry, the water will be hot again another in two hours," Brian said, raising his eyebrows for effect.

"Oh, that's good to know," Justin said, leaning into Brian.

They eventually both got dressed, and Justin returned to the kitchen to finish preparing dinner, leaving Brian to tidy up the bedroom and gather up any remaining scattered clothing.

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The aroma of dinner led Brian into the kitchen; he gently slid his arms around Justin's waist from behind and gently kissed Justin's neck.

"Something smells really good," Brian finally whispered, "Do you need any help?"

"I think everything is under control. Now, don't get excited, it's just a salad and that chicken with vegetable dish that I always make."

"You mean the low carb, low fat one?"

"Brian, that's not distinctive. Whenever I create a dish for you it tends to be low carb, low fat."

Brian smiled, trying to hide the fact that any dish that Justin created was his favorite. He could eat dinner tonight without guilt. This was another one of the things that Brian had missed over the last year...the tasty meals that Justin created... just for him.

Without being asked, Brian set the table. He selected the wine for dinner and even added the special touch of lighted candles. Justin smiled, as he realized that Brian had done of all of this just for him.

Brian turned out the lights, so that the candles provided the only illumination for dinner. Justin hugged Brian from behind and whispered, "Thank you."

Brian smiled, pulling Justin around into a gentle kiss. Then Brian whispered Justin's favorite saying, "Ever the romantic."

Chapter 20 – Thumpa Thumpa

Later That Evening...(Day 13)

As Brian and Justin got out of the car, they could already hear the thumpa thumpa of the music. When they entered Babylon and approached the dance floor, they saw that Ted, Blake and Emmett were already at the bar, so they headed over to say hello.

Emmett immediately asked Justin to dance. Justin accepted, leaving Brian to talk with everyone else.

"I know that you must be glad to have Justin back," Blake commented. "He still dances like a dream. I remember the night he won that contest at Babylon. He was just a kid then, but boy the way he could dance."

"Yeah, the King of Babylon contest," Ted added for effect, "How can we ever forget, right Bri?"

"Theodore, am I going to have to put up with you all night?" Brian smirked.

"I didn't come to Babylon to be with you Bri." Ted reminded him with a smile, "Justin's here and that changes everything."

Brian chuckled to himself as Ted and Blake left to dance.

Brian listened to the conversation between Drew Boyd and Calvin Culpepper, who were returning to the bar, as they both described the muscular attributes of several of the dancers on the dance floor.

Drew mentioned that he had a forthcoming speaking engagement, and Brian teased him to be sure that he mentioned Brown Athletics during the presentation.

"Well, now that Justin's back, I think I'll get him to paint my portrait, so he can capture all my athletic splendor. I saw what he did for the superheroes. Do you think he can do that for me?" Drew asked in all seriousness.

"Drew, that was a fantasy painting. Are you suggesting your athletic splendor is in the same category?" Brian teased with a smirk.

Drew laughed and mockingly punched Brian on the arm for that remark.

Brian also spent a few minutes talking with Calvin. This was the first time that Calvin had met Justin, who he had heard so much about over the last year.

"Wow! So that's Justin. He's almost as legendary here at Babylon as you are Brian," Calvin commented.

"Yeah, well believe everything you've heard," Brian answered teasingly. "It's probably all true."

"Emmett took me to see his painting. He has an amazing talent," Calvin remarked.

Brian watched the dance floor as many eyes turn to watch Justin, and Justin received many greetings from everyone on the dance floor. Brian tried to ignore it for the first few minutes. Then the combination of Emmett plus the wandering eyes of the other dancers became too much for Brian. So he proceeded to the dance floor and cut in on Justin and Emmett. Brian then swept Justin into his arms, and they begin dancing together.

This was the only partner that Brian and Justin had each really wanted. Dancing together was the primary reason for coming to Babylon, and each was still the other's favorite dancing partner. A year had not diminished their ability to move together as one on a dance floor. Brian and Justin never noticed anything that was happening around them. They were just lost in the dance, the music, and each other.

Emmett made his way back to the bar to join Ted and Blake. Ted nodded in the direction of the dancing couple and said, "Look at them. You can feel the air in the place change whenever they're together."

Then Emmett took one look at Calvin and Drew, both of whose eyes were transfixed on the dance floor. Finally Drew turned around and ordered another beer, while Calvin decided to lead Emmett back to the dance floor.

As they were walking, Calvin finally commented with a smile, "I had heard a lot about Justin. But all the descriptions and everything, doesn't really prepare you for actually seeing him for the first time. He and Brian are really hot together. I can feel the heat even way back here."

Emmett laughed, as he heard someone else comment that Brian and Justin on the dance floor was like watching vertical lovemaking, for throughout the dances, when they were not locked in an embrace, the two were touching and kissing each other in any place that the other could reach.

The others dancing were so turned on by the heat between Brian and Justin that the backroom became a busy place. Many hoped that they would be treated to the public spectacle of Brian and Justin in the backroom.

But Brian knew he wanted so much more than a trip to the backroom, so he eventually wrapped his arm around Justin's waist and led him off the dance floor. They quickly said their good byes to everyone and headed for the loft.

"I'm going to fuck. I'm going to fuck you all night long," Brian whispered in Justin's ear as they were walking to the car.

"Promises...promises," Justin teased in response.

"Sunshine!" Brian said, mockingly with his hand over his heart as if wounded.

"Give it a rest, Brian."

Justin leaned over to give Brian a passionate kiss.

Chapter 21 – Unexpected Arrivals

The Next Morning...(Day 14)

Debbie and Carl were relaxing at home, leisurely reading the Sunday papers. Emmett had recently come downstairs to mention that Drew wanted to come over to watch the game with Carl. Carl was excited to have the company since he knew Debbie would soon be busy preparing dinner, and Emmett would probably be lending her a hand.

Emmett and Debbie had already started to move in the direction of the kitchen.

There was a knock on the door. Carl looked out the glass portion of the door, but didn't see anyone. Thinking it was his imagination; he returned to his favorite chair and made himself comfortable.

Just as Carl got settled, he heard the knock again. He got up again to check. Carl was just about to approach the door again, when it appeared to open all by itself.

"Grandpa Carl, didn't you want to let me in?" Gus asked, with his hands on his hips.

"Gus, what are you doing here?" Carl said sweeping Gus into a hug. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you earlier."

Then Carl looked up and saw Ben and Michael smiling behind Gus. Carl greeted everyone.

"Are Lindsay and Melanie with you?" Carl asked, looking behind them for the girls and noticing that they weren't there, "What are you doing with Gus?"

Gus meanwhile scampered into the kitchen and was now in the middle of big hugs with Debbie and Emmett.

"We couldn't reach Justin in New York, so we decided to take a flight to Toronto," Ben explained calmly.

"How's JR?" Carl asked.

"She's fine. She's really growing. You should see her Carl; she has really gotten big," Michael pointed out with pride. "Melanie and Lindsay were fine too."

At that moment, Debbie returned to the living room, while Emmett gave Gus some milk in the kitchen.

"Is someone going to tell me what's going on?" Debbie asked, with hands on her hips, as she walked into the room.

"Don't get upset Ma. Lindsay and I were talking about my painting. I mentioned that JT wasn't in the picture and all. Gus overheard this and got upset," Michael started to explain.

Debbie walked over and swiped Michael on the back of his head. Somehow, he was expecting that. "Ma!" he protested.

Then he continued. "So Gus talked to Brian yesterday, now he knows Justin is ok. Brian even let Gus talk to Justin. Gus was happy and everything seemed fine. Then this morning at breakfast, Gus tried to stage a protest," Michael explained with a laugh. "Gus came down to breakfast this morning and refused to sit at the table. Then he announced he was starting a hunger strike until he saw HIS Justin. I think he must have overheard about the tactic from Melanie. It makes me wonder what they're teaching the kids. Nevertheless, he refused to eat his cereal. He folded his little arms across his chest and got that stubborn look. You know the one Brian has when you know he's not going to budge. Gus hasn't been talking to Lindsay and Melanie since yesterday, so they were just beside themselves. So Ben and I agreed to bring Gus back with us. I'm sure the only reason Melanie and Lindsay agreed, was because they knew Justin was here. They would have never let Gus come and stay like this with just Brian."

"Well that's quite some story," she remarked, reaching over to finally hug Michael and Ben.

Michael and Ben brought Carl and Debbie up to date on some of the other highlights of their trip.

After everyone was caught up, Michael asked, "Carl, could I borrow you car? I need to drop off Gus at Brian's, plus I wanted to check on Hunter and the store before dinner."

"I think I'll stay here and hang out with Carl," Ben said. "I'll leave my cell phone on if you need me."

Michael went to retrieve Gus from the kitchen.

With Gus in one hand and the keys from Carl in the other, Michael left for his appointed rounds.

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Brian and Justin were curled up on the sofa in the living room, reading the paper. Justin was spooned against Brian's chest, securely held in Brian's arms.

"Are you going to go with your mother to look at temporary loft space tomorrow?" Brian asked casually, as he turned the page.

"No. I don't think it'll be necessary," Justin said nonchalantly.

Then Justin could feel Brian's muscles tighten.

"Oh?" Brian commented, trying not to let his fear that Justin was about to leave take over his whole being.

"I've been thinking about it, and I have a better idea," Justin said, "I'm just not sure how you'll feel about it though," Justin said pensively.

Brian held his breath waiting to hear. He knew from experience the moment that Justin uttered the words, 'I've been thinking', that he needed to be prepared for anything. After all this was Justin.

"All right, what are you thinking?"

"Well, I think I want to stay at the house and paint," Justin said sheepishly.

"What house?" Brian asked, just to make sure they were on the same page.

"Bri-tin of course!" Justin confirmed, trying to figure out why Brian was being so dense.

"Justin ..."

"Brian, please?" Justin said almost in a whisper.

"I don't know," Brian whispered in response.

Justin turned around and starting kissing Brian ever so gently on the lips then on the neck.

"It'll just be for a little while...wouldn't it be fun?" Justin suggested, while continuing his kisses.

"Justin the house isn't livable. I haven't been there since you left. That's almost a year."

"I know. But you have caretakers and everything," Justin pointed out. "Everything works doesn't it?"

"Sure, everything works in the house? It's just empty," Brian confirmed sadly.

"I'm sure we could rent what we need. I sure Emmett would help," Justin suggested

"That seems like an awful lot of work if you're leaving in a couple of days," Brian said hesitantly.

Justin heard the Kinney-speak loud and clear. Brian wanted him to stay, but was afraid to ask.

"Well I was thinking of staying longer, if that's ok. I want to stay at least until the project that you brought me here for, is finished. Of course, I have to fly out for meetings and stuff with my agent, but that would just be day trips. I was thinking that I could paint here, in Pittsburgh...or rather West Virginia. I was thinking I could maybe stay for a while," Justin finally said and then waited with baited breath for Brian's response.

Brian fell completely silent. He heard the 'I was thinking I could maybe stay for a while' and he couldn't speak. He sat in stunned silence. Brian was afraid to move...afraid to blink for fear that what he had just heard would vanish in a whisper. He once again sent up a silent prayer of thanks, as he felt his heart soar.

"If you're sure that's what you want to do," Brian said, trying to sound calm but knowing that Justin could feel his racing heart. "I don't see any problem."

Brian pulled Justin into a passionate kiss. When they separated for air, Brian tried to speak again, "Wouldn't you rather get a studio here in town? Although I will admit I like the idea of being at the house, after all the interruptions of yesterday, we would be far enough away that I would have you all to myself. But are you sure it's what you want?"

"Yes," Justin affirmed.

"All right," Brian agreed. "I'll call the caretakers tomorrow and have them get everything ready. I'll talk to Cynthia in the morning so she can find out about renting whatever we need."

"I'll talk to Emmett during dinner," Justin volunteered.

"Be sure you keep it quiet Justin, you know if the family finds out you need help, they will all get involved, and you won't be able to get any painting done."

"I promise."

"It will be fun to stay at the house," Brian finally said with a smile, knowing in truth, that it was all he had ever wanted.

Brian and Justin just sat there spooned together for a while, each deep in thought about staying at Bri-tin. Neither one of them said anything. They just simply snuggled closer together.

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As Justin was reading the arts section of the paper aloud to Brian, they heard the door to the loft slide open. Brian kissed the top of Justin's head, as he whispered, "Michael".

The sound of approaching little footsteps suddenly made both Brian and Justin move in the direction of the door. Justin bent down just as this speeding little person propelled himself into Justin's waiting arms. Gus giggled joyfully

"Jus is that really you?" Gus asked, squeezing his little arms around Justin's neck and not letting go.

"I don't suppose you remember me?" Brian asked, pretending to be hurt.

"Oh yeah, hi Dad." Gus said, without taking a step or releasing his grip on Justin.

Brian just smiled and shook his head. The he peeled off Gus's coat and moved back towards the door to talk to Michael, leaving Gus and Justin alone. Brian took one look back over his shoulder and smiled at the two most important people in his life.

"Mikey." Brian said.

"Look Brian," Michael interrupted. "Gus threatened a hunger strike in protest until Melanie and Lindsay let him see Justin. He made his point by not eating his cereal this morning at breakfast. So Ben and I agreed to bring him back with us. I'm sure the only reason they let Gus come back with us was because they knew Justin was here to take care of him. It seems Gus is out of school this week, so he won't be missing any school time."

"Thanks, Mikey."

"Look I'm really sorry about what happened," Michael said humbly. "I guess I'd better let you get back to Gus and Justin. Don't forget Ma is still expecting all of you for dinner."

"I'll see you later, Mikey," Brian said as he ushered Michael out the door with a kiss on the forehead. "Thanks again."

Michael started to feel a little better.

Brian walked back into the living room. Gus had already settled into Justin's lap with his back against Justin's chest. Justin and Gus now were reading the funnies together. Gus had one of his arms raised and one hand was resting against Justin's cheek. Brian spooned in behind Justin and held them both. Brian laughed to himself as he tried to picture Gus and his protest, hunger strike.

Brian reached for his cell phone to call Lindsay and let her know that Gus had arrived safely. Brian handed the phone to Gus, so he could talk to his mother. Justin also talked briefly with Lindsay. Lindsay made a point to tell Justin that they only let Gus visit because they knew he was there. Justin was quick to point out to Lindsay that she was STILL underestimating Brian. Justin reminded Lindsay how much Brian loved Gus. Lindsay wanted to know about how New York was going, but Justin said he would tell her everything we he saw her.

Justin got up to fix everyone a snack, while Gus and Brian continued to read the paper together. Justin returned with a plate of fresh fruit. There were also a small stack of the double creamed Oreos, which both Gus and Brian had no trouble finding.

Brian called the car rental agency and arranged for an acceptable rental car to be delivered immediately. Brian wanted a luxury car...Justin wanted a van...they settled on a luxury SUV. After all Brian knew he was going to have to drive the car while Gus was here, so it had to meet his usual demanding standards. Justin couldn't believe how much trouble a simplest thing could be when Brian was involved.

Since this was the agency that Kinnetik used extensively, Brian arranged for the car to be delivered to the loft immediately, and that Cynthia would straighten out the paperwork on Monday.

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After dropping Gus at the loft, Michael stopped by the comic book store. He found that Hunter had everything under control. Michael let Hunter know he was very proud of him for handling the store while he was away. Hunter blushed at the unexpected praise.

Seeing that the store was in good hands, Michael walked into his office. He spent a few minutes checking the things on his desk; then his eyes drifted up to the painting. It appeared that Hunter had hung the painting of the Superheroes on the wall, as a surprise for Michael.

Michael got up and walked over to the painting. He ran his fingers gently over the painting.

"It's ok that they didn't believe me when I said that Justin was lost in New York," Michael said aloud to the painting, as if the superheroes would understand every word he was saying. "Brian brought Justin back home, and that's all that matters. Brian and Justin belong together."

Michael looked at the painting, but his thoughts were remembering the sight of Gus clinging to Justin, as if his little life depended on it. Michael also remembered the look in Gus's eyes the moment he saw Justin. At that moment for Gus, no one else in the world existed but Justin. Michael realized he had seen that same look in Brian's eyes many times, whenever Brian looked at Justin. Brian's feelings for Justin had been so plain for all to see, and Michael wondered how he could have missed them.

Michael thought about Jenny Rebecca and the fact that Melanie and Lindsay and the kids were now living in Toronto. He kicked himself for his part in that travesty because he failed to stand his ground and talk to Melanie about the importance of family. Instead he allowed Melanie to succumb to her own paranoia and relocate to Toronto. Michael believed now that their move to Toronto was a big mistake. Watching Gus with Justin had shown him that.

Even though Brian had supported him a million times, Michael failed to support Brian when it was most important. Michael had visions of having Brian all to himself again, so he allowed his own child to be taken to another country. In his anger with Brian over the custody battle, Michael had even allowed Gus to be separated from Brian. All his efforts had been in vain, because Michael received less time with Brian in this last year than he had ever spent over their twenty previous years of knowing each other.

Michael thought about all that he had lost.

Michael also realized that Ben was an understanding man, but even Ben's patience was wearing thin. Michael finally realized that he could still lose it all if he wasn't more careful.

Michael touched the painting one last time to remember what it was like to be 14 years old again...when life was simpler...and he was with Brian on those special Saturday afternoons in his bedroom, dreaming of superheroes.

Michael turned out he light in his office and returned to the main store. He helped Hunter close up the comic book store and set the alarm.

Hunter joined Michael in the car for the short ride back to Debbie's. Michael told Hunter the highlights of his trip and the story of the "littlest protester". Hunter was laughing so hard that his sides hurt by the time he reached Debbie's, especially as he visualized the image of Gus-in-protest.

Now Hunter was definitely looking forward to the return of Brian and Justin family dinners.

Chapter 22 – We Gather Together

Early Evening...(Day 14)

By 4pm Carl, Drew, and Ben were already engrossed in the game, when Calvin Culpepper joined them.

Ted and Blake were the next to arrive and settled into the dining room, chatting with Emmett while he was making the salad for dinner. Debbie was in the kitchen, completely in-charge of all that she surveyed.

Michael and Hunter arrived, and they both greeted Ben. Michael reiterated what a great job Hunter had done in handling the store in his absence. Ben and Debbie were quick to hug Hunter. When he was finally released and able to breathe again, Hunter staked out the best vantage point to watch the events about to unfold.

Jennifer and Molly were the next to arrive. Greetings were exchanged all around. Jennifer confidently reassured everyone that Brian and Justin would be here, as she joined Debbie in the kitchen. Molly realized that she would have both Brian and Justin in her sights, and she couldn't resist a sinister smile. She too scanned the room for a strategic viewing position, and she settled in next to Hunter.

Hunter and Molly were old hands at watching the family dynamics unfold, so they were well schooled in the drill. Both knew that nothing interesting was going to happen until Brian and Justin made an entrance. Hunter and Molly tried to exchange what little information they each had, but they knew the best was yet to come. They were even a bit impatient for the show to begin. Hunter did brief Molly that Gus was in town, which excited her no end.

During an intermission, all the game watchers: Carl, Drew, Ben and Calvin rounded up the additional chairs and added the extra extension to enlarge the table to handle everyone expected to be present. This task complete, the game was once again the major focus, and they scurried back to the sports action.

A few moments later Brian and Justin and Gus arrived. Jennifer was closest to the door so she was greeted first with hugs and kisses on the cheek. Brian once again started with the 'Mother Taylor' routine, but this time Jennifer made was no protest.

Molly slowly moved over to greet Justin and say hello. It had been a year since she had seen her brother, and she had missed him, but she would never let him know that.

Molly then greeted Brian, turning her face up to him and waited for her kiss. Brian sighed in mock protest but was really happy to oblige. Hunter laughed at Molly's antics, but wondered to himself if that was all it took to be kissed by Brian. Hunter realized that he had obviously been using the wrong tactics to get Brian's favor all these years.

Molly and Jennifer showered lots of hugs, kisses, and tickles hugs on Gus, while Brian and Justin made their way to the kitchen to greet Debbie. Her first hug was for Justin. Even though she had just seen him yesterday, her reactions were based on the fact that she had missed him for so long. Her second hug was for Brian, for doing the right thing in bringing Justin home.

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While Molly and Jennifer were smothering Gus with attention, Michael came over to talk to Justin. Brian paid close attention to the conversation between Michael and Justin. He was ready to intervene at the first sign of trouble. Brian was in full protective mode.

"I'm really sorry about everything Justin," Michael said.

"Look Michael, I just want you to be ok. If the painting is still a problem, you can sell it and make a lot of money. Then you can buy something that you really like. I didn't give you the picture to make you unhappy," Justin stated again sadly.

At this point Ben came over to join the conversation.

"It's not the painting, Justin. Michael is just trying to figure out some things about his life right now. In time he'll be ok. I tried to convince him to let me put the painting in my office at Carnegie Mellon, after all the painting illustrates so clearly all the imagery I try to teach in my classes. That's when I learned a painful lesson," Ben said laughing, "Michael and I may be married, but there are some things that Michael just won't share."

Ben and Justin laughed at the remark. Michael attempted to scowl, which caused everyone to laugh even more. Michael decided it was time to change the subject.

"You know Ben and I were talking in Toronto. We were talking about dreams and the stuff you mentioned in your letter. I've been starting to dream some new dreams, you know. I've been thinking about a couple of things. We need to do a PG rated version of the comic, along with the all out full version we're doing now. That way younger kids can have Rage and Zephyr and JT available to them much sooner, when they really need heroes. I've also been thinking about opening another comic book store. But Justin, you have to promise me if I ever open another comic book store, that you'll paint the superheroes on the wall."

"Wow! You've been doing a lot of thinking." Justin said, completely surprised by Michael's news.

"I'm just starting to think about it. Now that you're back I have someone to talk about it with, if that's all right?" Michael said sheepishly. "I know you'll understand my vision."

"Sure Michael those are great ideas," Justin said, trying to be supportive.

At this point, Gus decided he had been away from Justin long enough. He came over and crawled into Justin's lap, making himself quite comfortable.

Brian decided to intervene, "You know Gus you could actually spend some time with your dear old dad. You know I'm here too."

Gus thought about things for a while. Then he reached up and kissed Justin good-bye, before running over to Brian's waiting arms with giggles.

Molly and Hunter looked at each other and laughed.

"Brian, how's the project going?" Jennifer asked with a smile. "You know the one you supposedly brought Justin home to work on?"

"Fortunately we got quite a bit of work done before everyone stopped by to interrupt us yesterday. Isn't that right, Sunshine?" Brian asked mockingly.

"It's really going well, but I think I'm going to stick around until the project is finished," Justin added.

"When will that be, Bri?" Ted asked, knowing he is about to enjoy Brian squirm.

"It's hard to tell Theodore, but if you don't want to wait around, I'm sure I can arrange a pink slip," Brian suggested with mock sternness.

"You don't have to be so touchy, it was just a question." Ted remarked.

Brian smiled.

"Well I don't care how long it is. I'm just glad that you're here, Sweetie," Emmett said walking over toward Justin with outstretched arms, ready to give Justin a hug.

"Emmett, move away from Justin, please. I keep telling you that keeping your arms around Justin is not going to keep him here. But, as usual, you don't pay attention to me. Drew, can't you do something with him?"

"Brian you know Em. Asking me to handle Em is like asking you to handle Justin. They both have these strong wills and do exactly what they want to do," Drew quickly pointed out, "We just have to move out of their way and let them run."

"Gee Drew. Thank you so much for telling me that. How did you figure this out so quickly?" Brian asked with a smirk.

"I pay attention, Brian." Drew quipped with a smile.

Blake was laughing so hard that he had to turn into Ted's chest to contain it.

Molly and Hunter once again looked at each other and laughed.

"So Em, do you and Calvin have a lot of events coming up?" Justin casually asked.

"No, things have been relatively quiet. Things will start to get busy in a few weeks. But for the moment we're between events." Emmett explained.

"So Calvin, how do you like Pittsburgh?" Justin asked.

"Emmett and Drew have greeted me with that good old southern comfort, so I feel right at home. It was really lucky that I ran in to Emmett. It's not so lonely here having a friend from back home," Calvin explained, gently touching Emmett's shoulder.

"With Blake leaving for a seminar and Drew traveling periodically, it's a good thing that you're back, Justin. Otherwise things here in Pittsburgh would be pretty quiet." Ted commented with a grin.

"I have plans for Justin, so get all those silly ideas out of you head, Theodore," Brian tried to add some clarity to the conversation. "You and Em will have to find some other way to amuse yourself and not try to suck Justin into you hair brain schemes."

"Brian," they both said in unison.

"No. No. Justin and I are working on a project," Brian tried to explain again.

"I bet you are," they said in unison.

"So Justin, I've been meaning to ask you something" Michael began, "How come my painting was shipped from Santa Barbara? What were you doing there?"

"I think I need a cigarette," Brian stated, as he walked to the door. "I don't think I want to hear this."

Brian left the room, but he lingered by the door so that he could hear everything that was being said. He didn't want to miss any of Justin's information, just in case there was some new piece of information.

"Brian doesn't want to hear about Santa Barbara anymore," Justin said with a laugh.

Justin went on to recount about the Santa Barbara show and his decision not to sell the painting. He talked about the additional commissions he had painted and the ones left to be painted. Justin told about the media frenzy for the show, because an artist wanted to display his art to be seen but not sold. He talked about the Brett Keller and Connor James commissions. Justin also explain that part of the reason he had achieved what had was because of his willingness to exhibit his art in small galleries outside of New York City.

Brian walked back in just as Justin was finishing his story.

"So next week I have to go to Ohio. There is a new gallery there, and I have been invited to show my work as part of an emerging artist exhibit. My agent wants me to meet with the gallery owners. I haven't had to wait tables for a while because I've been designing websites and logos for companies on a freelance basis. So now Taylor Design and Graphics AND Justin Taylor Artist are both fully functional websites as well," Justin concluded. "You know Michael, don't be surprised if a lot of collectors call you and offer you a lot of money for your painting. Both Brent Keller and Connor James were very upset that your painting was not for sale during the show. And now that my website is up, the painting is catalogued with you as the owner."

"Well they can call all they want. My painting is not for sale at any price Justin," Michael said with a pout. "In fact Hunter hung the painting in my office for me while I was in Toronto."

Everybody laughed. Molly and Hunter looked knowingly at each other.

Justin talked about some of his more recent gallery shows and some of the paintings.

Brian beamed with pride at Justin's accomplishments.

Debbie called everyone to dinner. Gus located himself between Brian and Justin. Everyone enjoyed dinner, but Molly and Hunter kept a watchful eye on everything that was happening.

Brian refused dessert because of the carbs. Gus refused dessert because he was supposedly full. Justin, of course asked for dessert, which Gus and Brian proceeded to nibble on, while Justin was busy talking with everyone. Justin never gets to eat his dessert, when both Brian and Gus are around. It's an old story.

Molly and Hunter observed Justin dessert-loss and laughed. They both did offer to share their dessert with Justin because of his loss.

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After dinner everyone was relaxing. Jennifer and Justin were alone in the living room.

"So do you want to go look at studio space tomorrow?" Jennifer asked.

"No Mom that may not be necessary after all."

"Don't tell me you're going back to New York all ready. I thought you were going to stay to finish the project," Jennifer reminded him.

"I'm staying, but I want to paint at the house in West Virginia," Justin explained

"But Honey, the house has been vacant for almost a year," she pointed out.

"I know. The house has a caretaker. I'll just have to check things out. I really want to paint there. I want Brian and I to stay there for a while. It's only 30 minutes from town. But I need to rent the things we need. Now if I lived with an ordinary man this would be a simple task. But my partner is Brian Kinney, the label queen. So ordinary rental furniture won't work, if you know what I mean? I also don't have a lot of time. Brian and I are really busy, plus Gus is here."

"I know exactly where you can rent the stuff to satisfy the label queen," Jennifer interrupted. "You know those expensive houses that I sell; we rent furniture for staging the homes before sale. We do it all the time on short notice. So if we can figure out everything you need tomorrow, it can probably be delivered on Tuesday."

"And I'll be there to help and I'll bring Calvin. You know there is nothing I like better than spending Brian's money." Emmett said, interrupting the conversation. "Look I'm sorry I eavesdropped, but you know I just want to help."

"I know Em, I just don't want to drag the whole family in this. Brian will kill me. He only agreed to this if we could keep it quiet. Plus between his project and my work, I'm going to be really busy." Justin explained, "If we can't pull this off, I'll have to go back and work from New York."

"Don't worry Sweetie, we won't say anything to anyone," Emmett promised.

"Mom, you've got to promise not to say anything to Deb for a while," Justin stressed.

"All right Honey. I won't say anything. I understand your problem," Jennifer confirmed.

Emmett and Jennifer talked for a few moments and decided that they would work together to get everything done by the deadline Justin was aiming for. Justin breathed a sigh of relief.

Justin looked over and noticed that Gus was getting sleepy, so he moved over to Brian and Gus. Justin gently kissed Brian's cheek and told him it was time to go. Brian, Justin, and Gus said their good byes.

Chapter 23 – The Missing Pieces

Later that Evening...(Day 15)

Brian and Justin arrived back to the loft with Gus. Gus and Justin showered together; then Justin immediately fell asleep on the bed. Brian gave Gus a glass of milk and an Oreo cookie. Gus, dressed in his pajamas, settled into Brian's arms on the living room sofa, while Brian read him a story. Eventually Gus fell asleep, and Brian carried him back to the bed, settling him next to Justin.

Brian walked to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of Beam. So much had happened today; he had so much to think about now that everyone was asleep.

Brian was trying to process all the facts he had learned this weekend. There were so much, so many little details he couldn't believe how many he had missed. Listening to Justin at Debbie's told Brian so much. Now he had to take it all in.

First, Justin had a meeting next week in Ohio about a potential exhibit. Brian was beginning to see that except for the location, the Santa Barbara exhibit wasn't as unusual as it had originally seemed. Justin was willing to showcase at any gallery, not just in New York City.

Second, Justin was doing freelance design work, successfully in New York City of all places. Justin had a website for his freelance work. Justin had created his own path to success, on his own terms.

Third, Justin Taylor Artist also had its own website with all of Justin's work catalogued, including the original owners.

Fourth, Justin had an agent, who now performed the legwork of getting Justin into gallery exhibits. True, Justin has not been offered a solo show yet, but he was constantly showing in joint showcases, and his work tended to sell out at each show.

And Justin had an agent...now that Justin had an agent...maybe he didn't have to really be in New York anymore. Maybe he just needed to be able to get to New York, when he had a meeting or an exhibit.

Brian wondered aloud, "How could I have missed all this?"

Brian took another swig of his Beam.

He turned around to his computer. His first stop was the Taylor Design and Graphics website. There Brian found out that Justin had designed the website for several up and coming companies, many who Brian was familiar with. One of those sites looked very familiar. Brian scanned the Adz Week website. There it was. One of the websites that Justin had designed was nominated for a Bronze Quill award for innovative website design. There was already a lot of industry buzz about the site.

"Fuck! Justin when are you going to stop keeping things from me," Brian whispered to himself with a smile.

Brian then logged onto the Justin Taylor Artist website. He scanned through and saw the art that was the history of the artist. He recognized most of the paintings. Justin would usually show him pieces that he was working on whenever Brian visited New York. Brian was grateful for these previews for Justin's art seemed to sell as quickly as he produced it.

Brian followed the timeline to the most recent art and found the information about the Santa Barbara Exhibit. Brian couldn't believe he was willingly looking for information about the bane of his existence. Brian looked at the recent paintings, especially the ones that showed California ownership. These had to be the paintings that Justin had done since the Santa Barbara show, and Brian noted the experimental quality to the works. Brian was also amazed at the sheer number of paintings that Justin had completed in the last few weeks. He likewise noted the number of paintings left to be done, for Justin had listed those under WIP.

While Brian was searching, he stumbled upon a thumbnail image of a painting that he found interesting. He was about to click to enlarge the image, when he read the adjacent information first. This was one of the Santa Barbara paintings. According to website, he already owned the painting. Brian thought that was an interesting development.

Brian was about to investigate further, when a half asleep Justin walked past him into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. Dressed in pajamas with tussled hair, Justin looked hot and Brian had to try and restrain himself.

"Are you still working?" Justin asked with a yawn.

"Not exactly," Brian answered.

"Oh."

"You know I found a painting online that I really like."

"That's nice," Justin remarked, hoping that things would end there, and he could go back to sleep.

"Ah Justin, what is this?" Brian asked innocently.

"What?" Justin asked, starting to move in Brian's direction.

"Wow! Imagine that! According to this website I already own the painting. How is that possible, Justin? I've never even seen this painting before. If it was already in my collection, wouldn't I sure as hell know about it?"

"One would hope so, Brian," Justin said with a smile. Justin was now fully awake.

Brian reached over and pulled Justin to him over at the computer.

"Come to me, I want an explanation for this," Brian demanded with a smile. "How did I get this painting?"

Brian pointed to the specific painting on the screen.

Justin's only comment was, "Fuck!"

"Is that the same 'Fuck' that you use every time I find out something you don't want me to know?" Brian asked teasingly.

Justin knew Brian had him trapped. He had no choice but to come clean and hope for mercy. Justin knew Brian was going to love his discomfort once again. So Justin began.

"I sent the painting to you from Santa Barbara." Justin finally said, kissing the Brian's neck. Justin hoped that the mention of the dreaded city would let the matter drop.

There was not a chance in hell of that happening, for Brian was now relentless.

"If you sent it, how come I haven't received it?" Brian asked. "Melanie got her painting, and Michael got his painting. Where's my painting, Justin?" Brian demanded to know.

"It will turn up eventually. They all seem to always do that lately." Justin said with a laugh.

"Justin, this isn't funny," Brian demanded anxiously. "Where's my painting? Do you think it got lost?"

"Will you calm down? Your painting isn't lost. I sent your painting to Bri-tin. I'm sure if you check with your caretaker, you will find out, the painting is there," Justin explained, returning to kissing Brian's neck.

"Why did you send it there?" Brian asked with surprise.

"I wanted you to be at Bri-tin when you saw it," Justin said tenderly.

"Why?"

"When you see the painting you'll understand why," Justin explained.

"I saw the small image. I was just about the click on the larger image," Brian explained.

"Why don't you wait and see the actual painting?" Justin suggested as he kissed Brian again. "It's only a few more days. You've waited this long. I want you to experience the painting properly. You know how I feel about that sort of thing."

Brian looked at Justin completely baffled. Brian took another look at the thumbnail image on the website.

"Don't get too excited Brian, I was experimenting with a new technique. So it doesn't look like my other stuff. This is kind of different. I hope you like it when you see it."

Then Brian began to run his fingers gently over the image on the scene.

Eventually he found his voice to try to share what he was feeling.

"It's a beautiful painting, Justin, I can tell that just from the jpeg," Brian commented with a sigh, placing both hands over his heart. "God Justin ..."

Brian then pulled Justin into a tight embrace and kissed him passionately, eliminating all need for words.

"Brian, did you not hear me tell you not to get too excited about the painting? Did you not hear me tell you that the technique was new? This is why I don't tell you things because you don't pay any attention to me," Justin teased.

"Is there a note attached to my painting?" Brian asked, in way that reminded Justin so much of Gus. "Melanie and Michael got notes attached to their painting from Santa Barbara. So is there a note attached to my painting?"

"Brian!"

"Well, is there? It's a fairly simple question, Sunshine."

"If I answer this will you stop asking questions and come to bed? Some of us have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow."

Brian said nothing but nodded yes.

"Alright, there's a note attached," Justin whispered with a smile. "Now will you come to bed?"

Justin finished his water and settled back into bed, while Brian took a quick shower and changed into pajamas. Brian crawled into bed and gently ran his fingers through the soft blond hair of the sleeping Justin.

As Brian leaned down to kiss Justin's cheek, he whispered, "What's the title of my painting?"

A very sleepy Justin turned slightly and said, "You're unbelievable...do you know that?"

"I know," Brian said with a smile. "What's the title?"

"Talisman of Time," Justin whispered, drifting off into sleep.

"Talisman of Time," Brian echoed in a whisper. "Wait a minute, Justin, that doesn't tell me anything."

Justin just smiled as he fell asleep.

"This isn't over Sunshine," Brian whispered with a smile, as he too settled down and prepared for sleep.

**Meanwhile in Toronto**

**(Sidebar/Sequel to Superheroes)**

Chapter 1 – A Lazy Sunday Afternoon

Early Afternoon (Day 14)

"I can't believe that you let Ben and Michael take Gus back to Pittsburgh with them," Melanie complained to Lindsay as they were reading the Sunday papers.

"Look, Melanie, we discussed this. You agreed." Lindsay pointed out. "Gus wanted to see Justin badly enough to stage a protest hunger-strike. He wasn't speaking to us for almost the whole day yesterday. True, he probably would have eventually come around; after all he's only six. I'm sure by this afternoon he would have probably forgotten why he was mad at us. But Melanie, there was no point in making a fuss about this. Justin is there. You know how Gus feels about Justin. You know how Justin feels about Gus, and you know Justin will take good care of Gus."

"That's not the point," Melanie countered, trying to get Lindsay to see the problem. Melanie stopped glancing at the paper and was now giving Lindsay her undivided attention.

"What is the point, Melanie?" Lindsay asked resolutely. She now was also folding the paper she had been reading.

"We should have never let him have his way. We're his the parents. He has to respect that. We shouldn't have rewarded Gus for being willful like that," Melanie pointed out gently, slowing walking over to her partner and giving Lindsay a hug.

"Melanie, Gus loves and respects us. But just because he loves and respects us, doesn't mean he's going to like everything that we do or say. Even at six years old, he definitely has his own opinions, and we have to allow him to express what he feels. And he definitely feels that Justin is very important to him," Lindsay explained, giving Melanie a tender kiss.

"I wonder how Justin is doing in New York. I wonder how his art career is doing. I wonder how he likes New York. Gee, you know, we haven't talked to him in such a long time. I wonder how he's doing," Melanie said, starting to ramble nonstop. "That was a wonderful painting that he sent me. I've gotten lots of compliments at the office about it. Justin is a wonderful artist, but even more than that, I just really miss him. If we could only deal with Justin without having to deal with the Asshole, life would be perfect. In fact, when the wedding was called off and Justin moved to New York, I thought that's it, Justin's safe. But Brian wants Justin with every fiber of his being. You can just see it whenever he talks about Justin. No, I'm afraid Brian will never let Justin get away," Melanie finally said as if in defeat.

"So then you think that Brian is the one holding onto the relationship. Wow! I guess I always thought that Justin was the one hanging on. I guess I hoped with Justin focusing on his art career, he wouldn't have time for the distraction of Brian. I guess I hoped that by taking his career to the next level in New York he would gain some perspective. I guess I rather hoped he would take the opportunity for fame and fortune that lie before him, rather than continue to try to limit his focus on Brian. I love Brian dearly, but let's face it, Brian is never really going to change," Lindsay revealed, resting her head on Melanie's shoulder.

"I wonder," Melanie remarked quietly, kissing the top of Lindsay's head.

Melanie and Lindsay share a moment of quiet tenderness.

The moment doesn't last as Lindsay continues her rant once again.

"Brian's so unfair to keep raising Justin's hopes for the future. Brian keeps asking Justin to just accept him as he is, to accept the fact that Brian's never going to change. But, Justin just keeps hoping, and his hoping distracts from his art career. Justin is so talented. He's capable of achieving so much more, if he would just let go of Brian," Lindsay continued.

She moved from Melanie's embrace and started to gather sections of the paper that had been scattered across the coffee table.

"Well Michael thinks that everything is over. Michael thinks that Brian doesn't care about Justin anymore. That's why Michael and Ben were so concerned about Justin," Melanie pointed out, mindlessly assisting Lindsay in her efforts to eliminate the clutter.

"Right, and of course Michael's judgment is so perfect when it comes to Brian and Justin. Michael is still so in love with Brian and still hoping that one-day, he and Brian will ride off into the sunset together. So don't let Michael be your barometer for the Brian/Justin relationship." Lindsay counter-argued with a laugh.

"From what you're telling me the best barometer of the Brian and Justin relationship is...I know this is a scary prospect...but it does look like the truth... is Gus," Melanie said with all sincerity.

With that statement Lindsay couldn't contain herself, she burst out laughing until the tears started to stream down her cheeks, and she fell on the sofa laughing.

Melanie looked at her partner and realized what she just said. Then she too began laughing, and also fell on the sofa.

Lindsay was the first to regain her composure. "So based on the information provided by our son, what do we know?" Lindsay asked, preparing to assemble all known facts. She propped herself on one elbow and waited for the answer.

"Well, from what I overheard of the telephone conversation he had with Brian and Justin and from what little Gus has been willing to say...you know... during the period when he wasn't speaking to either of us, ..." Melanie began to elaborate, trying to make herself comfortable in the process.

"Yeah?"

"Well, according to his six year old mind, Justin may be in New York and Brian may be in Pittsburgh, but Justin still belongs to Brian, and Brian is still taking care of Justin. That's all there is to it, according to Gus!" Melanie recanted with a smile.

"I see," Lindsay sighed and matched Melanie's smile.

"What did Gus say when you talked to him?" Melanie quietly asked, hoping there was more information to come.

"He informed me he didn't have time to talk to me right now. He informed me that he and Justin were in the middle of reading the comics together. He was very busy. He would call me later, he said." Lindsay recounted with some dismay and a tinge of jealousy.

"Just give Gus a day or so with Brian. He'll be calling us to come and get him by tomorrow. You know Brian isn't going to change his lifestyle or his schedule because Gus is visiting, especially when the visit wasn't planned. And, Justin will be too busy painting to spend time with Gus. So Gus will be calling us tomorrow telling us he's ready to come home. You'll see," Melanie suggested, trying to allay any fears.

Melanie stated what she believed and hoped was true, for she missed Gus already and she clearly understood how Lindsay felt.

Lindsay walked across the room and picked up Jenny Rebecca from her playpen. Lindsay gave her daughter an extra hug. Then Lindsay and Jenny Rebecca snuggled into Melanie's arms on the sofa.

Chapter 2 – The Quiet Storm

Later that Same Day...(Day 14)

Later that afternoon, Lindsay was sitting at their shared desk, with a stack of articles and print outs in front of her. Melanie entered the room and tried to look over her partner's shoulder to see what she was doing. There was a look on Lindsay's face that Melanie had never seen before. It was as if Lindsay's mind was clearly somewhere else.

"Lindsay, what are you doing?" Melanie asked.

"Oh...I'm updating a scrapbook," Lindsay whispered.

"Oh...Gus and Jenny?" Melanie asked hopefully.

"Oh...no...no...I subscribe to a clipping service to keep track of stuff about Justin. They send me material and information, but I've gotten behind updating things...updating the scrapbook...you know," Lindsay explained. "He's really amazing isn't he?" Lindsay said, with a far away look in her eyes. "And, he keeps getting better and better."

"I don't know a lot about art, but I do know that the painting he sent to me looked different that the stuff he usually paints. But in spite of that, it was a magnificent painting," Melanie said with pride. "Justin is always so cutting edge, but he never sacrifices the beauty of the painting."

"I only wish I had what he has," Lindsay said with a sigh. "My life would have turned out so different."

And with that, Lindsay returned to her realm in the other world, working on her scrapbook.

It was an innocent enough statement to make, and if Gus had been running around the house, the statement probably would have gone unnoticed. But Gus wasn't running around, not this time, and Melanie was paying attention. Melanie felt a chill in the air, a cold snap.

Lindsay was completely oblivious to the powder keg that just exploded.

Internally Melanie went ballistic with the statement that Lindsay just made, but Melanie tried to maintain her calm exterior. So she calmly walked over and checked on Jenny Rebecca.

Seeing that her daughter was happily playing with her toys, Melanie walked into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of white wine. She wanted something stronger, but she was afraid she might need to keep her wits about her.

Melanie felt as if she had been slapped, and she couldn't understand how Lindsay could just sit there quietly as if nothing had happened. All Melanie could feel was the pain, and the more she thought about things, the worse it hurt.

Then Melanie thought about Brian, and her mind repeated, "pain management" with every sip of wine, and she silently thanked Brian for his many lessons.

Finally her racing heart began to calm as her mind replayed Lindsay's last remark: "I only wish I had what he has, my life would have turned out so much different."

Melanie felt she now understood it all.

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All during dinner, Melanie kept her mask in place. Never once giving a hint to Lindsay that anything was wrong.

Lindsay, in complete oblivion to the brewing firestorm, chatted about Gus and upcoming events at the gallery. Dinner conversation was light and pleasant.

That evening after dinner, Melanie asked her cousin to keep Jenny Rebecca for the night.

Lindsay was imagining an evening of candlelight and romance, as she waited in the bedroom for Melanie to return.

Lindsay was sorely disappointed when a very business-like Melanie entered their bedroom, and took a seat at the foot of the bed. She was now in full lawyer mode and ready to begin her interrogation.

"Lindsay, I'm going to ask you some questions, and I need you to be completely honest with me, Ok?" Melanie began, trying to control all that she was feeling.

"Sure, what's going on?" Lindsay asked, trying to figure out what was happening. Lindsay could see that Melanie was tense, but Lindsay couldn't understand why.

"Tell what you meant by 'I only wish I had what he has, my life would have turned out so much different.' Tell me what you regret." Melanie demanded calmly.

"Do you remember when we first met Justin? He was so young, so innocent. He wanted Brian. He had no idea what he was letting himself in for, but he grabbed on and he held on with both hands. He successfully rode the tiger. He succeeded where others had failed. Brian wanted to marry Justin. Can you imagine? Michael and I have known Brian a lifetime; yet Justin understands things about Brian that Michael and I never even knew existed. Do you know what it's like to watch this little kid come to understand things that you never even saw?" Lindsay explained.

"Lindsay, are you jealous of Justin?" Melanie asked.

"No. Not really. It's just that Brian seems to give Justin so much. He always has."

"What do you mean?"

"Brian has always earned a good living. He's always had money. Justin came along, and money suddenly became important to Brian. Brian did the Pool Boy campaign so that he could earn the bonus and with it, he could pay off his loft. That's not Brian. Brian wanted to pay off his loft because Justin was there. And in his own convoluted way, Brian wanted to take care of Justin. Brian wanted Justin to be secure."

"I see."

"Then Brian paid for Justin to go to PIFA, so Justin could develop his talent."

"Well, you were the one who suggested and encouraged Justin to go there."

"Yeah, but I never expected Brian to pay for it. I thought his parents would pay. But instead Brian spent his money on Justin."

"Lindsay, with all the shit that Justin had to put up with in dealing with Brian, there is no amount of money that Brian could spend that would even begin to compensate Justin for his agony." Melanie said with a smile.

"Melanie, Brian has a son. He should be lavishing all his money on Gus not Justin." Lindsay pointed out.

"Is that why you wanted Brian to be the Gus's father, because of the things you thought he would give Gus that you and I could not provide? Was that what you were thinking?" Melanie asked in horror.

"No...no...that's not what I meant." Lindsay tried to explain.

"Because, we told Brian if he agreed to be the donor, that he would be absolved of all financial responsibility. Yet every time I turn around you're always asking Brian for money for some reason or other for Gus," Melanie accused.

"And you're no different. You demanded the million-dollar life insurance policy on Brian's life right after Gus was borne...so, you tell me how is that so different?" Lindsay inquired, demanding to know.

" I demanded the life insurance to protect Gus. You ask for money from Brian out of a sense of entitlement because you have his child. Likewise because you have his child, you expect him to fulfill his pseudo husband role and to take care of YOU as well as his child," Melanie acknowledged. "The problem is, in this scenario, I have no place."

"How can you say that? I told you if it wasn't for you I wouldn't have had Gus."

"Sure. If you didn't have a partner you would have never had Brian's child. You would have never had your pseudo family. After all you had to keep Brian longing for more and more of this son, for that's a part of what keeps him bound to you. The more he wants to see his son, the more you get to see Brian. It becomes an never ending cycle and it keeps Brian bound to you as well."

"No! You're wrong!" Lindsay protested.

"Am I Lindsay?" Melanie asked. "You use to think that Brian and Justin were just cute together, didn't you. You never expected it to last, did you?"

"No. I didn't," Lindsay whispered. "And I never expected him to buy that fucking mansion for Justin. How could he? Well at least they're not living in that place."

"What did you say?" Melanie asked in complete disbelief.

"Well?"

And with that Melanie couldn't take anymore. She couldn't believe what she'd heard. She wanted to run from the house crying and screaming, but she knew that wasn't an option.

Melanie walked over and kissed the top of Lindsay's head and said, "Lindsay, I'm so sorry about the way things turned out for you."

Then she quietly walked into the guest room and closed the door. Melanie crawled into the bed and pulled the covers over her head. Melanie lay in stunned silence until she fell asleep.

Lindsay was left sitting in bed trying to figure out what just happened. Here she had been anticipating a romantic evening with her partner. Instead she was subjected to the grand inquisition. Lindsay knew Melanie was upset; the fact that Lindsay found herself alone in their bed was a real tip off. But as Lindsay sat there trying to understand why, there were no answers in sight for her.

In her state of confusion with no answers in sight, Lindsay turned out the light and eventually drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 3 – The Morning After

The Next Morning...(Day 15)

Melanie awoke, quietly showered, and got dressed. In the light of morning she sat on the side of the guest bed completely lost in thought. Melanie now understood how things were, and she let out a sigh as she realized that everything was going to be her responsibility from now on. From this moment on, Melanie felt that she no longer had a partner.

Melanie remembered that she had felt like this once before, just after Gus was born. She had not handled things particularly well that time, choosing to have an affair rather than deal with the issues at hand. Melanie did not intend to make that mistake this time. She would meet this problem head on. Brian had been the one to step in and single handedly help save her relationship that time. This time Melanie would handle things on her own.

First she called in sick to her office; then she also called into Lindsay's office at the gallery and told them that Lindsay was under the weather.

With those tasks accomplished, Melanie needed to prepare a list of things to do. Her thoughts were racing, so the idea to record on paper the things that needed to be done seemed like a good idea. Melanie went to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of orange juice and carried it back to the desk she shared with Lindsay.

There on the desk were the remnants of the scrapbook that Lindsay had been working on the day before. Melanie started to clean up the scattered papers to give herself more room to work.

While moving things, she casually leafed through the clippings about Justin, and she couldn't help but smile.

There was article after article, showing a smiling Justin next to his paintings. Melanie saw a picture of the painting she received, and she lingered to read the article about the Santa Barbara exhibit. When she finished reading the article, she placed it on the stack. Then she stopped for a minute. Melanie ran her finger ever so gently over the image of her painting and whispered, "Justin."

When her thoughts returned, she resumed organizing the desk. As Melanie moved the remaining things on the desk around, she found a second scrapbook underneath it all. Melanie started to leaf through this recent find.

Melanie could tell that this second scrapbook was much older, but had been lovingly prepared. As she started to randomly take note of some of the articles, Melanie realized what she was looking at. This was Lindsay's scrapbook. This was the history of Lindsay's short-lived career as an emerging artist. Most of the articles in the scrapbook were dated before Melanie met Lindsay.

As she went to move the second scrapbook, Melanie was immediately struck by the immediate differences in their relative sizes. Justin's scrapbook was already much thicker. Melanie was beginning to understand some things.

She suddenly remembered when the Art Forum article came out about Justin a year ago and how Lindsay talked on and on about how this was the opportunity of a lifetime for Justin. Lindsay would constantly talk about how most artists labor a lifetime and never get the kind of recognition that Justin was already getting at such an early age. Lindsay went on and on and on about how talented Justin was...how he shouldn't let anything stand in the way of his success. Lindsay clearly stated over and over again, that if Justin married Brian, his career would be over. Lindsay had said it so often that she even had Melanie believing that Justin would be sacrificing his whole future he if married Brian rather than pursued his art career in New York.

New York and a dream of a career as an artist was Lindsay's dream when she was in college. A dream she found out she didn't have quite enough talent and drive to pursue when she graduated. Lindsay found that in the art world everyone had talent, and her talent was not quite special enough. So she redirected her talent and settled for teaching art history and managing an art gallery. Lindsay accepted the fact that she was a good artist, but not a great one, and she knew the difference.

Enter Justin Taylor, who was already a great talent at 17... Justin Taylor, who to this day probably sketched nonstop...Justin Taylor, who continued to improve, continued to evolve... Justin Taylor, who took his raw talent and honed his skills with classical training at PIFA...but he didn't stop there...Justin Taylor, the master animator who brought to life the gay superhero, Rage...Justin Taylor, who could create political posters so powerful that they helped bring down a political candidate...Justin Taylor, who with an ever present pencil in his hand can create graphics that even Brian would admit were 'simply art'.

Melanie understood that Lindsay looked at Justin's talent in comparison to her own, and she saw the difference. And seeing that difference, Lindsay didn't want Justin to waste his talent. Like a parent, Lindsay wanted Justin to fulfill all those dreams she could never achieve. And, with Justin's achievements, Lindsay could experience every thing vicariously. Justin would become rich and famous, and Lindsay would live the fantasy through him. Justin would achieve it all; after all he was young and had his whole life ahead of him.

Lindsay once told Justin, "You're young and although you don't believe it now, you're going to have lots of relationships."

So from Lindsay's point of view, Justin shouldn't have a problem giving up Brian as the price for his fame and glory, it would be a small price to pay, when she thought of all that Justin would achieve professionally.

Melanie was about to close the scrapbooks when her eye fell on an article about Sam Auerback. Melanie hated to think of that name and that man...emphasis on the word MAN. Sam was a most unlikable person, and Melanie could never quite make the pieces fit as to what Lindsay ever saw in him. Also, he was a man... and then it hit Melanie.

Lindsay always said it was about art. Sam Auerback was a great artist, a great talent. Melanie couldn't believe their fucking was about art...their fucking was about form and function. Melanie had protested every time Lindsay tried to use art as an excuse. Melanie for the first time began to understand. Maybe Lindsay was telling the truth. Maybe Lindsay was trying to compensate once again for the artistic talent that she didn't believe she had by fucking a great artist. It sounded absurd at first, but it now started to make sense. Now more of the pieces were beginning to fit.

Then Melanie remembered that Lindsay also had another dream...the one she always talked about. She had repeated it often enough that it sounded like a mantra. Lindsay always said that 'she wanted to fall in love, get married, and have a baby'. Lindsay always said that she achieved all those things. Lindsay used to say, "Three out of three ain't bad," but now Melanie wasn't sure.

With Lindsay's WASP background, the love and marriage and baby was suppose to happen in a home...the kind of home that Lindsay took for granted... the kind of home that Lindsay grew up in...the kind of home ...the kind of home...the mansion that Brian bought for Justin. Melanie was starting to understand more and more.

Lindsay's parents had once offered her and Gus the opportunity to move in with them. It was at a time when Melanie and Lindsay were separated, and Lindsay had jumped at the chance to move out of that tiny apartment and try to live with her parents again. However, Lindsay had been forced to come face to face again the fact that parents did not accept her or her lifestyle. Add this to the fact that the Petersons gave so much to Lindsay's sister because she lived a traditional lifestyle complete with multiple divorces, while Lindsay and Gus they practically ignored. This had to hurt and help destroy Lindsay's self-esteem.

Melanie paused as she realized that she and Lindsay had never resolved things or worked through so much when they got back together. They never really talked. The trauma of the bombing at Babylon and Dusty's death had caused them to make a lot of rash actions. Feeling lucky to be alive, they just sweep their problems under the rug, got back together, and went on as if nothing had happened. Melanie and Lindsay were together again; that seemed to be all that mattered.

Then they hastily moved to Toronto under the premise that they could be safe and their lifestyle would be respected. They moved without taking the time or the due diligence of thinking things through or talking things out. As it turned out they were no safer in Toronto than they had been in Pittsburgh, and being removed from all their friends, Melanie realized their life was now empty. All their actions had deadly repercussions. Brian had tried to warn them, but Melanie wouldn't listen. Melanie realized that she and Lindsay had been running from everything, and those issues that had not been addressed before, were now really big problems that they needed to face.

Melanie quietly walked back to the bedroom to check on Lindsay. Lindsay was still sleeping. Melanie tenderly stroked a lock of blond hair that fallen across Lindsay brow. Melanie leaned down and gently kissed Lindsay's cheek.

As Melanie stood at the doorway and watched the sleeping figure, she realized how much she loved Lindsay. Quietly shutting the door, Melanie realized that she and Lindsay needed help before it was too late.

Melanie made a decision. She called their former counselor and asked for help. Their counselor scheduled a counseling session for tomorrow afternoon in Pittsburgh. The next step was to convince Lindsay to keep that appointment with her.

Chapter 4 – The Other View

A Few Minutes Later...(Day 15)

Lindsay gradually awakened as she sensed Melanie's presence in the room, but she didn't move. Lindsay felt Melanie's touch, and she let herself surrender to Melanie's gentle kiss. The touch and kiss told Lindsay that Melanie still loved her...so there was still hope.

Lindsay continued to lie there as she tried to piece together all that had happened the previous day. She shook her head and tried to figure out just where everything went so wrong. Lindsay tired to figure out, why an anticipated night of romance, led to this schism in her relationship...for Lindsay knew she loved Melanie, that was a given.

Lindsay looked at herself in the mirror and realized for the first time in her life that she and Michael had a lot in common. They both shared the same dream... that after a lifetime of standing by Brian's side, one day Brian would decide to grow up and be ready for a real relationship. Brian had done that, but it hadn't turned out quite the way either of them planned.

Lindsay admitted to herself for the first time that she too still held onto the ever so faint hope, that when Brian reached that point that he would choose her. It was a faint hope way down deep in her soul, but it was there none-the-less. And even if it never happened, Lindsay knew that she always had an unbreakable bond with Brian because of Gus.

Lindsay's heart might wish for a life with Brian and Gus, but her head accepted long ago that it would never happen. Unlike Michael, her head really knew the truth. And with the events of this weekend... as explained by Gus...Lindsay now knew it would always be Brian and Justin. And on some level, she was ok with that...but only on some level.

Lindsay looked around at her small rented house in Toronto and thought about the mansion that Brian bought for Justin, and she couldn't help wondering why she had to live like this. She wanted so much more from life. For although she had never seen it, Lindsay imagined the mansion to be magnificent and everything that she had ever dreamed of since she was a little girl. Lindsay couldn't help her feelings that the mansion was the home that she and Gus were entitled to. She couldn't help her jealousy.

Lindsay looked around and wondered why she was isolated in a foreign country away from friends and family. She felt so alone, and she didn't like it. The sense of isolation had awakened strange feelings within her. Feelings that were now showing up probably much more intense than what she thought she truly felt.

Lindsay always thought Brian would always remain just as he was...a Peter Pan to her Wendy. That way Brian would always be hers. Lindsay never expected Brian to grow up and change. Lindsay realized that she had never fully understood the true the impact of the Justin factor. She also couldn't help feeling some jealousy when Brian wanted to marry Justin. Brian, who swore he would never be in a relationship with anyone much less consider marrying someone, actually wanted to marry Justin. Somehow Lindsay felt betrayed.

Lindsay realized that she had a lot of growing up to do. Lindsay, at first expected her parents to take care of her. Then when her parents rejected her because of her lifestyle, Lindsay shifted the responsibility to Brian to take care of her. So whenever there was a problem, Brian was the first person she sought out to resolve it. Since she never expected there to be anyone special in Brian's life, she expected that he would always be there for her...both emotionally and financially. She realized that she never expected things between Brian and Justin to go as far as they did. Justin changed everything.

Lindsay realized that even though Justin was just a kid, he was always looking out for Brian. Justin tried to persuade Brian to keep his parental rights. Justin was always fighting by Brian's side. Justin was always fighting for Brian. Look how Justin defended Brian when it his taking care of Gus. Brian was always doing things for Justin, but not because Justin asked. Brian gave so much to Justin, just because he wanted to, because he loved Justin. Lindsay realized that she and Michael were always taking and demanding things from Brian, and Brian always gave willingly. Lindsay realized that she and Michael had always expected Brian to give. Lindsay couldn't remember a time, when she or Michael had ever given anything to Brian. Lindsay began to feel selfish.

Lindsay began to understand her feelings, but that didn't stop her from wanting Justin's success. She understood now that Justin's success would be her success if she could experience it all vicariously.

As Lindsay reflected about yesterday and assembling Justin's scrapbook, she looked at all that Justin had managed to achieve this last year. Justin was an amazing artist, and he was having an awesome career. Lindsay wished she had the chance to have Justin's career, and she couldn't help how she felt. Lindsay wished she had Justin's life. Lindsay wished!

Lindsay took a look at her relationship with Melanie, and she saw the same selfish pattern. There was no day-to-day tenderness between them. Something was definitely missing. Oh they gave to the Gay and Lesbian Community when they were in Pittsburgh, but they never really had time for each other. Lindsay realized that she and Melanie had taken each other for granted for a long time.

Lindsay realized for all the criticism of Brian, whenever Brian and Justin were together they were constantly touching. Over the years, a certain closeness existed between them. Even Gus used to talk about it all the time...the way they touched...the way they kissed. You could see Brian and Justin's love for each other in the way they looked at one another, even across a crowded room.

Lindsay was suddenly jealous, because although she loved Melanie, that closeness seemed to be missing. It had been there once upon a time. Lindsay wanted it back.

Lindsay thought about Michael and his possessiveness of Brian, in spite of his current loving relationship with Ben. Lindsay thought about her residual feelings for Brian and compared it to how much she truly loved Melanie. Finally Lindsay knew she needed help before it was too late.

Lindsay called her office to report that she was sick and was told that Melanie had already called earlier to let them know.

Then fumbling through her nightstand for her telephone book, Lindsay called their therapist in Pittsburgh and made an appointment for a counseling session tomorrow afternoon. The next step was to convince Melanie that they needed to keep that appointment.

With new resolve, Lindsay got out of bed. She showered and dressed quickly.

As Lindsay went into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of juice, she saw Melanie in the living room at their desk. Lindsay took a deep breath for courage. She was now ready.

Chapter 5 – Point...Counterpoint

Late Morning...(Day 15)

"Can I make you some breakfast?" Lindsay asked as she entered the kitchen and poured herself a glass of juice.

"No thanks. I had a glass of juice earlier." Melanie explained.

"Oh."

"I heard you on the phone," Melanie commented. "Were you calling Brian? How's Gus?"

"No, I was just checking in at work. They told me you had already called in for me. Thanks."

"No problem."

Lindsay gulped her glass of juice and gathered up all her courage. She told herself that she could do this. Then she began.

"Look Melanie, I know that you're upset with me, and you probably have every reason to be. But I want you to know I'm so sorry," Lindsay said, managing to get all that out in one breath.

"I'm not mad with you. I'm just sorry that you're so unhappy. I'm so sorry you settled for this," Melanie whispered with understanding.

"I didn't settle for THIS, Melanie, I chose THIS," Lindsay confessed, striking her hands together for emphasis so that Melanie would get the point. "I chose you. I love you," she then added, letting her voice lower to a whisper to convey the tenderness at the end.

"And I love you too, but that may not be enough. Maybe we should just..."

"Will you just stop! Stop right there!" Lindsay interrupted, with an intensity in her voice that Melanie was not accustomed to hearing.

Melanie could hear the hard edge that was developing. The WASP façade, usually so well in place, was starting to slip. Lindsay gave Melanie a hard stare.

"What?" Melanie asked with surprise.

"I've heard that tone before! I heard it many times! You get on your high horse of justified indignation, and I'm forced to wear the sack cloth of ashes and swallow bitter herbs...or whatever the Jewish equivalent of eternal suffering is..." Lindsay continued with anger, thinking back to a year ago, after the Sam Auerback incident, when she had been forced to suffer in silence. Lindsay was clearly determined, 'Not this time!'

"What the hell are you talking about?" Melanie asked in all innocence.

"Well not this time! I've got some problems that I need to work through. But you don't get to make me your whipping boy over them! I can't suffer for 4000 years of Jewish oppression! I'm not going to suck it up this time!" Lindsay said almost shouting.

"Lindsay, will you calm down, I can't follow you...you're mixing your metaphors," Melanie interjected, being completely lost in the conversation and not knowing how else to respond.

"What?"

"Calm down...you're mixing your metaphors....listen to yourself...just tell me what's on your mind," Melanie finally said calmly, this time in a whisper to try to ease the tension.

"I just wish we could move back to Pittsburgh," Lindsay finally said.

"You know why we moved here," Melanie explained

"So our kids could be safe...so that our marriage could be recognized...so we wouldn't be considered second-class citizens because we're gay...so we could all have a better life. I know the litany!" Lindsay retorted.

"Well?" Melanie challenged.

"Melanie, we're still second class citizens here in Canada. Gay marriage may be accepted in Canada, but gays are still not welcomed here. We're even less welcomed here in Canada because we're Americans. Oh sure there's a Starbucks and a Gap, but we really haven't made any real friends in the year that we've been here. Homophobia is everywhere...Brian was right. We should have stayed in Pittsburgh and continued to fight for our rights. We didn't plan things out carefully, we just ran. Brian was so right. We ran from the bully. We don't have the support system of friends and family here that we had in Pittsburgh. We have nothing here. I don't know why we're still here," Lindsay finally whimpered.

"Look we're together without the interference of everyone in our lives. We get to raise our kids the way we want to, without everyone butting in. We get to truly be parents," Melanie professed. "That's why we're here!"

"Is that the real reason that we made the move, so that you could feel in control of our lives? Was all that paranoia about the Nazi's and your grandfather just bullshit Melanie so you could be in absolute control?" Lindsay finally asked point blank.

Melanie felt as though she had just been slapped. Her mind could suddenly find no counter argument. So she simply stood there stunned.

Lindsay continued, "Anyway, I figure...I need some help...so I called and made an appointment with our old therapist. I have an appointment at 3PM tomorrow, and I expect you to go with me." Lindsay demanded forcefully, although her knees were knocking together and her hands were shaking. This was the first time Lindsay had ever forcefully demanded anything in the relationship. "However, you can do whatever you want, I'm going to go pack."

And with that Lindsay turned and swept out of the living room. She returned to the bedroom and slammed the door. She then sat on the side of the bed and tried to remember how to breathe. Lindsay knew for sure that they were in deep trouble.

About 15 minutes later, there was a knock on the bedroom door.

"Yes, what is it?" Lindsay asked.

The door opened slowly, just a few inches.

Through the small opening passed a white cloth attached to a pencil. The white cloth tried to imitate a waving flag.

"Truce?" Melanie requested, still standing on her side of the door and holding her breath.

Lindsay looked at the pitiful excuse for a flag waving between the opened door, and she just shook her head.

"Truce," Lindsay finally said with a sighed.

"Look I really hate to add another metaphor to your discussion with this flag thing, but do you think you could join me in the kitchen for a quiet conversation over some tea and grilled cheese sandwiches?" Melanie asked hopefully.

"Grilled cheese sandwiches, Melanie?" Lindsay asked in total disbelief. "Grilled cheese sandwiches?"

"Yes!"

At this point Lindsay burst out laughing, "Is that the best you could do?"

"Well I was desperate...I had to think of something fast. All right, so I was lacking in the creative department, but I can't help it if I don't have your artistic vision," Melanie said with a laugh. "And the sandwiches are getting cold."

Melanie extended her hand to help Lindsay off the bed, and Lindsay took it. Together they walked into the kitchen.

When Lindsay was seated and had taken the first bite of her sandwich. Melanie saw her opportunity, and she seized her advantage.

"Well, now that your mouth is full I want you to chew slowly because I want you quiet for the next five minutes. I have some things I want to say, and I don't want to be interrupted," Melanie began. "After all I have to pack too, because I also made an appointment with our old therapist in Pittsburgh for tomorrow at 3PM. So I don't have a lot of time to waste."

"What?" Lindsay said in complete shock.

Melanie just smiled. "Don't talk with you mouth full!" Melanie teased.

Then Melanie became very serious.

"Lindsay, we have some problems...notice, I said WE. And we...you and I...are going to deal with them. We're not going to bring all of gay Pittsburgh into this. You're not going to go running to Brian. I'm not going to go running to Ted and Deb. I love you, and we'll get through this mess together." Melanie began like she was addressing the court in a closing argument. "Since you aren't allowed to talk, you can agree by simply nodding your head yes."

Lindsay nodded yes.

"Good." Melanie went on with her summation. "Now, I also want you to know that I found your scrapbook beneath the one you were making about Justin." Melanie continued more gently now. "I see a lot of things now that I didn't understand before. I guess I was too busy being angry to notice. I'm sorry."

Lindsay stopped in the middle of eating her sandwich when she heard Melanie's apology. Melanie like Brian rarely apologized. The fact that Melanie did apologize meant there was hope. Knowing there was hope, Lindsay could obediently go back to eating her sandwich in silence.

"The scrapbook about Justin is a nice idea. I think you WE should work on it together and get it up to date before we leave for Pittsburgh. Maybe we could even take it with us and show it to Justin. Then we could get him to look at it with us and tell us everything he's been up to since we last saw him. How does that sound?" Melanie suggested, with gentleness now in her voice.

Lindsay nodded yes and was able to smile for the first time. Lindsay's courage started to return as she sheepishly asked, "Can I talk now?"

Melanie nodded yes.

"We should call Brian and talk to Gus. If he's ok, then we should let him stay where he is until the weekend, as originally planned," Lindsay suggested. She then waited for the idea to sink in with Melanie.

Melanie finally took a bite of her own grilled cheese sandwich and nodded yes.

"We should probably talk to Ben and Michael and Debbie and see if they will keep Jenny Rebecca for a few days. I'm sure they will love having her," Lindsay continued and waited for a response.

Again Melanie nodded yes, while continuing to eat her sandwich.

"With our therapy appointment tomorrow and staying in a hotel, this would give us a chance to talk and be together and try to figure some things out. We may be able to get in a few additional therapy sessions while we're in Pittsburgh. I think we should plan on being in Pittsburgh at least until the weekend. Then all of us, including the kids, would all come back together. How does that sound?"

Melanie finished her sandwich and was now pouring two cups of tea.

"I guess we should get packing, and I guess we need to retrieve our daughter," Melanie suggested finally deciding it was safe to speak.

"If I tell you your grilled cheese sandwiches were really gourmet...would you come into our bedroom for a while?" Lindsay asked pleadingly. "I need to be close to you?"

"You don't have to make up anything about my sandwiches," Melanie whispered, " I want to be close to you too."

Melanie lay diagonally across the made bed and Lindsay crawled in beside her. Melanie wrapped her arms around Lindsay, as Lindsay lowered her head to Melanie's chest. They held each other tightly as if their lives depended on it. They both needed this closeness at this moment; they needed each other for strength. They lay there together caressing and gently talking with one another. There was a new tenderness and understanding between them. They were really in this together. They remained like this for some time.

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Eventually Melanie went to retrieve Jenny Rebecca, while Lindsay cleaned up the dishes.

With their daughter happily playing in with her toys, Lindsay and Melanie worked together on the finishing touches to Justin's scrapbook. While Lindsay and Melanie worked on Justin's scrapbook, they actually talked to one another. They talked about Justin, and they talked about dreams. For the first time in a very long time they actually listened to each other. They both wanted things to be different.

With the scrapbook all updated, Lindsay and Melanie set about packing their things for the trip to Pittsburgh. They both made the necessary calls to their offices and arranged for their time off.

As Lindsay was closing her suitcase, she added Justin's scrapbook to her bag. Melanie walked back into the living room. Seeing Lindsay's scrapbook on the desk, Melanie decided at the last moment to add Lindsay's scrapbook to her suitcase.

With everything all packed including a small bag for Jenny Rebecca, they were now ready to leave.

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While the car was serviced for the trip, Melanie, Lindsay, and Jenny Rebecca spent some time browsing at the mall.

Melanie also made the calls to Pittsburgh to make the hotel reservations. Lindsay and Melanie talked to Gus and found him surprisingly content with Brian and Justin. So they said ok to Gus's request to stay with Brian and Justin until the weekend. They called and made arrangements with Debbie and Michael for Jenny Rebecca. Debbie insisted that since they were arriving late in the evening, Lindsay and Melanie must spend the night with her and Carl. They could check into the hotel tomorrow. Melanie agreed and changed their hotel reservations accordingly.

Melanie realized that they might need additional cover stories for their being in Pittsburgh. So Lindsay then called Sidney Bloom and made plans to stop by to see him while she was in town; likewise, Melanie called her old law office and arranged to visit there as well.

As their devious plans were laid, Melanie thought to herself that Brian would be proud of the way she handled things. Melanie laughed to herself as she thought about how Brian had rubbed off on them...for both she and Lindsay were now getting so good at creating believable bullshit on the fly. Melanie realized that Brian had taught her well.

Melanie laughed to herself at the thought about Brian and his ability to produce bullshit at a moment's notice; she realized that she still had a lot to learn from the master. Melanie thought too that she missed Brian and was looking forward to a chance to spar with her favorite sparring partner. It had been weeks, and it had been too long.

So with the bullshit dispersed and car servicing complete, Melanie and Lindsay and Jenny Rebecca settled into the car for the 3-hour trip to Pittsburgh.

**Sessions in Pitts**

**(Sequel to Meanwhile in Toronto)**

Chapter 1 - A Trip To Pittsburgh

Later that Same Day (Day 15)

The drive down from Toronto had been rather uneventful. The roads were clear, and the traffic had been surprisingly light.

Jenny Rebecca slept easily in the back seat, while Melanie and Lindsay talked easily. Every now and then on the drive to Pittsburgh, they would reach out and touch each other or momentarily hold each other's hand.

"You know we're probably going to have to stay with Debbie and Carl. At least we can talk to her if we have to without everybody else finding out what's going on," Lindsay casually mentioned.

"That is probably the best idea, you know how hyper Michael is. He would just blow everything out of proportion," Melanie responded. "You know I think back to the all the stuff about Jenny Rebecca and her custody. That was a really difficult time."

"Yes it was. You and I were separated. I just couldn't find a way to reach you," Lindsay said quietly.

"I know, sometimes I just get so angry, I forget how to listen. And then, I just don't hear you anymore," Melanie said remorsefully. "I feel like I heard you for the first time today."

"I guess I tend to keep everything inside. I always seem to cry on Brian's shoulder, but I guess I never tell you what I'm thinking...what I'm feeling. You've met my parents. You see how they treat Lynette. But me, they seem to act as if I don't exist. Sometimes they act like I'm not even alive." Lindsay acknowledged.

"But you are alive. We both are," Melanie reminded her.

"You know back when Gus was first born and Ted was in a coma, Brian and I had this discussion about how do you know when you are alive."

"What did the asshole say?" Melanie quipped.

"He asked me how I knew I was alive. I told him I knew I was alive because of Gus. I knew that Gus needed me to feed him, to change him, to love him, to take care of him. I told him that's how I knew that I was alive," Lindsay recounted. "You know, while you've been driving, I've been thinking about this quite a bit."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't let being Gus's mother be the only way I know that I'm alive. If I do that then I will smother Gus, and he will never be the person he was meant to be. No, I have to find other ways to define my own living...other ways to define who I am."

"You're not alone in this. Look at me. I've been in involved in the struggle so long... first because I was Jewish...then because I was gay. I've been fighting so long, I always seem to automatically come out swinging."

"That's partly why you've been successful. It's why you win all those cases."

"Yeah, but the whole world isn't hostile. The entire world isn't against me. I bet I come off as one angry bitch," Melanie said with a laugh.

"Well..."

"You don't have to say anything. I know the truth," Melanie interrupted.

"We're quite a pair, aren't we?" Lindsay commented with a smile.

"Yes we are," Melanie finally said with a smile.

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Just before 10PM, Melanie, Lindsay, and Jenny Rebecca arrived at Debbie's. Debbie and Carl helped to unload the car and helped everyone to get settled in the guest room.

When Melanie and Lindsay were alone and unpacking, Melanie commented, "You know this is the first time we've been back to Pittsburgh since we left a year ago. I missed being here."

In spite of Debbie's instructions when they left about returning to Pittsburgh for the various holidays, that really hadn't happened. Michael and Ben had been conscientious about visiting Jenny Rebecca every month or so in Toronto, and Debbie had visited six months ago. But this was their first trip back to Pittsburgh.

Returning back down stairs, Debbie doled out the suffocating hugs that everyone had come to expect. At that moment...Melanie and Lindsay realized how much that needed her hugs.

Debbie made sandwiches for everyone while she tried to catch up on what had been happening in Toronto since they last saw each other. Carl called Michael and Ben to let him know that the girls had arrived safely. Since Jenny Rebecca was already asleep, Michael and Ben planned to see Melanie and Lindsay tomorrow.

A short time later, Emmett came home. He welcomed Melanie and Lindsay with hugs as well.

Remembering that he wasn't supposed to mention about Brian and Justin's move to their house, Emmett was content to provide a recap of the yesterday's family dinner.

As expected the surprise return of both of Gus and Justin was the main topic of conversation yesterday at dinner. Emmett couldn't resist recounting for everyone how Brian and Justin were truly together, and how they couldn't seem to keep their hands off each other.

Everyone rolled their eyes and groaned at the last comment. Melanie and Lindsay were glad to hear that Gus was happy to move from family member to family member with tickles and hugs all around. They were especially glad to hear that Jennifer and Molly were there for dinner.

Emmett explained that the incident with Michael and his reaction to his painting, had originally sent Brian in full-protection mode where Justin was concerned, but things seemed to have calmed down and appeared to be back to normal by yesterday.

"I even noticed that Michael and Justin were talking to each other yesterday," Emmett recounted. "Of course, Justin's in town to work on a project for Kinnetik with Brian, or at least that was the line that Brian keep telling everyone."

As usual, everybody laughed at the last comment.

"I keep telling Brian that he can't have Sunshine all to himself. I have to keep reminding him that Sunshine belongs to all of us. But you know Brian," Debbie commented.

Everybody nodded their head in agreement and smiled.

"Well, I guess we better call the asshole and let him know we're here," Melanie remarked, reaching for the phone.

"Don't even waste you time, Sweetie. You're not going to be able to reach Brian until tomorrow morning," Emmett explained.

"Oh, is he at Babylon in the backrooms again," Lindsay asked with a smile. "Where's Gus? Is he forcing Justin to baby sit?"

Emmett let out a sigh of disgust. He had just gone through a similar discussion with Michael, now here it was again. Emmett wondered why no one had noticed that Brian had changed.

"No, Lindsay. Will you give it a rest?" Emmett said. Then he burst into a big smile, after all he had gossip to tell. "Justin and Brian and Gus are camping tonight. Justin and Gus have Brian sleeping in a sleeping bag in a tent. You should see the camping gear Justin got today."

"Camping!" Melanie reacted. "Need I remind you that it's the dead of winter? We nearly froze in the car driving here. Now you tell me Brian has our son out in this weather, in the woods, some place where he will probably catch pneumonia."

"Melanie, give it a rest!" Debbie interrupted. "This is Brian Kinney we are talking about. Brian Kinney doesn't do outdoors."

"Justin has been planning this all day. Remember Justin has allergies, so I promise you they are not deep in some woods somewhere," Emmett continued.

"They are probably at some lodge somewhere warm and cozy. Anyway, we'll hear all about it tomorrow morning. Gus is coming over tomorrow to make cookies so we'll get all the details. Until then you know you can trust Justin to be sensible, even if you have your doubts about Brian," Debbie added.

"That's true, Justin has always taken good care of Gus," Lindsay said with a smile. "I guess everything is probably ok. After all it's not like Gus and Brian are alone."

"Like I said, Justin planned this all out very carefully. So you have nothing to worry about," Emmett said once more for emphasis.

There was a bit of easy chatting among everyone as they continued to eat their sandwiches.

Melanie and Lindsay both started to yawn, for it had been a very long day. So they said their goodnight to everyone and proceeded upstairs to get ready for bed. After their showers, Melanie and Lindsay snuggled into each other's arms and fell asleep.

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"It's good to finally have my whole family back in the same town," Debbie commented to Carl.

"Yes, mother hen, your chickens have all come home to roost," Emmett teased as he hugged Debbie goodnight.

Chapter 2- Session 1, Part 1

Tuesday Late Afternoon...(Day 16)

Melanie and Lindsay were nervously waiting for their appointment with Elizabeth Bradshaw. Lindsay was mindlessly flipping through magazines, while Melanie was content to simply stare off into space.

Elizabeth finally opened her office door and asked them to come in. There were several chairs scattered about the room, Melanie and Lindsay chose two that were close together. They reached over to touch one another before things got started.

"Melanie, Lindsay you both called and asked to see me, what can I do for you?" Elizabeth asked with a smile, paying close attention to the body language between the two women.

"We seem to be having some problems, and we don't know what to do about them." Melanie explained.

"What kind of problems?" Elizabeth asked.

"In general, I seem angry all the time, and Lindsay seems to be in a constant state of longing," Melanie stated.

"You haven't said anything Lindsay. Is that how you see things?" Elizabeth asked.

"Once we were happy. We don't seem happy anymore. I look around at our friends, and they seem to have it all. But genuine closeness between Melanie and me is missing. The reality I'm living, doesn't match the dreams I once had," Lindsay explained.

"So why come to me, why not simply go your separate ways. Why not find try to find happiness with someone else?" Elizabeth asked gently.

"Because we still want to be together. We still love each other," Lindsay strongly insisted.

"Is that how you feel, Melanie," Elizabeth asked.

"We just want to get our lives back on the right track. We were happy once. I want us to be again," Melanie explained.

"Of course, you both realize that it may not be possible to get back to what you once had. You may never be able to get your relationship back to the way it once was," Elizabeth pointed out.

Both Melanie and Lindsay were shocked by this suggestion. They both started to protest.

"Listen, I'm not being cruel here. You have been together since your early twenties. You're now in your thirties. You've grown older. You've had life experiences. You have children. You have careers. All I'm saying is that things change over time. Sometimes the relationship can't withstand the individual changes that partners' experience. Sometimes it's simply best to remain loving friends and move on." Elizabeth continued.

"We have two children who need us. We also have to make this work for their sakes," Lindsay protested.

"Staying together for the sake of the children, isn't good for the children and becomes a prison sentence for the people involved. You might want to consider that." Elizabeth responded.

"I understand what you're saying. We've had problems before and separated. We do know that whatever happens, we'll always love and care for our children. That has never been an issue between us. It's just that every time we've separated, we've always managed somehow to work our way back to each other... because being together has always been where we ultimately wanted to be." Melanie explained. "We're here to figure out how to be together better. We're not even thinking about separating this time."

"All right. So with all that said, what do you two want from me? You're both living in Canada, where I'm sure they have excellent counselors. Why come all the way back to Pittsburgh to see me? Don't get me wrong, I'm truly honored, I just don't know how I can help you," Elizabeth stated firmly.

"Look Elizabeth, we'll be in town until the weekend. We still live in Toronto. We can easily come to Pittsburgh once a month without arousing questions, because our son and daughter each need to spend time with their fathers. We aren't looking for a quick fix. We really want to work on us, on our relationship. We'll do whatever it takes. We're committed to this," Melanie defined.

Lindsay nodded her head in agreement.

"Elizabeth, we're still trying to figure out what to do next. Do we stay in Toronto? Do we move back to Pittsburgh? Is it even possible? There's so much uncertainty that we're a bit overwhelmed. So much new stuff came up for us over the weekend that we both got scared. So I guess in a panic, we each called you for help," Lindsay explained.

"Knowing when to call for help is a good sign. So at least we have good starting point," Elizabeth commented with a smile. "You two usually wait until things are at some of crisis stage before you call me. So this is really a good start! Also, usually one of you tends to drag the other one in here to see me, kicking and screaming and resisting. So the fact that the two of you have both decided that counseling is a good idea, is also a plus. But the fact still remains that you live in Canada. Why not see a counselor there?"

"We both tried that before, and we couldn't find a counselor that worked for us. So we muddled through our problems. We thought we were doing ok, until this past weekend, when we both sort of panicked and called you." Lindsay said.

"Now that you're here. Let's see what we can do. Where are you staying?" Elizabeth asked.

"Right now we're staying with friends, who are really more like family." Melanie indicated. "We had planned to stay in a hotel, we still might. We're still trying to figure that part out."

"Sometimes it helps to be with loving and supportive friends. But there is something that I don't understand. You have loving and supportive friends, yet you abruptly moved away. Now it seems like you're just as abruptly considering moving back. So let's talk about the move."

"You remember Proposition 14 about a year ago? It was the most homophobic piece of legislation that ever has been proposed. Then you remember the fundraiser that was held at Babylon and the subsequent bombing. We were at Babylon that night. We were just outside the club when the explosion occurred. Our friend, Dusty was killed in the explosion. Michael was injured. There was so much hate. I knew that in Canada, gay marriages were recognized, and I figured that we would have a better life there. I had a cousin in Toronto. So we immediately relocated there after the bombing." Melanie explained.

"Before the explosion, we were doing this stupid in-house separation. I lived in my studio. Melanie stayed in the bedroom. We shared chores and childcare. But otherwise, we supposedly had separate lives. Then, Melanie started seeing someone. So, she appeared to be moving on. We had agreed to sell the house. Then, the bombing happened at Babylon. We were lucky enough not to have been inside when it happened. Because we were late...we were spared. We clung to each other that night. The next morning we both decided that we wanted to get back together. Then Melanie suggested the move to Toronto, and I agreed. So we talked to the fathers of our kids and got them to agree to the move. So we've been living in Toronto for the last year." Lindsay added.

"I see. And what happened in Toronto that was causing you to seek counseling now?"

"My job situation has not been good. There were a lot of things I didn't consider before the move. I can't really practice law in Canada. Money has been tight. It has been a real struggle for us there. Then, we started to argue a lot." Melanie explained.

"I found work at a local gallery, but the pay isn't much. We felt like outsiders in Toronto not because we were gay, but because we were Americans. I'm unhappy. I feel like we're missing so much...our friends and our community. And we started to argue, and our sex life started to disappear," Lindsay explained.

"I see. Now tell me what happened over the weekend that made you both decide to call me?

"I'm not really sure," Lindsay began. "I was updating on a scrap book, containing articles about a friend ours. He's just embarked on the beginning of his art career. He's already getting a lot of press. So I subscribe to a clipping service to follow every step of his career in New York. Anyway, with the kids and everything I hadn't had a chance to update the scrap book. So with Gus visiting his father, I finally had some quiet time. I was updating the scrap book and something I said upset Melanie."

"Melanie?" Elizabeth directed her attention to Melanie for clarification.

"What she said was, 'I only wish I'd had what he has, then my life would have turned out so different,' Melanie explained. "She compared herself to Justin. I realized that once again her life with me would never be enough for her. Justin is an artistic genius. He's going to be a great artist with a promising career. He's in a relationship with Brian, who is someone that Lindsay still loves. Brian is the father of her child. She turns to him for everything. Brian is rich and successful and an asshole...although I'll admit that he has mellowed over the years due to his relationship with Justin. Brian asked Justin to marry him a year ago and bought this mansion for him. Lindsay then convinced Justin to pursue his career. Brian and Justin didn't get married." Melanie explained. "Justin went off New York to pursue his art career. Brian stayed here in Pittsburgh."

"This weekend, we found out that Brian and Justin are very much together in a relationship, even though they live in different cities. Gus is visiting them for a few days, and as I much as I hate to admit it, he is having the time of his life. Considering this was an unplanned visit, there's no doubt that both Brian and Justin are spending time with him." Lindsay explained.

"We heard that they camped out in the living room at the mansion last night. Gus can't stop talking about it. We both overreacted to the story when we first heard it, and we falsely accused Brian of being irresponsible. We thought they were camping outside in the cold and risking Gus's health." Melanie said.

"We should have known better. We just got angry. We just weren't thinking." Lindsay said.

"The truth is we never give Brian the benefit of the doubt. We accuse first, then try to find out the facts later," Melanie said.

"Don't you think that's odd behavior for an attorney?" Elizabeth asked.

"Something about Brian just makes me see red," Melanie offered. "Maybe it's simply the fact that he's a man...true a gay man...but a man nevertheless. And I believe that he is Lindsay's fantasy man, capable of giving her all the things she has wanted since she was little girl. He's the father of her child. He's rich and successful. He and Lindsay are close. Maybe a lifetime of Brian, and then the Sam Auerback incident, combines to make me feel insecure in my relationship with Lindsay. It's like being a lesbian is never going to be good enough for her. She will always want more."

"It's true Brian and I have been close since college. We knew a relationship between us would never work, but we stayed friends. Brian never believed in relationships, but I knew I would always have a special place in his life. Then, when we he agreed to father Gus, I knew this special bond would always be there." Lindsay said.

"But he is what you envisioned as a husband and the father of your child. Aside from being gay, he could offer you all the material things you dreamed about as a child. He could offer you the lifestyle you grew up with and what you were led to expect from life: to be a stay at home parent, to live in a fancy house, to have a rich partner, to live in a dream world. But with Brian never doing relationships, you could hold onto the 'someday' fantasy. Couldn't you?" Melanie pointed out.

"But it was just that, a fantasy. Justin came along. This 17-year-old kid managed to get around all of Brian's walls. And Brian has changed into the person we all hoped he would become someday." Lindsay said

"Except he became that person with Justin not with you. He asked Justin to marry him. And in a strange way, you watched your childhood dreams die." Melanie said sympathetically. "Then you tried to shift your childhood wishes to Gus. You felt that Brian should give everything that he had to his son. Suddenly what we provide for Gus isn't good enough. You had chosen a rich, successful father for your son, and you felt Gus was entitled to have certain material things. So you resented the fact that Brian gave things to Justin that you felt ONLY you or his son were entitled to receive."

"Brian took care of Justin. He let him live with him. He paid for his schooling. He made sure that Justin had everything he needed, whether they were together or not. It just isn't fair," Lindsay argued.

"Lindsay, even though he doesn't have to, Brian provides financially for Gus. Although I hate to admit it, he is even there emotionally for Gus. You saw them this morning; Gus was perfectly content to cling to Brian's leg. I saw something this morning I had not considered. Gus is not willing to have either you or I separate him Brian. And he staged a hunger strike to force us to let him see Justin. So whether we like it or not, both of these men are very important to Gus. I don't think we ever have to worry about the relationship between Gus and his father. Brian will always be there for his son." Melanie continued. "The problem as I see it, is that Brian will not take care of you. You're important to him. He will always love you. But make no mistake...the primary relationship in Brian's life is Justin. He loves you the way he loves Michael, for the history that you share together. Look I'm not a fan of Brian Kinney, I probably never will be. But this I know, Brian is IN LOVE with Justin. He probably has been in love with Justin since the beginning, but he didn't want to admit it. Nevertheless, he sure as hell admits it now. And you saw him this morning. His guard is up. He's in full protection mode, and he will eliminate anyone or anything that is a threat to his relationship with Justin. So you need to think about that."

"I have thought about that. I'm not Michael. I don't really hold out some illusion that one day Brian will wake up and want a life with me. I really am past that fantasy. Brian and I will always love each other, and that bond is stronger because of Gus. But my concerns about Justin's career are real. He has a chance for a great career as an artist. I just want him to have every possible chance to achieve everything..." Lindsay responded.

Melanie interrupted, "Everything you couldn't achieve because you didn't have his talent?"

"Yes." Lindsay finally acknowledged quietly.

"But you're a talented artist in your own right, Lindsay. You're a great art teacher. You're a wonderful gallery manager. Surely you see that?" Melanie pointed out.

"But Justin's talent puts him on a totally different track. He has a real chance to have a successful career in New York. I never really had enough talent to do that. Lately everyone has been so caught up in Justin's talent, everyone seems to forget that I'm an artist too." Lindsay said sadly.

"Until Sam Auerback came along?" Melanie reminded her.

"Sam was a great artist who reminded me I had talent. You and I were having problems. I made a mistake, so we fucked. It was simply a onetime thing! Afterward, Sam wanted more. He asked me to join him on his European tour. I knew it wasn't what I wanted. All I wanted was to stay with you and get things back on track. But you were having a difficult pregnancy. We snapped at each other the whole time. Things just got unbearable. Then, you wouldn't forgive me. So after the Jenny was born, we agreed I should move out. You just couldn't seem to forgive me." Lindsay cried, reaching for a tissue.

"And Melanie, have you forgiven her?" Elizabeth quietly asked.

"After the bombing at Babylon, I realized we could have been killed. We decided to get back together, and move on with our lives." Melanie said.

"That wasn't my question. Have you forgiven her?" Elizabeth asked. "Or did you just move on?"

"I don't know."

"And Melanie, was the price for being able to move on with you, for Lindsay to give up everything here in Pittsburgh to be with you?"

"I don't know," Melanie answered.

"And Lindsay, were you so desperate to move on with Melanie that you just went along with anything?" Elizabeth asked.

"I don't know," Lindsay answered.

"Lindsay and I don't talk. She keeps so much bottled up inside. She always has. She shares everything with Brian, but she doesn't talk to me. That has always been our problem. Then, we seem to have some sort of screaming match. Then we have rough sex and make up. That seems to be our pattern," Melanie answered.

"Is that true, Lindsay?" Elizabeth asked.

"I can talk to Brian because he doesn't judge," Lindsay responded

"No, he just comes charging in to the rescue," Melanie insisted.

"When I need him," Lindsay remarked.

"That's just it Lindsay, you always need him," Melanie added.

"That's not true!" Lindsay challenged.

"Isn't it Lindsay?" Melanie said softly.

"How can you say that?" Lindsay asked.

"I can say it because with Brian in your life what do you need me for besides maybe sex, and even that is questionable." Melanie responded. "I seem to have no place in your life."

"Elizabeth, now you see why we're here!" Lindsay said directly to the counselor.

"Well now, I seem to understand things a little better. I think it's good that you're able to talk. It think it was good that both of you could get it all out on the table. These are some thorny issues. They can't be resolved overnight. But let's try to work on them a bit," Elizabeth suggested.

Chapter 3 – Session 1, Part 2

A Little Later ...(Day 16)

"Melanie, didn't Lindsay already know Brian at the point where you began your relationship? Weren't they always close?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes that's true," Melanie acknowledged.

"And Brian had already agreed to be the sperm donor for any children I wanted. He'd agreed to that even before I met you. So naturally when we decided to have a family, he was the logical choice."

"Maybe that's the problem. You have so much stuff going on between you and Brian that there doesn't seem to be any room for me in your life," Melanie stated.

"How can you say that? I told you that if it weren't for you, I would have never had Gus. I could have asked for Brian's sperm at any point over the years, but I didn't," Lindsay reminded her.

"The decision for Brian to be Gus's father, somehow made THAT the primary relationship in your life. You lived with me, but you sided with Brian in all decisions about Gus. You still do. You rarely take my side where Gus is concerned."

"Melanie, Gus isn't an object for a power play. He's not a possession. He's my son. I want what's best for him. Brian is good for him. I took your side after we moved to Toronto, when you didn't want Brian to see Gus for a while. Brian still supported his son, but he couldn't see him. Gus was miserable. Brian was miserable. It was a bad decision. Now that Gus and Brian are reunited, I've made a conscious decision not to separate them again, no matter how angry you get," Lindsay stated emphatically.

"Lindsay, Brian may be Gus's father, but WE are still his parents," Melanie professed.

"That's bullshit Melanie. Brian signed over his parental rights to you, so you could make decisions about Gus. Really he signed them over so we could get back together. But make no mistake...Gus has at least three parents...probably four, when you consider Justin. We couldn't support Gus without the money Brian provides. I admit this situation is not what we had planned when we had Gus. However, this is the reality as it is. Gus definitely has three parents. And judging by Gus's hunger strike, he thinks he has four parents."

"Excuse me, hunger strike?" Elizabeth asked.

"Ben and Michael are the other parents of our daughter. They were visiting last weekend. Gus overheard Michael mention that he thought Justin was lost being in NYC. Gus misunderstood and had images that Justin was lost, hungry, and alone. Then Gus wouldn't speak to us for a whole day, because we wouldn't go and try to find Justin. Gus was worried that he would never see HIS Justin again. So the next morning, he refused to eat his cereal. He said he wouldn't eat until we let him see Justin. So we sent him back to Pittsburgh with Ben and Michael so he could visit Brian and Justin," Melanie explained.

"That's some story. You have a rather strong willed son. I can see that he must be a handful." Elizabeth said with a laugh. "But let me stop your story for a minute. I noticed something you two have said many times. You constantly that 'Brian as the father of Gus, but you two are the parents.' However when speak about Michael and Ben, you say they are the 'other parents for your daughter'. Melanie, is there some reason that you see Michael and Ben differently than you see Brian and Justin?" Elizabeth asked.

"Michael and I have no emotional bond or history other than friendship. True, he maintained his parental rights. We had a rather nasty legal battle about that. Michael has joint custody of our daughter," Melanie explained.

"Whereas Brian signed over his parental rights to Melanie. In fact, Brian signed over his legal rights so we could get back together, and so I wouldn't marry Gui. Brian tried to be supportive of you during that time of our separation. You have never once showed him any appreciation. Instead once he signed over his rights, you treated him like he no longer existed in Gus's life," Lindsay professed.

"Why do you think that is, Melanie?" Elizabeth asked.

"I guess it's like once Brian signed over his parental rights, my plans...our plans were back on track. I went back to the things we had planned...the life we had planned. When Brian wasn't a part of things. And Justin was the one who originally talked Brian into keeping his paternal rights for so long. So I guess I felt some resentment toward him as well," Melanie continued.

"And I'm sure Brian allowing Justin to name our son Gus rather than Abraham didn't help," Lindsay interjected with a smile.

"So Melanie, the parenting situation with Gus didn't turn out quite the way you expected. So Gus has four people, who care about him, who love him, who dote on him. Four people with shared concern for Gus. You and Lindsay have primary custody. But Brian and Justin appear to be involved. According to Lindsay that's not going to change." Elizabeth said.

"There is no reason that it should. I just want to us to stop arguing about it." Lindsay added.

"Melanie, how do you feel about that?" Elizabeth asked.

"I don't know how I feel. It's not what Lindsay and I planned when we decided to have Gus. In fact nothing about having Gus has gone according to what we planned. We planned for Lindsay to return to work after her maternity leave. Then she wanted to stay at home full time and be with the Gus. Because she had been raised by nannies, she wouldn't allow one for Gus. And it goes on and on. Everything got so out of control. Nothing happened the way we planned!" Melanie said sternly with a sigh of frustration.

"Melanie, surely you realize that when you have kids, very little goes the way you plan. Look at what happened with Jenny Rebecca. Ben and Michael were prepared to go to court over parental rights and joint custody. Things don't always happen the way you plan. You can't control everything!" Lindsay pointed out.

"Is that an issue, Melanie? You don't do well when the things that you plan change."

"No, I don't." Melanie acknowledged.

"You also don't seem to make good decisions in the face of change either, do you?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, I evidently don't," Melanie said with a smile. "This is something I obviously need to work on."

Lindsay leaned over and kissed Melanie on the cheek. Melanie surrendered to the sign of affection.

"Melanie, you've been fighting for six years to change the immutable, that Gus has four parents. How's it been working for you?" Elizabeth asked with a smile.

"I guess if I would accept the new reality and realize that I can't change things, it would probably leave a lot more energy for those things I can change. Justin tried to tell me this in the letter he sent with the painting.

Sometimes you go on fighting even after you've already won...

Maybe you've been fighting so long because you no longer remember why...

Or, maybe you've been fighting for something that simply transcends time...

And can't be won.

Ted even tried to tell me the same thing a long time ago, when he told me about the Serenity Prayer. This is one of those things I have to find the serenity to accept, something that I cannot change. At least now I know the difference. I will work on this. I need some time. This is a major change."

"Take all the time you need," Lindsay said.

"But you still have to let me spar with Brian. That's still the highlight of my day. And he would think something was wrong if it suddenly stopped. But, I do promise to work on trying to see him as a true parent for Gus."

"What about Justin?"

"I guess I still see Justin as this little kid. True, when he fell in love with Brian and fought so hard for a place by his side, I did have to wonder about HIS judgment," Melanie said with a smile. "But let's face it, all of us adore Justin. Debbie was right. Justin belongs to all of us. When he joined our little group, we all changed. Both our kids adore him. So I know whatever resentment I feel about Brian doesn't still carryover to Justin. My problem is that it's hard sometimes to remember that Justin is a young man. I'm so used to him being this kid."

"Is that because of how you feel about men in general. Do you want to somehow protect Justin from that label?" Elizabeth asked.

"Men are such assholes. Yes, I guess because of how we all feel about Justin, I want to somehow shield him from that label," Melanie said with a smile. "I guess Lindsay and I are more alike, where Justin is concerned, than I realized. She wants to protect him from distractions to make sure he has every chance for a career as an artist. I want to protect him from being corrupted by the label of his gender. We're quite a pair, you know."

"Yes, I know!" Lindsay acknowledged with a smile, leaning over to give Melanie a gentle kiss. "But Melanie, the thing we both have to accept is that Brian will protect Justin."

"No! I think that Justin will take care of himself. He isn't a kid anymore. Justin does make his own decisions, which Brian will always support. I have to acknowledge that, even though I don't see what Justin sees in Brian in the first place...Justin could do so much better than the Slut of Liberty Avenue. I'm sure part of the reason I have such a hard time admitting that he is a parent to Gus is because of who Brian is and what his lifestyle was." Melanie stated with some anger. "And although I don't understand their relationship, I do understand that Brian and Justin are partners. I still have to work on the rest."

"I'm proud of you," Lindsay said, leaning over to give Melanie a kiss.

"Melanie, you said something earlier that I want to go back to for a moment. Earlier you described your feelings about Brian. You said and I quote, 'Something about Brian just makes me see red. Maybe it's simply the fact that he's a man...true a gay man...but a man nevertheless. And I believe that he is Lindsay's fantasy man, capable of giving her all the things she has wanted since she was little girl. He's the father of her child. He's rich and successful.' Does that ring a bell?"

"Yeah, that's what I said. What about it?"

"You also continue to refer to Brian as an asshole, is that true?"

"Yeah, what's your point?"

"Why don't you tell us how you really feel about Brian?" Lindsay added with a smile.

Melanie ignored Lindsay's comment, "Elizabeth, what is your point?"

"I was just wondering, why you always seem so angry at Brian? Why do you consider him an asshole? Is he an asshole because he's a man...a gay man...but a man nevertheless? Are you constantly angry with him because of something he has done? Are you angry with Brian for who he is? Or are you angry with Brian for what he has accomplished with his life? Or are the facts much simpler than that...are you angry with Brian because of how Lindsay feels about him?" Elizabeth continued.

"You never ask simple questions do you?" Melanie commented.

"Just trying to do my job here," Elizabeth quipped.

"Probably for all the reasons and more. It probably starts with the fact that Lindsay loves him, and they share a past...an entire history that has nothing to do with me," Melanie responded with a sigh.

"And you blame Brian for this?" Elizabeth asked pointedly.

"Yes," Melanie answered.

"You are angry with Brian for things over which he has no control and cannot change. Is that what you are telling me?" Elizabeth asked.

"I'm angry with Brian because of how Lindsay feels about him," Melanie finally admitted.

"When did Brian become responsible for Lindsay feelings? I know it's a ridiculous question but I was just curious?" Elizabeth asked.

"I know it isn't logical, but it is how I feel," Melanie responded.

"You are entitled to your feelings. They are clearly yours. But do you really gain anything by acting on those feelings. Lindsay gets angry. Gus gets defensive. What are you really getting out of the deal? I'm just curious?" Elizabeth continued.

Melanie thought for a moment. Then, she finally said, "When you put it like that it probably doesn't make sense, but when you sit there surrounded by the feelings it seems so right to feel about Brian the way that I do."

"Remember the painting," Lindsay suggested.

"What painting?" Elizabeth inquired.

"Justin did a painting called Sparring Partners. He sent it to me from one of his exhibits. It was a stylized abstract painting of two dark haired figures wearing boxing gloves... one male and one female. They're sitting on the edge of the boxing ring exhausted. Their legs were dangling over the side of the ring. In their exhaustion, they each had one arm draped over the shoulder of the other. The fighters were so exhausted that they had to lean on each other for support. You could just feel the total exhaustion in the fighters," Melanie described. "There is probably a lesson in there somewhere that I have yet to learn."

"What are you thinking Melanie?" Elizabeth asked.

"I'm thinking that I need to ponder this some more. I not sure that this is something I can resolve quickly. I just need some time," Melanie said with deep sigh.

"Take all the time you need," Lindsay added.

Elizabeth allowed a moment of silence for everyone to re-gather their thoughts.

"I'm not sure exactly what you two wanted to accomplish, so before we have to stop for today, I thought that we should do a reality check to see how each of you feel about the things," Elizabeth pointed out. "Lindsay, why don't you start?"

"I'm really glad that we came to see you. Things don't look as discouraging as they first appeared in Toronto," Lindsay began.

"Well that's good to hear," Elizabeth responded.

Then, Lindsay continued, "I do know that we love each other, and we really want this to work out. I have to begin to tell Melanie what I think and feel, and I need to make sure that she hears me. We need to reexamine the whether or not we continue to live in Toronto or return to Pittsburgh, but this is a decision we need to make together. I will look at my relationship with Brian, and I see it things may need to change. I will also look at myself as an artist and be sure that I am viewing myself correctly. I will think about my involvement in Justin's career as an artist and be sure that I am not going overboard. I need to reexamine the Brian and Justin's relationship with Gus. That is definitely a lot to think about and I'm not about to try to tackle this all at once. I'm going to work in baby steps," Lindsay explained.

"That sounds good. And you Melanie," Elizabeth continued.

"The same is true for me. I need to find a way to manage my anger. I have to learn to accept the fact that things will not always go exactly as I planned. I have to learn to accept a change of in my plans without becoming unbearable to live with. I agree that Lindsay and I need to reexamine whether or not we continue to live in Toronto, and that we need to do a lot of talking about that decision. I understand that Brian will always be Gus's father and all the fighting and arguing I do, is not going to change that reality. I also see that Justin is a big part of Gus's life. I also have to find some way to come to terms with the relationship between Lindsay and Brian...especially if I want to have a relationship with Lindsay. I see that we can't keep fighting this same battle over and over again because it's not getting us anywhere. I see that also need to look deep into myself and examine my own feeling about a lot of things. I know that I love Lindsay, and really I really do want things to work between us. I also realize that this is really going to take some time," Melanie explained.

"Our time is up for today. How would you two like to proceeded from here?" Elizabeth asked.

Melanie spoke up, "I would like to continue with our original plan to meet with you daily for the rest of this week. I know that we won't solve things but maybe we can get some new perspectives."

Lindsay added her comments, "Then, we can continue to talk to each other when we get back to Toronto, and hopefully see you again in a month. That is if you have the time available. I just think this is really important for us."

"Since this is what you both want, why don't we plan meet again tomorrow at the same time. I'll see you then. If there are any problem tonight, I want you both to promise me that you will call my service," Elizabeth insisted.

Melanie and Lindsay voiced their agreement with Elizabeth's terms before leaving the office.

Chapter 4 – Session 2

Wednesday Afternoon...(Day 17)

Lindsay and Melanie once again took their seats in Elizabeth's office. They made themselves comfortable to prepare themselves for whatever was to happen next.

"Well, it's good to see both of you back here again," Elizabeth began. "Yesterday was a rather long day. Quite a few issues surfaced. We only had time to touch upon them yesterday. Now that I understand the situation, let's see what we can do."

Elizabeth stood up and walked over to both Lindsay and Melanie before she continued, "But before we get started, I want to let you both know that I commend you both on your decision to work on your relationship. And, I appreciate you both being so opened and willing to discuss things. I'm really proud of you both."

Then, Elizabeth quietly returned to her seat.

Melanie and Lindsay took a moment to take in all that Elizabeth had said. They were surprised by her affirmation. When the full impact settled in, Lindsay was the first to speak.

"I noticed that you didn't say too much yesterday. I'm trying to figure out if that is a good sign or a bad one," Lindsay responded.

"Usually, when you come to visit, one of you is resisting. So I have to work very hard to get you two to talk to each other. My role appears to be different this time. You two are communicating so well that I'm not sure you really need me. So I'm going to let you talk to each other, and I will listen. From time to time, I'll stop you so we can focus on something that was said...something that we need to spend some time on."

"That seems reasonable," Melanie agreed.

"Also, since we are only meeting monthly, I want you to call me once a week. We'll have a brief phone call, and you both can tell me how things are going. If any problems come up, I need your promise that you will call me, as well. I'm only willing to do these monthly meetings if you two continue to talk to each other and to me. Do we understand each other?" Elizabeth insisted.

Both Lindsay and Melanie nodded their agreement.

"Now, let's get started. Tell me what happened yesterday after our session."

"We drove around Pittsburgh and reacquainted ourselves with the city. Then, we spent some quiet time together. We have tried not to talk about the things that came up during the session. But we have tried to simply be kinder and more loving toward each other."

"That's a good sign."

"We did hear one disturbing piece of news. Brian and Justin are actually moving into their house...mansion really," Lindsay began.

"Tell me why you think that is disturbing, Lindsay," Elizabeth asked.

"Brian has always shared the details of his life with me. He used to come to me for advice all the time...just like I could always go to him. But when it comes to Justin and the house, Brian is suddenly very closed-lipped. Once upon a time, Brian would have asked my advice before he even bought the house to begin with. This time he just plunged ahead without talking to anyone," Lindsay explained.

"I see. If Brian had come to you about the house, what would you have said?" Elizabeth asked.

"I would have told him it was a mistake," Lindsay said calmly.

"That is probably why he made the decision all by himself. Brian decided he was buying the house as an engagement gift for Justin. He didn't want any discussion. He had made his decision," Melanie added.

"I do see that. It's just that I feel him slipping away," Lindsay explained.

"Don't you talk to him?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, all the time. But he doesn't confide in me the way he used to," Lindsay continued.

"Lindsay, don't you think that Brian is entitled to his own life...a life with Justin that he really wants? He can't be Peter Pan to your Wendy forever," Melanie reminded her.

"I know. I just don't want things to change," Lindsay admitted.

"But you went on and built a life with me. Isn't Brian entitled to the same thing?" Melanie asked.

"What exactly are your afraid of Lindsay?" Elizabeth questioned.

"I'm worried about Gus. If Brian has moved on, what about Gus?" Lindsay tried to explain.

"Lindsay, Gus is spending the week with Brian and Justin? Didn't you see that Gus is having the time of his life? Didn't you see that Gus this morning. He was content to cling to Brian's leg, rather than run immediately into our arms?" Melanie pointedly asked.

"Yes, but..." Lindsay tried to protest.

"Don't those things maybe suggest to you that Brian and Gus are just fine?" Elizabeth asked sympathetically.

" I guess you're right," Lindsay conceded.

"Then what is it?" Elizabeth had to ask.

"Gus is becoming his own person. He and Brian can forge their relationship now with just the two of them. They don't really need me to make it work," Lindsay quietly admitted.

"That's what happens when kids grow up. They become independent creatures. But no matter how independent they become, they will always love you and will always want you to be a part of their life. Your role will just change in their lives," Elizabeth pointed out.

"I see that," Lindsay finally admitted with a sigh. "I know I'm just being ridiculous. I didn't expect to have to deal with this until Gus was 18. I was just caught off guard to lose my baby at age 6."

"Plus, we still have Jenny Rebecca to raise to this point of independence. Let's not forget that," Melanie pointed out.

"I haven't forgotten about her," Lindsay confessed.

"But you just don't feel the same way about Jenny that you do about Gus, do you? Is that what you're telling me?" Melanie began to press.

"Can you tell me that you feel the same way about Gus that you feel about Jenny Rebecca? Honestly?" Lindsay counter argued.

"I've had to fight so hard for Jenny since the day she was born, I clearly think of her as my daughter that we are raising together, and I do think about Gus as our son. And Lindsay, I love them both." Melanie professed.

"I know that you love them both...so do I," Lindsay added.

"It's just that nothing has gone the way we planned," Melanie finally said with a sigh.

"I know. I think it's time we make some new plans because the old plans are soooo outdated," Lindsay said with a laugh.

"You know, I think you're probably right. We definitely need to some create new plans. That will give us something to do when we get back to Toronto," Melanie agreed.

Lindsay and Melanie leaned in and gently kissed each other.

"Lindsay, what else bothers you about Brian and Justin moving into their house," Elizabeth asked, once again rejoining the discussion.

"Brian and Justin have so much. We seem to have given up so much in the move to Toronto," Lindsay explained.

"Let the fantasy go Lindsay," Melanie interjected.

"What fantasy?" Lindsay asked with surprise.

Melanie went on to explain, "If you and I are together, you have to look at what I have to offer. You can't compare our lives with Brian's and Justin's. We will never have the material things that Justin and Brian will have. First of all, because Justin is going to have an amazing career and become very rich from his art, and secondly, because Brian is already so successful and rich. You can't expect us to compete financially with the two of them."

"I don't expect that. But life is hard in Toronto. We had a better life here in Pittsburgh," Lindsay professed. "I want some hope that our lives will improve so we can provide for ourselves and our children," Lindsay admitted.

"Realistically, it's going to take me about four years before I can practice law in Canada as an attorney. I then I have to pass the Canadian bar. So it will take time. I thought you understood that," Melanie declared

"Melanie, what happens to our kids in the meantime. They are growing. Maybe this isn't a problem for you because Jenny is still a baby. But Gus is older, and he needs things. Things he would have had if we had stayed in Pittsburgh," Lindsay continued.

"Lindsay, when Gus was born. I gave everything I had to you so that you could stay home full time with him. Just what do you expect me to do now? At some point you're going to have to stop demanding your needs be met and look at the fact that I'm in this relationship too. My needs are different from yours, but they exist none the less," Melanie demanded. "I need to build a new career. I need a different life than we had here in Pittsburgh. I need some distance from Debbie and Michael. I need this if Jenny is to have any hope to grow up to be normal kid. She needs Debbie and Michael in her life, but she needs them in short doses. That's all I'm saying. I need a chance at a life, without being smothered to death by the two of them, just because I bore their daughter and granddaughter. I want more for my daughter than that. I thought you did too," Melanie proclaimed.

"You didn't tell me all this before we moved. You just said you wanted safety for our kids because of the Prop 14. Then you talked about your Jewish heritage and the holocaust. I know that Dusty's death brought up a lot of things for you. That was part of the reason that I so readily agreed to move with you. But, Melanie you never told me the real reason that wanted to move, and that wasn't fair. In essence, you lied to me," Lindsay asserted.

"I didn't lie to you. Debbie and Michael weren't necessarily the reasons that we moved. But they are surely the reasons that I keep pushing so hard for us to stay in Canada," Melanie continued to explain.

Elizabeth interrupted, "Lindsay, how do you feel about what you have heard?"

"I feel like Melanie made decisions for the family based on what she thought was best for her daughter, and that she expected the rest of us...me and Gus, to simply adjust. I just wonder if Melanie is sacrificing our happiness to achieve what she thinks is best for Jenny Rebecca. And then, I don't understand why we didn't make this decision together." Lindsay said, trying to control her hurt and anger.

"I guess I made this decision, the way that you make decisions when it comes to Gus and Brian," Melanie insisted. "Those aren't really joint decisions. I think we're a lot alike."

"Maybe we are," Lindsay whispered. "I just think I need some time to think about this."

"Are you sure you don't want to talk about this some more?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, I need time to think about this for myself for a while. This is something I never expected," Lindsay acknowledged.

"I need to make sure that you are ok. So Lindsay, tell me what you are feeling," Elizabeth asked.

"I really am ok. Melanie and I will be ok. I just need to process this. Maybe we can continue with this tomorrow," Lindsay requested quietly.

"Lindsay, I'm sorry. I guess I should have told you," Melanie whispered with remorse.

"Yes, you should have," Lindsay insisted.

"I didn't figure it out myself at first. It just became clearer and clearer to me every time Michael or Debbie came to visit this year. I wasn't sure about everything myself until I said the words here in session. I couldn't put the thoughts together," Melanie said as a way of explanation.

"I don't want to deal with this now. We have to go back to Debbie's. Maybe we should go to a hotel. I don't want to make this any harder for you," Lindsay said.

"Remember I said short doses were ok. It's fine when we visit for a week or something. I just don't want to have to deal with both Michael and Debbie everyday. And you know if we lived here in Pittsburgh, that is precisely what would happen," Melanie continued to explain.

Lindsay nodded her head in agreement. "I understand. Michael would walk in at will on us...the way he does now on Brian at the loft. Maybe that is partly why Justin wanted to move into the house."

"Maybe," Melanie agreed. "Who could blame them?"

Everyone lapsed into a period of silence. Elizabeth allowed the silence to continue for a moment, allowing everyone their individual thoughts. Then she once spoke, "We've made good progress. I'll see the two of you tomorrow. I want you both to promise me that if things get too rough during the night that you'll call me. My service will know how to reach me."

"Elizabeth there really isn't any need to worry. I am ok with this. I just need a chance to think about it. I'm not even sure Melanie and I will talk about this tonight. Tomorrow will be time enough to talk about this again," Lindsay declared.

"Are you ok with that Melanie?" Elizabeth asked.

"Sure, I'll do whatever Lindsay wants on this. I'll be ok. We'll be ok." Melanie answered, but a little voice deep down inside added the words, "I hope."

Chapter 5 – Happenings

Later Wednesday Night...(Day 17)

Melanie was restless during the night. Her own thoughts were disturbing, and hopes of a restful night's sleep proved elusive.

Melanie was ashamed of what she felt, and she was disappointed that she hadn't found some way to give voice to her thoughts and maybe discuss them with her partner before she blurted everything out like that during their counseling session today.

Melanie knew that she and Lindsay loved Debbie like a second mother. Debbie had been her biggest supporter during the custody battle, and Melanie felt that Debbie was loving and kind...the perfect grandmother. But, Debbie had raised Michael to be whiney, dependent, and eternally childlike and these were not behaviors that Melanie wanted instilled in her daughter.

Melanie had to examine her own motives at the choice of Michael as the father for her daughter. She realized now that she had failed to think through that decision. Although Michael was a loving and devoted father, Melanie had to admit she chose him to be Jenny Rebecca's father because she believed he wouldn't give her any trouble, and she would be free to raise her daughter as she saw fit. Once again, Melanie could see how she tried to control things.

Melanie couldn't help what she felt. Wasn't it her responsibility to take care of Jenny Rebecca, just as she had taken care of Gus? Then, she thought back to when Gus was born. In her zeal to take care of everything so that Lindsay could stay home with Gus, Melanie had been consumed with resentment. Things didn't go the way she planned, and her reaction had been to have an affair, which ultimately caused her separation from Lindsay.

Hadn't she tried to protect Gus from Brian's lifestyle in the beginning? Maybe she was so fierce in her protection of Gus that she was slow to recognize the fact that Brian had changed. Maybe she didn't see the changes in Brian because she didn't want to see them...because those changes didn't fit her plans.

Melanie realized that Lindsay was right. Brian had supported Melanie during their separation. He had not taken sides. Brian had relinquished his parental rights so that she and Lindsay could get back together. Melanie stopped and thought about it. In all the time that she had known Brian...in spite of all their sparring over the years...Brian had never tried to undermine her relationship with Lindsay. The problem was that Brian just didn't conform to her plans. Melanie had planned that once Gus was conceived, Brian would have no further involvement. She didn't plan on Brian falling in love with Gus after he was born. Melanie never planned on Brian being an involved father.

Her plans! There it was again. Nothing that Melanie had planned over the last six years had worked out exactly as she had intended...not Gus...not Jenny...not her life. Melanie started to wonder why she even bothered planning at all. Why not live spontaneously from day to day? Then she had to stop for a moment...for there was no need to go off the deep end. She could make some changes, but living spontaneously, without any plans at all, was a bit far fetched. Melanie realized that she wasn't perfect, but she did know some things about herself.

What was she going to do...all her plans seemed to do so far was to antagonize Lindsay?

She could still hear Lindsay saying in the counseling session that everything was ok, but this time Melanie wasn't so sure. She would have to come up with some way to make this up to Lindsay.

Melanie knew that she needed a plan! Oh, if she could only talk to Brian! He would help her figure out what to do! Brian would help her devise a plan...he was an evil genius! Melanie suddenly listened to herself and wondered where, in the cosmos, these thought were coming from. Then she no longer cared where the thoughts came from, right now Melanie became consumed with the idea...and this really scared the hell out of her...that 'she needed to talk to Brian'.

She started to panic, thinking that she was losing her sanity. Melanie knew she had finally lost all reason! She realized she must truly be desperate if her mind drifted to 'she needed to talk to Brian!' Melanie immediately started to look for alternatives.

It was time for a different approach. Melanie started to ask herself, what would Brian do in a situation like this. She already knew the answer...Brian would go out and buy a mansion for Justin. But then, of course, Brian would never be in a situation like this, because Justin would have already figured things out long before Brian got around to recognizing there was an issue. Well maybe not the marriage proposal! So the mansion was probably what it took to get Justin to say yes, or maybe that was merely a nice touch on Brian's part, to seal the deal. Melanie was still trying to sort that one out.

Melanie realized that she couldn't afford that mansion. But she could still equal Brian in the campaign department. Melanie located her cell phone and she quietly entered the bathroom, closing the door and turning on the light. Very carefully, Melanie sent a text message. With that done, she returned to the guest room to rejoin Lindsay in bed.

Melanie quickly fell asleep. Melanie finally had a plan.

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The Next Day, Thursday Morning...(Day 18)

Melanie checked her cell phone for both text and voice mail messages. The message she had hoped for had been received. Melanie had a date for lunch.

At the appropriate time, Melanie kissed Lindsay goodbye with the simple explanation that she had an appointment, but she promised to meet Lindsay at Elizabeth's office in time for their counseling session.

As Melanie was leaving, the phone rang. It was Justin, inviting Lindsay and Melanie to an impromptu early lunch at the Diner. Lindsay accepted for herself, but explained that Melanie already had a prior engagement.

Lindsay quickly got dressed and headed for the Diner to meet Justin.

Chapter 6 – Session 3

Thursday Afternoon...(Day 18)

When Lindsay arrived at Elizabeth's office for their counseling session, Melanie was already there deeply engrossed in a magazine.

"Well hello stranger," Lindsay teased, "Mind if I join you?"

"I'd like nothing better," Melanie responded, extending a hand to gently touch her partner. Lindsay accepted her hand, and Melanie could finally breathe. It was a small gesture, but one that Melanie needed at that moment.

"You missed a chance for lunch with Justin. You should see him so grown up, so confident. He really is no longer that little kid."

"He hasn't been that for a long time," Melanie pointed out, quickly returning to her magazine, "Dealing with Brian Kinney tends to age people."

"Are you going to start that again, or do you want to hear about my lunch? Justin told me something that's too funny for words?"

"Ok, now that I've had my daily dig at Brian, I think I'm ready to behave."

"Our son has a date with a horse this afternoon."

"Oh? Are Brian and Justin taking Gus to the zoo?" Melanie commented nonchalantly.

"Afraid not. It seems that Justin is at it again. Where does he come up with these ideas?"

"Oh god! I'm afraid to ask."

"Brace yourself, Gus has his first horseback riding lesson today," Lindsay said with a laugh. "Evidently there are stables near where Brian and Justin live, so they are taking Gus there to see if he likes horses. Now you understand, Justin has probably been riding since he was Gus's age. I just want you to picture Gus and Brian dealing with horses up close for the first time."

Melanie immediately burst out laughing. "No! You've got to be kidding? Well, with that image, you just made my day!"

"I suspect that you won't have to hold that image for long. I suspect our son will give us all the gory details. This is probably the only thing that will get him to finally stop talking about his camping experience."

"Good point," Melanie said still laughing. "Did Justin talk about his trip to Cincinnati?"

"Only briefly, he's going to be exhibiting at the Cincinnati Art Gallery for the opening of their new wing. But get this, he's going to be the featured artist."

"Featured artist? Isn't that like a solo show?"

"Not quite. And, it's not New York. But, I can tell you one thing I know, the critics and the press are going to be all over him. The opening of the new wing of a gallery is a major media event."

"Wow! Good for him. I bet he's excited?"

"You know Justin, he seems to take it all in stride, but he says that he's looking forward to it."

"That is quite an honor, and Justin is still so young."

"I know."

"Did you get to see the house?"

"No, but he promised to see what he could work out after talking to Brian. Knowing that Justin only has to bat his baby blues, and Brian will give him anything, I think we can safely say that our tour of the house is assured," Lindsay teased with a smile.

The door to the adjacent office opened, and Elizabeth appeared and smiled at the couple.

"I'm glad to see you both," she said. "Why don't you come on in, and we can get started."

Melanie and Lindsay followed into her office and settled into their usual chairs.

"I think we should continue with our discussion from yesterday. I know that you were both upset when you left here. You both sort of indicated that you wanted to have a chance to think things over before we talked about Melanie's revelation yesterday. How do you two feel about things now?" Elizabeth began.

There was a long silence.

Melanie was the first to speak. "Let me start. Lindsay, I'm so sorry that I didn't tell you what I was feeling. As I said yesterday, I didn't plan it out ..."

Lindsay interrupted, "That's the problem right there. You don't want to discuss anything with me until you have a plan...until you have thought it out in detail. Then you want to present your well-thought-out, well-analyzed plan to me. And you expect me to instantly accept or reject whatever construct you lay out in front of me. That's just not fair!"

"I'm sorry," Melanie whispered.

"Sorry's bullshit," Lindsay responded.

"Now, you sound like Brian!" Melanie quipped.

"Don't go there! I hate it when you do this. It always feels like you're running some game on me. I'm your partner, Melanie! I want you to share your feelings with me. I want you to tell me what you think before it becomes some plan, cast in concrete that is immutable. I want us to talk about things, even when we don't have all the answers. I want us to muddle through stuff together. I want a chance to have some input into the plans that get made. It's a simple as that," Lindsay said resolutely, and then let the silence between them speak volumes.

"Lindsay, I see that you have given this a lot of thought. Melanie, what are you thinking?" Elizabeth asked.

"Elizabeth, our whole relationship has been built on a certain dynamic, where I crafted the plan, then we discussed it, and then we made decisions. Lindsay has always wanted to be taken care of like a princess. And in the context of this relationship that is what I have tried to do. I have no fucking idea how to change the entire relationship dynamic to do what she is asking," Melanie explained with some frustration, for she now felt that things were once again hopeless.

"I don't want to be taken care of Melanie, I'm not a child. I'm a grown woman. But, how can I be that grown woman if information is being withheld from me to make an informed decision," Lindsay protested. "So how long have you had these feelings about Michael and Debbie?"

"I guess they started when Jenny Rebecca was born. You and I were separated. Then, we had the custody battle. Once everything was settled, I still felt smothered, but I couldn't figure it out. Then everything with Proposition 14 happened...and the bombing. I didn't take time to stop and think. I just reacted. I really did want to move for the safety of the kids, and I thought the kids would have a better life in Canada," Melanie admitted. She stood up to start to pace for a bit before continuing.

Lindsay patiently waited for her to continue.

Melanie eventually returned to her seat, and then she continued, "Then Michael and Debbie started to visit us in Toronto. You know how Debbie fills a room. I started to feel smothered again. Then Michael told us about the defeat of Proposition 14, and I seriously thought about moving back to Pittsburgh. But then I started picturing the constant interference from Michael and Deb about how Jenny was raised. That isn't how I wanted to raise my daughter. I want more for our daughter then that."

"I know how you feel. When you told me about your feelings, yesterday I was angry at first, because I do miss Pittsburgh. But then I thought about all you said, and understood that Debbie and Michael might not be the reason that we moved to Toronto, but they are a big part of why you want to stay there. I understood that you were doing what you thought was best. It just would have been nice to have been consulted because my life and Gus's life were impacted."

"You're right. I should have talked to you."

"You also made some stupid decision that you didn't want Brian to visit Gus once we moved. You said that Gus needed time to adjust to the new city. What was the real reason behind that, Melanie?" Lindsay demanded.

"I guess I was just desperate to control things in my own household. I know that it was selfish, because you are big part of things. I just wanted us to be a family without outside interference. And...."

"That's bullshit, Melanie! I'm not a big part of things. I'm your partner. We held a commitment ceremony! My status as your partner is something that you seem to forget. I am not just a big part things...I'm not one of the kids! And, you don't get to make decisions about me without my consent! We need to make these decisions together. Maybe if we thought about these things together...we might have made better decision. You don't always have all the answers!"

"I said I was sorry," Melanie said contritely.

"Well you're going to have to do more than that. You're going to have to give up this power trip that you've been on. I don't want to do that anymore."

"What are you saying?"

"You made a decision. You placed consideration for your daughter over everything. You didn't give a damn how I felt. You didn't give a damn what was best for Gus. Once again, you only cared for what you wanted. You had to be in control of everything."

"I thought you wanted what I wanted. I thought you wanted us to have a chance to parent our kids."

"Melanie, Jenny is still a baby. But, Gus needs his father. You pulled him out of Pittsburgh just as he and Brian were getting close. You didn't give a damn what was best for Gus. All you cared about in your plan was you and Jenny. And I went along with it!" Lindsay insisted.

"Michael can be annoying and relentless. I know he loves Jenny, and I want him involved in her life, but I don't want Jenny to grow up to be just like him. So, I want us to be able to raise our daughter as we see fit. After all, we're her parents. But, I realize now that I was selfish. So this afternoon I had lunch with my one of the partners in my old law firm. I wanted to just explore with them the possibility of returning to the firm."

"How did it go?"

"It will take a bit to put all the pieces into place, and it appears that I can go back, if we should decide to return to Pittsburgh."

"I see. So that's where you went? You could have told me where you were going."

"I didn't want to tell you until I had some idea what we were up against, and I wasn't going to make any plans or decision until we talked."

"Well, that's a start," Lindsay huffed.

"Mind if I say something here?" Elizabeth finally interjected. "A relationship is a dynamic beast. It grows and changes over time. Once upon a time, Lindsay may have wanted you to plan everything out...to make all the decisions. However, at this point, she just sat here and told that she wants something different. For starters she wants you to share your thoughts and feelings with her."

"I heard her. I guess I am a bit of a control freak," Melanie admitted.

"But hasn't this been the source of many of your problems when you really stop to thing about it?" Elizabeth pointedly asked. "Haven't you both failed to share your thought and feelings with each other?"

"But Lindsay can be so stubborn sometimes," Melanie said in her own defense. "And, I really do hate to argue."

"When you share your thoughts and feelings with someone else, they're not always going to agree with you. That would be too easy! But at least each of you can know where the other stands, and you can go through the normal give and take to reach some sort of compromise. Does any of this sound familiar, Melanie? After all, you're a lawyer," Elizabeth explained.

"Yeah, but I was not that kind of lawyer," Melanie said with a laugh. "I was the kind that wanted it all. I'm the scrappy kind of lawyer."

"Well scrappy, unless you plan on being married to your job, you might want to reconsider your position," Lindsay added with a laugh. "I'm not blind justice, I need things to be different."

"I'll work on that," Melanie finally said, after having a chance to think things over.

"You won't be alone. We'll work on this together," Lindsay said, leaning over to give her partner a gentle kiss.

"Is there anything else that either of you wanted to talk about while you're here today," Elizabeth asked. Both Melanie and Lindsay shook their heads no.

"Then, we're going to stop here for today. I guess I will see you two tomorrow? As always, call my service if there are any problems during the night, and I'll see you both here, the same time tomorrow," Elizabeth proclaimed.

Chapter 7 - Reflections

Later Thursday Afternoon...(Day 18)

Melanie and Lindsay decided to go for ice cream after their counseling session so that they could have a chance to talk with each other. They decide stop at a nearby creamery, and they settled into a booth in the far corner.

"I can't believe we're stopping for ice cream without the kids," Melanie teased. "You have to promise not to tell them."

"Oh please, I can keep a secret!" Lindsay responded with a smirk.

The two of them were able to share a laugh.

Then their ice cream arrived. "You know, I never understood until this moment why you wanted Brian to father Gus," Melanie began, while taking a spoonful of her ice cream.

"What do you mean?" Lindsay asked, mimicking the action.

"Because you're such a romantic!" Melanie remarked, using her spoon for emphasis. "But fortunately, as it turned out, Brian was a good choice as a father for Gus, and relatively speaking it turned out that he really doesn't give us a lot of trouble."

"I would have had difficulty carrying for nine months the child of someone I didn't care about. For me there was Brian or no one. I know you thought that I was being unreasonable, but it was how I felt. Even today, with all the problems, it is how I still feel. I know you don't feel the way about Michael that I feel about Brian and maybe that explains a lot."

"What do you mean?"

"First of all, you decided that it was time for me to have another child. You just decided. We didn't decide this together. I had to hear about your decision from Dusty one day in passing. Then when I said I wasn't ready to get pregnant again, you had your surgery to take care of your endometriosis, and then you were immediately ready to get pregnant. It was all so mechanical."

"Yeah."

"I don't know how you could carry for nine months the child of a man you don't love."

"What do you mean?"

"We all like Michael. He's like family. I'm was just surprised that he was your choice for a father for your child."

"All I cared about was that he wouldn't give us any trouble. After all the problems we initially had with Brian, I wanted things to be easier this time."

"I'm surprised that you thought that would be the case knowing that Michael grew up without a father. Even if we had not been separated, Michael was going to be obsessively involved in his daughter life. You could see it from the moment she was born...you could see it even before she was born."

"I know. He does tend to hover."

"I just wonder if all that had anything to do with the reason that the baby really wasn't your first priority during your pregnancy. You still tried to work on that major case. You still tried handle to large a workload...do too much. You wouldn't listen. You went to the start of the bike race. Need I go on? I have to wonder if that was the reason you failed to take the proper precautions during your pregnancy. You were reckless."

"Lindsay, I'm never going to be you. I'm never going to have the absolute devotion to my children. I never expected to bear children. I always thought that you would bear all our children. So the whole experience was not something I dreamt about. If you had been willing to have another baby, I would have gladly gone a lifetime without the experience of pregnancy and childbirth. I love Jenny and I'm glad she's here. But there is no way I want to go through the experience of pregnancy and childbirth again."

"Are you saying that you don't want any more children?" Lindsay forcefully asked.

"Are you saying that you do?" Melanie countered.

"I don't know. Gus is getting older. He's already starting to pull away. He doesn't need me as much anymore. Maybe? And, I'm not getting any younger."

"We still have Jenny Rebecca to raise. This is something we need to think about very carefully. I'll admit I rushed into the decision last time, and then I made some unwise choices. I don't want us to that again."

"I agree. And before we think about another child, we have to think about where we're going to live. I hope we can spend the next month talking about this once we get home. That will give us lots of time to think everything through."

"You're right."

"I think I'll see if I can have lunch with Sidney Bloom before we go back. Maybe I can feel him out about whether or not there is a potential position for me at the gallery."

"Maybe...that is a good idea."

"Melanie, exactly what are your feeling about Michael and Debbie?" Lindsay asked.

"You know that I love them. They are like family to us. Debbie is the glue that holds the crazy Liberty Avenue family together, and I love her dearly. She is the perfect grandmother for Jenny. Michael is a loving father, and he spoils his daughter. But based on what I saw when we were living in Pittsburgh, both of them would be at our house everyday. We would never have a moment to ourselves, unless Jenny was staying with them. It would be good to have ever-ready baby sitters available...but like I said they would be at the house all the time. And I want our daughter to have more than only just what they have to offer. I don't want my daughter to grow up to be like either of them. So we have several really difficult things to think about," Melanie remarked, and then, she proceeded to change the subject. "Now, let me ask you a question? What are you going to do about your art?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know that at the moment you can't teach in Canada without proper credentials. But during the last year, I haven't you heard you mention anything about teaching at all. Are you content to only work at the gallery?"

"I wish I could go back to teaching art, but I don't have the credentials. Both you and I can't be pursuing our credentials at the same time. We can't afford that. Plus we have the kids to consider. So in answer to your question, yes for the moment I am ok working at the gallery. I just wish I could make more money," Lindsay explained.

"Lindsay, first I have to know what you really want. Then, we can figure out what we can do. I don't think you should make decisions for us without consulting me...anymore than I should make decisions without consulting you," Melanie was quick to point out.

"I'm just not sure whether I want to teach or not. Once I got to Canada and found out I couldn't, I didn't give it another thought."

"Once we get back, I want you to take sometime and consider it. It's too important to just push aside."

"I guess you're right," Lindsay finally conceded.

"Are you ok about Justin and his art career?"

"I fine with it as long as Justin pursues his career. I really do care too much about him and Brian to let him just throw it all away just to be with Brian in the mansion," Lindsay insisted.

"Careful Lindsay..."

"I just don't want Justin to have regrets in the future. Believe me, I promise I will tread very carefully. I have no desire to tangle with Brian on this, and he is in full-protective mode where Justin is concerned. All I will do is raise the issues. I think I have to do that as their friend. But I promise not to push. I know that it's Justin's life. I'm really happy about his successes. I will just try to steer him out of trouble. That's all."

"Just be careful. Brian is not the same Brian you have dealt with since college, especially where Justin is concerned."

"I really do know that. I promise, I will be careful."

"Well, I guess we should get going back to the house."

"Ice cream was a good idea...with or without the kids," Lindsay said with a smile.

Chapter 8 – Session 4

Friday Afternoon...(Day 19)

Melanie arrived at Elizabeth's reception area first. She was constantly checking her watch, wondering where Lindsay was. Melanie was afraid that Lindsay was going to be late, and her concern was increasing.

Finally, Lindsay appeared, and Melanie let out a sigh of relief. But then, the questions started. "Well hello. Where have you been? I haven't seen you for most of the day. I was beginning to worry."

"I had an early lunch with Sidney, and then I stopped in to see Brian at his office," Lindsay admitted.

"Why? How did it go?" Melanie asked. But before Lindsay could answer her questions, Elizabeth appeared at the door and ushered them into her office, leaving Lindsay a bit flustered.

Lindsay and Melanie took their usual seats, but Elizabeth could see that something was up with Lindsay. "Lindsay, would like to start? You look like you have something on your mind."

"I just left Brian's office," Lindsay admitted

"Why would you go to see him?" Melanie wondered. "What could you possibly have to talk with him about?"

"First of all I wanted to apologize to him for our behavior. We were so rude to him on Tuesday that I wanted let him know that we had overreacted about the camping thing with Gus."

"How did he take it?" Melanie continued.

"You know Brian, no apologies...no regrets."

"Asshole."

"But, Brian did say something that really hit home. He said that he had changed, and that I needed to see him, not as he was in the past and not as I want him to be...but as he is. Justin pretty much told me the same thing when we had lunch yesterday," Lindsay revealed.

"And how do you feel about that?" Elizabeth asked.

"I liked Brian the way he was. I was used to him. This new Brian is going to take some getting used to," Lindsay answered.

"How has he changed?" Elizabeth inquired further.

"He used to talk to me about everything. He used to seek my advice. We were always there for each other. We were so close. Right now he is so fiercely protective where Justin is concerned, he won't let me in. The only one he will let in is Gus," Lindsay explained.

"So why go to see him?" Elizabeth continued her questioning.

"I also wanted to make sure that he would pay for Gus and me to fly down for our monthly visits. He said that he would," Lindsay responded.

"Is there any other reason that you went to see him?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes. I also wanted to be sure that Brian kept the proper perspective about Justin's career," Lindsay answered.

"Why did you do that?" Melanie asked in total frustration.

"Because, I don't want to see Justin lose it all, everything that he has worked for, just because he wants to live in that mansion and be with Brian. Justin career is more important than that. I just didn't want Brian to lose sight of that!" Lindsay insisted.

"Lindsay, why do you keep doing this?" Melanie retorted.

"I know that Brian and I will never be together. But I will always love him. And I love Justin. I just want the best for both of them. I just don't want Justin to make a mistake that he will regret later in life. He has a chance to be a great artist. I just don't want him to blow it! I'm sorry. It's how I feel, and I can't help it," Lindsay pleaded.

Melanie walked over to Lindsay and crouched down in front of her, taking both of Lindsay's hands in her own. She started to speak very softly, "Lindsay I need you to listen to me very carefully. I know that you love Brian. I know that you love Justin. I really do know that you want the best for both of them. But Lindsay, there are certain realities that you must accept or you're going to make yourself sick."

Melanie took a deep breath, and then she continued, "Brian and Justin love each other. Justin believes he can have his art and Brian too. You have to get over the belief that Brian is going to interfere with Justin's art. Brian would never do that. The fact that Justin went to New York is proof of that. Justin wants to be a great artist, but he has made it clear that he doesn't intend to sacrifice everything to make that happen, whereas many years ago you were willing to make the supreme sacrifice, to give up everything, to have an art career. Justin isn't you. Look at him! Every time you see him he has a pencil and a sketchpad in his hand. It's second nature to him. Brian is so used to that, he doesn't even bat an eye about the constant sketching. In fact Brian allows himself to be Justin's primary subject."

Both of them did have to laugh at the image, and the laughter released some of the tension between them.

But Melanie wasn't finished. "With Justin you're like a stage mother. Justin has always loved your support. You were his first supporter. You hold this special place in Justin's heart. Art is something that only you and Justin share on this level. What I'm saying is that you can enjoy the ride with Justin career...he wants you to do that...but let Justin drive. Sooner or later you're going to have to accept that Justin has real ideas about how he wants his career to proceed...I read the article on his Santa Barbara show. The art world knows who Justin Taylor is, more because of what he did in Santa Barbara then for anything he really did in New York. Don't you see that? And in Santa Barbara, Justin was just being Justin. Justin has enough talent to backup who is as a person and as an artist. And furthermore, if Justin was capable of allowing Brian to change and become this different person, we have to give him some credit for being able to manage his own life as well."

"I know that you're right. I just don't understand why I can't let this go," Lindsay said with tears in her eyes.

"You have any ideas, Lindsay?"

"I guess it feels like Gus slipping away. I also feel Brian slipping away, and now Justin. I just feel so all alone! I know it irrational. It's just how I feel," Lindsay protested.

"The three people you mentioned haven't gone anywhere. They are still very much in your life. You just have to find a way to deal with all three of them differently," Elizabeth suggested.

"Besides, Gus still needs you! Brian and Justin still love you. They just need you differently. Look, if you need to smother someone, Jenny Rebecca and I are in constant need of overbearing loving," Melanie teased.

"Your Serenity Prayer, again...Huh? I guess I too, need to save my energy for the things that I can change," Lindsay finally said with a laugh. "This growing up stuff is hard!"

"Welcome to the real world!" Melanie quipped.

"Elizabeth, this is going to take some time," Lindsay insisted.

"What exactly are you afraid of Lindsay?" Elizabeth asked.

"You know my parents almost act as if I don't exist. Melanie and I have been together for almost twelve years, yet they barely acknowledge her. They act as if my children don't exist. I've tried to act as if it doesn't bother me, but I guess it does. I guess when this is the relationship you have with your parents, you hold on too tightly to those things that you do have in your life...for fear that they will float away," Lindsay revealed. "I know it doesn't make any logical sense. It's just how I feel."

"And you are entitled to your feelings," Elizabeth explained. "You just have to think before you act on them."

"I really do see that." Lindsay finally admitted. "Give me some time on this."

"Take all the time that you need," Melanie said, leaning up to give Lindsay a kiss. "I love you."

"I love you too," Lindsay whispered in response.

Elizabeth allowed the moment to linger between them. Then she cleared her throat and continued, "I guess this is a good place to stop, unless either of you have something that you want to add?"

"Before we go, what happened when you had lunch with Sidney," Melanie asked Lindsay.

"Sidney said he really doesn't have a position, but he would create one, if I wanted to return to the gallery," Lindsay explained with a smile. "So at least now we know."

"Yes, now we know. Now we just have to consider everything and make our decision," Melanie said resolutely.

"Is there anything I can do to help on this?" Elizabeth asked. "Do you want to talk about this? We still have a little bit of time."

"No, not yet. We need to work on this together first. It's all too new to process," Lindsay remarked. Melanie shook her head in agreement.

"Elizabeth," Melanie said, "Thanks for seeing us during this week. I know we called in a panic, and you managed to make time available to us on short notice. We haven't solved everything, but at least we can go back to Toronto and work on these things together. I, for one, feel so much more hopeful now than I did at the beginning of the week. Thank you."

"My pleasure, Melanie."

"I feel the same way too. I was in a panic when I called you. I do feel better now," Lindsay added.

Lindsay and Melanie scheduled the times for their weekly telephone calls to Elizabeth, and they scheduled the date and time for their next appointment in one month.

Everyone finally said their goodbyes.

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Author's Comments: For details of Lindsay's meeting with Brian, see Talisman Of Time, Chapter 16. This sidebar will link with Talisman Of Time at Chapter 17.

Final Comments: The time that Melanie and Lindsay spent in Pittsburgh was an opportunity to be simply focused on their relationship issues without the demands of jobs, household duties, and taking care of the kids. Here in Pittsburgh, they had the support of their extended family members so the couple could devote the necessary the energy necessary to their counseling sessions.

With Melanie and Lindsay's return to Toronto, they returned to a community in which they were isolated, not because they were gay, but because they were American. In Toronto, they had only the limited support system of Melanie's cousin, who lives a few doors away. They had, by their own admission, few friends.

As we saw in Meanwhile In Toronto, Melanie and Lindsay were prompted to take this in-depth look at their problems ... because there was a drastic change in their day-to-day dynamics as Gus was visiting Brian and Justin. This left only the care of Jenny Rebecca to divert the couple's attention. Once they arrived in Pittsburgh, of course, their daughter primarily visited Debbie and Michael. Absolved of primary responsibility for their kids and back among loving friends, Melanie and Lindsay had the chance for introspection.

Now, Melanie and Lindsay are returning to Toronto with a both a rambunctious six-year old and a demanding two-year old in tow, and once again they will be caught up in the demands of everyday life. So, working on their relationship will once again have to take a back seat to everyday living.

I would suspect over the next month, their primary focus to be learning how to be simply talk to each other and be kinder to one another. The issues will remain unresolved until at least their next counseling session.

They will make their required weekly telephone call to the Elizabeth. But these phone calls are more to insure that Melanie and Lindsay are not in crisis in between their counseling sessions, rather than an attempt to resolve routine issues. So very little will be resolved until their return to Pittsburgh in about a month.

Melanie and Lindsay will obviously continue to appear throughout the series, with additional sidebars as necessary to tell their story.

**More Sessions in Pitts**

Chapter 1 – Session 5

First Monthly Session, Saturday Morning ...(Day 48)

Lindsay and Melanie hurried off to Elizabeth's office for their scheduled appointment.

In Elizabeth's outer office, Lindsay appeared to be mindlessly flipping through magazines, while Melanie was deep in thought.

Melanie was extremely concerned about Lindsay's reaction to the news about Brian and Justin. Brian and Justin had legalized their relationship. Melanie couldn't help thinking that Brian, who had always been opposed to marriage and commitment, had bound himself more tightly to Justin than any other couple they knew. Brian and Justin were more than married... they would be permanently together.

Melanie knew one more thing that she hadn't bothered to mention to anyone; Brian has always been very protective where Justin was concerned, whether they were together as a couple or not. For Brian to have taken this step with Justin, she knew that Brian was ready to cut anything and anyone out of his life that interfered with that relationship, so Melanie wanted to be sure that her partner treaded very carefully in her dealings with Brian later today.

Although Lindsay appeared to be mindlessly flipping through magazines, she actually tried to focus her thoughts on her discussions with Debbie, Emmett, and Melanie at breakfast. She too was trying to get her mind around the fact that Brian and Justin had legalized that relationship. When Lindsay thought about it, she realized that Emmett was right. Brian and Justin had been a couple for years now, and it was true that they were even supposed to get married a year ago. So she realized that she really shouldn't be surprised by the turn of events...but she was...nevertheless.

What really seemed to bother Lindsay was that Brian had made this life altering decision without discussing it with HER, and that marked this as a big step for him. For Lindsay, ever since their college days, Brian had relied on her to be his sounding board for all things of importance with his life...until now. The fact that Brian made this major decision, without discussing it in advance with anyone, meant that Brian had changed...he now trusted himself enough to keep his own counsel. And if Brian trusted himself enough to keep his own counsel, then he had finally become his own person. And if Brian had become his own person, then he would no longer need her as his most trusted confidante. The circle of Brian's life was now complete.

Lindsay knew that she would always love Brian, and that Brian would love her. Even the existence of Gus hadn't been enough to stop Brian from making this life-altering change in his relationship with her. He had simply made his life-choice, and that choice was Justin, leaving Lindsay alone to close her book of fantasies and dreams. At that moment, Lindsay realized that things had changed drastically between her and Brian, and she wasn't sure how she felt about this change.

Lindsay's thoughts were interrupted as Elizabeth came out of her office into the waiting room to greet them. "I'm glad to see you both. Why don't you come on in?" she said.

Melanie and Lindsay followed her, making themselves comfortable in their usual side-by-side seats in her office.

"It's been a month since we've seen each other. Why don't you bring me up to date on how things are going?" Elizabeth asked, after making herself comfortable in her own chair.

"We've missed talking with you," Melanie explained. "But I'm pleased to report that we've made some progress. I think that we're in a much better space now, than we were when we came to see you a month ago."

"That's good to know," Elizabeth said with enthusiasm, "I always like to hear success stories."

"Things have definitely been much better between us," Lindsay added confidently.

"So tell me, what's been going on?" Elizabeth inquired.

Melanie waited a few minutes to see if Lindsay would start.

When the silence continued, Melanie stepped in. "Lindsay and I are learning to talk to each other about our issues," she revealed.

Lindsay finally found her voice and added, "I think things between us have been better. There's been less anger between us, even when we don't agree on things," Lindsay admitted. "We have, at least, been able to talk about things," she said with a sigh.

"Well, that's really good news," Elizabeth said with a smile.

"Lindsay and I have come to accept that Brian, and to a certain extent Justin, are necessary for Gus' development. I have made a conscious decision to stop creating a confrontation every time that Brian wants to spend time with Gus. So over the last month, Brian has asked and actually spent almost every weekend with Gus...in Toronto, in Cincinnati, and now here in Pittsburgh. Our son couldn't be happier with the new arrangement." Melanie began.

"This represents a major step for both of you," Elizabeth commented.

"Thanks," Melanie continued, "Also Lindsay and I have talked about the issue of moving back to Pittsburgh versus continuing to live in Toronto. I know that Lindsay is unhappy in Toronto, because we're so isolated there. Our kids are safe, but so far we still haven't been able to establish that sense of community, we've been seeking. But we seem to be in agreement that with family considerations, a move back to Pittsburgh would not be a wise idea...we both feel that such a move would not be in the best interest of our daughter."

Elizabeth commented, "These were significant problems when you were here a month ago."

"Unfortunately, we still have a few issues," Lindsay easily said.

"Is there something specific that comes to mind?" Elizabeth asked with interest.

"I'm unhappy living in Toronto, that part is true. By the same token, moving back to Pittsburgh isn't a reasonable alternative either. We've been able to talk about the problem and our feelings, but we haven't been able to arrive at any particular solution to the problem," Lindsay quietly agreed.

"So, why don't we talk about it a bit right here and now?" Elizabeth offered as beginning guidance.

"It just feels like we're at an impasse. I don't want to stay in Toronto, and Melanie doesn't want to return to Pittsburgh. No matter how you view our situation, this is a no win scenario," Lindsay pointed out.

"Your situation isn't no win, Lindsay," Elizabeth interrupted, "There's always a third alternative."

"What? For me to return to Pittsburgh with Gus and have Melanie remain in Toronto with Jenny?" Lindsay said begrudgingly. "That would probably work except that Melanie and I want to remain together. We love each other."

"Is that the only option that you see to this situation?" Elizabeth asked with some surprise. "No one has even suggested that you and Melanie reside in separate cities. Is that the only other solution you can envision to your dilemma?"

"That's all I see at the moment," Lindsay professed with a certain degree of anger. "And I don't like it one bit."

"There is clearly another alternative," Elizabeth clearly stated. "I'm surprised that the two of you have never considered it."

"And what would that be?" Lindsay asked sarcastically.

"Yes, by all means, tell us what we're not seeing?" Melanie requested.

Elizabeth took a deep breath. "Have you considered moving together to a different city? Maybe somewhere in the States that is close enough to Pittsburgh to allow for continued closeness with the family, but not in Pittsburgh itself," Elizabeth suggested. "Some place where you feel your kids would be safe and where you both could resume your careers at something approximating your former salaries," she suggested. "Thus allowing many things to re-normalize in your relationship."

"I would hate to have Gus start over again in another new school, but it may be a solution if it could provide a better life for everyone...us and both our kids," Lindsay quickly suggested.

"I have considered that possibility, but I didn't think that you would even consider another move," Melanie revealed, speaking directly to Lindsay. "So with that option unavailable, staying in Toronto was always the lesser of two evils."

"How come you never told me that you were thinking about another relocation?" Lindsay asked.

"Since I thought you were against the idea, I saw no reason to even bring it up." Melanie explained in her own defense, "Besides, it was just a random thought."

"I see," Lindsay added. "This would be ideal if we can find a way to make it work," she replied. "That way Melanie could actually practice law, and I could work at a more prestigious gallery. Or I could teach again part time if I wanted to. I guess that's an idea worth investigating," she added with enthusiasm.

"Now that I know you're interested, we can research some cities and investigate further," Melanie agreed. "I'm sure we can find someplace in the States that is gay friendly but also offers good opportunities of both of us."

"So it looks like you have something to consider when you get back to Toronto," Elizabeth suggested.

"Is there anything else that you two want to talk about?" Elizabeth asked.

"There is something else," Lindsay began. "I've been missing my art. I know I can't have the career that Justin will have, but I want to do more with my art. I miss it."

"Yes, go on," Elizabeth suggested.

"There's a summer program in Paris that I want to apply for," Lindsay continued. "Gus is older, so I could take him with me now."

"Yes, so what's the problem," Elizabeth innocently asked.

"When we made the decisions to have the kids, we made certain decision about our lives. I don't see how I can manage with Jenny all alone during the three months she would be in Paris. I don't know how I would manage being separated from Gus for all that time either. Not to mention, I don't see how we could afford to pay for Lindsay to be in Paris for three months. The whole thing just feels so unrealistic to me," Melanie responded.

"I can see your point, Melanie. Lindsay what do you have to say in response to that?" Elizabeth asked.

"Before Gus was born, we said we wanted a house full of kids...kids to be raised in love. We have set about fulfilling that dream. Now I want to develop my art too. And I can't develop my art if I have primary responsibility to mother our kids," Lindsay professed.

"I don't know what I can do to change that Linds," Melanie admitted.

"I feel like a disproportional amount of childcare responsibility falls to me," Lindsay continued to complain. "I know we agreed to work together to raise our kids, but I seem to be able to manage both kids when Melanie has to work. But if I have to work, Melanie has a problem handling both kids. Lately, this hasn't been a problem, because Gus has been spending a lot of time with Brian and Justin. But when he's at home, Melanie can't seem to handle the kids without one of them being neglected. This feels unfair to me," she professed.

"Lindsay is right, I do have difficulty handling both kids when she isn't around," Melanie admitted. "Lindsay is a wonderful mother and great with our kids. She is the reason we agreed to have kids in the first place. But Lindsay, I'm never going to be the kind of mother that you are. I just don't seem to do a good job of watching both kids."

"You have difficulty with these things, and you automatically expect me to take up the slack. You always expect me to step in when you can't figure out how to handle things. I'm beginning to resent it. You're willing to spend time with Jenny, and you want me to spend time with Jenny too, but when you're overwhelmed with two kids, you always show a preference for Jenny, and Gus is neglected. This is another one of those cases, where it feels like you place your child's needs over my child's need," Lindsay professed.

"I never consciously made a distinction between our kids. I simply figured that Gus, being older, was capable of entertaining himself, in his room, with his toys, while Jenny was still too little to play alone," Melanie went on to explain. "After talking with you and Brian, I've tried to avoid sending Gus off alone to his room to play. I've tried to handle things differently."

"I think your inability to handle both kids together may have a lot to do with your evolving belief that Gus should spend more time with Brian and Justin. When Gus is with them, handling both kids is something you don't have to deal with," Lindsay explained. "So consequently, you don't even have to try to get better at it."

"I thought you were happy that Gus was spending time with Brian and Justin," Melanie argued. "It's what you've always said you wanted."

"I am glad. It has been wonderful for Gus. But you and I and the kids don't do things together as a family, and this is a problem for everyone. And trips to Pittsburgh don't count, because once we reach here, Jenny goes one way, and Gus goes another," Lindsay complained.

"That's a valid complaint. Money has been tight. We're barely getting by. There isn't extra money for family things. You and I are pretty much working all the time. I'm taking classes. We, as a family, have a shortage of both time and money," Melanie complained.

"That's another reason to move away from Toronto," Lindsay quipped.

"As for Brian and Justin compensating for some deficiency I see in my own child-management skills, absolutely. You wouldn't allow for a nanny when Gus was a baby, even though that's what most working couples, gay or straight, have to do with small children. I understood your reluctance, and we've managed to work around it. But Brian and Justin aren't strangers when it comes to Gus, so as far as I'm concerned, Gus is practically, almost under parental supervision when he's with Brian and Justin. All the time that they spend with Gus, has been time that Brian requested. I didn't instigate the time, and I don't see a problem it," Melanie went on to explain.

"Lindsay, Melanie can't raise the daughter you two agreed to have together, without both of your participation. And yet you feel you can't be devoted to your art and raise your kids. I would say that once again you're at an impasse," Elizabeth explained. "There has to be a third solution. And likewise Melanie, maybe you haven't exhausted the resources at your disposal to solve this problem. Maybe you've just given up?" Elizabeth asked.

"I like to think that I have been practical. Lindsay's solution for funding her career development in Paris is based on her belief that Brian will fund this. Based on something we learned recently, I think that depending on Brian's money to fund outrageous things may be a pipedream of the past."

"What do you mean?" Lindsay asked.

"Brian isn't going to make financial decisions any longer, without discussing them with Justin," Melanie added.

"Why should Justin object? He's an artist after all...he has his own art career," Lindsay pointed out.

"An art career that you made sure he had to pursue totally on his own. Justin has been a starving artist for the last year in New York, because you told him that's what he needed to do for his art. He struggled with odd jobs...whatever he could find...until his paintings started to sell. You convinced Justin that he needed struggle like this, and you admitted that he was a more talented artist than you," Melanie continued to explain.

"So what's your point?" Lindsay asked.

"So you think Justin is going to agree to Brian funding your three month artistic excursion into Paris. I don't mean to be cruel, but I suggest that you think again," Melanie pointed out.

"Why shouldn't Brian fund this...my being in Paris would create new experiences for his son? Brian is always willing to spend money on Gus," Lindsay professed.

"Careful Lindsay, that ploy has always worked on Brian. Trust me, Justin sees through that manipulation. Justin isn't Brian. Justin usually doesn't say anything, but he clearly knows what you've been doing. And just so you know, you think Brian is overly protective of Justin...Justin is fiercely over-protective of Brian. Not to mention that what we did to Brian and Justin last year was terrible. We created so much doubt that they postponed their wedding. We have a lot to atone for...you and me," Melanie suggested.

"I did what I thought was best," Lindsay argued.

"For whom Lindsay, for you or for Brian and Justin?" Melanie challenged.

"That's not fair!" Lindsay argued.

"It doesn't matter whether it's fair or not. Even if your intentions were good, my point is, you're going to have to find new ways to deal with Brian and Justin," Melanie argued.

"Lindsay, you seem to have some problems with what Melanie just said," Elizabeth questioned. "Tell me what's going on?"

"Once again, I'm concerned that Gus will begin to think of Brian and Justin as his family unit, when Melanie, you and I are his parents," Lindsay professed.

"But Brian and Justin ARE part of Gus' family unit. I thought we settled that during our last session," Melanie said with some exasperation.

"We did," Lindsay said in a whisper, "It's just that..."

"It's just that, what Lindsay?" Elizabeth asked.

Lindsay just sat there shaking her head... suddenly unable to speak her thoughts, as she fought to hold back tears.

Melanie leaned over and put her arm around Lindsay, offering her support and understanding.

"Melanie, Lindsay, there's obviously something going on here that I'm unaware of," Elizabeth interjected, "It's not my job to pry, but I can't help with things if I don't know about them?"

Melanie took a deep breath. "This morning right before we came here, we had an unusual conversation with Gus. Gus spent the night with Brian and Justin at the mansion along with some friends of ours, Paul and Jason and their son Nicky. Our friends are at the mansion, so that Nicky and Gus can have a weekend play date," Melanie began to explain.

"That sounds like a wonderful planned weekend for Gus," Elizabeth responded. "What's the problem?"

"During the telephone conversation our son started talking about toast," Melanie revealed.

"Ok, I'll admit that kids remember the strangest things. What's so significant about toast?" Elizabeth innocently asked.

Lindsay finally found her voice, "Gus wasn't talking about something you serve with jam," she said sadly, "He was talking about bubbly that tickled his nose. Gus was talking about a celebration," she finally clarified with concern still evident in her voice.

"Oh dear, don't tell me you're worried about Brian giving Gus champagne?" Elizabeth asked.

"According to Gus they made many toasts, so I suspect that Gus may have had sparkling cider. Justin used to make sure that Gus had a glass of sparkling cider for certain celebrations...like New Year's. It was a private thing between them," Melanie responded with a smile.

"Then I fail to see what the problem is," Elizabeth explained once more.

"The problem is that everyone at the mansion was celebrating the fact that Brian and Justin had legalized their domestic partnership; they're going to be a couple forever," Lindsay explained.

"Lindsay, is there something about them being a couple that you have a problem with?" Elizabeth casually asked, already knowing the answer from the prior sessions, but she had to get Lindsay to talk about this.

"Not really. Brian and Justin have been a couple for a long time," Lindsay remarked. "It's just that Brian and I used to be so close. I can't believe that he made this lifetime commitment to Justin without talking to me about it first. He essentially made this decision on his own...that means that Brian has changed."

"You and Brian have always been so close. You were close in college, and you've been each other's confidants ever since. But you moved on with your life, and so has Brian," Melanie reminded her.

"But even though we moved on with our lives, our friendship wasn't supposed to change. We have Gus. And..." Lindsay paused before she continued, "The existence of Gus was supposed to insure that things never changed between us? How could he do this to me?" she said tearfully.

"Lindsay, Gus is part of the reason that things changed. Brian wanted to leave a different legacy for his son than was left to him by his parents. Whatever else is going on, Gus is really clear that Brian loves him. And as for Justin, Gus and Justin are so crazy about each other. All the things that you hoped for between Brian and Gus are there. What's missing from your plan...from your dream...is that Brian will fall so completely in love with Gus that he would want to be a full-time parent. What's missing from your plan is that Brian would eventually want the two of you to be together to make it happen. That was never going to happen before...and with Brian and Justin being legally a couple like they are...that is never going to happen in the future. So it's time to let the fantasy go, Lindsay!" Melanie calmly clarified for her.

"It just hurts," Lindsay finally admitted.

"I know it does," Melanie said sympathetically. "Go ahead and grieve your loss, Lindsay, but don't try to play the victim here. Brian did nothing to hurt you. He simply made a significant choice about HIS life...by himself...correct that...he made a significant choice about his life...with the only other person that mattered...Justin," she continued gently, "And you and Brian are still friends."

"Look Elizabeth, I know that what Melanie just said is true," Lindsay acknowledged, "But I will always love Brian, and there's nothing I can do to change that."

"You may not be able to change the fact that you love Brian. But how you craft your love for Brian, going forward, is clearly within your own hands. It's clearly an issue between 'you and you'. Don't you see that?" Elizabeth gently reminded her.

"I think so," Lindsay said quietly.

There was a moment of silence for everyone.

"Why don't you take a moment and gather yourself together?" Elizabeth suggested, "I'm going to take a break for a few minutes, then I'll be right back."

"Sure," Melanie said.

When Elizabeth had left the room, Melanie moved in closer to her partner, and wrapped her arms around Lindsay without saying a word.

"I'm sorry, Melanie," Lindsay finally said, "This doesn't mean that I don't love you."

"I know," Melanie answered with a sigh. "You love Brian...you're always going to feel the same way about Brian...I came to terms with that a long time ago. The question between us now is will OUR relationship ever be enough for you? But that's a question for another time. I don't want to talk about this now."

Elizabeth returned to the room, "Lindsay, Melanie, is everything ok?"

Lindsay and Melanie both nodded yes.

"There's one more thing, Lindsay. You already know that Brian is fiercely protective of Justin. Know this, Justin is equally protective of Brian," Melanie reminded her.

"What are you trying to say, Melanie?" Lindsay asked, with a measure of fear and uncertainty entering her voice.

"What I'm saying again is that Brian will probably no longer make financial decisions without consulting with Justin first." Melanie said quietly.

"Brian has always been generous where his son was concerned," Lindsay reminded her emphatically, "I don't expect that to change because of his new legal union with Justin."

"Think again, Lindsay. What I'm trying to tell you is that things may have already changed," Melanie reiterated. "We're on our way out to the mansion for lunch. I have a feeling we're about to see that a lot of things have changed."

"So you were invited to the mansion," Elizabeth said cautiously, "I know this is something, Lindsay, that you've been very eager to see. Are you sure that you're ready?"

"I'm sure. I'm closing the book on my fantasies and dreams. I'll be fine," Lindsay responded with confidence.

"You two have the number of my service if there are any problems," Elizabeth reminded them. "And I would like to meet with both of you tomorrow morning briefly. I want to be sure everything is ok before you go back to Toronto."

Melanie and Lindsay both tried to assure Elizabeth that such a meeting would be unnecessary, but Elizabeth explained that it was just a precaution. Finally everyone agreed to one more session the following morning. They settled on a time, and finally said their goodbyes.

It was now time for Melanie and Lindsay to call Brian and arrange for their transport to the mansion.

Chapter 2 – Session 6

Early Sunday Morning ... (Day 49)

Elizabeth Bradshaw had arrived early to her office and had already had her first cup of coffee. Dressed more casually than usual, she took a moment to relax and gather her thoughts. She wanted to have enough time to review her notes from yesterday's session with Melanie and Lindsay before today's session got started.

It was unusual for Elizabeth to insist on another counseling session...on a Sunday...within twenty four hours of a previous session, but she felt strongly that she would be remiss in her duties if the couple had to return to Toronto without having a chance to share their feelings with one another about whatever transpired at the mansion with a newly united Brian and Justin.

How Lindsay would react to being in the house that had figured so prominently in her dreams and fantasies for the last year? What about Melanie? Elizabeth had to wonder how Melanie was reacting to everything. Would Melanie continue to be a loving partner to Lindsay, as Lindsay tried to come to terms with everything changing in her world?

At the same time Elizabeth didn't want to over-react. But try as she might, she found that she was unable to believe that yesterday, Melanie and Lindsay simply experienced a simple luncheon with old friends.

Before Elizabeth could continue this line of reasoning, she heard Lindsay and Melanie arrive in her outer office. Things were about to begin.

Elizabeth took a deep breath for courage and prepared to open to the door to her waiting room.

As she opened the door, Elizabeth took a moment to size up the waiting couple, who seemed totally relaxed and eagerly waiting to meet with her.

Elizabeth simply smiled a hopeful smile.

"Good morning, Lindsay, Melanie," Elizabeth said as she opened the door to greet them. "Thanks for coming this morning. I'm glad that you're both here. Why don't you come in so we can get started?" Both Melanie and Lindsay smiled as they returned her greeting.

Melanie and Lindsay reached for each other's hands as they followed Elizabeth into her office. Once there, they made themselves comfortable in their usual side-by-side seats.

"When we met yesterday, both of you were looking forward to your luncheon with Brian and Justin at the mansion. How did it go?" Elizabeth began quietly.

"You have no idea," Melanie volunteered. "It was definitely a day to remember," she added with a smile.

Lindsay also broke into a big smile. "We had a wonderful time at the mansion yesterday, didn't we, Melanie? Our friends were there so we had a chance to just relax and spend time with everyone. I can't remember when I've had so much fun," Lindsay explained.

"So Brian and Justin made you feel welcome?" Elizabeth needed to ask.

"We were at the mansion until late evening. We stayed for lunch and dinner too," Melanie pointed out.

Elizabeth was pleasantly surprised. "So tell me about the mansion," Elizabeth inquired, showing a bit of feminine curiosity.

"The mansion is beautiful. It's large and expansive and sits on a beautiful estate. It's the perfect metaphor for Brian's love for Justin. Brian used to live in open, expansive spaces with stark, clean lines...like the loft. Yet Brian openly admits that the mansion feels like home...like it's a place that he can completely relax. I've never heard him talk like that before," Lindsay pointed out.

"It's big on the outside, but it's warm and friendly on the inside. It even has a name...Bri-tin. Leave it to Brian and Justin to name their home," Melanie added with a laugh. "And it really is home for both of them...and for Gus."

"Gus?" Elizabeth asked.

"Our son has his own room at the mansion, as well as a special guest room for when he has overnight guests. Leave it to Justin to think of everything," Melanie added with a laugh.

Lindsay too shared in the laugh. Then she became quiet.

As the silence continued, Melanie felt the need to talk to Lindsay. "I know a house, like the mansion, has always been the home of your dreams. I got in so late last night that I didn't have a chance to ask you how you're dealing with everything," she added sympathetically.

"That was supposed to be my line," Elizabeth reminded them jokingly. Her remark seemed to lighten the air in the room just a little.

Lindsay tried to smile. "You know I think I'm ok. I'll admit that I was hurt that Brian would make a decision as big as this, without calling and discussing it with me first. I'm so used to us talking about everything and used to him listening to my opinions. This is a big change in our relationship," Lindsay pointed out.

"Certainly after what you saw this weekend, you must realize that Brian is unlikely to continue consulting with you on the major decisions of his life," Melanie pointed out.

"I think that he has made that abundantly clear," Lindsay responded.

"Just because he no longer consults with you, it doesn't mean that Brian no longer loves you. You do realize that, don't you?" Melanie pointed out.

"Brian said as much when we talked at the mansion," Lindsay added.

"Are you going to be ok with that?" Melanie asked.

Lindsay took a few moments to consider the question before she responded, "I will admit that this is all going to take some getting used to, but I think I'm handling things pretty well. I'm definitely handling things better than Michael so even though Brian and Justin didn't talk to me about their decision, I can honestly say that I'm truly happy for both of them," she acknowledged.

"That's a good start," Elizabeth suggested.

Lindsay continued, "Michael on the other hand..."

"What about Michael?" Melanie asked...although she could pretty much guess at the answer.

"Michael seems to feel as if his dreams of a lifetime have been betrayed. He feels that Justin has now, what by right should have been his," Lindsay explained.

"Haven't you been feeling the same way?" Elizabeth asked.

"I fully realize that Brian, for me, was just a fantasy. Watching Michael last night, I realized how lucky I am to have Melanie and the kids and our life together. This is real. I really do know the difference," Lindsay continued to explain to Elizabeth.

"I see," Elizabeth cautiously commented.

"But are we enough for you?" Melanie asked pointedly. "Can the kids and I make you truly happy? I know that you still envision a life of glamour. You were talking about studying this summer in Paris as late as yesterday. What about all the things you wanted out of life since you were a little girl?" she continued to ask.

"This weekend showed me so much. It showed me that life is about choices. Brian and Justin made a decision to be together. You and I made the decision to not waste our lives. We made the decision to be together. I've never regretted that decision. I really do love you, Melanie."

"Well, that's good to hear," Melanie said simply. "You know that I love you too."

"I do know that. I will admit that, on occasion, I have been jealous of Justin, especially his talent. Sometimes it's so hard to sit on the sidelines and watch someone so young, be so talented. But as I looked at the latest pieces that he's created, I really do understand that Justin has a remarkable talent. I see it. I admit it. I'm trying now to come to terms with it. My career in art needs to take a different path," Lindsay admitted quietly.

"But Justin has asked you to be a part of his success. That really is quite an honor," Melanie reminded her.

"I know, and I'm really thrilled to be asked to help him set up for his show," Lindsay replied. "Acceptance of everything else will have to come in time."

"Time is a great healer," Elizabeth reminded her. "Lindsay, I think that you have the right attitude and at least a strategy in mind."

Elizabeth then turned her attention to a pensive Melanie. She found that she had to ask, "Melanie what are you thinking about what you've heard?"

"I really want Lindsay to be happy. I will admit that there are times that I'm not sure her happiness lies with me. I'm not sure this relationship is ever really going to be enough for her. There are times that I think that she has settled for what we have...because she knew she could never have Brian. Now that he is truly out of reach...once again she is ready to focus on us. I don't think it's conscious, but I do think it's there," Melanie admitted.

"I don't know what to say to show you that you're wrong. I guess I'll have to show you how I feel. Maybe in time you'll believe me," Lindsay said, reaching over to gently touch Melanie's cheek.

"Maybe..." Melanie said quietly.

Melanie and Lindsay looked at each other. Elizabeth allowed the silence between the two women to linger for a few moments. "Is there anything else about yesterday that you two would like to discuss?" Elizabeth finally asked.

Lindsay was silent for a moment as she gathered her thoughts.

"You should have seen the wonderful painting that Justin gave Gus? It was a painting of Gus and Brian horseback riding together. I don't know why Justin wasn't happy with a simple photograph. I'll never know what on earth possessed him to spend the time on a painting," Lindsay revealed, "Especially when he as so many shows coming up."

"As Justin told us, Gus and Brian riding together was too momentous an occasion to simply capture it on film. At least now we all know that Brian can truly ride. We can no longer challenge his horseback riding ability," Melanie said with a laugh, "Especially since we've seen the painting, and because we actually witnessed for ourselves Gus and Brian during their riding lesson."

"So you got to see Gus and Brian riding together? That's wonderful," Elizabeth commented.

"It would be if that was all there was to it," Lindsay responded.

"What do you mean?" Elizabeth asked.

"As you know, Justin is a magnificent painter..." Lindsay quickly pointed out.

"I believe that you've mentioned that on several occasions," Elizabeth quickly responded, trying to wonder what the problem was.

"Justin's paintings are worth a fortune," Lindsay continued.

"So I've heard..." Elizabeth responded with a sigh, still wondering where this was going.

"Evidently, Justin had agreed to do a painting for Gus' room. Justin doesn't do a simple painting of cartoon characters that a child would enjoy...no...he created a masterpiece. Justin gave a gallery quality painting to a six year old. What was he thinking?" Lindsay had to ask.

"Justin doesn't think like that. He simply painted a picture that he thought Gus would like. Obviously Gus loved the painting. He couldn't wait to tell us all about it. He even took great pains all day to remind us that this was HIS painting," Melanie couldn't resist laughing, as she relayed the events.

"Melanie, the painting is a masterpiece. Did you notice how much Justin's talent has grown over the last year? I can't believe Justin gave Gus a painting of his very own," Lindsay continued shaking her head. "It's got to be worth a fortune!"

"I'm sure it is, but you know that isn't why Justin gave it to Gus," Melanie commented.

"I can't believe that Brian didn't stop him. It's too much!" Lindsay added emphatically.

"There must be more to it than that. Why does the painting bother you so?" Elizabeth had to ask.

"Justin gives Gus a painting...supposedly for his bedroom. Gus decided he liked his painting in the living room. Don't you see the problem?" Lindsay asked, as if the facts should be clear to everyone.

"I'm afraid not," Elizabeth responded, "So why don't you tell me about it?"

"Yeah, tell me too...'cause I don't see the problem either," Melanie added haltingly.

Lindsay let out a long suffering sigh. "You have to see it. It's so plain." Lindsay responded.

Melanie and Elizabeth looked at each other without saying a word. They both were patiently waiting to hear Lindsay's concerns.

Finally, Lindsay realized that she was going to have to spell things out. "Gus had HIS painting placed over the fireplace. He didn't ask Brian to hang it in his room. He didn't ask that the painting be shipped home so we could hang in his room in Toronto. Don't you see? Gus thinks of the mansion as home. You know how he already feels about Justin. The fact that he was willing to place HIS painting in the living room at the mansion...Gus must believe, he's going to be spending a lot of time there," Lindsay explained, as if she were relating the obvious.

"This is a problem...how?" Melanie asked.

"I'm afraid Gus will decide he likes living in a mansion. I'm afraid he'll start to compare spending time with Brian and Justin to living with us. I'm afraid that we won't be enough for him anymore." Lindsay related, with tears starting to fall down her face. "I think we may have lost him," she added sadly.

"Are you saying that Gus wasn't happy to see you?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, in fact, he seemed thrilled that Melanie and I were there. He took great pains to show us everything, especially his room and his own art work," Lindsay continued. "But he's so confident and comfortable with Brian and Justin. I noticed it when they were riding together. You've got to admit, the mansion has got to be a wonderful place when you're a kid. We don't have anything like that to offer in Toronto," she finally admitted.

Melanie couldn't sit quiet any longer. "Lindsay honey, at six-years old, all Gus knows, is that Brian and Justin love him. If you'll remember, Gus has spent most of this time traveling with Brian and Justin. He's only been at the mansion periodically. So believe me, Gus is totally unaffected by the things that they have to offer. Gus is just happy to spend time with Brian and Justin. Now I will admit, Gus is hopelessly in love with Justin...but then you've known about that since day one," Melanie pointed out with a smile.

"You think I'm being unreasonable?" Lindsay asked with a forced laugh.

"I wouldn't say that exactly," Melanie said haltingly, "But I have to admit, that the particular shade of green that you've taken to wearing lately...doesn't become you," Melanie said sternly.

"What are you trying to say?" Lindsay asked with a pout.

"I don't think that I'm trying to say anything. Why don't you just admit that you're jealous?" Melanie suggested.

"Jealous! Me? What would make you think that?" Lindsay replied, starting to ramble in between laughs.

"You can go ahead and admit that Justin is a constant threat to your happiness. First he got Brian! Now he's got Gus too. Where does it end?" Melanie added sarcastically, throwing her hands in the air for emphasis.

"I'm just not ready to lose my baby," Lindsay replied.

"Careful Lindsay, don't suddenly start to clutch Gus too tightly because you must put aside your dreams about Brian," Melanie said, cutting right to the core of things, "I won't allow you to start to smother our son. Brian made a lifetime commitment to Justin...I know that this is hard for you. You've had these dreams for such a long time. But, don't make Gus suffer because his father chose to be with someone else," she insisted.

"I love Gus. I would never ..." Lindsay finally said with a sigh.

"You're starting to sound like Michael," Melanie said quietly.

"Oh please, not that. I never believed that Brian and I..." Lindsay began and then she paused. "You don't have to be so cruel. I'm not Michael, you know," Lindsay protested.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Melanie asked.

"Michael is having a hard time accepting Brian's decision to be with Justin. He could lose Ben if he doesn't come to his senses soon," Lindsay rambled.

"What are you talking about?" Melanie asked.

"All these years, Michael figured that by the time Ben died, Brian would be ready to settle down in a relationship with him. That way he wouldn't have to spend his golden years alone. Michael had a contingency plan in place for when Ben died. Ben is furious!" Lindsay revealed.

"Don't you think he has a right to be?" Melanie protested. "I know...we all know that Michael loves Ben, but to have planned out what he was going to do to insure his own happiness when his partner is dead...is really just too much. Surely, you see that!"

"Of course, I do. What Michael has been doing is horrible!" Lindsay confirmed.

"Don't you see that you were almost doing the same thing?" Melanie pointed out.

"As Michael and I were talking lately, I do have to admit that he and I have certain things in common. But at least I see clearly the mistakes that I've made over the years. I know there have been times that I've been a real bitch to you. I'm just glad that we're still together. I really do love you Melanie. You're really who I've always wanted to grow old with...I've even told Brian that many times over the years, but still I have a lot to make up for with you," Lindsay quietly admitted.

Melanie didn't say anything.

Elizabeth finally found her voice. "Well Melanie, tell me what you're thinking? How do you feel about what Lindsay's just said?"

"I understand that these are difficult times for her. I'm glad that she told me how she feels....the good and the not so good. I know that she's probably always going to have feeling for Brian. I know that. I've always known that. But I will admit it's good to know that she loves me and truly wants to be with me. I've always wondered if this relationship...what we have... was ever going to be enough for her. We've both had opportunities to leave...but we both want to be together. We're just going to have to work through all the rest." Melanie reiterated.

"I'm glad to hear you say that. You don't know how much I want things to continue to get better between us," Lindsay added.

"Me too... I just don't want you to try to smother Gus to make up for your imaginary loss of Brian. Gus is presently doing very well with his four parents. He really does love us, you know. Besides, we still have Jenny to spoil for several more years. And we still have another 12 years before we lose Gus completely and he moves away to go to college. In the meantime, we need to enjoy our kids and each other," Melanie reminded her.

"We're definitely very lucky to have friends and family, who love us. We have all this support, and we have so many plans still to make. I'm really looking forward to the future...with you," Lindsay said.

Elizabeth felt the time was right for her to again step into the conversion. "I'm glad that you two can still talk about your feelings. Lindsay, I realize that you're on an emotional roller coaster right now. Give yourself a little time to adjust to all these changes. But I do think that it's good that you and Melanie can talk things over."

"I want us to keep on talking," Lindsay reiterated to her partner.

"And Gus?" Melanie asked.

"You're right, Gus needs to spend time with us...and time with Brian and Justin. He is thriving, and I want that to continue. I just miss my little boy. I just hope that Brian doesn't get too busy to pay attention to him," Lindsay said on reflection.

"We'll have to make sure that Gus is ok with things. Brian is bound to get busy from time to time. We just have to make sure that Gus understands and knows that he's loved," Melanie suggested.

"Well our time is almost up. I just wanted to be sure that the two of you are ok," Elizabeth suggested, needing to make a reality check before she ended this session and allowed the couple to leave.

"Believe me, Elizabeth, we're going to be fine. We realize that we still have some issues so we'll keep talking to each other and try to work on things. We'll see you in a month," Lindsay said

"And if things get too difficult for us, we know that we can always call you, and we definitely promise to do that," Melanie added.

"I, too, can promise that we will definitely do that," Lindsay added.

"So I will see you two next month," Elizabeth said.

And with that Lindsay and Melanie quietly left Elizabeth's office.

As they were leaving, Melanie suggested that they stop for coffee before returning to Debbie's. Lindsay agreed for they still had some talking to do, even though they had made progress during the session with Elizabeth.

Melanie and Lindsay made their way to the coffee shop nearby and settled in at a table. Their coffee was ordered and cheerfully brought to their table by their waitress.

During their discussions over coffee, Melanie reminded Lindsay of how many people were going to be at Debbie's this afternoon for dinner. The two of them shared a laugh at the possible chaos that was about to ensue.

As they drank their coffee, Melanie and Lindsay realized that they could hardly wait.

Chapter 3 – Session 7

Saturday Morning... (Day 62)

Immediately after breakfast with Carl and Debbie, Lindsay and Melanie headed for their hastily scheduled appointment with Elizabeth.

In the two weeks since their last visit to Pittsburgh, they had lived an estranged existence in Toronto. They resided in the same house, and both of them looked after Gus and Jenny, but Melanie was now sleeping in the guest room, leaving Lindsay alone in their bedroom. They were cordial, but distant, in their dealings with each other.

Lindsay hoped that this counseling session would help to change the tenor in their household. Melanie, on the other hand, wasn't sure that she was ready, just yet, to forgive and forget. However, she did agree to attend this counseling session. She had a lot of things on her mind too, and she hoped that discussing them with Lindsay, while Elizabeth was present, would prove to be a safe environment for her to express herself.

Both Melanie and Lindsay felt that they had a lot riding on this session.

Elizabeth opened the door to her outer office and noticed that Lindsay and Melanie were waiting to see her. From the intense looks on their faces, she knew that things were not well between the women. Of course, she was already forewarned that there was trouble because Lindsay had begged for this session only two weeks after their last session...rather than waiting the usual month interval.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and knew that she had her work cut out for her today, but she felt she was ready.

"Lindsay...Melanie...why don't you two come on in," Elizabeth said, trying to sound cheerful as she invited them into her office.

The couple stood up and walked into her office. They took their usual seats. The usual signs of support and affection for each other were absent this time. Elizabeth silently noted the change.

"Thanks for seeing us on such short notice," Lindsay began immediately.

Elizabeth immediately noted that things had changed drastically, for Lindsay usually had to be coaxed to speak. Now, here she was, immediately leading things off. Once again, Elizabeth silently made note of the change.

Lindsay continued, "I've made some terrible mistakes, and I need to know how to set things right. I love Melanie, and I don't want to lose what we have," she said.

"I see," Elizabeth said with a nod. "Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

Once again, Lindsay immediately jumped right in. "I made a terrible mistake. I allowed my feelings for Brian to interfere with my relationship with Melanie. I didn't mean to. I really do have things in perspective. I keep telling Melanie that I'm not Michael. But so much happened two weeks ago that I just don't think that she hears me anymore."

"Melanie, what do you have to say to that?" Elizabeth asked.

"I really don't have anything to say. For months, Lindsay sat in these sessions and made pronouncements about things she sees....mistakes she's made...lessons she's learned...changes that she wants to make. And I believed her. I have since learned that she only means what she says when she's in here...in this office," Melanie pointed out.

Elizabeth simply nodded to let Melanie know that she was heard.

Melanie sighed deeply, trying to collect herself before she continued. "But let Lindsay and me return back into the real world...let Brian be in the room...let him appear to pull away from her in any way, and Lindsay starts to fight with all her might to hold on to him. She wants to have the old Brian back. And once she starts down this path, our life together and our relationship just become unimportant."

Lindsay immediately fired back. "How can you say that? You have to know how much I love you...how much we love each other."

Melanie appeared to ignore Lindsay's outburst. In her mind this had become a scripted response that no longer had any meaning. Instead, she decided to share her own observations. "Personally, Elizabeth, I feel as though I've grown a lot over these last few months. I know that I've been less angry. I have to believe that these changes have to do with work we've done in our counseling sessions."

"I'll admit that you've worked very hard. I'm glad that you're able to see some of the results," Elizabeth said with a gentle smile.

Melanie continued, "I've seen certain truths and not all of them are pretty. I realize that I still have a lot to work on, and I'm trying to do that. But as far as our relationship is concerned, I can't help feeling as if we've wasted our time and our money sitting in therapy...especially since we seem to be back at square one. And I'm not sure that I really have the energy to begin this process, yet again, from scratch with Lindsay."

"If you truly feel that way, Melanie, why are you here?" Elizabeth asked.

"I'm here because Lindsay and I have split apart before and later gotten back together again. We've done that so many times that our relationship has a revolving door element to it. That may have been okay when it was just the two of us. But now we have the kids. And they are entitled to a degree of stability in their lives. I'm here because I want to be absolutely sure if we split apart this time...that we are, as you suggested, loving friends with two kids in common. I want to be sure that if we split apart, it truly is the end. That we can, in fact, move on with our lives and find that future relationship that will bring us true happiness," Melanie revealed.

"That's pretty harsh, Melanie! Why didn't you say anything?" Lindsay demanded to know.

"Maybe, I've been with you long enough to know that you like the silence. You like to peacefully co-exist, with unpleasant things remaining unsaid. It's not the way I usually do things. I decided that the way I usually handle things, trying to get you to talk about everything before you were ready doesn't get us anywhere either. I didn't want Gus and Jenny subjected to an angry household. I've learned that I can't control things. I've learned that there's always another option. So when you asked that we return for more counseling sessions, I agreed to give it another try...because I love you and because you asked," Melanie explained.

"But it seems like you've already made of up your mind," Lindsay protested. "I asked for our counseling sessions to continue, so we could work things out. If you've already made up your mind that there isn't anything worth saving...then there really isn't any hope for us."

"I agreed to come to counseling. I'm here with an open mind. But we don't come here with a clean slate. I'll admit that I still have my doubts," Melanie restated.

"How can you doubt how I feel about you? If nothing else that should be clear," Lindsay protested. "Maybe it's that you've lost all feelings for me?"

"No Lindsay, you can't shift the blame to me this time. I'll admit that I feel betrayed. But you decided to make your feelings for Brian the primary concern in your life. Oh, you may be in a relationship with me...but he's clearly your main focus."

"But you know how much Brian needs me? He's always needed me."

"I used to believe that. I used to believe that it was Brian's dependency on you that caused all our problems. Certain events have told me a different story. Now, what I know, is how much you need Brian. All these years I've been so wrong. I once thought that Brian held on to you like he held onto Michael. Now, what I understand is that he does love you, and you're one of his closet friends. But he has clearly moved forward into the future...and his future is with Justin...and you're the one, fighting for a past that you once had with him. Time moved on, and the past can probably never be repeated. You, like Michael, are lost in the long ago fantasy," Melanie stated clearly but calmly.

A silence fell over the office, and Lindsay seemed lost in deep thought.

"Lindsay?" Elizabeth gently said to bring her back to the present.

She immediately responded. "I'm not like Michael! I'm not! All I wanted was for Justin to have no regrets about his choices..."

Melanie quietly interrupted Lindsay train of thought. She had heard this line so often, and she felt it was time to challenge this fantasy...here and now.

"You mean like you have? You chose to have this relationship with me. You decided that you wanted to redirect your art career. We decided together to have two kids. You decided that our family was the most important thing. And now you have regrets! What am I missing?"

"I don't have any regrets. You're right, we made certain decisions together. Those decisions were right when we made them. But now..." Lindsay said sadly.

"Now...what?"

"I still want to have an art career as a painter. No, it won't be like Justin's because I don't really have his talent. But, I deserve a chance to see how far my own talent can take me," Lindsay argued.

Melanie sighed to herself. "But you did that, Lindsay. You went down that path. You tried to have a career as a painter. You traveled that road and came out on the other end with a decision that it's not for you. You decided that you wanted to work in an art gallery. What's changed now to make you want to go back there to painting again?"

"Watching Justin...I realize...I realize...that maybe that could still be me," Lindsay whispered.

"What could be you?" Melanie asked quietly but without malice. "Having a career as an artist or being Brian's partner? Which fantasy now comes to life for you when you look at Justin...when you look at Justin's life?"

Lindsay immediately burst into tears.

Elizabeth reached over and handed her a box of tissues. Melanie sat their quietly, realizing that she had cut through all the bullshit and had finally struck a nerve.

Elizabeth and Melanie waited in silence, allowing Lindsay the time she needed to regain her composure.

Finally Elizabeth broke the silence, "Lindsay, tell us why you're crying? Tell us what you're feeling?"

"I just never realized that Melanie was so angry. For the last two weeks she has been silent. She has been distant. I realize that I should have forced her to talk. I can't believe the terrible thoughts that she harbors."

"And which thoughts are those?" Elizabeth asked.

"Elizabeth, I am not a fool!" Lindsay quickly said. "I sat back and watched what Justin had to go through these past 6 years to become Brian's partner. I'm clear that there was no way in hell that I would have had the strength to endure all that. I realize that I could have never survived it. I'm fond of Brian...that's true...but I clearly realize that our relationship...his and mine...has limits. But I don't want to lose him as a close friend. He is Gus's father. But more that, we've been through a lot together over the years," she added.

"I can understand that," Melanie chimed in. "Really, I can. Brian still loves you. That's probably never going to change. But Brian is clear that his life is with Justin. And both Brian and Justin have made sure that Gus has a place in their lives. So whereas your choice of Brian as Gus's biological father may have seemed like the worst choice, it's turned out to be for the best," Melanie acknowledged. "Our son couldn't be happier."

"Thank you for at least admitting that," Lindsay said, once again drying her tears.

"But I have to wonder," Melanie continued. "I have to wonder, when you'll reach a point that OUR relationship...the one that exists between you and me...is the most important relationship in your life."

"It already is...can't you see that. That's why we're here. You know that I love you. I don't know what I have to do to make you understand that. I don't know why you won't accept that."

"I'll tell you what I see," Melanie said calmly. "Let's say, for the sake of argument, that you've accepted and gained a new perspective on your relationship with Brian, as you profess. Then, I have to wonder why your next order of business was not to see what you could do to make our relationship better. Your next choice of where to focus your energies was to chase after a career that you once decided was not in the cards for you. What does that tell you?"

"It doesn't tell me anything. My art is as important to me as the law is to you. You don't apologize for your ambition. Why should I?" Lindsay argued.

"What about Gus and Jenny? When do they become a priority?" Melanie challenged "And what about me?" she added.

"You might ask yourself that question! You can't decide that taking care of Gus and Jenny is my responsibility...while you're the bread-winner. We don't have that traditional a marriage. They are both our children. They need us...both of us," Lindsay reminded her.

"And when are you planning on remembering that YOU have two kids? That you can't go off for a summer or a year to pursue an artist-in-residence program in Paris, leaving those two kids behind. What were you thinking?" Melanie asked.

"Then I was thinking that Paris is a wonderful city. Gus and Jenny would have a wonderful summer. You could find a temporary work assignment in Paris. We could be together as a family. Don't you see?" Lindsay argued.

"So, the summer in Paris is your consolation prize for the loss of Brian. This is your way of moving on?" Melanie asked incredulously.

Lindsay couldn't come up with a response to her question.

When the silence became deafening, Elizabeth decided it was time for her to step in again.

Chapter 4 – Session 7 Continues

Saturday (Day 62)

"Lindsay, the issue of the artist-in-residence program seems to be very important to you...specifically the artist-in-residence program in Paris. Tell me what's so important about Paris," Elizabeth asked.

Melanie didn't like this line of questioning, as she indicated by rolling her eyes. But she accepted that Elizabeth knew what she was doing, so she tried to exhibit some patience to let events unfold.

"You've got to admit that Paris would be a wonderful place for us to make a new start. We could put all the upsets and the disappointments behind us and begin things again...renewed," Lindsay said wistfully.

"What makes you think that a new place will be different?" Elizabeth asked.

"When I was a little girl, my parents would occasionally have disagreements. My mother would pack Lynette and me up and take us to some faraway place for a visit. Then we returned home, and things would get back to normal," Lindsay said, lapsing into a childlike voice.

"I'm sure those are wonderful memories of your childhood...but you aren't a child anymore. You and Melanie have already made "one great escape" to Toronto. Then you just swept everything under the rug and moved on. How long did it take for everything that you were trying to run away from to resurface there...even though you were in this new place?" Elizabeth suggested.

Lindsay thought about things for a moment and realized that the answer was obvious. "It really didn't take long," she had to admit.

"Besides, if you're now thinking about refocusing on your art career, when were you planning to spend time focused on your relationship and your family? If I remember, all the things that you've said about art and Justin...art really is a jealous mistress," Elizabeth suggested.

"And isn't that why you're supposed to be so upset with Justin?" Melanie interrupted, "Because you feel that Justin can't concentrate on his art AND his relationship with Brian at the same time? One or the other is bound to suffer...at least that's what you've been saying for the last year," she added. "How are things supposed to be different for you? I was just curious..."

"Justin and I are at different points in our career. It's not the same!" Lindsay fired back quickly, without thinking. She was beginning to feel like she was cornered in a situation of her own creation.

"But don't you think it would be exactly just like Justin?" Melanie suggested, "Especially if you're trying to take your career as a painter to the next level. You already acknowledged that Justin is a great talent, and yet he's constantly locked away in his studio. I would think you would have to work even harder than he does to achieve any results. You would also have to be patient. Don't you think the career that you're considering would take a good deal of time...years maybe?"

"I suppose," Lindsay, once again, had to admit. She could hear where this line of reasoning was going, and she realized the truth of what she was hearing, but she was having a hard time letting go of her dream.

"What are Melanie and the kids supposed to do while you're building this career? Where do they fit into your future scheme?" Elizabeth asked patiently.

"I figure they would be supporting me...just like Brian supports Justin," Lindsay quickly pointed out, hoping this would deflect the current argument.

"Okay, I can see that," Elizabeth acknowledged. "What you're suggesting might take care of your needs to be an artist. I can imagine that you foresee a glorious future for yourself as an artist. But what about Melanie, Gus, and Jenny...what do you see for them while you pursue this career? What's in it for them?"

Once again Lindsay was silent. She tried to find some answer to these burning questions that Elizabeth was asking. As she sat there pondering the questions, Lindsay seemed to have a moment of insight. Finally she said, "You make me sound so selfish."

"Really?" Elizabeth asked, with an intonation in her voice to suggest that Lindsay's observation was a complete surprise to her. "How is that possible?"

"You make it seem like all I do is think about me. You make it seem like nowhere in my plans did I factor in Melanie and the kids. You make it seem like all I had laid out was a glamorous life for me...a great fantasy!"

"There ARE a few other people to consider, don't you think?" Elizabeth suggested.

"I guess I figured just as we moved to Toronto...that we could move to Paris. Just as I got a job there, I thought that Melanie could get a position as a lawyer in Paris. The kids would grow from the experience. I just thought it would be perfect."

"Lindsay, forget about me for a second," Melanie said quietly. "Gus is six, and Jenny is two. Right now they both need their fathers to become well rounded little people. They also need the love of all the people in our little family more than anything. Don't you think they both may be a little young to reap the benefits of living in Paris?"

"And if you're going to be busy intensely pursuing your art...and if Melanie were working as an attorney...you're both going to be rather busy...especially when you factor in, another language and another culture. I have to ask, what about the kids? When would either of you have time for them or for each other? How would the two of you help the little ones adjust? I'm just asking...because I'm sure that you see a clearer vision, that Melanie and I are probably missing," Elizabeth suggested. "Why don't you help us see what you see?"

Lindsay was silent for a moment. Both Melanie and Elizabeth sat there patiently waiting for her to continue.

"I just thought it would be a dream-come-true for everyone. I thought that being in Europe would be like living a fairy tale for the kids. Think of all that they would learn. But then again...maybe, I didn't really think it through," Lindsay finally admitted quietly. "I just never considered my marriage to be that traditional. I never figured that I had to give up everything for my kids."

"Maybe not everything, Lindsay, but you have to be willing to give up something for your kids. Somewhere along the line, Gus and Jenny have to feel like they're most important to you," Elizabeth added.

"But, I am the primary care giver for our kids," Lindsay challenged. "Maybe it's time for Melanie to do more. After all, they are her kids too."

"I'm never going to be the kind of mother that you are Lindsay." Melanie reiterated quietly. "I've said that over and over. I love our kids...both of them. I mother differently than you. You have to allow me that latitude. I try to make sure our kids have what they need. I'm not going to let you make me feel guilty about that. But never doubt how much I love them."

"I'm sorry. You have admitted your limitations. And you have made sure that Gus gets to spend time with Brian and Justin, as you promised. I really understand your acknowledging that you can't do it all. I just wish...." Lindsay said sadly.

"I know..." Melanie agreed.

Elizabeth decided that it was time for her to mention the obvious here. "Lindsay, I've heard you talk about what you want in terms of a career. I've heard you talk about what you want for the kids. Yet, nowhere in this discussion, did I hear you mention Melanie...except that you want her to practice law in Paris. Doesn't that seem a little odd to you, especially since you requested this session saying that you wanted to save your relationship with her?"

"Oh, my god!" Lindsay said in horror. "I've gone on and on about these things that really don't matter...rather than talk about what really is most important. And my relationship with Melanie is the most important thing. Without her, the rest doesn't really matter!"

"I see," Elizabeth said quietly. "I can understand the fantasies are much easier to construct. Reality can be a really scary place."

"I'm not Michael! I'm not Michael! I'm not Michael!" Lindsay protested repeatedly, with her voice elevating with each repetition. "I live in the real world. I don't create fantasies to help me get through the day like he does. Michael can't deal with Ben's chronic illness, so he lapses back to a childhood fantasy to help him cope. Unfortunately, he lost sight of the line between the fantasy and reality and tried to make sure his fantasy didn't fade away. Brian's legalizing things with Justin reinforced that Brian and Michael would never be a couple. Michael just snapped. And in his fight to hold on to fantasy, he lost everything that was real...he lost Ben. I'm still fighting to hold on to my relationship with Melanie. I really do want things to get better. That was the reason that we started counseling in the first place, and I'm still committed to that!"

"It appears that you still have a few fantasies of your own?" Melanie pointed out. "And it's okay to dream. But just like Ben wasn't a part of Michael's fantasies...I sometimes don't feel like I'm a part of yours either. This Paris thing is just one example."

Lindsay listened to Melanie and thought about what she just said. For the first time she understood that if she continued to pursue her dream of Paris, it could cost her everything. This prospect scared Lindsay, so once again she broke down in tears.

Melanie decided to allow Lindsay her moment of tears, while she raised a subject that was pressing on her own mind. "Elizabeth, while Lindsay is gathering herself together, I need to talk to you about something that happened last night."

Elizabeth looked over at Lindsay, who quickly nodded that she was okay. "Sure, Melanie, go ahead. Lindsay, you'll let us know when you're ready for us to continue, won't you?"

"I just need some time," Lindsay admitted. "So, please go ahead, what Melanie is suggesting is really important too."

"Melanie..." Elizabeth said with a nod.

Melanie began, "Michael, Jenny's father, always believed that his own father died in Vietnam two weeks after he was born. He always had visions of his father as a war hero. However, over the last few days, he just found out that his father is very much alive. He just found out that his father didn't die in Vietnam. His father is instead a world famous female impersonator, who happens to be appearing in town this weekend. Michael just found out that Debbie has lied to him for 35 years," she explained.

"Brian had Emmett tell us last night, so that we would know the facts and wouldn't bombard Debbie with a lot of stupid questions," Lindsay added. "This has got to be a difficult time for her too."

"Brian also wanted us to be there for both Michael and Debbie...without being judgmental," Melanie suggested.

"And can you do that?" Elizabeth asked. "After all, you're a mother, and Michael is the father of your daughter. Can you suspend all judgment?"

"I don't know," Melanie admitted. "After all, Debbie began the lie when she was only 17. She did it because she wanted to give Michael a father he could be proud of. At 17, she didn't stop to think about the long term consequences of what she was doing. I'm sure that she believed that the truth would never come to light."

"When you're 17, some times you think you're invincible. You also think that you can control Fate," Elizabeth commented, with a smile of understanding.

"There is no age limit to that," Melanie commented with a smile. "I'm much older than 17, and to a certain extent, I've been trying to do the same things. I've tried to control everything involving my daughter since before Jenny Rebecca was born."

"What do you mean?" Elizabeth asked.

Melanie continued, "As much as I love Michael and Debbie, I clearly want Jenny Rebecca to grow up to be different...I don't my daughter to use either of them as a role model. I want her to want more from life. Over the last two years, I've come to realize that just as Gus needs Brian, Jenny needs Michael and Debbie to help her to grow into a total person. Debbie and Michael and even Ben and Hunter, dote on her in ways that Lindsay and I don't."

"So, what you are saying is that you see the benefit of an extended family?" Elizabeth asked to be sure that she understood what was being said.

"Yes," Melanie confirmed for her.

"And that's why you travel back here every month so Jenny Rebecca can spend time with the rest of the family?"

"Yes. Before we started coming here to see you, Michael and Ben would come to Toronto once a month to see our daughter. Each time Jenny Rebecca sees them she gets the extra attention that she seems to crave...without me having to deal with Debbie and Michael smothering her on a day-to-day basis, and without them telling me how to raise my daughter. Lindsay and I still have to make the decisions that are best for her. We still need to decide what will give her the best chances in life."

"I can see that. But I also get the feeling that there's something that you're not telling me," Elizabeth quietly suggested. Then she waited to see if more was going to be said.

"I'm really not much different than Debbie," Melanie quietly admitted.

"How so?" Elizabeth asked.

Melanie began to answer her. "Debbie told a lie to give Michael a father he could be proud of. I keep my daughter in Toronto, so that she will not be over-influenced by ..."

"A father that's still child-like and a grandmother that is totally outrageous and over-the-top," Lindsay quickly added, helping her partner find the words. "We love them both...but they are who they are. We both agree that we want more than this for our daughter."

"I see that you two are in agreement on this," Elizabeth commented.

"I'm just starting to wonder if I've made a mistake," Melanie suggested. "I admit we've know Debbie and Michael for years. I may have been hypercritical. I may have been judgmental. I never once stopped to imagine the underlying reasons that Debbie is, the way she is...and Michael is, the way he is."

"I'm afraid that I'm guilty of the same things," Lindsay added. "I admit that I made allowances for Brian over the years because I understood why he was, the way he was. His childhood was terrible. I never stopped to think what past events might be impacting Debbie and Michael to make them the way they are. I never even stopped to consider."

Melanie continued, "I admit that Debbie has spent a lifetime smothering Michael. And Michael and Brian have been best friends since they were 14. So whenever Michael got into trouble, Debbie was always content to blame Brian. So, Michael doesn't really understand about accepting responsibility. Even with Jenny Rebecca, he fought for his rights, but he doesn't think about supporting her...not that we expect him to. At the moment for him, she's like a china doll...something to be played with."

"For most of his life, there has always been someone to blame. Now Michael still seems to expect it. He still has a few life lessons to learn," Lindsay suggested. "But then I'm probably not in a position to talk. Michael and I really aren't that different. We've both always looked to Brian to get us out of whatever mess we get ourselves into. And I guess neither of us had to take any responsibility for things. It was just easier to blame Brian," Lindsay admitted.

"I was guilty of the same thing. I blamed Brian for all the problems between us too," Melanie said to Lindsay. "The problems between us are really of our own making. That means that fixing them is going to have to be between us as well. And we have to do it without fantasies and unrealistic expectations."

"You mean, we have to do it by hard work," Lindsay admitted with a smile.

"Of course, I'm always glad to hear you say that," Elizabeth added with a smile. "Well, our time is up for today. I know that we still have a lot to talk about. I was hoping that we could meet tomorrow morning. I need to be sure that things are okay before you go back to Toronto."

Melanie and Lindsay looked at each other for confirmation, and then they both agreed that meeting tomorrow would work in their schedule.

Finally, everyone said their goodbyes.

Chapter 5 – The Walk To Remember

Saturday Afternoon...(Day 62)

After their session, Lindsay suggested that she and Melanie take a walk together. For Lindsay so much had come up in the session, and she wanted a chance to talk about her feelings with Melanie before they returned to Debbie's.

"You know, I never liked the silence between us," Melanie admitted, as she agreed to take that walk with Lindsay.

"I know that you don't. That's what made the last few weeks so frightening. You wouldn't really say anything. You were polite...yet distant. I had no idea what you were thinking," Lindsay said softly.

"And now you know..."

"I don't like the idea of you thinking that we should go our separate ways. I want us to stay together. You have to know that."

"I know that. But I don't think our staying together just for the sake of being together makes sense. I don't want to live in a shell a relationship. If we were going to do that, then we should separate and build separate lives. Gus and Jenny would eventually learn to cope. But I don't want to live in a relationship where I really don't matter."

"That's just it. You do matter. You're really what's most important to me. My friendship with Brian is important, but not more important than what we have. I love our family and our life. I love working at the art gallery. I admit that the one in Toronto isn't as satisfying as working for the Bloom Gallery. Sydney gave me a lot more opportunities and a lot more responsibilities. I felt like I made a difference. Working at the Toronto Gallery is merely a job."

"Is that why Paris keeps coming up...because you're unhappy in your current job?"

"I'm sure that probably has a lot to do with it. But even more than that, I just want to make a new beginning with you. Paris just seemed like a good place to start. After thinking about it, I can see that it probably was a fantasy."

"You know, we did talk about moving to someplace new."

"I know. It's just that in the last few weeks, we haven't said much of anything to each other. Now I hear that you seem to be thinking that we should go our separate ways. I don't know what to think."

"I'm just not sure about you sometimes. You say one thing in counseling, but when we return to the outside world, I hear something entirely different. I'm just not sure sometimes where I...and even the kids stand with you. You look at Justin...you look at Justin with Brian...I know that you once had dreams. But like Michael, if you continue to cling to those dreams so tenaciously...dreams will be all that you have. Because nowhere in those dreams, do the kids and I fit in. Surely, you see that."

"Of course, I see that," Lindsay stated emphatically. "I'm sure that it's simply because our life just seems to be such a struggle right now. I just don't see an end in sight. I want more. I don't know how to make things better for us. So I guess, like Michael, I drift into fantasy, and Brian is the perfect fantasy."

"So you really are that unhappy?" Melanie asked calmly.

"Things just aren't working out the way that we planned. Surely, you see that we're so isolated in Toronto. Money is tight. Things just aren't working."

"So, that's what you see is the problem?"

"That's a large part of it. I think things between us would improve if our living together were easier."

"Lindsay, that's just its. We co-exist together...I'm not even sure that we're living together. We don't seem to be focused on the same goals. You're obviously unfulfilled in this relationship, or your art wouldn't suddenly become such as issue at this moment. Something must have happened to reawaken this sleeping giant."

"I work in an art gallery where I see people with less talent than I have, selling their paintings. I want to have a chance to have it all. Why should I have to sacrifice everything?"

"I see. I know a few years ago, Sam Auerbach seemed to reawaken the artist within you. Of course, there was more to that than just your art, wasn't it?"

"How can you bring that up now? I thought you had forgiven me for all that."

"This isn't about forgiveness. I've heard Brian say this to Justin over the years, and I never quite understood it before...but I think that I see it now."

"What is that?"

"It's your decision where you want to be."

"That's not fair!"

"I have often wondered if this relationship would ever be enough for you. Watching you try to deal with the loss of Brian, and now the loss of your artistic future, I have to wonder, once again. What the kids and I have to offer must pale by comparison. In fact, I'm having a hard time understanding why you're trying to hold on so tenaciously. Is it just that this is familiar? Is it just that you don't want to be alone? What is it? Because, from what I see, there is nothing HERE motivating you to want to stay. All the things that you seem to want to make you happy seem to exist outside of us...outside of this relationship."

"Melanie!"

"I'm not saying this to make you uncomfortable. I'm not saying this to hurt you. I think if you give yourself some time to look at things, you too will see what I see. I just can't seem to find a place in your life. It's just how I feel."

"Then what you're saying is that there is no hope for us," Lindsay said as the tears started, once again, to slide down her cheeks.

Melanie handed her a tissue. "I'm looking for a reason to hope," she added quietly.

"You have to know that I love you," Lindsay argued.

"Lindsay, you say that so often. I don't know whether you love me or not."

"How can you say that?"

"Think about it Lindsay, in the last two weeks, since you learned of the new status of the relationship between Brian and Justin, when was the last time that you thought about me?" Melanie asked quietly.

For this Lindsay had no answer.

Melanie and Lindsay walked a little bit further in silence before Melanie finally said, "It's okay...an answer really isn't necessary." Then she tried to force a smile.

They continued walking a little further. "Look, you mentioned that there was some shopping that you wanted to get done. I have a few errands that I'd like to run too. Why don't we go do these things and meet each other back at Debbie's later?"

"Sure..." Lindsay finally agreed. "But, Melanie, please don't make any decisions about us just yet."

"Don't get melodramatic. I'm not running away, we're only going shopping," Melanie tried to say cheerfully. She leaned over and gently kissed Lindsay on her cheek. "I'll see you a little later."

And with that Lindsay and Melanie walked off in different directions.

**Talisman of Time**

**(Sequel to Superheroes)**

Chapter 1 – Morning Plans

The Next Morning (Day 15)

Brian felt, rather than heard, Justin slide out of bed the next morning ahead of the alarm.

Brian had not forgiven Justin for falling asleep in the middle of their 'critical discussion'. Read 'critical discussion' to mean something that Brian wanted to talk about, but Justin didn't.

Justin had sent Brian's painting to the house in West Virginia for the simple reason that Justin wanted Brian to see his painting, for the first time, there. Brian tried to understand Justin's reasoning because he knew from experience that Justin firmly believed that a painting should be seen in its proper setting. Justin may have an artist's sensibility about such things, but at this moment Brian wanted his painting, and he wanted it now. The suspense was killing him.

All he remembered was the beauty of the painting from the quick glimpse of the thumbnail on Justin's website. Brian already knew he loved the painting, even if he couldn't remember many specific details about it.

Brian kept thinking to himself, if he had only had a little more time with the computer, this problem wouldn't exist. He had been just about to click on the thumbnail and to see the larger image of the painting, when Justin intervened and convinced him to wait and see the real thing. Justin had then extracted a promise that Brian would not peek at the website images. That sealed his fate, for no matter how desperately Brian wanted see what was on the website, he would never break a promise to Justin.

Brian accepted that he would have to suffer and wait until the time was right to see the actual painting, but he didn't have to like it one bit.

Brian's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the shower. Deciding this was an invitation, Brian turned off the unnecessary alarm on the clock so it wouldn't wake Gus while he was in the shower. And then Brian quietly slipped out of bed and joined Justin for their morning shower.

An hour later as the water turned cold and Justin had made his usual complaint about the insufficient capacity of hot water in the loft, Brian and Justin emerged from their shower thoroughly fucked and ready to start the day.

Justin dressed first and went to the kitchen to start the coffee and prepare breakfast. Brian took a little longer to dress, while he tried to figure out exactly which suit/shirt/tie combination matched his mood today.

Brian looked at the sleeping Gus and gently kissed his cheek. Then the aroma of brewing coffee forced Brian to toss on a pair of sweatpants and hurry to the kitchen.

When Brian arrived in the kitchen, Justin was nowhere in sight, but the door to the loft was opened. Walking to the open door, Brian peered into the hallway and noticed the door to the storage area was opened. Justin had given strict instructions to Brian not to venture into the storage area. So Brian simply shrugged and returned to pour himself a glass of guava juice, while he waited for the coffee to finish brewing.

Through the open door Brian could hear the rustling sounds of things being moved. His instinct was to offer help, but he remembered Justin's instructions to stay out of the storage area, so he made himself comfortable on one of the bar stools and continued to wait for Justin's return.

Hearing the door to the storage room close and Justin's approach, Brian gulped down the rest of his juice.

"Is Gus still asleep?" Justin asked, returning to the loft and sliding the door close. "I guess he did have a rather busy day yesterday."

"Yes, we all did!" Brian remarked with a smile. Then noticing the sketchpad in Justin's arms, Brian had to ask, "What do you have there?"

"Brian, I've been gone a long time, but surely you recognize a sketchpad," Justin teased, while gently stroking Brian's cheek.

"Don't be a smartass, Sunshine. I know it's a sketchpad. Why were you fishing this one out of the storage room, when you already have one over there on the coffee table?"

"This came from 'my just in case list' when I was packing to come to here."

"What?"

"Never mind. Would you like me to fix you some eggs and toast?" Justin asked, moving into the kitchen and starting to gather ingredients.

"Hold on. What are you talking about 'my just in case list'? You've mentioned that before."

Justin sighed and explained, "When I was packing to come to Pittsburgh, you were really vague about why I was coming. So I packed a few things that I thought I might need while I was here. Things I couldn't purchase here, but just might need for one reason on another. This sketchpad was on that list."

Brian reached for the sketchpad and starting flipping through it. He was utterly fascinated by the images before him. Justin had done color sketches of various rooms in a house. The sketches were unusual in that furniture and special touches had been added to each room. This was the first time that Brian had ever seen color images in one of Justin's sketchpads. Color images were usually reserved for canvas.

"Justin, if you ever to decide to give up painting, you have a terrific future in interior design," Brian commented with a smile. "These are magnificent interiors."

"Thank you, I'm glad you like them," Justin gushed, always surprised by praise from Brian.

"What are they?" Brian asked.

"Bri-tin."

"What? Bri-tin? How?"

"Come here and I'll show you," Justin said, motioning toward his computer.

While Justin fired up his computer, Brian poured two cups of coffee and brought them over to the computer. Brian was always most curious to see what Justin had show him, for Justin never failed to intrigue him.

Justin opened a file on his computer and smiled at Brian.

Then Justin started to explain, "Right after you asked me to marry you, I ordered the architectural plans for the house. I loaded them on my computer. We were starting to talk about renovations and things, so this seemed like the easiest way to manage things."

Justin had been mindlessly clicking through images, when he paused for a moment. He became a bit more subdued, before he continued. "Of course, then we decided not to get married," he said sadly.

It was just a moment, then Justin's voice quickly returned to normal.

"Anyway, I now have the layout for the whole property. I have the house and the surrounding structures, including the pool, tennis court, and stables," Justin said, clicking rapidly through image after image, showing the entire expanse of the West Virginia property.

"Well...well...well," Brian commented, showing total amazement. "What else have you been up to?"

"In the beginning when I went to New York, remember you wouldn't talk to me, and nothing was happening on the art scene for me there, so I would work on the designs for the house. Then in between shows, I would periodically update my sketches. Eventually, I digitized the interior spaces of the house. See?" Justin continued to explain, zooming in and enlarging images of the various rooms on the computer.

"You did all this while you were away?" Brian asked in amazement. "Well if you know how you want the rooms to look, if you know what we want, why are we just renting what we need? Why not just buy everything we need and furnish the house?"

Justin let out a laugh, "You've got to be kidding, right?"

"Justin..."

"Brian, WE don't have time to negotiate with YOU over every items that will go in the house. Need I remind you how many hours it took for us to settle on the rental car that I'm primarily going to be the one driving," Justin teased. "I don't want to think about really furnishing the house, taking into consideration both our tastes, with constant negotiation with you. That's just too big a task, when you consider all that we both have on our plates at the moment: the Belluss Occhiali/Eyeconics project, the remaining paintings for Santa Barbara, my upcoming show, Gus is here, you're busy with Kinnetik, plus I still have to fly to Cincinnati tomorrow or the next day. There just isn't time right now. All I want is for us to spend some time at the house and enjoy it before my next show. So renting is best. We'll just get what we need quickly. You and I can furnish the house together later," Justin suggested, sealing his thoughts with a kiss.

"Well if you see something you think I'll like, just buy it. If you guess wrong, it's not going to be a problem." Brian said, returning the kiss.

"I just don't want to get too many things, until we know what's going to happen with Belluss Occhiali...after all, you could be moving to Europe," Justin teased. "But then I guess I could stay at Bri-tin and still enjoy the house, while you're busy setting up the European office of Kinnetik."

Brian was about to challenge Justin's remark, but their conversation was interrupted as a little person suddenly appeared out of nowhere and proceeded to climb into Justin's lap.

"Well, did we wake you?" Justin asked, kissing the top of the head of a very sleepy Gus.

"No I woke up all alone. So I came in here to find you," Gus said, leaning into to Justin's chest, but reaching a hand out to Brian.

"So Gus, let's you and I get dressed, then I'll take you and Justin out to breakfast at the Diner. How does that sound?" Brian volunteered, reaching for Gus and lifting him into his arms.

Gus simply cheered and clapped his acceptance of the idea.

"That will be great, I'll call Em and my mother so we can coordinate our plans for today," Justin said, reaching for the phone.

Brian reached in his desk drawer and pulled out a business card, he had obviously set aside last night.

"Here's the card for my decorator at the Designer's Showcase, just in case you're unhappy with the rental choices available. Just decide what you want, and then I want you to let Emmett handle the details. I really want you to get back to painting as quickly as possible, ok? And, if you need me to do anything you just call Cynthia. I don't want you to feel like you have to do this alone," Brian said, leaning down and kissing the top of Justin head.

Gus imitated Brian's motion and also kissed the top of Justin's, since he was still being securely held in Brian's arms. Brian and Justin both burst out laughing. Gus just smiled. Gus was now fully awake.

"Let's go Sonny Boy," Brian said, tossing Gus in the air and catching him. "Let's you and I get dressed."

Justin called Emmett and invited him to join them for an early breakfast at the Diner.

Justin also called Jennifer, who was already having breakfast with Molly. Jennifer indicated that she downloaded the original listing for the property, which gave a detailed description of some of the unique features of house.

Jennifer also indicated that she would make the preliminary calls to the furniture rental company. Justin gave her the name and phone number of Brian's decorator, just in case they needed to formulate a backup plan.

Justin made one final comparison between what was on the computer with what was in his sketchpad. He felt he was now ready to tackle the task at hand. Justin made one more precautionary move...the computer file, which he and Brian had just been looking at, was emailed to Jennifer.

Gus and Brian emerged dressed and ready to go. Justin noticed that Brian was dressed casually in jeans and a sweater and carrying a suit bag over his arm. Gus was also similarly dressed and carrying a small backpack.

Justin took one look at the pair of them and asked, "So where do you think you're going dressed like that?" Justin couldn't help laughing.

"Gus and I talked it over, and we decided to spend part of the day with you," Brian said innocently, thinking that their decision should have already been obvious to Justin.

Gus eagerly nodded his agreement.

"After breakfast, I'm just going to ride to the house with you to make sure you have everything you need, and then Gus and I will be off. We won't be in your way," Brian said reassuringly, secretly thinking that he might get a chance to look at his painting.

"Brian, there will be too many people at the house. Promise me you won't try to look at your painting amid all this chaos," Justin said knowingly with a smile.

Brian sighed resolutely and nodded his acceptance. 'Justin was definitely on to him,' Brian thought.

Brian suddenly realized that Justin had been issuing instructions to him and now exacting promises from him ever since his arrival from New York. It was obvious to Brian that Justin was losing sight of who was in control. Then he stopped to notice the new confidence that Justin exuded as he went about his tasks, and Brian smiled as he realized he liked this new aspect to Justin.

Of course Brian also noticed his plans to see HIS painting were being thwarted at every turn, but he remained hopeful that an unexpected opportunity would present itself for him to sneak a peek at the painting.

With everyone now dressed and properly equipped with their respective bags...they were on their way to breakfast at the Diner.

Chapter 2 – Plans Within Plans

A Little Later...(Day 15)

Arriving at the Diner, Brian ordered his usual egg white omelet, dry wheat toast, and coffee while Gus ordered cereal. Justin made his usual statement about being hungry and ordered scrambled eggs, blueberry pancakes with sausage and bacon, juice and coffee.

"You know if you keep eating like that, you're going to be too fat to fit through the door to the loft," Brian teased, shaking his head in continual amazement.

"I'm sure we can find some way to work off my excess calories, if you would just be a little more creative," Justin responded with a laugh.

"I see, so any weight that you gain is now going to be my fault?" Brian asked, feigning complete disbelief.

"Of course."

A few moments later, Emmett joined them.

"You know, Sweetie, we have to talk about your concept of morning," Emmett complained. "After all, some of us still need our beauty rest."

"Sorry Em, we just have a lot to do, and I wanted to get an early start," Justin said apologetically.

"Will it placate your loss of beauty rest, if I pay for your breakfast?" Brian asked with a smirk, not bothering to lower the morning paper he was now reading.

"Nothing makes up for the loss of beauty rest, but breakfast is a start," Emmett finally sighed.

Emmett's disposition changed immediately as he ordered his favorite blueberry/banana pancakes.

Everyone's order eventually arrived.

Emmett paused from eating to flip through the images in Justin's sketchpad.

Emmett and Justin began talking about the sketches, and Justin became temporarily distracted from his plate of food. They both made notes about a few special items they needed to purchase, and Emmett made his own set of notes based on Justin's drawing.

While Emmett and Justin were talking, Brian and Gus found the opportunity they had been waiting for. Justin mistakenly left his plate unguarded just for a moment...just long enough for Brian to decide he would like to have bacon with his omelet and dry toast, and for Gus to decide he really wanted blueberry pancakes. These items were quickly and easily removed from Justin's plate. So when Justin looked at his plate again, there was a lot less food there than he had originally ordered.

Brian and Gus both tried to look innocent, but instead they had these guilty expressions on their faces.

Justin mumbled something about he just couldn't understand why people just didn't order what they wanted to eat. Emmett found the whole thing amusing...since it always happened. Both Gus and Brian always found Justin's plate more interesting than whatever they had ordered. Emmett laughed as watched, for he couldn't believe that Brian and Gus still believed, Justin wasn't wise to their actions.

While they were at breakfast, Brian called the caretaker at Bri-tin and told him he had decided to stay at the house for a while. He also warned the caretaker that a lot of "strange" people would be stopping by the house, helping to get things ready. The caretaker was excited by the news, for the house had been empty for so long.

For the last year the house had remained empty. Now Brian and Justin were going to occupy the house. For a long time, Brian had secretly always hoped this moment would arrive. Now that time was finally here.

In the course of the conversation, the caretaker reminded Brian that a large package had arrived at the house several weeks ago. The caretaker indicated he had called Kinnetik several times, but each time he was told that Brian was out of town. The caretaker indicated that he had been assured that the messages would be given to Brian upon his return.

Brian immediately called Cynthia and instructed her to find out why he had not received those messages.

Cynthia could hear that Brian was upset, so although this might have seemed to her like a trivial matter, she knew she needed answers, and she needed them fast.

During the conversation, Brian mentioned that he would stop by the office after breakfast to drop off the receipt for the Justin's rental car, so Cynthia could complete the remaining paper work.

While closing his cell phone, Brian took a moment to remind Emmett that HE would be occupying the house. He further gave a continual stream of last minute threats and warnings to Emmett, which included references to 'no pink, no feathers, and no lace'.

Brian attempted to continue with his 'no list', but Emmett silenced him with a wave of his hand. "Brian, will you go run Kinnetik or something where people actually pay attention to you. Justin and I have work to do."

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By the time Brian, Justin, and Gus made it to the Kinnetik offices, Cynthia had already solved the mystery of the undelivered messages from the caretaker. The problem had to do with temporary employees and vacation schedules. The people responsible had already been severely reprimanded, and Brian was assured this sort of thing would never happen again.

"You know Brian, when you first mentioned using the Kinnetik art department to produce the final boards for the campaign if my schedule got jammed, I didn't think it would be necessary. But we've had so many interruptions and I still have to go out of town, I was thinking that it would probably keep us on schedule if I could get some help with those boards for the presentation. How do you want me to handle it?" Justin mentioned casually, while standing in Brian's office.

Before Brian could answer, Cynthia interrupted, "Whatever you're thinking, Brian, forget it. You promised me that you wouldn't deal with any Kinnetik staff on this project. You promised!" Cynthia folded her arms across her chest in a stance of defiance.

"So how do you propose that we get any necessary work accomplished, Ms Fixit?" Brian asked sarcastically.

"It seems simple to me," Cynthia tried to explain. "We let Justin be your liaison with the art department. I'll make the necessary arrangements. I already have everything practically worked out."

Brian watched from the sidelines as Cynthia and Justin worked out a few minor details.

Brian quietly tried to figure out the exact moment that he lost control of HIS company. Of course, in the midst of Brian's brooding, Justin just happened to look at him and smiled, and Brian no longer cared about the answer to that question.

When Justin and Cynthia were finished plotting, Brian finally handed her the receipt for the rental car.

Brian also asked that she coordinate with Jennifer and Emmett during the day, so that Justin had whatever he needed.

With last minute tasks out of the way and Brian, Gus, and Justin were off to Bri-tin.

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The traffic was extremely light on the interstate in the direction they were traveling, but Brian observed the heavier traffic on the other side of the highway. He made a mental note to be sure to allow extra time for commuting during peak hours, once he and Justin had moved in. Brian was already envisioning himself on the highway in his Corvette. Brian knew he was going to enjoy this commute.

About 30 minutes later, they approached the house, and everyone became very quiet.

Brian remembered the day he bought the house and the hopes he had for their future. He remembered the first time Justin had seen the house, and how much he had loved it.

"I had hope this house would be everything you had dreamed of," Brian had said, after their first tour of the house.

"It is and more," Justin had responded.

Brian remembered that he had proposed to Justin here, and here Justin had finally agreed to marry him. They made love in front of the fireplace. And, for one brief moment in time, everything was perfect...and then the art world intervened.

Justin remembered things too. He recalled the last time he had seen this house. It had been the day before he was to leave for New York City. Justin had asked Brian to bring him here one last time before he left. Justin had tried to imprint in his mind a lasting memory, fearing he would never see this house again. Brian had already voiced his plan to sell the house at the first opportunity.

Then, there were the months when Brian just withdrew, and they didn't talk. During this time Justin would often despair, but somehow working on the designs for the house gave Justin a great deal of comfort and a reason to hope.

Eventually Brian came to New York, and they were able to put the relationship back on track. But Brian never mentioned the house, and Justin just assumed it had already been sold. Justin thought his drawings were all that was left of what had once been a beautiful dream.

Then one day Jennifer mentioned that she had received offers from several potential buyers for the house, but Brian always seemed to resist selling the property. Eventually, Jennifer stopped taking offers, and the sale of the house was never again discussed.

Then Brian made the decision to hire a couple, to live on the property as caretakers. Brian had instructed them that the house and grounds were to be maintained in move in condition at all times. Like the rings that Brian couldn't return, the house also began to represent the promise of hope, and Brian had dared to cling to hope.

Brian parked the SUV in the driveway and slowly got out of the car. He helped Gus out of the car, and Justin walked over to join them. Brian and Justin each held one of Gus's hands, and together they opened the front door and walked inside the foyer.

There in the entryway, resting against the opposite wall was the package, prominently bearing the Santa Barbara return address.

Brian cast a longing look at his package and then looked back at Justin with sad eyes.

"For crying out loud Brian, you're worst than Gus," Justin said with a smile.

Brian moved closer to the package, trying to content himself with touching the outer surface of the package. At least now, Brian knew his painting was real.

At that moment the caretaker and his wife appeared. Brian made the appropriate introductions of Thomas and Teres to Justin and Gus. They all chatted for a moment.

Finally Justin asked Thomas, "Would you mind moving this package into the living room?"

Brian simply beamed with hope, as Thomas relocated the package, as requested.

The package was laid flat on the floor. Gus curled up on the oversized ottoman to watch the events unfold.

Justin left Brian and the painting alone in the living room with Gus while he returned to the car, and removed a wrapped set of tools from under the front seat.

"You're probably going to need these," Justin said, with a smile as he handed the wrapped tools to Brian.

"What?" Brian asked, completely surprised by the turn of events.

"You're going to need these to open that package," Justin repeated, motioning with the wrapped tools in the direction of the painting.

Brian eventually took the offered tools, and then he simply sat here in utter disbelief.

Justin interrupted his state of shock as he said, "Gus and I will leave you alone. We're going to go upstairs so Gus can see his room."

Justin took Gus by the hand and turned to leave the living room.

Brian reached out and grabbed Justin and kissed him passionately. Gus just giggled because he was so used to seeing Brian and Justin kissing.

"Well, what was that for?" Justin asked with a smile.

"Thank you," Brian whispered, before releasing Justin completely.

"Just remembered what I said, there's still going to be a lot of chaos here at the house for the next few days."

"No problem."

"And, Brian remember I was experimenting with a new technique, so don't expect too much from the painting."

"None of that matters, Sunshine...it never matters," Brian whispered. "I know I'll love the painting."

Chapter 3 – Surprise, Surprise

A Few Moments Later...(Day 15)

Justin picked up his sketchpad in one hand and held Gus's hand in the other as they walked toward the steps, leaving Brian and the painting behind in the living room.

As they reached the second level, Gus immediately ran ahead to a room and said, "Mine!"

"Are you sure you want this one?" Justin asked with a smile. "Maybe you would like one of the other ones?"

"No. No. I want this one!" Gus said defiantly, folding his arms for emphasis.

Justin took one look at the expression on Gus's face, noticed his stance, and immediately knew that Gus would accept no arguments.

Justin just laughed, for he had been the recipient of both the stance and the expression many times from Brian, but he wasn't exactly expecting to come face to face with the miniaturized version.

Gus then proceeded to sit on the floor of HIS room, staking his claim. He waited for Justin to join him.

Justin walked into the room and sat down beside Gus. Putting his arms around Gus, Justin showed Gus the sketches of what the room would probably look like someday.

Gus looked at the sketches with Justin and smiled. Then he threw his arms around Justin and just hugged him.

"Is this really going to be my room?" Gus asked, without ever once releasing his grip.

"Yours and no other," Justin reassured him. "Of course we'll have to get things like a bed and a few other items to make your room look like the sketch. What do you think?"

"And will you make the picture for the wall...like there?" Gus asked, pointing to what looked like wall painting on the sketch.

"Absolutely. I probably won't get it done by the time you leave this week, but I'm sure I can get it done before you come back for another visit. You want to think about some ideas of what you want in your picture?" Justin suggested.

Justin turned to a blank page in his sketchpad. He and Gus started to think some ideas. Gus leaned over to supervise, while Justin started to draw. Gus was talking and laughing with Justin as images started to appear on the page.

Their tender moment was interrupted as Brian knocked on the opened bedroom door. Brian had followed the sound of their laughter to locate them among the myriad of bedrooms.

Gus made sure that Brian knew that this was his room. Gus also wanted Brian to see the sketch and to know what HIS room was going to look like.

While Brian and Gus were discussing the room, Justin heard cars in the driveway.

Justin crossed over to the window to investigate. Justin immediately recognized Jennifer's car in the driveway. Then he noticed that a second car and a small van were parking there too.

"Brian," Justin called out questioningly.

Brian walked to the window to see what was going on.

A man exited the second car, and Emmett and several people exited the van. Justin was totally surprised. Justin and Brian went downstairs to greet the arrivals. Gus followed behind them.

"Ah, Gregory," Brian remarked with a smile. "I'm sure the call this morning must have been a complete surprise. I'm really surprised to see you considering the short notice. I know how busy you claim you always are."

"Brian, we go way back. You know how I like spending your money, so when Jennifer called, I just dropped everything. I wouldn't miss this for the world," Gregory said teasingly. "Look at the amount of space you've given me to work with!" Gregory made sweeping motions with his arms to designate the space. "This is so much bigger than your loft. Oh, I can really work with this! However, I see that your usual, unreasonable deadlines apply. Why am I not surprised?"

"Gregory, this is my partner, Justin Taylor. I'm not sure if you remember him," Brian said, sliding his arm around Justin's waist. "And for the record, those are HIS deadlines."

"Ah the artiste. I've admired your work. It's good to meet you at last," Gregory continued. "And who is this?" he asked, motioning toward Gus, who had finally come running to join the conversation.

"This is my son, Gus," Brian explained. "He's six years old."

"Oh, well hello Gus," Gregory said, shaking Gus's hand.

"Look Gregory!" Brian said, handing Gregory the sketchpad. "Justin did all your work for you. So don't expect your usual, outrageous fees."

"Brian let's not be gauche and talk about money. I'm dealing with a real artiste. Now go away and leave us alone. Justin and I have work to do," Gregory continued. "Besides, this seems like so much fun working with Emmett and Jennifer too, you never know, I might just do this assignment for free."

"That'll be the day," Brian laughed.

Gregory began flipping through the sketches. "These are very interesting Justin, very interesting indeed. Notice the use of color. Oh yes, I can work with these. At last, a project worthy of my talents," Gregory teased.

"Gregory and I have all sorts of idea," Emmett added, "Wait 'til you see them."

Brian just shook his head and smiled in response. He then walked over to Jennifer.

"Mother Taylor, I'm so relieved just knowing that you're here," Brian said with a smile, giving Jennifer her usual kiss on the cheek.

"Stop worrying Brian, between us we have everything under control," she reassured him.

"I'm not worried," Brian responded. "But Gus and I have things to do. C'mon Gus, it's time for us to go."

Brian and Gus kissed Justin and said their goodbyes to everyone.

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Justin, Jennifer, Gregory and Emmett did a complete walk through of the house. Jennifer pointed out all the invisible features of each room that she knew about. Everyone was writing feverishly, generating lists, of what they needed as they went from room to room.

They finally reached the room that Justin had intended as his studio. Justin opened the door and found this room was the only room with things inside. This room seemed to be completely furnished with all the items covered in sheets.

Justin entered this room alone and peeped under the coverings. Justin smiled and realized Brian had prepared all this for him, so that everything would be ready whenever he returned. This was the proof of how much Brian loved him, and Justin just stood there and took it all in, just for a moment.

Eventually Justin closed the door to his studio, for there was a lot of work to be done before he could settle into this room.

Justin had decided to more or less, completely furnish the lower level.

Everyone proceeded to the upper level. Jennifer took in the number of bedrooms and suggested that they furnish only a few bedrooms. She suggested that they simply close the doors to the remaining rooms and furnish them later. Everyone welcomed this idea. For now, the task of furnishing the house became much more manageable.

Emmett and the team remained at the house, taking measurements and considering details. While Jennifer, Justin and Gregory were off to the showrooms to select furniture.

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Their walk through of various showrooms produced the desired choices of high-end and designer furniture rentals that Justin hoped would be acceptable to Brian. Arrangements were made for all items to be delivered the next day.

On the way out, something caught Justin's eye. He found exactly what he needed as a surprise for Gus for tonight. Justin hesitated because he wasn't exactly sure how Brian would react to his idea.

When Justin explained his idea, Gregory and Jennifer lapsed into sidesplitting laughter at the prospect of what Justin was planning.

The necessary rental items were loaded into Gregory's van for immediate transport back to Bri-tin. Justin made a rough sketch for how things should be set up. Gregory and Justin selected a few additional accessories that would achieve the desired effect.

Jennifer and Gregory helped Justin prepare a list of other things that he might need to purchase to complete his vision for the evening.

Justin hoped that Gus would enjoy his surprise, and that Brian wouldn't kill him as the night progressed.

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A few hours later, Jennifer dropped Justin at Kinnetik to retrieve the SUV and to check on Gus, who seemed content to stay with Brian at the office. Justin went off to complete his appointed rounds, for he wanted everything to be perfect tonight.

Justin stopped by the loft and retrieved a few items he knew would be essential and loaded them in his SUV. Justin's next stop was the music store, and his final stop was the grocery store. After one final check of his to do list, Justin felt ready.

Justin reentered Bri-tin, and Thomas and Teres helped him unload the car.

Justin proceeded to the kitchen, which he noticed was now fully equipped with top of the line cookware, appliances, and gadgets...all identical to those used at the loft. Emmett had even selected potholders and all the other accessories Justin would need.

"Thank you, Em," Justin whispered aloud. "Well I guess I'd better get started."

Justin began to prepare dinner.

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Later Justin walked into the living room, where everything had been set up according to the layout he had sketched.

Justin's eye drifted to the far corner of the room. There propped up in the corner of the room was the UNOPENED package, containing Brian's painting, and the still wrapped package of tools.

Justin smiled as he realized that Brian must have decided not to open his painting in the midst of impending chaos. Justin was relieved by that decision, for now the painting would not be damaged as things were moved into the house. Also now, Brian could choose just the right moment that he wanted to experience his painting.

While continuing with his preparations, Justin called Brian and convinced him to come to Bri-tin after work.

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Brian called as he and Gus were leaving Kinnetik to let Justin know that they were enroute. On their way, Brian and Gus stopped by the Diner to pick up lemon bars, as an intended surprise for Justin.

While Justin was waiting, he called his agent in New York and confirmed that the meeting with the gallery owner in Cincinnati would be in two days, on Wednesday at 11AM.

Justin talked with his agent about his new Justin Taylor Artist website. His agent was scrolling casually through the site, while they were talking on the phone, and she was very impressed with all that she was seeing.

Justin then called the airlines and changed his reservations, since the original booking had him flying between New York and Cincinnati.

Shortly after finishing all his phone calls and unpacking his most recent purchases, Justin made one more check to be sure that everything was ready. Then he returned to the kitchen to finish preparing dinner.

Within a few minutes, Justin heard Brian's Corvette pull into the driveway.

Chapter 4 – Something In the Dark

Early Evening...(Day 15)

Brian and Gus walked up the lighted path leading to the house. They crossed under the ivy-covered archway and entered the foyer. The sensors detected their presence, and the foyer became softly lit. Brian could see a small table and a coat rack off to his left. Brian placed his briefcase on the table, so he could help Gus off with his coat. Next Brian removed his own coat.

Gus continued to hold tightly to the package containing the lemon bars.

Gus and Brian had only taken a few steps into the foyer when Justin was there to meet them. Gus reached out and handed Justin the treasured package of lemon bars

"Jus, these are for you. Dad and I went to the Diner," Gus explained.

"You got these for me!" Justin exclaimed with surprise. "Thank you, Gus," Justin said, giving Gus a big hug. After the hug, Justin continued to hold Gus's hand.

Brian and Justin greeted each other with a gentle kiss and their usual greeting.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Stay where you are, I have something for you," Justin instructed, making sure they didn't proceed any further.

"Justin, what's going on?" Brian asked apprehensively.

In the next instant, two small flashlights seemed to appear out of nowhere. Actually, Justin had the flashlights hidden in the pockets of cargo pants.

"Here, these are for you. There's one for each of you. It will make moving about easier," Justin suggested with a smile. In the next instant the house went completely dark.

Brian and Gus looked at each other in confusion, as they turned on their flashlights.

"Justin?" Brian questioned.

Justin ignored their questions...instead he gave more directions.

"Brian, I picked up a few things at the loft. I also picked up some comfortable clothes for you and Gus. Everything is in the media room over there to your left," Justin said, motioning in the direction of the nearest room with his own flashlight. "I want you both to get comfortable. Gus can help you change. Then I'm expecting both of you in the living room in less than 15 minutes," Justin ordered with a smile as he turned and walked away.

Brian held Gus's hand as they slowly walked toward the designated room...both were moving in stunned silence.

"Dad, which room is the living room?" Gus finally asked in a whisper.

"Gus, this morning I had a pretty good idea. But you know Justin... it could be anywhere by now. Let's go ahead and change clothes. Then we can call out to Justin and let him come get us. How does that sound?"

"Dad, do you think Justin knows where the living room is?" Gus asked quietly. "How can he even find things in the dark?"

"You know how Justin likes to hide things for us to find?" Brian asked, thinking of all the games Justin has played with Gus.

"Yeah." Gus said with a smile.

"Well I think the living room is just going to be another one of those hidden things. We're just going to have to do whatever Justin tells us to do?"

"Ok Dad." Gus finally agreed. "But I don't know about this."

As Brian thought about their predicament, he had to smile.

Using their flashlights for illumination, Brian quickly got out of his Armani suit as he settled into the comfortable sweat pants and sweatshirt that Justin had provided. As usual, Brian was barefoot, since he really liked the feel of the wood floor beneath his feet. Gus also changed into sweat pants and a sweatshirt, and imitating his father, Gus removed his shoes and socks. He wiggled his toes against the wood floor.

Brian just smiled as his son tried to imitate him.

"So are we ready?" Brian asked.

"Yep." Gus said with a nod of his head.

"Then let's call Justin." Brian suggested.

They both moved to the doorway of the media room and called out into the dark. "Justin! Justin!" they both said in unison.

"Justin, where are you?" Gus added.

"I'm right here, Gus," Justin responded, while slowly approaching the pair from a great distance.

Then Brian became aware of strange noises. "Do you hear that?" Brian asked Gus. "Justin, what are those strange sounds?" Brian had to ask into the darkness, "And, why are the lights off?"

Justin ignored all their questions. Instead he simply appeared with a flashlight, for he knew the original flashlights would have been left behind in the room, when they changed clothes.

"Now if you two will follow me, our evening can begin," Justin said, leading the way.

Brian and Gus followed close behind Justin. It seemed like a really long journey to Gus.

"Are you sure it is not a long way away?" Gus finally had to ask.

"Not too far," Justin answered with a smirk.

They all traveled a few more paces, and then they stopped.

"Welcome to our campsite for the evening," Justin finally said as the group finally reached the living room, which was located on the opposite side of the house. Justin had taken a circuitous route to get there just for good measure.

"Campsite?" Brian asked with surprise.

Brian hesitated a moment as his eyes adjusted to the changed lighting. There in the living room, Justin had created a campsite...complete with tent, trees, rocks, and nature sounds.

"Justin, are those crickets?" Brian asked, after listening to the chirping.

Brian secretly hoped those sounds were being imitated by a machine rather than the real insects.

"Yep. Gus do you hear them?" Justin asked.

"Listen to them, Dad there must be a zillion of them," Gus said excitedly.

"Justin, I hear a water fall," Brian said, apprehensively not knowing what to expect next. But just to make sure, he looked around the room to see if he should start to worry.

"Yep. There are also lions and tigers, but I heard they won't be out tonight," Justin teased as Gus giggled.

"I see," Brian smirked, thinking that having that knowledge was a big relief.

"There are a couple of blankets scattered around for sitting, or you could sit on the rocks. I'll have dinner ready for you shortly," Justin announced, leaving the room and disappearing into the darkness again.

"That sounds good," Brian said, suddenly realizing that he was hungry.

Justin reappeared and handed Brian and Gus each bottles of water, and he once again disappeared into the darkness.

"So this is the living room? How did you find it?" Brian teased, thinking it sure didn't look like this earlier in the day.

"I had the plans, of course," Justin responded laughing.

Brian and Gus laughed too and made themselves comfortable on one of the blankets.

The fireplace provided the only lighting for the campsite. The remainder of the room was still dimly lit in shadow.

"Look Dad, stones," Gus said, with his eyes wide in wonder.

"No Gus, those are rocks...boulders actually," Brian explained lovingly.

Justin had scattered rocks of different sizes around the room. Gus started to climb up and down the various levels of rocks, with Brian helping to steady him as he climbed. The rock formation went all around the lighted area of room, so Gus could go from rock to rock and never touch the wood floor. Giggles were heard within a few minutes.

Finally Gus needed to rest from all the jumping and climbing, so he settled on a rock and once again sipped his water, and Brian did the same.

A few minutes later, a lantern and a small plate of fresh veggies appeared on one of the other boulders toward the rear of the room. Brian and Gus moved to the light and immediately started to nibble on the veggie treats.

Justin finally appeared again and joined them at the rock. Justin started to nibble on the veggies while he talked to Brian and Gus.

"Gus, did you have a good time today in your Dad's office." Justin asked.

"I got to draw and color and everything." Gus responded, munching on a carrot.

"I see." Justin remarked. Then he turned to Brian and asked, "How was the traffic?"

"We waited just long enough to leave so that it wasn't too bad. Did you get everything you wanted to get done today?" Brian asked, munching on another veggie.

"Emmett and Gregory were a big help. Everything will arrive tomorrow around noon," Justin confirmed.

Brian just smiled as he tried to picture Emmett and Gregory scurrying around trying to get everything done.

Gus and Brian were busy talking to each other, when they noticed that Justin had disappeared again.

"Justin where are you, and what are you doing?" Brian asked, finding Justin's appearances and disappearances a bit perplexing.

Justin had discovered the rotisserie and grilling features in the kitchen. He had put these to good use as he created the campfire dinner. It took him a minute to answer Brian.

"I'm right here, and dinner is served," Justin announced, reentering the room carrying a tray of food, containing mini-hotdogs and mini-hamburgers for everyone, as well as all the fixings for little sandwiches. Justin served everything on paper plates and even provided the necessary eating utensils.

Gus started munching on his hot dog immediately, while Brian proceeded to make faces in protest.

"Justin, surely you don't expect me to eat those things?" Brian protested as expected, using his hand for extra emphasis.

"But Dad, you have to. This is what you eat when you go camping," Gus informed him, obviously speaking from experience.

"Brian, you have to at least take a bite," Justin insisted. "Here you can have a bite of mine." Justin said, handing over the morsel to Brian.

Brian took a bite, and Gus cheered. Brian continued making faces in protest.

Justin of course, was prepared for this. He had made a little packet of turkey and vegetables just for Brian, who looked at his packet and realized this was another of Justin low carb/low fat creations. With that, Brian decided that he suddenly liked this camping thing a whole lot better.

Justin disappeared and reappeared once more, this time with special green vegetable salad, which everyone ate without complaint.

Later, Justin brought out the torch... you know, the kind that you would normally use to light cherries jubilee... which made a perfect device for toasting marshmallows. Justin made s'mores by adding the graham crackers and a chocolate bars to the toasted marshmallows. The s'mores were a bit messy, but Gus loved them.

Brian wasn't sure he liked any of these things. He found that the toasted marshmallows looked particularly strange. They were after all sticky and sweet and obviously carbs, and it was clearly after 7pm. The graham crackers and chocolate bars weren't any better. No, Brian wasn't sure he wanted to deal with any of this.

Brian protested for several minutes more, and each comment caused Justin and Gus to look at each other and laugh.

Finally Gus and Justin saw that they had no other option to get Brian to enjoy camping. These were desperate times, and desperate times called for desperate measures. So they tickled Brian and wrestled him to the ground.

Gus pinned Brian down while they forced fed him toasted marshmallows. Due to his squirming and protesting, Brian ended up with marshmallows all over his face before he finally ate the required one. Gus giggled the whole time.

"I don't see what's so funny," Brian remarked, licking the excess marshmallows with his fingers.

Justin assigned Brian and Gus the task of assembling a little tent. The idea was that the tent would be a father/son project, and Gus would get a chance to sleep by himself. But assembling things was not Brian's strong suit. So every time the little tent was raised, it kept collapsing a few minutes later. Gus giggled every time the tent collapsed, but Brian failed to see the humor. They both had a good time, which was the whole idea of the project.

Finally, Justin took pity and moved Gus's sleeping bag into their already assembled tent. Justin had the larger tent assembled during the day, to be sure they all had a place to sleep. The tent was easily big enough to handle the additional sleeping bag.

Justin had thought of everything. He had even purchased a book of campfire stories.

Brian and Justin read to Gus by light of the campfire...correction, make that by the light of the fireplace. Gus listened in complete fascination from his snuggled position between Brian and Justin.

Finally Justin noticed that Gus was starting to get sleepy. Once again, Justin was prepared.

"Gus, you pajamas are inside your sleeping bag," Justin said. "Why don't you get dressed for bed?"

Brian borrowed a flashlight and helped Gus find his way to the bathroom. Gus quickly changed and entered the tent.

"So Gus, how did you like camping?" Brian asked, helping his son into his sleeping bag.

"Fun Dad...can we do this again," Gus asked with a big grin.

"Not too soon," Brian said in mock protest, "I still have to recover from that marshmallow experience."

Gus and Justin just laughed.

Brian curled up on top of an adjacent sleeping bag and stayed with Gus until he had fallen asleep.

Meanwhile, Justin did a quick clean up of the kitchen, and then he and Brian sat spooned together in front of the fire, using one of the boulders as a back support.

"I can't believe you created this elaborate campsite." Brian whispered, kissing Justin on the cheek. "Gus had a ball just jumping from rock to rock throughout the room. His little eyes lit up and his face was aglow."

"I'm glad he had a good time," Justin said with a smile.

"I'm sure this is a evening he will definitely remember."

"Well, he's been so good with all the stuff going on. I wanted to do something special for him. You know after tomorrow, the house will be filled with furniture. I wanted us to enjoy the house, to initiate it, while it was still empty."

"You know this house feels so different from the loft. Whenever I would come here before, it would always used to feel so big. But this camping in the living room experience, makes the whole house actually seem cozy," Brian confessed with emotion.

"Wait until you see it with actual furniture in it," Justin teased. "You're going to love it."

Brian wasn't actually sure about that, but as long as Justin was happy, that's all he cared about.

"Did Emmett and Gregory help you find everything you think we'll need?" Brian asked one more time.

"Yeah, I'm sure by tomorrow or the next day, everything will be ready. I have to fly out on Wednesday morning to Cincinnati, but I should be back in plenty of time to help you put Gus to bed."

"Well tomorrow Gus has a busy day planned. Debbie and Gus are going to make cookies. I understand that your mother is supposed to join them for lunch. I also heard that the munchers are coming into town. I'm sure they just want to make sure that Gus doesn't have pink hair or something. I think they're going to be in town until the weekend. I'm not really sure what that's all about. Anyway, we'll probably have Gus for a few more days."

"Well I guess if Gus is making cookies tomorrow, I think I may drop in at Kinnetik so I can get the art department started on those boards. We never really know when Signor Silvestri will make a surprise appearance, and I know you want to be ready," Justin suggested.

"But, what about your painting?" Brian asked with concern. "I know the trip here has probably put you behind schedule. I really didn't mean to do that."

"I know. Don't worry about it. It's only been a few days, and I could definitely use the break," Justin said, snuggling in closer.

"Maybe," Brian said, still having his doubts.

Justin then turned around and kissed Brian passionately.

"Wow! Believe me I'm not complaining," Brian said breathlessly as the kiss ended, "But what was that for?"

"I saw my studio earlier today. You furnished and equipped everything, didn't you. You even got that really expensive easel that I was drooling over. When did you do all this?"

"It was right before you left. I talked to Lindsay and ordered everything. By the time it got here though, you had already left for New York. Somehow, after you left, furnishing your studio let me know that you would be back. I wasn't sure when that would be, but I wanted everything ready for you whenever it was," Brian said softly.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

They sat there for a moment just enjoying the fire and each other.

"So what else do you have planned?" Brian asked with a smirk.

"I was hoping you could leave work early on Thursday," Justin mentioned casually.

"Why, what's going on?" Brian asked hesitantly. After the camping experience, he now knew to be ready for anything.

"I found riding stables not too far down the road. So, I scheduled Gus for a riding lesson at 3PM on Thursday. I thought maybe you would like to take him. It's only a half hour lesson, but I thought we could see if he and the horses like each other."

"Well that's an interesting prospect." Brian commented with a smile. "But, what about your painting?"

"Ok I worked that out. I thought I would spend the mornings at Kinnetik overseeing the project, and then I could paint in the afternoons and evenings. After the house is set up and I get back from Cincinnati, I shouldn't have anything else to throw me off schedule. Is that all right?" Justin asked, hoping to finally have Brian stop worrying.

"Ok," Brian said emphatically.

With that settled, they enjoyed another quiet moment.

Justin snuggled in closer to Brian's chest and said, "Thank you."

"For what?" Brian whispered, trying to figure out what else he'd done.

"For keeping the house, and for agreeing to let us move in, even if it's only for a few months," Justin said quietly.

"I bought this palace for you, remember?" Brian reminded him, gently kissing the top of Justin head.

"Yes, for your prince." Justin answered.

"You remembered," Brian whispered.

"Of course, I remembered. How could I forget?" Justin said, as he snuggled even closer to Brian. "Do you think you'll ever get used to living here?"

"Well if you promise not to hide from me," Brian teased. "I think I'll be ok."

"I promise," Justin assured him.

Justin eventually stood up and pulled Brian with him. "Come with me...let me show you the shower," Justin suggested seductively. "It's not quite as big as the one in the loft, but I think we can manage."

"I don't know, I'm used to having a lot of space to maneuver," Brian teased.

"I promise this time you'll be ok in tight spaces," Justin responded with a smile, pulling Brian along.

Justin leaned in and kissed Brian passionately.

When they finally pulled apart Brian simply said, "Well, as long as you're sure."

"Absolutely."

The shower was just a slightly smaller version of the shower in the loft. And as Justin had predicted, Brian was definitely able to maneuver. After several blowjobs and a few fucks, Brian and Justin emerged in pajamas ready to sleep with Gus by the fire.

Chapter 5 – Morning At Debbie's

The Next Morning...Day (16)

The next morning at Debbie's, Michael and Ben arrived as everyone was having breakfast.

"Ma," Michael called out, walking through the front door.

Just as Michael and Ben stepped through the door, there was a sound of a horn blowing outside. And, Emmett bounded down the stairs and headed for the door.

"Emmett, are you sure you don't want coffee or breakfast before you leave," Debbie asked.

"No thanks, I have a lot to do for my client. My ride is outside, so I need to get going. Hopefully, I'll be back in time for dinner, and then we can all chat. I'll see everyone later. Sorry, got to run. Bye!" Emmett said, and with that he hurried out the door.

"I wonder what that's all about. Emmett doesn't usually leave this early. This must really be something special. That's two days in a row, that he has left really early," Debbie commented. "Hopefully, we'll get the details at dinner."

By this point, Michael and Ben reached the kitchen, and Debbie poured them each a cup of coffee.

"How was your drive down?" Ben asked Melanie.

"It was a fairly easy drive. There wasn't too much traffic. I hope the drive back goes as smoothly," Melanie remarked.

With the niceties dispensed with, Michael turned his attention to the real purpose of his visit.

"Well, there's my little snuggle bug," Michael said, seeing his daughter and tickling her under her chin.

Michael then took the spoon and cereal from Melanie, and proceeded to finish helping Jenny Rebecca eat her breakfast. Although the toast and finger foods were easy for the 2 year old to handle, steadying the spoon, milk, and cereal required a father's touch.

"So how are things?" Melanie asked. "How are you and that painting getting along?"

"Things are good. Justin and I worked everything out. I saw him and Brian at dinner on Sunday. Justin and I had a good talk," Michael explained. "You know Mel, I was wrong about Brian and Justin."

"How so?" Melanie asked, patiently waiting for the explanation.

"I was wrong because Justin wasn't lost, and he didn't need to be rescued. Everything was ok with him in New York. But, Brian brought Justin home to work on a project for him, and I'm really glad he did. I got a chance to see and talk to him. Now I know that Justin's ok. In fact, everything is ok. Now I know that they're definitely together. They are definitely a couple. Brian has tried to tell me that just because they happen to live in two different cities didn't mean they weren't together. I didn't want to believe it before, but I understand it now. You can just see it when you see them together. Brian has changed...he's so different now. I don't know why I didn't see it before. But I sure as hell get it now," Michael explained with a laugh.

Everyone looked at each other in stunned silence, after hearing what Michael had just said.

"Wow Michael! That's quite an admission coming from you," Melanie remarked. "Are you sure that you're feeling alright?"

"And that was a loving thing for you to say," Ben commented, kissing the top of Michael's head.

"My baby's finally growing up," Debbie remarked, wiping a tear from her eye, then swiping Michael on the back of the head for good measure.

"Ma!" Michael squealed in protest.

Michael then turned to talk to Melanie. "Ben and I would like to spend the day with JR, is it ok if we take her?"

"Sure that would be great, we have lots of errands to run today, so that would be perfect," Melanie remarked. "I was even thinking that she could even spend a few days with you and Ben, if you wanted, while we take care of things here in town for the next few days."

"Really?" Michael said in disbelief, as he and Ben couldn't help glancing at each other.

"How long are you planning to be in town," Ben finally asked.

"We thought we would stay until the weekend. If we leave on Saturday or Sunday, it will get us home in time because Gus has school on Monday."

"So, my little snuggle bug will be here for a few days, and that should give me lots of time to completely spoil her," Michael commented. "Have you talked to Brian and Justin?"

"Not since we got here. We couldn't reach them last night because Emmett said they were camping somewhere," Lindsay explained. "Somehow I can't picture Brian camping."

"Me either! Brian hates the country and the out of doors," Michael added.

"I would love to see the image of Brian Kinney trying to pitch a tent. That must be a sight indeed. He couldn't even assemble the swing set for Gus's first birthday, if you will remember," Melanie teased.

"Well Gus is coming over this morning to make cookies, so I expect to get all the gory details," Debbie teased. "But you have to admit, Brian is a good father, who really loves his son. So anything is possible."

"Why don't you gather whatever you're going to need for the day, and I'll give you and JR a lift over the store on my way to work," Carl suggested, after kissing Debbie and proceeding toward the door.

Michael, Ben and Carl left with JR and her various belongings. So now Melanie and Lindsay could finally settle down and enjoy their breakfast.

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About an hour later, Brian opened the door to Deb's to allow Gus to run in.

Everyone was still sitting around the breakfast table having coffee. Brian knew that this was Debbie's day off, and she and Gus had plans, which included making cookies, but he was surprised to see Lindsay and Melanie still at the breakfast table.

"Look what the evil wind blew in!" Brian began, starring straight at Melanie.

"Hello Lindsay, you on the other hand, I'm glad to see," Brian said, kissing Lindsay on the cheek.

"Don't start Brian, it's too early!" Melanie responded. "Where's Justin?

"Justin is getting ready for an out of town trip," Brian relayed. "Plus he has a lot of things to do today."

Gus was clearly clinging to Brian's leg. He hadn't made any movement in the direction of his mothers.

"What did you do to my son?" Melanie demanded to know.

Brian reached down and picked up Gus, who immediately started to giggle.

"As you can see Gus is fine! What's your problem Melanie?" Brian asked.

"So Gus, what have you been doing? Are you having a good time with you Dad and Justin?" Lindsay asked.

"We went camping last night. It was really dark. We had tents and bags and everything," Gus tried to explain. "Didn't we Dad?"

"Bags?" Melanie asked.

"He means sleeping bags. Damn Melanie, he's six years old. Give the kid a break!" Brian remarked.

"We had hot dogs and hamburgers. We ate on these big rocks. We even fired marshmallows. Justin and I love marshmallows. Dad said he wasn't eating any, but Justin and I made Dad eat marshmallows. Dad and Jus read me stories. We all slept in a big tent. We had a campfire. It was great. Dad said maybe we could do this again sometime. I had fun. I'm going to tell Auntie Em." Gus recounted without taking a breath, and then started to run upstairs to look for Emmett.

"Whoa Gus! Auntie Em isn't here," Debbie informed Gus mid-stride.

"Oh," said Gus, returning to the kitchen to once again stand by his father.

"Don't we even get a hug?" Lindsay asked, opening her arms, fully expecting Gus to immediately run to her.

"But you said I could stay with Dad longer," Gus said with his hands on his hips. "I don't want to go home now."

"Gus, you can stay with your Dad and Justin for a few more days. We're here because we have some things to do." Lindsay assured him, and then she waited a moment before asking again, "So now do we get our hugs?"

Gus seemed satisfied with this explanation, and he ran over to give hugs to each of his mothers.

"Whew, that's a relief," Melanie commented with a grin. "I thought we had lost him to the dark side." Melanie said, looking straight at Brian. Brian rolled his eyes.

Gus remained in the kitchen talking to Debbie, while Melanie and Lindsay and Brian moved into the living room so they could talk. That's when it all started.

"What's the idea of camping with Gus in the middle of winter, are you insane?" Melanie started, her anger evident.

"Excuse me?" Brian remarked in complete shock.

"How dare you expose Gus to cold weather. Sleeping on the ground. Eating on rocks. What were you and Justin thinking?" Lindsay interrupted.

"Justin was thinking that a six year old might like the camping experience. What's so wrong with that?" Brian answered, quite perplexed by their reactions.

"How could you endanger Gus that way? How could you endanger Justin that way? You know Justin has allergies. Is he ok?" Lindsay continued, with a worried look on her face.

"Hold it! Hold it!" Brian interrupted, holding up his hands. "My partner, who I may severely punish the first chance I get, decided to rent camping gear yesterday. Justin set everything up in the living room. He even rented these huge artificial boulders for us to eat on. We slept in a tent. We slept in sleeping bags. He torched marshmallows. But I promise you everything was inside our living room. Justin is an artist, Lindsay; surely you of all people understand that he has quite an imagination. So you can image what he created. Justin covered every detail. He even bought a book of campfire stories, so we could read to Gus. I assure you Gus had a ball. I assure you Gus was safe and warm and toasty the entire time."

"What do you mean campfire?" Melanie inquired, sounding a bit calmer.

"Well when you're six years old, a fireplace easily doubles as a campfire. Stop worrying about Gus and Justin for a minute and think about me! Look, Justin and Gus held me down and force-fed me marshmallows, and you know how I feel about carbs after 7PM. I'm completely traumatized, isn't anybody concerned about that?" Brian asked, trying to evoke a little sympathy.

"Brian, your loft doesn't have a fireplace. Where exactly were you camping?" Melanie asked, paying no attention to his most recent attempt to elicit sympathy.

"The house is empty right now. Of course after today it won't be. So before it got cluttered up with furniture and stuff, Justin decided we should camp out in the living room last night," Brian casually explained.

"You and Justin are moving into THAT house?" Lindsay asked. "How could you do that?"

"Justin is in town working on a project. He has to paint somewhere. He decided he wanted to paint at the house. That's probably where Emmett is now, helping him get everything set up. As I said, Justin has to fly out of town tomorrow, he wanted the house pretty much set up before he left," Brian explained with a sigh. "What's the problem?"

"Why are you moving into the house? I thought Justin was only in town for a long weekend," Lindsay reminded him.

"Not that it's any of your business...Justin had originally only planned to be here for the weekend or maybe a few days longer. But he changed his mind and decided to stay and paint here for a while. He has a show in three months; so he'll probably be in town at least that long," Brian declared, thinking that everything had now been laid out, and the matter should be closed.

"He can't stay there," Lindsay insisted. "What about his art? What about his career in New York?" Lindsay demanded to know.

"Did you not hear me? Justin is going to be painting HERE. He's going to be painting at OUR house," Brian repeated again. "What is your fucking problem Lindsay?"

"No...No...No...No! If you and Justin are together, Justin won't be able to paint. You will constantly distract him. His career will be over, and his career had so much promise. Justin has a wonderful future in front of him, if you don't mess it up. You can't do this to him Brian," Lindsay protested with nonstop rambling. "I thought you understood that."

"Lindsay!" Melanie interrupted, trying to keep everyone's temper under wrap...for clearly she could see that Brian was justifiably pissed.

Brian tried to reign in his temper. He took a deep breath, counted to ten, and then coldly replied, "Lindsay, I appreciate your concern. I know that you have always been very supportive of Justin's art. But I assure you, Justin is most capable of managing his own career," Brian insisted, somewhat sternly. "So if MY partner tells me he wants to paint at OUR house in West Virginia, that is precisely where he'll paint. And, I don't intend to discuss it further with you. Neither Justin or I need to seek your permission or obtain your approval for the choices that we make!"

"I'm sorry, Brian. I didn't mean..." Lindsay said, starting to apologize profusely.

"Yes you did, but we won't get into that right now. I'm going to say goodbye to my son, and then I'm going to the office. I'll talk to YOU later," Brian finally stated emphatically. As far as Brian was concerned, all discussion was now over.

"Goodbye Sonny Boy. I'll see you later this afternoon," Brian said, while hugging Gus tightly.

Brian also hugged Debbie again before he left. Brian and Debbie shared a look of understanding between them.

"You did good, kiddo," Debbie said softly. "I'm really proud of you."

"Thanks Deb, that means a lot to me," Brian responded, before kissing her again and walking out the door.

"Now what was that all about?" Debbie asked, storming into the living and confronting Melanie and Lindsay.

"It's nothing, Deb." Melanie said, trying to cover for her partner's behavior.

"Nothing, huh? Well if you ask me, you're suffering from a little green eyed monster, and it's time both of you got over it," Debbie said adamantly, directing her gaze primarily at Lindsay, but also including Melanie in her wrath.

Lindsay said remorsefully, "I'm sorry Deb."

"Me too Deb," Melanie added.

"I'm not the one you two need to apologize to," Debbie reminded them. "Now are you two going to tell me what's really going on?"

"What do you mean?" Melanie asked innocently.

"I can't put my finger on it but something isn't right. So again I ask, are you going to tell me what's going on?" Debbie demanded quietly. "Because I'm going to find out sooner or later."

Before anyone could answer, Gus called out that he was ready to make cookies.

"I'll talk to you two later," Debbie announced, shaking her finger at them, before she turned to return to the kitchen to see about Gus.

Melanie and Lindsay just nodded their acceptance.

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Debbie started cleaning up the breakfast dishes, while she and Gus chatted. Gus recounted the whole evening of camping again to Debbie, trying not to leave out any details. Debbie listened to a child's perspective and realized that Gus must have had a great adventure.

Gus told Debbie about his new room that Justin let him pick out. Gus couldn't remember what the room actually looked like, but he remembered that Justin had a sketch, and he told her that Justin was doing a new painting just for him.

Debbie thought to herself, 'So Brian kept the house. He's actually going to move in there with Sunshine. Good for you kiddo.' Debbie then let out a quiet laugh.

"Ok Gus, what kind of cookies do you want to make?" Debbie said as she tickled Gus.

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A few minutes later, Melanie and Lindsay entered the guest room.

"Things look a lot different up close than they did when we were sitting in Toronto don't they?" Melanie commented, trying to offer some support to her partner. "Maybe relocating to Toronto was a good idea after all."

"It DOES look a lot different from here. Brian and Justin are moving into THAT house. It really doesn't matter that they didn't get married. They are totally committed to each other. And if I want Brian to be a part of our lives, a part of Gus's life, I have to change how I see things. Because if I had any doubts before, I just had everything confirmed this morning. Did you see him? Emmett was right. Brian is in full protection mode. Brian is no longer willing to put up with a lot of bullshit. He is prepared to cut anyone or anything from his life that tries to interfere with his relationship with Justin," Lindsay said mournfully. "I could see it. That has never happened before. I've never seen him like this."

"Yes, I noticed." Melanie commented. "Look Lindsay, I think we should get out of here, before there're more confrontations with Deb. We should plan on visiting some people and just getting away. We have a lot of things to do before our 3PM counseling session with Elizabeth."

And with that Lindsay and Melanie prepared to leave, assuring Debbie they would be back in time for dinner.

Chapter 6 – Surprising Truths

A Little Later...(Day 16)

About hour later, Brian was still recovering from his morning encounters at Debbie's. Brian pulled out his cell phone with the intent of calling Justin, but then he changed his mind. After all, Justin would probably be busy getting stuff arranged at the house. Brian decided he would wait and talk to him later.

Brian finally settled into his office at Kinnetik, ready to start his day. Since Cynthia wasn't at her desk, Brian went to pour himself a cup of coffee. As he was on his way back to his office, he and Cynthia bumped into each other.

"Hi, here you are!" Cynthia said, cheerfully to him.

"And, where else would I be?" Brian asked with a sneer.

"What's wrong? I expected you to be in a good mood with Justin here." Cynthia commented, wondering what the problem could possibly be.

"Never mind! It's not important," Brian commented, taking a seat at his desk. "Is there anything going on that I should know about?" Brian finally asked, giving her his undivided attention as he waited for her answer.

"Justin's in the art department," Cynthia reported with a smile. "He's creating quite a stir."

"What?"

"The art department jumped at the chance to work with an established artist. Justin is down there, giving instructions about the artwork for the Belluss-Eyeconics joint venture boards for you. Everyone is working like little beavers. Justin had really good drafts so Murph wanted to give him the next stage boards on Thursday when he returned from Cincinnati," Cynthia relayed joyfully.

"How can Justin be here? I left him busy at home this morning when I came into town. He's supposed to be getting the house ready?" Brian explained

"Well he's here, and I suggest you leave him alone. After all, you sure as hell can't work with the art department, and Justin is so much easier for everyone to deal with. By the way, why are you so grumpy?"

"Last night, Justin decided to surprise us with a campsite in the living room at the house. Gus loved it. I did too until Justin and Gus forced me to eat toasted marshmallows. You know how I feel about carbs after 7PM. I was horrified." Brian explained, while Cynthia tried to conceal a smile.

Brian paused for just a moment to see if he was going to get any sympathy. Catching a glimpse of Cynthia's smile, told him that sympathy would not be forthcoming. Brian just sighed.

Then he continued, "We slept in sleeping bags and a tent all night. I never went camping as a kid. Evidently Justin did, and he wanted to share the experience with Gus and me."

"Well that sounds like fun."

"It had been fun until this morning when I dropped Gus at Deb's. Lindsay and Melanie were there. I don't know what they thought, but they gave me shit about exposing Justin and Gus to cold weather," Brian remarked, still quite perplexed by it all. "Then Lindsay went on about how I was ruining Justin's career," Brian recounted.

"Is Lindsay still having problems about you and Justin?" Cynthia asked, already guessing the answer by Brian's mood.

"Yeah, she still thinks Justin's art career is being ruined while he's with me," Brian confessed. "She thinks he needs to be alone in New York, suffering for his art, in order to take it to the next level...whatever that is."

"Brian, you know there is more to it than that with Lindsay, don't you?" Cynthia asked point blank.

"I try not to think about it," Brian confessed. "But what exactly do you mean?" he asked.

"Brian, do I really have to state the obvious for you. Lindsay thought things would always remain the same. She could go on and live her life, but you would always be the same. You would always be there for her especially now that she has Gus, and so she manipulates you. It's not just the money for Gus. Lindsay has a tendency to become completely helpless so you'll have to come in and rescue her," Cynthia tried to explain what was so obvious to her, but Brian just couldn't see.

"Lindsay is in a committed relationship with Melanie, surely you remember that," Brian reiterated.

"Lindsay may be in a relationship with Melanie, but you are who she turns to whenever anything goes wrong in her life. She depends on you being there. Justin is an obstacle to her manipulations of you because he protects you so fiercely," Cynthia went on to explain, "His move to New York was his one slip up. You and Justin missed Lindsay's manipulation."

"Except right now, Justin is with me here in Pittsburgh," Brian said mechanically.

"And if I know you, you will do everything you can to get Justin to want to stay here. And, if you sneak down into the art department and remain unseen, you will see what I already know," Cynthia said, and she turned to leave his office. "I'm going back to my desk."

"Freeze!"

"Brian, what is it now? I have work to do," Cynthia said, with a little exasperation.

"What do you see that you already know that I don't know?" Brian asked with a smile, but still some confusion. "Or whatever you just said. Did I get it right?"

"Word perfect," Cynthia smirked. "Brian, Justin is a creative genius...emphasis on the word creative. You have great staff of technical artists. They need creative direction. When we lose an account, it's not because of lack of vision, it's because another company outshines us on graphics. Haven't you noticed that before Justin left for New York, he would casually drop in to see you, and without thinking, he would absentmindedly mark up any board lying on your desk? You would send those changes back to the art department, and even you would comment on the improved graphics. Justin naturally thinks outside the box like you do. Maybe that's why you two are so good together. We need that here. You have to figure out a way for us to get it," Cynthia demanded. "You should sneak down to the art department and see it in action for yourself. Can I go to my desk now?"

"By all means."

Cynthia turned to leave his office with a smirk, but she knew Brian had heard every word.

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A few hours later, Brian had to contend with another interruption.

"Brian, can we keep him?" Murph asked, walking into Brian's office unannounced.

"What are you talking about?" Brian asked with concern, trying to determine what the problem was now.

"I saw what you created for the Belluss-Eyeconics campaign. The artwork is different from anything we've ever produced. We would have never suggested anything like this because of the complexity, not to mention the expense. But Justin has these techniques and short cuts and stuff. Everybody is so eager to work with him. There's so much to learn. Can't we find a way to keep him?"

"Murph what are you saying? Are you telling me my art department isn't up to the task? Lord, how in the world have we been winning all these awards?" Brian asked sarcastically.

"Look Brian, we're better than most agencies because of the campaigns YOU create. We get the art done for you. But, it takes us forever with trial and error. Justin has the true eye of an artist. He picks up the weaknesses right away. A shift in color here, a shift in perspective there...it all makes a big difference in the final product."

"I see," Brian said laughing. "So how are the boards coming for Belluss-Eyeconics?"

"Brian, everyone is fighting for a chance to work with Justin. At first a few people were volunteering to work with him just for the supposed brownie points, after all everyone knows who he is...even if he is just a kid. That only lasted for the first hour. But this is different. With him here it reminds us that what we do is art. We lose sight of that sometimes. Everyone is scrambling to produce their best work for him," Murph said wistfully. "Look, let me get back to the department. Will you think about what I said?"

Brian leaned back in his chair to take everything in. Well this was certainly an unexpected development.

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A little later, Brian reached for cellphone and called Justin.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Where are you?" Brian asked, already knowing the answer.

"I'm in your art department; we're really quite busy...did you want something?" Justin asked nonchalantly.

At that moment Brian had a million questions, like why are you in the art department instead of furnishing the house. But Brian was trying not be controlling. He knew Justin had everything under control. He just knew.

"I was checking to see if you're free for a late lunch," Brian said, "I missed you."

"I have a bit more to do here, then I have to check on things at the house. Everything was supposed to arrive by noon. I know Emmett will handle things, I just want to be sure everything goes ok."

"You still have to eat. Why don't you let me buy you a disgusting lunch at the Diner before you head back to the house? Call me when you're ready." Brian insisted. The last statement was not a question, and Justin understood the subtle shift in tone.

Justin finally agreed to lunch, and Brian just smiled. For the first time in four days, Brian felt like he still had a little control left.

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A short time later, Brian and Justin entered the diner and took their usual booth. Kiki saw Justin and gushed again that she was glad that he was back. Then she finally took their orders.

While waiting for their food to be delivered, Brian settled back to think about the day's events, while Justin called Emmett to check on things at the house. Emmett gave Justin a full report.

Justin talked with Emmett and found out that the master suite was completely setup with its king size bed and armoire. The hypo allergic, high thread count linens had been purchased, and Teres had helped to make up the bed. The bathroom had been stocked as Justin requested with duplicates of items already at the loft, including the fluffy red towels that Brian preferred. The nightstands had arrived and were appropriately stocked with the essentials: condoms, lube, and massage oils. Emmett mentioned that the lamps for the bedroom just didn't look right when the room was put together. So Gregory replaced the rented lamps with a set of designer originals that were closer to Justin's drawings.

Gus's room was set up with the bed and furniture that Justin selected. Gus's bookshelf had been stocked with the items Justin has listed and few toys he specified. The oversized Teddy bear, which Justin was sure would be absolutely necessary, had been placed in the room. Gus's bathroom had also been stocked. Emmett commented that the extra futon for Gus's room would be perfect if he ever invited a friend to spend the night. Otherwise it was a perfect chair in the room.

The media room on the ground floor was furnished with a couch and comfortable reclining chairs. The media center had been set up. Emmett confirmed that the large flat screen plasma TV had been already hooked into cable, and most importantly, the DVD of The Yellow Submarine was waiting and ready to be viewed. Emmett also pointed out that duplicate copies of Brian's favorite movie collections were also waiting in the room.

Emmett gave a report of the living room. The camping stuff had been removed and returned this morning. The overstuffed leather chairs and the ottoman had been returned to their original positions in the living room. These were the items that Brian had previously purchased for the house. The extra long leather sofa that they selected to rent blended perfectly with the chairs. The extra tables, chairs, and lamps also looked great.

"Gregory said to tell you that you have to get busy painting some canvasses. The blank walls are distorting HIS perfect interior designs, and he just knows that Brian will blame HIM for this minor flaw," Emmett recounted with a laugh. Justin also had to laugh at the comment.

"As you have already found out, the kitchen is stocked with accessories and appliances to match the loft. Teres went grocery shopping so the refrigerator and pantry are stocked with food. The stools for the kitchen counter were too uncomfortable, so we sent them back, and we're waiting for the replacements to be delivered," Emmett continued.

Emmett continued his report on the progress by stating that the two computers had been set up in the office and high-speed connections were in place. The modern desk for Brian has been delivered and placed in the study, as well as the second table for Justin.

Emmett finally confirmed that two additional bedrooms had been furnished as guest rooms with basic furnishings of bed and linens and furniture. As Jennifer had suggested, the other bedrooms were still empty, and the doors had simply been closed.

Emmett than paused for a moment before continuing, "Sweetie, the treadmill and workout machine that you rented for Brian didn't seem to quite fit where you originally suggested. I supposed that you could move them to one of the empty bedrooms, except you know Brian doesn't like to be by himself when he exercises. So for right now we set everything up in the family room. It just seemed to fit there. But if you don't like it, we'll be glad to move it, you know that."

"That all seems fine, Em."

"Gregory said to tell you that your mom emailed him your computer file with all the interiors of the house. So all you have to do is let him know what other rooms you want to furnish, and he can handle getting the rental furniture for you, especially the remaining bedrooms and the dining room.

Once Emmett had finished his report, Justin mentioned that he needed one more favor.

"Emmett, Gus has a riding lesson on Thursday, can you get him a cowboy riding outfit for the occasion."

"Oh, Honey," Emmett replied, "You mean Brian is actually going to trust me to dress the little prince. Oh my, I have the vapors," Emmett said, fanning himself.

Brian had been trying to ignore the whole conversation, but suddenly when he heard Justin's last request, he knew it was time for him to intervene. So he took the phone from Justin and took control of the situation.

"Emmett," Brian demanded, trying to sound as forceful as possible, "No pink, no orange, no feathers, and no lace. Have I made myself clear? We don't want my son to scare the horses, now do we?" Brian teased with a smile.

"Oh Brian," Emmett said, letting him know he understood.

Brian laughed as he returned the phone to Justin.

Justin was just about to hang up, knowing now that everything was just about ready, when Emmett had one more thing to add.

"The pool was filled, and the water has been heated to proper temperature," Emmett added. "Just in case you and Mr. Wonderful want to take a dip. Of course the view of pool boys made the whole day worthwhile. I'm not sure how I'll ever be able to thank you enough."

"Wow, Emmett you have taken care of everything," Justin said with a smile. "Thank you."

"Glad to do it for you, Sweetie. I'll see you later."

By the time Emmett's report was complete, the food arrived. Both Justin and Brian suddenly realized they were hungry. While they were eating, they did try to bring each other up to date on the day's events so far.

Brian thoroughly enjoyed Justin's account of his time in the art department. Justin's eyes lit up as he talked about the project boards, and Brian loved to see Justin so happy.

However, Justin was not pleased to hear about Brian's encounters at Debbie's, but he didn't say anything. Justin made a mental note to talk to Lindsay and Melanie at the first available moment. Justin had decided it was time for things to change. It was time for Melanie and Lindsay to see that Brian had changed.

Chapter 7 – Out of Town Plans

Later That Afternoon...(Day 16)

After hearing Emmett's report and finding out that everything was pretty much set at the house, Justin decided to delay his trip to Bri-tin.

Justin's mind was working overtime as he tried to figure out how to convince Brian to also delay his return to Kinnetik. Finally, Justin settled on the direct approach.

"Brian, I think we should stop by the loft," Justin said, with lustful eyes and complete with suggestive eyebrow movements for emphasis.

"The loft, huh?" Brian smiled, catching every movement and looking into Justin's lust-filled eyes. "Well Sunshine, who am I to argue?" Brian said, feeling his cock react to Justin's suggestion.

Neither one had said anything, but in the last three days their sexual encounters had been limited to fucking in the shower. The shower made it possible to for them to be together, away from the prying eyes of a six year old, but Gus's sleeping at the loft with them had deprived them much of their much needed intimacy. Now they had an opportunity to simply be truly alone together, and neither of them wanted this chance to pass them by.

Brian immediately called Cynthia and indicated he would be back at the office much later, using his favorite phase, "Something came up!" Cynthia understood the implied meaning and smiled.

Brian slid his arm around Justin's waist as the left the Diner, kissing on the way to the car. Once in the car their fingers intertwined, as neither man wanted to lose contact while forced to sit apart from one another. At the loft kisses were exchanged and hands roamed freely under each other's shirts while they waited for the elevator to reach the top floor.

By the time they reached the loft door their passions were fully ignited. Brian pushed Justin against the loft door as he ground their bodies together. Their mouths continued to devour each other as Brian struggled to get the door open and enter the alarm code. Brian walked Justin backward, both undressing the another with every step. They allowed their hands to explore each other's body, as they enjoyed the skin-to-skin contact. They had simply missed being together like this.

They climbed the steps to the bedroom with only each other as body cover. And as Justin felt the edge of the bed touch the back of this leg, he pulled Brian down on top of him. Their kisses continued as each of their mouths and tongues fought for dominance.

Each moaned in pleasure from the long, slow caresses of the other. Brian managed to find all those special spots as he explored Justin's body with his tongue, as Justin writhed and groaned beneath him.

"It's been so long," Justin moaned.

Brian felt himself grow harder as Justin responded to his every touch. This was the body that Brian knew so well, but he would never tire of the feel of Justin beneath him.

"Too long." Brian whispered.

"I need you inside me," Justin whispered, reaching for the supplies.

Brian placed Justin's legs on either side of his head. He looked at Justin who stared back at him with eyes full of love. Brian turned his head to the right and kissed Justin's ankle then turned to the left and did the same.

He heard Justin's sigh and smiled slightly as he began his entrance into Justin's hole. Justin's sigh turned into a hiss as Brian slid in further. Brian bent Justin in half as he bent to capture his mouth in a searing kiss. They both groaned with pleasure as Brian entered him.

And after a few moments they were meeting each other thrust for thrust until they both reached climax and Brian finally collapsed on Justin.

They stayed like that fused together and just enjoyed the warmth of the other's body. Eventually, Brian removed the used condom and tied it off, before tossing it in the trash.

"You know, no matter how many times we're together, it's always amazing being with you," Brian said later as they spooned together. "I've missed being with you like this."

Justin rolled over and nudged into Brian's neck. Gently kissing his way up to Brian's ear, Justin whispered, "I've missed you too."

Brian loved the feel of Justin wrapped in his arms like this. He casually allowed his fingers to slide through Justin's hair as he pulled him in closer. Justin breathed in the scent that was Brian.

It had been days since they had the chance to be together like this, and Brian was overwhelmed with the sense of just how much he loved the man in his arms.

Before Brian could say anything, Justin began exploring his body with sensual strokes, and Brian couldn't help but respond.

When Justin kissed that certain spot on his neck and then reached up and kissed him passionately, they became lost in each other, as they both became hard again.

Their lovemaking continued for the few hours, alternating between tenderness and passion.

Brian rolled over and looked at the clock and let out a sigh of exasperation, "You know, Sunshine, there is nothing I would rather do than stay here in bed with you all day."

"Hmmmmm," Justin responded continuing to kiss Brian's neck.

"You know you're not helping."

"That's the general idea."

Brian leaned down and kissed Justin gently, "Come shower with me. I'm afraid we are going to have to go."

"Agh!" Justin groaned as he allowed Brian to pull him off the bed and into the shower.

"Don't worry. We'll do this again soon," Brian reassured him with a smile.

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After they dressed, Brian needed to return to the office to finish a few things, while Justin remained at the loft to tidy things up and to make a few calls.

Justin first called Jennifer to thank her for her help and to update her on the progress at the house. Jennifer had been looking forward to talking to Justin as well.

Justin was amused to discover that after lunch with Deb and Jennifer, Gus had asked to spend the afternoon with Jennifer. Molly had joined them after school, and now the three of them were at Jennifer's condo enjoying Gus' homemade cookies and cold glasses of milk. Justin couldn't help laughing at the image.

Jennifer already knew in advance about the planned camping adventure, but the version she heard from Gus was even funnier than she could have imaged. Jennifer was extremely proud of her son and his creativity, and she told him so.

Justin blushed from his mother's praise as he ended the call, and Justin allowed himself a few minutes to savor the moment.

There was one more call Justin wanted to make, so he reached again for his cell phone and punched in the number.

"Dunbar and Smith," the operator answered.

"Jason Smith, please," Justin requested.

"May I tell him who's calling?" the voice asked.

"Justin Taylor."

After a few moments, an old familiar voice answered.

"Justin, could that really be you?" Jason asked. "To what do I owe this phone call? It's been ages since we've talked."

"Don't give me a hard time? Can I help it if you and Paul won't come and visit?" Justin teased.

"And just where would you like us to visit, Jus...Pittsburgh or New York or maybe Santa Barbara?" Jason said sarcastically.

"Well that's true, I have been on the move a bit. That's partly why I'm calling."

"Oh?" Jason remarked with renewed curiosity.

"Look Jason, I have a meeting with the Cincinnati Art Gallery tomorrow morning. Something about them opening a new wing. I was wondering if we could get together for a bit tomorrow afternoon. I know it's short notice..."

"Not a problem. I look forward to seeing you."

"Are you sure?"

"Paul and I would love for you to see the new remodel of our offices, and then maybe we could go to lunch," Jason reassured him. "Is Brian coming with you?"

"No, it's just me. Gus is visiting him from Toronto. For me it's just suppose to be a quick meeting, so I'll be flying back tomorrow evening, but I really want to see you."

"I'm really looking forward to seeing you too, Jus."

"Good, then I'll see you tomorrow. I'll call you when my meeting with the gallery is over. Then we can play it by ear."

"Sounds good! I'll see you tomorrow."

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Jason got up from his desk and walked over the office of his partner, Paul Dunbar.

"What's up?" Paul asked as Jason entered his office. "Is there some crisis in the art department, or is it that you just miss me?"

"I know that after all these years, you still think you're totally irresistible, but this is important," Jason explained, kissing his partner on the forehead.

"So what's going on?" Paul asked, with some concern in his voice. "Is everything ok?"

"I didn't mean to alarm you, but I just got off a very interesting phone call...with Justin. It seems he's coming to Cincinnati tomorrow," Jason said smiling and letting his excitement show through.

"Wait a minute. Isn't Justin supposed to be in New York? Well this is great. How long is he staying? Is he going to be staying with us?"

"Slow down, old man," Jason said mockingly, "He's only going to be in town for the day. Something about a meeting with Cincinnati Art Gallery, about being in some show for the opening of the new wing. I don't know all the details. He just called to see if we could get together after his meeting."

"That's a brief visit, but I'm really looking forward to seeing him. Wow, Justin Taylor! I shudder to think how much mischief ensues whenever you two get together. I don't know if my little heart can take it," Paul smirked, mockingly clutching his chest.

"How can you say that? Justin is a true artist," Jason informed him with a laugh.

Paul interrupted, "With a very creative mind. Need I remind you of Atlanta?"

"Oh, I was thinking more of New York. You know Justin and Brian are sooooooooo evenly matched. I can imagine that they must still be challenging each other," Jason reflected.

"Yeah, but how is that possible with Justin in New York and Brian in Pittsburgh. They should have gone ahead with their plans to get married. I think Brian made a big mistake letting Justin go. I've never seen him happier then when he and Justin were together. But from what I've heard from Lindsay, I'm not even sure they're still a couple," Paul pointed out.

"Well Justin called me from Pittsburgh, so they must at least still be seeing each other. I know he's from there, but he did mentioned Brian and Gus," Jason said, hoping for the best.

"Does that mean that Brian is coming with him?" Paul wondered aloud.

"No, Brian's son is visiting from Toronto, so Justin will be coming alone. Justin has to meet with the gallery in the morning, and then we're going to try to get together and maybe have lunch,"

"How long has it been since we've seen them?"

"Let's see, we saw them in Atlanta and then later in New York. Of course there was our trip to Europe that got cut short, because we had to rush home for Nicky's birth. I know you and Brian run into each other at meetings and of course Justin and I stay in touch. We email each other all the time, but it's still been a while since we've all been together. And of course, we haven't had a chance to visit them recently."

"All I know is that Justin is supposedly living in New York. Lindsay and Gus are living in Toronto. So Brian must be pretty much solo. I also heard that Brian rebuilt Babylon after the recent bombing. Beyond that, we're going to have to get the details from Justin tomorrow."

"I'm looking forward to it. Justin and I have always had so much fun together. Justin has a fascinating mind. I guess I better go pick up and an extra sketchpad," Jason teased.

"Yes, the two of you are known for creative mischief together, as I remember," Paul said reminiscing.

"No...no, Justin was the creative one, I just go along for the ride," Jason smirked. "I'm so looking forward to his visit."

"Maybe we can convince him to stay for a few days," Paul suggested. "I'll be sure the guest room is ready just in case."

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Meanwhile back at the loft in Pittsburgh, Justin changed the bed and placed the dirty linen in the hamper. He scanned the loft once more to be sure that everything was back in place.

Justin then placed one more call to Emmett and found that everything had been delivered, and the house was ready. Emmett indicated that everyone was about to leave Bri-tin and would soon be returning to Pittsburgh.

Justin couldn't wait to see how the house had turned out. Just as he was about to leave the loft the phone rang.

"Hey, you're still there," Brian began. "Molly just called to see if Gus could stay overnight. Since I said yes, I thought I would call to see what you had in mind for this evening?"

"I was thinking of finally driving out to the house."

"Perfect, why don't we go together. I can help you unpack your studio, so that you can finally start to paint," Brian professed. "See what a good partner I am?"

Justin was thinking this was a nice gesture...but he wasn't fooled.

"So you're going to help me set up my studio, Huh?" Justin smirked.

"Of course."

"Don't you mean you will leave me to unpack my studio, while you spend time in the living room viewing your painting?"

"Sunshine? How can you think such a thing?"

"It's ok Brian. You don't have to pretend any longer. The chaos at the house should be over by now. I'm really proud of you for waiting this long to see the painting. You are welcome to view it. You've waited long enough. Anyway, I'm curious to see what you think of it. Ok, I'll pick you up in less than an hour. We have to make it an early evening though, because remember I have a 6AM flight in the morning to Cincinnati."

"Yeah, I guess you're right...staying overnight at the loft is probably best. It's closer to the airport. Don't worry, I promise we'll make it an early evening."

"Perfect."

"Can you grab a change of clothes for me? I'm really looking forward to actually seeing the house this time. I thought I would actually relax a bit. Are we going to have to use those fucking flashlights again?"

"Only if we want to," Justin teased. "I'll see you shortly. Later."

"Later."

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Justin packed the change of clothes for Brian, a few items for Gus, and a few items from the storage area. He loaded everything into the SUV and was quickly on his way to meet Brian at Kinnetik for the drive to Bri-tin.

During the drive they were both pretty excited to get their first glimpse of the furnished Bri-tin...the place that would be their home for at least the next three months.

Unfortunately the drive took almost an hour due to the traffic, but they chatted easily with each other, and the time seemed to pass quickly. As they arrived at the house, the ever-present Thomas greeted them.

Justin grabbed a small bag from the back of the SUV, and he and Brian slowly entered the foyer to Bri-tin.

Thomas unloaded the remaining boxes, while Brian and Justin walked through the entire house taking it all in. Each room was like seeing a sketch come to life. They couldn't help but smile, for they were both definitely happy with the way things turned out. The house was furnished but not overly cluttered, which meant that Brian could fully enjoy the expanse of space...and Justin could enjoy the coziness of furniture. Although the furniture was rented, Brian found everything both tasteful and comfortable. He decided he could definitely get used to this place.

Brian quickly changed clothes and began to help Justin move furnishings around in the studio. Brian actually helped to unpack the few boxes that Justin had brought from the loft.

Then Brian leaned again the doorframe, smiling as he watched Justin trying to make the final decisions about the ultimate placement of things in his studio.

Finally, Brian saw his opportunity. With Justin completely occupied, Brian now saw his chance to make his escape towards the living room.

However, enroute to the living room, Brian walked past the kitchen and realized that something needed to be done about dinner.

Being so comfortable in his surrounding and acting from force of habit, Brian opened the drawer closest to the telephone to call to have dinner delivered...for in the loft this would have been where all the take out/delivery menus were kept for easy access.

Imagine his surprise when now, here at Bri-tin, was a drawer full of food takeout/delivery menus for local eateries. Brian smiled for this was another touch that made the house feel like home. Someone had paid attention to this important detail. Brian called one of the local restaurants and arranged to have dinner delivered.

With that taken care of, Brian quickly proceeded to the living room to finally unpack his painting.

Chapter 8 – Long Awaited Unveiling

A few moments later...(Day 16)

Leaving Justin to setup his studio, Brian continued his trek to his painting.

Finally reaching the living room at Bri-tin, Brian paused to take in the room with its temporary furnishings. The additional furniture that Justin had selected and the placement of everything in the room had created a space that now felt warm and inviting.

Brian chuckled as he remembered the last time he was here...for Justin's carefully constructed campsite for Gus.

Brian laughed as remembered being forced to eat toasted marshmallows.

But more than anything Brian remembered the laughter he heard from Gus all evening, and the laughter he heard from Justin. Brian also remembered his own laughter, and the joy he felt just being with the two most important people in his life. Justin sure knew how to make a memory.

"Justin," Brian whispered lovingly.

Brian turned on the fireplace, and for a few moments, he sat in one of the oversized chairs and enjoyed the solitude of a room that he had waited so long to occupy.

Remembering the sketches he had seen, Brian could clearly feel Justin's presence in every touch in the room, from the arrangement of furniture to the chosen plants. Even though Brian knew everything was rented, Justin had managed to make sure the little extra touches were there, so it felt like home.

Brian especially liked the oversized ottoman, which he himself had purchased over a year ago. The ottoman was equipped with wheels and just seemed to move effortlessly about the room. Brian slid the ottoman over in front of his chair to support his long legs, while he gazed for a moment into the fire.

Brian eventually moved the oversized ottoman to a spot just in front of the fireplace as he once again enjoyed the oasis that Justin had created. Brian took it all in and sighed contentedly.

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It had been three days since Brian had learned of the existence of HIS painting. Just a random search of Justin's website, and there it was for him to see. He had fallen in love with the painting at first glance, just as he did with everything Justin created.

Justin had said the title of the painting was 'Talisman of Time', and as Justin was falling asleep, he had also confirmed that there would also be a letter... a note attached to the frame...just like when Melanie and Michael had received their paintings.

It had been two days...two days of not sneaking out of the loft to THIS house in the middle of the night to see his painting... two days of suspense...two days of waiting for the right moment.

Now Brian would finally see what had been waiting for him. The private unveiling of a Justin Taylor Original, but even more special was the unveiling of a Justin Taylor Original that was intended as a gift for him.

Walking to the corner of the living room, Brian was more than ready to begin. He quickly unwrapped the small packet of tools that Justin had given him for opening the package.

Then it was time...the moment he had been waiting for. Brian could feel the anticipation building. Now, he was about to see HIS painting.

Brian carefully cut away the outer packaging and carefully removed the painting.

Brian leaned the painting against one of the chairs, while he checked to make sure that the note was still attached to the frame...the note that Justin had promised would be there.

With all the moving around of the unopened package, Brian was afraid that the note might have become dislodged or entangled or lost in the interior packaging. But no, the expected note was still attached to the frame, just as Justin had promised.

Brian made one more check of the packaging to be sure nothing else was inside. After all this was Justin, and one could never tell what else his devious mind would consider placing in the package.

Once assured that all contents of the package had been removed, Brian called to Thomas and asked him to assist in removing and disposing of the excess clutter.

Brian rewrapped the tools and placed them back in the corner of the living room.

Brian was now ready to deal with his painting.

"Talisman of Time," Brian said to himself, repeating the title he remembered so well.

Brian was now ready to experience his painting.

The scene of the painting was the living room of this house... the exact room in which he now stood. He could see the window, the fireplace, and the mantel.

Brian took in the whole scene, as he took in the overall beauty of the picture. The colors and textures that Justin had chosen to convey the scene did not disappoint. As Brian expected, this was a beautiful painting.

He now understood why Justin had sent it here to the Bri-tin. Justin wanted this painting experienced in this room. Brian had to wonder if there was some other reason...some other message that Justin wanted to convey.

"A Justin Taylor Original painting will hold the viewer spellbound by its simple beauty," Brian said aloud, repeating a well-practiced mantra. Then his voice became almost a whisper, "Justin, you never fail to deliver a beautiful painting. Never!"

Brian felt compelled to touch the picture, as if he could feel the love of its painter through the canvas and frame. Brian sighed at the touch.

His eyes were drawn to the oversized ottoman in the forefront of the painting. The ottoman, which Justin had painted from memory, was casually placed in front of the fireplace in the painting, much as Brian had just done in the room itself.

"You knew didn't you? You knew I would move it in front of the fire. It didn't matter where you had placed it in this room. You knew I would move the ottoman in front of the fire. You know me so well, don't you?" Brian questioned aloud. Once again Brian felt compelled to reach out and gently touch the painting.

Brian took a step back to once again take in whole painting. Now he noticed the objects resting on the ottoman in the painting. Brian sat on the ottoman in the room and scooted forward again for closer look at its counterpart in the painting.

Two suit jackets looked as if they were hurriedly cast aside. One was charcoal gray and seemed to be lying casually on the ottoman. The second jacket appeared to be more navy blue in color, and it lay crumpled on the floor beside the ottoman, as if it had a will of its own and had slid from its designated spot. The place on the ottoman lay vacant, where the jacket had probably been originally placed. Brian felt that he could feel the second jacket slide away, leaving a vacancy that could never be filled.

Brian felt the symbolism. He didn't know why but he started to feel the burn of unshed tears behind his eyes. It was too much. Brian had to walk away from the painting as he could feel his emotions racing.

"Fuck, Justin why do you do this?"

And Brian could hear the answer in a whispered echo...

Beginning of Flashback

"Brian, it's just a painting," Justin would say in complete innocence.

"You never do 'it's just a painting' paintings," Brian would always respond, using his fingers to make the necessary quotes.

"I just paint Brian, you know that."

"Justin, they say when you paint, a soul can feel the emotions in your painting."

"Don't make such a big deal, Brian...after all, it's just paint."

End of Flashback

"No Sunshine, it's not just paint. Don't you see?" Brian whispered aloud. "It's so much more."

Brian crossed over to the window and looked at the evening sky in a veiled attempt to quiet himself. While standing there, Brian felt the impact of his year of separation from Justin hit him squarely in the heart, and he collapsed under the sheer weight of it all.

There had been brief visits to New York, and of course, they had helped. But now he felt the full the extent of his own loneliness. True, he had continued with his life and gone through the motions of living while Justin was in New York. But at this moment he understood the difference between the motions of living and truly living.

'Enough! Enough! It's over! This just doesn't make any sense! I need you with me! We just can't do this anymore!' Brian thought to himself, letting his emotions explode.

It took a while for Brian to recompose himself.

When he was finally able to stand again, he slowly walked back to the kitchen. He wanted a glass of Beam, which he quickly poured. He took a sip and quickly returned to his painting bringing his glass of Beam with him for comfort and support.

Taking another sip of his Beam, Brian repositioned himself to take in the details of the painting.

There were several more items on the ottoman, and this time Brian noticed them all. The very expensive watch carelessly tossed on the ottoman, bearing the time five minutes to twelve, was the next object he noticed. He reached out to touch the watch and swore he could feel the expensive metal, cold beneath his touch.

He noted too the time on the face of the watch, five minutes to twelve. And he could hear his words echo back, 'It's only time.' The watch may say: 'It's only time,' but the carefully chosen time on the watch face implied that 'it was almost time'. Something was about to happen.

Brian took a minute to let this sink in.

There were also rings, which appeared, at first, to be carelessly tossed aside. At first they looked like just ordinary rings, but on careful inspection Brian realized they were far from ordinary. No, Justin had captured on canvas the rings that they had intended to exchange a year ago.

Brian reached out to touch his ring, for one ring was painted slightly larger than the other. There they were...the promise of another time...the rings that Brian couldn't bring himself to return.

Beginning of Flashback

"You didn't return them," Justin stated, with some surprise as he gently handled each ring.

"I didn't return them," Brian answered, quietly from across the room.

Justin took one more look at the rings and closed the box, placing it ever so gently on the table. Justin then walked over to Brian and held him in an embrace.

"We don't need rings or vows to prove we love each other," Justin had stated emphatically and sealed his declaration with a passionate kiss.

End of Flashback

His ring, lying next to the one intended for Justin, Brian had to touch them both. The rings in the picture were carefully painted to form the symbol for infinity.

There it was...the promise of hope and the dream fulfilled.

The rings were no longer hidden away in the velvet-lined box, stored silently in his drawer. There they were, released in all their regal splendor, side-by-side for all to see. And Brian had to reach out and touch them once again to feel their life force emanating from the painting. For here, captured on canvas, was the promise of eternity. He and Justin were together.

As Brian's hand moved over the painting, he noticed the final objects on the ottoman, a white tuxedo scarf and a CD case. Brian didn't need to see any writing to know what the title of the CD was.

The tuxedo scarf and the song were the remnants of the momentary joy that was Justin's high school prom. Brian remembered the evening. He remembered the dance. He remembered the feelings of love and feelings of hope, so quickly silenced by the swing of bat. That should have been the night the universe shifted off its axis, but instead the scarf and the song remained as tangible proof of the Transcendent.

"What do we do with the time that is given to us?" Brian asked aloud. "What's the good of second chances if you let them slip away? It's time for me to seize this moment and take back what is rightfully mine. There has to be something else for us beside sacrifice, Sunshine. There has to be. And, we have to find it!" Brian insisted.

Taking another step back, Brian looked as his watch and realized that dinner should be arriving soon.

Brian sighed deeply for he really wasn't ready to leave his painting. He considered loading the painting in the car and taking it back to the office, so he could spend more time with it. But Brian now understood Justin's reasons for sending the painting to the house, and Brian would continue to honor those reasons.

It was time to move his painting back to the corner of the living room for safekeeping, but in the process of moving the painting, something else caught Brian's eye.

There it was... a shadow...ever so faint above the fireplace in the painting. There... he saw it... two lovers in a kneeling embrace...cast in shadow. Brian knew it was them... he and Justin locked in a lovers' embrace. He could feel the love and passion of the lovers.

"God Justin, did you have to push me off the fucking cliff?" Brian said aloud with a smile. "I'm definitely going to have to punish you severely for this."

Brian touched the painting one more time. "Talisman of Time, indeed," Brian whispered, tracing the outline of the lovers.

Brian removed the note attached to the frame. He would save the note for another time. Then he would sip another glass of Beam and savor what else Justin had to tell him. But for now, he had seen enough.

Brian located his office at the house and placed the note in his the desk drawer. He then returned to the studio to check on Justin's progress. Reaching the studio, Brian swept Justin into his arms and kissed him passionately until their tender moment was interrupted by the sound of the door chimes.

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"I ordered dinner," Brian announced with a smile. "They have take out and delivery even way out here."

"Really?"

"Someone stocked a special drawer, just like at the loft. The menus were so easy to find."

"Emmett thought of everything. I'll be sure to tell him that you were pleased."

"You do that."

They grabbed plates and silverware from the kitchen and had dinner in the living room by the fire.

"Well Sunshine, again here it is that floor picnic that you always seem to want to have. I hope you're happy."

"Very. How about you?"

"Surprisingly so."

They kissed each other gently.

"Oh if we only had time to christen a few rooms," Brian said, with a smirk and matching eyebrow movements.

"Ever the romantic," Justin quipped, hitting Brian on the arm with the back of his hand.

"Another time."

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps...bullshit. When you get back from Cincinnati we have a lot of rooms to christen."

"I'm sure we'll manage...somehow."

Brian looked at his watch and noted the time. "Did you get your studio set up the way you wanted it?" Brian asked.

"Pretty much."

"Then, we'd better get ready to go back to town."

So they cleaned up the living room and tossed the trash. Brian finally turned off the fireplace. They turned off interior lights and set the alarm. They got back into the car for their return trip to Pittsburgh.

Once they were on the highway, Brian reach over and took Justin's hand.

"Thank you for the painting. It is exquisite. I love it."

And, Justin just beamed. "I had hoped that you would like it."

"I love the new techniques you were experimenting with. I see what you mean...they are so different than your usual work. And, I'm glad you decided not to sell the painting. I'm also glad you made me wait to experience it at the house...it seems so right somehow."

"Ah huh." Justin said with a smile.

"You know after experiencing my painting, I began to understand why Mikey spent so much time just looking at Superheroes. There is so much to see in one of your paintings. Usually you only capture the emotions...this time your use of symbolism is so powerful. I was almost overwhelmed. You have to give me some time to take it all in."

"The painting belongs to you. Take all the time you want."

Brian reached over and touched Justin hand, allowing their fingers to interlock. Then Brian lifted their joined hands to his lips and gently kissed Justin's wrist.

"I love you, Sunshine," Brian whispered.

"I love you, too," Justin responded, leaning his head onto Brian's shoulder as they made the remaining drive back to the loft.

Chapter 9 – Initial Meetings

Late Morning...(Day 17)

"Brian, Susan Weaver from Eyeconics is here." Cynthia said, standing in Brian's office. "She said she doesn't have an appointment but she thought that you might give her a few moments. There is someone with her from Belluss Occhiali."

Brian thought to himself, 'So this is how it all begins.'

"Cynthia, please send them in. I'm sure I can spare a few moments," Brian said with a smile.

Susan Weaver walked into Brian's office. Following her was a beautiful woman, tall, slender, and impeccably dressed. Brian was suitably impressed.

Brian motioned for them to be seated. They chose to sit on the sofa rather than the chairs, so Brian made himself comfortable in the adjacent chair.

"Brian, I apologize for barging in like this, but I have someone I wanted you to meet," Susan began. "Brian Kinney, this is Maria Silvestri. She is VP of marketing at Belluss Occhiali."

"Well, I'm please to meet you. I've heard a lot about you. It's good to meet you at last," Brian commented. "How do you like working in the family business?"

"My father has often complained that my mother created the perfect torture for him by having only daughters," Maria began with a laugh. "He used to think that he could marry us off and get the sons he had always been hoping for. Several years ago he finally gave up on that idea and brought my sister and I into the business. Evidently we have proven ourselves or else we would still be serving coffee to visitors."

Everybody laughed at the comment.

"Speaking of coffee, can I offer you anything?" Brian asked cordially.

Everyone indicated they were fine.

"Well Brian," Susan began. "How is the campaign coming? I sure hope you're going to wow us?"

"That's my plan," Brian said confidently with a smile.

"Mr. Kinney..." Maria started to say, but was interrupted.

"Brian, please," he said graciously.

"Very well... Brian, we have had six of the top international firms working on campaigns. They have been most disappointing. They don't understand the products. They don't understand our company. It has been a disaster. Susan seems to think that you will have all the answers. I know about all the awards you've received. But I'm still skeptical," Maria stated candidly.

"I know that you have been dealing with top notch firms, but now you're dealing with Kinnetik. We're a boutique agency, so we specialize in unique campaigns to serve the needs of our clients," Brian explained. "I saw the three new products that your two firms created together. Those products will basically fly off the shelves once the public gets a chance to see them. Our job is to merely frame the product in the proper setting. We think you'll be pleased with what we've come up with. If not, we're prepared to work with you and your ideas, until we make you happy," Brian reassured her.

"Really, you're willing to work with us? You're ready to exchange ideas with us? That's a change." Maria admitted with surprise. She was very pleased by this turn of events.

"We're creating two distinctively different campaigns to show you at our meeting. Of course my hope is that you'll like the direction of at least one of those campaigns. But failing that, our hope is that you'll find at least a few elements from our campaigns that appeal to you, and then we can create exactly what you have in mind during our meeting," Brian said, again restating his intent.

"So Brian, just out of curiosity, who's going to direct the art on our project?" Susan asked, now that her curiosity had been sufficiently piqued.

"Well of course my entire art department is available for support. And everyone is feverishly working on your boards as we speak. So I wouldn't be concerned Susan, trust me." Brian reassured them.

"So is our project important enough of a priority that you assigned George or Murph to us?" Susan asked smiling. Her curiosity was getting the better of her.

"Neither, I have someone special assigned to this project." Brian said, with a knowing smile.

"Well who? Where is he? We'd like to met him," Susan continued to ask anxiously. She was dying to meet this 'someone special.'

"Unfortunately he had to fly to Cincinnati on business. He'll be back tomorrow." Brian said calmly. "Susan will you relax. Kinnetik will have everything ready for the meeting in two weeks. Besides I created the campaign for your joint venture personally. Your account was too important to relinquish to another ad exec."

"Well that makes me feel a little better," Susan teased.

"Now is there anything else I can do for you?" Brian asked patiently.

"No. It's been nice to meet you Brian. I'm really looking forward to our meeting in two weeks." Maria commented with a smile. "By the way Brian, I was admiring the paintings in your lobby. They are magnificent."

"Thank you. Yes, we're quite pleased with them," Brian said with a knowing smile.

"They give your lobby a special feeling. I like that." Maria continued. "Susan was telling me that this building used to be a bathhouse."

"That's right. Let's just say it was a historic building that I had to see preserved."

"I'm impressed by a man who, would turn a bathhouse into the corporate office of Kinnetik. Brian, that says you're definitely a man of vision. I like that. And I really like your lobby, especially those paintings."

"Why thank you."

"Well, we're going to leave now and let you get back to work," Susan said finally. "Thanks for seeing us on such short notice."

"It was my pleasure," Brian responded with a smile.

"We're looking forward to working with you and your team," Maria remarked, extending her hand to shake hands with Brian.

Brian walked everyone to the lobby, where Maria once again lingered over the paintings.

"Brian, these are original oils not lithographs, and judging by the number of paintings, I have to assume that you're acquainted with the artist."

"Yes, you could say that," Brian said with a smile.

"His work is so emotional," Maria said, continuing to stare at the paintings. "You know Brian, maybe we should meet next week at the Eyeconics offices instead of here."

"If you wish. The change of venue isn't a problem. But I thought you like my offices?"

"Oh it's not that. My sister is coming over for the meeting. She's the artist in the family. Once she sees these paintings, we'll never be able to get her out of the lobby, and we'll never be able to get her to focus on work," Maria said with a laugh. "Don't worry Brian, I'm just joking about changing the place for the meeting."

"Well that's a relief," he said with a smile.

"Brian, we'd better get going and let you get back to work. We'll see you in two weeks for the meeting," Susan interrupted.

"I'm looking forward to it," Brian confirmed.

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When everyone had left, Brian returned to his office and once again settled comfortably at his desk. Within fifteen minutes, Cynthia breezed back into his office.

"Well that was a surprise! How did the meeting go?" Cynthia asked, dying of curiosity.

"Remind me to add a bonus to Justin's consulting fee," Brian said with a laugh.

"Why?"

"Thanks to him, that surprise visit went soooo smoothly. I can see where there would have been tensions all around. I would have handled them, that's not what I mean, but that was a smooth first meeting. For the moment at least, we're all on the same team," Brian said, smiling with satisfaction.

Cynthia smiled as she realized that calling Justin in on this project was a smart move on her part. Everything was proceeding along smoothly. The art department was all excited to be working with Justin. The process of having Justin and Brian meet about the artwork, and then having Justin make sure it got done, was making things so much more interesting at the office. Brian had never been easier to work with. Brian had never been happier.

"Cynthia, I'm leaving for the a few hours," Brian announced.

"Now, where are you off to?" Cynthia teased.

"There is something at the house I want to take care of before Justin gets home. I've put it off long enough. I'll probably be back sometime later this afternoon."

And with that, Brian left the office.

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Meanwhile in Ohio, at the Cincinnati Art Gallery, a meeting was about to start between Justin and Tyler Larson, the managing director of the gallery.

Justin had arrived a little early for the meeting so he would have a chance to tour the gallery and see some of the exhibits and collections. Having a feel for the perspective gallery made it easier for him to create the paintings to be exhibited.

"Well the artist himself, it's wonderful to meet you Mr. Taylor," Mr. Larson began, after the gallery assistant announced Justin's arrival.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you too, Mr. Larson," Justin said, extending his hand for a warm handshake.

"I know Cincinnati isn't New York, but we like to think that we have a world class gallery here."

"You do. I got a chance to tour the gallery before our meeting. Your collections are most interesting."

"Wait until you see the new wing, especially with your work displayed. It's going to be spectacular."

"I'm really honored that you even considered me as part of your emerging artist showcase, especially for such a major event as the opening of a new wing to the gallery," Justin gushed.

"Our original plan was to include you as one of several the emerging artists. But, after your agent directed me to your website and now that I've had a chance to view your work, we've changed our minds. We would like to make you the 'featured artist' in the showcase," Mr. Larson announced.

"What?" Justin was stunned, this was more than he had ever expected.

"You have amassed an impressive body of work for one so young. You seem to be continually experimenting with your art. I like an artist that isn't complacent. I read the article about you in Art Forum a year ago and of course the entire art world heard about your Santa Barbara Exhibit. You're quite an interesting young man, Mr. Taylor."

"The press made too much of Santa Barbara..." Justin protested modestly.

"Not at all. I saw the images of the paintings from Santa Barbara. You even did a painting of comic book heroes and made them fine art."

"The Superheroes wasn't that much of a stretch. As you know, I provide the illustrations for the gay comic book, Rage. A friend and I created the comic several years ago," Justin admitted with some pride.

"I'd heard about that. The comic is very successful, I understand. But I'm surprised that you would acknowledge it. Most artists are snobbish about that sort of thing. They don't want their high class art tainted by the fact that they produce images for the masses."

Justin laughed. "Mr. Larson, my work speaks for itself. All of it! I believe art should be enjoyed, whether in a gallery painting or a comic book. A love of art can start at any age. Besides I had two commissions for Superheroes' type paintings, which were very lucrative, so I have no reason to be ashamed of any aspect of my art."

"That's a good attitude."

"Now, is there any particular theme or perspective you would like for the paintings for the show?"

"I leave that up to your artistic expression. We would like at least five, preferably ten paintings."

"Well I think I can handle that."

"We really appreciate your willingness to fly here to meet with me. I hope it gives you a better perspective on things."

"Yes, it does."

"Mr. Taylor, my son is a big fan of Rage. He wanted to skip school today when he heard that you were coming for a visit. I convinced him to go to school today only because I promised to bring a picture and an autograph home. Do you mind?"

"I afraid I don't have any pictures with me," Justin commented beginning to feel a bit flustered by the request. "This has really taken me by surprise. I suppose I could send him one when I get back to my studio."

"Don't trouble yourself. My secretary has the digital camera to take a quick snapshot. If you wouldn't mind just signing the print."

"Sure."

"And my son is so looking forward to meeting you. So don't be surprised if you happen to be mobbed by teenage fans during the opening. You have fans here in Cincinnati," Mr. Larson said with a smile.

"Oh my goodness. I never expected that," Justin said with a smile.

"In fact, Mr. Taylor, I was wondering if you would consider staying over an extra day after the opening. I know this is going to seem like an unusual request. But several of the high schools will be touring the gallery the day after the opening. I was wondering if you would stay an extra day to be available to talk to the students...sort of as visiting artist in resident. I know the students would love it. You're young enough that they could actually relate to you. I think it would be most interesting." Mr. Larson proposed.

"I like that idea, and I would love to do it," Justin said, now beaming at the idea.

"I'll contact your agent and work out the additional details," Mr. Larson suggested.

With that concluded, they shook hands, and Justin left the gallery almost with a feeling of walking on air.

Justin's first instinct was to call Brian and tell him the news. Then he decided it would be better to share this news with Brian, in person, when he got home.

Justin checked the time and dialed the office of Dunbar and Smith. Justin was about to have a reunion with an old friend, and he was really looking forward to this.

Chapter 10– The Legend...The Letter

Early Afternoon...(Day 17)

"Oh, Mr. Kinney. I'm surprised to see you in the middle of the day. There has been a team of people here all morning. They just finished installing things at the windows all over the house. Everyone just left not too long ago," Thomas said as Brian parked in front of the West Virginia house and exited his car.

"Well Thomas, we seem to be slowly moving in at last," Brian announced with a smile.

"It's great. It's just good that the house is no longer going to be empty. Is Mr. Taylor here with you?"

"No he's in Cincinnati on business, he'll be back tonight."

Brian continued walking toward the entrance to the house.

"You know there seems to be a bit of a chill in the air." Brian said, with a note of joy in his voice. "I think I'll light a fire."

"Would you like Teres to fix you a snack?" Thomas offered.

"No, but I might fix one. Hopefully I'll be able to find the kitchen."

They both laughed at the last comment.

"The refrigerator is stocked. Of course, if there is something special you need, we'll be more than glad to get it for you. It's going to be so good to have you here at the house," Thomas said again.

"Thanks, I'll let you know if I need anything."

Brian made his way into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

There they were...his favorite green apples. Brian smiled. Justin had thought of everything. He opened the drawer and found the knife. He then checked the upper cabinets and located the plates. Brian began to slice the apple. After a further search through the refrigerator, Brian located the sliced turkey. He added a few slices to his plate. A further search in the refrigerator, and Brian found the already cut up veggies, which were also added to the plate. Placing his plate on a tray, Brian was on his way to the living room to relax.

The slight chill in the room reminded Brian to turn on the fireplace.

He returned to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of Beam. Then he walked to his new office and retrieved Justin's letter from his desk drawer. Armed with he letter and his glass of Beam, Brian reentered the living room.

Wanting to have a full view the painting while he read the letter, he repositioned his painting to lean against the opposite chair, and then made himself comfortable in the other oversized chair, with the ottoman supporting his long legs.

Now Brian truly felt ready to find out what else Justin had to tell him.

Brian,

Legends have told us that the Ancients would craft a Talisman, a sacred object forged at the astrologically auspicious time when all the forces of the universe converged, to consecrate the energy of the spirit within the object. For the Talisman could only be created at this one moment in time and space.

It was said that with the proper Talisman, time could be eluded.

Some have said that with the proper talisman, time would have no meaning...one could travel at will...back in time to the past... or forward in time into the future.

Still others have said that the talisman can be used only once...one time to change a moment of the past or one time to change an instant of future.

How often have we wished to go back in time to change the outcome of a moment? How often have we asked "what if"? And how often have we desperately clung to some single moment hoping it would never end?

We have had our moments, you and I...moments when all the forces of the universe converge. We have known both moments of extreme joy and moments of utter despair. And through it all...through all the ups and downs...we come here to this moment in time...here in the present...when We are still US...when we are still together.

The shadow of the lovers' embrace is the ultimate Talisman of Time, for the love that is shared is transcendent.

We choose what we'll do with the time that has been given to us.

Can't we simply choose to find some way to share a love without sacrificing a life? Can't we find some compromise? Can't we find some way to be together?

'It's only time' isn't good enough, Brian.

This is the moment for which our Talisman of Time was forged. Now is the time!

Justin

"Oh great! Melanie and Michael get notes that are straightforward and say clearly what you meant for them to say. But do I get a clear and precise note...No I get one of your cryptic tomes. This isn't going to work Justin. You can't do this to me!" Brian protested.

Brian stood up and crossed to the window taking his glass of beam with him. He leaned his head against the cool pane of glass and searched the afternoon sky for answers. There were no answers to be found.

Brian walked back to the chair to read the letter again. This time his thoughts were shrouded in conversations of the past.

Beginning of Flashback

"I don't want to be with someone, who sacrificed their life and called it love to be with me," Brian had said that night as they lay in each other's arms.

"Neither do I," Justin had quietly agreed.

End of Flashback

With those words they had made the decision not to get married. With those words Brian had convinced Justin to pursue his art career in New York.

The wisdom of the decision for Justin to go had been confirmed many times over. Justin had gone to New York, and even if he had not taken the art world by storm as predicted, he was definitely getting attention as an artistic breath of fresh air. Justin was being recognized for his talent, and the world was getting to see his paintings. Brian knew the success part would come with time.

The separation had been hard on them both. Justin had fought to prove that they were still partners even though they lived in two different cities, and Brian had learned to trust in the relationship with someone that he loved. It had been a year. And although many people still didn't understand their relationship, Brian knew they were stronger than ever.

But somewhere in the back of Brian's mind was the lingering "what if". True, Justin may have needed to go to New York. Now Brian questioned himself... what if he had worked harder and found a way to have moved Kinnetik to NY also. Then, they could have been together all along.

What if there was no reason for this separation. After all, Justin wasn't the fiddler. He really had not needed to suffer for his art. Justin's art was simply a part of who he was. What if Ben had been right, and there was really no need for Justin to be alone... to do this starving artist routine? Brian thoughts were drowned out by other memories.

Beginning of Flashback

"I'll be back...you'll come there...we'll see each other all the time," Justin proclaimed.

"You don't know that...neither do I," Brian responded with a shrug of his shoulder. "Whether we see each other next weekend or next month...or never again...it doesn't matter...it's only time," Brian continued softly.

End of Flashback

Justin's words had in fact been prophetic, for they did see each other all the time...well, not all the time, but every few weeks. Brian made the time to visit because Justin couldn't.

Brian's Monday morning trip to the airport after each visit was always the hardest moment, when he had to leave Justin behind as he boarded the plane. What got him through the emotion of leaving was that it was not goodbye...but only "later"...until his next trip.

'It doesn't matter...it's only time,' was said as the ultimate declaration of Brian's undying love.

'Now Justin wants us to be together.' Brian thought. ' He has an agent. Maybe he doesn't have to live in New York anymore. Maybe now he can really paint here in Pittsburgh. It's want he's always said he wanted to do. Maybe all he has to do now, is be able to travel back and forth to New York. Maybe?'

'Can't we find a way to share a love without sacrificing a life?'

"What more do you want, Justin?" Brian asked aloud. "I thought we had worked that all out...about your going to New York."

Brian looked into the flames of the fire and knew the answer. Justin was ready to come home.

Justin wasn't defeated by New York or the art world. Justin wasn't even running away from a challenge. Justin was clearly unafraid, but Justin had simply decided that he would deal with the art world on his own terms...the exhibit in Santa Barbara was proof of that. Justin's decision to paint for three months in Pittsburgh was even further proof.

But Brian also knew that making it ok for Justin to come back presented its own set of challenges. Lindsay had made that abundantly clear. If Justin was going to be a great artist, he needed to be in New York. Pittsburgh had too many distractions.

His staff wanted Justin to stay here. Witness the fact that Justin had only spent one day at Kinnetik, and Murph and Cynthia were already insisting that Brian find some way to keep Justin on staff. But Brian didn't need any coaxing. Working on the Eyeconics-Belluss Occhiali campaign with Justin was invigorating...an exchange of ideas between equals. Brian hadn't had this much fun since the Stockwell campaign. Already he was spoiled.

Brian caught himself. What was he thinking? He had to stop thinking this way. Justin was right, 'the shadow of the lovers' embrace IS the ultimate Talisman of Time.'

Brian walked over and gently ran his fingers across the shadow of the lovers in the painting.

"I love you, Sunshine," he said out loud. "Don't worry. We'll work this out."

Brian looked at his watch and realized that it was getting late. He returned his painting to its spot in the corner of the living room. He turned off the fireplace. He gathered his tray and the dishes and returned them to the kitchen.

Brian had a lot to think about, but it was now time to return to Pittsburgh.

Chapter 11 - Old Friends

Early Afternoon...(Day 17)

In the offices of the ad agency, Dunbar and Smith, two old friends were reunited.

"Jason, it's so good to see you. You haven't changed a bit," Justin said with a smirk.

"Well you sure have, I like the look of the longer hair. It fits with the new image of you as a mad painter," Jason teased, running his fingers through Justin's hair

"How's Paul?" Justin asked.

"He's fine. He's in a meeting right now, but we're to stop in after your tour."

"How's Brian? I can't believe he let you fly all over the country without him," Jason teased.

"Jason please, I'm not a little kid anymore! For the last year I have been living in New York, all alone, trying to build a career in the art world. Brian's still lives in Pittsburgh running Kinnetik. I have been pounding the sidewalks in New York, trying to get my work shown at various galleries. I guess, all things being considered, I've been pretty successful. Various small galleries outside of New York have asked to exhibit my work. I'm not an elitist. I'll show my work anywhere people want to see it. So I did a show in Santa Barbara. I got so much press, not to mention commissions, that I was finally able to secure an agent. So now someone else is working to get my work shown, and I actually have time to just paint."

"I got a chance to look at your website, your body of work is amazing. You're still experimenting with new techniques I see. Of course, I'm still partial to your regular stuff." Jason confessed.

"The good thing about the shows outside of New York was I had a chance to experiment with new techniques, and I had a chance to get objective feedback. I like to see people's reaction without any pressure. Usually most of my out of town shows have happened under the radar of art critics. But after Santa Barbara, I'm not sure I have that luxury anymore," Justin said with a laugh.

"Did things go well with Cincinnati Art Gallery?" Jason asked with intense curiosity.

"It turns out the director's son is a fan of Rage. I had to pose for a picture for his son. That was a real surprise," Justin recounted laughing. "Anyway, the gallery wants me to participate in the emerging artist showcase for the opening of the new wing. I have another show in New York in three months too. That will mean two shows coming almost back-to-back. So I have to get busy painting."

"So are you on vacation in Pittsburgh? Or, did you just miss Brian, and you couldn't stay away any longer." Jason teased.

"No Brian and I see each other every couple of weeks in New York. This is my first trip back to Pittsburgh since I left a year ago. This time Brian asked me to come back to work on a project with him."

"How does it feel to be back in Pittsburgh?"

"It's been good to see everyone. And, it's good to be back home with Brian. Gus lives in Toronto with Melanie and Lindsay; I think I told you about that. Anyway, Gus decided that he wanted to see me so he staged a hunger strike. Let me clarify that, Gus staged a six years old's version of a hunger strike. He refused to talk to Mel and Lindz for a day, and then refused to eat his cereal the next morning."

Jason burst out laughing as he pictured the six year old in protest.

"From the stories that Paul has told me about Brian, I guess Gus is truly Brian's kid," Jason smirked. "I don't know if the world can stand both Brian Kinney and Mini Me."

Both Jason and Justin had to laugh as they contemplated that dual prospect.

"Michael and Ben were visiting Toronto so they brought Gus back to Pittsburgh with them. Gus is out of school this week, so he'll be visiting until the weekend, probably."

"So how is the project going with Brian?" Jason had to ask.

"Brian and I haven't worked on anything together like this since the Stockwell campaign. That was back when I was an intern at Vanguard. I forgot how much fun and how challenging it is to work with him professionally. "

"You sound like you really loved the experience. I know that I really love working with Paul."

"I did. I would love to work with him like that again. On this project we are equals. I really liked that."

"Have you mentioned it to Brian yet?"

"No, there hasn't been time. Plus, I'm not sure what he'll think of the idea. After all I have very little to offer. I didn't finish PIFA, although I managed to take quite a few graphics courses, but except for my internship, I have hardly any actual industry experience. So I don't have very much to offer Brian that he doesn't already have. What's the use?"

"I know how you feel. I felt the same way when I came to work here. But the campaigns that Paul and I work on together are just different from the ones we develop independently. I can't explain it, but there is just a distinct difference. I guess what I'm saying is, there may be an intrinsic value to you working with Brian. Why don't you talk to him about it?" Jason suggested.

"I think I'll wait and see how this project actually turns out," Justin suggested.

"Justin, I don't think you're giving yourself enough credit. Remember when you and Brian were here during the time Nicky was born. Everyone in the art department talked about what a great job you did, and how much they enjoyed working with you. That has to count for something. You have even more to offer now than you did back then. So please, promise me you will talk to Brian about this?"

"All right. If I can find the right time, I'll talk to Brian about it. Geez!"

"Just so you know...I saw your design website too, Justin. You could really go far in this business. I love the designs for the websites you created. They are really innovative."

"I have been freelancing in New York. I have quite a few clients. At least with the freelance work, I have been able to minimize waiting tables in the City. I'm also able to support both my loft and my studio...at least for the moment."

"Do you like living in New York? That must be exciting."

"Now that I have an agent, I can live and paint anywhere I choose. I just need to be able to fly to New York for meetings and things like that. I like New York, but I miss Brian. I'm ready for this separation to end, but I haven't had a chance to talk to Brian about it yet. Like I said, so much has been happening since I've been in Pittsburgh."

"I can't imagine Brian being any more thrilled about you staying in New York than you are to be there. But knowing Brian, he'll put up with anything if he thinks it will make you happy. He loves you, you know," Jason said, causing Justin to blush.

"Enough about me. Tell me what you and Paul are up to? How is Nicky?" Justin asked.

"Ah, Nicky. He's three years old. He's a holy terror and has Paul wrapped around his little finger. He's grown so much since the last time you and Brian were here. Of course, Nicky keeps looking at the pictures of you and Brian, so he knows who you are. Wait until you see him. Paul and I were hoping we could persuade you to stay overnight. We prepared the guest room for you. That way you could spoil your godson and spend some time with Paul and me."

"I would love to, but there is too much going on right now in Pittsburgh. Gus is visiting. We're moving into the house. I'm working on that project with Brian. When I flew out this morning, I promised Brian I would be home this evening. Another time though, I promise," Justin said resolutely. "Give Nicky a big hug for me."

"OK, I'll accept that this time, but Justin make it soon. I've missed you. Emails just aren't the same. We're a lot alike, and I miss your wicked mind."

"I've missed you too."

"So let me show you our remodel of the art department."

Jason and Justin stood up and prepared for the tour. Jason made it a point to show Justin some of the campaigns they had worked on and the artistic concepts incorporated in each. Jason showed Justin some of the new state of the art equipment that had just arrived and some of the planned uses. Finally, Justin got a chance to get reacquainted with a few graphic artists he had previously met and to see some of their work on the various campaigns.

"So before you steal all our ideas and give them to Kinnetik, we better say hello to Paul,"

Jason teased as he knocked on Paul's office door. "Paul, do you have a moment? Look who's here?"

"Justin." Paul said softly, giving him a big hug. "So Brian let you travel into the enemy camp. Huh? Maybe I should hire you right away. That would teach him a lesson," Paul said teasingly.

"Paul! You say the sweetest things," Justin responded seductively, complete with fluttering of the eyes.

"I heard you had a meeting with Cincinnati Gallery. Are you going to exhibit here?"

"It does look like I'll be part of the emerging artist showcase for the grand opening of the new wing," Justin explained, with a certain amount of pride.

"That's wonderful! That's going to be real gala, black tie and all. Jason has been pestering me about advance tickets. I guess knowing that you will be part of the exhibit eliminates all my usual excuses for avoiding art galleries," Paul teased, casting a mischievous glance at his partner. "I guess Brian will be coming here for the show. You know you guys are welcome to stay with us."

"I'm starting to look forward to the opening," Justin admitted. "We have to talk to Brian and see what his schedule is like. He's been really busy lately."

"Justin, if I know Brian, no matter how busy he is, he will drop everything for one of your shows," Paul stated emphatically.

"Well, we'll see about that," Justin stated quietly.

"Besides you and Brian have to spend time Nicky. You have a godson in desperate need of spoiling. You should bring Gus with you next time. I bet he and Nicky would have a ball together." Paul said, still pushing his point.

"We'll see," Justin insisted.

"Look, Justin and I are off to a late lunch. Then I'm going to drop him at the airport. I want to be sure he's home in time to tuck Brian in," Jason couldn't resist the opportunity to get in one more tease. "I understand that Gus is visiting too. Otherwise, you know I would kidnap him and force him to spend couple of days with us?"

"Have a good trip Justin. Tell Brian that I said hello." Paul said with a smile.

"I'll do that. I'll see you later." Justin said.

Then Justin paused for moment.

"Paul, when Nicky was born you offered me a job. I was wondering if that offer is still open?"

"Of course it is, right Jason?" Paul asked, directing the question to his partner.

"Absolutely!" Jason concurred.

"But why Justin?" Paul asked questioningly.

"No reason. Just checking. You never know what the future has in store." Justin teased.

"Well just for the record, there'll always be a position here, if you want it. I won't even ask about your reasons. Of course, you're so in demand right now, that contingency is highly unlikely. But if you ever want it, the job is here for you." Paul confirmed again.

"Thanks. Look, we'd better get going. I'll be in touch, Paul. It's good to see you." Justin said, giving Paul a hug as he was leaving.

"I'll make sure of it Justin. Bye." Paul responded, with a sigh before closing his office door.

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Jason and Justin enjoyed a leisurely late lunch. As expected, they spent part of lunch sketching while they talked. Both Justin and Jason share that unique skill to be able to sketch and carry on a conversation at the same time. They were both mischievous, and each spent time sketching the other.

"That sketch you're doing of me is going to be worth a fortune, once I force you to sign and date it," Jason said with a smirk.

"It would probably be, which is precisely why I'm not giving it to you." Justin quipped.

"Your sketches used to have such a rough edge to them, but now the lines are so refined," Jason commented.

"Well, now my hand is better and I have the medium of paint to resort to, so I can now be much more free with my sketches." Justin explained. "I'm hoping that now that things are starting to settle down, that I can actually spend my time painting at our house. I'm so looking forward to being there. I'll be there for a couple of months, so you and Paul have to promise to visit."

"We'll see," Jason said sarcastically. "Of course we'll visit. We heard about that mansion a year ago, and we're dying to see it."

"Oh Jason," Justin practically cooed. "I should tell you the house has a swimming pool and a privacy fence. You might mention that to Paul, if he's reluctant to visit," Justin said seductively.

"Justin, you are so wicked! So you think it's time to relive Atlanta, huh?"

Justin said nothing but simply wrinkled his eyebrow, and they both burst out laughing.

"Maybe it's time to make some new memories."

The time between friends always ends too soon, and it was time to get Justin to the airport for the trip back to Pittsburgh. The gentle banter continued on the ride to the airport, where Justin and Jason would finally have to say their goodbyes. So the two friends hugged each other and promised to see each other soon. Then Justin boarded his flight back to Pittsburgh. It had been a very good day.

Chapter 12 – Reunions

Late Afternoon...Day (17)

A few hours after leaving Bri-tin, Brian arrived at Debs to pick up Gus.

"Hey Deb! Hey Sonny Boy!" Brian said, walking in the house. He was instantly greeted with a hug from Gus.

"Where have you been, and where is Sunshine?" Deb asked.

"Justin had to go to Cincinnati to meet with an art gallery, but he'll be back this evening."

"You and Sunshine should come back for dinner."

"We'll see Deb, Justin's had a rather long day."

"Brian, it has been three days since I've seen Sunshine. I told you that he belongs to all of us, and you can't keep him all to yourself. Anyway, I know that's the real reason that you're moving into THAT house."

"Deb, how can you say that?" Brian smirked, gently kissing Deb on the cheek. "You know Justin needs a place to paint. He wanted to paint at the house. End of story."

"You're not fooling me one bit, you little shit."

"I know Deb, we can't hide anything from you," Brian said with a laugh.

Then Brian once again returned his attention back to his son. "Well Sonny Boy, are you ready to spend some time with dear old dad while we wait for Justin to get back?" Brian asked, bending down to hug his son.

Gus clapped his hands at the prospect of spending time with his dad and seeing HIS Justin.

Emmett entered the room, carrying a several bags, which he handed to Brian. "Be sure to give these to Justin," he said simply. "And Brian, no peeking."

Brian gave Emmett a glare as he took the bags. Emmett responded to the glare with a laugh. The bags contained the riding outfit for Gus that Justin had requested

"Thanks Em."

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Brian tossed the bags in the car, and he and Gus were off to do some last minute shopping.

Brian wanted to pick up a new soccer ball for Gus to leave at the house. Brian felt the grounds at the house would be perfect for father and son to practice together.

Brian also took Gus shopping for a few new outfits, all bearing the appropriate designer labels, of course. Brian and Gus did some other special shopping as well.

Since a day and a half had passed since father and son had last seen each other, Gus had quite a bit to tell his dad. He told Brian all about making cookies with Deb and the afternoon and evening he spent with Jennifer and Molly.

Gus also mentioned that he told his mothers about the new house because they were asking a lot of questions. Brian laughed, as he realized that everyone must be desperate for information about the house, if Lindsay and Melanie had resorted to information gathering from a six year old.

Finally a quick stop at Kinnetik to grab his briefcase, and Brian and Gus were off get a bite to eat before picking up Justin at the airport.

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Liberty Air had a very limited flight schedule between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. This was obviously not a heavily traveled route. So Justin had flown out on a 6am flight, which arrived in Cincinnati at 8am. Justin had toured the Cincinnati Art Gallery and met with its managing director. He had then visited with Paul and Jason at their agency, and then had a late lunch with Jason. Justin had left Cincinnati on the 5pm flight, arriving back at Pittsburgh at 7pm. For Justin it had been a very long day indeed.

When Justin walked through the gate at the terminal, Brian was concerned, for he could see how tired Justin looked. Although Brian wanted to hear the details of Justin's trip, he chatted with Gus in the car instead, allowing Justin to fall asleep on the way back to town.

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Back at the loft, Justin quickly showered and dressed in sweatpants. He quickly fell asleep on top of the covers.

Brian then helped Gus to shower and to get into his pajamas. Afterwards Gus climbed into bed beside Justin.

Brian had a few things do for Kinnetik before he could turn in for the night, so he was working on the computer at his desk in the loft. As he was working, he heard the pitter patter of little feet approaching. Brian smiled

"Dad, Justin's asleep. But I'm not sleepy now, so I'm going to stay up with you," Gus announced, trying to whisper. Gus reached up to give Brian a hug and kiss.

"Thank you, Sonny Boy. I like having you stay up with me," Brian responded, kissing the top of Gus's head, knowing full well his son would be asleep within the hour.

Gus quickly reached down to the floor and retrieved one of his books. Then he curled up on the sofa to read while Brian continued to work on the computer. Gus was determined to keep Brian company while he worked.

Within half hour, Gus was asleep. Brian covered Gus with a quilt and placed a pillow under his head. Brian smiled at the sight of the sleeping Gus, while he continued to work.

Several hours had passed. The loft was quiet. Everyone was asleep. Brian poured himself a glass of Beam and once again let his thoughts drift back to Justin's note. He still didn't have any answers, only more 'what if' questions. Brian knew the answers would only come when he finally talked to Justin.

Finally, Brian went to take a shower and get himself ready for bed.

Justin was awakened by the sound of the shower, but was too exhausted to move. He waited for Brian to spoon in behind him in bed. When he did, Justin turned and snuggled against his chest.

"I thought you were asleep," Brian whispered.

"I missed you."

"I missed you too."

"How was your trip?"

"It was a good trip, and I have news. I'm going to be the featured artist at the emerging artist exhibit for the opening of the new wing of the gallery. I'm really excited. I couldn't wait to tell you."

"Featured artist? Wow! That's like having a solo show. I'm very proud of you."

"It really was a surprise. The gallery director saw the catalogue of my work on my website and changed his initial offer to me from just exhibitor to featured artist."

"That's wonderful!"

"I'm a little worried though. That's two shows almost back to back. I have a lot of paintings to do. But at least my studio at the house is now ready...so I can get started," Justin said with a grin. "Now I just have to get to work."

"I'll make sure of it."

"Well, we still have the project to finish...you know with the meeting and all."

"By the way, I met Maria Silvestri today. They want to have a meeting in two weeks. Do you think the artwork will be ready?"

"You and I did the majority of the work over the weekend..."

"You mean before all the interruptions."

"So the drafts were pretty clean. All that the art department had to do was produce the next stage boards. With any luck they should be ready tomorrow. Then all I have to do is add the finishing touches. So we should be ready for your meeting."

"That's good."

"What did you think of Maria Silvestri?"

"She has this soft exterior, but you know that she's tough. She would have to be to hold the position in the company that she has. By the way, she was very interested in your paintings in the lobby."

"Really? That's odd! She's a numbers type. Cristina is the artist."

"In fact, Maria wanted to move the meeting next week to the Eyeconics offices so her sister would be able to focus on the meeting. She's afraid Cristina will be distracted by your paintings instead on focusing on the task at hand."

Brian and Justin both had to laugh at the prospect.

"I saw Paul and Jason while I was in Cincinnati," Justin mentioned casually.

"You did?"

"They said to tell you hello. They did major renovations on the art department at Dunbar and Smith. It's now state of the art with the new equipment and everything. Jason and I had lunch together, but Paul couldn't get away. My trip was short notice and all. But, Paul said to tell you hello."

"How much sketching did you and Jason do during lunch?"

"Brian."

"What other mischief did the infamous duo create?"

"Paul and Jason want us to stay with them. Maybe even go out a few days before the show. And, Brian, the opening for the new wing of Cincinnati Art Gallery is going to be a black tie affair. It would be good for us all to be together again."

"Why Sunshine, are you inviting me to your show in Cincinnati?"

"Will you go with me?"

"A chance to wear my Armani tux...how can I resist?"

"Ever the romantic!"

"Of course, we need to have Patrick fit you for a new tux before the show."

"Brian."

"Sunshine."

"You want to hear something funny. The gallery director's son is a fan of Rage. I had to leave an autograph on the digital picture they took of me while I was there."

"So it seems you and Michael have fans everywhere. Who would have believed it?'

"Because of Rage, I have been asked to stay over a few days after the opening. It seem the high schools will be touring the new wing. The Gallery wants me to talk to them about art as Visiting Artist in Resident. Mr. Larson said something about I was young enough to relate to the students. So that should be interesting. I think the fact that I worked on a comic book has a lot to do with their offer."

"Congratulations, Sunshine. You have been able to so much with your art. I remember when you and Michael were creating the comic. Cluttering up my loft."

"Yes, I remember."

"I did some horrible things back then. I was so jealous. I would have never destroyed your work otherwise. I'm not the same person now that I was then."

"I know."

They were both quiet for a moment.

"So what mischief did you and Jason cook up?"

"None actually. I did invite them here for a visit. I did mention to Jason that if Paul resisted the idea, he should mention that our house has a pool."

"Ah, Atlanta."

"You remembered?"

"It was a long time ago. But when I saw your campsite for Gus, it all came back to me."

"The campsite...why did that bring it back?"

"Atlanta was hot, but you showed the same attention to detail at the campsite too. I think it has to do with your artistic sensibilities. Anyway, Paul and I learned a long time ago, when you were just twink, to get out of your way and let you and Jason have free rein. That lesson has served us so well over the years," Brian said with a laugh.

"I was more hoping to create some new memories."

"Oh, you were? Huh?"

"Well we better get some sleep. You have to go into Kinnetik in the morning."

"Yes and Gus has his riding lesson at 3pm."

"Emmett picked up the outfit you requested. So I guess we're ready. But Justin, promise me you'll spend some time in your studio tomorrow."

"I promise. Will you stop worrying?"

"I'm not worried."

Justin leaned up and kissed Brian passionately.

"Yes you are!"

They passionately kissed again, and Justin deepened the kiss.

"Fuck Justin, don't start that now, when you just told me you were too tired to get into the shower."

"The shower, what's wrong with here in bed. Gus is asleep on the sofa instead of between us," Justin teased. "We can be quiet."

"Sunshine, you're never quiet."

"Well I can be. If I must."

"We'll be at the house tomorrow, where the rooms have doors. Besides you really need your rest."

"Oh you mean for painting."

"No, I wasn't thinking about that."

"Then why do I need to rest?"

"Because you made me promise to fuck you in every room of Bri-tin as well as the pool, the tennis courts, and the stables. When I was at the house today I realized how many rooms that is. Justin, the house is huge...there have to be at least 7 bedrooms. I was too tired to count the rooms downstairs."

"So you mean if you had known about the fucking-requirement, you would have bought a smaller palace when you asked me to marry you?"

"No I'm going to be fine. It's you I worried about. You have to have enough energy for your art and me and all those rooms. That's a lot. We are all quite demanding. So you need to get some sleep."

"You're probably right. I hadn't thought about it that way," Justin said, snuggling in closer to Brian's chest.

"Well...see...that's what you have me for." Brian replied, wrapping his arms every so tightly around Justin. And, they both drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 13 – Suggestions

The Next Morning...(Day 18)

Brian could hear the coffee grinder being put in to service, so he ventured out into the kitchen area of the loft. He noticed that the coffee brewer had been started, but there was no Justin in sight.

Sounds of rustling in the storage area could be heard once again, and Brian just laughed and shook his head in acceptance. A few minutes later, Justin appeared carrying a small box.

"Justin, I realize this is a stupid question, but how much stuff did you put in the storage area?" Brian asked with a laugh.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because every opportunity you've had lately, you seem to pull something else out. It just seems endless. Did you leave anything in your apartment in New York?" Brian continued to tease.

"I just know how much you hate clutter."

"Yeah, well..."

"Look Brian, when I was high school and staying a Debbie's, I used to move stuff into the loft all the time. I did it by moving in a few items at a time," Justin started to explain.

"Well I know I never saw you move in...but you always seem to have everything here that you needed. I always wondered about that," Brian remembered.

"See it worked. You would have freaked if I had moved everything in at once," Justin teased, leaning in to give Brian a gently kiss for emphasis.

"Probably. I did notice that every time you moved out though, you always had this big duffle bag. I always wondered where everything came from, and how it got here."

"Now you know."

"So how much stuff is now left in the storage area?"

"Not much. Most of what I need is already at the house. I'm leaving some clothes here though."

"Justin, tell me I'm not going to be missing my shirts again?"

"What?" Justin asked with complete innocence.

"Tell me you're not stealing my shirts again. When you went to New York I accused the cleaners of losing them. I was going to have my lawyer sue the cleaners. Then I visited your apartment in New York, and I found out where the errant shirts happened to be."

"What do you mean?" Justin asked, feigning complete innocence again.

"Why can't you be like Lindsay and other artists and simply wear a smock? I thought artists liked to paint in smocks and maybe even berets."

"I'm unique. I like to wear your shirts," Justin said, gently kissing Brian.

"Explain something else to me, will you?"

"Huh?

"How is it that you live in cargo pants and tee shirts on a day-to-day basis? You wear them anywhere you can get away with. You protest when I try to dress you in designer labels. I just don't understand," Brian said, shaking his head.

"Is there a point here, Brian?" Justin asked, standing with his one hand on his hip.

Brian continue, "But when you decide to paint, you have to wear my Armani shirts...need I mention my Armani shirts that are going to get paint all over them! Doesn't this seem a bit backward to you?"

"You're always complaining about my lack of interest in designer shirts. So...well."

"Justin."

"It isn't that they're designer shirts...I like to paint in YOUR shirts...especially when I was in New York...because then YOU didn't seem so far away," Justin said quietly.

"So now that you're here...my shirts are safe? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far. Now I've gotten used to wearing them. I'm not sure I can paint without wearing one of your shirts," Justin explained.

"Well we can't have that now, can we?" Brian said with a laugh, leaning up to give Justin a kiss.

The coffee had finally finished brewing. Brian and Justin were each leisurely enjoying a cup.

Justin believed he was dressed and ready to go to Kinnetik to check on the status of the boards for the Belluss Occhiali/Eyeconics' campaign.

"Justin, do me a favor?" Brian asked quietly.

"Sure."

"I know it's asking a lot, but do you suppose that you could wear something else beside cargo pants to Kinnetik, especially if you are going to boss my art department around."

"And, what would you suggest?"

Brian walked into the bedroom and returned with an suit bag, which he handed to Justin.

"Here. Try this."

Justin reacted as if the suit bag was contaminated.

"Brian, I'm not wearing a suit. I'm an artist, remember."

"Will you stop being a princess? It's not a suit. Gus and I went shopping yesterday. He complained that I never buy you any NICE clothes. So he made me buy you an outfit. He picked it out himself."

"Gus picked it out?" Justin said with a smile, finally accepting the clothes from Brian.

Justin unzipped the bag to examine the contents.

"Hmmm, Gus has good taste. I'm going to try these on," Justin said with a smile.

In a few minutes, Justin returned dressed in his new outfit. Gus had chosen midnight blue Armani slacks with a corresponding lighter blue sweater.

"Gus has really good taste!" Justin repeated, modeling the new outfit for Brian.

"Of course, he has good taste! He's my son, and unlike some people, he has actually liked wearing designer labels ever since he was a baby," Brian pointed out. "Gus mentioned something about the color would set off your eyes."

Justin leaned in to kiss Brian. "I'm obviously going to have to find some unique way to say thank you to Gus, aren't I?" Justin continued kissing Brian's neck and shoulder.

"You know, you could show your gratitude to me, and then I could relay the message to Gus for you," Brian suggested with a smirk.

"We'll have to talk about this later. I have to get going," Justin said with a smile.

"Later."

"Later."

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"Cynthia, I'm on my way to the art department to check on the artwork for the campaign," Justin announced.

"Everyone was so busy yesterday trying to get everything finished. How was your trip to Cincinnati?" Cynthia asked.

"Good. I'm going to be part of the emerging artist's exhibit for the opening of the new wing in a few months."

"That's great Justin!"

"Yes. I'm pretty excited about it. That will be two shows back to back, so I have to get busy painting. Well my studio is all set up at the house, and I promised Brian I would actually go in there and paint today. So I better get down to the art department and check on things."

"Sounds like a good idea."

As Justin was leaving Cynthia's office, Susan Weaver arrived. She was alone this time.

"Cynthia, I know I was just here yesterday, but is Brian available?" Susan asked.

"He's not in yet," Cynthia explained, trying to understand why Susan was back again so soon.

"Cynthia do you know who's directing the art for our campaign?"

"Did you talk to Brian?"

"He just said it was someone special. They were supposedly out of town yesterday, so I couldn't meet them. Do you know who it is?"

"Susan, you know I'm not a liberty to discuss it with you."

"I know. I know. But the suspense in killing me."

"You'll have to talk to Brian."

"Isn't there anything you can tell me?'

"Let's just say that you were extremely fortunate to have this person working on your campaign. He and Brian work well together. Brian is pleased. So I think that you will be pleased too."

"And that's all you're going to tell me?"

"Pretty much!" Cynthia said with a laugh, thoroughly enjoying this conversation.

"Well ok, I'm going back to my office and let you get back to work. I'll see you in two weeks," Susan said, preparing to leave. Then she turned back. "Oh, Cynthia. We don't have to mention this visit to Brian do we? There's no reason for him to know how anxious I am."

Cynthia laughed, "Susan, he knows already knows how anxious you are. But I think we can omit telling him that you were here."

Susan let out a sign of relief, as she said her goodbye. Cynthia simply smiled.

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Meanwhile, in the art department, Justin was reviewing the artwork for the campaign. The boards had turned out pretty much the way Justin had expected. Justin made the required finishing touches, and he now felt everything was ready for Brian's review.

Justin's stomach started to rumble. He decided to head to the Diner for an early lunch. Realizing he had not had a chance to see Lindsay and Melanie, he called them at Debbie's to see if they could join him.

Melanie was on her way out to an appointment, but Lindsay agreed to meet him.

Justin entered the Diner and was immediately engulfed in loving arms for a trademark Debbie hug. "Sunshine. How did Brian let you escape from your exile at the house?"

"Debbie..."

"Don't try to defend him. I know the reason you're at the house is to keep you away from us."

"In fact, I'm on my way back there this afternoon. I had to do some work to do for Brian at Kinnetik. I just got back last night from Cincinnati so we stayed at the loft."

"How did it go?"

"I'm going to be exhibiting there for the opening of their new wing?"

"That's great! I always knew you would be famous!"

"Not yet Deb, but I'm getting there. At least my work is being seen."

Lindsay entered the Diner, and Justin stood up to hug her before she joined him in the booth.

"Gee Lindsay, It's been so long. I haven't seen you or Mel or JR in ages. I miss you guys."

Debbie came over and quickly took their orders, leaving Justin and Lindsay to chat.

"Everyone misses you too. Mel had an appointment. JR has been spending a lot to time with Ben and Michael and Deb. She is going to be so spoiled from all this attention, I'm not sure I can get her to go back to Toronto," Lindsay said with a laugh. "So how's New York?"

"New York is good. I've been part of several exhibits at various galleries. I have a show coming up in about three months. Yesterday, I agreed to be part of the emerging artist exhibit for the opening of the new gallery wing in Cincinnati. So I'm really excited about that."

"Why are you exhibiting in Cincinnati? I thought the idea was to get exhibits in New York?" Lindsay started to protest.

"I like the non-New York exhibits. I usually get a chance to challenge myself and experiment with new techniques and be outside the radar of the critics. At least that used to be the case, until Santa Barbara," Justin said with a laugh.

"Melanie and I read about your Santa Barbara exhibit, and of course I loved the painting that you sent her. You have really succeeded in taking your art to the next level. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks Lindsay. You have always been one of my biggest supporters."

Debbie quickly delivered their food, kissing Justin on the cheek. "My own little Picasso," Deb uttered as she turned away.

Lindsay and Justin continued their conversation while they ate.

"I thought that you might be still be upset with me. After all, if I hadn't interfered, you and Brian would be married now."

"Brian and I are fine. Our relationship is still strong. We're still partners, even though we live in two different cities. He comes to New York when he can get away. We're ok. I'll just be glad when I can come back to Pittsburgh and paint here."

"Justin, it's every artist dream to be in New York. I know it was my dream once. Why on earth would you want to comeback here?"

"I'm in New York to accomplish a goal with my career, so I can get back here to Pittsburgh and paint. It's that simple. I like New York. I'm meeting lots of interesting people. I'm making lots of contacts. I'm getting to show my work. But Lindsay, Pittsburgh is my home."

"You know I have a whole scrapbook about you. I even subscribe to a clipping service so I can keep track of you." Lindsay said, trying to change the subject.

"That's great to know. When you get a chance you have to take a look at my new website. I finally have all my work catalogued there. It's really exciting. And, because I have the website, I just found out that Cincinnati offered me featured artist status for the opening of their new wing. Isn't technology wonderful?" Then Justin got rather quiet for a moment. "Lindsay how come you never went to New York to pursue your art?"

"I had wanted to. When I was in college I once had a dream to be an artist in New York City. But I found out that it was just a dream. I found out in college, that I was talented. I know I'm a good artist. But everyone in the art world has talent. Unlike you, my talent wasn't special enough to sustain a career in New York. I'm a good artist, but I'll never be a great artist. So I redirected my talent toward teaching art history, managing art galleries, and nurturing artists. But you...you are a great artist. You couldn't have survived this year in New York if you weren't. You have a chance at different life than I've had. You have the buzz, as well as the talent. I want all possible success for you! I'm just sorry that I interfered in your life in the process."

"Lindsay, Brian and I are fine. I want to be successful with my art, but I don't want to be consumed by my art. My relationship with Brian is still MOST important, and it ALWAYS will be. Being a successful artist wouldn't matter if at the end of the journey, Brian weren't with me there. Fortunately, Brian supports my art and me."

"You're very lucky."

"I know."

"I saw Brian. He's so proud of you. You know that he loves you."

"Yes, I know."

"Who would have ever thought that a "twink" would tame the great Brian Kinney? He's even turned into a good father to Gus."

"Brian has always been a good father to Gus. He has always loved Gus, from the moment he first saw him. I remember Brian at the hospital that first night I met him...the night Gus was born..."

"When you decided that Gus should be his name, instead of Abraham. I'm not sure Melanie will ever forgive you for that one," Lindsay teased.

"Brian STILL loves his son. When he and Gus are together, it's as if there's no one else in the world. So you were right...Brian is a good father. I just wish you and Melanie would give him some credit. Make no mistake, there's no reason for you ever to doubt his love for Gus. There's no reason for you to doubt the way Brian takes care of Gus."

"Of course, Gus just demonstrated how he feels about you. A hunger strike," Lindsay said shaking her head."

They both just laughed.

"You know Gus thinks of you as HIS JUSTIN," Lindsay continued with a smile. "Gus was so upset with Mel and I after hearing Michael's theory about you being lost in New York. He wouldn't talk to us...then the hunger strike. So now I know that Gus thinks of you as his other dad. Gus is very lucky to have you. We never worry about Gus when he's with you."

"Thanks Lindsay, that means a lot to me. But have no reason to worry about Gus when he's with Brian. Brian is very protective where Gus is concerned. Brian has changed. He is not the irresponsible person you remember from your college days. Surely you can see that."

"I know. Mel and I are trying to see Brian differently. But he and I go way back. There is so much history. We just thought he would always remain the same."

"Lindsay, you sound like Michael!"

"Oh please! Not that! Look, I know that Brian is very important to Gus, and as Gus gets older he's going to need Brian more and more. I realize that Melanie and I are the parents, but I'm starting to see that we can't do it all. Gus needs both you and Brian. Besides, who else would have taken him camping in the middle of winter?"

"Oh, I see you heard about that."

"In gory detail. Gus can't stop talking about it."

"Then I guess I should warn you that Gus is scheduled for his first horseback riding lesson today. Well not lesson actually...there are stables down the road from the house. So Brian and I thought that we should see if Gus and the horses like each other."

Lindsay started to laugh uncontrollably.

"Lindsay. What did I say?"

Lindsay laughing continued.

"I'm sorry Justin. I just got a picture of Gus meeting a horse up close. But even funnier, I just got a picture of Brian meeting a horse up close. You and I were raised riding horses. Brian and Gus are going to be another matter. You're going to have your hands full. You think Brian was a drama queen about the marshmallows, I can just imagine him with the horses. I'm sorry, Justin. You have to allow me this good laugh," Lindsay said and then burst out laughing again. "Please take pictures. I wish I could there, but I have an appointment this afternoon. So please take lots of pictures."

"You're right. You and I rode as kids. I forgot about that. Brian and Gus have probably only been close to horses at the zoo. You're right! This is going to be an experience for both of them. Don't worry, I sure that you will get a full report from Gus."

"Oh yeah! I'm betting on it. Wait 'til I tell Melanie!" Lindsay remarked, still laughing.

"Well I guess I should get ready to go. I have a long drive to the house."

"Just a minute, where do you think you're going?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're not going anywhere until you tell me about the house," Lindsay demanded.

"Lindsay."

"I'm waiting, Justin!"

"All right. What do you want to know?"

"Tell me all everything about it."

"The house is special. Yes, it's large and expensive, but that's not why I love it. It's the first place that Brian and I have every moved into together. When we decided not to get married, I thought he had sold the house. But he didn't. So it's been sitting empty for a year. So we rented some furniture, and we're going stay there for a while. I'm going to paint there. Gus has his own room there. Brian is totally relaxed there. You'll see what I mean when you see it."

"When...when?"

"Now, you know Brian..."

"Yes, I do. That's why I'm pleading with you to see the house. You're more likely to give in than Brian."

"I'll see what I can do. How long are you going to be in town?"

"Melanie wants to leave on Saturday or Sunday because Gus has school on Monday."

"Brian took Gus shopping. I have no idea what they bought, but I think he was buying Gus more school clothes. They even bought me this new outfit."

"So that's why you are out of your usual tee shirt and cargo pants."

"Yeah, Brian said as long as I was bossing his art department around, I had to look the part. I'm grateful he didn't buy me a suit. I'm sure I really have Gus to thank for that," Justin said with a laugh. "Look Lindz, I really do have to get going."

"Well, I guess I really do have to let you go...unless you have more to tell me?"

"Nope. Nothing that I haven't already said," Justin said with a smile, while Lindsay nodded her acceptance.

Chapter 14 – First Times

Meanwhile at the Loft...(Day 18)

Justin wanted to get an early start on the day, so Brian allowed Gus to sleep late, while he packed a few items.

Brian also packed the two additional outfits that he and Gus had purchased for Justin.

Justin had not protested too much about the first outfit. Brian was thinking things had gone pretty well, but he decided not to push his luck and mention the other outfits. Brian's plan was to keep them hidden away in Justin's closet and let him find them in due course...and deal with any fallout then.

Gus and Brian showered together and quickly got dressed. Of course Gus was very concerned that Justin had left before he had awakened, but Brian assured him that Justin would be joining them later. Gus seemed relieved.

Over a scrumptious breakfast of juice and cereal and milk, Brian went over the day's activities with Gus.

"Did you know that the house has furniture in it now?" Brian casually asked, watching for Gus's reaction.

"Really?"

"So I guess you would probably like to see your room, huh?"

This would be the first opportunity that Gus would have to see his room all furnished and ready for him sleep in it.

"My room?"

"You know Justin left you a little surprise in your room at the house," Brian teased. "He wouldn't tell me what it was, but he told me to be sure to have you check it out."

Suddenly Gus couldn't finish his breakfast fast enough. He could hardly wait to see Justin's surprise.

So with the car properly loaded, father and son were on their way to West Virginia.

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Arriving at the house, Brian helped Gus out of the car, while Thomas unloaded the bags from the car.

"Well Sonny Boy, are you ready to see the house?" Brian asked gleefully.

Gus nodded an excited yes. Passing under the ivy-covered archway, Brian and Gus entered the foyer.

Brian helped Gus off with his coat and hung it on the coat rack. They took a few steps so that they could peek into the nearby room.

"Things sure look different, huh Gus?" Brian commented. "We can actually see where we're going this time."

Thinking this was how things started before...Gus had to ask, "Are we going to be dark again, Dad?"

"No Gus, with Justin safely at work, this time there should be no surprises," Brian said hesitantly, still thinking in the back of his mind that with Justin, one could never really tell what was going to happen next."

Brian gave Gus the tour of the lower level of the house, and they even got a chance to peek into Justin's studio.

Gus especially liked the media room and the comfortable chairs. Gus also noticed that The Yellow Submarine was all queued up and ready for viewing. Brian just smiled.

Brian had not paid much attention to the media room before, but he was pleasantly surprised to find that duplicate copies of his collection of Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Humphrey Bogart movies were comfortably tucked away on a special shelf.

"This house is really big, Dad," Gus commented during the tour.

Brian took this to be 'mini-Kinney speak' for 'Dad will you carry me'. So

Brian lifted Gus into his arms. Gus hugged his dad upon being lifted up.

After touring the first floor, Brian and Gus moved upstairs. Brian showed Gus where he and Justin would be sleeping. Gus liked the fireplace in the their room.

Now Gus was ready to see his room.

Brian slowly led Gus to his bedroom door. Brian had a blindfold hidden in his pocket. He quickly slipped the blindfold over Gus's eyes.

"Are you ready to see your room?" Brian asked with a smile.

"C'mon Dad, I can't see."

"Are you sure you're ready?"

"Dad!"

"Ok. Here goes," Brian said, removing the blindfold.

Gus had already entered the room and immediately located the oversized teddy bear that Justin had insisted Gus would absolutely need in his new room. Gus's first move was to go and hug the teddy bear.

After seeing the teddy bear, Gus took in the furnishings for his room. Brian lay comfortably across the bed, while Gus checked out each toy and every book that had been placed in the room.

Finally Gus joined his father on his bed. Gus loved everything about the room and he hugged his father to say thank you.

Gus started to look through his drawers and closets and found out that Justin had already put Gus's clothes away in the room. So pretty much, Gus was all moved in. Brian was just as surprised as Gus by this turn of events.

Brian left Gus alone to let him get acquainted with his room, while Brian returned downstairs and entered his office on the lower level of the house. He placed few calls.

"Cynthia, so is my company still standing?" Brian began with a smirk.

"Only because Justin been in the art department most of the morning," she quipped. "He completed his finishing touches to the boards, so they're ready for your review. "Brian, the boards really look great."

"That's good. Justin's not answering his cell phone. Can you get him to call me?"

"He's not here. He got hungry, so he left for an early lunch. He's at the Diner. Murph and George mentioned that they want him to review another campaign, so he agreed to come back. Then I think he'll be heading to the house soon afterwards."

"Is anything else going on I should know about?"

"Just that Susan Weaver wants to meet the art director for her campaign. She stopped by again."

"Susan isn't usually this much trouble. Rudolpho Silvestri must still be giving her a lot of sleepless nights."

"So the next time she shows up...what do you want me to tell her?"

"It's not long until the first meeting. Things will take care of themselves."

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Justin drove into the driveway while Gus and Brian were outside practicing soccer moves. They both waved and smiled.

After quickly changing into a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, he located the outfit for Gus, which Emmett had purchased. Justin took a moment to lay the clothes out on Gus's bed. The highlight of the outfit was the cowboy hat.

While rummaging through his closet, Justin happened to notice the extra suit bags hanging in there. He remembered that Brian had just been shopping again, so he didn't think anything about new additions to the closet.

Eventually his curiosity got the better of him and Justin unzipped each bag, so that he could get a look at Brian's new outfits.

To his surprise, he noticed that the clothes were not Brian's size. At that point Justin knew that HE had several new outfits, and he just shook his head.

Over the last year, he and Brian had talked about Brian constant need to buy things for Justin. Brian had finally accepted that he didn't need to show his love for Justin by constantly buying things for him. Justin knew that he and Brian would have to have THE TALK again, once Gus was gone.

Justin positioned himself at the window in the spare bedroom and watched his two favorite people at play. He noticed how much fun Brian and Gus seemed to be having, so Justin grabbed his sketchpad and began to sketch. Justin smiled as the images formed on the page.

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"I was thinking of inviting Melanie and Lindsay for lunch tomorrow," Justin said, when Brian had come inside to grab water for himself and Gus.

"You'll do anything to keep from painting, won't you?" Brian teased.

"I had lunch with Lindsay today. She wants to see the house. I thought maybe you would join us."

"Sunshine."

Justin leaned in and starting nibbling on Brian's neck. "I thought you could take a break from work, pick them up, come out for lunch, and then go back to town."

"Justin."

"How bad can it be?"

"Justin."

"Think about it?"

Brian let out a sigh of defeat. "All right. Just lunch and a quick tour and back to town."

"Promise," Justin said, sealing his declaration with a passionate kiss.

"Lindsay I don't mind, but I guess this means I will have to put up with Melanie too?"

"It's only for a little while."

"At least I already know that tomorrow will be totally fucked."

"I promise to make it up to you," Justin said, punctuating with eyebrow motion.

"Big time!" Brian said with a laugh. " But let me go take the water outside to Gus. He's waiting."

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Later that day, Justin finally told Gus that he was going to meet the horses. Gus mistakenly thought they were all going to the zoo, so he was really excited.

Gus decided he wanted to dress like Brian and Justin, but he did grab the cowboy hat.

Now dressed in Jeans and a sweatshirt, everyone was ready to head off. There were still surprises in store for Gus.

When they arrived at the stables, Justin talked with Chuck, who was to be Gus riding instructor. Justin carefully went over his plans. Chuck smiled and assured Justin that everything was ready. Chuck noticed the slightly worried expression on Justin's face, and Chuck once again tried to reassure him that everything would be fine.

Chuck returned with two ponies, just the right size for Gus. After he got over his surprise that they were not going to the zoo, Gus' eyes got wider as he took in these unfamiliar surroundings. Gus initially watched from a distance, clinging tightly to Brian's leg for support.

After watching Justin and Chuck stroking and feeding the horses, curiosity got the best of Gus, and he slowly ventured over for a closer look.

Holding tight to Justin's hand, Gus finally started to pet each of the ponies. Gus learned the ponies' names and spent some time talking to the horses, but never once releasing Justin's hand.

Brian, however, was content to watch this entire interaction from the fence line.

Finally, Brian decided to come over and to observe the horses at closer range.

Only with Justin's hand on the small of his back, did Brian finally consent to actually pet the horses.

Eventually Gus became brave and was ready to fed carrots to the ponies. Gus was all smiles.

Chuck noticed that Gus seemed to like one of the horses better than the other. "So Gus, would you like to ride him," Chuck asked cheerfully.

Gus nodded yes.

Things were going so well, that Chuck immediately lifted Gus onto the horse's back. Once Gus was settled, Chuck led the horse and rider into a small circular area.

Brian and Justin moved back to the fenced area and watched with smiles and waves.

"You realize now I'm going to have get him a horse," Brian mumbled to Justin as he watched the events unfold.

Justin just smiled.

Later, Chuck gave an undetected signal to two of his assistants.

While Brian and Justin were watching Gus riding his horse, Chuck's two assistants approached, each leading a horse. Thinking they were somehow in the way, Brian attempted to back up.

Justin gently put his hand on Brian's arm to stop him.

Brian considered the situation for a moment. He immediately felt Justin's hand move to his back. Feeling the hand on his back and looking at the horses, Brian recognized the setup.

"Justin?"

Recognizing the start of a drama queen moment, Justin slid his arm around Brian's waist. The contact of skin on skin, made Brian relax.

"Justin?"

"Brian, all you have to do is just sit on the horse. C'mon this is for Gus," Justin said quietly. "Look at how much fun he's having," Justin said, pointing over toward Gus, who was eagerly riding his pony and waving.

"Justin?"

Brian looked over a Gus and saw him smiling and waving. So Brian let out a deep sigh and resigned himself to the inevitable.

"You realize that you're going to pay for this, Sunshine. Right?" Brian commented just before he mounted his horse.

Justin nodded acceptance.

Brian mounted the gentle Palomino, while Justin mounted a Chestnut Bay. Each held on tightly to the reins as the assistants led the two additional horses into the circle.

Once Brian calmed down, he realized that this wasn't so bad. Of course, he was not about to admit that to Justin.

The riding experience was made much more palatable as Brian continued to contemplate the various punishments he was going to met out to Justin in return for this particular stunt. There was no way that Brian could allow Justin to get away with this...no way at all.

Justin looked over at Brian during the ride and clearly read the expression in Brian's eyes. Justin knew it was only a matter of time before Brian exacted his punishment.

When the hour was over, Chuck and the assistants helped everyone to dismount from there respective horses.

Gus and Brian headed to the car, while Justin paid for the riding lesson.

Both Brian and Gus besieged Justin with hugs and tickles, when he finally reached the car. Justin quickly got inside the car, seeking the comfort of the SUV for safety. Brian and Gus finally entered the car, and they were now ready for the trip home.

"That was fun," Gus commented. "Can we do that again?"

"So Gus, I take it that you like the horses," Brian said with a laugh.

"I think next time we'll have to ride the trails," Justin suggested. "Won't that be fun?" Justin continued looking over at Brian. "We can all go riding together."

"Look, I know you and Lindsay having been riding horses since you were kids. But you're going to have to take pity on the rest of us," Brian said.

"I know it was a bit surprise. But after you got over the shock, what did you think?" Justin asked sheepishly while they were riding back to the house.

Brian didn't say anything.

Back at Bri-tin before exiting the car, Brian leaned over and gently kissed Justin. "Thank you for a most excellent adventure." Justin just smiled.

Gus also leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Justin's neck from his position in the rear of the car, and said, "Thanks Justin."

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Everyone showered quickly and headed down to the kitchen, where Teres was preparing dinner and talking to Thomas. Gus propped himself on one of the stools and started to tell Teres and Thomas all about his riding adventure, causing laughter all around.

After dinner, Gus called his mothers and recounted his adventure with the horses to them. He even told Lindsay and Melanie about Brian and Justin riding horses too. Melanie and Lindsay couldn't stop laughing, about what they were hearing.

Before Justin could extend the invitation for lunch tomorrow, Lindsay relayed that Debbie expected them for an early dinner on Saturday. Brian, much to Justin's surprise, cheerfully agreed immediately.

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Eventually, Brian, Justin, and Gus moved to the media room to watch the DVD of The Yellow Submarine. This was the moment everyone realized that Bri-tin became home. Although Gus and Justin had watched the movie like a hundred times, for it was clearly their favorite movie to watch together, and Brian had seen the movie many times as well, this time watching the movie was somehow more special.

Brian's mind drifted back to the first time he had watched this movie. It was almost six years ago when Jennifer had included the video of the movie in a duffle bag of clothing for Justin that she dropped off at Brian's office. This was when Jennifer handed a 17 year-old Justin over to Brian. This was also when Brian had first learned that Justin wanted to be an animator.

Back then, he and Justin had watched the movie together, and during that viewing Brian had tried to come to terms with the fact that Justin was now in his life. Now six years later, Brian knew he couldn't even begin to imagine his life without Justin.

And Brian started to think about the letter again. 'It's only time isn't good enough, Brian. The shadow of the lovers' embrace is the ultimate Talisman Of Time. Now is the time!'

Chapter 15 – There's More

A Few Moments Later...(Day 18)

Brian's thoughts were interrupted as Justin whispered, "Gus fell asleep."

"Well, I would say that he's had quite a day...quite a week in fact," Brian responded with a quiet laugh. "I guess I should carry him up to bed."

"I'll give you a hand," Justin offered.

"That isn't necessary. I want you to stay down here until I come back."

"Brian?"

"Humor me, Sunshine?"

Gus grumbled a bit as he was lifted into Brian's strong arms, but he quickly wrapped his arms about Brian's neck and nestled into Brian's chest.

Brian easily carried Gus to his bedroom and placed him in his bed. Brian covered him up and turned on the night-light. As he was about to leave the room, Brian noticed the monitor and smiled.

Once again Justin had thought of everything. The monitor was so that they could hear if Gus called out or got scared. Since the house was so much larger than the loft, Justin wanted to be sure Gus would be ok if he needed them during the night.

Brian made sure the monitor was on. Brian then walked into their bedroom and saw the corresponding unit. He made the checks to insure that everything was working properly.

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Brian set about preparing something that he had been thinking about for some time. He had thought about this whenever he would make occasional trips to the house. This is something he definitely wanted to do.

Meanwhile in the media room, Justin noticed that Brian had been gone for a long time. He wondered what was going on, but he obeyed Brian's instructions and waited downstairs for his to return.

Justin decided to use the time to tidy things up and return the DVD to its location on one of the shelves. He returned the dishes to the kitchen and settled back in the media room to once again wait.

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"I have something for you," Brian said to Justin with a sheepish grin, upon his return to the media room.

"What is it?" Justin asked suspiciously.

"After the stunts you've pulled over the last couple of days, you expect me to just tell you. It's not going to be that easy, Sunshine. It's payback time," Brian said, sliding the blindfold over Justin's eyes.

"Brian?"

"Yes Sunshine?"

"I can't see."

"That IS the general idea of a blindfold."

"Brian?"

"Now, I need you to stand up and come along with me," Brian said, gently nudging Justin to a standing position and gently tugging him along.

"Where to?"

"You ask too many questions. Just do it!" Brian said sternly, and then he started to laugh.

Brian led Justin to the steps leading to the upper level. Then sliding his arm around Justin's waist, Brian gently nudged Justin up the stairs.

Upon reaching the upper level, Brian maneuvered Justin into the master bedroom and closed the door.

Brian turned on the fireplace and turned off all the other lights. The light from the fireplace gave the large room a yellow glow.

Brian kissed Justin passionately and removed his blindfold. When the kiss was broken, Brian gently pushed Justin on the bed.

"So you're going to ravish me by the light of the fireplace. I can get used to that," Justin commented.

"Maybe later," Brian teased. "But for right now you're wearing too many clothes."

"And why is that?" Justin asked with a slight laugh.

Brian walked Justin over to the door leading to their bath area. At the door, Brian stopped and said, "Join me?"

"Brian, I can't believe you did this."

Two piles of clothes suddenly were dropped at the doorway, as Brian and Justin headed for the two-person hot tub, which was already filled with water. Rows of lit candles had been strategically placed throughout the bathroom for a special effect.

"Shall we?" Brian said, stepping into the hot tub and extending a hand to Justin.

They both lowered themselves into the churning, steamy water without once breaking contact, and each groaned with pleasure as they spooned together enjoying the feel of the other's skin.

"I love this," Justin said, still trying to recover from the surprise.

"I'm glad. You and I have pretty much lived in the shower since Gus arrived. I thought it was time for something a little more..."

"Romantic?" Justin asked.

"I wouldn't go that far. Let's just say, I knew that you would look beautiful in candlelight," Brian corrected.

Justin smiled his trademark smile and leaned in to give Brian a kiss. Brian pulled him close and deepened the kiss, allowing it once again to turn passionate.

"I just can't believe you did this," Justin said again, when they finally broke apart.

"I just wanted to spend some time with you before I lose you to your studio. This week has been so hectic, and you've been doing special things for Gus and me. I wanted to do THIS for you."

They lingered together in silence for a moment just enjoying the water, the candlelight and being together. And, for a moment neither of them said anything.

Then Justin asked quietly, "So what's on your mind?"

"Why are you so suspicious?" Brian asked.

"Brian."

"You know, I finally read my letter."

"Oh...."

"I loved the legend of the talisman of time." Brian said, leaning down to kiss Justin.

"You did?"

"And the painting with all its symbolism..."

"I didn't mean for all the symbolism to be there."

"The time on the watch, the placement of the rings, the lovers embrace, the slide of the jacket...it's all there."

"You figured all that out?"

"The painting and the letter, I guess, said it all."

"Oh good! With every other painting that's been received, you've asked me to tell you the back-story. You've asked me to tell you what I was thinking. You've asked me to tell you what it all meant. At least we don't have to go through that exercise this time," Justin said with a smirk. "Thank goodness!"

"So I guess that means I have to table my questions about what you were REALLY thinking when you did the painting. Huh?" Brian teased.

"I think that should be obvious."

"The painting is so personal. I can understand why you didn't want to sell it."

"Your painting...was never intended to be sold," Justin explained, shaking his head. "I was willing to show it because of the technique I was experimenting with. I really liked the painting. If you didn't like the painting, I would have simply destroyed it or maybe reused the canvas."

"What!"

"But, the reaction of everyone at the show indicated that the technique was worth pursuing. So I got to experiment with the technique even further as I did more paintings. Your painting was originally just an experiment in technique...or so I thought. But my thoughts and feelings are always worked out on canvas. You've always been able to see through everything."

"The painting told me everything I needed to know. What made you include the letter too?"

"I wanted to be sure you understood what I was trying to tell you. I wanted there to be no room for any misunderstandings between us."

"So you pushed me off the fucking cliff?" Brian asked with a laugh. "How could you do that, Sunshine?"

"I learned from the best!" Justin retorted with a laugh.

"I hope you know how much I've missed you. My life is so boring when you're not around. Just look at how much upheaval you've created so far." Brian teased. "Ok, I know that with you around I'll never have another peaceful moment. I can accept that. But, ever since I saw the painting, I keep thinking we could have done things differently."

"Maybe we could have. Maybe we could have done things differently. Maybe we still can. But, that isn't what's important right now. I just want to be close enough ..."

"To turn my world upside down?"

"That wasn't what I was going to say!"

"Just trying to help you out here. What were you going to say?"

"Don't help! Ok...I thought you hate it when couples finish each other's sentences?"

"I've changed my mind," Brian said as if this fact should have now been obvious. "Go on, you were making a point."

"I learned so much being in New York. I've met artists and made contacts that I wouldn't have made if I had simply stayed here. And I know, we have made our relationship stronger. We know that we're together as partners even if we are in two different cities. So maybe it was right for me to go. But now, it's time for us to be together. It's time for me to come home."

"So what are you planning?"

"I haven't worked that out yet. You know details take some time. I just wanted to plant the idea. I won't do anything without talking to you about it first...you know that."

"Justin, that's just it. You don't talk to me about anything. I have to discover everything," Brian carefully pointed out.

"How can you say that?" Justin responded with mock surprise.

"Melanie's painting. Michael's painting. My painting. Need I go on?"

"So you're going to let a few little random incidents be considered a pattern?"

"Justin, when were you planning to mention to me that one of the websites you created was nominated for a Bronze Quill award?"

"Fuck!"

"Ah yes! This would be the usual 'fuck' that you exclaim every time I discover something else you neglected to mention."

"Fuck!"

"So when were you planning to tell me about your nomination?"

There was a long silence.

Brian continued, "I gather by your silence you weren't planning to mention that either."

"Brian, it was only a first round nomination. There were like a zillion other people nominated. I was waiting to see what would happen. How did you find out?"

"You're right, there hasn't been a lot of mention about the nominees, but their websites have been featured in the trade publications. When I was looking at YOUR website, I recognized that one of the website you created was a nominee. It was child's play from there."

"I'm sorry. I just didn't think there was anything to mention."

"So what, you WERE going to ask me to escort you the awards ceremony? Was that about the time you were planning to tell me, your loving partner, about your nomination? Huh, Sunshine?" Brian teased. "Or maybe you were just planning on winning the award, placing it on our mantel over the fireplace, and letting me find it accidentally one day? I just don't want you keep things from me."

"I never intended to. It's just that so much has been happening...I just didn't get around to telling you. Then, I also thought you might be a bit upset."

"Why would I be upset?"

"Because I wasn't painting. It wasn't the solo exhibit. The award was for doing graphic design. That wasn't what I was supposed to do in New York. I thought you would be disappointed somehow. So I was trying to find a way to tell you."

"Justin, the nomination was a acknowledgement of your talent and innovation and creativity. You liked what you were doing, and it showed. You have achieved so much being in New York. I'm really proud of you. But Justin, I support you doing whatever you want to do with your art."

"I tried to explain that to Lindsay today at lunch. She doesn't understand it yet. I went to New York to kick my career up a notch, just as everyone thought that I should. I did that. I've opened up new vistas for myself by being there. But now, I only need to fly into the city from time to time so that everyone remembers my name. I still need to go there and everything, but with an agent, I just don't have to live there. No longer is there anything that I can do in New York that I can't do from here. But most of all, I want us to be together."

"All I want is for you to be satisfied with your achievements in New York before you come back here. Only you will know when you've reached that point. Justin, I want us to be together too. But we're ok, and I'm not going anywhere."

Justin leaned back and kissed Brian.

"So how do you like our hot tub?" Brian asked.

"Well, we seem to have enough hot water here."

"Yes, but your skin is starting to wrinkle. I think we should move this discussion to the bedroom."

"I like the moving to the bedroom part, but I wasn't planning on continuing the discussion there," Justin said softly, leaning back to kiss Brian gently.

"Oh, I see! You had something else in mind?" Brian asked, tightening his arms around Justin.

"Most definitely." Justin confirmed quietly.

"Well, that could probably be arranged," Brian quickly agreed. "But we're going to have to continue this talk, at some point, you know?"

"I know."

"We'll make it soon?"

"Promise," Justin agreed.

They helped each other from the hot tub and wrapped each other in the oversized towels, which were warm from the heated towel racks.

"This house is full of surprises, isn't it?" Brian mentioned, sinking into the warmth of the towel.

"You have no idea." Justin said, pulling Brian fully into the bedroom. They collapsed with a laugh onto the bed.

Completely relaxed from their time in the hot tub, they looked into each other's eyes. As Brian and Justin saw their love and trust for the other, their lips met in the gentlest of kisses.

And, by the light of the fireplace, Brian and Justin made love for the first time in their bedroom at Bri-tin.

Chapter 16 - Encounters

The Next Morning...(Day 19)

Brian awakened to three strange sensations...one and two were his favorites, that of finding his nose tickled by blond hairs and Justin curled up in his arms...the third was a complete surprise...he heard singing. Brian tried to look around the room to locate the source of the sounds.

It took a moment for Brian to figure out that the singing was Gus, and the sounds were coming though the monitor. Brian smiled. He gently kissed Justin awake so he could listen. Justin smiled.

Brian thought back to his own childhood, and he could never remember a morning when he woke up singing. Yet here was Gus singing away in his room.

Brian put on sweatpants and quietly crept across to Gus' room.

There he saw Gus still dressed in his pajamas...singing and dancing around his room...with his oversized teddy bear as a dancing partner. Not wanting to disturb the scene before him, Brian quietly made his way back to tell Justin what he had seen. Justin smiled.

"I'm so glad Gus is happy," Justin said with a laugh. Then he yawned.

"What are your plans for today?" Brian asked, once again snuggling into Justin.

"I have some ideas I want to work on in the studio."

"Don't tell me you're going to finally paint?" Brian smirked. "Ouch!" Brian grimaced as Justin hit his arm with back of his hand.

"You know my studio here at the house is so much bigger than the one in New York. I was thinking maybe it time for another large scale canvas," Justin pointed out. "By the way, have you decided where you want your painting to be hung?"

"I was thinking in my office downstairs. That way I can look at it whenever I want to, but I don't have to answer a lot of questions about it, at least not yet. What do you think?"

"I'll see if I can get Thomas to help me hang it today."

"I guess I'd better get ready. I have a couple of meetings today."

"And be sure you take a look at the boards. I left everything in your office. I'll be back in the art department on Monday to make any changes. But now, I guess Gus and I will hang out in the studio for a bit," Justin explained. "Do you want breakfast?"

"I thought I smelled coffee when I went in to check on Gus. Teres must have made coffee for Thomas."

"No, that's the new coffee maker. It will start to brew automatically at the same time each morning. I set it last night before we went to bed."

"Well, you're just full of surprises are you?"

"Nothing will match my surprise of last night. Did I thank you?"

"Many times," Brian smirked, leaning down to give Justin a kiss. "I guess I better get a shower and get dressed. I have a meeting this morning and I need to allow extra time for the traffic."

Brian took a quick shower and got dressed. He then walked to Gus' room to kiss him goodbye. Gus found out that Justin was awake, and he immediately followed Brian back to the bedroom to join Justin on the bed.

Brian kissed Justin goodbye and said, "I'll see you two this evening."

"Later."

"Later."

When Brian left, Justin and Gus made plans for the day. Justin announced to Gus that he would be in his new studio. Gus got excited because he really wanted to finger paint, and now he would have a chance to do that in a real studio...like a real artist.

So Justin and Gus got up, showered and dressed. They stopped in the kitchen for cereal before heading to the studio to take advantage of the morning light.

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Later that morning...(Day 19)

Having only a cup of coffee before leaving Bri-tin, Brian decided to stop at the Diner to grab breakfast before starting work. Of course, everyone was there in the usual booth: Michael, Ted, and Emmett.

"Debbie, you have to release me I can't breathe," Brian uttered as a pair of loving arms engulfed him as he entered the Diner.

Debbie finally released him. "Where's Sunshine?"

"At home, painting I hope."

"You're both coming to dinner tomorrow?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really."

"That's what I thought."

"Now that we've got that settled, what would you like to order?"

"Three egg white omelet, dry toast, coffee and juice, Deb. Thanks," Brian ordered.

"That's a big breakfast for you. Are you all right, Sweetie?" Emmett teased.

" I have a lot of things going on. I have to keep my strength up," Brian quipped with a smirk.

"We know that Justin's in town. You don't have to be a smart ass," Michael remarked.

"How is Justin doing, by the way?" Ted asked. "I heard you moved into the house. So I guess no one will see ever Justin again. Huh?"

"Justin is fine. He and Gus are painting together today in Justin's studio. Emmett, you did a wonderful job furnishing the house. Thank you."

"Do my ears deceive me? Did I actually get a compliment from his royal badness? Will wonders ever cease?" Emmett rambled on. "Thanks for the compliment anyway."

"You really earned it."

"So Brian, are we ever going to see Justin again?" Debbie asked as she started to clear the table. "Or are you going to try to keep him all to yourself?"

Brian rolled in eyes in disbelief as he wonders when they will stop asking THAT question.

"I plan to let him loose just long enough for dinner tomorrow...then I'll lock him back in his studio again. How's that?"

"I'm sorry I brought it up," Deb said with a sigh.

"What are you doing here Mikey?" Brian asked. "I thought you and Ben had JR?"

"She's with Lindsay and Melanie. I'll pick her up this afternoon. It's been great having her this week. I'm going to miss her when she goes back to Toronto."

"You're a good dad, Michael," Brian commented.

"So are you," Michael responded.

Ted and Emmett did a double take on hearing that comment. Both wondered what had come over Michael to produce this change in attitude.

"Thank you, Michael," Brian said with some surprise.

"Well Theodore, I think it's time we get to work. You have a very demanding boss. So it's a good idea not to piss him off by being late."

Ted became slightly flustered. "Late. No. Never. I'm leaving right behind you, Bri. I'll see you at the office."

"I've still got it," Brian said aloud, realizing he can still momentarily strike fear in the heart of Ted every now and then.

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Early Afternoon... (Day 19)

"Brian, Lindsay is here to see you," Cynthia said, showing Lindsay into Brian's office and making a quick exit.

Lindsay took a seat in the chair opposite Brian's desk, and waited while he finished what he was working on. Brian eventually looked up and acknowledged her presence.

"Ok Lindsay, what do you want?" he abruptly asked.

"Well hello to you too," she responded sarcastically.

"I don't have a lot of time. I've had enough of dealing with you and Melanie, and we still have dinner tomorrow to get through. So what brings you here?"

"I came to apologize."

"Oh! For what?"

"Melanie and I overreacted to the camping thing. We should have heard you out before we jumped to conclusions. I just stopped by to tell you, Melanie and I are sorry."

"Sorry is bullshit. Let it go," he suggested.

Lindsay got up and started to pace around the office.

"Is that all?" Brian asked solemnly.

"No. I came here because I need to talk to you about something else too."

"What?"

"I need to talk to you about something, and I need you to promise not to say anything to anyone about it."

"I can't make you that promise. Justin and I don't keep secrets from each other."

"You used to keep secrets. Why did that change?"

"Lindsay, Justin is my partner. I promised him no secrets. I'm not going to even think about breaking that promise to him. So if those are your terms, I guess we have nothing to discuss."

"Why are you being so harsh with me? We've been friends for a long time. I thought we would always be there for each other."

"Lindsay, I will do what I can to help...whatever it is. But I'm not going to keep secrets from Justin. So do you want to tell me what's going on or not?"

"Melanie and I are working through some issues. So we're seeing our old counselor here in Pittsburgh. We have seen her every day this week. I'm starting to see some things more clearly now."

"Well that's good. I hope you and the dragon witch can work out your issues. But what does that have to do with me."

"We need to come into town one weekend per month to meet with the counselor. I was thinking that Gus could visit you that weekend, if that's all right."

"Not a problem, you know Gus can visit me anytime. Now you know, he even has his own room at the house for when he visits."

"And I was wondering if you will pay for my plane fare, as well as for Gus, to travel back and forth here to see you?"

"I don't have a problem with that. I have always said I would cover travel costs for you and Gus to visit me, haven't I?"

"Yes, you have. I just wanted to be sure you haven't changed your mind."

"And I don't really care what you do while Gus is visiting me. I hope you and Melanie can work through whatever you problems there are. You know I want you to be happy."

"Thank you."

"But Lindsay, as much as I love seeing Gus, I'm not going to allow you to use Gus as a pawn in your schemes with Melanie."

"I understand."

"Once Gus and I start seeing each other on a regular basis, I want to know that you're not going the pull the rug out and suddenly disappear again. The last time we worked out an arrangement like this, you and Melanie decided to move to Toronto. Then you decided you didn't want me to see Gus, because you wanted him to adjust. He and I were out for touch for almost a year. I'm not going through that again."

"You won't have to. I promise."

"Lindsay, I want Gus to be able to talk to me when he needs to. I want us to have weekly father/son chats on the phone. I want him to be a part of my life, and I want to part of his life. That's all there is to it."

"You don't have a problem there. Gus wants you to be a part of his life. Can't you see that? Look, our son inherited your stubborn streak. He staged a hunger strike to see Justin. Gus thinks of Justin as HIS JUSTIN. Gus loves Justin. I realize that he needs both you and Justin in his life, especially as he grows older. Melanie and I really can't do it all, and I really want to do what's best for our son."

"We both want the same things. I just wish that you and Melanie would stop treating me like the devil incarnate."

"I already know that. Justin has already reamed me out about the fact that Melanie and I can't seem to acknowledge the changes you've made. According to Justin, we seem to be stuck in the past."

"Lindsay, you and I have been friends for a long time. Open your eyes and see who I am...not who you want me to be...not who I was...but who I am. I love Gus and Justin and will do everything in my power to protect them both. I mean that."

"I know that. Speaking of Justin...what about Justin's career?"

"As I told you before, Justin is doing what he wants with his art. His has two shows coming up in three months...one in New York, one in Cincinnati. He has an agent and everything. So he's painting at the house. It's what he wants to do."

"And you're just going to support his decision when he has so much talent."

"Lindsay, I'm only going to say this once. It's Justin's talent. It's Justin's life. He isn't a teenager anymore. He gets to make decisions about his life and his talent and what he wants to do with them. My job as his partner is to understand that and to support him in those decisions."

"But how can he do what he needs to do, when he's tempted by things like you and the house and money and stuff?"

Brian just laughed.

"Lindsay, do you really think that Justin is with me because of the things I have? Do you really think that Justin cares about my money? Do you think that the house sways Justin? I can't believe that you're that deluded. You've watched Justin for the last six years. I can't believe you don't see the obvious. One of the constant struggles between Justin and me has been this...Justin wants to make his own way in the world...and I'm used to providing for the people I care about. When I lost everything: my job, my money, my possessions...when I had nothing, Justin still stood proudly beside me as my partner. No Lindsay, Justin doesn't care about my money. If being in Toronto has caused you to think that, you're more fucked up than I realized." Brian continued with a sigh. "You know I don't know why I'm explaining things to you. I have finally reached the point where I no longer care what you or anyone else thinks about my relationship with Justin. It's enough that he and I know exactly where we stand."

"It's just that he has a chance at a future..."

Brian held up his hand to cut her off. "Lindsay, be very careful. I will not let you try to live out your failed career fantasies through Justin. I will not let you manipulate Justin's career. I also will not let you drive a wedge between him and me. You managed to get a way with it once. That's not going to happen again. Do I make myself clear?"

"I understand."

"Well I need to get ready for a meeting; so I guess I'll see you at dinner tomorrow?"

"Melanie and I are thinking about driving back to Toronto after dinner. That way there should be less traffic, and the kids should sleep all the way back home."

"No problem. We'll pack Gus' things and bring them with us to Deb's tomorrow."

"Next month the trip should be easier because we'll fly rather than drive. Thanks for everything, Brian."

"Justin and I have enjoyed this time with Gus. And you're right...Gus is crazy about Justin. Right now Gus seems to be happy. I want him to stay that way as you and Melanie work through your problems." Brian said finally, with a completely relaxed tone to his voice. "How bad are things between you two?"

"This isn't like before. We're not breaking up. Melanie and I still love each other. We're working things out. We're really talking to each other. So there's no reason for you to worry."

"Do you need anything? Is there anything I can do? Do you need money?"

"No. And, I don't want you to worry," Lindsay said quietly. "Everything will be all right; it's just going to take some time."

Lindsay leaned over to gently kissed Brian goodbye. "I'll see you at dinner tomorrow."

"Bye."

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Later That Afternoon...(Day 19)

As Brian returned to his office from a meeting, Cynthia greeted him with a smile. "You have a visitor waiting in your office."

"Who?" Brian asked.

"Susan Weaver."

"You're kidding me?"

Cynthia started to laugh. "I told her that you weren't here. She insisted upon waiting. She seems upset."

"What now?"

"I don't know. She didn't say."

Brian turned and proceeded to toward his office. "Well, let's get this over with," he whispered aloud with a sigh.

Brian opened the door to his office.

"Susan!" Brian said, entering his office. "If we keep meeting like this people are going to start to talk. And, I have a very jealous partner."

"Brian, I'm really sorry about this. Eyeconics just has so much riding on this deal. Everything is ready to go, as soon as we have the campaign strategy. You're going to handle is for us, aren't you Brian?" she asked with pleading eyes.

"I told you I would. Everything will be fine. You'll see."

"Look Brian, I hate to ask. I really need a favor. Everything is scheduled for a meeting in two weeks, but Signor Silvestri and the Belluss Occhiali team are already here in the states. They're in New York for meetings with their distributors. Brian, I can't live with this uncertainty for another two weeks. Can't we meet sooner?"

"If we meet sooner, will you go back to running your company and leave me alone so I can run mine?" Brian teased with a laugh.

"Brian you're so cruel." Susan said with a matching laugh. "You're enjoying my misery. Just wait until you have to deal with the Italian Tiger. Then, you'll understand why I'm a basket case."

"Susan, if the deal is causing you this much discomfort, then explain to me again why you're doing this? You could have just walked away. Why did you say that you are putting yourself through this?"

"Oh no. I'm not going to give The Beast that satisfaction. As you have pointed out the designs are wonderful. The deal is a good one. It makes business sense. It's just he problems with the ad campaign. We're so far off schedule that it's made me crazy. I'm sure after you meet with them, everything will be ok. Can we meet first thing Monday morning?" she practically begged.

"Susan, you have to give me some time to prepare. You don't want me to face Signor Silvestri unprepared do you?" Brian continued to tease.

Brian called Cynthia to have her check his schedule for the beginning of the week. Then,

Brian placed a second call.

"Hey."

There was a brief pause, while Brian listened.

"What's your schedule like next week?"

There was another moment of silence.

"Susan Weaver of Eyeconics is here. It seems that Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali want to move the meeting up to beginning of the week. I was checking to see if that was a problem."

There was another pause.

"Yes, I saw them. They're exactly what we discussed. Excellent job as always."

There was another pause.

"Thanks. Is Gus ok?"

There was another pause.

"I'll see you at home. Later."

Brian closed his cellphone, and returned to talking to his client.

"Ok Susan. Monday is a bit of a stretch. But let's say 10AM on Tuesday. That should give us all day to iron things out. Will that work for you?"

Susan took out her cellphone and placed a call to the Signor Silvestri and the Italian Team. They were absolutely delighted that the meeting had been moved up and were thrilled with the Tuesday, 10 AM time slot. With everything settled, Susan Weaver started to relax.

"So if we're going to lose a full day meeting on Tuesday, I guess we had both better get back to work," Brian said with a smile. "Don't you think?"

"Yeah, you're probably right. Thanks for everything."

Susan stood up to leave. Suddenly, something disturbed her greatly. "Wait a minute! Wait a minute!"

"Yes?"

"What do you mean a full day meeting? Your presentations usually only take 2 hours...all the presentations you've done for us have been 2 hours or less. Brian, you're scaring me."

"Trust my instincts on this one. Clear your calendar for the entire day. Then you can come to the meeting and relax." Brian said reassuringly. "I'll see you then, on Tuesday. I'll even take care of lunch."

Susan finally nodded her acceptance. "Tuesday it is," she said as she was leaving.

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Brian pulled out his phone and placed a call to Emmett, asking if he would cater lunch on Tuesday. Brian and Emmett spent some time discussing the particulars of what Brian had in mind. Emmett agreed to handle everything.

Everything was now ready.

Cynthia eventually breezed into Brian's office. "Did you calm Susan down or do I need to set up a desk for her here at Kinnetik?"

"None of that should be necessary. Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali will be here at 10AM on Tuesday. Please be sure my calendar is clear for the entire day. Also make sure you and Theodore are available as well. The boards are ready. Justin and I have the weekend to refine the presentation. Everything should be ready to go on Tuesday."

"I'm really looking forward to this." Cynthia said with a grin.

Chapter 17 – So We Meet Again

Early Evening...(Day 20)

Michael, Ben, and Hunter were adding the leaf to the table, while Carl, Drew and Calvin Culpepper were arguing over something on television. They took a break to help with the set up of the table and chairs.

"Debbie honey, it looks like everyone will be here today. I know you're glad to have the girls and your lost boys all together again. The house will be full once more." Carl pointed out.

"It's been good having the girls here this week. I wish they would decide to move back. I hope this week has reminded them about the importance of family," Deb said with a smile.

"Well, JR is growing. Gus has gotten so big. So Toronto must be agreeing with them," Ben commented, adding napkins to the table.

"It's also good to have Justin back. This is going to make getting out the next issue of Rage so much easier. It's so much better when we work together, side-by-side," Michael commented.

"Well, I wouldn't expect to see to much of Justin. He has a lot on his plate. Not to mention dealing with Brian." Ben said with a laugh.

"I think Brian will settle down once he gets used to Justin being here." Ted commented, walking through the door with Blake in tow and joining the middle of the conversation. "Where is everyone?"

"Melanie and Lindsay are resting, I think. They also had some last minute packing to do since they want to leave right after dinner. They should arrive in Toronto late tonight but the kids at least should sleep the entire trip, which should make the drive easier," Deb clarified.

"I can't believe we're all together again." Ted added.

"Ok Emmett, quick before Brian and Justin get here. Tell us about the house." Michael asked.

Molly and Jennifer arrived in time to overhear the request.

"Wait a minute," Molly said.

Molly quickly joined Hunter in their usual spot to await the details. Both of them had heard so much about the house...now they couldn't wait for details.

"Ok, you can tell us now," Molly continued, now that she was comfortable.

"Words can simply not describe the house." Emmett began.

"You really have to see it." Jennifer said. "So I think everyone is just going to have to table their curiosity until you're invited out to see it. Knowing Brian, that means we're all going to have to be REALLY patient."

Everyone let out a sigh of disappointment at Jennifer's words, but everyone knew she was right.

"You know Jennifer, you haven't seen it since all the furniture that Justin and Gregory selected was put in place." Emmett continued. " They managed to preserve the uncluttered feel, even with all the furniture there."

"I know Justin was worried about that. Especially, since Brian hates clutter." She responded. "So I'm glad everything worked out."

"I hope we get invited out there soon," Michael added.

"Drew, I heard the grounds are big enough for you and I to run patterns," Calvin mentioned, joining the discussion.

"I heard everything was surrounded by a wooded area," Drew responded. "So we have to watch out for those trees." They both laughed.

Then Melanie came downstairs and chatted with the group for a while. Eventually, she and Ben drifted outside for a breath of fresh air.

"So how has your visit been?" Ben asked, kicking off the conversation between them.

"It was a good trip. I think Lindsay and I will come back in about a month. It will be good to see everyone again." Melanie said suggestively, while secretly hoping that Ben wouldn't ask for any further details.

"Well if you're willing to travel, Michael and I help out with some of your travel costs. I know that money is tight for you guys, and we do want to help. I pretty sure Brian would cover Lindsay and Gus travel costs, if you ask him. That way you can all fly here, and you won't have to make that long drive next month. I know Michael is most eager to spoil JR again."

"Thanks Ben for the offer of the money. It will help. Lindsay and I aren't earning in Canada, what we earned when we were living here. But things are getting better. I really want us to make a life there."

"I know you do. I can't say I blame you, but just remember that your family is here when you need us."

"I need to ask you something, and I need this discussion to stay just between us. Can you do that?" Melanie quietly asked.

"I think I can do that. What's on your mind?" Ben asked.

"How do you deal with the specter of Brian Kinney in Michael's life?"

"You never ask easy questions do you?"

"No. I guess I don't. Sometimes Brian and Lindsay are so close I just can't deal with it."

"Look, Melanie. I'm not sure I can help. I know that Brian and Michael have a history. I will admit that sometimes Michael goes overboard. But Michael is like Debbie. They overpower and consume the ones they love. Brian and Michael are like brothers; they love each other. But, I know Michael loves me, and I guess I'm secure enough in that love that I don't feel I have to compete with Brian for Michael affection. Michael still tries to keep Brian as some sort of trophy of his misspent youth, but Brian has changed. That simple fact has upset the delicate balance for Michael and probably does for Lindsay too. Neither of them ever expected Brian to grow up. So you see them looking longingly at Brian. It's not that they want to be with Brian. It's that they want the Brian of the past back...because they knew how to handle that Brian. This Brian is a bit of mystery for them. But Melanie, the old Brian is gone forever."

"I see what you mean. I hadn't thought about it that way. Thanks."

Melanie and Ben went for a walk to talk about this a bit more before going back inside.

"Jennifer, what did you think about Justin getting to exhibit for the opening of a new wing of the gallery?" Lindsay asked. "Things are really opening up for him aren't they?"

"Yes, and not only does he have the exhibit in Cincinnati, but he also has another show in New York at about the same time. I'm really excited for him. I really proud of all his success, but I have to admit, I really glad he's back in the area. After all, he's still my baby," Jennifer remarked.

"Mom, please don't let Justin hear you say that, or we'll never see him again. He'll be so grossed out, he'll hibernate to that mansion," Molly pointed out, while she and Hunter exchanged glances. Everybody laughed.

Ben and Melanie returned about this time. "What's so funny?" Ben asked.

"Mom still thinks of Justin as her baby. Yuk!" Molly repeated.

"I like to think when Gus is 25 or so, I guess I'll probably still think of him as my baby," Lindsay said reflecting.

"Absolutely, I still think of Michael as my baby," Debbie added to the conversation.

"And there in lies the first problem," Hunter added with a laugh.

Everyone else laughed too...well, except for Michael, who scrunched up his face and scowled, making everyone else laugh harder.

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The door suddenly opened and Gus ran in followed by Brian and Justin.

"The main event has arrived," Hunter whispered to Molly. "Things are about to get interesting." Molly quietly laughed and waited for the action to begin.

"I see you're fashionably late...as usual," Ted commented.

"How else am I supposed to make my grand entrance?" Brian quipped.

Gus ran into the room, said a quick hi to everyone, and made a beeline for Emmett.

"Auntie Em, I've been waiting to see you," Gus began.

"I'm right here, Gus. What's going on?" Emmett mistakenly asked, greeting Gus with tickles and hugs.

"I saw ponies. I petted them. I fed them carrots. I sat on a pony. I had fun."

"You did. That sounds like fun."

"It was. I had a cowboy hat. Dad and Jus rode too. On ponies that were bigger than mine. Dad's was the color of Justin's hair. Justin's was the color of Dad's hair. We had fun."

There was a collective gasp from everyone present. Then everyone was asking the same question, "Brian, you were riding a horse?????"

Justin just snickered, which caused Brian to scowl at him.

"I don't know why you're all reacting this way. The house has stables, so of course I was riding," Brian said with bravado.

Then everyone was a buzz about this new piece of information about the house.

Gus continued, not wanting his tale interrupted by these unnecessary details. "Dad and Justin said we could go riding again. I had so much fun."

"Well that's great," Emmett finally said, when he could get in a word edgewise.

Jennifer took pity on Emmett and asked Gus another question: "So Gus, how do you like your room?"

"I love my room. Justin got me big bear," Gus explained, using his arm spread to indicate the size of the teddy bear. "I have a big room with toys and books and everything. I have a big bed. I slept in my room last night. We watched that movie again. I fell asleep. Dad carried me to my room."

"Wow Gus, you've been really busy. Did you have a good visit with Justin and your Dad?" Blake managed to ask, trying to join in the conversation.

"I had fun. But I'm going home with Mommy and Mama tonight." Gus explained reaching to give his mothers a hug, but then immediately running back to grab Brian's leg.

Brian picked Gus up and gave him a hug. Gus squealed with laughter.

"So Justin did you get any painting done," Lindsay asked.

Brian scowled at the question, and Justin could feel Brian tense beside him. Justin slid his hand under Brian's shirt and around his waist. Justin could feel Brian relax.

"Yes, Gus and I spent most of yesterday in the studio. We got quite a bit done.

"Of course when I got home they were BOTH covered with paint," Brian added.

"Lindsay you should see the size of my studio at the house. It's actually big enough for me to once again work on large scale canvass."

"You haven't done those since you had that dingy loft. You remember the one with the 18-flight walk up. But that seems like a lifetime ago," Michael added.

"Well my studio in New York is not much better than that old loft. But I could afford it, and it's mine. I was fortunate that I didn't have to share loft space anymore. I tried that for a while. Then I decided to wait tables so I could get my own space. The change was good. I painted better. I got more shows. I sold more paintings. So eventually I didn't have to wait tables anymore."

"Justin, now that you're settled. I still need that painting of me," Drew added. "Just so you don't forget."

"You still want him to make you a comic book superhero after all? Right Drew?" Brian smirked.

"Don't start, Brian. I was thinking about a portrait of him in his Brown Athletics underwear. I know just the spot for that picture." Emmett interjected.

"We all know what you have in mind, Em. But there are children present." Brian added with a laugh.

"Oh you!" Emmett quipped, hitting Brian on the arm.

"Shall we eat?" Debbie asked, calling everyone to the table.

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After dinner, Brian stepped outside for a cigarette. Michael slipped out to join him.

"Brian, are you all right."

"Yeah, Why?"

"You were rather quiet during dinner."

"Are you kidding? With that crew in there, especially with Justin and Gus at the table, I couldn't have gotten a word in, anyway. But I'm fine, Mikey."

"You and I haven't really had a chance to talk. Are you still mad with me?"

"Don't worry I still love you Mikey, you know that. Always have...always will!"

"Brian, I missed Justin when he was in New York. He and I talked all the time. But it wasn't the same. I'm just glad he's back."

"I know Mikey, I missed him too," Brian said, almost in a whisper. "Did you and JR have a good visit?"

"Yeah, I got a chance to really spoil my daughter. You should see her with Ben. I think because he's so tall, she keeps staring up at him. Then she loves for him to pick her up."

"I bet she does." Brian said with a laugh.

"Gus really loves Justin, doesn't he?" Michael said quietly.

Brian laughed, "Yes he does. Well, you've seen them together."

"Yes I have. Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"What is it about Justin?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've known a lot of men. Why did you choose Justin?"

"I didn't choose Justin. He stalked me...remember?" They both laughed.

"Who could forget? But seriously."

"All I know Mikey, is he gets me better than I get myself. With you and Lindsay it's different; we have a history. With Justin it's so much more. He gave me a reason to break all my rules. And Mikey, I love the me I am when I'm with him. I don't know how else to explain it to you. Besides you said yourself, I couldn't go on being an over the hill club boy."

"You've got to admit, though, you were the perfect poster boy for perpetual immaturity."

"Yea, I know. But Mikey, I'm so much more than that," Brian whispered as he leaned over and pressed his forehead to Michael's.

Michael and Brian drifted back inside.

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A while later Justin drifted onto the back porch for a cigarette, and Melanie followed him.

"Melanie."

"Hey, Justin. You and I haven't had a chance to talk all week."

"I know, I'm sorry about that."

"I wanted to thank you in person for the painting. I love it. It's hanging in my office. It's like this gentle reminder."

"I'm glad you liked it."

"What made you paint it? What were you thinking?"

Justin laughed, "Oh no, not you too. Brian asked me the same question."

"What did you tell him?"

"Pretty much what I said to you in the letter."

" I know that you and Brian don't hate each other. I also know you too will spar with each other for a lifetime. I don't expect that to change. You two are so much alike, it's inevitable."

"Gee thanks, Justin," she said sarcastically.

"Seriously, you know that Lindsay loves you. You know that Gus loves you. That isn't going to change. But you have to remember that Brian is very important to both Lindsay and Gus. And no matter what you do, Gus and Lindsay are always going to love Brian. And Melanie, at some point you have to stop fighting and realize that Brian is a good father to Gus. He loves his son."

"I know. As Gus gets older, he has this way of making his opinions known. Did you know he thinks of you as HIS Justin? He staged a hunger strike to see you. It's beginning to feel like I have a miniature version of Brian in my house sometime. Gus inherited Brian's stubbornness. But as Gus get older I've had to re-examine things. I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"Oh? About what?"

"I'm going to only admit this to you, but I know that Gus needs both you and Brian in his life. Try as we might, I realize that Lindsay and I can't do it all. I heard what you said to Lindsay at lunch. It's just that it's so hard to accept that Brian has changed."

"I guess Brian's falling in love with Gus the day he was born kind of ruined your definition of YOUR family. Huh?" Justin asked.

"Yeah, I guess it did. But Gus is happier with Brian in his life. So I'm going to have to come to terms with it, I guess. When did you get so smart?"

"I keep telling Brian, it's those paint fumes."

They both started laughing. Melanie reached out and hugged Justin.

"Brian is lucky to have you. I hope he realizes it."

"It works both ways, Melanie."

"Take care of yourself. Lindsay and I will be back next month, so you and Brian will have a little visitor again."

"That's great."

"It will just be for a weekend though. We'll fly next time, so the trip will be easier."

"I'll probably still be here."

"Yep, Brian will still have you in exile at the mansion," Melanie said with a laugh as she turned to go back inside.

She then reached out and pulled Justin with her. "Let me get you back inside before Gus and Brian come looking for you."

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The hour was getting late and Melanie wanted to get on the road back to Toronto. So everyone helped Melanie and Lindsay load everything into their car.

Everyone hugged each other goodbye. Michael easily loaded a sleeping JR into her car seat and kissed her goodbye.

Gus tried to clamp onto Justin neck. Eventually, Brian was able to peel him away and placed him in the car.

Lindsay reassured Gus that they were coming back in a few weeks. So Gus released his death grip on Justin and finally, allowed Brian to place him in the car.

"See you soon, Sonny Boy," Brian said, once again kissing Gus goodbye. "I'll see you soon."

Gus reached up and hugged his dad, "See you soon, Dad."

Justin leaned in the window to say one more goodbye, "See you next month, Gus."

Gus clapped his hands.

Melanie and Lindsay did final hugs with Brian and Justin. And then they were off.

As Melanie drove off, she reached for Lindsay's hand. "I'm glad we made the trip. I love you, Lindsay."

"I love you too."

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Back at Debbie's everyone was getting ready to leave.

"Dinner was great as usual, Deb." Justin said, giving Debbie a hug and kiss.

"You know I love having you here, Sunshine. Look, I know you're busy with your painting, but I have some leftovers for you to take home. I don't want you to wither away while you're in exile at the house."

"Sunshine, why is it that everyone thinks I'm holding you in exile? How come no one seems to thinks that you're holding me captive? Huh? What wrong with this picture?" Brian inquired of everyone.

"Brian, give it up. I'm the innocent here. Everybody knows that. I think it's the blond hair." Justin explained.

Everyone laughed.

"Are you going to Babylon?" Michael asked Brian. "It's still pretty early."

Brian at first looked at Michael in complete disbelief. Then he remembered it was Michael, and he accepted that some things never change.

Slipping his arm casually around Justin's waist, Brian simply said, "No Mikey, I'm going to take Sunshine home. We need to get up early tomorrow to work on a project, and I want him well rested. He's had a rather busy week. Maybe another time."

"Sure." Michael accepted quietly, leaning into Ben for support.

And with that, everyone finally departed for home, and another dinner at Debbie's came to an end.

Chapter 18 – Preparations

Sunday at the Loft...(Day 21)

Brian awoke first and tried to focus on his surroundings. Everything felt so familiar, including the sleeping blond, who was wrapped around his body. Brian took a minute to savor it all.

It took another moment for Brian to process why he was back at the loft. Then he remembered that he and Justin were going to work on the presentation today, so they opted to stay at the loft last night.

Had it only been 10 days since he asked Justin to come back from New York for a few days to work on a presentation? Had it been less than a week ago, that Justin had made the decision he wanted to extend his stay in Pittsburgh for three months? Did they really move into the house...together?

Then, Brian's thoughts drifted back once again to Justin's letter...

Beginning of Flashback

And through it all...through all the ups and downs...we come here to this moment in time...here in the present...when WE are still US...when we are still together.

Can't we simply choose to find some way to share a love without sacrificing a life? Can't we find some compromise? Can't we find some way to be together?

'It's only time' isn't good enough, Brian.

This is the moment for which our Talisman of Time was forged. Now is the time!

End of Flashback

Brian thought to himself. 'Not now, but soon! Just get through this presentation on Tuesday. Then, we can talk. I have to know what you really want, Justin. We have to work this out together...you and I. But we'll have to save this for another time.'

Brian ran his fingers through Justin's hair and gently kissed the top of his head. Justin began to stir again and snuggled closer into Brian's chest.

Dazed blue eyes eventually stared up at him, and Brian smiled and said, "Good morning, Sunshine."

"Hmmmmm, I must have been dreaming. I just heard you promise to fuck me into the mattress."

"That wasn't a dream. That was an event. Evidently you missed it?" Brian teased.

"Oh."

"You're soooo easy. Are you even awake?"

"Yeah. I'm awake."

Justin snuggled further into Brian's chest and started nibbling on his neck.

"Justin, don't start that."

Justin paid no attention to Brian's request.

"Justin, I'm trying to think here. You know I can't think when you do that."

"That's the general idea."

"Justin," Brian said, becoming aroused as he felt Justin kissing and licking a path down his chest.

As Justin quickly engulfed Brian's cock, he gasped for air, becoming overcome by the intense sensation that he never wanted to end.

Brian ran his finger again through Justin's hair as Justin increased his rhythm, and Brian quickly released down the back of Justin's throat and collapsed.

Justin slid up to give him a gentle kiss. Brian deepened the kiss and it became passionate. When they finally parted for air, Justin once again snuggled into Brian's chest.

"So what are you trying to think about?" Justin casually asked.

"Now, I don't remember."

"You aren't worried about the presentation are you?"

"Maybe a little." Brian sighed. Justin once again slid up and kissed Brian passionately. "Maybe not so much now," he commented, when they separated for air.

"We should spend all day in bed. After all, it's Sunday...and Sunday is suppose to be a day of rest."

Brian laughed and said, "And...this has been a public service announcement."

"What?" Justin asked laughing.

"Never mind."

Brian gently rolled Justin onto his back. "Now about your dream..." Brian said, starting kissing and biting his way down Justin's neck and shoulders.

"My dream?" Justin breathed haltingly.

"Yes, your dream?" Brian said, continuing his path down Justin's chest.

"What about it?"

Brian continued nipping and licking his way down Justin's body.

"Hmmm, maybe you'll remember it this time?" Brian said, taking the steps leading to their morning fuck, as Brian and Justin surrendered to each other.

After several hours of lovemaking and fucking in the shower, they finally emerged from the bedroom casually dressed.

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While the coffee was brewing, Brian was helping with breakfast by cutting up fresh fruit. Justin, on the other hand, was heating several huge muffin-like creations.

"What is that?" Brian asked with a strange look on his face.

"Ben's muffins."

"Ben's muffins? How did they get here?"

"Debbie put them in our pack last night. There was a note that this was Ben's latest recipe creation, and we have to try them. At least we know they're healthy," Justin explained.

"Well, Ben does create some interesting recipes. Some of them aren't too bad. At least, as you say, it's worth a try," Brian said with some anticipation.

Moments later they were eating at the counter. Brian watched in horror as Justin added butter to the muffins. Justin continued to happily enjoy his muffins. Finally Brian could keep silent no longer. "I can't believe you added butter!"

"The muffins are good...but a little dry. They're perfect with the butter. Do you want a taste?" Justin innocently asked.

Brian made the usual protest, but took a bite...then another...another...by the time breakfast was over, Brian had eaten a half of one of Justin's muffins.

"You're right. They're pretty good," Brian commented. "Too bad Gus has gone back, he would have loved these."

"I'm sure," Justin said, thinking here was part of another meal he didn't get to eat.

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A Few Hours Later...(Day 21)

"Tell me again what we're doing here?" Justin asked as they made their way to the conference room at Kinnetik.

"We need to prepare the presentation for Belluss Occhiali and Eyeconics."

"Why do WE need to prepare the presentation? Presentations are what YOU do all the time. Why are WE involved?" Justin asked, leaning comfortably across the conference table on his elbows. "I'm only here for moral support."

"Because this time, you're the only one of us with a clue. If it wasn't for you, WE wouldn't have gotten this far." Brian quickly clarified, walking over and wrapping his arms around Justin from behind.

"Just remember this meeting is being held on your turf...you have the home court advantage. Also remember, no matter how much Signor Rudolpho bellows and blusters, you're Brian fucking Kinney, and this is your domain."

"Now, if I could do the presentation from this position, it would be a snap," Brian commented with his arms still wrapped about Justin.

Justin laughed. "Ever the romantic!" and pulled Brian into a gentle kiss. "Ok, so let's get started." He moved to the head of the table where three stacks of boards were sitting.

Justin started to finger through the stacks. Brian came over to join him.

"The boards are labeled for the two separate campaigns. Did you see the colored dots? And the little numbers?" Justin pointed out.

"Yeah."

"That's to make sure that whoever is handling the boards doesn't mix them up or get them out of sequence. Everything is keyed to the original script we prepared together"

"Ok. I see that. But what are these?" Brian asked, flipping through a third stack of boards.

"Oh, those are graphics of the website images. The two companies are going to need to add the new products to their websites," Justin added nonchalantly.

"What website images?

"Well I realized that they developed the products jointly, but they're going to want to each show them on their respective websites. So I generated images that reflected the campaign and incorporated them into their respective websites."

"When in hell did you have time to create website images?"

"Flying between Cincinnati and Pittsburgh. You know how I like to sketch. Murph and George helped me do the final boards from my sketches when I got back. They turned out pretty well, don't you think? Of course, none of this is going to matter. We're probably going to create everything from scratch all over again during the meeting. But it never hurts to be prepared." Justin reflected.

"Fortunately you and I are so in tune with each other that we can 'pitch and volley' to one another in the mist of a group of people. That's the only reason I have any confidence we can pull this off meeting. You realize that this whole idea of creating a campaign on the fly is totally insane?" Brian pointed out.

"No more so than anything else we've ever done together. Can you say Stockwell?"

"And look how that turned out?" Brian said, with a laugh and shook his head. He ran his fingers though his hair and rubbed his neck. Brian then looked at Justin with a smile and said, "Ok! Ok! We can do this! Like you said, I'm good at what I do."

"Exactly!"

"And the Professor always said that I was always strongest with you by my side."

"He did?" Justin asked, with surprise and glee. "He said that?"

Then Justin smiled the full wattage, sunshine smile and looked over at Brian. In that instant, Brian knew that he could do anything.

The two of them spent some time doing a walk-though of the presentation. They also did some minor readjustment of the boards. Now they felt ready.

Brian noted that hardly any changes had been made since he and Justin had formulated the original concepts. Brian really loved working with Justin.

Suddenly there was a rumbling sound, which signaled that it was time to call it a day.

"I heard that." Brian said with a laugh. "Is it time to feed you again?"

"So it seems," Justin responded. "You know it probably wouldn't be, but someone ate most of my muffin earlier."

Brian ignored the comment.

"It looks like we're pretty much finished here. What are you up for?" Brian casually asked.

"Can we order Thai? Maybe pick it up on the way back to the loft?" Justin suggested.

"How about we pick it up and take it HOME instead?" Brian counter-suggested.

"Home?" Justin noted, with surprise at the new word in Brian's vocabulary.

"We still have few rooms at the house left to explore." Brian said, using his famous eyebrow movements and a smile. Justin laughed.

Brian ordered dinner, while Justin made one more check of the boards, and stored them safely in Brian's office. Then they were off.

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"So what rooms did you plan to explore tonight," Justin managed to ask finishing the last of the mango salad.

"None really, that was just an excuse to come home," Brian confessed.

"I didn't think you would ever see Bri-tin that way."

"Believe it or not, I can actually relax here. You've got to admit this place definitely meets my requirements for space." Brian said with a laugh.

"But I like it when we're not too far apart."

"Me too," Brian said, pulling Justin into his arms.

"I have a few finishing touches to add to a painting. Why don't you come and hang out in my studio for a bit?" Justin said, wiggling his eyebrows for emphasis.

"You know, I've always wanted to see a real artist's studio." Brian teased, allowing himself to be pulled along by Justin.

Chapter 19 – Presentation Is Everything, Part 1

Tuesday Morning at Kinnetik... (Day 23)

Brian, Ted and Cynthia were handling the last minute details in the conference room when Susan Weaver was escorted into the conference room.

"Brian, I know we're early, but..." Susan began.

"Susan, why am I not surprised," Brian said with a sigh.

Susan motioned to the gentlemen on her left, "Brian, I would like to introduce Signor Rudolpho Silvestri. Rudolpho, this is Brian Kinney."

"Signor Silvestri, your reputation precedes you. I'm pleased to meet you at last," Brian began, extending his hand for a firm handshake.

"Mr. Kinney, I've heard good things about you too. We appreciate you rearranging your schedule to accommodate us. We're most eager to see what you have to show us."

"I had the pleasure of meeting your daughter last week. I'm really looking forward to meeting the rest of your team."

"As you know Mr. Kinney, I had envisioned the campaign to be such a simple matter. However, we've had proposals from six of the top international firms, and I've been most disappointed. I'll be honest with you...I was hesitant to hear another campaign proposal, especially since Kinnetik is a much smaller agency then the ones we have been dealing with, but Susan has assured me that you're the best in the business."

"Kinnetik is considered a boutique agency. I like to believe our size makes us more specialized, more nimble. We believe we're better able to serve the unique needs of our customers. Of course, you'll have to be the judge of that," Brian said.

Signor Silvestri smiled.

"I did my research on you Mr. Kinney. Susan and others have said you're very good at what you do. I know about all the awards. But, you're still a small Pittsburgh agency. I have to wonder how you can begin to understand a company as cosmopolitan as Belluss Occhiali."

"We'll have to see, won't we? The new products are truly magnificent. As I've told Susan, the products speak for themselves, our job is to simply showcase them properly."

"My daughter told me that your offices used to be a bathhouse. You're obviously a man of vision to have made such a structure your company headquarters. I must say I'm intrigued."

Brian smiled. "This was a historic structure that I felt needed to preserved. What more can I say? We have found it to be a stimulating work environment...once I spent a fortune for renovations, of course." Brian motioned for Ted. "If you will excuse me, I have a few last minute details to take care of before our meeting. Please make yourself comfortable. There's coffee, tea, drinks...please help yourself."

"Mr. Kinney, there are a few members of my team in your lobby. I think we lost them to your paintings." Rudolpho commented.

"No problem. I'll see that someone ushers them in when we're ready to start. Please excuse me for a moment." Brian said as he turned to leave.

Brian gave last minute instructions to Cynthia that he wanted the art department ready to respond to anything that Justin needed. She confirmed that had already been taken care of, and that Justin was down there now making sure that Murph and George were only a phone call away.

Ted and Brian chatted for a moment, ending with Ted confirming that everything was ready.

Brian was just outside the door of the conference room, when he heard a voice he would recognize anywhere. To his surprise that voice was not speaking English.

"Cristina, da quanto tempo. È bello rivederla," Justin said in perfect Italian. (Translation: Cristina, it's been a long time. It's good to see you again.)

Cristina Silvestri and the few members of the team turned toward the voice, which was now speaking. Cristina realized that she knew the speaker, but she couldn't seem to match the speaker to any image in her memory banks.

While she was struggling, Justin recognized her confusion and picked up the conversation once again in Italian, "Mi spiace che lei non si ricordi me. E' passato tanto tempo. Ho incontrato lei, Maria e suo padre circa tre anni fa, quando lavoravo alla Vanguard. E' stato molto tempo fa, e sciocco pensare che lei mi ricordi. Mi chiamo Justin Taylor." (Translation: I'm sorry you don't remember me. It has been a long time. I met you and Maria and your father about three years ago, when I was working at Vanguard. It was a long time ago, how foolish of me to think that you would remember. My name is Justin Taylor.)

"Justin, of course I remember you. You look so different. I would not have recognized you. Wait until Rudolpho sees you," Cristina said, in perfect English, grabbing Justin into a big hug.

At that moment, Maria Silvestri walked over to join her sister and Justin in conversation. Brian couldn't hear the conversation, but in a few seconds, she too was hugging Justin.

Brian watched this from his distant vantage point. 'That hug was quite long enough. Now take your hands off of him. Ok. That goes for you too. How long do you intend to hug him? When are you going to let him go?' Brian thought quietly to himself, trying to resist the urge to remove these women's arms from Justin. Instead he just sighed and patiently waited.

Maria and Cristina, each with their arms still linked to Justin, introduced him to the other members of the team from Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali.

"I saw the products that your combined team developed," Justin pointed out, "They are truly elegant and sophisticated."

The team members smiled at the praise. Cristina maneuvered Justin and her sister back in front of the paintings in the lobby.

Maria said to Justin, "I told Brian that the meeting shouldn't be held here. I knew we wouldn't be able to get Cristina away from these paintings."

Justin laughed. "So Cristina, I'm wondering what you think of my paintings?" Justin innocently asked.

"Your paintings?" Maria and Cristina said in unison.

"Yes, they're mine. I did them several years ago... when Kinnetik first opened."

Both Maria and Cristina continued to gush with praise.

Justin looked up and saw Brian standing off to the side. "Will you excuse me for a moment?" he said, leaving Maria and Cristina to continue to admire the paintings while he walked over to speak to Brian.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"I see once again I find you wrapped in the arms of someone else." Brian teased.

"Brian, they're women...they're Italian...what more can I say?"

"We're just about ready. So will you get your fan club and move them to the conference room," Brian continued to tease.

Justin nodded ok with a smile and returned back to Maria, Cristina, and the teams. At Justin's urging everyone started walking in the direction of the conference room.

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On entering the room, Justin began again in perfect Italian, extending his hand. "Signor Silvestri, so che sono passati tre anni ma e bello rivederla." (Translation: Signor Silvestri, I know it's been three years, but it is good to see you again.)

Cristina interrupted, this time in Italian, "Ricordi Justin Taylor, papa. Pensavi che sarebee stato il marito perfetto per me o Maria. Be ho deciso che avevi ragione. Sono pronta a sposarlo adesso." (Translation: You remember, Justin Taylor, father. You thought that he would make the perfect husband for either Maria or me. Well I decided that you were right. I'm ready to marry him now.)

Maria decided to join the conversation in Italian, "No papa io penso sarebbe un marito migliore per me. Non sei d'accordo Justin?" She walked over to give him a hug. (Translation: No father, I think that he would make a better husband for me. Don't you agree Justin?)

Signor Silvestri started to laugh. Then said to Justin in Italian, "Justin, sono passati diversi anni ma e bello rivederti. Sapevo saresti stato il genero perfetto. Sono rimasto in attesa," as he opened his arms in greeting and hugged Justin. (Translation: Justin, it's been many years but it's good to see you again. I knew you would make the perfect son in law. I have been waiting.)

The Italian members of the design team were thoroughly amused since Signor Silvestri was constantly trying to marry off his daughters. It was an inside joke, and this was a family business.

Susan Weaver and the Eyeconics members of the team had no idea what was going on, and they tried to follow the Italian. They were also trying to understand the unexpected relationships unfolding before them. Susan watched in fascination the way that the Silvestri family responded to this stranger.

Susan made careful note of the change in the demeanor of Rudolpho Silvestri as he embraced this stranger. She also noticed the unguarded way Maria and Cristina Silvestri were also acting. She didn't know what was going on, but she was most intrigued by the unfolding events.

Justin stood there with Maria on one arm, Cristina on the other, blushing several shades of red. Finally regaining his composure, Justin approached Susan Weaver and said in English. "Hello, my friends have failed to introduce me, I'm..."

Susan finally recognized him before he identified himself, so she finished his sentence for him, "You're Justin Taylor, the artist. This is indeed an honor. I've admired your work."

"Thank you."

"You obviously have a fan club," she teased, motioning with her eyes from Cristina to Maria with a laugh.

"It's a long story." Justin said, sheepishly with a smile. "We're old friends."

"Now, that's a story I would so love to hear," Susan teased with a smile.

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Brian and Ted entered the room and the meeting was set to begin. Justin reached for the sketchpad from the side table and took a seat off to the side.

At first everyone was surprised that Justin remained in the room. Everyone thought he was simply a visitor at Kinnetik. No one could exactly put the pieces together as to why he was casually seated in the room, but everyone was too polite to ask.

Eventually, formal introductions were made once again, and Justin was introduced as the special artistic director for this campaign.

Then suddenly there was the relaxed smile of recognition from Susan, as she thought about all the campaigns that Brian had created for Eyeconics. She then tried to re-imagine the artistry of those campaigns in the hands of someone of the caliber of Justin Taylor. Susan began to completely relax into her seat, for she knew Brian's presentation was going to be dazzling.

The Silvestri family realized that the appearance of Justin Taylor into the mix changed everything. Here was a man, who had proven in the past that he understood both the company and the Italian sensibilities with respect to design. Everyone knew in advance that their two biggest problems with all the other agencies weren't going to be a problem here. However, Maria and Cristina knew that their father could still create a crisis, so they cautiously held their breath and waited.

Brian welcomed everyone and talked a little about Kinnetik being a boutique agency that focused on the unique needs of its clients. Then he moved directly into the presentation.

"Signor Silvestri, your first concern has been that you wanted ads that reflected your company. Your complaint, as I understand it, has been that previous firms didn't connect with your unique design culture. As you will remember, Justin assisted in the design of your campaign three years ago, which integrated your design culture and high art."

"Yes, I remember." Rudolpho acknowledged and smiled warmly. "Although my recollection is that he did more than 'assist'. Rudolpho remembered well the circumstances surrounding his meeting with a young Justin Taylor, and he was glad to see that this time Justin had received recognition and status on the campaign, right from the start.

"Wait until you see what WE came up with this time."

"I'm looking forward to it," Rudolpho said, noting the use of 'we' and deciding it was a tribute to Brian's integrity that he shared recognition with Justin right from the beginning. Rudolpho decided at that moment that he liked Brian Kinney.

"Susan, you had indicated that you wanted the campaign to reflect Eyeconics as well, where your design culture is considerably more modern."

"Yes, we didn't want to be completely overshadowed by our Italian counterpart." Susan responded.

"You know here at Kinnetik we believe in edgy campaigns, which leave lasting impressions. You are about to see what we came up with for you, incorporating your combined design cultures," Brian explained.

"The next problem, we understand, was that you needed a name for your magnificent collection. So we tried to develop a name for the entire collection that should work across your full international marketing spectrum. May I present to you the products developed by your two firms to be marketed under the name "Collezione Fiero"." Brian said and waited a moment for the name to sink in.

Initially the room was absolutely silent.

Then Brian continued again, "To those on the Eyeconics team, the name implies "fire' and 'passion'." There were mumblings from the Eyeconics team, and Susan eyes lit up as she smiled.

"Using the name untranslated works perfectly in our markets," someone on the Eyeconics team commented aloud.

"To those on the Belluss Occhiali team, I believe the name of the collection indicates 'pride' and 'boldness." There were eventual nods from the Italian group.

"We like this name so much better than 'Phoenix', which we were using as a temporary name during the development cycle," someone on the Italian team commented aloud.

"Forse lei l'avrebbe dovuto chiamare il fenice invece," commented another team member. "I'm sorry," he continued this time in English, "Maybe we should tried 'fenice,' the Italian word for Phoenix. But now that I hear it, it wouldn't have sounded much better."

Everyone laughed.

"You will notice the focus is on each of the products in the next series of boards. These are the concepts for the print ads. We didn't make the mistake of most traditional European trends, which tend to focus on the long setting shot with lots of models. When models were used...we focused only on the headshots...this way, we actually showcase the products of the collection and not the models. Further, notice the majority of the ads focus on the exquisite detailing, which are the hallmark of this collection. There is nothing, anywhere to distract from your products' image."

Cynthia continued placing the boards to show what Brian had described. The audible oohs and aahs continued.

Brian continued, "Then we used abstract art in the vacant spaces to focus the eye, again in the direction of on your designs. Rather than make the art prominent, we used recessed imagery and half tones instead. In live ads, we will even give you a touch of subtle morphing and animation, to again produce movement in the direction of the product. Therefore, the art will be used again solely to make your products more memorable.

"Finally, I would like to give you an idea of a possible European media campaign. Justin and I wanted to create this one just for fun. We realize that the ad must be toned down for U.S. market, but let me show the concept to you...just for fun." Brian finally said, as he started to paint the word picture to go with the boards.

"Picture a perfect day at a plush resort. The sun is shining. The air is clear. The foliage around the pool area is lush. As the camera moves closer, we see the cool, clear waters of the shimmering pool. There are people swimming in the pool. Off to the left of the pool are five men in Speedos sunbathing. Other people are also scattered around the pool engaged in various activities.

"This placid scene is broken as a voluptuous dark haired beauty is seen in water. With panther like grace, she rises out of the water in slow motion. All eyes are on the woman. Her body is tanned, and she is dressed provocatively in a bikini. The water droplets cascade down her body as she rises. The woman happens to cast a seductive smile in the direction of the five male sunbathers.

"The five men returned the smile, each thinking of the promise of a long night and never-ending sex. Then one by one each man leaned forward on his chaise, returning the flirtatious glance.

"The first four men are focused on the woman, who has emerged from the water. The fifth man clearly has his attention focused only the hard bodies of the four men beside him. All five men are wearing Collezione Fiero sunglasses, so an outsider would not be able to tell exactly where the sunbathers are looking.

"The final scene is simply the single pair of sunglasses spotlighted in the foreground, with bathing suits scattered behind them. You don't know whether you have a one pair of Speedos and one bikini, or if you have multiple pairs of Speedos, or if you have permutations somewhere in between.

"The tagline is...The Look That Says It All."

Brian had everyone mesmerized by his presentation. The room erupted in laughter at the various implications of the ad.

"With an ad like that, the buzz at the water cooler alone will have our collection on everyone's lips," someone from the Italian design team commented.

"Can't you see all the extra air time we'll get as the newscasts mention our collection," someone else added with a laugh.

"I guess the ad will be toned down here in the U.S. I guess we'll have to stop with the woman rising out of the pool and casting a seductive glance at the five sunbathing men. But even at that, the ad still works," someone on the Eyeconics team said with a laugh.

"The slogan works so well even with the shortened version of the ad. I love it," someone else commented.

When Brian was finished, the Eyeconics team was thrilled. The members of the Belluss Occhiali team seemed excited.

Brian presented the second campaign, which contained the same essential focus with slightly modified execution. The products are placed in a more urban setting. This time the tag line... "Hide the Fire In Your Eyes."

The members of the two teams were again impressed.

Finally, Brian asked Justin to present the boards showing the graphics to integrate the new collection into the existing websites for the two companies. These graphics were highly refined and both companies were impressed. Justin explained that the website graphics were more universal and would work with either campaign with the only change being the correction of the tag line slogan.

"Will we be able to run the video of that ad on our website?" someone asked with a laugh.

"Of course, our tech team will kill us. Can you imagine the number of hits that video would generate? It will probably crash our server...which of course will get us more media coverage for our products," someone else commented.

Justin smiled at the enthusiasm and confirmed that streaming video would be entirely possible on both company websites. Justin returned to his seat and everyone settled down again.

Brian did the final wrap up...summarizing what had been presented to refresh the images in everyone's mind...as if that was necessary.

Under normal circumstances, Brian would have expected that the problem for the two teams would have been to decide between two equally impressive campaigns.

Then Brian remembered these were not ordinary clients...so he steeled himself for the reactions he knew would follow.

After a few moments, Signor Silvestri said, "What you've presented is very interesting. Both of these campaigns truly represent unique concepts. However, neither of the concepts represented the campaign strategy we had in mind."

There was a collective gasp from everyone else in the room.

"I see," Brian said quietly, trying to hide his disbelief at the response.

There was a knock on the door, and Emmett signaled to Brian, who simply nodded in response. Then he resumed speaking to Rudolpho Silvestri.

"Not a problem, Signor Silvestri. I would be most interested in working with your ideas. I realize that I have held you captive in this room for quite some time, but I see that lunch has arrived. May I suggest that we take a break for lunch and resume our meeting here after we eat? Don't worry. We have dedicated the entire day to developing a campaign strategy that is consistent with your vision. But, I'm sure things will progress more smoothly with the addition of food," Brian said with a smile.

"I didn't know that you were Italian," someone from the Italian team teased.

Everyone stood up and looked at their watch and mumbled their agreement with Brian's suggestion about lunch. Brian impressed everyone with the catered meal, giving everyone an opportunity to relax.

Emmett and his staff directed every one to the area where lunch was being served. Maria and Cristina were constantly talking with their father in whispered Italian.

Susan and her team were whispering also. The Belluss Occhiali and Eyeconics teams were whispering. The entire group was talking among themselves.

Emmett and his staff made sure everything was perfect. The atmosphere was very relaxed. Ted and Cynthia mingled with the members from both company, and this was their first chance to mingle. Ted and Cynthia continued to oversee the lunch gathering, while Brian and Justin stepped in Brian's office for a moment.

"Brian, your presentation was wonderful. It's been a long time since I've seen you in action," Justin said with a smile.

"Nonsense, you saw me several times this morning. Did you forget already?" Brian said taking Justin into his arms for a gentle kiss.

"Brian."

"I'm so glad you're here. This would be unbearable without you."

"I can't think of anywhere I would rather be"

"You know I should have listened to you." Brian said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"You told me I didn't want to touch this account. You told me to take a pass. I should have listened."

"Why would you say that? You know you're the best. Everybody knows that."

"Justin, I've been in this business a long time. I'm a master at what I do...I know that. But I want you to know the art that you created for both of these campaigns was outstanding. I could win my next Clio award on your graphics alone."

"Brian," Justin said blushing.

"Look, we could sit in there and create a new campaign. This isn't about our ability to do that, for you and I have done it before. But I have to wonder if Signor Silvestri is capable of knowing a memorable, attention getting campaign when he sees one."

"What are you saying?"

"As much as it would be a feather in Kinnetik's cap to win this account, I'm reaching a point where I wonder if the rewards are even worth the effort."

Justin looked at Brian when he made the statement. Then he let the subject drop. "Well, we had better get in there and have something to eat," Justin said instead.

"Is food all you ever think about? You know I could lock the door. We probably have enough time to feed each other a high protein snack right here." Brian teased.

"Brian," Justin said, blushing slightly.

"Oh. All right. You've made your point. I guess, we do have to join everyone at lunch," Brian said with a laugh.

Chapter 20 – Presentation Is Everything, Part 2

Later That Same Day...(Day 23)

Toward the end of lunch, Maria and Cristina gently pulled Justin into the lobby. The three friends were casually chatting among themselves, and decided to drift outside for a breath of fresh air.

"What happened to you Justin? You worked on father's campaign, and then you disappeared," Maria asked.

"When I finished my internship at Vanguard, I didn't return to classes as the PIFA. I went to Hollywood to work on a movie. When the movie was cancelled, I came back here to Pittsburgh and started to paint. I received some attention from art critics, and I've been living in New York for the last year building my career as an artist." Justin explained, deciding it best to leave out the details of the Stockwell campaign.

"We looked for you, you know?" Cristina added sadly.

"You did? Why?"

"Because we were both crazy about you. We had fun together. And you blush so easily," Maria teased.

"Oh yes, well, there is that," Justin joked in response.

"Seriously Justin, back then, you were the only one who understood what we needed. You understand us better than anyone. The campaign you worked on back then was right on target. The new campaigns are the same way. It's like you knew precisely what we had in mind. You spotlighted the product. Anything else on the page was there to enhance the product. That's what has always been wrong with our ads. We knew something was wrong with our ads for years, but we couldn't put our finger on the problem."

"Then why is Signor Silvestri ..."

"Father is just being Father. You know how he can be." Maria chimed in.

"I see," Justin said quietly.

"Have you gotten married yet?" Cristina asked with a grin.

Followed immediately by Maria, who asked, "Do you have children?"

"How is it that you two always seem to conveniently forget that I'm gay?" Justin teased.

"Maybe because we still both think you would make someone the perfect husband. " Cristina added with a laugh.

"But there IS someone special?" Maria asked quietly.

"Yes. We've been together for six years."

"So there really is no hope for either of us?" Cristina asked, trying to sound forlorn, but failing miserably.

"I'm afraid not. You two are still pathetic." Justin said, shaking his head. They all laughed.

"It doesn't matter. I'm just so glad to see you again. You have to come and visit us in Milan." Maria bounced back quickly.

"I might just do that."

Cristina joined in. "Yes come, we can do the museums and galleries together. It would be great to do them with someone who truly appreciates..."

Maria interrupted, "Meaning she hates visiting galleries with me and re-explaining everything over and over. Yes, please come, Justin. Rescue me!."

"We'll see."

"Anyway, I'm glad that we found you again." Cristina added. "Promise me, we can get together and talk after this is over? Maria and I have missed you."

"I've missed you too," Justin finally admitted, which caused both Maria and Cristina to blush. "We had better get back inside. I think they're ready to re-start."

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"Signor Silvestri," Justin began when everyone had reassembled in the conference room and taken their seats. " In the past, when you created Belluss Occhiali campaigns, you had the luxury of directing the marketing and advertising campaigns in directions, which were unique to your company. However, in this case Belluss Occhiali did not create this collection alone. Eyeconics produced these products jointly with you. So any campaign must reflect the character of both companies, and any ad campaign must have input from both perspectives. For that reason, your usual strategy of us creating your advertising campaign, here and now, in this room, is not going to work. I believe that you might like to reconsider your plans."

"I want to create a new campaign from scratch. There are significant problems with the campaigns that have been proposed." Rudolpho continued. "We can't resolve those problems. We need to start from scratch."

"What are those problems? So I know where to start?" Justin quietly asked. "What are those problems so that adjustment can be made?"

"The problems are so severe we can't work them out. We have to develop the entire campaign here and now from scratch. Can't you see that?" Rudolpho insisted.

"Maybe if you would share with us your vision of your campaign, we would be better able to provide input, maybe refine your suggestion, and ultimately create the exact campaign you had in mind," Justin quietly suggested.

"We don't have specific ideas in mind, that is why we think you should suggest and develop a new campaign strategy for us, here and now." Rudolph continued.

Justin continued, "Signor Silvestri, the idea is to have a memorable campaign that has your product on everyone lips. The two campaigns that we have shown you accomplish that goal. They stress the magnificence of your products and were painstakingly created after extensive research. Due of that fact, I firmly believe any campaign that we create here...now, will be significantly less effective than what has already been presented. Therefore, I see no reason to engage in our usual exercise when we already know the outcome."

There was a moment of silence as Justin looked over at Maria and Cristina, who both nodded their support, but they said nothing. He also looked over at Susan, and she also nodded, confirming that she saw Justin's point.

Justin looked back at Signor Silvestri, and he braced himself, for he had a feeling that he knew precisely what was going to happen next.

Signor Silvestri began to speak in rapid Italian. Justin remembered from experience that his first reaction would be to spout off in anger. Translation of what was said at this point was unnecessary, but judging by the expressions on everyone's faces the lack of Italian expertise was a blessing.

While Rudolpho continued to rant, Justin calmly walked over to the side cabinet and poured a glass of ice water. He then turned around to Signor Silvestri and calmly handed him the glass of water. Finally, Justin interrupted Rudolpho's tirade, this time speaking calmly in Italian, "Signor Silvestri, si calmi per favore. Questo e del tutto inutile. Ecco, beva questo. Pensi a cio che sta facendo. Brian el il migliore nel suo campo. Perche vuole cancellare tutti i suoi bei progetti? Perche vuole creare una campagna pubblicitaria inferiore per vendere dei prodotti magnifici? Mi perdoni, ma cio non ha alcun senso." (Translation: Signor Silvestri, please calm down. This is totally unnecessary. Here drink this. Think about what you're doing. Brian is the best in the business. Why do you want to cancel out all your beautiful designs? Why do you want to create an inferior ad campaign to sell magnificent products? Forgive me, but that just doesn't make any sense.)

Maria joined in the conversation in Italian, "Non siamo mai stati soddisfatti delle nostre pubblicita in passato quindi e sempre stato necessario per te tentare di ricominciare da capo. Non siamo mai riusciti a identificare il problema delle nostre pubblicita in passato. Quindi abbiamo continuato a cercare soluzioni diverse che non hanno mai risolto il problema. Ma papa, non vedi, Justin e Brian hanno risolto quel problema. E' inutile che noi interferiamo con cio che hanno fatto. Non lo vedi?" (Translation: We were never happy with our ads in the past so it was always necessary for you try to start over. We could never identify the problem with our ads in the past. So we kept trying different things that never seemed to fix the problem. But Father, don't you see, Justin and Brian have solved that problem. It's unnecessary for us to tamper with what they've done. Don't you see that?)

Signor Silvestri began to speak again, this time in English, "It is important that we at Belluss Occhiali create a quality campaign."

Brian was about to speak, when Justin silenced him with a knowing glance. Brian continued to hold back, and let Justin continue to handle the discussion.

Justin continued once again, "Just so you know Signor Silvestri, Brian and I can sit here all day and develop campaigns for you. And you can sit there and continue make suggestions. Now here's the problem as I see it. You, Brian, and I may be able to work under these conditions, but I'm not sure your partners on the Eyeconics team could create under these conditions and have their perspectives adequately represented. So after we worked with you to create a campaign, we would have to repeat the process separately with Eyeconics. I could envision a protracted back and forth, creation process for us between your two companies. Although we would be happy to do this, what I see would be a never-ending ad campaign development cycle with products that NEVER reach the marketplace. I'm sure your partners at Eyeconics would have problems with this strategy, especially since you are already behind schedule."

Susan Weaver nodded that she agreed with what Justin had just stated, but she was too stunned to utter a word.

Then Justin once again spoke in Italian, "Ed io, in quanto suo amico, non posso starmene da parte e lasciarglielo fare." (Translation: And I as your friend, can not stand idly by and let you do this.)

"One final point," Justin continued, "Kinnetik has worked very hard to build a certain reputation in this industry. Yes, it's a small regional firm, but due to Brian's efforts this firm has a sterling reputation. That reputation would be severely tarnished if we proceed in the direction that you're suggesting. Therefore Signor Silvestri, since you and Eyeconics find the two campaigns we have already proposed to you to be totally unacceptable, it would appear that in spite of our best efforts, Kinnetik was unable to offer you anything of interest. For that we are truly sorry. And, the two ad campaigns, which were presented this morning, are no longer available for you consideration."

Justin stood up and crossed the room. All eyes were following him waiting to see what would happen next. Justin now stood by the opposite wall and began speaking again.

"Rather than take up any more of your valuable time, I suggest we simply end this meeting. I hope that Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali will have much success as you deal with you next agency on this ad campaign. And, we anticipate that the campaign ideas shown to you today will not be incorporated in any future campaigns of your companies, either individually or jointly."

Finally Justin smiled his trademark smile and said in Italian, "Signor Silvestri,, Maria, Cristina...e stato bello rivedere tutti voi." (Translation: Signor Silvestri, Maria, Cristina...it's been good to see you all again.)

He then addressed the entire room in English and said, "I seem to have pressing matters, if you will excuse me."

And with that Justin calmly walked out of the conference room, closing the door behind him. As Justin exited the room, it erupted in chaos.

Brian recovered from his shock quicker than the others and smiled. Then he brought the room back to order.

Brian calmly said, "I guess we have nothing further to discuss," and held up his hands stopping all discussion. Brian calmly returned to his office, leaving Cynthia and Ted to escort everyone from the conference room.

Entering his office, Brian went to his cabinet and located his bottle of Beam. He poured some in a glass and carried the glass back to his desk. As he took a sip, Brian remembered another time.

Beginning of Flashback

The scene is the darken room deep within Vanguard agency. It's late a night and the only sound is that of a copier in action.

Brian appeared out of nowhere to investigate the source of the sounds, and he finds Justin making copies.

"Taylor, what are you still doing here," Brian asked, continuing his approach. Let me guess, PIFA was too cheap to do their copying at Kinkos, so you agree to do it for them?

"I told you it was just an art project for school." Justin tried to explain.

"Huh!" Brian remarked and then began to laugh, seeing that these were another set of protest posters of against Stockwell. "I'm sure you'll get an A+ even if it is a bit crude and heavy handed," he continued, using Justin's own words back at him to describe his art.

"Look, I didn't think anyone would be here this late. So... You found out my secret identity," Justin responded.

Brian started to roll up the copies of the posters produced by the copier. "Well, fun's over, Superboy," he uttered emphatically.

"What are you doing?" Justin asked.

"You made your statement once, that's enough. Now, it's time to cut it out!" Brian continued to insist.

"I'm not going to cut it out. I'm doing what I believe in," Justin protested.

"Fuck what you believe in. I'm telling you to stop!"

"You also once told me you wanted me to be the best homosexual I could possibly be, which includes not giving a shit what anyone tells me. Think for myself! Stockwell is a homophobe. He's a fascist. He's a threat to everything and everyone we know. I don't care what you think."

"You don't know what I think. I don't give a shit about Stockwell. But you're not just fucking with him...you're fucking with me. It's my business. Now get the hell out of here!" Brian demanded.

End of Flashback

Brian pulled out his cellphone and called Justin, but the call rolled over into voice mail.

Brian then called down to his art department, but found out that they hadn't seen Justin since this morning.

Brian called Thomas, and asked him to call if Justin arrived at the house.

Brian waited, trying to will his cell phone to ring.

Beginning of Flashback

The scene is the loft as Brian's possessions are being carted away after Brian, presenting himself as the Concerned Citizens for the Truth, had risked all that he had, to pay $100,000 for the ads to stop Stockwell.

"Why did you do it?" Justin had asked him, touching him gently. "It's so ..."

Brian finished Justin's sentence by voicing the word, "Noble?"

Justin corrected him by saying, "Out of character."

Brian said, "Some asshole once told me...if you believe in something strongly enough, you have to be willing to sacrifice everything."

End of Flashback

Taking another sip of his drink, Brian tried to put the pieces together, replaying the events in the conference room.

Justin had taken control of a very important meeting, then had abruptly ended that meeting, and finally had calmly walked out of the room.

Justin had exhibited no fear, no hesitation, no doubts, no apology, and no regrets.

And, Brian could do nothing now except wait to hear from Justin.

Chapter 21 – A Waiting Game, part 1

A While Later...(Day 23)

Brian was still sitting at his desk, casually sipping his glass of beam, when Cynthia entered without knocking. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine, or at least I will be once I locate Justin," Brian calmly explained.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No. I'm fine."

"I'm sorry, Brian. I know how much you wanted that account."

Brian simply shook his head. "Sorry's bullshit!"

"I don't understand what happened in there. Everything seemed to be going so well, and then it all fell apart. What happened?"

"Not now, Cynthia."

"Are you sure I can't get you anything?"

"No, I'm fine. Just handle things here. If Justin calls, I'll be at the loft."

Cynthia left to return to her desk, trying to figure out how things could go so wrong. The day had started with such promise, and now it ended like this. Cynthia was trying to understand what had happened. She really wanted to talk to Brian about it, but she decided by the look of him that now wasn't the right time. Cynthia decided that her questions would have to wait.

Brian was gathering his things to leave the office, when Ted entered and made himself comfortable in the nearest chair.

"Theodore?"

"I really sorry, Bri. I know how much you wanted that account. That account would have put Kinnetik on the map." Ted said, using quiet tones.

Brian recognized this as Ted, trying to be supportive, so he tried to put up with it.

"We're already on the fucking map, Theodore, don't you read the trades?" Brian teased.

Realizing at this point that Ted was in no hurry to leave, Brian settled himself in a comfortable chair, as Ted continued.

"That's not what I meant." Ted tried to back pedal, obviously missing the teasing tone in Brian's voice.

"I know what you meant," Brian said with a smile, letting Ted off the hook.

"I just don't know what got into Justin. I've never seen him like that," Ted continued.

"I have always said Justin was a drama princess. Well, you have just witnessed a true drama queen moment." Brian said with a laugh.

"So what are you going to do now?" Ted asked, waiting to hear the master plan for damage control from Brian.

"Except for finding Justin...not one fucking thing." Brian explained calmly, looking directly at Ted.

"What do you mean?" Ted couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I don't understand how you can you be so calm."

"Theodore, I've spent the last six years with Justin..."

"No. No. I watched you and Justin for six years. I don't even begin to understand the two of you," Ted rambled, without taking a breath. "That's not what I mean."

"Then what do you mean?" Brian asked in frustration, hoping Ted would finally get to the point.

"What about damage control? Brian, it's not like to you just accept this."

"I can accept this because he was right." Brian said quietly.

"What?"

"Justin was right in everything that he said." Brian then started to laugh as he continued to speak. "Now there may be some question as to whether or not he should have said it...as if that would ever stop Justin." Brian laughed again.

Ted interrupted Brian train of thought with an accusation, "You didn't even try to stop him. Why?"

"Theodore, did you not hear Justin rattling off in two different languages in that room. You've seen him at family dinners. Once Justin gets on a roll in one language, I can't get a word in edgewise. You know that. You saw me try to get a word in, but Justin paid no attention to me and just kept switching languages. How in the fuck did you expect me to stop him under those circumstances? Plus, I was as much in shock as everyone else," Brian revealed, returning to a standing position and hoping that Ted would do the same. "But I figured out what was going on faster than everyone else in the room...so I stayed out of it."

Ted made no movements, so Brian simply made himself comfortable at his desk again.

"But why would he do it, Brian? Justin isn't destructive!" Ted continued, still trying to make all the pieces fit into place.

"No, he's not! He did it, so I wouldn't have to. He did it for me," Brian said quietly.

"Brian, I'm not sure I understand."

"If I had said those things...and believe me I was almost ready to...everything would be over now. There would be no room for discussions or apologies or negotiations that could ever be made. The deal would be over. Because Justin did it...and the way he did it...we all have time to think things over. Everyone has an opportunity for one more play, if they want it, before this thing is finally over. I just have to leave it alone and let it play out."

"Why do you think this isn't over?"

"Because while Justin was creating his little scene with Signor Silvestri, I had a chance to watch the faces of everyone else in the room. Susan and the Eyeconics team agreed with Justin. Maria and Cristina Silvestri and the Belluss Occhiali team agreed with Justin. And finally, Justin handled Signor Silvestri with such kindness and respect...kindness and respect that he didn't deserve...that he can simply change his mind if he wants to and still save face."

"So you're not upset with Justin?" Ted asked with complete surprise.

"I wouldn't go that far. It would have been nice Justin had spoken to me quietly...maybe taken me aside, and said: 'Now Brian, this is what I thinking about doing.' 'Can we discuss this?' 'What do you think?'" Brian said, using his little squeaky voice.

Ted laughed hysterically. "Justin?" Ted laughed again. "You've got to be kidding?"

"Theodore, is this necessary..." Brian said with exasperation.

"I'm sorry. You were serious..."

"Look, I've had as much as I can deal with today. I have to go. I'll see you later," Brian said, leaving a laughing Ted in his office.

Brian reached the loft and looked for signs of Justin. There were none. The loft looked the way it did when they had left it a few days ago.

Now Brian was starting to worry.

Chapter 22 - A Waiting Game, Part 2

A Few Hours Later...(Day 23)

Brian was anxiously waiting at the loft when his phone rang. "Kinney," Brian answered, taking a seat and making himself comfortable. He tried to prepared himself to listen.

"Brian, it's Cynthia. The phones have been going crazy here ever since you left. The staff has questions. You have a stack of messages..."

Brian cut her off before she had a chance to finish providing her updates.

"Have you heard from Justin?" Brian immediately asked about the only call that he cared anything about.

"That's why I'm calling. Justin called. He said he tried to call you on your cell phone but his calls kept going into voice mail, so he called here at office. He just wanted to let you know he's going home to paint." Cynthia relayed.

"Would you repeat that?" Brian asked incredulously, knowing he couldn't possibly have heard her correctly.

"Justin...said...to...tell...you...that... he...is...going...home...to... paint," Cynthia repeated slowly, making sure to enunciate each word clearly. She also was trying to figure out why Brian was suddenly having hearing problems.

"Unbelievable! Unbelievable! Only Justin can create this much havoc and calmly go into his studio to paint," Brian said with a laugh. At that moment, he let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks Cynthia, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wait a minute Brian. What about your other messages? You have messages from Eyeconics. Of course, Susan called. But Kellie called, as well. Brown Athletics called. Remson called. Justin has messages from both Maria Silvestri and Cristina Silvestri. Don't you want to go over any of them?"

" No. I'll deal with them tomorrow. I'm on my way home to West Virginia. I'll see you in the morning." Brian said firmly. "Thanks Cynthia."

Brian hung up the phone and quickly exited the loft. Within minutes, he was on his way to deal with Justin.

Thankfully, Brian caught only the tail end of the rush hour commuter traffic, so the drive to Bri-tin took only about 45 minutes. That was just enough time for his emotions to subside and for him to once again replay the today's events. Brian tried to prepare in his mind what he was going to say to Justin, but he was getting nowhere on that score. He realized he was just going to play this by ear.

Brian lingered a while longer in his car, trying to get his bearings after the long drive. Then before exiting the car, Brian took another moment to play his voice messages. There was a message from Thomas, letting him know that Justin had arrived home.

There was also a message from Justin. Brian didn't like the sound of Justin's voice on his voice mail. Finally deciding that he could find no other reasons to linger in his car, Brian finally opened the door to the Corvette and exited his car.

With a quick wave to Thomas, Brian entered the house, dropping his briefcase on the hall table. He went upstairs and changed out of his suit and tie and into his more comfortable sweatpants and tank top.

Brian tried to place a call to Justin's cell phone, but it still rolled into voice mail. Brian laughed to himself when he realized he was trying to make a phone call to/from within his own home. The laugh released a little more of his tension. Brian made a mental note that they needed an intercom system installed at the house as soon as possible.

Brian noticed that his bare feet, moving across the wood floors, seemed to relax him with every step as he moved through the house.

Seeing he had no other choice, Brian slowly found his way down to Justin's studio.

Coming face to face with the door to Justin's studio, Brian hesitated again. He thought for a minute. Then he decided that no matter what the problems were between them, the most important thing right now was that Justin was on the other side of this door.

Brian slowly reached for the door handle, and finding that the door was unlocked, he took this for a good sign. He quietly opened the door a few inches and peeped in. Justin was sitting on the futon in his studio sketching. This was an image that Brian would never be tired of seeing...the vision of the man he loved...the sight of the artist at work. He lingered there for a few moments, taking in the view.

Then, Brian knocked loudly.

Justin got up to open the door. There they stood face to face, neither of them moving, neither of them saying a word.

Brian then reached out and pulled Justin into a passionate kiss. Justin tightly wrapped his arms around Brian and held on. When the need for air forced them apart, they shared the momentary breath and once again interlocked themselves to each other.

"Are you all right?" Brian finally asked, pulling Justin with him onto the futon. Then, he leaned back a little to try to get a look at Justin. As hazel eyes met pools of blue, Brian pulled Justin to him again into an embrace.

"So orange is the new blue again, huh?" Brian whispered.

"What?" Justin asked, pulling back slightly to look at Brian. "Why bring that up now?"

"It's deja vu." Brian said, shaking his head. "I guess I should have learned! Is this how it going to be?"

"I don't know what you mean?" Justin said, trying to sound completely innocent.

"We need to talk." Brian said, immediately starting to look around the studio. "But not here. How about someplace more comfortable? I don't want to take a chance on you walking out in the middle of our conversation."

"How can you think that I would ..."

"Let's just say that I'm not taking any chances. So any suggestions?"

"You know we have a hot tub down here too, with a sauna."

"Justin, seducing me isn't going to work this time. This is serious!" Brian insisted. "You're in a lot of trouble here!"

"I was afraid of that," Justin said solemnly.

"Ok. Since you're the only one who knows where anything is...lead the way," Brian finally agreed.

"Don't you remember your tour of the house?" Justin smirked.

"Justin!"

Justin got off of the futon and pulled Brian up with him. Together they made their way to the lower level hot tub and sauna area.

They quickly removed their clothes and submerged themselves into the swirling hot water.

"Hmmmmm. This feels nice," Justin moaned as Brian spoon in behind him in the hot tub.

"Don't try to change the subject. You're in a lot of trouble, Sunshine! What did you think you were doing today in MY meeting?" Brian said, trying to sound stern.

"I did what I had to do, Brian. Surely you see that?" Justin tried to explain quietly, leaning back into Brian.

"That's beside the point, Justin," Brian continued. "That was a very important meeting. You just took over MY meeting. You gibbered in a language I didn't understand, and then you walked out of MY meeting. What on earth possessed you do that?"

"I realized that you might be getting ready to pull the plug everything, and I couldn't let you do that. I had to stop you."

"Did it ever occur to you to come to me and talk this over?" Brian asked emphatically.

Justin tried to turn slightly to face Brian. "There wasn't time. I didn't realize until I was talking to Maria and Cristina during lunch that everyone liked the campaigns, including Signor Silvestri. And, that his protests were just part of his usual staged demonstration of control. There wasn't time to talk to you about it. I just had to act."

"And the use of the Italian?"

"The Italian said to Signor Silvestri, I'm speaking to you as your friend."

"Ah huh"

"It was non-threatening. If I had spoken only in English it would have appeared as a challenge."

"I see. I'm so glad you explained that to me," Brian teased, actually starting to get the true picture.

"Fuck Brian. Remember I was a little nobody in that room. Once I walked out, all you had to do was negate everything I said. You could have taken the position that everything I had said, were merely the raving of temperamental artist. Everyone would have understood. People seem to think that artists are mad anyway. You could have said that those were my personal opinions and did not reflect the position of Kinnetik. No one in the room would have held MY statements against YOU. Kinnetik was free to make the deal once I was gone. We both know that I had no power to speak for Kinnetik. And, that was all you had to say. I knew that you pretty much figured everything out, so I figured that you would handle things."

"Probably."

"So, what happened after I left?"

"Well, let's just say, you really know how to end a meeting."

"Oh...sorry."

"Look, I really appreciate what you tried to do. Yes, you're probably right. I was ready to walk away for the opportunity. But thanks to you, we all have another shot. Still we have to wait and see how this plays out. But Justin, if you ever pull a stunt like that again..."

"You always tell me to have some balls and stick up for myself. Well now..."

"Justin, if I said it when I was stoned or on drugs, it doesn't count. You know, I think I liked you better when you were 17, and you simply deferred to me on things." Brian said wistfully as if trying to think of another time, but reality immediately intervened as Justin gently hit him on the arm. "Although now that I think about it, I can't actually remember a time that you deferred to me. I obviously have you confused with Mikey."

"Brian!" Justin proclaimed, gently hitting him on the arm again.

"Look, I want you around for a long time. I want you safe. You're so fucking fearless, Justin, that it scares the hell out me sometimes...and living in New York hasn't helped," Brian said, wrapping his arms tighter around Justin. "But Justin, if you ever pull a stunt like that again..."

"Don't worry. I won't."

"Oh how I wish I could believe that," Brian said, raising his eyes to the heavens. He leaned down and kissed the top of Justin head. "By the way Maria and Cristina Silvestri have been trying to reach you."

"What for?"

"How the fuck should I know?"

"I guess I'll have to call them tomorrow, huh?"

"I saw them with their arms around you, Justin. Didn't you tell them you have a partner? Didn't you tell them that you weren't available?"

"Brian, they just mentioned that they thought I would make someone the perfect husband? You obviously agreed with them once upon a time." Justin teased, leaning back to give Brian a kiss. "Don't worry I reminded them I was gay. I even told them there was someone special. However, that really didn't seem to matter to them," Justin teased.

Brian took no comfort in that last statement.

"Brian, can we move this discussion to another room?" Justin said with some concern.

"Why? What's the rush?"

"Your skin is wrinkling."

"So these discussions in the hot tub are good. Anytime we have anything important to discuss we have to get undressed and get into the hot tub. That way no one can walk away. But the down side is, we have to keep these discussions short. Is that basically what you're telling me?" Brian asked with total seriousness.

"Basically yes." Justin said with a laugh.

"I must say that I do like the short discussion part." Brian said, just before Justin hit him again on his arm.

"Maybe next time we have to have one of these discussion, we should try the pool?" Justin casually suggested.

"Why do I get the distinct feeling that for the next three months, you and I are going to be spending a lot of time naked in water?" Brian asked, beginning to get a sense that this was the truth.

"How can you say that?"

"It's just a feeling?" Brian quipped. "I bet if we asked...Mysterious Marilyn would agree with me."

"Were going to have to do that the next time we see her."

They were both laughing as they helped each other out of the hot tub, and Justin easily located towels and plush terry cloth robes.

"Justin, the robes and towels are a nice touch, but where did they come from?" Brian asked as they were drying each other off.

"Well I thought as long as we're here at the house, I wanted everything to be at your fingertips no matter where we were in the house, so I had Emmett stock each bathroom with supplies and robes and towels. See?" Justin said, as he opened the adjacent closet.

"Why am I not surprised?" Brian said with a laugh. "You tend to think of everything."

"Not everything," Justin protested. "What do you want to do about dinner?"

"After that lunch that Emmett prepared for the meeting..."

"That was really great. Everyone loved it."

"I was just wondering," Brian started to say, wrapping his arms around Justin.

"Yesssssss?"

"I was wondering," Brian continued, this time kissing Justin's neck and nibbling on his ear. "If maybe ..."

"Yesssssss," Justin responded, snuggling into all the attention.

"If you could be persuaded...." Brian continued kissing his way down to Justin's shoulder. "To maybe ..."

"Yesssssss."

"Make your chicken and veggie dish?"

"What!"

"I'll even help," Brian insisted.

"You will. So you must be desperate for low fat, low carb, huh?" Justin asked with a smile.

"Honestly, I've just missed your cooking."

"Well, in that case, I think dinner can be arranged."

After tossing the towels into the hamper, they dressed back in their sweats and proceeded toward the kitchen.

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"We have to get a contractor in here," Brian said, making himself comfortable on one of the kitchen stools, while Justin was searching in the refrigerator.

"And why is that?"

"When I came home looking for you, I was upstairs in our bedroom changing."

"Yeah."

"Justin, I called you in your studio using a cell phone...while in the house."

"Yeah, so?" Justin asked still continuing to gather ingredients.

Brian realized that Justin must be too distracted to get the point he was making. So Brian rapped on the counter to get Justin's full attention.

"Justin, I was IN the house. I called you on your cell phone IN the house. Doesn't this seem a little odd to you?"

"Ok. I'll talk to Gregory about it." Justin finally agreed. "I guess this house is huge, huh?" he commented as an afterthought.

"I'm just glad you called Cynthia and told her you were coming home to paint. So at least I knew where to start looking for you. Otherwise, I would have reported you missing, but you would have been here in the house the whole time," Brian said laughing, "It probably would have taken me days to find you."

"Are you done?" Justin asked, stopping in the mist of preparing dinner and looking over at Brian with that certain look, complete with one hand on his hip.

Brian got up and walked over and embraced Justin from behind, kissing him gently on by the ear he said, "I would have found you, though. I'll always find you."

And with that, Justin turned around and kissed Brian gently. Brian deepened the kiss and it turned passionate.

Dinner would obviously have to wait, for now there were more important things that needed to be taken care of. It had been twelve hours since Brian and Justin had been together, and as their hard cocks rubbed against each other during the kiss. They both knew they couldn't wait any longer. It was time to initiate another room of Brit-tin.

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Two Hours Later...(Day 23)

Two hours later, Brian and Justin returned to the kitchen to resume preparing dinner. Both of them were thoroughly fucked and much more relaxed.

"I know I'm supposed to be helping, so what do you want me do now?" Brian asked, looking around and trying to figure out what to do next.

"Did you decide on the wine for diner?"

"Wine? We didn't stop to pick up any. Sorry. I was eager to get home to..."

"Brian, it wasn't necessary to pick up wine. We have a wine cellar."

"We do? When did we get that?"

"You remember the door you keeping ask about. That leads to the wine cellar," Justin mentioned casually.

"Surely you don't expect me to go down there alone? I'll get lost," Brian protested.

"It's not that big," Justin reassured him.

"Then how will I find anything?" Brian mumbled.

Justin set the timer on the oven, just in case. He took Brian by the hand and together they ventured into the wine cellar, which was essentially empty. There were however several cases of assorted wines waiting to be unpacked.

"Just the basics to get us started," Justin teased. "But, you do have to go shopping."

Brian swept Justin into a tight hug and another kiss. "This would make a great substitute for a backroom," Brian teased. "I will definitely have to add this to our rooms to initiate."

"Brian!"

"Surely you agree with me?" Brian continued.

"Another time maybe. You have work to do." Justin insisted. "So I'll leave you alone while I check on dinner?"

"I won't be alone," Brian teased motioning to the bottles nearby. Justin just laughed.

While Justin checked on dinner, Brian took some time to unpack and organized things in the wine cellar. He also made sure that everything was stored at the right temperature. Brian then rejoined Justin in the kitchen, carrying one bottle of Justin's favorite chardonnay and a bottle of his favorite merlot.

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"Are you really ok about today?" Justin asked when they were finally cleaning up after dinner.

"I will be," Brian said, "As soon I pick the movie for us to watch tonight."

"Us?"

"Surely, you didn't think your stunt today was going to go completely unpunished. I think watching Marlon Brando with me might prove fitting."

"Marlon Brando?"

"Surely, you didn't think that you would get to chose the movie?"

"I guess not. I guess Marlon Brando does seem fitting," Justin said, snuggling against Brian.

"Thank you." Brian said quietly, tightening his arms around Justin. "For everything.'

Chapter 23 – Glimpses (Sidebar)

After the Meeting...(Day 23)

The air in the car from Kinnetik to their hotel was so thick that you could cut it with a knife, and the silence between the family members added an extra heaviness.

"Well, are either of you going to say anything?" Rudolpho asked, when they finally settled in their suite at the hotel.

"What's there to say?" Cristina commented as she slumped into a comfortable chair. "You did what you always do."

"Now, we have a collection and no advertising campaign. This little stunt of yours, father, is going to cost us a fortune," Maria insisted, beginning to pace so her father could see her agitation.

"All they had to do was create with me," Rudolpho tried to explain. "I would have admitted that the original campaigns were better. We could have signed the contract, and I would be on my way home to Milan. Instead I sit here trying to explain myself to my daughters."

"This is clearly your fault his time, father. With the other agencies, it didn't matter because we didn't like the campaigns. The other agencies truly didn't understand us, so we really DID think we could do better by trying to create a new campaign. We really thought we could do a better job. But this time was different. Kinnetik gave us precisely what we hoped for in a campaign right from the start. There was no reason for your antics. I tried to tell you that in the meeting, but you wouldn't listen." Maria recounted, letting her frustration with her father show through.

"That ad campaign would have been the buzz of Europe. Now we have to start all over again with yet another agency. We will never get the products to marketplace. Now everything is a mess!" Cristina added her frustration to that of her sister. "So tell me father, why did I and the design team waste all this creative time? We had other projects we wanted to pursue. But you insisted on this project with Eyeconics. Why did you do that? Just to bring us here to this point?"

"So what do you want me to do?" Rudolpho finally asked, conceding defeat against the tirade of his daughters.

"You...have...to...fix...this!" Maria insisted.

"Look, I'm as disappointed as you are. I was already starting to imagine our products in Kinnetik's hands. With all the extra press coverage, our sales' projections could easily be double our original forecasts," Rudolpho commented.

"Well that's not going to happen now. Is it?" Cristina said, with resignation as she stood up and walked out of the room.

"So what do you want me to do?" Rudolpho kept repeating in defeat.

"Make it up to Justin?" Maria demanded. "Really make it up to Justin."

"Justin, don't you mean Brian? Brian Kinney is CEO of Kinnetik, not Justin," Rudolpho reminded her.

"Yes, but it was Justin, who withdrew the campaigns. Brian only ended the meeting. He merely supported Justin's decision."

"I wonder why he did that? Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali are large companies. The collection would have been a major account for his agency. Why would he risk all that on the temperamental ravings of an artist?" Rudolpho wondered aloud.

"Kinnetik may be a small, boutique agency. But they handle some rather large accounts. Their survival doesn't hinge on getting our account. They probably only created the ad campaign as a favor to Eyeconics," Maria explained. "Besides, I'm not sure that Justin is temperamental. He sure handled you expertly enough during the meeting. When we dealt with the other agencies, they were so interested in the possibility of the Silvestri Holdings account that they kept falling all over themselves to try to make you happy. But Justin never waivered, he held to his position that creating another campaign would be a waste of time, and the outcome would be predictable. All you had to do was agree with him. Also he didn't attack you. Instead, he saved you from a lot of embarrassment. All he said was you needed to reconsider your position."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"You're going to have to figure out something. You're still going to have to deal to Eyeconics. If you think Cristina and I were difficult to deal on this, you can imagine what trying to talk with Susan Weaver is going to be like. It's going to be soooo much worst! Couple that with the fact that you have been difficult for her to deal with during this whole joint venture. I'm not sure that she is going to have any patience left. So I suggest you remember to turn on the charm in dealing with her tomorrow."

"I don't know. For Eyeconics there is no real issue. Susan and Brian have been dealing for some time...I could tell that by the banter between them. All Eyeconics has to do is ask nicely. If they want the campaign, Brian would probably let them have it. Our joint designs would sell under the Eyeconics name."

"Sure father, we would make our percentage on the deal, but we would be ruined in the industry. Our reputation would be ruined. There has already been a lot of publicity about our joint venture with Eyeconics. If they alone were to market our jointly created products, no one would ever work with us again. So father, I suggest that you to fix this!" Maria said emphatically to her father, before she also left the room to locate her sister.

Rudolpho stretched out on the sofa in the suite to think. Oh how he wished that he were anywhere except in Pittsburgh at this moment.

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Meanwhile...(Day 23)

Susan Weaver was sitting in her office at Eyeconics, trying to replay the events of the meeting in her mind. Kinnetik had, as always, fulfilled all its promises and created a campaign that exceeded her expectations.

Yet Eyeconics still didn't have the campaign they needed, because some artist was allowed to remove the campaigns from consideration.

Then she paused to reflect. That's not what happened. Justin Taylor merely told Rudolpho that he needed to reconsider his position. It was only when Rudolpho was rigid in his position that the campaigns were removed from consideration.

While Susan was sitting there pondering her options, her partner Kellie Mc Quaid entered and immediately made herself comfortable in a nearby chair.

"Kellie, what are you doing back?" Susan asked, upon seeing her partner.

"We got those licensing deals I went after. I saw no reason to prolong my visits to strange countries any longer than necessary. So here I am. I know Kinnetik had the presentation today. How did it go?" Kelly asked, showing her intense interest.

"Don't ask? Brian abruptly ended our meeting. Now he isn't taking our phone calls."

"That doesn't sound like Brian. What happened?"

"What do you know about Justin Taylor?"

"Justin Taylor? What does he have to do with this?"

"Brian brought him in on the art direct our joint campaign. I know he's an artist. The graphics that Kinnetik created for the ads were spectacular. They created a great name for the products, Collezione Fiero. What do you think?"

" I love the name? What about a slogan?"

"The Look That Says It All. He also came up with a second slogan: Hide the Fire In Your Eyes. You should see the campaigns Brian came up with to go with the slogans."

"Were they as edgy as always? Were they sexy?"

"Oh yeah! This was Brian. Of course, they were." Susan went on to relate the components of the ad with the woman rising out of the water, the four sunbathers, the fifth sunbather, the looks, and the racy ending."

Kellie was laughing, "Yes...that's pure Brian." Then her mood became more somber as she asked, "So why did you ask about Justin Taylor, and what did he have to do with this?"

"Did you know that the Silvestris and Justin Taylor know each other? I think they're old friends. They were speaking to each other in Italian and hugging each other. Cristina and Maria wouldn't stop holding on to him. Someone on the Belluss Occhiali design team told me that they heard that Rudolpho wanted Justin to marry Maria or Cristina several years ago. You should have seen the Silvestris with him...so unguarded...so agreeable...so at ease. Then Justin directly challenged Rudolpho in the meeting," Susan relayed quietly.

"What?" Kellie interrupted. "Where was Brian? Brian is very careful to always control his meetings."

"Not this time! When we came back after a wonderful lunch, Brian seemed to just sit back and let Justin take over the meeting. I don't know," Susan continued.

Kellie immediately started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Susan asked, trying to figure out why her partner was behaving so strangely.

"Do you know who Justin Taylor is?"

"Sure. He's an up and coming artist. I've seen his work in the lobby of Kinnetik. I've also seen a few of his paintings at The Bloom Gallery about a year ago. I've been reading about him being in New York. His recent show in Santa Barbara got quite a lot of press. It seems he adopted the unorthodox strategy that his paintings should be seen for the pure enjoyment of them. So he exhibited without the intent of selling any paintings. If you would read something else beside the financial pages, you would know these things. Over the last few weeks, every time I would casually drop in at Kinnetik, Cynthia kept telling me we were lucky to have him working on our campaign. Now I understand why she kept saying that. He is an amazing artist." Susan relayed. "But, why do you ask?"

"Is that all you know?" Kellie asked, implying there was so much more to the story. She leaned back in her chair and waited for her partner's reaction.

"What else is there to know?"

"Susan, Justin Taylor is the only person with enough balls to challenge Brian's opinion in a open meeting. He's blond haired, blue eyed, and looks like a kid. But if you ask him a question, he will speak his mind. This kid gave his opinion in a meeting that contradicted Brian's opinion back when he was an intern at Vanguard. Anyone else would have simply dodged the question or deferred to Brian or Gardner. Justin was asked, and he gave an honest answer. And, he lived to tell about it." Kellie said, with a smile as she thought back to that meeting a long time ago.

Then she continued, "Remember the Stockwell campaign a few years ago? There were rumors circulating that Brian Kinney and Justin Taylor were responsible for the campaign loss of the then Chief of Police. Lincoln Stiles sits on the board at PIFA, and he told me that Justin was expelled from PIFA because he refused to compromise and apologize to Stockwell. Justin is truly a man of principle. Then, the rumors go on to say, that Brian and Justin were also responsible for Stockwell's subsequent conviction. So, don't let the blond hair and blue eyes fool you. He may look like a kid. But he's a fearless force to be reckoned with."

"So that's who he is." Susan started to get the picture.

"Oh yeah, and Justin Taylor is also Brian Kinney's partner," Kellie continued.

"But, Kinnetik isn't a partnership."

"Brian Kinney and Justin Taylor are a couple. Didn't you notice his picture in Brian's office?"

"So that's why he was so involved in the meeting!"

"No, that's not why he got to present. Brian doesn't mix business with personal stuff. If Justin Taylor got to present, it was because he did quite of bit of the work. Believe me, Brian believes in only giving credit where credit is due. So if he was sharing the credit, believe me, the campaign would have been different without Justin's involvement...that much I know."

"You should see the website graphics he created to go with the new collection. You should see the ads that were created for the collection, the graphics were really different. The long shots are gone. They so focused only on the details of the products. This collection could be our biggest seller ever. Now that you're back, you can figure out how to get Brian to let us have the campaign."

"From what you've been telling me the campaign is wonderful. What's the problem?"

"I'm not sure exactly. Something happened between Justin and Rudolpho. They were speaking in Italian."

"Don't tell me Rudolpho pulled the 'let's create a new campaign from scratch' bullshit again?"

"Afraid so."

"So what happened?" Kellie asked with a sigh, knowing she didn't really want to hear the answer.

"I know that Brian was ready for this. Justin must have warned him, because you know Brian takes less than 2 hours to present a campaign. This time he told me to allocate the entire day to the meeting. So I know he was prepared for something to happen."

"Yeah."

"Then Justin stepped in. He said it would be a waste of time to create another campaign. He and Rudolpho went back and forth in Italian. Evidently Rudolpho wouldn't budge. Then, Justin calmly removed the campaigns from consideration and walked out of the meeting."

"Justin did?"

"Justin said that the two campaigns were no longer available for our consideration, and Brian immediately ended the meeting."

"And, that was it?"

"Yep. That was it."

"Don't worry. Everything is probably still salvageable. But we just have to handle this carefully. Let me talk to Brian. You deal with the Silvestris. We have to come up with a strategy to change Kinnetik's mind," Kellie suggested.

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The Next Morning ...(Day 24)

"So Rudolpho, what are YOU going to do about the campaign problem?" Susan asked impatiently as their meeting began.

"What do you mean?" Rudolpho innocently asked. "We love the campaign."

"Then why didn't you say so yesterday?" she demanded.

"I would have, but Justin didn't me a chance. He suggested I change my mind, but then he didn't give me chance to do just that."

"Well, you two are friends with Justin." Susan said, gesturing with her arms to Rudolpho and Maria. "Have you talked to him?'

"He hasn't returned our calls." Maria said quietly.

"But I do have a couple of ideas," Rudolpho added.

"By the way, where is Cristina?

"She mentioned something about going to the museum. I guess you can tell my daughters are not very pleased with me, right now."

"They and I share that lot in common." Susan commented sternly.

"Look Susan, I really want to apologize for this mess. I want you to know that you have my full cooperation to set things right."

"Well, that's a welcome change in attitude."

"I never meant to be difficult in the past. It's just that people being afraid of me has always worked to my advantage before."

"But how can that be? I saw you with Justin."

"Justin has always known how to handle Rudolpho," Maria added. "I think you saw that yesterday. We're all rather fond of him."

"So can't you get him to change his mind?"

"We're working on it. Just give us a little time."

"What about Brian? You have a long standing relationship with him," Rudolpho tried to remind Susan.

"Kellie is working on that angle. But Justin is really key to this deal, since he was the one that removed the campaigns from consideration."

"We're working on this." Maria acknowledged again.

"We need to work fast. Everything has been so delayed, and we don't want to waste anymore time," Susan emphasized again.

"I fully understand," Rudolph said quietly. "Plans are already in motion."

Chapter 24– A Waiting Game, Part 3

Wednesday Morning... (Day 24)

Brian walked into his offices and into a very heated discussion between Ted, Cynthia, and Cristina Silvestri. When Brian approached, all conversation stopped.

"Where is Justin?" Cristina demanded, as if realizing she had been dealing with assistants before, but now that Brian was here, she could get the answers she sought.

"He's not here. If you must know, he's probably in his studio." Brian said calmly, nodding to Ted and Cynthia that he would handle this. Brian turned to walk toward his own office. Cristina, of course, immediately followed him and made herself comfortable in his office.

"Brian, I want to see Justin. I just want to talk to him."

"Cristina, based on our previous meeting, I'm not sure you have anything to talk to Justin about." Brian gently pointed out.

"Oh, you mean the ad campaign?"

"What else?"

"I'm a designer, Brian. My team and I developed the products with Eyeconics. My job was done at that point. Personally, I loved both of the campaigns that you and Justin created. Everyone did, but my father can be difficult at times."

"It's good to hear that you liked the campaigns. Can I offer you coffee?" Brian asked. Cristina shook her head no. "So tell me again, why you are here?"

"I wanted to see Justin. Let's just say I'm fond of him. We have a lot in common. I was forced to lose touch with him before. I just want to make sure that doesn't happen again."

"Let it go, Cristina. That was a long time ago."

Cristina thought that Brian's remark was an odd comment. She started to get a sense of something but she couldn't make the pieces fit. Her mind kept searching. Then she asked, "What is the problem?"

Then she caught a look from Brian...it was probably only an instant, but Cristina was an artist, with an artist's eye for detail. Then she caught a glimpse of a photo behind Brian's desk. Suddenly all the pieces fell into place for her.

She simply smiled and said, "So that's it."

"Excuse me?" Brian asked, trying to figure out what she was driving at, with her change of tone.

Brian noticed the distinctive change in Cristina's demeanor and the fact that the person sitting across from him, now looked as if she knew the secret of the ages.

"Then, the rumors are true. You're gay?" Cristina said with a smile.

"That's common knowledge." Brian confirmed. "Not that I can figure out why, on earth, that would interest you."

"And for some reason you don't want me to see Justin," Cristina continued, reminding Brian of Melanie, making an argument in a case. Brian shuddered at the thought.

Brian was now intrigued with where Cristina was going with this. So he allowed her to continue without further interruption.

"Now I get it...you're jealous!"

"That's ridiculous!" Brian said in protest, knowing full well he doesn't do jealousy.

"No, it's true."

"Of course not," Brian continued to protest, although now that she mentioned it, his mind did flash back to the image of her and Maria practically draped over Justin. However, once again he remembered that Brian Kinney doesn't do jealousy.

Cristina laughed and said, "Oh, I don't blame you. Justin is quite special. He's definitely worth fighting for. I let the ball drop three years ago. I don't intend to make that mistake again."

"What exactly did you want with Justin, Cristina?" Brian asked, now in full protective mode.

Cristina sensed the change in tone and decided not to play games. "Everyone else is tied up in meetings. They're trying to figure out what approach to use to get you and Justin to change your minds and let us have the Collezione Fiero campaign."

"Now, why would you think that?" Brian asked with a smile.

"I don't think, Brian, I know." Cristina pointed out, returning his smile.

"So is that why you're here looking for Justin? Are you going to try to persuade Justin to change his mind?"

"No. I simply have a free day. I thought I could get Justin to show me the local art galleries or maybe the museum. Honest! Just two artists hanging out together," she said, then she smiled too sweetly. "I know how Justin likes to hang out in museums."

"And that's all?"

"That's all...and I want to try to persuade him to come to Milan."

"And why would you want that?"

"Relax Brian. We're simply friends with common interests. But make no mistake, he's a friend that I intend to keep."

Brian and Cristina stood there staring at each other. Brian realized he had just gotten a glimpse of the steel beneath the carefully crafted artist exterior. For some reason, a part of him couldn't wait for this whole Belluss Occhiali/Eyeconics deal to be over and for Cristina Silvestri to return to Milan.

Brian buzzed Cynthia and asked her to call Justin for Cristina to see if he was available to spend time with Cristina visiting museum and art galleries. Cynthia was forced to leave a message as her call rolled into voice mail. As Brian had suspected, Justin had his cell phone turned off when he was in the studio.

"Cristina, be sure I have all your numbers. We promise to have Justin call you as soon as he we hear from him."

"Thanks," Cristina said with some disappointment as she fished out a card and wrote something on the back.

"Please be sure that he calls," she once again emphasized.

She walked back into Brian's office. She simply stood at his desk and waited for him to look up. When he did, she looked him directly in the eye and smiled.

"Thanks so much for you help." She said sweetly.

"You're welcome." Brian tried to smile and then immediately returned to work.

Cristina turned to leave and then turned back once more. "And Brian, you realize this isn't over," she said and waited for Brian to look up again.

Before he could say anything, she was gone. Brian smiled.

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A few minutes later, Cynthia appeared. "I left all of Cristina's phone numbers on the voice mail to Justin's cell phone. I also sent him an email."

"Yeah, he's probably in the studio. Even when he's in New York, he usually doesn't answer his cell when he's painting," Brian said with a smile.

"Cristina is very demanding, isn't she? And, she really wants to see Justin," Cynthia pointed out.

"Yes, she does," Brian quietly acknowledged.

"The Silvestris are hard to deal with, but their fondness for Justin is unmistakable. You can just see it, even with the language barrier."

"Is this your feminine intuition or your overactive imagination?"

"Either way, you know I'm right."

"Of course," Brian finally conceded with a smile and once again returned to the project on this desk. Cynthia, however, wasn't leaving his office just yet.

"Brian, how are you doing after yesterday's meeting?" she asked with intense concern.

"I'm fabulous. Can't you tell?" he said sarcastically. "Seriously, I'm ok. Thanks for asking."

"And Justin?"

"Fine...why?"

"I talked to Ted this morning. He explained things to me. Now what are we supposed to do?"

"We go ahead with business as usual. I just have to be sure that the Silvestris don't interfere with Justin and his painting. I have done enough of that already."

"Why are the Silvestris trying to reach Justin?"

"If Cristina is to be believed, they think they need his cooperation in order to be allowed to have the campaign."

"Why Brian? Didn't they notice that you're CEO of this company?"

"I may own the company, but Justin was the one who pulled the campaigns away from everyone. So they must figure Justin and I have to agree on this."

"Is that true?"

"Justin was right. It would have been a waste of time to create any new campaigns. Once we started down that path, it would have turned into a slippery slope. Justin is very protective, but he knows how much I want this account. I think he will support whatever decision I make. But I would hate to be someone trying to change Justin's mind about anything. We both know how stubborn he can be. Still, as much as I want the account, I only want it under certain conditions."

"Such as?"

"The Silvestris go back to Italy and never try to contact Justin again," Brian said resolutely. Cynthia immediately burst out laughing.

"I saw the way daughters were draped over Justin. Don't they know he's gay?"

"According to Justin that doesn't seem to matter."

"I can understand that. You have to admit he is hot," Cynthia teased.

"Cynthia, don't you have work to do at you desk."

"I'm leaving." Cynthia said with a smile. "But you know I'm right."

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A Few Hours Later...(Day 24)

In a restaurant across town, two friends are having lunch. "All right Cristina, I agreed to meet you for lunch under the condition that we wouldn't talk about what happened yesterday," Justin insisted.

"I just wanted to make sure that our friendship was ok," Cristina insisted. "I know that you can separate business and personal stuff."

"It was simply a business decision, and we're not going to talk about it," Justin protested.

"I just wanted to hang out with you, and to try to persuade you to come to Milan."

"I like that idea. I can hardly wait for my career to go international. I hope to someday show my work in the galleries of Europe. But that's going to take awhile."

"I know it's going to happen. You're very talented."

"Thanks."

"But, just because you aren't having a show there doesn't mean you can't come to visit. I want to introduce you to some of my friends. I would be the envy of everyone. Of course, I would have to share you on your visit with Maria. You know how pushy she can be."

"You two are as bad as Molly and I, but Molly's just a teenager. I had hoped that things would change as we got older," Justin smirked. "But after watching you and Maria, I'm not so sure I can expect that anymore."

"I don't know how to tell you this...it never completely changes," Cristina confirmed with a laugh.

"Well, I guess we had better get going. I really am curious to see those new exhibits."

"Me too."

They spent a pleasant afternoon together, just two artists hanging out and viewing the exhibits.

Afterwards, Cristina headed back to her hotel, while Justin decided to stop in at Kinnetik.

"Hi Cynthia, is Brian available?" Justin asked upon entering Kinnetik.

"He's in on a conference call. Did you reach Cristina Silvestri?"

"Yeah, she and I had lunch, and then we went to see the new exhibit at the gallery. Don't worry, I stayed away from the topic of the campaign."

"I wasn't worried. You showed us yesterday that you could handle anything they might try to throw at you." Cynthia said with a laugh.

"I guess I should go. Tell Brian I'll see him at home."

"Why don't you wait a minute? He's been in there awhile. I think he is just about finished."

A few moments later, Brian walked out of his office and smiled upon seeing Justin.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"I got your message that you were having lunch with Cristina. What have you done now? Do you have anything you want to tell me? Are we going to have to get in the hot tub as soon as we get home?" Brian teased. Justin blushed slightly, and Brian smiled at the reaction.

"All that I know is that they want the campaign. But I wouldn't discuss it," Justin explained.

"You know they all think that you're the key to getting me to change my mind. So I wouldn't be surprised if they all keep leaving messages for you." Brian warned.

"You once said: Tell them that they can't have something and it just makes them want it more," Justin said, reminding Brian of his own words from a year ago.

"Don't tell me you remember that?" Brian mused.

"Why wouldn't I remember? It was true when you opened Babylon. It appears to be true for ad campaigns as well."

"So it does," Brian reflected. "Did Cristina talk to you about Milan?"

"Yeah. I explained that I would like to visit there someday."

"And you will. So how is the painting going?"

"Pretty well. I thought I would spend time in the studio tonight. I have finishing touches to add to two paintings. I know that you have a lot of work to do. By the way, I have to stop off to see Michael though before I head back home?"

"Don't tell me it's time again for another issue of Rage?"

"You know Michael! His mind is always working on some storyline or other. He has a rather active imagination. Well, I better get going."

"See you at home," Brian said, emphasizing the remark with a gentle kiss.

"Oh, my agent called this morning. It seems that Catherine set up a bunch of appointments so it looks like I'm going to have to go to New York next week."

"For how long?"

"From what she said, just a few days...maybe a week. She kept saying we don't want people to forget my name, while I'm painting away here in Pittsburgh."

"Well, that makes sense," Brian reluctantly agreed, trying to smile. "She doesn't know yet that you're unforgettable? I'm going to have to call her."

"Brian!" Once again, Justin blushed at the remark. "I'll see you at home."

"Later."

"Later."

Once Justin left his office. Brian sat back at his desk and tried to figure out how he was going to get through a week with Justin back in New York.

Brian's thoughts once again returned to the letter:

We choose what we'll do with the time that has been given to us.

Can't we simply choose to find some way to share a love without sacrificing a life? Can't we find some compromise? Can't we find some way to be together?

'It's only time' isn't good enough, Brian.

This is the moment for which our Talisman of Time was forged. Now is the time!

Chapter 25 – Random Talks

A Little Later...(Day 24)

Justin arrived at Red Cape Comics to find that the door was unlocked, but Michael was nowhere in sight.

"Michael!" Justin called out as he entered store.

Michael's head suddenly popped up from behind the counter at the mention of his name.

"Well boy wonder, what brings you into town? How did you escape the bat chamber?" Michael teased.

"I had to come into town anyway, so I thought I would drop by and see you. I got your message. What's up?"

"Brent Keller called. He just offered me a huge amount of money for my painting."

"Oh, he must have finally found my website and found out you're the owner of Superheroes. So are you selling it?"

"No way! I just wanted to let you to know that he was trying...to get me...to sell." Michael grinned. "But, now that you're finally here, let me show you where Hunter hung my painting for me," Michael said with pride, leading the way for Justin to follow.

Justin followed Michael into his office. The painting was featured prominently on the wall opposite Michael's desk. The painting actually looked like it belonged there.

"Have you gotten used to the painting without JT being in it?" Justin asked hesitantly, hoping not to open any old wounds.

"I still think JT should be in the painting with Rage. But, now that you're back in town, I don't mind him not being in the painting as much," Michael said, surprising Justin with a slight hug. "You still have to promise me that when I open another comic book store, that you will paint the Superheroes on the wall. That will be so great!" Michael gushed.

"So when are you opening that next store?"

"Ben and I are beginning to talk about it. It's just an idea...so I guess it's still too soon to really mention too much about it."

"You know when I went to the Cincinnati Art Gallery last week, the gallery director asked me about Rage. It seems his son is a big fan."

"Really! All the way in Cincinnati!"

"The gallery even asked me to stay over and talk to some high school kids about art. I think they asked because they know that I draw Rage."

"That and you still look like a kid so they could relate to you," Michael said continuing to tease Justin and mussing up his hair in the process.

"Hey, watch it!" Justin protested.

"Just kidding."

"So how is the story coming for the next issue?"

"Now that you're back, can we get together and brainstorm. It'll be like old times."

"So you want to do this at Babylon? On drugs?"

"No, Brian would kill me. I was hoping that maybe you would want to hang out at Babylon this weekend though? It's been awhile since we've all been there together."

"We'll have to see," Justin said patiently. "So was there anything else you wanted?"

"No, that was it."

"Look Michael. The painting is yours. If you want to sell it, it will be ok with me."

"That's just it. I'm not interested in selling it, but it feels really good to be asked." Michael said, smiling a very big grin.

"I see." Justin acknowledged with a shake of his head. "Well, I'm going to try to go back home before the traffic gets too heavy. But first, I'm going to pick up some lemon bars to take home."

"So they don't have lemon bars in the bat chamber where Brian has you imprisoned?" Michael teased.

"I'm afraid I haven't found them yet. So I still have to go to the Diner," Justin admitted with a laugh.

"Is the painting going well?" Michael inquired, trying to show true interest. Justin was mildly surprised by the question.

"Pretty well. I like having the studio at the house. I can usually paint without too many interruptions. So I'm getting a lot done. However, every since I got back, I've been unusually busy. But I'm not worried... eventually, things will settle down."

Justin turned to leave. "Well, I better get going," Justin said, finally waving goodbye and leaving the store.

Justin managed to get into and out of the Diner without incident since Debbie was off and Kiki was pretty tied up. Justin simply ordered his six lemon squares to go and was quickly on his way back to Bri-tin.

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Later that evening ...(Day 24)

Brian arrived home after work, and he and Justin ended up in the one of the hot tubs at Bri-tin. "Ok, so explain to me again why we're in the hot tub?" Justin asked, as he sank into the water.

Justin was carefully searching his memory to figure out what he could have possibly done this time to warrant a trip to the hot tub.

"I need to talk to you and I wanted to make sure you don't go anywhere?" Brian explained, helping Justin to spoon in front of him.

"Well, you know we have to keep it short?" Justin reminded him, figuring that reminder should handle things easily enough...whatever it was that he had done.

"Oh yes, the wrinkling of the skin." Brian said with a laugh.

"Just as long as you remember. Now, what's on your mind?"

"I've scheduled a meeting Friday morning at 10AM with Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali. I would really like if you were there."

"I think we can arrange that." Justin said, leaning into Brian. "Are you ok with my going back to New York?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"That wasn't the question."

"I know." Brian said as he started to sulk.

"I don't know why you're acting like this. You go away on business trips for weeks at a time. What's the difference?"

"There's no logic to it, Justin. Stop trying to find some. Look, I know we're not breaking up or anything. I know everything is ok with us. I really don't have any doubts."

"Then, what is it?"

"Nothing," is all that Brian will say. He can't bring himself to say to Justin that he is simply going to miss him while he's gone. Brian will admit it to himself...he's just having some problems admitting this to Justin right now.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Look, it's only a week. I'll be back before you know it," Justin said, fortunately still able to interpret these moments of Kinney-speak.

"I doubt that. I miss you already. But when you return, you and I have to sit down and have a real talk about your letter."

"No problem."

"I want you to be completely honest with me. I don't want you to hold anything back."

"Deal. But, of course, the same goes for you too."

"Deal. But, promise me I'm not going to have to hire private detectives to gather data on all the things you haven't told be about."

"There shouldn't be anything else...except maybe Michael."

"What about Michael?"

"It seems Brent Keller offered him a large amount of money for his painting, but he doesn't want to sell it."

"Well, you warned him about that."

"Yeah. And he's thinking of opening another comic book store."

"Wow! I hadn't heard about that."

"Well, he sold his first edition of Captain Astro to open this one. I figure he will sell the painting to open the next one."

"Not necessarily. He and Ben are together, and the comic book store has been doing pretty well. So, I wouldn't expect the painting to disappear anytime soon. Especially since Mikey loves the painting, and Zephyr and Rage are in it."

"I know but JT isn't. So when I start traveling back and forth to New York on a regular basis, I just expect Michael to become Michael again."

"He'll be ok." Brian added. After a pause he asked, "Do you think you will have to do a lot of traveling back and forth to New York on a regular basis?"

"I'm still an artist, Brian. I still need to travel for shows, but I don't have to live and paint there, all the time. Catherine Mahan is a well respected agent," Justin insisted. "I would definitely rather just travel back and forth when I need to, without having to live in New York all the time."

"I see," Brian said, making note of all that Justin was saying. "So do you like living in New York?" he continued cautiously.

"I love New York. It's an exciting city. I realize that I'm growing as an artist in ways I couldn't have done if I had just stayed here. But, Brian I don't want to live there anymore. I want to live here with you. I want to travel there when I have to, but live here."

"Would you feel that way if I wasn't in the picture?"

"Oh no you don't! Oh no you don't! You asked that question a year ago, and the next thing I knew I was packed and on my way to New York. Not this time, Brian!"

"Justin, what are you talking about?"

"A year ago, you asked me exactly the same question!

Beginning of Flashback

"Would you feel that way if I wasn't in the picture?" Brian asked.

"How do you expect me to give you a rational explanation when the circumstances you've presented are completely suppositional and, as such, have no basis in reality?"

End of Flashback

"So?"

"And, then you packed me off to New York!" Justin exclaimed.

"I did no such thing!" Brian protested. "New York was a mutual decision. You know that."

"Just because we didn't want the other to sacrifice, who they were as a person for us to be together. We made the decision a year ago. I guess the decision was probably the right one at the time, but the way we chose to do it probably showed really limited vision on both our parts. That's why I sent you the letter and the painting. We are very creative people, Brian. We've always been able to come up with a set of rules that worked for us and no one else. Yet a year ago, I think maybe we didn't try hard enough to find a workable solution. There has to be another a solution for us, and we have to figure it out."

"And how are we supposed to do that?" Brian asked solemnly.

"I don' know," Justin quietly responded, leaning again more into Brian for support. "But we have to find it."

They both sat there for a moment lost in each other, remembering the words from the letter:

Can't we simply choose to find some way to share a love without sacrificing a life? Can't we find some compromise? Can't we find some way to be together?

They both knew they had much to talk about. But this wasn't the right time, because right now, neither of them had answers. After a moment, their conversation resumed.

"By the way, Michael wants us all to go to Babylon this weekend," Justin reported.

"I could get into dancing with you again. But what about your painting."

"I'm ok. Plus I expect to get a little bit of painting done while I'm in New York."

"You mean in between the parties that your agent is planning to have you going to," Brian teased.

"More like talking to gallery owners about my work. No parties are scheduled that I'm aware of. Besides if there turns out to be parties, you'll just have to fly in to join me," Justin said emphatically.

"Do you mean that? You would really want me to be there?" Brian asked quietly in total surprise by Justin's declaration.

"Yes. We're in this together," Justin confirmed, recognizing the implied Kinney-speak, and reaching to interlock fingers with Brian under the water.

Brian broke out in this wide smile as he leaned down to gently kiss Justin, who leaned up to meet his kiss with passion.

They both knew that somehow they were going to be ok.

'It's only time' isn't good enough, Brian.

This is the moment for which our Talisman of Time was forged. Now is the time!

Chapter 26 – The Plot Thickens

Late Evening ... (Day 24)

"Where have you been?" Rudolpho demanded.

"How could you miss the meeting with Eyeconics?" Maria demanded to know.

The barrage of questions continued as Cristina entered the hotel suite. She casually ignored them all and made her way directly to her room. Her father may have accepted her abrupt exit, but Maria was another story. Maria immediately trailed along behind her sister continuing with her barrage of questions.

"What's going on with you?" Maria asked, gently touching her sister's arm to slow down Cristina's movements. "Look, I know you love art, but it's not like you to simply miss a meeting to go to a museum? Father may think this is normal behavior, but I know you better than that. You worked too hard on the designs for the collection to just walk away. So tell me what you were up to?"

Cristina paused to look at her sister. Then, she gently disengaged from the contact and continued towards her room, with Maria following close behind.

"As I said in my message, I was going to see the new exhibit at the gallery." Cristina proclaimed, flopping down on the bed.

"And did you?" Maria asked, towering over her sister.

"Yes. It was a great exhibit. End of story," Cristina said, making herself more comfortable on the bed.

"Ok. I know you. I know that you're up to something. Now tell me what you've really been up to? Now! And I want the truth."

"If I tell you will you go away and leave me alone?"

"That depends on what you tell me," Maria said, making herself comfortable on the bed facing her sister.

"You know Justin was so right," Cristina grumbled, shifting in her position to become more comfortable and trying to make room for Maria. "Sisters really are a pain. I'm going to talk to father about the fact that I maybe I should have been an only child."

"That's going to be a pretty difficult subject to bring up, since you're the youngest." Maria asserted with a laugh. "Since I'm obviously not going anywhere, will you stop stalling and tell me what you've been up to."

Cristina groaned loudly in defeat. "All right! I went Kinnetik this morning. I demanded to see Justin. I finally talked to Brian."

"You talked to Brian? How did it go?"

"He finally got a message to Justin for me, and Justin and I went to the gallery together this afternoon."

"Is Justin upset with us?"

"No, we had a good time together. He even promised to visit us in Milan."

"That will be fun."

"I also found out something rather interesting."

"Yeah"

"Remember when you asked Justin if there was someone special?"

"Yeah."

"Remember that he said yes?"

"Yeah."

"That someone special is Brian Kinney."

"Susan and Kellie hinted at the same thing during our meeting. If that's true, then father had better come up with something really special to make up for his behavior in the meeting. He has to do something really special for Justin to try to make this up to him."

"Has father said anything?"

"Only that he was already working on something?"

"Has he said what it is?"

"Not a word."

In the middle of this discussion, there was a knock on the door. Maria got up and opened the door only to come face to face with the casually dressed image of her father.

"I realize that it's asking a lot, but do you suppose that I might have the company of both my daughters for dinner?" Rudolpho humbly asked. "I promise to be on my best behavior."

Both Cristina and Maria both thought about his proposition for a moment. Then they both nodded their acceptance. Rudolpho smiled.

They entered the main area of the suite to find out that Rudolpho had already ordered dinner and had remembered to include all their favorites.

"All right father, what's going on?" Maria asked.

"I'm trying to make peace. You know how I hate family discord." Rudolpho tried to sound sad and totally defeated.

Maria and Cristina looked at each other, and then they both agreed to at least talk to their father.

"How was your day?" Rudolpho asked Cristina without any hint of malice. "How was the museum?"

"I went to see the new exhibit with Justin, and we had a good time," Cristina answered hesitantly, suspiciously waiting to see what came next.

"You saw Justin? Did he say anything about the campaign?" Rudolpho tried to ask casually.

"No, he wouldn't even discuss it. But I did invite him to visit with Maria and me in Milan. He said that he hoped someday to exhibit in Milan...when his career was more established. I tried to convince him to visit us anyway." Cristina casually responded.

"So he is interested in exhibiting in Milan. That works so perfectly with my plan," Rudolpho quietly uttered.

"What are you up to father?" Cristina asked firmly.

"I know that you have some kind of plan in the works. Tell us what it is!" Maria demanded.

"I have to make it up to Justin for my behavior in the meeting and let him know that I appreciate the kind manner that he treated me. And you are all wanting me apologize to him. This is my chance. I have to apologize before we can ask him to reconsider about the campaign. I have to make everything right with Justin. I'm going to do that," Rudolpho professed. "Now will you two enjoy your dinner before it gets cold?"

"Father, whatever you're planning, please be very careful. I saw Brian today, and he is super-protective where Justin is concerned. So don't do anything to make matters worse," Cristina cautioned him. "Please be very careful."

"You two have absolutely no faith in me, do you? That's not what a father wants to hear."

"Father, after your behavior throughout this entire campaign, is it any wonder?" Maria confirmed. "Experience is a bitter teacher."

"I guess I have truly behaved badly. I'm going to have to seriously rethink how I operate. Your mother has been upset with me as well. So I guess it really is time for a change."

"Mother? What does mother have to do with this? Mother doesn't usually get involved. She usually leaves the running of the business to you," Cristina mentioned.

"That's true... except when it involves Belluss Occhiali. Remember it's still her baby. So she helped me devise the plan to apologize to Justin. Trust me, it's a good plan, if I do say so myself. Your mother is a genius."

"Father, Maria and I would feel so much better if we knew exactly what you were up to. So I suggest you discuss your plans with us and let us give you our opinions," Cristina demanded, hoping her father would see reason.

"Father," Maria joined in, "I think Cristina is right. Tell us what you planned!"

Rudolpho let out a sigh. Before he could respond to the demands of his daughters, the telephone in the suite rang. Rudolpho answered the phone immediately, as if he was expecting the call.

Maria and Cristina watched their father as he talked on the phone. They were only able to hear his side of the conversation.

"So you're here at last and settled in your suite," Rudolpho said.

There was a pause.

"Perfect! You know what to do?" he continued.

Another pause...

"You'll keep me posted on what happens?" he continued again.

Another pause...

"Great! Now, get a good night's sleep, and I'll see you tomorrow," he finally said and hung up the phone.

Rudolpho turned back to his daughters and smiled. "Everything is ready!"

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The Next Morning at Kinnetik...(Day 25)

Justin's paintings, in the lobby of Kinnetik, were being carefully scrutinized by a tall, dark handsome stranger, who was impeccably dressed in a well-tailored designer suit. He was slowly and carefully moving from painting to painting, paying close attention to the detail in each one.

Ted quietly observed the stranger for a while. The stranger easily looked as if he should be meeting with Brian, but Ted didn't recognize him. Thinking he might be a new client, Ted approached him and offered his assistance.

"May I help you?" Ted asked and then waited for the stranger to shift his attention away from the paintings.

"I probably should have called first, I'm looking for Justin Taylor," the stranger announced. When the stranger spoke, Ted immediately recognized the Italian accent.

"I'm sorry, but Justin's not here. Would you like to leave a message?"

The stranger pulled out his card and handed it to Ted. "Please see that he gets this, and please have him give me a call. My phone number at the hotel is on the back of the card."

And with that, the stranger turned to leave. Ted took one look at the card and gasped.

"Excuse me, Signor Marani. Please wait one moment before you leave." Ted insisted, motioning for the stranger to take a seat.

Signor Marani returned to take the offered seat and proceeded to make himself comfortable. Ted offered him coffee, but he shook his head no.

Ted immediately walked back to Cynthia's desk. "I need to see Brian immediately!" Ted insisted. "This is really important!"

"Convince me, Ted. You know how busy Brian is. Can't this wait until later?" Cynthia asked.

"I'm afraid not," Ted said, handing her the business card. Cynthia looked at the business card and then looked back at Ted.

Cynthia immediately picked up the phone and announced to Brian that Ted needed to see him.

Ted swiftly entered Brian's office.

"All right Theodore, what's so important," Brian demanded to know. "Can't you see I'm busy here? You know we're against a deadline."

Ted simply handed him the business card and said, "He is in the lobby right now. He came to see Justin."

"Justin's not here," Brian said calmly, stating the obvious.

"I know that! But I thought you might like to talk to him. After all he appears to have traveled a long way."

Brian thought for a moment. Then agreed that Signor Marani should be shown back to his office and introduced to Brian. Brian was definitely curious.

"Mr. Kinney, this is indeed an honor. I have heard a great deal about you. Thank you for seeing me," the stranger said upon entering Brian's office.

"Signor Marani, when the direttore di Pinacoteca Ambrosiana appears in my office, it is I, who am honored. It's a pleasure to meet you," Brian said, standing up and shaking hands with his visitor. "How can I help you?"

"As I explained to your associate, I am here looking for Justin Taylor."

"I'm his partner, what can I do for you?"

"First of all let me assure you, I mean him no harm," Signor Marani asserted with a smile.

"Well, that's always good to know." Brian said with a smile.

"I should also tell you that Rudolpho Silvestri and I are old friends." Signor Marani paused for a moment to let that statement sink in. Then he continued again. "And, in my capacity as an old friend, I am here to extend Signor Silvestri's apology to Justin Taylor for his behavior at a recent meeting. I am supposed to act as an intermediary and beg Justin Taylor's forgiveness. Then I am to return to Signor Silvestri with Mr. Taylor's response, if there is any."

"Oh really?" Brian commented with surprise.

"I gather from the expression on your face that you know a great deal more about this situation then I do. I have known Rudolpho for a long time so I can only imagine what happened. Let's just say that, over the course of our long friendship, I have occasionally had to fulfill my role as intermediary. But it's rare that I am required to fly half way around the world to so. Therefore, I can only assume that whatever he did must have been pretty serious for me to be dispatched as an intermediary in this situation."

"Let's just say he may be pretty desperate at this point," Brian said with a laugh.

"In addition, I was instructed to critique the paintings of one Justin Taylor, which I have done. He is a very talented artist."

"I will be glad to pass that information along to Justin, as well," Brian remarked. "Justin loves to receive complements about his art."

"Having seen the paintings, I would like to ask him to make a submission of his work to the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan. I would like to ask him to consider participating in our emerging artist exhibit, which will be held there this summer."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Is it necessary to repeat what I just said? Did I not make myself understood?"

"Well, Signor Silvestri is resourceful, I will give him credit for that."

"Rudolpho can merely bring a talented artist to my attention, all submissions are judged by an independent artistic panel. All submissions are judged solely on their artistic merit ...of this I can assure you. But, I will tell you from what I have seen from both his website and the paintings in your lobby, the panel would be most interested to receive Mr. Taylor's submission."

"I don't know what to say," Brian admitted "That's quite a lot to take in. Signor Silvestri must be extremely penitent to gone to such extreme measures to obtain forgiveness."

"You realize that we Italians tend go overboard from time to time, but that, in no way, diminishes the sincerity of our remorse," Signor Marani said with all seriousness.

"Oh, I fully understand."

"Thank you for your time and for seeing me, Mr. Kinney. Hopefully, you will have Mr. Taylor contact me at his earliest convenience. I would like to fulfill my duties as intermediary as quickly as possible and return to my gallery in Milan. Although I must say, I am most curious to meet the artist himself. He must truly be a most interesting man." Signor Marani said with a smile, extending his hand to Brian.

"That he is, Signor Marani. Just wait until you meet him," Brian said, returning the handshake. Brian walked over to escort his visitor to the door. "It has indeed been a pleasure to meet you, and I will be sure to have Justin give you a call."

And with that Signor Marani left the office.

Brian sat at his desk and smiled at the turn of events. The day was turning out to be most interesting.

While Brian was trying to figure out how to present all this to Justin, Cynthia and Ted barged into his office, looking for answers.

"I'm afraid you two are going to have to get your answers, on this one, directly from Justin," Brian said with a smile, before they could begin to pose questions.

"But Brian, surely you can tell us something." Cynthia asked.

"Afraid not. However Cynthia, I'll need you make a reservation at Popagano's for tonight."

Cynthia nodded that she would take care of this and returned to her desk to make the arrangements. The disappointment was evident on her face as she left the office.

Ted, on the other hand, would not be so easily dispatched.

"Theodore?" Brian said, realizing that he still had one guest in his office.

"Brian, why would the director of one of Milan's most prestigious galleries be looking for Justin? Why would he be looking for Justin here? Doesn't Justin have an agent in New York?"

Brian merely stared at Ted without saying a word.

"He was examining Justin's paintings like he was making an appraisal. Brian exactly what is going on?" Ted continued, hoping that eventually Brian would acquiesce and say something.

Brian simply continued to stare at Ted.

"You're not going to answer, are you?" Ted finally said in frustration.

"I think the answer to that should be obvious," Brian responded.

Ted let out a sigh of frustration, finally accepting that he would receive no information from Brian. And so, Ted conceded defeat and left the office.

Brian smiled as he reached for his cellphone to call Justin to invite him to come into town for dinner.

Chapter 27 – The Intermediary

Later that Afternoon...(Day 26)

"Hi Cynthia," Justin said, upon arriving at Kinnetik.

"Justin! Go right in," Cynthia responded. "He's been waiting for you."

"Hey."

"Hey."

Brian immediately came out from behind his desk and swept Justin into his arms. He kissed Justin, at first, ever so gently. Then Brian allowed the kiss to deepen and become passionate. Justin completely yielded to the kiss. When the need for air finally forced them to break apart, Brian was the first to speak.

"I missed you," Brian whispered.

"I missed you too," Justin responded. "Does this mean I should lock the door?"

"Nothing would please me more, unfortunately there really isn't time. Why don't you sit down? I need to talk to you about something."

"Brian, what's going on?" Justin asked with hesitation.

"You had a visitor this morning," Brian said, handing Justin the business card.

Justin didn't immediately look at the business card. "Who would visit me here?"

"Look for yourself and see!"

Justin looked carefully at the business card with ever widening eyes.

"Brian. There must be some mistake."

"I'm afraid not. Ted found him in the lobby closely examining your paintings."

"Wow! That's amazing! What did he want?"

"He wanted to talk to you. Brace yourself! He is Signor Silvestri's intermediary. It seems they're old friends."

"What do you mean?"

"It seems Signor Silvestri brought his friend, the Director of Ambrosiana Art Galley of Milan, to the US to apologize to one Justin Taylor for his behavior at the recent meeting."

"Brian, a simple a apology was really all that was necessary. Besides, as we both know, I'm really quite powerless in this matter. The ultimate decision is now, and always has been, yours."

"I'm not so sure about how powerless you are. You still hold the rights to your artwork, after all."

"Well yes, there is that."

"So now that some time has passed, how do you feel about the campaign?"

"My reservations are still the same. I still feel that creating a new campaign would be a waste of time. I think I did the right thing to remove the campaign from consideration. Of course, now that everyone has had time to reconsider, I don't know. But I do know that the Silvestris are going to be a handful to deal with."

"I can see that," Brian said with a laugh. "But with you by my side, I think I'm up to the challenge. Also, at the moment they are remorseful, so that should keep them in check for a little while."

"But, I know how much you want the account. So if you can reach the agreement you want with both Belluss Occhiali and Eyeconics, I see no problem signing off on the deal."

"That is so good to know," Brian smirked.

"I can't believe that Signor Silvestri is using an intermediary to make his apology."

"Well, he's old world enough to try arrange a marriage between you and one of his daughters. So when you think about it, this is probably something he might do. I'm sure if a duel had been called for, he would have used Signor Marani as a second," Brian said with a laugh.

"You are probably right."

"So are we going to move to Milan to manage this account."

"I don't know yet. But you may be going to Milan before me."

"Huh?"

"The second thing that Signor Marani wanted to discuss, was the possibility that Mr. Justin Taylor might want to make a submission of his work for consideration by the artistic panel of his gallery. It seems that there may be some interest in having the artiste participate in the upcoming emerging artists exhibit to be held at Pinacoteca Ambrosiana this summer."

"You're kidding?"

"No. I'm serious. But, I'll let Signor Marani tell you about these things himself."

"I don't know what to say. Signor Silvestri has really outdone himself this time."

"Yes, I would say so."

"What should I do?" Justin asked. "This is going to look like a bribe."

"That's why I wanted to mention everything to you before you saw Signor Marani. I didn't want you to go into drama princess mode in the middle of the conversation with him."

"Brian!"

"I talked with Signor Marani earlier. The visit and his acting as intermediary was clearly a blatant attempt to impress you and to secure your forgiveness."

"After all, who could say no to such a prestigious intermediary."

"Precisely. But Justin the part about your possible participation in the emerging artist exhibit this summer is something else."

"How so?"

"When I talked to Signor Marani this morning, he pointed out that Signor Silvestri merely brought your talent to his attention. He could have simply looked at your painting, maybe made a comment that you are very talented, and said nothing else."

"So what are you saying?"

It was your talent as an artist, as reflected in your paintings and on your website, that prompted Signor Marani to give you a chance to compete for a place in the emerging artist exhibit. All he's offering you is a chance to submit your work to the artistic panel of the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana for their consideration. Your work, as always would be judged simply on its artistic merit. If I didn't believe that Signor Marani was sincere, there is no way that I would give him a chance to talk to you."

"I see your point."

Brian reached out and pulled Justin into his arms. "You realize that no matter how much I may want this account, I would never let anyone do anything to jeopardize your career in the process."

Justin leaned into Brian's arms, "So you really think I should talk with him then?"

"Absolutely. Then afterwards, I'll take you to dinner at Popagano's to celebrate."

"Popagano's?"

"Well, I can't let the my client out do me. I thought if Signor Silvestri could fly his intermediary in from Milan, I could at least take you to Popagano's before I fuck your brains out."

"Ever the romantic!" Justin said, leaning up give Brian a gentle kiss.

"After all, I need you senseless enough to sign off on the deal."

"Brian!"

There was a gentle knock on the door. Brian and Justin separated as Cynthia entered the office with a knowing smile. "Brian, there is a Pietro Marani here to see Justin."

"Show him in Cynthia."

"Signor Marani, it's good to see you again," Brian said, extending his hand in greeting.

Signor Marani firmly shook Brian's hand. "It's good to see you too. I was so pleased to receive your call. And this must be Justin Taylor."

"Signor Marani, it is an honor to meet you." Justin said

"I must say that I have been very interested in meeting you as well," Signor Marani said, while shaking Justin 's hand.

"Well, why don't you use my office, I'm going to go torture Theodore while you have your meeting." Brian said, grabbing a stack of papers from his desk.

Justin gently touched Brian's arm and said quietly, "I'd like you to stay."

Brian turned toward Signor Marani, who smiled and nodded his acceptance of the idea.

"Ok, but I'm going to sit quietly over here," Brian teased, pointing to a far corner.

"Please have a seat," Justin said, motioning Signor Marani toward the couch, while Justin settled into one of comfortable chair.

"I guess Mr. Kinney told you why I was here," Signor Marani began. "Rudolpho Silvestri and I have been friends since childhood. So as one of his oldest friends, I have been pressed into service as his intermediary. I am here to extend to you his sincerest apology for his behavior at a recent meeting. Rudolpho acknowledges that he should have listened to your wise guidance. He is extraordinarily sorry for being the stubborn, overbearing person he became during the meeting. He is also sorry for the angry outburst. Rudolpho wanted me to tell you that whereas in the past that behavior has worked in his favor, he realizes, that is no longer the case. You have shown him the error of his ways. So if you would accept his apology, Rudolpho Silvestri promises to endeavor to become a better man."

"Wow, that's a very impressive apology. That is far more that was necessary. It's clearly far more than anything I expected," Justin said with a smile.

"Well, this should give you some idea of how sorry he is." Signor Marani added with a smile.

"I can see that he must be truly contrite. I guess in view of your efforts, I have no choice but to humbly accept the apology. I can't believe that he had you come all the way from Milan just to deliver that message."

"Mr. Taylor..."

"Please call me Justin."

"Justin, It's true that Rudolpho wanted me to deliver his apology. But that's not the only reason why I'm here. Rudolpho also wanted to make sure that I saw your paintings, so that I would become aware of your talent."

"I don't understand."

"Please don't be offended. Milan is a long way from the US. Often artistic talent goes undiscovered. With a talent such as yours, that was not going to be the case for much longer anyway. Even in Milan, we read Art Forum. And, even in Milan we hear about eccentric artists, who exhibit their work for the pure joy of having it seen. Yes, your decision not to sell your paintings at the Santa Barbara exhibit hit the worldwide press. So I was definitely curious to meet you."

"I don't know what to say. I see myself as simple a struggling artist living in New York trying to get my work seen in small galleries."

"Judging by what I have seen of your work, you're going to have quite a future in the art world. I just had no idea you were so young."

"Ah yes...well yes...there is that." Justin said with a smile.

"Every summer, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana holds a showcase of emerging artists. I would like to offer you the opportunity to submit an entry to be considered for that showcase. A separate artistic panel judges all entries, so your work would be evaluated solely on its artistic merit. I am here merely to give you the opportunity to apply for consideration."

"I can't believe it. I had always hoped to someday show my work in the galleries of the Milan, but I never expected the opportunity to come so early in my career."

"The fact that it is coming now is truly a tribute to your talent. I saw your website, and I must say I was impressed with the variations of styles and techniques that I see displayed there. Your art has truly matured over the years. And, I love to see an artist that is willing to take risks."

"Thank you."

"I can't speak for the artistic panel, but personally, I think you're very talented. The paintings in the lobby are exquisite. I know that they were done several years ago. But the work displayed on your website, lets me know that you didn't stop growing as an artist. I'm very glad that I had a chance to act as an intermediary for Rudolpho Silvestri, and I'm very glad that I had the chance to meet you."

"It has been an honor to meet you, Signor Marani."

"So now that my duties as an intermediary are complete, let me return to my little gallery."

"Signor Marani, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana will never meet the criteria of a 'little gallery', but I do understand your desire to return to it," Justin said with a smile. "It has always been a dream of mine to visit your gallery ever since we studied about it in school. I understand your collections of the masters is amazing."

"Well something tells me that you'll be seeing my 'little gallery' very soon, so I suggest you get used to calling me Pietro."

"But I couldn't," Justin tried to protest.

"But I insist!"

"Very well, Pietro, I look forward to seeing you soon."

"So I will leave you now, and I have to report back to Rudolpho about our meeting."

"I will call Signor Silvestri directly, so you won't have to carry back my reply."

"Very well. Thank you for seeing me Justin. Mr. Kinney, it was good to see you again. I have the feeling that we will probably meet again very soon. Goodbye, Justin. You have my card. Please feel free to contact me."

Brian and Justin continued to casually chat with Signor Marani as they walked him to the door. Eventually they said their goodbyes to Signor Marani, and Brian and Justin returned to Brian office.

"I can't believe what just happened." Justin said with surprise.

"I can," Brian said confidently.

"Well, I guess I should call Signor Silvestri and let him know I accept his apology. I also should thank him for the introduction to Pietro."

"Go ahead and call him. You can use the office. I'm going down to terrorize Theodore, but this shouldn't take long. I'll be back shortly. Then we can leave for dinner."

When Brian left the office, Justin called Signor Silvestri at his hotel suite.

"Signor Silvestri, Signor Marani was just here. I wanted to call you personally to let you know that all is forgiven."

"Thank you," Rudolpho said with a smile. "I am truly sorry for my behavior."

"And Signor Silvestri, I would also like to thank you for mentioning my art to Signor Marani. That was a wonderful thing you did for me."

"Nonsense, you are like family. Maria and Cristina are as fond of you as am I. I'm glad that you have finally forgiven me. Of course, I would love to have you for a son in law, but I understand that Brian will never allow that to happen. I'm trying to accept that, and I do genuinely like Brian. So no matter what happens with this campaign, I want you and I to stay in touch," Rudolpho insisted, letting his warm affection for Justin show through.

"I'd like that. Well, I had better let you go. Thanks again. Please, take care of yourself." Justin said, becoming overcome with emotion.

"You too."

Justin hung up the phone and sat there in Brian's office, trying to take in all that had happened.

Justin was still sitting at Brian's desk smiling, when Brian returned a few moments later.

Brian paused for a moment to just look at the smiling image of his partner.

"So are you ready to go to Popagano's?" Brian asked.

Justin stood up and walked into Brian's arms. "Would you mind if we skip dinner and get right to the other part."

"You mean the part where I fuck your brains out?"

"Yeah. Maybe we could order in later."

"So I guess you want to maybe stay at the loft?"

"It is closer."

"That could be arranged," Brian said, starting to reach for his jacket and brief case while they talked. "So are you ready?"

"Absolutely."

Brian slid his arm around Justin's waist. And after a quick goodbye to Cynthia, Brian and Justin quickly made their way to the loft.

Chapter 28 – Resolution

Friday Morning ...(Day 26)

On Friday morning at 10AM in a conference room in Kinnetik, everyone reassembled for the second meeting about the campaign.

"Well, it seems we're all here together again," Brian said as he started the meeting. "Although, for the life of me, I can't figure out why that's the case?"

"Sarcasm doesn't become you Brian," Susan commented, "Especially at this hour of the morning."

Brian noticed that Kellie McQuaid was in the room, and he said, "Kellie, I see that Susan called you home... welcome back."

"It's good to be back. But you can cut the bullshit, Brian. You know precisely why we're all here. Now where is Justin?" Kellie responded back. "It seems you have a new artistic director on your staff. I understand this is someone new that I should probably get to know."

Brian couldn't resist continuing to tease, "Kellie, you are too late. As I'm sure that Susan told you, Maria and Cristina Silvestri have already staked their claim to Justin years ago. Since they tend to be extremely possessive, once again I would say you're out of luck."

"That's not what I mean Brian, and you know it. I understand that Justin was called in to direct the art on this campaign"

"Yes, that's correct. I wanted you to have the benefit of the best. However..."

"And I understand that Justin removed both campaigns from consideration."

"Yes, you heard correctly."

"But Brian, I wasn't here for the original presentation. I was hoping that maybe I could talk to Justin. I was hoping that I might be able to persuade Justin to reconsider and let us have the campaign," Kellie explained.

"That's right, Brian, that's why we're all here," Maria added, looking around the room for confirmation. "We had hoped that we could somehow persuade Justin to change his mind and let us have the campaign."

"Really? You all want the campaign? I find that hard to believe when it was so clearly pointed out that the campaigns had severe flaws. Kinnetik is not one to force a flawed campaign on its client."

"Need I remind you that you have a contract with Eyeconics? A contract we intend to hold you to," Kellie insisted.

"Kellie, you need to reread your contracts more carefully. This project is a joint venture and is not covered by our existing contract. So you were saying," Ted pointed out.

"Oh come on Brian, surely you have made us suffer enough. We all came here suitably contrite. Are you going to let us have the campaign or not?" Kellie asked point blank.

"Ok Brian, now that you know that we want the campaign for Collezione Fiero," Susan interjected. "So tell us what we have to do?"

"I'm flattered that you think I'm all powerful in this matter, but if you'll remember, I didn't remove the campaigns from your consideration. Justin did. And I can tell you from experience, Justin can be very stubborn."

"Well Rudolpho, you created this mess. What do you have to say for yourself?" Susan interjected with complete frustration.

"Oh, if we were in Milan, it would be so simple!" Rudolpho commented.

"This is the USA and bribes are illegal, Signor Silvestri," Brian reminded him. "So are those other things you were contemplating."

"I'm aware of that," Rudolpho said with a smile. "You know, I have the feeling we are going to be dealing with each other for some time to come, do you think that you could manage to call me Rudolpho. You're obviously not intimidated by me, so Signor Silvestri is beginning to sound a bit pompous."

"I suppose I could do that."

Everyone laughed, which released a degree of tension in the room.

"Brian, now that you and father are on first name basis, do you suppose that we could get back to the task at hand," Cristina smirked, giving Brian a knowing smile. "As I was saying, since you know Justin better than anyone, surely you have some idea how we could persuade him to change his mind."

"By the way, where is Justin?" Maria suddenly asked.

"He's solving some problem in the art department. He'll be joining us shortly."

"I have a suggestion," Ted volunteered. "Look, I don't know if it will do any good, but Justin can be best persuaded by tangible evidence."

"And your point is, Theodore?"

"If Justin were to consider changing his mind, it would have to be in the face of compelling evidence."

"So what do you suggest?"

"I suggest we try to reach agreement on conditions of a potential contract, in the off-chance that Justin might be willing to change his mind. Then if he does, all the details will be already worked out between the companies. That way you at least have a chance to prove to him that you can all work together. Seeing that, Justin may be encouraged to change his mind and simply release the campaign."

"That's an excellent suggestion, Theodore. At least that way Justin wouldn't have to sit through the usual round of contract negotiations. It may make changing his mind an easier proposition. That could work," Brian added.

Everyone in the room nodded their head. Then they all mumbled among themselves.

"To save everyone's time, I have a draft of our standard contract. I have penciled in a few proposed changes that we suggest to handle your unique situation."

"So when would we start to see ads for the collection appear?" Rudolpho asked.

"Based on the budget you identified for the project, I prepared for you a tentative roll out schedule," Brian explained.

"We need a faster rollout. After all, we're so far behind our projected schedule already," Maria added.

"And, whose fault is that Rudolpho? If we had come to Kinnetik in the first place, instead of wasting our time with the larger international firms, our products would already be on store shelves," Susan pointed out in frustration.

"I have already apologized. Let's not get sidetracked here. Brian, can you give us the associated costs for the most accelerated roll out schedule," Rudolpho asked.

"Ted?" Brian asked.

"Not a problem. I can run the calculation today," Ted confirmed, making notes to himself.

"Also, the international roll out is going to generate a lot of media attention. Brian, will Kinnetik handle that for us? How about if we provide our local ad agencies to give you any needed support, will you oversee the international roll out?" Maria continued.

"Cynthia?" Brian asked.

"There are some details that need to be worked out, but I think everything should be doable," Cynthia confirmed, making notes to herself.

"What about production? I know we planned a preliminary quantity to handle initial demand? But this campaign is going to double our sales projection, do we have the production capacity to handle the increased demand?" Rudolpho inquired.

"Did I hear you say double our sales projection?" Susan questioned.

"At least, just wait, you'll see," Cristina added.

"That shouldn't be a problem. We have excess capacity available in Italy and Spain, so we can shift manufacturing if we need to," Maria pointed out. "Those plants have both been doing test production runs."

"Plus, we have been producing the product at our facilities, while we have been going through this the ad campaign fiasco, so once Brian has our campaign ready to roll out, we should be set." Susan added.

"So I guess we should go through the other issues to be sure we are in agreement," Ted suggested. "Of course, we realize that everything has to be run through your respective legal departments. But, we have always found that if we reach consensus here first, it makes everyone's job far easier."

They continued negotiating for several hours over the various points in the contract. With everyone focused on the same goal, details were easily worked out. Compromises were readily reached when points of conflicts did arise.

Cynthia observed that the three companies were actually working like a coordinated team, all focused on the same goal. She smiled to herself as she realized that Justin would probably be pleased.

"Well, it seems like we have the issues resolved, what do you think?" Ted asked.

Everybody mumbled their agreement.

"One more thing, Brian, so that we don't have any repeat of our previous problems, I propose to give Kinnetik complete creative control of the campaign." Rudolpho insisted.

Kellie and Susan nodded that they completely agreed.

"That makes sense, that's pretty much the way the Eyeconics agreement with Kinnetik is crafted." Ted commented.

"What do you think, Brian? Do we essentially have the details worked out? Do you think Justin will go along with what we have decided? Do you think that he might reconsider and let us have the campaign?" Rudolpho asked.

"Well there's only one way to find out. Cynthia, can you call down to the art department and see if Justin will join us?" Brian instructed.

Cynthia made the necessary phone call and Justin eventually appeared.

"Well, I see that you're all still meeting. I hope everything is going well. Hello everyone," Justin said with a smile upon entering the conference room. He immediately started looking for an out of way seat.

"Justin, I'm Kellie Mc Quaid. It's been a long time. I met you several years ago at Vanguard."

"Oh yes, I remember."

"We've all been sitting here wondering if there was any way to get you to change your mind and release the campaign for Collezione Fiero to us?"

"Signor Silvestri?"

"Justin, as I told you yesterday, I'm sorry for my rash behavior. I love the campaigns that you and Brian created. I was a bit hasty in my reactions before. On careful reflection, I see that you and Brian were right, and the campaign you created was precisely what we needed to enhance and market our new product line. So Justin, I am begging you as a friend, to forgive the raving of an old man and allow us to have the campaign you created."

"What guarantees to do we have that we won't have other outbursts and objections from you the moment things appear not to be going your way during the course of the campaign? How do we know that you won't interfere as the campaign progresses?" Justin asked.

"We just put it in the contract to give Kinnetik complete creative control. So you and Brian are the final decisions on everything. We all promise not to interfere," Rudolph pointed out with a smile.

"Of course, we'll make our international staff available to assist you in any way, if you would just let us have the campaign." Maria added.

"Believe it or not, we have actually found out how to work with each other," Susan added. "It's been an interesting experience. Now all we need now is your campaign."

"Everyone has been working really hard, Justin, and we essentially have worked out all the contract details, subject to approval by the various legal departments, of course," Ted commented.

"Of course," Justin replied.

"So Justin, what do you think?" Brian asked

Finally the room fell silent and all eyes were focused on Justin. He looked at Brian and smiled.

"If everyone has worked out the agreement, and you still want either of the campaign for Collezione Fiero, I see nothing to prevent my signing to release them to you."

The entire room let out a collective sigh of relief. There were handshakes and hugs all around. In this general atmosphere of and satisfaction, the visitors eventually all left the conference room.

Brian decided that Justin should break the news to the art department, and Justin immediately left to do just that.

Brian, Cynthia and Ted were the only ones left in the conference room.

"Good job, Theodore." Brian said firmly.

"Thanks, Bri." Ted said, graciously accepting Brian's praise.

"You too, Cynthia."

"Thanks. I knew I was right to bring Justin in on this project."

"Yes, who else but Justin could create this much chaos during the preliminary phase of such a simple campaign?" Brian teased with a laugh, but really he was quite proud of the way Justin handled things.

"In two languages no less!" Ted added, thinking back over everything that happened.

Cynthia listed to the banter between Brian and Ted. She had initially kept silent, but she couldn't hold her tongue any longer.

"Brian, this campaign was far from simple...and it's far from over. I think you know that," Cynthia commented, leaving it for Brian to read between the lines. "What are you going to do?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know," Brian whispered quietly in reply.

Chapter 29 – Aftermath, Part 1

Friday, A Little Later...(Day 26)

Brian, Cynthia, and Ted continued to have their impromptu meeting in the conference room to go over a few issues. While they were still meeting, Justin returned to relay how excited the art department was about the prospect of the Belluss Occhiali/Eyeconics campaign, and how eager everyone was to get started.

"All right, we've all been patient. We've tried not to pry, but Justin, tell us about Signor Marani," Ted insisted.

"C'mon Justin," Cynthia added. "You can tell us! We want to know everything."

"Now. Now. You mustn't pester, Justin. He's had a really hard day," Brian tried to add to deflect their questions.

"You didn't tell them?" Justin asked with some surprise.

"No, I told them they would have to get the story from you," Brian explained in his own defense. "So it's up to you whether you tell them or not."

"Justin, just tell me why the Director of Pinacoteca Ambrosiana wanted to see you," Ted pointed asked. "It's really a simple question."

"We're listening, Justin," Cynthia added her comments again.

Justin looked at the inquisitive stares on their faces and decided to relent. So he let out a sigh and then, began to relay the story.

"Signor Silvestri felt he behaved badly during our meeting. So he felt an apology was in order. So he called his childhood friend, Signor Pietro Marani, to act as an intermediary. Signor Marani was to come here and deliver said apology on Signor Silvestri's behalf," Justin explained, while Brian sat there smiling. "I accepted the apology, and all was forgiven."

"You mean he had Signor Marani come all the way from Milan to Pittsburgh, just to apologize to you? How could you not accept such an over the top apology?" Cynthia said with a smile.

"Exactly. So, now all is forgiven."

"That's quite a story!" Cynthia added. "We could all see that the Silvestris are extremely fond of you, but who would have expected this? I'll say one thing Justin, with you around things are never dull."

"I've often said the same thing myself," Brian interjected with a smirk, and received the appropriate glare from Justin in return.

"Justin, Signor Silvestri had the director of one of the most prestigious art galleries in Milan to come to the US, just to make an apology to you?" Ted asked, seeking confirmation of what had just been told to him.

"Yeah, it's unbelievable isn't it?" Justin confirmed

"That's some story." Cynthia said with a laugh.

"Then why was he so focused on your paintings?" Ted persisted, being one to never leave any small detail unresolved.

Justin let out another sigh. "Because after seeing my paintings and looking at my website, he offered me the opportunity to apply for the emerging artist exhibit that's held in Milan this summer. I'm very honored to be asked to apply...it would really be something if I was accepted for the exhibit."

"Oh, please Justin, you're very talented," Cynthia reassured him. "You couldn't have survived this year in New York if you weren't."

Justin smiled at the supportive vote of confidence from Cynthia.

"Well, the New York art scene and Milan are two entirely different levels. Milan would give me international exposure. I'm still growing as an artist, and I'm still pretty young. It's an honor to be asked, but don't expect too much."

"Nonsense!" Ted remarked. "You've been painting since you were in the crib, I've heard you say that many times. So artistically that makes you a mature painter. Right, Bri?"

"Now Theodore, don't go pulling me into this. I'm already envisioning a painting of me or my body parts hanging in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana," Brian said with a laugh.

"Brian! You're no help," Justin said, gently hitting Brian on the arm. "Of course, you realize that if I'm accepted, it means that you have to take me to Milan this summer."

"Milan, home of Armani. I think that trip could easily be arranged." Brian quipped with a smile.

"Well, I guess I should get going," Justin indicated as he proceeded toward the door. "My studio awaits."

"Not so fast! Let me buy you lunch before you drive out to the house. That way at least I'll know that you have eaten. Besides, it's the least I could do for your all help on the campaign." Brian decided with Cynthia and Ted nodding their agreement.

Justin considered for a moment and then said, "Sure."

"Cynthia...Theodore, we'll see you later," Brian said as he stood up to leave. "Besides, you two have your work cut out for you."

Standing up to leave, Cynthia quipped, "Right away, Boss!" She turned back toward the room one more time before her exit to say, "I love my job!"

Brian and Justin were standing there smiling when Ted also decided to take his leave. "I'm on it, Bri," Ted commented. "Don't worry about anything!"

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"Sunshine!" Debbie called out, quickly approaching them as they entered the Diner.

"Hi, Deb," Justin was able to utter, before being engulfed in a pair of loving arms.

"Debbie, you have to release him. He needs to breathe." Brian added, finally prying Justin free. "You know you are going to have to stop doing this," Brian insisted.

"Oh you," Debbie commented as she actually acknowledged Brian for the first time. "It's all your fault I don't get to see him anyway, holding him prisoner at that house. It's a good thing you got free, isn't it, baby?" she said, once again turning her attention back to Justin.

Brian just sighed and finally said, "We'll have our usual."

"Coming right up!" she uttered as she left to place their orders, while Brian and Justin settled comfortably in the booth.

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"You two are coming to dinner on Sunday!" Debbie said as she returned to deliver their order. It wasn't a question.

"I'm not sure, Debbie," Brian answered. "Justin has painting to do, and he has to leave for New York."

"New York?" she squealed.

"You remember...city where I'm pursuing my art?" Justin teased. "But I'll only be gone a few days...maybe a week."

"Well, I suppose that will ok," she finally accepted but added, "But you get you butt back here as quickly as you can."

"I will," Justin confirmed. "It's just a quick trip. I'll have to make them from time to time, but I'll be back as quickly as I can."

"Well ok," she said, kissing Justin on the cheek and finally leaving them.

"Somehow a cheeseburger, fries, and a milk shake doesn't seem like the proper sustenance for an rising international artist," Brian teased, as Justin was taking a bite of his burger.

"And the lemon bars..." Justin added.

"How could I forget?" Brian began shaking his head. "I have to make sure that you're healthy enough to step on the international stage. So I think it's time we change your diet," Brian insisted.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I think we can depend on Debbie to make sure that I'm properly acclimated to the Italian diet, should I be accepted to exhibit in Milan," Justin said with a laugh. "My addiction to lemon bars is another issue."

"I'm sure arrangements can be made to ship you lemon bars while you're in Milan. So I wouldn't worry about that."

"I'm not worried," Justin said quietly.

Brian looked up when Justin made the last remark. It was said a little too quietly. Brian realized that Justin had several moments of quiet ever since Signor Marani made his appearance. A quiet Justin was always a cause for concern. Now Brian decided to try to press for answers.

"Are you going to tell me what's on your mind?" Brian tried to inquire nonchalantly.

"It's nothing," Justin insisted, suddenly finding the pattern of the catsup on his French fries most interesting.

"Are you going to make me guess? You know how lousy I am at that," Brian tried to point out. Justin tried to smile a little.

"No, that won't be necessary."

"Then what is it? I'm listening."

"No, that's ok."

"Justin, I want you to focus all your energy on your painting. I know that you have a lot to do. I just want you to go ahead and do your best work...including the submission to Milan."

"Yeah but..."

"And, I don't want you to worry about anything. Ok?"

"Yeah..."

"And Justin, I promise you that we will come up with a more creative solution about Milan, than we managed to come up with about New York."

"We will?"

"Just in case that is what you're worrying about," Brian suggested with a smirk.

"How did you know?"

"You and I may not have had a chance to talk, but that doesn't mean that I haven't been listening."

"Really?"

"Really. So now can we celebrate? That campaign is going to be a major account for Kinnetik. Not to mention your chance to apply for the exhibit in Milan. I think we have a lot to celebrate."

Justin finally smiled. "What did you have in mind?"

"How about dinner at Popagano's? What do you think? How about tomorrow night? Then we'll go to Babylon, if you want."

"All that...it seems like a DATE," Justin teased, emphasizing the last word.

"Justin, you know I don't do dates," Brian said, trying to sound completely serious and failing miserably. "So are you going to call your mother?"

"No, I think I'll stop by and see her before I go back to the house. That way she won't give YOU such a hard time the next time she sees you," Justin said with a laugh. "And you have to admit, I have a lot to tell her."

"Good idea. I definitely prefer not to have Mother Taylor upset with me."

At that remark, Justin burst out laughing.

Hearing Justin laugh let Brian know that everything was going to be ok.

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Justin called his mother while he was still having lunch with Brian, and she agreed to meet him at her condo.

"Mom!" Justin called out as he entered the condo.

"Oh honey, it's so good to see you," Jennifer said, hugging him in a vice like hold.

Justin thought for a moment that Jennifer was spending too much time with Debbie.

"How's the painting going?" she asked as she finally released him.

"Pretty well actually. It's great having the studio at the house, so I can pretty much paint whenever I want to."

"How's that project for Brian going?"

"The final meeting was today, and it looks like they will sign the contract. So Brian's pretty happy. Me too."

"Well that's good."

"Brian is taking me to dinner at Popagano's tomorrow. I just drop by to see if maybe you wanted to join us."

"Dinner is one thing. Popagano's is something else. Well, what did you do so special that he's willing to spring for Popagano's?" Jennifer asked with a smile.

"It's because of my help on the project. You have no idea how hard I worked."

"That wonderful, honey. Now tell me all about it."

Justin filled Jennifer in on the original meeting with Belluss Occhiali/Eyeconics meeting, seeing the Silvestris again, Signor Silvestri's outburst, the apology delivered by the intermediary, Signor Marani. Jennifer was impressed and amused at the same time.

"Signor Marani, also looked at my paintings and my website. I've been invited to APPLY for emerging artist's showcase this summer. I don't know whether I'll be accepted or not, but I at least have the opportunity to apply. I'm pretty excited about it."

"What about Brian?"

"Brian has promised that we'll work this out somehow. You know he's always supportive."

"Well as long as you two are working this out. You know he really does love you."

"I know. So will you join us for dinner? I have to go back to New York next week."

"But I thought you would be here for three months. That's why you went to all that trouble to furnish the house."

"I'll only be gone for a few days...maybe a week. I have to meet with my agent, and she has set up some meetings with galleries. She doesn't want everyone to forget about me, while I'm painting here."

"Well, that makes sense."

"So between preparing for the New York show and the Cincinnati show... plus working on my submission for the gallery in Milan, I'm really going to be busy the next couple of weeks."

"Just remember to take care of yourself, honey."

"Of course, I'll take care of myself. You sound like Brian. So are you going to be able to go to dinner tomorrow with us?"

"I'm going to have to take a rain check. I have a meeting that I can't get out of."

"That's ok. Maybe we'll all get together when I get back from New York?"

"That seems like a good idea. You'll call me?"

"Yes I promise. Look, I should probably get going. I just wanted to see you and tell you the news," Justin said, hugging Jennifer.

"You know you could invite your mother out to the house. I haven't seen it with all the furniture in place. After all, you and Brian have to come up for air sometime."

They both laughed.

"I'll do that when I get back. You know, it's hard to believe that we have only been in the house for less than two weeks, and already we're so comfortable there."

"I'm really happy for you, honey."

"Me too."

"I'm glad you called me. After all, you know that you ARE pretty hard to reach."

"Mom. I don't answer my phone when I'm in the studio. Brian even wants an intercom system installed. He's already complaining about using cell phones to talk to each other in the house, " Justin said with a laugh.

"You've got to admit the house is a little large for just two people."

"Yeah, but it's starting to feel like home."

"What about New York?"

"New York is simply a place I live to pursue my art. But it's not my home."

"You have moved around so much, I'm glad you have a place that you can call home."

"Me to," Justin said as he hugged his mother goodbye.

In the car driving to Bri-tin, Justin thought about the discussion with Jennifer about home. Justin realized a simple truth...right now Bri-tin was home...but home for him...was really wherever Brian happened to be.

Chapter 30 – Quiet Reflections

Friday, Late Afternoon...(Day 26)

In his studio at Bri-tin, Justin couldn't help but think about Milan. While he painted, he replayed part of his conversation with Signor Marani.

"Please don't be offended. Milan is a long way from the US. Often artistic talent goes undiscovered. With a talent such as yours, that was not going to be the case for much longer anyway. Even in Milan, we read Art Forum. And, even in Milan we hear about eccentric artists, who exhibit their work for the pure joy of having it seen. Yes, your decision not to sell your paintings at the Santa Barbara exhibit hit the worldwide press. So I was definitely curious to meet you."

Signor Marani...correction make that Pietro...Pietro had said that even in Milan, they had read the Art Forum article about him last year. Also, Pietro had heard about what happened at the Santa Barbara show.

Justin smiled as he thought about the fact that he was achieving international attention, and it was happening ...just by him being himself.

Justin had met the art world on his own terms and had prevailed. He had been in New York for a year. Although thus far he had not achieved his dream of a solo show at a major gallery, he had successfully had his work shown as part of several group exhibits. Each time he exhibited, all his exhibited paintings sold. And as he told Ted and Cynthia today, he was still growing as an artist, and he was still young.

Hearing Lindsay tell him that he had a great future was one thing...after all she was family and definitely biased. Hearing Pietro say that he was talented enough to apply for the summer exhibit in Milan was something else. It reaffirmed his belief in himself, and encouraged Justin to work harder.

Justin smiled to himself as he continued working on his painting. He loved painting at Bri-tin. He looked at the few pieces he had painted here, and he saw the joy he felt captured on canvas. Joy! This emotion was clearly missing from his New York work. Something else was there instead. Justin liked to think that it was determination. The determination to achieve his stated objectives and return back to Brian as quickly as possible. But it had to be more than that. What was it exactly?

The question in his mind caused Justin to put down the paintbrush. It was time that he looked for himself. He walked over to his computer and brought up the Justin Taylor Artist website. Justin looked at his own artwork on his website. And for the first time, Justin held a personal retrospective of his own work.

Justin thought back to his earliest sketches of Brian made so long ago. Then, little more than line drawings, they lacked the depth of emotions that could be seen in his sketches today.

Examining the images of his paintings through the years, Justin realized that not only was he growing as artist, but also he had already grown, especially over the last year. His years at PIFA had made a big difference, but also so had all his life experiences. Justin saw all of his life lessons played out across the canvasses of time. One thing was clearly evident in the volume of work that he had produced...there was never complacency in any of his work. Every piece was ripe with emotion. The artist had truly found his medium.

Yet in spite of all this, Justin had enjoyed working on the Belluss Occhiali/Eyeconics campaign with Brian more than anything. He had enjoyed the chance to work with Brian as a partner on the campaign. In spite of the long hours on the campaign and all the interruptions, Justin realized that he had still managed to create a few paintings, and those paintings represented some of his best work. What did this mean?

When he was in Cincinnati, he and Jason had talked. Jason was probably the only person who could understand what Justin was feeling when he had talked about working with Brian. Jason has worked with Paul, his partner, since he had graduated from high school, and they had lived and worked together ever since.

Jason was quick to point out how the campaigns that he created together with Paul were so different than the ones they developed independent of each other. Jason talked about the "distinct difference". Justin wondered if that "distinct difference" existed when he and Brian worked together.

Once Justin had felt he had very little to offer. After all, Kinnetik had a full art department filled with experienced graphic artists. But working on the Belluss Occhiali/Eyeconics campaign, Justin came to realize that he knew things that the others were still trying to figure out. His artist's eye let him see things immediately that others had to figure out by trial and error.

Initially the art department had been happy to work with him. Of course, at first it was probably because he was Brian's partner, and everyone knew that. But after the first few hours, Justin recognized that things noticeably changed. Then everyone became eager to work with him, because they realized that he knew things that they needed to learn. Likewise, working with the other artists added another dimension to Justin as an artist.

Lindsay had once said, "You know you have talent. You should develop it. Maybe go to art school."

And that is precisely what Justin had done. He had endeavored to continually develop his talent. But whenever it came to a choice between who he was as a man and what he believed in vs. his art, Justin had always remained true to himself. And in remaining true to himself his art had continued to develop in spite of everything.

Now he was becoming known as an artist in New York. And through a simple twist of fate, he was being given the opportunity to at least apply to exhibit his work in Milan. Justin was pleased with all that he had accomplished.

But most of all, Justin was thrilled that through all his accomplishments, he and Brian were still together as partners. And now he and Brian were at home at Bri-tin.

He simply smiled, as he thought about Brian, and Justin decided it was time for a break, so he reached for his cell phone and punch the number.

"Kinney," Brian answered, forgetting to first check the caller ID on his cell phone.

"Hey," Justin said quietly, and he could hear Brian smile.

"Hey. How's the painting going?"

"Pretty well actually. I'm just taking a break, and thought I would call."

"Your timing is perfect. You just rescued me from Theodore and Cynthia, who are now leaving my office at last." Brian declared. Justin could hear the rustling sound through the phone, as Ted and Cynthia made their exit from Brian's office. "How did things go with your mother?"

"I invited her to dinner with us, but she already had plans. So we agreed to get together when I get back from New York."

"That can be arranged. So, did you call me for phone sex?" Brian teased. "I think we have just enough time?"

"Brian!"

"I was just asking."

"I was really hoping you were coming home soon, so I could have the real thing. I miss you."

"Well, I suppose that could be arranged. I miss you too," Brian admitted. "Let me clear up a few things and I'll see you soon. Later."

"Later."

Justin made a few phone calls while waiting for Brian, and once again returned to his painting.

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After the phone call, Brian had to stop for a moment and reflect. Had it only been about a month ago that Michael's painting of Superheroes had arrived or that Melanie's painting of Sparring Partners had been received. Time does pass quickly, doesn't it?

Brian thought of all the trips to New York to see Justin over the last few months. Each trip had helped to make the separation easier. They had shown Brian that he and Justin were truly a couple and very much together, even if they lived in different cities.

However for Justin to come back to Pittsburgh was totally different. Brian really understood that. He had avoided having Justin come back for just that reason. It was easier to visit him in New York, even though it was always a hard ride to the airport for the early morning flight back to Pittsburgh.

But Justin being at the house in West Virginia or the loft in Pittsburgh was a simple statement that Justin was home, where he belonged. And Brian wasn't sure he was going to be able to let Justin go. Justin's trip to Cincinnati had been hard, and that was only for one day. He and Gus had managed to keep each other company, but it was clear that were both just biding their time until Justin's return.

"When did I become so lesbianonic?" Brian asked himself with a laugh. Brian tried to sort out the pieces.

Cynthia had suggested that Justin be brought back to work on the Belluss Occhiali/Eyeconics campaign. Brian laughed as he thought about all the twists and turns between that original idea to final acceptance of the campaign by the clients. And at the center of it all, sat Justin. Justin's knowledge and instincts matched with Brian's advertising skills had produced a campaign that was definitely going to garner attention.

Brian was smart enough to realize that his relationship with Justin would never be traditional...but it would always simply be. But this was the first moment that he also realized that Justin was the vortex, and the whirlwind of events just seemed to swirl around him. Brian thought about all the campaigns he had created in the last ten years. He could never remember a single campaign that had this much intrigue. Brian felt it took all his skills to keep stay grounded in the middle of chaos. Once again Brian laughed.

Brian had once thought that he would be lucky to have Justin in Pittsburgh for a week to develop the campaign. And Brian remembered those first few nights when Justin came back from New York, when the very air in the loft was electrified by his presence. Brian realized that he still felt that way.

Brian remembered how he felt when Justin announced, rather than asked, that he wanted to paint in Pittsburgh for the next three months. And the even greater surprise when Justin announced his decision to paint at Bri-tin, and the way that Justin managed to turned Bri-tin into a home in such short a period of time.

Then there's Gus and Justin together. It's the way they lovingly interact and pushed him to have all these new experiences that he never knew he wanted. Brian is overwhelmed by how much he loves them both.

Brian remembered the life he used to live before Gus and Justin came into his life. He remembered how hard he had tried to resist them both. He laughed at how easily he succumbed to them both. And now, he can't imagine his life with them both.

Now Justin had extracted a promise of a creative solution to their living arrangements. Justin was ready to move back to Pittsburgh or West Virginia. And more than anything, Brian's heart wanted the same thing. But this was a decision that Brian knew he had to make with his head, and Brian knew he had a lot of work to do to find the perfect solution and make it a reality. A promise is a promise!

Brian smiled to himself as he gathered up his things for the drive home to Bri-tin, for he had a date with a very hot blond.

Chapter 31 – Aftermath, Part 2

Saturday Morning at Bri-tin...(Day 27)

Justin wanted to take advantage of the early morning light, so he gently slipped out of bed leaving Brian asleep and quietly made his way to his studio.

Brian obviously felt things shift in the bedroom, because he awakened shortly thereafter. Realizing that the bed was not somewhere he wanted to linger without Justin, Brian got up. Taking a quick shower and stopping to have a glass of guava juice while the coffee brewed, Brian decided to make breakfast.

Making coffee, toasting two bagels, and finally locating cream cheese, peanut butter and fresh fruit in the refrigerator, let Brian know that he had made a good start. Pouring the coffee in to cups, placing everything on plates, placing the plates on a tray, let him know that he could pull this off. Brian easily made his way to Justin's studio.

Since Justin had the door open, Brian just walked right in. "Good morning, Sunshine."

"You fixed breakfast?" Justin said, greatly surprised by the gesture as he made room for the tray on the table.

"Of course, can't you see how complicated it is?" Brian smirked, setting down the tray and making himself comfortable on the futon

"This is truly a surprise."

"I missed a morning blowjob because you got up early. So I figured that if I bribed you with breakfast..."

"I see. Ever the romantic!" Justin said with a laugh. "Did you want this blowjob before or after breakfast?"

"I was thinking after. That way it won't be interrupted by your stomach rumbling."

"I guess I could take a break after breakfast. Some things are a priority after all."

"I'm glad you realize that," Brian said with a smile, taking another bite of his bagel with peanut butter.

"This is nice Brian, will you do this every weekend?"

"No, I think I prefer to take you out to breakfast, but you were already at work. So..."

"I didn't want to wake you when I got up. I really thought you might like to sleep in for a change, especially after everything that happened last night," Justin said complete with suggestive eyebrow movements.

"Not without you." Brian whispered. " Besides, I'm going to work in the study this morning. I have some work to finish and a few phone calls to make anyway."

"On Saturday?"

"I want to be sure to call Gus."

"Good idea."

After breakfast had been eaten and the dishes cleared away, Brian and Justin quickly stripped out of their clothes and made their way into the shower in the studio area. Brian was surprised to find this bathroom too was stocked with condoms, lube, and his shampoo and soap.

"So I guess, we're going to initiate another room, huh?" Brian asked as he regulated the water in the shower.

"I guess so. I love this house. There is enough hot water for a long, leisurely showers," Justin said, stepping under the water but snuggling into Brian's chest.

"You keep looking for excuses not to paint, don't you?" Brian asked with a laugh, reaching around to soap Justin's back.

"That's not true, but I'll paint better once I'm inspired." Justin said, settling in under the spray, and leaning up to give Brian a kiss.

Brian leaned into the kiss, allowing it to turn passionate and then deepening it. When they finally separated to draw in a breath of air, Justin asked, "Are you sure that you still want that blowjob?"

"Not particularly," Brian responded with a smile, pivoting Justin around in the shower and reaching for the lube. Brian seductively stretched and prepared Justin for entry. He then quickly sheathed himself within a condom.

Brian let out a groan as he entered Justin and was soon surrounded by the tightness.

As Brian began to thrust, Justin met him stroke for stroke. Justin groaned as Brian pushed him over the edge, with Brian immediately following behind him.

They stayed like that for a few moments under the shower spray.

Eventually Brian pulled out, tied off the condom, and tossed it aside. Justin snuggled against Brian chest once again.

Finally, deciding they had been in the shower long enough, Brian and Justin emerged from the shower, grabbing towels and wrapping themselves in robes. They decided to curl up together on the futon in the studio.

"I see that you have quite a cozy little setup in here and so well equipped too," Brian commented, repositioning Justin in his arms and tightening his grip. "Of course, I'm getting used to the robes and towels everywhere within easy reach."

"That's good." Justin smiled, snuggling in closer.

"So are you going to just lay here with me, or are you going to get back to painting?"

"Is that a trick question?"

"Justin!"

"I'm thinking it over."

"Justin!"

"Ok, I'm going to paint...only because you have to call Gus."

"Good point," Brian said with a smile, leaning down to kiss the top of Justin's head.

Brian finally managed to get dressed and headed for the study to make his phone calls. Justin lingered a few moments on the futon. Then he too got dressed and returned to his canvas with a knowing smile upon his face.

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About An Hour Later...(Day 27)

Justin's cell phone rang, and he mindlessly answered it without checking the caller ID, "Hello."

"Justin, it's Jason. I'm glad I caught you," the voice on the other end began.

"Why is that?" Justin had to ask.

"I hope you've made your reservations? Time is fleeting." Jason reminded him with that singsong style that was always most irritating.

"I was just there, don't you remember? The wing of Cincinnati Art Gallery isn't due to open for another three months. So what are you talking about? Don't you think this is a little early for reservations?"

Justin knew it was a waste of time, but he thought he would try logic anyway. He could hear that Jason was on a mission; so he knew he would just have to ride this out, until he found out what his friend had on his mind.

"I'm just trying to make sure that you and Brian are on your way here?" Jason said, trying to understand why Justin was being unusually dense.

"Remember that project I was working on with Brian, well we just had the final meeting and ...."

Jason interrupted, figuring he didn't really want to hear excuses. "Perfect! So you can get your ass here to Cincinnati with no problem!"

"The client wants an accelerated roll out schedule. Brian is going to be swamped. I'm on my way to New York, next week...."

Once again Jason interrupted, "And you're saying this, because...."

"We'll have to reschedule whatever visit you had in mind for another time," Justin explained when he could finally get a word in edgewise.

"I don't think so!" Jason protested. "Don't tell me you forgot!"

"What?"

"Your godson is having his fourth birthday. He expects you and Brian to be here. Your visit is the whole reason that he is looking forward to being four years old. So, I suggest that you redo your release schedule. Unless of course, you and Brian are planning to explain to a three year old why he's about to be disappointed."

"You know, Jason, you're really getting brutal. You used to be such a nice person."

"I learn from the best. How am I doing?" Jason said with a laugh. "Your room is ready. We even added sound proofing."

"What a thoughtful gesture. So I see there is no way around this?"

"Not really."

"I take it Paul is on the line with Brian giving him the same spiel."

"Pretty much. So I guess things are settled, and I have no choice in this."

"You know Brian keeps talking about your 1500 SAT scores. I'm beginning to see that you may be more than a pretty face. You know, Jus, you're very smart for a blond."

"Let me talk to Brian, and we'll let you know when we're coming."

"Now that's what I've been waiting to hear. I knew if I talked to you long enough that you would come around," Jason teased. "By the way, I got your email about Milan. I know that whatever you submit is going to be wonderful. Of course, you HAVE to be accepted."

"Have to be accepted? Jason, don't you bother to read the emails that I send you? I have been given a chance to apply!...to apply! There is no guarantee that I will be accepted for all the reasons I told you in the email. Didn't you read it?"

"You're just going to have to make a great submission because you have to be accepted. That's all that there is to it!"

"What? Why is that?"

"Well if you are selected, you will have to be in Milan this summer. Paul and I have already invited ourselves to accompany you and Brian. I know Brian is already there...home of Armani and all. We just decided you shouldn't go alone, so we're inviting ourselves to tag along. So you have to make a great application. Paul and I have plans."

"I love the way you two would have no life if it wasn't for Brian and me."

"Yeah, well things are so quiet otherwise. I seem to stay out of mischief until you're around. Or at least that's Paul's version of reality. However, now it's apparent that you alone cause all the trouble, I'm sure that Brian will agree with me.'

"What are you trying to say?"

"Paul and I have worked together since I was 18. Never once did one of our clients need an intermediary. You and Brian work on one project together and intermediaries start flying half way round the world. Now I ask you, which one of us causes the mischief? You know after that little stunt of yours, my status as 'total innocent' in anything that we do is going to be assured. Oh yeah, I'm going to love this."

"You have such an evil mind."

"Have you talked to Brian yet about working with him?"

"I told you I would wait to see how this project went. Sure Brian got the account, but I created so much chaos, he probably doesn't want to work with me again."

"Brian is used to you. After all these years, Brian is perfectly capable of handling the firestorms you create. In fact, I'm sure that he loves them. Talk to him Justin!"

"I'm trying to build up my courage. We're going to talk when I get back from New York. Then, I can feel him out to see what he thinks about this."

"Well, I'm going to start my research on places of interest in and around Milan. I want to be ready. The summer isn't that far away."

"Will you give it a rest?"

"Wasn't planning on it! I want to be sure that you're properly motivated."

"Will you let me get back to painting? I'll talk to you later." Justin said. "We'll let you know when we're arriving. Give Nicky a hug for me."

"I can do that...I'll talk to you later. Just remember what I said. Bye, Jus."

"Bye," Justin said, closing his cell phone. Justin took a moment and just shook his head.

Without bothering to clean up or change clothes, Justin walked out of the studio and into the study, where Brian was just finishing up a phone call. Brian looked at Justin as he entered the office and smiled.

"You know I have watched you paint for years. It's a good thing your paintings sell for so much money," Brian said, closing his cell phone.

"Why do say that?"

"Because you manage to get more paint on you and, dare I say it, on my shirts, than you ever get on the canvas. It must cost you a fortune. How do you manage it?" Brian continued to tease.

"What is your point, Brian?" Justin asked slowly, placing his hand on his hip for emphasis.

Brian still wasn't ready to let this go. "You're even instilling bad habits in my son. I talked to Lindsay earlier, and it seems that now Gus only wants to finger paint when he's in her studio, and he manages to get covered with paint. You know what a neatnik Lindsay is when she paints! She's trying to figure out where Gus learned his painting techniques."

"Are you finished?"

"I'm sorry, did you want something?" Brian innocently asked with a smile.

"Jason just called. We have to go to Cincinnati for Nicky's birthday. Are you going to be able to get away?"

"Like Paul gave me a choice!"

"I see your conversation went pretty much the same way that mine did with Jason."

"Pretty much."

"Did Paul mention to you that he and Jason have invited themselves to tag along to Milan for the emerging artist show, if I get accepted."

"No he didn't mention that part. So I guess this means any plans that you had about not being accepted are out the window."

"So I guess I better get back into the studio and work on my technique, so I make a good application, huh?"

"Looks like it. Let me know when you're ready for me to pose."

"Pose? Pose for what?"

"I told you, I'm already picturing my picture or my body parts on display at the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana. So in order for that to happen, I assume I have to pose. I'm going to start my work out schedule now so everything will be just perfect by the time you're ready to paint me."

"Brian, don't you think I have enough sketches of you to be able to paint you without you posing? That is assuming I'm planning to make you the subject of my submission."

"Who else would you use? I'm so handy." Brian said with a smirk, kissing Justin's ear since that is the only place that was free of paint.

Justin leaned into the kiss. He then smiled and said "Later," before returning to work in his studio.

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Meanwhile In Toronto...(Day 27)

"Gus, did you have a good talk with your dad?" Lindsay asked, noticing the smile on her son's face.

"I told dad about my spelling bee and playing soccer in gym class," Gus recounted.

"That's good, honey."

"Did you talk to Justin?"

"No, Justin was in his studio. I just talked to dad. Justin is going to New York."

"Justin is going to New York?" Lindsay repeated, knowing she couldn't possibly have heard correctly.

"New York!" Melanie exclaimed, walking in on the tail end of the conversation.

"Yep!" Gus reassured everyone.

Lindsay and Melanie immediately knew there was going to be trouble. The last time that Gus had to think of HIS Justin in New York, he worried about Justin being hungry and alone. Gus had refused to talk to them and even staged a hunger strike because Lindsay and Melanie didn't show the proper level of concern for Justin. Now Justin was returning to New York. Both mommies knew this could spell trouble.

"Mom, when are going back to see dad. Has it been a month yet?" Gus asked, flipping through a calendar on the wall.

"No, Gus. It's only been a week." Lindsay explained. "We have about three more weeks to go."

Gus was definitely not happy with that news. "Three weeks is a long time," he finally said resolutely, lowering himself to the floor in disappointment.

Finally Gus crawled over to play with Jenny Rebecca, hoping this would make the time go faster.

Seeing that Gus was occupied, Lindsay eased into the next room to call Brian back.

"I thought Justin was going to be in Pittsburgh painting for three months. Yet Gus just told me he was going back to New York," Lindsay began as soon as Brian had answered the phone...all without the requisite hello.

"Well hello to you too, Lindsay. You have obviously been hanging with Melanie too long, you're starting to pick up her bad habits. Now why are you giving me the third degree about Justin's whereabouts?"

"I just thought Justin would be in town for three months. Now he's going back to New York. What did you do this time?"

Brian let out a long-suffering sigh. "I didn't do anything. Justin has to meet with his agent and a few galleries. He'll be gone less than a week." Brian answered.

"I just wondered why he didn't mention it when I talked to him."

"He probably didn't think it was important. Did he tell you about Milan?" Brian asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Yes, isn't it exciting?"

"Justin has been reserved about this. He wants us all to remember that he is only getting a chance to apply. There are no guarantees that he will be accepted. Still, it's quite an honor to be asked to apply."

"Brian, there's no doubt in my mind that he will be accepted. I can't believe how his career is taking off. I'm really proud of him."

"Be sure you tell him that."

"I already have. The question is how are you dealing with this?"

"Me? I'm as excited as he is."

"Have you considered the implications?"

"We'll handle them," Brian said in a tone that let her know the topic was now closed.

"That's good."

"How are things with you and Melanie?" Brian asked, changing the subject.

"They're good. We're still working on things."

"Let me know if I can do anything to help." Brian said.

"No, I think we can work this out. Everything is going to be ok."

"If you say so. Is there anything else?"

"Gus was so worried about Justin being in New York last time. I'm afraid that he will get concerned again."

"Don't worry. Gus and I have had a long talk about this. Doesn't he seem ok about Justin going to New York?"

"Yeah..."

"Stop worrying. Justin will call him from New York. Everything will be fine. If there's a problem just call me."

"Ok. I feel better now, so I'll let you go."

"Lindsay wait a minute. What do you know about Catherine Mann, Justin's agent?"

"She really very good and highly respected. She has a great reputation. She'll handle Justin's career with great care. I'm not sure how she'll feel about Milan though. It's a really big step for Justin."

"I know. We'll have to wait to see what happens. Either way, Justin is going to be ok."

"I know. He really is very talented, you know."

"I know. You take care. Bye."

Lindsay closed her cell phone and turned around. Melanie was standing there waiting for an update.

"Brian and Gus talked about Justin being in New York. Brian said that Gus is ok with it," Lindsay explained to her partner.

"I will admit that he does seem to be ok so far," Melanie said after careful reflection.

"I guess we just have to be sure that Michael doesn't come up next weekend to upset things."

"Michael and Ben aren't coming up here...because they're paying for Jenny and me to fly there this month. We only have a few more weeks, and we're back in Pittsburgh."

"I'm looking forward to it. Another session with Elizabeth will be good. Although... Since you and I have been talking, things are getting better between us. I must say that I really like that," Lindsay said, gently kissing Melanie.

"Me too," Melanie whispers as she leaned into the kiss. After a few moments, she posed a question with some concern. "Are you ok about Justin and Milan?"

"I'm just really surprised, that's all. I knew it would take a while for him to get the solo show at a major a major gallery in New York. But, Melanie, he's been able to survive a whole year there. He's had a chance to participate in several showcases, and his paintings always seem to sell out at each show. So his career is going to be fine, whether he gets to exhibit this summer in Milan or not."

"What does it mean if he's accepted for the show in Milan?"

"You remember I said that many artists work their whole career and never get one mention in Art Forum. But Justin had a whole article about him in Art Forum by the time he was 22 years old. The critics are going to be watching everything he does from now on, especially if he gets Milan. That's a lot of pressure for one so young."

"Lindsay, we're talking about Justin. He's one of the strongest people we know."

"Melanie, Justin wants to be with Brian. That's why he's in Pittsburgh now. I don't know if he's willing to make the sacrifices necessary to have an international career. We were able to push him in the right direction last time. Justin is a lot more stubborn now."

"Lindsay, promise me that you will not interfere between Brian and Justin. Justin will have to figure out what he wants. He really can do that. But you need to promise not to push. Whatever happens is Justin's decision. You need to leave him alone to decide for himself."

"I know. I intend to stay out of this...unless Justin asks for my help."

"That's a good idea."

"But it's a really wonderful opportunity for Justin. I'm really very happy for him. And, I'm very proud of him."

"Be sure you tell him that when you talk to him again."

"I'll do that."

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A Few Hours Later at Bri-tin...(Day 27)

Justin was sitting at the computer pondering over what was on the screen. Brian happened to pass by the studio door. He walked in and sat down beside Justin and began to mindlessly massage Justin's right hand.

"That feels good. Thanks," Justin said, leaning his head on Brian's shoulder.

"So with all the threats and interruptions, did you get anything done today? I'm really sorry. I know I'm as bad as everyone else. You're just going to have to close the door to your studio and turn off the phone when you don't want to be disturbed."

"I usually do. Today was a relaxing day of painting. I really got quite a bit done."

"So what are you doing now?"

"Just doodling. My hand was tired so I couldn't use the sketchpad."

"I'm not taking very good care of you, am I?"

"You're taking very good care of me, but I think I'm getting hungry."

"Do you want to do an early dinner at Popagano's?"

"Would you be disappointed if we eat here instead? I just want to spend some time with you before we go to Babylon."

"Do you still want to go to Babylon?"

"Yes, I'm looking forward to dancing with you."

"So we'll order delivery...eat in front of the fire...maybe go back to bed...then go to Babylon. How does that sound?"

"Perfect."

"Is Chinese ok?"

"You read my mind."

"Oh, if that were only true!" Brian smirked, receiving a swat on the arm from Justin for that comment.

Chapter 32 – Babylon

Late Evening...(Day 27)

The gang has all assembled at their usual spot at the bar. Ben and Michael had already danced a few dances. Emmett had danced with both Drew Boyd and Calvin Culpepper. Ted and Blake had just arrived to join them.

"So Brian and Justin aren't here yet," Ted commented after surveying the crowd. "After the week the two of them have had, I would understand if they didn't make it."

"Well I wouldn't!" Michael explained. "I talked to Justin, and he said he would be here."

Emmett was completely caught off guard by Michael's outburst. Then he was trying to process the statement that Michael just made, and totally surprised by whom Michael was actually waiting to see.

"Did you talk to Brian?" Emmett asked.

"No, Brian seems to be too busy to return my phone calls," Michael whined loudly.

"Isn't that the truth!" Ted mumbled, just above a whisper.

Then Emmett started to get the picture. Brian had been busy and ignoring Michael. Emmett knew they were all in for one of Michael's very vocal drama queen moments.

"Wow sweetie, are you ok about this?" Emmett asked Michael with some concern.

"No. I'm just waiting for Brian to get here so I can remind him that he has to talk to me. After all, I am his best friend."

Everyone rolled their eyes. Things appeared to have returned to normal. Everyone realized that the period of the new, improved Michael had probably ended. Everyone thought to themselves...what a pity!

"I'm sure they'll be here soon. They must be driving in from West Virginia. You forgot that it probably takes them a little longer to get here," Ben added as the voice of calm reason to the situation.

"I don't know why they have to live so far away. What's wrong with Pittsburgh?" Michael continued to complain.

"So you haven't been invited out the house either," Drew commented. "You know that Brian is a very private person. And right now, no one except Justin gets Brian to do anything he doesn't really want to do. So Michael, I guess you are going to have wait like the rest of us for the invitation to their secret hideaway."

"I don't see what the big secret is anyway." Michael continued to protest.

"Justin is getting ready for several shows. He has a lot of painting to do. Brian is determined that no one interrupts Justin while he's painting," Ted was quick to point out.

"Do you really think that Justin is painting? After all, he dropped into the comic book store to see me. I think Justin is just making excuses to keep Brian all to himself."

Calvin interrupted with a laugh, "Wait a minute. I thought the prevailing wisdom was that Brian was holding Justin prisoner at the mansion. When did Brian become the captive? Did I miss something?"

"You know I was starting to wonder the same thing," Blake commented with a laugh.

"From what I can tell, they have both simply made the mansion their home. Oh, they still stay at the loft when they need to, but the mansion is now their home base," Emmett added. "And I personally think it's wonderful. Brian is even being a really good sport about all the rented furniture and all."

"See once again, Justin is costing Brian a fortune," Michael ranted.

"Michael, do you remember how much we insured your painting for?" Ted asked, hoping to intervene and return Michael to the land of reason.

"At first?"

"No, finally?"

"Yeah."

"At this stage in Justin's career, he can make the decision not to sell three paintings. Each painting would have probably sold for about $50,000 each. So, let's give up the poor Justin, taking advantage of Brian routine. It's old news," Ted pointed out, hoping the facts would pierce the veil of whatever alternate reality Michael had drifted into.

"Justin has been living on his own in New York. Taking care of himself without help from Brian," Emmett added to the conversation. "You were there when he told us everything he had been doing this last year. Didn't you listen?"

"Do you really think that is the case? Or is that just what he has been telling everyone?" Michael still continued to protest, he just couldn't seem to let this go.

"Michael, you are unusually snippy tonight. What's wrong?" Ben finally asked.

"I don't know. I can't come up with the storyline for the next issue of Rage. I was hoping that Justin and I could brainstorm together tonight here at Babylon. But if he and Brian don't show up...well then..."

"Oh, the comic book. We should have known it was something like that," Emmett added.

"Well, it looks like your problems are over. I see that the super couple have just arrived," Ben pointed out.

"Good evening, twats," Brian said, approaching the group with his arm firmly around Justin's waist. "What did we miss?"

"Brian, where have you been? You haven't returned my calls, and I must have left you like a zillion messages."

"At least. But, I've been really busy at work, as Theodore can tell you. Plus I have a very demanding blond at home. It just doesn't leave a lot of time. It's a wonder I even manage to get any sleep."

"Brian!" Justin protested.

"Don't you and Justin ever get enough?" Michael asked.

"You know Mikey you have been asking that question since the beginning. And my answer now, is still the same as it was then...There is no such thing as enough!" At that comment, everyone started choking and coughing and laughing...well except for Michael. "Well Sunshine, shall we dance?" Brian finally said, twirling Justin onto the main dance floor.

"Asshole." Michael commented, as he motioned for the bartender's attention so he could get another beer.

Emmett, Drew and Calvin remained at the bar to watch everyone's drinks, while the others danced.

A few moments later, Ben and Michael returned to join the trio at the bar.

"Why are you guys back so soon?" Calvin asked them as they started to lean on the bar.

"We couldn't take the heat on the dance floor. Brian and Justin are dancing as one person. Need I say more?" Ben explained.

"So I guess we should move up to the catwalk for a better view of the sizzle until the two of them wear each other out," Drew asked with a laugh.

"This is all so predictable. Tell me again why we come here?" Ben continued.

"Well I was hoping to at least get one dance with my best friend, and to talk to Justin. I don't understand why, if they are this preoccupied with each other, why did they even come out. Why didn't they just stay home?"

"I came to dance! You know how I love displays in public places," Brian informed them with a smirk, overhearing the last part of the conversation. "And Justin says it helps him to paint better, and you know what a supporter of the arts I am?"

Brian made suggestive eyebrow motions at Michael. Then, he continued again, "Besides Mikey, we're queer. We're not breeders. We don't always want to fuck at home in our beds."

"Brian!" Michael complained.

"Also, I have to go back New York next week," Justin added. "And I wanted to see you guys before I left."

"Well if that's the case, I had better get my dance in now," Emmett said, tugging Justin back onto the dance floor.

"He said he was going to be here for three months! Now he's leaving already!" Michael complained.

"It's only for a few days. He'll be back within the week. So you can relax Mikey, we're not breaking up," Brian assured him.

"Who can figure out the fucked up relationship that you and Justin have? You two don't look like any couple I know."

"Why Mikey, that's the nicest thing you have ever said to me," Brian said, planting a kiss on his best friend.

"I didn't mean it as a compliment." Michael hissed, pulling away from Brian.

"Drew, I'm glad you're back in town. Brown Athletics is coming into town next week. Will you have time to drop by Kinnetik to see them?"

"I think that can be arranged. Especially since you did such a great job on the new contract," Drew commented.

"You're welcome," Brian smirked.

"So Mikey, except for the fact that I haven't returned your calls, what has you so upset?" Brian asked in his most supportive manner.

Before Michael could answer, Ben tried to explain things calmly, "It seems that Michael is having trouble with the story line for next issue of Rage. As a result, he is snipping at everyone. But, I wouldn't pay too much attention to him. He's just having a bad day."

"I see." Brian cast his eyes onto the dance floor. He observed that Emmett was just a little too close to Justin for his taste. "Let me go rescue Justin from Emmett. I'll be right back."

Everyone else rolled their eyes. Emmett suddenly returned to the bar alone, as expected.

"All right Michael, now that Brian and Justin have shown up, you can relax and get rid of that foul attitude," Emmett whispered so that only Michael could hear. "Be careful, Ben is only going to put up with so much from you, and Brian has already made it clear he doesn't want to deal with this. So..."

"I know you're right. I'm sorry," Michael finally admitted. He then excused himself to go to the bathroom so he could get himself together.

Ted also headed away from the bar to check on a few things.

"Well that was surreal," Blake said to Calvin while they were left standing together. "I wonder what that was really all about?"

"I've never seen Michael quiet like that before," Calvin added.

"Thank goodness," Blake responded.

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Brian and Justin decided to take a break from dance floor. They took a glance at the crowd in the backroom on their way back to join their friends.

"Theodore, I see the backroom is unusually busy tonight," Brian commented.

"With you and Justin steaming up the dance floor, what did you expect?" Ted explained. "The only thing that will draw a bigger crowd is when you and Justin are actually IN the backroom."

"Why don't I show you my renovated VIP lounge?" Brian whispered to Justin, trying to ignore Ted's remark.

"Brian!" Michael interrupted, and Brian just rolled his eyes.

"What now, Mikey?"

"I still need Justin's help to brainstorm story ideas for the next issue of Rage."

"Mikey you are so pathetic. Not tonight!"

"Michael, I'll call you. We can do it by phone when I'm in New York...like we always do," Justin finally said, which seemed to finally placate Michael. Justin just shook his head.

Michael finally let out a sigh of acceptance, "Ok."

"I'm glad that's finally settled," Brian added, pulling Justin again away from the group. "Now about that VIP lounge."

"And, there they go again," Emmett quipped with a laugh.

"I don't think I've ever seen Brian happier," Drew commented.

"How long did you say they have been together?" Calvin asked.

"Six years," Emmett answered with a sigh.

"I hope I meet someone who is still that hot for me after six years," Calvin added.

"One can only hope," said a stranger as he approached and extended his hand toward Calvin. "I'm Trace. Would you like to dance?"

"I'm Cal. Sure, why not."

Calvin followed Trace to the dance floor, while the others smiled their approval as they considered the new coupling.

When Brian and Justin returned shortly, Emmett started to tease. "That was quick."

"Even the VIP lounge is packed. What is going on?" Brian asked with a smirk. "Well Sunshine, it looks like I'm going to have to take you home to fuck you all night long."

"The sacrifices you make," Justin teased, leaning up to give Brian a gentle kiss.

"Brian, don't you own Babylon?" Blake sheepishly asked.

"Yeah, Why?"

"Don't they HAVE to make room for you?"

Brian laughed. "Justin and I like to have room to maneuver. The lounge was just too crowded. Another time, perhaps." Brian teased, once again sliding his arm around Justin's waist and pulling Justin towards him. Justin leaned into the hug, but blushed at the attention.

Brian then looked over at Michael, "All right Mikey, now that you have stopped being a drama queen, how about a dance, if that's ok with the professor."

Ben nodded his agreement, and Michael broke into a big smile. Brian and Michael headed to the dance floor.

Justin took this opportunity to move in closer to Ted and Blake and grab a beer.

"How are you doing, kiddo?" Ted gently asked. "How are you dealing with everything?"

"Still trying to get used to it all. You know?" Justin said just above a whisper.

"Yeah, I do. You know we're all here for you."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks."

Blake looked at Justin and Ted and realized that they shared more things than he could ever begin to understand. Blake noticed the gentleness with which Ted talked to Justin, and he knew that the brief conversation spoke volumes. Blake found the interchange to be interesting, and he wanted to ask Ted about it later when they got home.

Brian and a smiling Michael returned back after their dance.

"Well Sunshine, how about one more dance before we go?" Brian asked.

"You mean The Last Dance?"

"Yeah, I saved that one especially for you."

"I think that will be perfect," Justin said, standing up and joining Brian. "We'll see you guys later."

"Yeah later," Brian said to everyone. Then he sang into Justin ear as they were walking, "Now, don't forget who's taking you home, and in whose arms you're gonna be..."

And, Justin just smiled.

Chapter 33 – Together

Sunday Afternoon - Day (28)

It was a typical Sunday afternoon at Debbie's. Carl and Drew were debating a referee's call during the basketball game shown on TV. Emmett and Debbie were exchanging gossip in the kitchen while they were preparing dinner. Everything was sort of laid back and leisurely.

Michael and Ben arrived, and after quick hellos to everyone, they easily slipped into their usual routine. Ben and Michael chatted with everyone as they began to add the additional leaf to the table and gather the chairs.

"Well, I guess it's just us this week, huh Debbie?" Ben commented. "So it's going to be one of the quieter Sunday dinners."

"I guess so. Sunshine has to go to New York, so that means Brian will keep him caged at that house until he leaves," Debbie said mournfully. "There is really no telling when I'll ever see my Sunshine again."

"Ma will you give it a rest. Justin will only be gone for a few days...a week at the most," Michael added. "Brian and Justin were at Babylon last night, so I wouldn't say that Brian is holding Justin captive."

"You sure have changed your tune since last night." Emmett reminded him, looking up from the salad he was making.

Michael went on to explain, " This Rage storyline problem just made me crazy. Once Brian and Justin got there, I was ok. Justin said we would work on the problem once he got back to New York. That's how we've been handling this problem over the last year. So everything is ok. I guess I just panicked! I started thinking that somehow Justin wouldn't want to work on the comic anymore."

Emmett then had to stop what he was doing to ask, "Has Justin said anything to make you think that?"

"No. It's just that Justin doesn't really need the money. With the prices his paintings command, he can afford not to bother. And Ted said that Justin has been really busy working with Brian on some project, so I thought that he may no longer have time to draw the panels."

"Michael, do everyone a favor...stop thinking so much!" Emmett teased.

"Michael, will you stop making yourself crazy. I'm sure that Justin will let you know when and if he doesn't want to do Rage anymore. Until then, will you quit worrying?" Ben suggested.

"I'm half Italian and half drag queen...worrying goes with the territory." Debbie walked over and swiped Michael on the back of the head. "See what I mean." Everybody laughed.

"Did you see Calvin with Trace last night?" Michael asked.

"Yes, I noticed. Trace is such a cutie. It was rather gutsy of him though to just walk up and ask Calvin to dance like that. Sort of reminds me a little bit of Justin," Emmett volunteered. Then he turned around towards Michael and waited for his reaction.

"Poor Calvin! If Trace is anything like Justin, Calvin will be stalked and followed, and he will never get rid of him. Look what happened to Brian, and Justin was just an innocent twink."

Emmett laughed to himself as Michael's response was just about what he expected. Some things never change. Ben looked over at Emmett, and they both shared a smile.

"But it all worked out in the end, look how happy Brian is?" Ben tried to add to see if that would fly. Ben held his breath for what he guessed was going to follow.

"Brian is being held captive at that house. He's so confused he doesn't know whether he's happy or not."

"Honey, you're confused. Brian is the one holding Sunshine captive at the house. You know that," Debbie tried to set the record straight. "Poor Sunshine is the helpless one here."

"Justin helpless? That will be the day," Michael quipped. "But you can keep believing that, if you want to, Ma. And they say I have a vivid imagination!"

Everybody laughed.

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Meanwhile In A Nearby Condo (Day 28)

Blake and Ted were having a leisurely Sunday at home. Blake was curled sprawled on the couch reading the Sunday paper, while Ted was flipping through his collection of CDs trying to make the selection.

"Ted, what are you doing?" Blake asked.

"I'm trying to find just the right music. I want to mentally escape before I have to go to back to work tomorrow."

"That's not like you. I thought you liked the challenge of working for Brian."

"Oh I do. It's just that the last few weeks have been rather demanding."

"Difficult client or is Brian picking on you again?" Blake asked with smile.

"Brian I'm use to! No, this has to do with a potential client that proved to be more of a challenge than I anticipated. Add to that Brian and Justin working together on a project," Ted said with a laugh, remembering everything that had happened on the Belluss Occhiali/Eyeconics account, "And you have intrigue and dynamics you wouldn't believe."

"Oh, I did hear that Justin was working with Brian on a project for Kinnetik. That's suppose to be why he came back from New York."

"Was it a big project?"

"Oh yeah."

"Did Kinnetik get the account?"

"Um Hmmm."

"So what's the problem?"

"A few things happened that I'm sure no one expected. They probably threw Justin for a loop more than anyone."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you for reasons of confidentiality. Justin will have to tell you in his own time. You'll have to wait to hear about it from him if he feels there is anything to tell," Ted tried to explain leaning down to give Blake a kiss.

"Is that what you and Justin were talking about last night. You two had some cryptic conversation going on that didn't make any sense."

"What? Probably." Ted said, distracted again by his CD selection. "I just wanted Justin to know I was here for him. That's all."

"You aren't interested in Justin are you?" Blake sheepishly asked. "Should I be jealous?"

"Excuse me?" Ted responded harshly.

"Are you interested in Justin?" Blake pointedly asked.

"I'm not sure where that question is coming from... but I'm interested only in you," Ted said definitively, leaning in to gently kiss Blake and then, wrapping his arms around him. "You've heard Debbie say that Justin belongs to all of us. He always has, ever since he joined the group as a kid. We're all so use to looking out for him that sometimes we forget that he can more than take care of himself. He really isn't 17 anymore."

"I was just wondering."

"Well don't!"

"Ok," Blake finally said, pulling Ted on top of him on the couch.

"How much time do we have before we have to meet my mother for dinner?" Ted asked.

Blake simply answered, "I'm sure we have enough."

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Meanwhile at the Loft...(Day 28)

"Are you in the storage area again?" Brian teased. "I thought you were done in there."

"Now I have to figure out what I need to take back with me to New York. We have things scattered here and at the house. I'm trying to be somewhat efficient about my packing. It would be so much easier if I could drive, then packing would be easier."

"And what would you do with the car, once you got it there?"

"I'm trying to figure that out now."

"Well, don't waste your time because it's not going to happen," Brian said emphatically. "By the way, when does your flight leave?"

"I thought I would take the noon flight, so I arranged to be picked up at your office. That should get me back into New York at a decent hour. I have to meet with Catherine on Tuesday morning."

"You know, I could take you to the airport. It's no trouble," Brian offered.

"I really don't want to say good bye to you at the airport," Justin said as a way of explanation, and Brian understood perfectly.

"Ok, if you're sure."

"I am." Justin thought for a moment and then continued. "I noticed you were in my studio last night before we left, what were you doing?"

"I was looking to see if there was a painting of me or my parts of me on your easel?"

"Are you still on that? Give it a rest, Brian." Justin teased. "Am I going to have to put an alarm on my studio while I'm gone, just to keep you from poking around in there this coming week?"

"No. I'll wait until you get back, and then you can give me a personal showing of what you have been working on."

"I can do that," Justin said with a smile. "By the way, we need go online. We have to come up with the perfect present for a Nicky."

Brian and Justin began scanning the FAO Schwarz website trying to find the perfect gift for a four year old. After scanning this and several other websites, they were not coming up with any ideas.

"This is going to be tough. What do you get the kid that has everything? Because the one thing we know for sure, Paul and Jason have made sure that Nicky wants for nothing," Brian added. "What was Nicky talking about the last time you talked to him?"

"Trucks!"

"You're kidding? He has two creative parents, and he's talking about trucks. Doesn't that seem odd to you?"

"Jason also made some cryptic comment that they soundproofed their guest room. So now, they're ready for our visit. Maybe he saw trucks when construction was going on. I don't know," Justin tried to explain. "Kids get fascinated by the strangest things."

"That must be it. Soundproofing, huh? Oh, if only it were true. Then I could fuck your brains out without disturbing anyone. For some reason, we don't seem do be able to master the technique of fucking quietly. You, especially, are soooo noisy!"

"Me? Well I'm sure with the proper amount of practice I could probably be a little quieter."

"Are you implying that we don't practice enough?" Brian pondered for a moment. Justin said nothing, but instead answered with his distinctive eyebrow motions. "Now that I think about it, you're probably right." Brian walked a few steps to wrapped Justin in his arms.

"What are you doing?"

"If you have to ask, then I guess you were right, we really don't practice enough," Brian said just before he kissed Justin. Justin leaned into the kiss, and it deepened and turned passionate. They continue to kiss each other breaking intermittently for air.

Justin noticed that he was being walked backward, and they begin removing the clothes from one other, without breaking the kisses. By the time Justin felt the back of his legs touch the bed, he and Brian were naked, and there was a trail of clothes strewn behind them.

Brian gently pushed Justin on the bed and gently eased himself on top. "I think this practice thing maybe a good idea," Justin commented. "I think I remember this part."

"That's a start," Brian said as he started kissing his way to Justin's neck. Brian always managed to find the right spot, which always drove Justin crazy, and Brian could hear the quiet groans starting from his partner.

Brian worked his way to Justin's chest continuing to work a path down the body that he knew so well...while Justin's responses grew louder, and Brian's voice joined him in his ecstasy as they climaxed within moments of each other.

When Brian and Justin had reminded each other a few more times how they failed to master the delicate art of quiet lovemaking, they simply snuggled together in defeat.

"Well, the practice was good, but I don't think we were one bit more quieter than usual," Justin suggested.

"You noticed that, did you?" Brian smirked, tightening his arms around Justin.

Justin decided that was rhetorical question and merely snuggled closer to Brian's chest.

"We need to go to the office before we head out to the house," Justin mumbled hesitantly a little later.

Brian allowed his fingers to leisurely play in Justin's hair, finally asked, "Why is that?"

"I want to be sure that the art department is ready to work on the ads while I'm in New York. So we need to go over what you think you need to keep Collezione Fiero on schedule."

"I don't want you to worry about that, I just want you to deal with what you need to in New York. Everything here will be ok. I've got you so far off your schedule where your painting is concerned that I'm really beginning to worry."

"Ah! That's sweet. But I'm fine. Will you stop worrying? You've been listening to Lindsay again, haven't you? You know, Brian, I'm not one of those artists that you can lock away in their studio and shut out the outside world, and they will produce painting after painting on some prescribed schedule. That's not who I am and it's not who I want to be as an artist. I would rather have a few paintings that I'm happy with than a large number of paintings that I hate. Besides, when Gus was here I made lots of sketches of some new ideas. I may have to talk to Lindsay about borrowing him again," Justin teased.

"You and Gus locked away in your studio. What am I supposed to do in the mean time...just wander around this huge house all alone?"

"You'll be just fine."

"I know. Just as soon as you capture my body parts on canvas."

"Are we back to that again? You know, Brian, once again your perseverance is exceeded only by your narcissism."

"Like I said, now you know the secret of my success," Brian said with a laugh.

At that moment there was a rumble, which Brian felt as well as heard. "It can't possibly be time to feed you again."

"Afraid so...I guess that means we have to get up. I thought we would stop by Debbie's."

"Why on earth would I want to do that?" Brian teased, trying to prevent Justin from getting up.

"I'm just thinking of you. If I go back to New York without saying good bye you know she is going to give you grief the whole time I'm gone. If we stop by she'll be easier on you."

"Maybe," Brian grumbled, knowing Justin was right. "Ok, but we won't stay too long."

"Deal!"

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"Sunshine!" Deb shouted as Brian and Justin walked through her door. Then she quickly encased Justin in a pair of loving arms. Feeling Brian's glare, she quickly released Justin.

"What are you two doing here?"

"I just wanted to say good bye, you know I'm leaving for New York tomorrow. My agent arranged some meetings so I'll be gone for a few days, a week at the most. I take it you will keep an eye on Brian for me while I'm gone?"

"You know you don't have to ask," Debbie assured him, pinching his cheek.

"No one has to keep an eye on me. I'll be fine," Brian protested.

Debbie grabbed them both by the fronts of their shirts and pulled them into the kitchen. "Now I want you both to grab a plate and sit down," she insisted.

"No Deb, that's ok. We didn't plan to stay," Justin tried to protest to no avail. Two additional chairs suddenly materialized, and Brian and Justin joined everyone at the table.

"I thought you two weren't coming," Michael commented when their plates with food was handed to them.

"My little bottomless pit over there, demanded to be fed." Brian quipped. "So I had to let him out of his cage."

"See I told you Brian was the one holding Justin prisoner," Debbie jumped in immediately. "I don't know where you get you ideas, Michael."

Michael rolled his eyes, while everyone else chuckled.

"Michael, I'll call you, and we can work on that story line that had you so worried," Justin said in between forkfuls.

Michael smiled and once again apologized for his behavior last night.

Brian and Justin ate quickly and spent a few moments chatting with everyone. Then as promised, Brian and Justin left early and headed back to Bri-tin.

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"You know we need another practice session on quiet lovemaking before you leave for New York, especially since there isn't much time before our trip to Cincinnati," Brian tried to point out as they entered Bri-tin.

"Ever the romantic!" Justin quipped as he leaned in to give Brian a gentle kiss.

Brian was a man on a mission, so he pulled Justin upstairs for another practice session. This one turned out to be even noisier than the previous one at the loft.

"It's hard to believe that we're so good at so many things, but we can seem to get the hang of this quiet fucking thing. It's not like us to fail at something," Brian teased.

"I know. What will we do?" Justin innocently asked, moving up to Brian's chest and snuggling close.

"We're going to have to schedule extra practice sessions, once you get back from New York. I think we can get the hang of this if we really try."

"You do. Well, I'm game! They say practice makes perfect."

Chapter 34 – Back To The Apple

Tuesday Morning...(Day 30)

The clock sounded too soon announcing the morning, especially when you've painted most of the night, so Justin resisted rolling out of bed. He justified his resistance by mentally recounting his plans for today.

First, he had the morning meeting with Catherine Mann, his new agent.

Second, and most importantly, he had to purchase that futon for his studio...a key element that had been needed for some time. A round of phone sex on the studio floor, reminded Justin that this purchase could not be put off any longer. Justin couldn't believe that he had managed in his New York studio for almost a year without that needed futon. But now as he remembered falling asleep on his studio floor before his visit to Pittsburgh and how stiff and sore he found himself the next morning, he was determined that was never going to happen again.

Procrastinating, Justin tried to lie there to figure out what else he wanted to get done today. Thinking that there was no end to what he would do to delay getting out of bed, Justin had to smile to himself.

After a few more minutes, Justin's conscience took over, and he begrudgingly rolled out of his comfortable bed, and headed for the kitchen to start the coffee.

Justin opened his refrigerator, and immediately added to his mental to do list...clean out the refrigerator and pick up a few groceries. Justin tended not to keep a lot of food in the refrigerator to begin with, but anytime you're away for two weeks, refrigerator maintenance and restocking are mandatory.

Justin's to do list now had four tasks.

Setting the coffee aside to brew, Justin took a quick shower and got dressed. Somehow a meeting with his new agent required more than his usual paint stained cargo pants and tee shirt.

As Justin got dress in tailored slacks and sweater, he thought to himself that Brian would be pleased. Looking at himself in the mirror, Justin reminded himself that he was a confident artist on the rise, preparing for a routine meeting with his agent. No big deal!

An hour later, Justin stepped off the elevator and walked into the office of Mann & Associates. After a quick glance at the name on the nameplate at the receptionist desk, Justin prepared to introduce himself.

"Good morning, may I help you," asked the voice that was much too cheery for this hour of the morning.

"Hi, I'm Justin Taylor. I have an appointment with Catherine Mann."

"I'm Linda, Mr. Taylor. I'm Ms Mann's assistant. She is expecting you. I'll let her know that you're here. Can I get you coffee or anything?"

"Thanks Linda, I'm fine."

Linda lifted the phone and announced Justin's arrival. "Please have a seat, Ms. Mann with be right with you."

Justin made himself comfortable in one of the nearby chairs and started mindlessly scanning the latest issue of Art Forum. Within minutes, a tall stately woman with black hair and green eyes appeared. She was dressed in a designer pantsuit that was impeccably tailored to fit her thin frame. Justin immediately thought that he was face to face with the feminine equivalent of Brian...the words 'dressed to impress' crossed his mind, and Justin smiled.

"Well Justin, you decided to leave the wilds of Pittsburgh and return to your realm and civilization," she teased. "It's good to have you back. Follow me?"

Justin followed Catherine down to her office. Once there they both made themselves comfortable in the available chairs.

"Gee Catherine, I was only gone for a few weeks," Justin responded, "I couldn't have missed very much, after all, I was only a phone call away."

"Just teasing you, Justin. I'll admit that it's been refreshing to have a client that isn't camped on my doorstep night and day. However, judging by this," she said holding up a folder of papers, "I would say that you've been quite busy."

"What's that?" Justin curiously asked, trying to read label on the folder upside down.

"It's your contract for the Cincinnati Art Gallery. They revised everything to reflect your elevated status to featured artist. Congratulations, by the way! And, according to their cover letter, the contract reflects the increased fees for you to remain extra days as Visiting Artist in Residence."

"So it's all there in writing."

"They must have been quite impressed with you. After all, when I sent you out there, it was just to meet with Tyler Larson to discuss participating in the emerging artists exhibit for the opening. They must have been quite impressed to have added all these other things."

"I was quite surprised too."

"That's all a tribute to your talent. Well, you might as well take a look at the contract. Be sure that you and your attorney review everything. Let me know if you have questions or anything needs to be changed."

"I can do that."

"How is the painting going?" Catherine had to ask. "Now you have not only the New York show but the Cincinnati opening as well. Those are two major shows happening really close together. Are you going to be ready?"

"Not a problem. I managed to get a few pieces done while I was in Pittsburgh. They're still in my studio there. I'm working on few pieces here in my New York studio as well."

"It's good to know that you're keeping busy."

"You have done quite a few shows here in New York over the last year. I've been in touch with a few of the galleries where you had previously exhibited. The fact that you sell out at all your shows is a definite plus. It seems that several of the galleries are requesting that you submit works to them on an ongoing basis."

"You're kidding? That's wonderful!"

"When I contacted the galleries, it seems that were always interested, but for some reason they were just slow in making the necessary phone calls to ask for your work. Now you know why there are so many starving artists here in New York City. The fact that you now have an agent seems to make things easier for the owners. It's as if your work suddenly became much more marketable. You and I know that isn't the case, but perception is everything."

"Brian seems to have mentioned that."

"Oh yes, Brian...your partner. I understand he's in Pittsburgh. I'm looking forward to meeting him. Does it get to New York often?"

"Periodically. We've managed with this arrangement for about year now, and we still manage to see each other."

"I see," Catherine said with a knowing smile. " I forgot to ask, how did the project go? When you told me you were leaving town, you indicated you were going back to work on a project. Did you finish the project? How did it go?"

"The project is ongoing, but my part is probably over. I would say things went very well."

"You're a person of many talents, aren't you? You always seem to have so much going on. Tell me again, why you need an agent? I would like to think I'm going to earn my fees," Catherine teased.

"As you said, having an agent makes dealing with the New York galleries so much easier. I'm sure these galleries wouldn't be asking for continual submissions without your efforts."

"Well, maybe you're right," Catherine finally admitted. "I may have had something to do with it."

They both laughed.

"Have you heard anything about your nomination for the Bronze Quill?" Catherine asked nonchalantly. Then, she waited for Justin's reaction.

Justin was completely shocked by the question. "How did you find out about that?" he asked.

"I shouldn't have had to 'find out about that'. You should have told me." Catherine insisted, no bothering to hide her displeasure.

"Did I fail to mention that? Since it's for website design and had nothing to do with my painting, I really didn't think it was relevant." Justin tried to explain in his own defense.

"If I'm going to be your agent...everything about you relevant. I don't like surprises, Justin."

"Sorry. I just didn't think it was important. It won't happen again."

"Let's hope not. Now is there anything else I should know about?"

"I guess I should tell you that I have been invited to apply for the emerging artist exhibit at the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana this summer."

There was a moment of silence. "Excuse me? What did you just say?" Catherine asked, speaking as if she were in a fog. She realized that she couldn't possibly have heard what she thought she heard. She had no choice but to ask that whatever had been said...be repeated.

Justin took a breath and slowly repeated himself. "I have been invited to apply for the emerging artist exhibit at the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana this summer."

"Are we talking about THE Pinacoteca Ambrosiana...as in the art gallery... as in Milan?"

"Is there another?"

"That show is coming up soon. Are you going to participate?"

"Catherine, listen to me very carefully. I have not been asked to be in the show. I'm merely being given an opportunity to apply...to apply...to apply. There is no guarantee that I will be accepted. My work has to be reviewed the gallery's artistic panel."

"Justin you've been in Pittsburgh for two weeks. How did this happen? Did Brian take you on a romantic holiday to Milan? Give me all the details? Don't leave anything out," Catherine insisted sounding more like Emmett than the polished professional she truly was.

"Through an unusual set of circumstances, I happened to meet Signor Pietro Marani..."

Catherine had to interrupt, "Pietro Marani as in il direttore di Pinacoteca Ambrosiana?"

"Yes, and Pietro was in Pittsburgh and saw some of my paintings. He then offered me the opportunity TO APPLY for consideration to be in the exhibit."

"Justin, did I just hear you refer to the director of the gallery by his first name?"

"Yes, he insisted on that when I met him."

"Justin, I'm truly honored that you have asked me to be your agent. I want you understand that. But, you seem so capable of managing you career. I'm not even sure that you actually need me," Catherine teased with a laugh. "However, I want you to know I'm going to enjoy collecting my exorbitant fees." They both shared a laugh. "But seriously Justin, don't you think that you should wait a few years...before you attempt to go international? Don't you think that you should conquer New York first? You haven't been here in the city that long? You haven't had your first solo show here yet."

"Catherine, this is only an opportunity to apply. There is no guarantee that I will be accepted. But you have to admit it is an amazing opportunity."

"There's no denying that! But, why subject yourself to additional stress at this time in your life? Your career is just taking off here in New York. You're starting to get commissions from galleries. How are you going to take advantage of all the myriad of opportunities opening up to you here in New York and still prepare a application for Milan?"

"I'll manage. It's simply an opportunity. I believe I would be foolish to turn down the chance to apply. What do I have to lose?"

"It's not a matter of what you have to lose...it's a question of the greatest chance for success. I believe you have the greatest chance for success if you just focus. I think you should focus on what's going on here in New York. You should save the international exhibit until another time, later in your career. And then in a few years..."

"I see."

"Justin, you're still young. What's your hurry?"

"Catherine, this was not something I sought out. I was asked to apply. It is merely an opportunity for exposure...a chance for people to see my work. This opportunity feels like my first art show back when I was in high school. That show let me know that I wanted to try to be an artist. Milan just feels like something I should try. No matter what the outcome."

"Will you at least think about what I have said?"

"I will think about it, but don't be surprised if I don't change my mind."

"All right," Catherine said in defeat. "I guess I can accept that. Now that we have that settled we need to schedule a few meetings with gallery owners."

"Oh yes, I forgot to ask you. You've been working on those commissions from your Santa Barbara show."

"Yeah."

"Where do things stand?"

"I completed most of those commissions before I left for Pittsburgh. I have two more painting to be done, and I have been in touch with the clients. So that's not a problem. I will probably complete them when I return to Pittsburgh."

"So the Santa Barbara show worked out for you?"

"Well, I would say it was a plus. You became my agent. I earned enough money so I don't have to wait tables for a while. I can simply focus on my art. It's really a good feeling. Yes, I would say that the Santa Barbara show was good for me."

"You seem so content to participate in shows outside of New York. That's both a plus and a minus, you know."

"I know."

"Galleries outside of New York are always clamoring for New York artists to exhibit there. Most artists here would rather wait for their chance to exhibit at the local galleries here. You, on the other hand, get a lot more exposure. The downside is that sometimes the New York galleries don't take you seriously. But then again, your reputation is solid here in the City so that really isn't going to be a problem for you."

"You've got to admit I get a chance to experiment with new techniques in the shows outside of New York. I was able to do these out of town shows outside the radar of critics."

"Justin, sweetie, how do I tell you this?" Catherine said, starting to laugh.

"What?"

"Justin, you're now what we call a 'hot property'. Everything that you do...everything that you paint...everything you sketch from now on... will be watched by critics. Your days of anonymity are over," Catherine said with a laugh.

"I don't see what's so funny," Justin said innocently, sounding more like Michael than himself. Like Michael, Justin failed to see the humor in the situation...especially when it occurred at his own expense.

"You create a stir in the artistic community, and then you think that you can slink back into obscurity. I'm sorry. I really think that's really funny. You know, I'm going to really love being your agent. Working with you is going to be a challenge."

"I'm so glad to hear that," Justin said, raising an eyebrow suspiciously.

"So, let's go over the list of galleries clamoring for your work. Then I can firm up some appointments for you."

"That sounds like a plan."

Chapter 35 – More Surprises

Wednesday...(Day 31)

"Why are you in my office Theodore? Uninvited I might add!" Brian said, reluctantly looking up from the computer screen.

"How long did you say that Justin is going to be in New York?" Ted immediately asked.

"And your point is?"

"Now that Justin is back in New York, things will return to normal, huh? You're going back to being difficult and demanding?"

"Meaning you should anticipate a pink slip at any moment?" Brian insisted, once again returning to his work on the computer and trying to ignore Ted's presence in his office.

"Yeah. That's pretty much what I figured. I was just checking," Ted said with a laugh, immediately taking a seat in the chair at Brian's desk.

Brian looked up with his usual expression of annoyance. "Theodore, what exactly did you want?"

"I just wanted to let you know that we received the signed contract for the Eyeconics/Belluss Occhiali Joint Venture. Everything has been green-lighted. We're about to be very busy."

"That's really good news," Cynthia commented, entering Brian's office without knocking to join the ongoing conversation. "When is Justin coming back?"

"That was my question," Ted chimed in. "But for some reason, Brian is ignoring me."

"Did you want something in particular Cynthia, or are you, like Theodore, here to be annoying?" Brian asked, now giving up totally on whatever he was working on. He saved the file and then leaned back in his chair.

Cynthia thought for a moment and realized that being lumped in with Ted was not a good sign...so she quickly got to the reason for her intrusion. "The courier just dropped off this package for Justin. It's from Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, should I send it to him in New York or should we hold it here until his return?" she asked and then waited for an answer.

Brian pondered for a moment. "Why don't you give him a call or send him an email and ask HIM?" Brian suggested, trying to scowl so they would get the hint and leave his office.

"Sure, I'll take care of it," Cynthia acknowledged with a sigh.

"Now if that's all, will you two get out of my office so I can get back to work." Brian spoke a bit louder to emphasize the point. To his surprise, nobody made a move to leave his office. Brian let out a deep sigh of exasperation. "Is there anything else?"

"Well actually there is," Ted said hesitantly.

"Well?"

"There was a note with the contract."

"What did it say?"

Ted began to repeat the contents of the note verbatim. "The Pentland Group is willing to give us the licensing agreements we'll need to for the Collezione Fiero Campaign. Also you should expect a call from Andrew David of the Pentland Group to work out the details with you."

"What licensing agreements for the campaign? Why would they be going to calling us? What's going on?" Brian let out another sigh. "Who was the note from?"

"Rudolpho Silvestri." Ted clarified with a sinister laugh.

"Say no more!" Brian said with growing frustration.

"Well, that explains the phone message I just got," Cynthia added, providing additional information.

"What phone message?" Brian asked, continuing to feel like he had lost all control of events.

"I have a message from a Millicent Henry of the Pentland Group. She indicated that Andrew David would be in New York next week. It seems Mr. David wants to meet to discuss their ad strategy with you. Here's his number. It seems that you were highly recommended."

"You're kidding?" Brian questioned with complete surprise.

"No, I'm serious." Cynthia confirmed.

"Bri, what's going on?" Ted asked in complete amazement.

"That's what I would like to know. The Pentland Group is the international holding company for such brands as Speedos and Lacoste. They consolidated under one group to facilitate marketing of their products. The group is based in London. They are huge. What do they want with us?"

"There's only one way to find out?" Cynthia said with a smirk, handing Brian the note. "And Justin is coming back when?"

"You leave Justin out of this!"

"But..."

"This is not a point of discussion. Now, will both of you remove yourselves from my office. I have work to do," Brian huffed.

Having been finally made to feel unwelcome, Cynthia and Ted hurriedly exited Brian's office, but they never quite made it back to their respective offices.

On the way, Ted and Cynthia stopped to discuss a point of strategy and to think what to do next, when Murph from the art department approached their conversation.

"Hi Murph," Cynthia said, "What can I do for you?"

"I need to see Brian," Murph explained.

"This isn't a really good time. Brian is really not in a good mood. He just booted us out of his office. Is there something I can help you with?" Cynthia asked.

"I know that Justin is in New York, do you happen to know when he'll be back?" Murph asked.

"Why are you looking for Justin?" Ted asked, with mild curiosity.

"No reason," Murph sheepishly answered.

"What is it?" Cynthia began to press. "You can tell us."

"I can't explain it. The energy in the art department just feels different when Justin is around...even if he only drops in...everybody produces better. The whole department is more creative. The last few days have been miserable. It's like a dark cloud is hanging over everything." Murph explained solemnly.

"Hasn't he only been gone two days?" Ted teasingly asked. "I'm sure Justin will be glad to know he's missed," Ted continued with a laugh. "But I would be careful if I were you...Brian tends to be a bit jealous where Justin concerned."

"Will you stop it? You're just trying to cause trouble so Brian will pick on someone else, and you think that if that happens that you'll get a free pass," Murph said with a laugh. "But, I've already talked to Brian about this."

"You have? What did he say?" Ted inquired, never one to want to miss any juicy details of office gossip.

"Nothing really. You know how Brian is...he listens but he doesn't say much. So, do you know when Justin will be back?" Murph asked with a sigh, returning to his original question.

"He's only supposed to be gone a few days...a week at the most. He's meeting with his agent." Ted explained. "He should be back by Monday or Tuesday at the latest."

"It will keep that long. No problem. I'll just wait until he gets back." Murph said, still pondering the new information.

"Murph, if you need something, just send him a email. Calling him is probably a waste of time, but he does seem answer his emails promptly," Ted explained.

"Maybe I'll do that. Well, let me get back to my desk," Murph said, turning and walking away sadly. "You'll let me know if you hear anything?"

Cynthia and Ted nodded then looked knowingly at each other.

"So the art department misses Justin," Cynthia commented with a laugh. "Well, what do you know?"

"Murph looks kind of lost. This isn't like him. With the signed contract for the Belluss Occhiali/Eyeconics joint venture, everyone is about to be very busy. I sure hope Justin gets back quickly. Otherwise, things could get really tense around here," Ted pointed out, realizing that his life could potentially be really miserable.

After a moment's reflection, Ted remembered a disturbing thought. "Wait a minute, Justin is preparing for three major shows. He's going to be really busy when he gets back. This changes everything. Now, I really just don't know what's going to happen."

"Let me try to reach Justin on his cell to let him know about his package from Milan," Cynthia said, moving around to the other side of her desk. "I'll try to see how things are going in New York. It never hurts to ask."

"Be sure to tell him we got the signed contract on the joint venture," Ted reminded her with a smile. "He'll want to know about that, especially after all his hard work." Ted paused for a minute. "You might also mention that Murph is looking for him."

"Oh yeah! I was definitely planning on doing all that," Cynthia said with a grin.

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Later Wednesday Afternoon...(Day 31)

Brian was alone in his office, when his cell phone rang. He quickly noticed the caller ID as he answered, "Hey."

"Hey."

"How are your meetings going?" Brian immediately asked.

"Several galleries are interested in carrying my paintings," Justin responded.

"That's wonderful! So getting the agent actually paid off, huh?" Brian asked.

"So it seems. Although, she's not exactly thrilled with me at the moment, and she doesn't understand some of my career choices."

"You got to admit you do take some getting used to! Just give her time. Better yet, just have her call me. I'll fill her in. She'll get quickly up to speed on the Justin Taylor care and feeding manual," Brian quipped.

"Brian!"

"What seems to be the problem?"

"She thinks I should wait on Milan...wait until I have conquered New York first."

"What do you think?"

"You and I talked about this. Nothing may come of it. But, I just feel like I should go for it anyway."

"I already told you I envision my image hanging there. So if you want to go for it, that's precisely what you should do. I told you everything would work out."

"Yeah, but you're not on the gallery committee reviewing my application."

"Will you stop worrying? Did Cynthia tell you got a package from Milan?"

"Yeah. I'll probably be back tomorrow night, so I told her to just keep it there for me."

"Email me your flight information and I'll pick you up."

"It's probably easier if I just take a limo to the loft. It will probably be quite late, and I'm not really sure about the time...I have to wait for a delivery."

"Don't tell me that you ordered art supplies to be delivered to you in New York?" Brian asked, starting to be concerned that Justin might have considered cutting short his stay in Pittsburgh.

"No, I've been meaning to get a futon for my studio here. It's supposed to be delivered tomorrow towards the end of the day. If I don't take care of this now, it will be months before I finally get one," Justin quietly explained. "I really can't put this off any longer."

"What's the rush?" Brian innocently asked.

"Well, someone we know, now likes to have phone sex while I'm in my studio."

"Oh!"

"Yes, so you see the problem? The studio floor is really uncomfortable."

"In that case, I think staying to be sure that your studio is properly furnished seems like a most excellent idea. Did you order a comfortable one?" Brian teased.

"Yeah, but anything would be better than the floor."

"I'll bet," Brian said with a laugh.

"Did Cynthia make our reservations for Cincinnati?"

"All handled! We still have to solve the problem of a present for Nicky."

"I'm working on that. I have a few ideas," Justin hinted.

Justin could hear additional voices in the background of the conversation, so he knew something was happening.

Brian came back on the line and explained, "Well Cynthia just came into my office. She's standing here glaring at me...something about a meeting. So I better get going."

"Ok, I'll talk to you later."

"Later."

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Later Wednesday afternoon...(Day 31)

Brian reluctant dialed the private number for Signor Silvestri and patiently waited for the call to be answered.

"Hullo," said the voice of Rudolpho Silvestri.

"Rudolpho, it's Brian Kinney of..."

"Brian, how nice to hear from you. How's Justin?"

"Let's leave Justin out of this. What have you been up to?"

"Me?"

"Please don't play innocent. It doesn't become you," Brian insisted.

"I'm afraid I don't understand. You know, my English is not very good?"

"Well, Justin isn't here to coddle you in Italian so I suggest that you get your act together and talk to me in English. I'm rather upset with you."

"Oh dear, you're upset with me! That can't be good. I knew I should have gone ahead with my plans to add the clause to the contract that would have made Justin the Account Executive, but Susan and Kellie assured me that you would probably easier to deal with. If you're upset with me already, I knew I should have trusted my original instincts," Rudolpho said with a laugh.

"Rudolpho, don't try to change the subject! You promised Justin and me that you wouldn't interfere in the campaign. Don't you remember?"

"Yes Brian! Of course, I remember. But, I just arrived in Zurich. How am I interfering?"

"Rudolpho, the ink is just barely dry on the contract, and already you've been busy."

"Brian, how can I interfere when I'm an ocean away?" Rudolpho was quick to point out, figuring this cleared him of anything that Brian could be upset about.

"Does the name Andrew David ring a bell?"

"It's a rather common name, you want to help me out with a little more information," Rudolpho asked, feigning complete ignorance and stalling for time.

"Andrew David of the Pentland Group, London. Does this help your memory? He left me a message. Strange it's the same name you mentioned in your note."

"Oh yes. That Andrew David. I sent you a signed release so that you could talk to him, and he already signed a non disclosure agreement, so...have you talked with him yet?"

"He and I have a meeting scheduled for next week."

"Perfect. I didn't want you to have to waste time any time. He and I met for drinks before I left..."

"How do you get releases and non disclosure agreements signed over cocktails? What to you do, carry them in your coat pocket?"

Rudolpho laughed. "It was just a chance meeting, more or less. Why are you so upset? Have you seen the new Speedo bathing suit line? No, of course you haven't! I'll email you the file. Anyway, I thought Andrew's bathing suits would be perfect for our commercials."

"So..."

"Pentland is interested in cross merchandizing with us. By the way, have you seen the Speedos website? Take a look! Can you image what their website will be like when Justin finishes with it? I thought it would be important to consider all this before you went too far in our campaign," Rudolpho rattled on nonstop. Then, hearing the silence on the other end of the line he asked, "Brian, are you still there? You're awfully quiet."

"Just out of curiosity, what does 'I won't get involved...you and Justin will have complete creative control' mean to you? Hmmmmm?"

"I don't know why you're upset. Susan and I discussed this. She agreed it was a wonderful idea."

"You discussed this with Susan?"

"Of course, she's my partner. I wouldn't do anything without talking to her...at least not anymore...I gave her the signed agreements and everything. Hasn't she talked to you?"

"No. I haven't talked to her. When did you do talk to her... after everything was agreed to?" Brian pointedly asked. " Never mind! Don't even bother to answer that."

"Anyway, Andrew didn't need to hear about you from me. He's been talking to Leo Brown, and somehow your name came up. So be prepared for anything when you meet with him. He has his own agenda, " Rudolpho said with a smile.

"Rudolpho!"

"You know, I think I'm suffering from jetlag. I must say buonanotte. Don't worry, Brian. I promise, I won't do anything else until I talk to you first. I promise! You have my word!"

"I wish I could believe that," Brian quietly sighed.

Brian hung up his phone, but continued to stare at it as if it was an offending member. Brian placed his thumb against his forehead...for he knew he had a headache developing.

"Cynthia, have you talked with anyone from Eyeconics lately?" he bellowed into the phone.

Cynthia decided to walk into his office to answer the question while Brian continued to hold the phone in his hand waiting for her response.

"Susan just called while you were on the phone, and she faxed over copies of two signed agreements. She said she would be sending the originals over by courier. She mentioned something about Rudolpho Silvestri having tentatively secured the rights to use Speedos in their ads. She was really excited about it." Cynthia rattled on nonstop. Then, she took a look at Brian and paused before she said, "You know, Boss, you don't look well."

"Justin tried to warn me! He told me that dealing with Rudolpho Silvestri was going to be trouble! I should have listened to him," Brian muttered to himself, while searching in the drawer for a bottle of aspirin.

Cynthia tried not to laugh as she overheard Brian's mutterings. Then she added, "You know, I've been doing some research. If we were to land Pentland Group along with everything else..."

Brian interrupted her before she had a chance to finish her thought. "Cynthia!"

"Yes, Boss."

"Don't you have something else better to do then annoy me?"

Cynthia stopped talking and handed the faxed agreements to Brian. "Sorry. I'll be at my desk if you need anything." Cynthia said, finally leaving the office while Brian was still muttering as he continued reading over the documents.

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"Theodore, can you come in here?" Brian uttered into the phone in his hand. A few minutes later, Ted appeared and made himself comfortable across the desk from him.

"Sure, Bri. What's up?" Ted asked.

"Here!" Brian said, shoving the signed documents across the desk.

"What are these?"

"Signor Silvestri's definition of not getting involved. It seems the Pentland Group is probably going to be interested in having their bathing suits featured in Collezione Fiero ads. I say probably because I won't know for sure until I talk to Andrew David next week."

"That's wonderful! Another international account!" Ted said with some excitement.

"Yeah. Right!"

"This means we might need to think about the possibility of opening another office..." Ted nonchalantly suggested.

"I don't want even want to think about that!" Brian groaned.

"Don't worry Bri, I'm on it."

"Not a word about this to anyone or you're fired." Brian insisted sternly.

"Got it!" Ted said, leaving the office.

When Ted got back to this desk, he smiled to himself and thought, 'Things are really about to get interesting!'

Chapter 36 – Almost Home

Thursday Morning...(Day 32)

"God, I hate New York mornings," Justin mumbled as he reached over to turn off the alarm clock. Once again, he lay there rechecking his mental to do list instead of getting out of bed.

He had already met with Catherine Mann, his agent, and he had gone to a few gallery appointments yesterday. He had one more gallery appointment today, and then he would spend the day in his studio painting and awaiting the delivery of that futon.

Justin thought that he might spend a little time this morning cleaning out the refrigerator, but he would leave the whole exercise of acquiring groceries until his next trip. Otherwise, he would have to repeat this refrigerator clean out operation on that trip as well.

While he was lying there thinking of the mundane, his cell phone rang. Justin knew immediately who it was. "Briiiiiian," he said as he answered the phone.

"Sunshine, I know how you hate mornings so let me get right to the point. I called for phone sex," the voice demanded, without observing the normal niceties.

"No hello. No I miss you. None of the usual foreplay," Justin teased, starting to make himself more comfortable.

"I would have called last night, but I knew you were working in your studio...and your futon hadn't been delivered yet. And, as eager as I was, I didn't want you to be uncomfortable, so I waited until this morning," Brian calmly explained with a smirk, "When, I assumed, you would still in bed... so the comfort issue would not be a problem."

"Brian!"

"Stop stalling, Sunshine. I have been without you for the last couple of nights. Our bed at the house feels empty without you."

"You're staying at the house?" Justin asked with surprise.

"I tried staying at the loft, but I couldn't sleep so I came home to the house. I must admit I sleep better here. I sleep best of all when you're in bed beside me. Then, the where doesn't seem to matter," Brian anxiously admitted.

"I miss you too," Justin whispered with a smile, and he could hear Brian begin to relax through the phone. "Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"No, that will wait until you get home. Let's just say that I'm dealing with more of Rudolpho Silvestri's handiwork."

Justin started to laugh. Then he sheepishly asked, "Do I even want to know about this?"

"It's not really important," Brian insisted.

"I think it is. Tell me! Are we moving to Europe?"

"Justin!"

"Well? Are we?"

"Can't we just have phone sex and not talk about this right now?"

"Only if you planning on starting without me," Justin said quietly.

"I knew that I should have just jerked off like I started to," Brian mumbled. "Then, I would have avoided all of this. You can be such a drama princess."

"You wanted all of this or you wouldn't have called...you would have just waited for one of my masterful blowjobs when my plane landed tonight."

"I was thinking that by tonight a blowjob is not going to be enough...not nearly enough. So I think when you return, I will just fuck you into the mattress as usual. In fact, maybe I'll just leave you tied to the bed so that I can continually have my way with you."

"Now that's an interesting image."

"You know this four poster bed that you selected has all sorts of possibilities."

"I can even see myself begging for mercy as you continue to have your way with me," Justin said with a laugh.

"I like the way you beg for mercy," Brian said lustfully. Justin could recognize the change in tone.

"But of course, you will be gentle with me?"

"Hah!"

"And you will eventually release me?"

"Maybe."

"After all, it's hard to for me to do anything to you from this position."

"I know."

"And, it's hard for me to touch you."

"And I like the way you touch me."

"And, it's hard for me to move around."

"I know."

"And, without moving around...it's hard for me to kiss you."

"Oh."

"And, it's hard to caress you all over."

"Oh."

"And, it's hard for me to kiss a path down your body."

"Hmmmm"

"And it's hard for me to straddle you."

"Oh..."

"And, it's hard for me to impale myself on you."

"Oh..."

"And, it's hard for you buck your hips and thrust up into me."

"Hmmmmm"

"And, it's hard for you to feel how tight I am."

"Oh..."

"Hmmmm...and, it's hard to feel you cum inside me."

At this point all talking finally stopped and the only sounds were quiet groans. Then there were a few moments of silence on the line. Then the unmistakable sound of scrambling could be heard on both ends of the line as they each reached for much needed tissues and towels. And few moments later, the line was once again quiet.

"Brian?"

"Justin?"

"So, you're sure this is what you had in mind?" Justin seductively asked.

"I'm sure..." Brian finally said with a smile. "But hurry home anyway."

"I miss you too," Justin whispered.

"That's always good to hear. I'll see you tonight?"

"Count on it. And Brian, we have a lot to talk about."

"I know," Brian whispered, realizing that he was not going to be able to put off having a talk with Justin any longer. "Later."

"Later."

As Justin finally closed his cell phone, he allowed himself to collapse fully against his bed. He simply lay there and tried to once again slide under the covers. Finally, he rolled over and looked at the clock and realized that now he really did have to get up.

Justin started the coffee and made his way to the shower. After a quick cup of coffee, he dressed again in tailored slacks and sweater. He was now on his way to a meeting with another gallery.

Justin had a full schedule for today and a lot on his mind today, but he knew at the end of the day he would be returning home to Brian.

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Later Thursday Morning...(Day 32)

Cynthia walked into Brian's office. "I have been doing some research on The Pentland Group," she said with some excitement.

"Oh?" Brian responded without showing any interest.

"Did you know that they pretty much have a website for each product-line? Each website seems to have one interesting feature, but then the designer seemed to think that one interesting feature per website was enough. The websites are boring. It's as if really designing the website was just too much trouble so they didn't really even bother. Justin could work wonders for these sites."

"Let's leave Justin out of this, shall we? He's preparing for three major shows, not to mention he's working on paintings for the New York galleries. I don't want to do anything to drive him back to his New York studio any sooner than necessary."

"Don't you get it? Justin is where he wants to be. Stop worrying," Cynthia insisted.

"I'm not worried," Brian responded a little too quickly.

Cynthia decided it was time to shift the topic back on point. "Speedos. Did you see the line of new women's bathing suits?" Cynthia asked.

"Bikini's or thongs?" Brian mindlessly asked.

"Neither. Their one piece is so sexy I think it would be perfect for the Collezione Fiero ads. Did you see it? Look!" Cynthia said, pointing to her full color print out. "You know when I think Speedos I usually think mostly of swimming trunks or specially designed swimsuits for the Olympic Teams. I guess with their overall international brand loyalty, marketing hasn't really been a priority for them. But I bet with the right campaigns, Kinnetik could do a lot for their image and definitely increase their market share."

Cynthia noticed that Brian was now unusually quiet. "Brian, did you hear what I just said?"

"I heard you. I just have a lot on my mind."

"Can I help?"

"Not this time, but thanks for asking."

"I'll be at my desk if you need me." And with that, Cynthia returned to her office.

A few minutes later, Brian emerged from his office and announced that he was going to lunch.

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Brian left the offices of Kinnetik on his way to the Diner. He thought that a mindless lunch with Emmett and Michael would be just perfect distraction. He hoped that he could put aside all the conflicting thoughts that were troubling him by watching the antics of his two friends.

But as Brian started to walk down Liberty Avenue, random thoughts intruded. He noticed that the weather was starting to get warmer, and it wouldn't be long before spring would be at hand. Impulsively, Brian reconsidered his destination and opted instead for a leisurely walk to the park. During this walk, Brian tried to organize his thoughts.

Brian thought about an element in Justin's painting where one jacket had slid from the ottoman, leaving a space that could never be filled. He was overcome with emotion when he originally saw it, and even now, he could still remember that feeling. Talisman Of Time...isn't that what Justin called the painting. Only Justin could create a painting with such strong emotion that the imagery persisted weeks after seeing the original art.

Justin was to come home tonight! It had only been four days. In the past, they had managed separations of weeks at a time. Now it had only been a matter of few days, and Brian had truly missed Justin already. What had happened? Brian was concerned. Brian started to ask himself, if he felt this way after being with Justin after only three weeks, how would he ever let Justin leave after their three months together? He had to ask himself, what was he thinking when he had agreed to this arrangement? Did Justin do this on purpose? Brian realized whatever the answers...he was so fucked!

Brian wondered if Justin had really ever intended, at the end of three months, to quietly leave Pittsburgh and dutifully return to the status quo in New York and pursuing his art career. Not likely, this was Justin he was talking about! Justin had made it clear that he wanted to return to Pittsburgh...or rather West Virginia...to paint. And Brian had to admit to himself that he liked nothing better than waking up each morning with Justin in bed beside him.

Brian thought about all the time he and Justin had spent in the hot tub as Justin tried to talk his way out some situation he had created. Brian chuckled to himself as he realized that living with Justin day-to-day was going to mean practically living in the hot tubs on a daily basis...with the associated skin wrinkling. Living with Justin would never be tranquil...especially if the last two weeks was any indication. Justin constantly made life challenging, and Brian wouldn't want it any other way. He laughed again to himself. Brian knew that living with Justin day-to-day was something that he wanted more than anything.

The voice of Rudolpho Silvestri filtered through his thoughts. 'I knew I should have made Justin the Account Exec on the account...but Susan and Kellie assured me that you would be easier to deal with...maybe I should have trusted my instincts.'

Brian laughed to himself when he considered that after everything that had happened thus far on the Collezione Fiero campaign. Rudolpho Silvestri still held the illusion that Justin might still be the one to coddle him. The blond hair and blue eyes seemed so deceptive, and Brian wondered if Signor Silvestri would ever see things clearly where Justin was concerned. Once again, he laughed. Not likely!

Brian had to also admit to himself how much he enjoyed working on Collezione Fiero with Justin. Justin just had a way of translating Brian's words into images like no one else could. Brian knew it was true. What was surprising was that Murph and George also knew it was true, and they wanted Brian to figure out a way to make Justin part of the art department. As much as everyone wanted things to be different, Justin had to be allowed to make his own way in the world.

This reminded Brian that he needed to be very protective of Justin's time once he got back from New York. It was too easy for George and Murph to lure Justin into projects in the art department. It was also too easy for Cynthia and Ted to corral Justin to smooth the way for dealings with Brian. Brian had to admit it had all been too easy so far, and now he had to make sure that it didn't continue to happen once Justin returned. Justin had to be allowed to paint uninterrupted. Brian was going to make sure of it.

'It's only time isn't good enough Brian' , Justin had said in his letter, 'Now is the time.'

Brian had told himself that the decision to for Justin to go to New York a year ago had been a mutual decision, but Justin in retrospect believed that they had failed to look for a creative solution problem. Justin believed that they overreacted and settled on the decision that he should move to New York. While it was true that Brian wanted Justin to have every chance to succeed as an artist, and he was willing to risk everything so that Justin would have this chance.

Brian wanted there to be no regrets, but Justin decided that his success as an artist was not to be at the expense his relationship with Brian, and Justin had fought for his position against all odds. Justin had been in New York for a year, and he had been successful.

Justin had decided they should be together now...not later. He made that clear in his painting; he made it clear in his letter. Now, Brian knew that he had promised to find creative solution that Justin wanted.

Justin wanted to live in Pittsburgh/West Virginia to paint. Yet every time Brian tried to process making that happen, he was confronted with the real possibility that his own address might be about to change. This week the dream of Kinnetik International seemed to be a little closer to reality, but every time he started down that path of thought...there was Justin.

'Are we moving to Europe?' Justin had asked this morning, making it sound as if his bags were already packed. Brian couldn't even begin to answer that question.

Kinnetik International...what price was Brian willing to pay to make his dream a reality? Whereas it might be true that Justin did not need to live in New York, he did need to have easy access to the city. Justin's career was just taking off in New York. If Justin followed him to Europe, he could possibly sacrifice everything he had gained during this last year. Brian knew he would never allow that to happen. And yet, Brian couldn't even begin to process the idea of setting up the international office of Kinnetik without Justin by his side. What was he going to do?

To prove to the person that I love how much I love him...that I would give him anything...I would do anything... I would be anything...to make him happy.

And with those words, Justin had finally agreed to marry Brian. The marriage didn't happen, but Brian knew the words were still as true today as they were a year ago when the words were originally spoken.

And Brian knew that Kinnetik International would be a decision that he would have to make. Justin was coming home, and Brian knew they had much to talk about. Brian knew that somehow...together...they would try to make all the pieces fit.

Brian looked as his watch and realized that quite a bit of time had passed since he started his walk. So, he turned around and headed back toward his office at Kinnetik, stopping to grab a carryout order at the Diner on his way.

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Thursday Afternoon...(Day 32)

Justin was reviewing his mental to do list one more time. He had his scheduled meeting with the final gallery that was interested in carrying his paintings. Justin had a chance to shop at FAO Schwarz to find a selection of birthday gifts to be delivered to Nicky in Cincinnati. While he was there, Justin couldn't resist purchasing the latest painting toy, which he had sent to Gus in Toronto. Justin grabbed a takeout order and headed to his studio to wait for the delivery of his futon.

Although he had confirmed reservations on the 10PM flight to Pittsburgh, Justin hoped that by some miracle he would be able to get an earlier flight. These few days in New York had been wonderful, but Justin really couldn't wait to get back home to Pittsburgh. Then, he and Brian would talk, and he could find out what had been going on Pittsburgh in his absence.

Justin knew that something was clearly up. The mention of Signor Silvestri was the first tip off. The second tip off was distinctive change in Brian's calling pattern over the last few days. True, it had only been a few days, but Justin sensed that there was a lot going on in Pittsburgh that he didn't know about. Justin knew that he and Brian had a lot to talk about.

'Are we moving to Europe?' he had asked this morning. Europe. Justin knew that this was a possibility from the moment Signor Silvestri became part of the mix. He had warned Brian about this before the Collezione Fiero campaign was created. Now, he could imagine the thoughts racing thought Brian's mind. Brian probably wouldn't ask him to move to Europe, because Brian would be afraid that it would jeopardize Justin's burgeoning art career. Justin was determined not to let Brian sacrifice his dreams. Justin was also not going to let Brian move to Europe without him.

Justin's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door to his studio. Fate was smiling on him today...for his futon was being delivered early. Justin supervised the futon's placement within the studio. Satisfied with the new décor, he gathered his messenger bag, set the alarm, and locked the studio. Justin quickly headed for his loft to pack.

He efficiently packed for his return trip to Pittsburgh, changed his plane reservations to an earlier flight, and sent a text message to Brian about the change in plans.

The cab to airport maneuvered through traffic to get him to his plane on time.

A phone call to Brian just before he was ready to board the plane confirmed that Brian would be waiting at the airport for his arrival home. Justin used the hour flight to gather his thoughts for he and Brian had much to discuss.

Chapter 37 – So It Begins

Thursday Evening...(Day 32)

Brian stood there watching as Justin's plane taxied to its gate, and he felt himself exhale a breath he hadn't realized that he was holding. For just a moment Brian felt the world right itself once again on its axis...at least his world anyway.

Watching the blond hair and familiar smile approaching, caused Brian to finally smile. And a few minutes later, finding himself hugged a little tighter than usual by his partner, made Brian almost forget about the stares he knew they received.

"Hey," Justin whispered quietly into his ear.

"Hey yourself," Brian said, leaning back slightly to get better look at Justin.

They quickly made their way back to the car. Once inside, Brian reached across and pulled Justin into a passionate kiss. Justin yielded into the kiss until the need for air caused them take a quick breath and immediately resumed kissing each other again.

"Welcome back," Brian said, trying to remember how to breathe.

"I've missed you," Justin added, followed by sigh.

"I can tell," Brian teased, reaching over to gently grasp Justin's hand.

Justin responded to Brian's touch and let their fingers gently lace together.

"I thought we would go to the loft, since it's closer," Brian said as they were driving out the airport exit. Then he smirked. "Unless of course, you did something while you were in New York that we need to discuss in a hot tub," Brian said with a laugh.

"It's true we're probably going to need to get into the hot tub...just so that you can try to talk your way out of that 'maybe I'll tie you to the bedpost' comment you made this morning," Justin teased in response

"You know, I've been imagining you in that tied-up condition all day. The only interruption to the fantasy of course, is the fact that I know you."

"What's that suppose to mean?"

"Knowing you and your constant need to be fed, posed a real obstacle to sustaining my fantasy."

"Speaking of feeding me...can we pick up something? I haven't eaten anything since early afternoon."

"But you promised me one of your masterful blowjobs. Food is not going to get you off the hook! Stop worrying, we still have time to have something delivered. Is Thai ok?"

Justin nodded.

"So how was New York? I guess that you got your futon? I hope it's really comfortable."

"It really is a nice touch to my studio. We'll have to make plans to christen it," Justin said with lusty eyebrow movements for emphasis. Brian couldn't contain his laugh.

As they continued the drive to the loft, Justin leaned across and slid his right hand inside Brian's shirt and leaned his head against Brian's shoulder. It was a simple gesture, but this was the contact that Justin had missed all week.

"I love the feel of you," Justin whispered. For just a moment Brian leaned his head over to gently touch the top of Justin's head. Brian kept driving, but he could feel the heat every place that Justin caressed. "You have no idea how much I missed this."

"I think that I do. I've missed you too. But Sunshine, I'm driving here."

"Yeah?"

"Stop that!" Brian demanded as Justin's caresses started to wander to interesting places within reach. "I need to get to the loft in one piece...I have definite plans for you." Justin reluctantly removed his hand from inside Brian's shirt.

Although they were still holding hands, Brian felt the loss of the additional closeness when Justin's hand was removed from his chest. This loss of touch caused Brian to sigh.

" Just let me get us safely to the loft, and then you can have your way with me."

"Really!" Justin said with a twinkle in his eye that Brian could see without diverting his eyes from the road.

"It's just a figure of speech, Sunshine. Don't go getting any ideas." Brian insisted, trying to sound convincing and failing miserably.

"Too late!" Justin said shaking his head with a grin. "Much too late!"

"Somehow, I figured that." Brian said with a sigh, resigning himself to his eventual fate, but inwardly, he couldn't resist a smile.

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Brian and Justin were kissing passionately and groping each other as the elevator ascended from the ground floor to the loft. The rumbling of Justin's stomach, which Brian felt reverberate against his own body, interrupted their passion.

"You know it's awfully hard to fuck you when your stomach is rumbling like that?"

"Well, I warned you that I was hungry."

Finally opening the door to the loft, Brian accepted defeat and went immediately to the phone to place their dinner order for delivery.

"There, that's..." Brian tried to announce as he was hanging up the phone, but his words were interrupted as he felt his cock surrounded by the mouth of a kneeling Justin.

Brian threaded his fingers into Justin's hair and got lost in the silkiness of the blond strands, while he felt his body thrust forward into the expert mouth upon his cock.

Brian felt his body yield to the mixture of the sensations he was experiencing, and he wanted the feelings to go on forever. But too soon Brian felt himself being pushed over the edge as he shot down the back of Justin's throat. Justin swallowed all that Brian had to offer, and they drifted in silent pleasure together.

After a few moments later, Justin reached up to gently kiss Brian on the lips.

Brian could taste himself in Justin's kiss and their kisses became more passionate. Justin surrendered to the kisses as their tongues began to battle for dominance until the need for air finally pulled them apart.

"Ok, we have about 20 minutes before dinner arrives, that should give us just enough time," Brian panted, pulling Justin into the bedroom and pushing him down on the bed.

"Ever the romantic!"

Clothing for both of them was quickly cast aside and Brian once again pushed Justin down on the bed. Brian slid up Justin's body caressing any place that he could reach. Once again kissing Justin, he reached for the condom and lube. Brian licked and nipped a path down Justin's body savoring the familiar tastes and smells.

Brian took great care to gently prepare Justin, before sheathing his own cock with the condom, and gently placing Justin's legs on his shoulders. With well-practiced movements, he pushed into Justin, allowing time for his partner to adjust. Once their mutual rhythm was established, their thrusts and writhes matched each other until Brian was able to hit that certain spot that sent Justin over the edge, and he released his load between them. Brian felt Justin's release and wasn't far behind as he released into the condom.

Fully satiated, they collapsed onto each other as their bodies stuck together by the sweat and cum that they shared between them. Brian remained where he was as long as he could, but eventually he had to pull out of Justin. They both groaned at the loss of contact. Brian removed the condom, tying off the end, before tossing it in the trash. He headed for the bathroom and returned with a damp cloth for Justin.

Then they eventually spooned together and once again enjoyed the recovered closeness of one another.

After a few moments, Brian looked at the clock and uttered, "Dinner should be here soon...so, I'm going to grab a quick shower."

Justin just nodded his agreement.

Just as Brian had dried off and had dressed in his jeans and wife-beater, there was a knock at the loft door. Justin went to grab a quick shower while Brian went to meet the delivery person. Brian slid open the loft door. A surprise awaited him.

"Brian," Michael said as he entered the loft, paying no attention to the look of surprise that he received from his friend.

"Mikey, what are you doing here?"

"I saw that your lights were on, and so I figured you were home. I decided to drop by and keep you company. I haven't seen you all week. I've been calling and calling, and you haven't been returning any of my phone calls."

"Busy...busy!" Brian said, continuing to stand by the door.

"Well, I thought that this would be a good time for us to spend some time together since Ben is working on his lecture notes, and I have a free evening."

"Afraid not, Mikey. I'm busy! And ..." About that time, there was another knock on the door. "Excuse me," Brian said, once again sliding open the door to the loft.

Michael simply moved out of the way and made himself comfortable on a nearby stool.

Brian greeted Dave, his favorite delivery person, with a smile. Dave efficiently unloaded the bags, containing dinner on the counter, handed Brian the charges, and quickly received enough money to cover the amount due and a generous tip. Then with a quick thank you, Dave was quickly on his way.

Brian turned around and saw that Michael had made himself comfortable. Brian sighed as he said, "Are you still here?"

"I'm not going anywhere. I couldn't let you eat alone. What did you order?"

"Mikey, what about I'm busy did you not understand? And, I'm not alone."

Michael finally heard the rustling sounds from the bedroom. "Well, if that's a trick he should be leaving soon, so we should be able to spend the rest of the evening together unless you want to go Babylon...to check out the back room."

"Afraid not," Brian insisted, sliding open the door as an overt hint that it was time for Michael to leave.

"I don't know why you're asking me to leave. That trick has got to be on his way out. You would never let them stay for dinner anyway. After all, I'm your best friend, and we haven't spent any time together."

"Not this time Mikey," Brian said once again, motioning toward the open door.

"I hope that was dinner...I'm starving." Justin said, coming down the steps, dressed in sweat pants and a tee shirt.

"What else is new?" Brian quipped with a smile, reaching into the refrigerator for bottled water. "Mikey was just leaving!"

"Oh, hello Michael," Justin said when he noticed the visitor.

"Justin! What are you doing here? You're supposed to be in New York."

"I just got back. And I do sort of live here. You remember? What are you doing here?"

Michael looked over at Brian, who was smiling but still motioning for the door. Michael got the distinct impression that Brian was enjoying this moment.

Michael became flustered. "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought Brian was ... I was just...I'm leaving. Brian, I'll talk to you later," Michael rambled on with this guilty expression on his face.

"Bye Mikey," Brian said sarcastically as Michael finally hurried through the opened door, which Brian quickly shut behind him. "Let's eat!"

"Did Michael want anything in particular?"

"Not really," Brian answered with a smirk. "But tell me something, when did lights on in our loft become an invitation to just drop by for a visit?" Brian asked as he started to unpack the dinner delivery.

Justin had no answers.

Justin set up the plates and things on the coffee table in the living room. Brian and Justin grabbed cushions and settled in on the floor to eat.

"I think we should drive out to the house after we eat," Brian suggested. "I want you all to myself, and I really don't want to deal with any more interruptions."

"So are we going to talk or are you once again thinking of tying me to the bedposts," Justin asked with a smirk as he stood up to head to the kitchen.

"No, I'm planning to fuck you into the mattress. I'll have to save tying you to the bedpost for later," Brian said, giving Justin a swipe on the ass as he passed by.

They finished dinner and quickly loaded the dishwasher. They gathered their things and left the loft heading out to Bri-tin.

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On the ride to Bri-tin, Justin talked about his meeting with the galleries that were interested in carrying his work. Justin pointed out that he hadn't made any decisions yet. He still needed to decide whether any...or all of galleries...were actually going to carry his paintings.

"What's causing you to hesitate?" Brian asked out of genuine curiosity.

"I don't want to be reduced to some 'artistic automaton' turning out painting after to painting to meet the arbitrary whims of some gallery owners," Justin explained.

Justin still had reservations about just selling paintings...as opposed to selling his paintings associated with actual exhibits. Somehow, for Justin there was a big distinction.

Justin still wasn't sure how he felt about this difference, so he was going to take some time to think things over. He wasn't going to make any rash decisions, and Brian agreed that it was probably wise to be cautious.

"Be sure to talk to your agent, and let her know your concerns," Brian later suggested. "And you could always talk to Lindsay or even Sidney Bloom if you really need a talk it through."

"That's a good idea."

Justin brought Brian up to date on the list of presents for Nicky that he purchased at FAO Schwarz before he left New York. He was careful to mention that the packages had already been sent so they wouldn't have to try to trudge them on the plane next weekend.

"It's hard to believe that it has been four years," Justin commented. "I remember that we all had to rush back from our vacation. All the complications associated with Gabrielle's sudden delivery. The hours of uncertainty about whether either of them would survive. Then the mixture of joy and sadness as both Nicky and Alex were born then Alex not making it. But things have been happier since then. Paul and Jason have Nicky and they couldn't be happier. Gabrielle was depressed for a long time, but now she is ok too."

"Yeah, and we got to run the agency for a little while. You were really good with the art department," Brian pointed out.

"I didn't really think that I had that much to offer. After all, I wasn't an experienced graphic artist or anything. In fact, my only experience had been my internship at Vanguard. But everyone in their company pulled together, under your great guidance," Justin said, leaning over to kiss Brian's shoulder, "So that the company was still standing when Paul and Jason got back. Glenn and few of the guys in the art department are still with the agency, so I got a chance to say hello while I was in Cincinnati a couple of weeks ago."

"You're good at what you do. I wouldn't have asked you to work on Collezione Fiero if it you weren't. So don't let this lack of experience thing throw you. Besides, look at what you did on the Collezione Fiero campaign?"

"Bad example," Justin said with a laugh. "If every time I work on a campaign, it becomes an international incident...I'm not going to have much of a career. I think I should definitely keep my day job as a painter."

They both laughed.

"You've got to admit, there wasn't a dull moment on that campaign. And, if my dealings, so far, with Rudolpho Silvestri are any indication, life will just keep getting more and more interesting. No one else could have pulled this off the way you did," Brian said, raising their entwined hands and kissing Justin's wrist.

"Cynthia told me that Kinnetik received their signed contract. Congratulations by the way! How much havoc can Signor Silvestri create...it's been less than a week?"

"You have no idea. Does the Pentland Group ring a bell?"

"No, should it?"

"They are the holding company for such sportswear brands as Lacoste...and Speedos."

"Really?"

"It seems your friend Signor Silvestri had cocktails with Andrew David of the Pentland Group. They may be interested in having their Speedo's swimsuits featured in the Collezione Fiero ads. I'm meeting with them next week to talk about it."

"You're kidding? Wow, that's wonderful!"

"Don't get excited yet, Sunshine. The deal isn't done."

"Of course it's done. You're the best! They have to know that."

"It does seem that Leo Brown gave Kinnetik a great recommendation. When I talked to Leo he mentioned that he would also like to see us work with the Pentland Group as a favor to him."

"Wow! I'm really proud of you. That's really great!" Justin said enthusiastically. Brian blushed, being unaccustomed to such exuberant emotions.

"I don't want you to say anything about this to anyone. I want you to keep this confidential. Ok?"

"No problem. How are Ted and Cynthia dealing with things?"

"It's going to mean a lot of long hours. If we get the Pentland Group account on top of everything else going on at the agency, everyone is going to be really pushed to the max. But at the end of the day, Kinnetik should be on really solid footing, and there should be big bonuses all around for everyone."

"That's really great!"

They pulled into the driveway at Bri-tin. Both Thomas and Teres appeared at their window and waved. Brian waved back to them as he exited the car. Justin also waved to them as he reached for his suitcase in the back of the car.

Brian walked around to Justin's side of the car, and swept Justin into his arms. "It's good to have you back."

"It's good to be back. It's good to be home."

As they entered the foyer, Brian stopped for a moment. Justin gently slid his arm around waist. Brian paused before opening the main door. Brian stood there as all images of the events that had happened in this house flashed before his eyes. Moving in, camping with Gus, tossing a ball with Gus in the back, Justin in his studio, working in his the study, Gus singing in the morning, watching old movies in the media room with Justin, watching the DVD of Yellow Submarine with Gus and Justin, being in the hot tub with Justin, seeing the painting for the first time that Justin sent to him, and reading Justin's letter. All that happened here! Along with the biggest memory of all, Justin agreed to marry him here.

Brian leaned down and whispered in Justin's ear. "I love you."

Justin dropped his suitcase and turned around into Brian's arms and held him tightly. And they just clung to each other...there in the hallway...of their house. This was now truly home, and this home had memories.

When they broke apart, they finally continued inside.

They hung up their coats and Brian walked into the living room and flipped the switch to turn on the fireplace.

Justin watched as Brian settled in one of the oversized chairs with his legs sprawled across the oversized ottoman. It was obvious that Brian was completely relaxed. Justin started to walk away to give Brian a chance to savor his alone time.

Brian reached out his arm and pulled a laughing Justin back into his lap. "Where do you think you're going? Come back here!"

Justin curled up with Brian in the same oversized chair, without saying anything, just snuggling closer together as Brian wrapped his arms around him. They just sat there together for a while, watching the fire in silence.

Eventually, Brian broke the silence. "I think I'd like to keep this house for just us...you, me, and Gus. I'm not ready to share Bri-tin with the rest of them yet. Is that ok? Can we keep this for just us? I know it's a lot to ask...after all this is your house too."

"No problem. But, you know that eventually they are going to find us?"

"Yeah, I know. I have my reasons. I also want you to be able to paint without interruptions. And I know that I'm the biggest culprit of all. I'm really sorry about that. When I asked you to come back, I never meant to jeopardize your work."

"You haven't. I want you to stop worrying. Everything is ok. When we come back from Nicky's birthday celebration, I'm going to sequester myself in the studio and paint nonstop."

"I think I'll arrange with Teres to slide you meals occasionally under the door, so that I won't have to worry about you becoming a starving artist. That way you really can pretty much paint nonstop."

"That seems like a good idea." Then Justin paused to ask, "Are you are all right with everything going on at Kinnetik?"

"Now, that you're back here. I'm fine. When do you think that you'll have to go back to New York?"

"I'm not expecting anything to send me back anytime soon. I got the contract from Cincinnati Art Gallery. I already talked to the galleries. I met with Catherine. I talked to my attorney. I'm sure things will crop up, but I'm pretty much going to be here at the house."

"Me too."

"What do you mean...you too?" Justin asked with surprise.

"You and I have a lot to talk about. I think maybe I'll take tomorrow off, and we can hang out here through the weekend. That should give us plenty of time to talk thing over. Besides we still need some time for other things...we still have quite few rooms to christen." Brian said with a smile. Justin just laughed.

"You know we have a fireplace in our bedroom?" Justin pointed out after a few minutes.

"Yeah. What's your point?"

"I think we should go there."

"Why? Are you sleepy?"

"Would it matter? You promised to fuck me into the mattress, and I intend to hold you to that promise."

"Well Sunshine, you know I always keep my promises." Brian said, pushing Justin up from his comfortable spot and turning off the fireplace. With arms around each other, they headed for their bedroom.

Chapter 38 – The Talk, Part 1

Friday Morning at Bri-tin...(Day 33)

Brian awoke the next morning to find that he was almost alone in bed. Justin was nowhere in sight, having scampered out of bed at first light to head for his studio. Much earlier, Brian vaguely remembered hearing the shower. He then remembered turning over and going back to sleep.

Now Brian found himself almost alone in bed...almost alone...because beside him in bed, where he would have expected Justin to be, was a sketch of himself sleeping among the rumpled sheets. Justin had lingered long enough over the image of the sleeping Brian to make this sketch before proceeding down to his studio.

Brian admired the sketch of himself. He wondered if he really looked like this, or if Justin just chose to sketch him this way. It was just a question...the answer probably really didn't matter. It was a just a question.

Brian was, of course, used to being the model for Justin's sketches, but it was rare for Justin to sketch him without his knowledge. Brian looked at his new sketch and remembered another sketch of him done while he was sleeping. He still had that sketch tucked away from prying eyes. He bought it over six years ago at Justin's first art show at the GLC when Justin was only 17. Brian looked again at the sketch of himself, and he could see how much Justin's skill as an artist had grown since then...as if he needed any reminders. He liked this image of himself.

Yes, Brian was definitely going to enjoy seeing his image hanging in the emerging artists exhibit at the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana this summer. Brian was sure of it.

After a quick shower and dressed simply in sweat pants and a tank top, Brian carried his sketch downstairs with him. Brian propped his sketch up on the counter to keep him company while he had his first cup of coffee.

As Brian was sipping his coffee, he heard approaching footsteps, and he smiled. "What are you doing out of your studio?"

"I came in to have coffee with you, but I see that you already have company." Justin teased, noticing the sketch. "How do you like yourself?"

Brian fingered the sketch and asked, "Is this how you really see me?"

"I took no liberties with your sketch," Justin said seriously, then leaning over to give Brian a gentle kiss. "You're still the hottest guy around."

"After having seen what Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, and New York have to offer...you can still say that?"

Justin laughed again, "Add Santa Barbara and Cincinnati to the list...and I still stick by my statement."

"Well, since I have it on good authority...then I must be hot!" Brian smirked.

"Absolutely!" Justin said with suggestive eyebrow movements.

Brian reached out and pulled Justin into his arms and whispered in his ear, "As long as you still think so."

"Always..." Justin whispered as he tightened his arms around Brian.

They lingered there wrapped in each other without saying a word for a few moments.

"So what do you and the collection of my expensive, paint-covered, designer shirts have planned for today," Brian teased.

"Oh...no...you...don't!"

"What?"

"You said that we would talk. Don't tell me you changed your mind?"

"Not at all. I just thought that you were inspired to paint."

"Then you would what...go in to the office? Think again! You said I had you all to myself, today and the weekend. You promised we would talk, and I intend to hold you to it."

"And we will, but I want to spend some time with you in your studio while you paint."

"You do?"

"Yeah. I'm sure I might find some little corner out of the direct line of your paint spatter," Brian continued to tease. "That's if it's ok with you."

"I'd love it. But let me fix breakfast first. How about French Toast?"

"That's different from the usual. Fortunately the treadmill is right over there to help me work it off." Brian said, pointing to the nearby exercise equipment. "You really did think of just about everything when you furnished the house."

Justin smiled as he moved to the refrigerator to gather the ingredients to make breakfast, while Brian made himself comfortable on one of the stools.

Noticing that Brian hadn't had his usual glass of guava juice, Justin poured him a glass of juice and handed it to him.

"Oh yeah. I guess I forgot. Thanks," Brian responded, accepting the glass of juice. "Can I ask you a question while you're fixing breakfast?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

"I know that you want to move back to Pittsburgh. I heard you loud and clear. Ok?"

"Ok."

"But if you were to stay in New York, say another couple of years, what do you envision happening?"

"Brian!"

"C'mon Sunshine. It's just a hypothetical question."

"Well, I would probably continue to exhibit. I would get exhibits at larger and larger galleries. You know, more of the same. Eventually I would start to have solo exhibits. But Brian, I don't have to live in New York anymore for that to happen."

"I know. What about your agent? What about the galleries that want to carry your paintings?"

"For the next three months, I'm pretty much committed with the Cincinnati and New York shows. I'm not committed to any shows after that at the moment. Hopefully Catherine will be able to get me into some of upcoming showcases, leaving me free to paint." Justin started to explain. "The paintings for the various galleries are an entirely different story. I'm still not sure how I feel about them. The galleries I have been meeting with are the same galleries where I have previously done shows. But I still don't want to be told what to paint and when to paint it. I still want to be able to try new things. I'm still growing as an artist. If I can't be allowed to grow, then I might as well go back to waiting tables. Why do you ask?"

"I'm just curious what New York still has to offer you...that's all."

"You've had two distinct chances to go to New York. Once with Kennedy and Collins after you won that award back when I was still in high school. I know that didn't work out, but I noticed that you really didn't look for other opportunities then either. You had another chance with the Stockwell Campaign. You and Vance were hoping that all of Stockwell's contacts would have been your ticket to the New York office of Vanguard. Stockwell was such an asshole; Vance didn't really leave you a choice either. I don't know...I'm sure neither of those were the right opportunity for you. But I know that you have always wanted to take on New York by storm. I think that was part of the reason that you were so insistent that I go."

"What are you driving at?"

"With a client base as diverse as Kinnetik and with clients here and abroad, it might make perfect sense to think again about a New York office."

"Would you like that?"

"You and I together in New York? Yes, I'd like that."

"I'll admit that I have thought about it," Brian finally admitted.

Justin finally put the food on the plates and joined Brian at the counter.

"What did you come up with?" Justin had to ask.

"Once upon a time, I thought that if things worked out for you in New York, I thought I might consider the possibility of an office there."

"You did? You never said anything. How come?"

"Well, I'm not known for telling you everything. And, it never directly came up."

"I see. You never mentioned that you were even interested in New York."

"I wasn't sure that you would still want me to come there."

"Why? Every time that you visited me there, I kept telling you that you would love it in New York."

"Yeah you said that. But, I still didn't think that you wanted me to be WITH YOU in New York. I didn't want to interfere with your career. After all, you made a life for yourself there that didn't include me."

"Only because I was forced to. Of course, I wanted you with me. I just never knew it was an option. But then, I also could have painted in Pittsburgh and been happy."

"Could you? I didn't want you to make that kind of sacrifice."

"Brian, a year ago I may not have understood it...now I see things differently. Sacrifice is a part of loving. I didn't want you to sacrifice who you were as a person to make me happy. You didn't want me to sacrifice what you believed was my artistic chance of lifetime to be with you. What we sacrificed instead was that time together. I don't want to ever do again!"

"Eat your breakfast, I have plans for you."

"What? Don't tell me you're still thinking about that 'tied to the bedpost thing'?"

"Justin, will you just eat your breakfast. Let's just say I'm not in the mood to hear your tummy rumbling."

"Ok...ok...I'll eat."

They finished breakfast, and loaded the dishwasher.

Brian disappeared and returned wearing shoes and carrying their coats. "It looks like a pretty nice day. Here!" Brian said, tossing Justin his coat. "Come, go for a walk with me."

"Where are we going?"

"I know you have sketches and maps and things. But I just want to spend some time walking this property...with you. I want to really see it...with you. Are you up for it?"

"Yes!"

They crossed the courtyard and started walking down the path. Brian reached for Justin's hand and entwined their fingers.

"Thank you agreeing to move into the house," Justin remarked leaning into Brian as he spoke.

"You're welcome."

"This is the first place that we've ever moved into together. You know it's special?"

"What about the loft?"

"The loft is special for other reasons."

"Oh, I see," Brian said with a slight laugh.

"I was surprised to hear that you stayed at the house while I was away," Justin commented with ease.

"I was too. Don't go making a big deal of this. Here feels like home. The loft feels like someplace we stay from time to time."

"That's how my loft in New York feels...like a place I stay from time to time."

"Is that why you decided you wanted to paint here?"

"I wanted to live here with you...even if it was only for a few months. I thought painting here would make it easier for you to say yes to our staying here temporarily. I thought after we stayed here on a temporary basis that it would be easier for you agree to my move permanent move back here."

"Oh."

"Why did you say yes to our moving in here?"

"I couldn't think of any real reason to say no to you. And, I guess I wanted to move in here as much as you did. It's an interesting house. But even more, I can relax here."

"I'm glad. If you open the New York office, do we have to sell the house?"

"Justin, did I say that I was opening a New York office?"

"Hypothetically speaking, that is?" Justin commented with a laugh.

"Well, if we're only speaking hypothetically..."

"Well?"

"I would still have to visit the office in Pittsburgh, so I would have to stay somewhere when I was here, I guess."

"The loft?"

"The loft is more centrally located, but it doesn't work when Gus visits. Plus, I was ready to sell the loft a year ago."

"You were ready to sell the loft...and the club."

"Mikey wanted me to rebuild the club. Plus, rebuilding the club gave me something to do while you were gone. I know how much you love going to Babylon. I still love going there with you. So yeah, I'm glad I reopened the club, and I'm glad I still own it. "

"Me too."

"But, the loft is something else. If we're going to be living here at the house, and you're going back and forth to New York, the loft makes it easier to get to and from the airport. Otherwise, we really don't need the loft. Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"And if you and I need a break from each other, this house is big enough for us to do that without either of us going anywhere. Then, neither of us needs to travel very far when we finally come to our senses and make up. So..." Brian explained.

"You have the house all worked out...hypothetically." Justin agreed.

"Hypothetically..."

They continued walking pass the stables. "Have you considered what you wanted to do with the stables...hypothetically, of course?" Justin casually asked.

"If you drag Gus and I to riding lessons every time he visits, I'm going to have to figure out how to at least get us horses."

"Are you thinking of us raising a future Triple Crown winner?" Justin teased.

"That would require a staff bigger than just Thomas and Teres. I wasn't thinking about joining the breeder set," Brian teased, "But riding isn't so bad. Maybe I'll look into leasing a few horses...I haven't really thought about it."

"Oh. I can see us riding now."

"You can, can you?" Brian laughed.

"Yes."

They followed the path beyond the stables to the edge of the wooded area. Brian made himself comfortable on one of the tree stumps. Justin knelt behind him on the stump and wrapped his arms around Brian from behind. Brain leaned into the warmth of the embrace.

"Brian, what are you going to do when Signor Silvestri asks you to move to Milan?" Justin quietly asked, holding perfectly still.

"Where did that come from?" Brian asked with a laugh.

"According to my calculations, it's the next logical step. He likes you. He likes your work. He's never going to give it a rest. You realize that it's just a matter of time...don't you?"

Brian pulled Justin around to beside him, keeping Justin wrapped in his arms.

"No, Signor Silvestri doesn't like me. He's crazy about you. He only tolerates me because he found out I was your partner. I'm just riding on your coattails here, Sunshine," Brian said with a laugh.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Look at the facts. Rudolpho didn't send an intermediary to me, the CEO of Kinnetik. No, he sent Signor Marani to you with his apology. I'm really nonessential here."

"Brian!" Justin said, standing up in protest.

"And, there's more. He wanted to make you the account exec for Collezione Fiero campaign," Brian said with a laugh.

"What? You're kidding? No! How do you know that?"

"He told me himself. He thought you would be easier to deal with. Fortunately, Susan and Kellie convinced him that between the two of us, I would be easier to deal with, so he relented. But I was clearly his second choice."

"That's funny," Justin said with a laugh.

"I'm glad you think so. Just so you know, if the industry gets wind of the fact that I was only second choice, I'll be finished in the industry. When that happens, I hope you're planning on supporting me?" Brian said, trying to feign wounded pride.

Justin burst out laughing. "Stop changing the subject."

"What was the subject?" Brian innocently asked.

"What about Milan?"

"You mean aside from when we go with Paul and Jason this summer for the opening of the exhibit at the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana to see my image on international display?"

"Brian! What about Milan?"

"Justin, New York is at least hypothetical. You realize that any talk of Milan is purely speculative...totally in the realm of the imagination?"

"Ok...let's say I accept your premise that anything regarding Milan is speculative. If we move to Milan, what would we do with the house?"

"Speculatively speaking?"

"Yes."

"I'll still have to come back to Pittsburgh periodically, and I'll still need a place to stay."

"So I guess the next question would be, can we afford to keep it?"

"I don't know yet. I haven't really thought it through. Besides you'll probably need someplace to paint, while I'm in Milan,"

"What!"

"Or, I guess you could move back to your loft in New York? It would make visiting you easier...as flights between Milan and New York are easier to maneuver."

"What!"

"Of course, I would have to come back and forth to the Pittsburgh Office, so I guess you really could paint here at the house like you originally wanted to. Either way, it's not a problem. We'll eventually work it out." Brian said resolutely, believing that the topic was now closed.

"No!" Justin said, immediately standing up and facing Brian.

"No? What do you mean, no?" Brian innocently asked, noticing Justin's new stance but trying not to overreact.

"You promised! You promised you would find a creative solution to our living arrangements. And that's the best you have to offer?" Justin said with a clearly raised voice.

Brian could see that Justin was getting upset, but he was still having a hard time understanding why. "Why are you getting upset? We would see each other every few weeks, just like we do now. You could focus on your art..."

"Brian, I can paint anywhere. Don't you get that! I may have to leave for an occasional show, but I want us to be together otherwise." Justin demanded.

"Justin, with the scenario I just laid out for you I could be floating back and forth between several offices. What do you suggest? Are you suggesting I build you a studio as part of every Kinnetik location? Are you suggesting that every time I travel between offices, you're proposing that you accompany with me? What are you going to do when I visit new clients, accompany me and make the preliminary sketches of my ideas? Maybe send the ideas back to Murph and coordinate the artwork from the road? It's all a lovely idea, Justin...but how would you get any painting done?"

"I don't know. I would manage. But, it's time for us to be together. I thought you understood that."

"Justin! Why are we even arguing about this? This is a hypothetical discussion...no make that a speculative discussion!"

"We're arguing about this now...while it's still at the speculative stage...so that when it becomes a reality, you won't do something incredibly ridiculous without thinking about it. And judging by your reactions here and now, I would say it's a good thing that we're at least discussing this." Justin was now clearly upset.

"Will you calm down?" Brian insisted.

"No Brian, I'm not going to calm down!"

"Gheez Justin, give me some time to figure this out."

"Brian, there is no figuring out for you to do on this one! You figured things out the last time and I ended up in New York. We were dealing with the hypothetical and suppositional then too, but that didn't stop you from pushing what you thought was best for me. I don't know if it was the right decision. At this point...that's beside the point. But, I can't let you continue to think that way for the future."

"I don't know why you're getting upset. We have been doing ok this last year. We've seen each other as often as we could. You've made me see that we don't have to live in the same city for us to be together. Our relationship is strong. I just don't see the problem."

"Brian, if in the hypothetical and the speculative you're not planning on us being together, what chance do we stand for being together in the reality. Sure our relationship will survive us living in two different cities and seeing each other whenever we can. We have a track record now to prove that. But I want more. I love you Brian. It's just time for us to be together. I don't know how to make it any clearer."

"Justin, don't you think that I want us to be together. There is a part of me that can't even think of Kinnetik International without you and I being together. But New York may be your chance of a lifetime, and I don't want you to even think of sacrificing everything to be with me."

"Don't you get it? New York isn't my chance of a lifetime...you are! Can't you see that?"

"But, I'm right here...I'm not going anywhere."

Justin just sighed, not knowing what to say. Finally, he found the words. "It seems that we want different things. Maybe we've reached an impasse. So before we each say something that we'll regret, I'm going back inside."

Justin leaned over and gently kissed Brian, and walked back inside toward the house with slow and heavy steps. While Brian stood alone watching Justin walk away, wondering how things could have quickly gone so wrong.

Chapter 39 – The Talk, Part 2

On The Grounds At Bri-tin...(Day 33)

Brian paced for a few moments, listening to his own thoughts shouting at him, 'You can't allow this to happen!' Brian watched as Justin walked away from him.

"Not this time!" Brian said to himself as he followed down the path to catch up with Justin. Finally, he called out, "Justin!"

Justin, lost in his own thoughts and sadness, didn't hear his name being called.

"Justin!" Brian shouted again, this time speeding to a catch up to his partner. Justin finally stopped and turned around to look Brian.

"What?" Justin asked when he finally heard his name being called.

Brian let out a sigh and said, "We might as well go back to the house and get in the hot tub."

"The hot tub, why?"

"If we're going to continue to argue about the hypothetical and the speculative, I guess we had better get in the hot tub to do it." Brian said, taking Justin in his arms and holding on tightly. "We obviously have a lot to talk about."

"You want to go...and get in the hot tub...together?"

"Yeah."

"You're sure?"

"Justin!"

"Well, I'll admit that's probably a better idea than the 'tied to the bedpost' thing that you've been suggesting lately," Justin said with a smile, leaning back to look at Brian. "Now, don't tell me that you want to talk some more?"

"Well, after all...I did promise," Brian said with a sigh. "And when all is said and done, we may still not agree, but at least we can talk about it. So what do you think? "

"Let's do it!" Justin said, sinking further into Brian's embrace. Finally, Justin released the breath he didn't realize that he was holding.

Finally with fingers interlaced, they started to walk back toward the house. "At least, we both love the house," Brian finally said with a smile.

Justin smiled and leaned into Brian, "Yeah, at least...that."

They made their way back to house. The coats were quickly hung up again, and Brian was once again in his bare feet. Brian walked up and hugged Justin from behind. Justin automatically leaned into Brian in response. Brian finally leaned down and whispered in Justin's ear, "Well, which hot tub do you think we should use?"

Justin smiled, "The one down here is closer, and we should probably get in there before you change your mind."

"You don't have to worry, Sunshine. I won't change my mind."

They quickly moved to the hot tub area and removed their clothes. Brian was the first to enter the swirling waters, and Justin stepped into the tub immediately thereafter. They both lowered themselves, enjoying the warmth of the water. Then, they eventually spooned together in their usual position with Justin leaning his back against Brian's chest. Brian wrapped his arms around Justin.

"Tell me about your dreams of Kinnetik International?" Justin asked as soon as he was settled.

"I guess you heard what I said outside. I would love to have a reason to have an international office. And you're right, if I had an office, say in Milan, I would still need an office here in the states, and New York would be the next logical choice."

"So what's the problem?"

"Well, first of all, at this moment, I don't have enough international clients to make an overseas office feasible."

"But you will have...it's just a matter of time," Justin reassured him.

"Besides, I'm not sure I'm ready to do all that's necessary to make it happen."

"Oh?"

"But I did ask Theodore to look into it...just to be on the safe side."

"You did?"

"Yes, you know how I hate surprises."

"So can we work on another campaign together?"

"What? Where did that come from?" Brian asked with complete surprise.

"It was just a question," Justin sheepishly admitted. "I know I don't really have a lot to offer, but I really had fun working on that last campaign with you?"

"So did I. But let's face it, you just like to stir things up...to create international incidents and such. You're still such a drama princess," Brian said with a laugh.

"Yeah. Well, there is that too, I guess."

"But I can't deny that we created a masterful campaign together. I've never seen my art department so eager. My job was never easier. I liked working with you too. And you've got to admit that the international incident you created..."

"Brian!"

"Anyway, we still managed to create the campaign in record time. The clients were happy. Everyone is about to be really busy. Things are about to heat up. I suspect that when we come back from Cincinnati, I'm going to have pull a lot of late nights. Fortunately, you'll be so busy getting ready for your shows that you won't have time to miss me too much."

"Of course, I'll miss you. I just have to leave my cell phone on when I'm in the studio, and we'll just have to have lots of phone sex from wherever you happen to be."

"Especially since you now have that futon, even in your New York studio. I'm just surprised it took you a year to figure out that you needed it."

"Until now, you never wanted phone sex when I was in my studio. You usually only made the suggestion when I was at my loft in bed...late at night when you usually called."

"Oh."

"In fact, this week was the first time I can remember you even calling me first thing in the morning for phone sex."

"I guess I missed you more this time. I've gotten used to having you around."

"My point exactly. We miss each other too much. It's time for us to be together."

"Are we back HERE again?"

"We never left HERE! HERE is why we're in the hot tub!"

"Thank you, Dr. Taylor, for reminding me."

"You're welcome."

"Now, what exactly was your point?"

"We need to be together, sleep in the same bed, and wake up together every morning. That's all I'm saying."

"That sounds like a marriage."

Justin pivoted slightly so that he could face Brian. Justin's facial expression became totally serious when he said, "We don't need rings or vows to prove we love each other. You know that."

"But it doesn't change the facts though does it?" Brian's voice took on a serious tone.

"What do you mean?" Justin asked, snuggling back into the spooned position.

"You and I are very much ... you know."

"Brian, we're a couple. And as much as we drive each other crazy, we're going to stay a couple. We have survived a year in a long distance relationship, and we're still together. And being with each other is still where we both want to be. That's all there is to it!"

"You realize that just because we didn't get married a year ago, doesn't mean that I'm any less committed to you, you know?" Brian stated firmly.

"I know. That's why I want us to be together. We can't help the short periods of separation. But, the rest of time..."

"I've had my chance to be successful, Justin. I'm still having it. I still get to chase my dreams. I want you to be able to do the same. I want you to be able to go as far as your dreams and your talent will take you. I just don't want you to give all that up just to be with me."

"What is it with you and Lindsay?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where is it written that I have to sacrifice everything to be a great artist? My talent isn't going to wither and die because you and I are together. We know that there is more to who I am as an artist than that. I'm not one...to sacrifice everything that I am...and to sacrifice everything that I have...to achieve my success as an artist. Art is important to me, but success at any cost is not. I still don't want to be told what to paint and when to paint it. I need different challenges to keep my artistic skills sharp. I'm a better artist because of the diverse projects that I pursue. So working on campaigns for Kinnetik wouldn't make me any less of artist than illustrating Rage."

"What's your point here?"

"If you're opening Kinnetik offices all over the globe, I want to be with you when that happens."

"So I wasn't too far off, you really do want to travel with me, when you can. You want me to build a studio for you in each Kinnetik office. So you can paint wherever we happen to be. Is that you're telling me? Is that what you really want?"

"Yes!"

"What about your exhibits? I suppose you want me to travel with you to all your shows and stuff."

"When you can...that seems reasonable, don't you think?"

"I suppose...that would be fair. At least that means that you would still seriously continue to pursue your art."

"You can charge me rent for my studio space in each of your offices. And, I'll make it worth your while, by working on Kinnetik projects when you want me to."

"But I keep offering you a job at Kinnetik, and you keep turning me down. Something about you wanting to make you own way in the world."

"I'm doing that. I'm making my way in the world. I have my own identity now. I'm not just your partner. I'm an artist in my own right. In time, I guess I'll be successful. I just have to keep working at it. And I intend to do just that. The fact that you and I are living together is not going to suddenly make me lose all my artistic talent. I'll still be an artist. The difference is you and I will be together, which is all that I really want."

"You are serious about this, aren't you?"

"Yes! Haven't you been listening to me?"

"Well, you're going to be here at Bri-tin for the next three months painting. So that's a given. You'll be flying back and forth to New York, as you need to. I'll try to get used to you taking trips...leaving and coming back. After the Cincinnati and New York shows, we have to get ready for your exhibit in Milan. Then, we'll just see what happens. I have noticed that you lose valuable painting time when you fly back and forth between here and New York. It's obvious to me that your career is there. I know you don't have to live there. But if you lived there, things would certainly be a lot easier for you; even I can see that. I know we both love this house, but I agree with you that being together is most important. Let's wait and see what we can best work this out. I'll put Theodore to work on it. Just don't say anything to anyone, ok?"

"Ok."

"That also means, don't say anything to Jennifer. The family grapevine is as strong as ever. I want us to have a chance to work this through before everyone starts to add their opinion into the mix."

"I won't say anything. I promise."

"Neither will I...well, except to Theodore, of course. But, he's already been sworn to secrecy."

Justin did his best to snuggle in closer against Brian, and Brian automatically responded by wrapping his arms tighter around Justin. At this moment, they both felt totally together.

"Well, Sunshine. It looks like the moment has arrived," Brian said, looking at Justin's skin in the water.

"What do you mean?" Justin asked, pivoting to face Brian again.

"I think we have to move this discussion out of the hot tub and back on dry land. Your skin is starting to wrinkle."

"Oh. Ok. Where do you suggest we go now?"

"Oh, I don't know. You seem relaxed...I'm definitely relaxed...maybe back to bed. Now that I think about it, I did actually wake up without you being beside me this morning."

"Yes, let's erase that memory! Going back to bed seems like an excellent idea...assuming, of course, you're over this 'tying me to the bedpost' thing," Justin teased.

"Well, I'll admit it's a delicious image, but I have other plans for you while we're in bed," Brian said with a smirk and suggestive eyebrow movements. "I'm sure we can work something out."

"Ever the romantic!" Justin said, leaning in for a gentle kiss.

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Several hours later, the usual rumbling of Justin stomach once again caused a disturbance in the bedroom, producing the usual complaints from Brian. "Sunshine, how can you be hungry already? Didn't you just eat?"

"Look Brian, some of us actually need food. Plus, look at all the activities you've forced me to engage in so far today." Justin extended his hand to begin to enumerate. As he was beginning the countdown, Brian silenced him with a gentle kiss. When the kiss ended, Justin continued, "So, it would stand to reason that I would be hungry."

"Thank you for the public service announcement, Dr. Taylor. So what do you want to do about dinner?"

"I'm pretty tired of take out. How about I put something together?"

"One of your low carb, low fat dishes? You know how I love those, but I didn't want ask. But since you volunteered, I'll show you what a good partner I can be. I'll even help you prepare dinner," Brian said with a satisfied smirk.

"You will? Now, that's a scary thought," Justin teased.

"I'll have you know that I managed to survive and eat when while you were away. How do you think I did that?"

"You mean aside from all the food Debbie gives you?"

"Yes, aside from that."

"And take out?" Justin continued with a laugh.

"Yes, aside from that."

"You probably have even pressed Teres into service when I'm not here."

"Not yet, but I'm thinking about it. Ok, you made your point. Maybe I should just settle for keeping you company while you're making dinner."

Justin started to wonder aloud, "I had better check and see what's in the refrigerator. I don't know whether Teres restocked since I wasn't here."

"She did. I'm just not exactly sure exactly what she restocked."

"Let's find out," Justin suggested, giving Brian a tug off the bed.

They slowly made their way to the kitchen where Brian settled on one of the stools. Justin rooted in the kitchen, looking for ingredients to prepare dinner.

Justin was busy in the kitchen. He happened to look up and noticed that Brian had disappeared. "Brian, where did you go?"

"I'm right here," Brian answered, reappearing a few moments latter carrying his laptop and a folded piece of paper. Once again, Brian resumed his seat at the counter.

"What do you have there?" Justin asked.

"I have something to show you."

"You do? What is it?"

"Well, as soon as I get all set up and link to your website, you'll see." Brian said, as he continued fumbling with the laptop and searching the web for Justin's website.

"What are you looking for on my website?" Justin asked, puzzled by Brian's strange behavior.

"You'll see!" Brian said, continuing to be mysterious. "Just a few more key strokes and ...there. Now I'm ready."

"What are you looking for?" Justin asked again, with confusion now showing on his face.

"My painting," Brian answered as if he was stating the obvious.

"What painting?" Justin asked, still not grasping the workings of Brian's mind.

"Talisman of Time," Brian whispered confidently.

"Why would you be looking for it on my website? It's hanging in the study. Why not just go in there? Unless you sold the painting while I was away?"

"Of course, I didn't sell the painting! But if I bring it up on my laptop...I can ask you... about the painting...and letter... while you're... preparing dinner. I have so wanted to talk about this ever since I finally got my hands on it, but with everything that was going on we never got around to it. Now that I have you trapped in the kitchen, it seemed like a good time to bring it up."

"Oh it does, does it?"

"Yes. So tell me about my painting." Brian simply demanded and then waited as if he expected the answer to be immediately forthcoming.

"Excuse me?" Justin asked with total surprise.

"Tell me what you were trying to say when you created my painting? It's a fairly simple question, Sunshine." Brian turned the laptop around to that Justin could get a better look at the screen. "Here, take a look at the screen so that you'll remember what you painted," Brian smiled as he made the suggestion.

"Brian, I don't need to look to see what I painted. Believe me, I remember each of my paintings! And, I put everything that I wanted to say on canvas. So the question is not what was I trying to say...the question is what did you see when you looked at the painting?"

"That's not exactly how I envisioned this conversation going?" Brian acknowledged, trying not to concede any ground. "Just give me a moment. I need a minute to think about this." Brian added, trying to come up with an alternate strategy to bring Justin back around to his way of thinking.

"Ah huh...well go ahead...take all the time you need." Justin patiently added.

"Let's see. I knew from the painting and the letter that you clearly believed that it was time for us to be together. You made that painfully clear. Of course, you have driven home that point ever since you've been back."

"Yeah. Well, I wanted to be sure that you didn't miss my point."

"I really couldn't miss that point if I wanted to," Brian mumbled. "I just...you know."

"I know. So then everything worked out just right, didn't it?" Justin pointed out, thinking the matter was now closed.

"Justin, the painting..." Brian said, gently trying to nudge Justin's attention back to the task at hand.

"Go ahead...tell me what you see?" Justin persisted. "I'm listening."

Brian let out a deep sigh for he could see that Justin was probably not going to give in on this. Accepting defeat, Brian began, "The scarf and the CD...takes us back to the prom."

Justin walked around to the other side of the counter, and wrapped his arms around Brian. "I love dancing with you, you know. Daphne has described for me many times, how we danced at the prom. I don't remember it...I still wish I could. But I do know how it feels every time I dance with you now at Babylon."

"Oh you mean the thumpa, thumpa?"

"No. I mean that I know how it feels to be locked in your arms on the dance floor. I also see how everyone stares at us when we dance. Everyone must have looked at us the same way at the Prom. Everyone must have felt like they witnessed something special. Even at Babylon, everyone seems to watch us...let's face it, those people are definitely not impressed by the fact that we're gay, so something special must still be happening, even now, when we dance."

"At Babylon they simply realize that we're hot. I'm sure that anyone who sees us dancing knows how we feel about each other. And they wish they were one, or maybe even both of us."

"I bet that's how my classmates must have felt when they watched us dance. Oh, I know about the fancy footwork and all. I'm sure it was impressive. But if you kissed me in front of everyone, while we were dancing...I'm sure everyone could see how you felt about me. And I'm sure that there...in that instant...on the dance floor...my classmates all wished that they were me. You may not have loved me then, but I know I was special to you. I'm sure everyone else could see that too."

"I don't know exactly when I fell in love with you. It happened so gradually that one day I realized that I couldn't move because you had this grip on my heart. I know I don't tell you often enough, but Justin, please know that I do."

"I know. I love you, too."

"I do know that." Brian affirmed.

After a few moments, Justin once again made his way back to the kitchen. "So are we going to Babylon tonight?" he asked.

"What?"

"Are we going to Babylon?"

"I wasn't planning on it. I was planning on keeping you all to myself. Besides, you still have to finish explaining the letter and the painting."

"We still have time, and there's always tomorrow. I want to dance with you. We'll make it an early evening. We won't even call anyone to tell them we're going, and we'll even come home early."

"I suppose we could probably do that, if you want to, but first things first...my painting... my letter, remember?"

"Oh, all right!" Justin sighed from his position in the kitchen.

Brian once again focused his attention on the laptop screen. He was already forming the next question in his mind. "What about the rings?" he asked.

"The rings?" Justin mindlessly asked.

"The rings in the painting. Did you know that they were linked together to form a symbol for infinity? I'm sure that wasn't an accident."

Justin sighed. "No, it wasn't an accident." Once again Justin walked back around to stand beside Brian. "The rings symbolized that we would love each other forever," Justin said, gently touching his forehead to Brian's.

Brian pulled Justin into his arms. And they started kissing each other, gently at first. But they were both overcome by the emotions of the moment, and the kisses turned passionate. The need for air caused them to momentarily break apart, but the kissing resumed immediately.

"You realize at this rate, we're never going to get dinner?" Justin stated, while never moving from Brian's arms.

"Who cares?" Brian said, pulling Justin back into a kiss.

The kissing led to a comfortable couch in the adjacent family room. In spite of their re-ignited passions, there was an overriding element of tenderness to their lovemaking.

The shadow of the lovers' embrace is the ultimate Talisman of Time, for the love that is shared is transcendent. Some have said that with the proper talisman, time would have no meaning...one could travel at will...back in time to the past...

Their thoughts were lost in remembrances of another time.

Chapter 40 – The Talk, Part 3

A Little Later...(Day 33)

About an hour later, Brian nudged Justin back into the kitchen, and then resumed his seat on his favorite stool.

Brian made a few clicks on the laptop, and decided that it was clearly time to plug in the laptop. So he started looking under the counter for a nearby outlet.

"What are you doing?" Justin asked, trying to lean over the counter to see what his partner was up to.

"I'm plugging in the laptop. Since your discussion of the painting is taking longer than I originally expected...I'm just making sure we don't lose power before we finish."

"The discussion isn't what's taking time. It's..." Justin tried to protest, but he was interrupted.

"You know, we could have had this discussion with you 'tied to the bedpost'. If I had only known how our discussion was going to go...you would have been in the perfect position...your nose pressed against the laptop screen...your ass in the air...so perfect!" Brian couldn't resist teasing.

"Brian!

"What's the matter, Sunshine? Don't you like my fantasies?"

"Brian!"

"Ok, I was just teasing. Sort of... Can we get back to the task at hand?"

"After what you just said, I'm not exactly sure what the 'task at hand' is," Justin said with a laugh.

"Excuse me...my painting...please...pay attention, Sunshine."

"What now? Haven't we talked about your painting enough?"

"No, not nearly enough," Brian whispered.

In the refrigerator, Justin located an assortment of sliced veggies and cut up fruit. He arranged these slices on a plate, which he then placed on the counter within easy reach of Brian.

Justin started munching on a piece of fruit as Brian once again started to talk.

"Ok, so we covered the scarf, the CD, and the rings. Now what about the jackets?" Brian asked, reaching over to pick up a few veggies.

"What about them?" Justin asked.

"I can see that my jacket is still on the ottoman, but your jacket has slid to the floor. You can even see where your jacket was once located on the ottoman. See the space?" Brian said, pointing to the vacant space on the ottoman on the screen. "When I first looked at the painting, it was so painful."

"Painful, why?" Justin asked with complete surprise.

"Justin, your painting is so powerful, I could feel the jacket slide off the ottoman. When it slid, I could feel my heart wretch. I was afraid that you were slipping away from me."

"And just where did you think I was going?"

"I was afraid that you were moving on. There's emptiness where your jacket should have been. And that space is haunting because it can never be filled. The missing jacket was just upsetting. I don't know, when I finally got a chance to look at the painting, you had gone on your trip to Cincinnati. I guessed I missed you more than I realized. Maybe I overreacted. Gus and I couldn't wait for you to get back from your trip. We both really missed you."

"But I was only gone for a day."

"It was a day too long."

For just a moment, Brian and Justin couldn't take their eyes off each other. Then Brian simply smiled and turned his attention back to the laptop.

Justin realized that this was the first time that Brian had been this open and revealed this much about himself and his feelings. He noticed how vulnerable Brian looked. Justin saw how Brian felt about a simple, one-day separation. Justin could only guess how hard the last year must have been for him. No matter how misguided Brian's action may have been, Justin understood that Brian suffered all this because he thought he was doing what was best for Justin.

"It wasn't meant to be upsetting, you know?" Justin said softly, now reciprocating with a little information.

"It wasn't?"

"No. I intended the jackets and the rings to be seen together."

"You did?" Brian said, looking again at the painting and trying to see things differently. Not understanding, he asked "How?"

"The placement of the two jackets said that the time wasn't right for us to be together, but that in time, we would be together again. The rings were the affirmation that we would love each other always. It was a promise. But the whole picture was painted to tell you simply that now was the time for us to be together," Justin said, reaching over and gently touching Brian's cheek.

"You know, there have been times that I felt we should have gotten married last year," Brian softly admitted.

"Where did that come from?"

"I really wanted to marry you...you know...last year...when I asked...I was serious."

"I know. I did say yes. Remember?" Justin reminded him with a smile.

"But then the article in Art Forum happened, and I didn't want to hold you back. And..." Brian started but then stopped mid-sentence.

There was a moment of silence between them

Justin once again began to speak softly, "You know, we could have gotten married last year, and I still could have gone on to New York to pursue my art." He paused for a moment to let that idea sink in. Then he continued. "Those two things were not mutually exclusive...in spite of what Lindsay may have thought."

"But, I wanted you to have every chance for a different life...if you wanted it. I didn't want you in New York encumbered by me."

"Too late...much too late! Brian, my commitment to you didn't disappear simply because we didn't get married. I thought you understood that. I went off to New York because you convinced me that it made sense. The decision to go, and my living there, changed nothing about how I felt about you. I can't believe that you thought it would."

"I know that now. But I was afraid that you would go to New York and never come back."

"I don't know why, but you always feel that way whenever I go away. You felt the same way when I went to LA, but I came back then too."

"You came back because the movie was cancelled."

"I only went to LA because of the Rage, the movie. When the movie was cancelled, I had no reason to stay. You were in Pittsburgh, and I wanted to return to be with you."

"I know, but you seemed so disappointed."

"But, I could have stayed in LA. I had made quite a few contacts. I had my earnings from the movie. I guess I could have stayed and looked for other projects. That wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to be with you. So, I came back, and well, you know the rest."

"Yes, I remember. I was so obsessed with being the Stud of Liberty Avenue that I drove you away. Once you moved out, I had to take a long hard look at myself. I looked forward to seeing you around. I knew I had to figure out some way to get you back. But, before I had a chance to do anything about it, the bombing happened at the club. I realized then that I could have lost it all."

"So you asked me to marry you?"

"No. I finally told you that I loved you. You already knew that I did, of course. I didn't really have to tell you. But I wanted you to actually hear the words. You more than deserved that. I should have told you years ago, but I just couldn't say the words then. Maybe, if I had said them before, then you would have never left me for the fiddler. But Justin, I asked you to marry me because I wanted to marry you...not because of the bombing at the club. You have to know that! I'm sure that everybody else may have thought that too...that I was reacting to the bombing when I asked you...after all, my views on marriage were so legendary. I asked you to marry me, because I was ready to take that step...with you. When you said yes...I was never happier."

"I always thought that you had second thoughts about us getting married. You behaved so strangely after you proposed."

"I know I surprised you at the bachelor party. But, I meant every word I said there when I turned down the dancer...

'The prisoner respectfully chooses not to partake of his last meal, but be led instead to the gallows a hungry but happy man. I am happy to take my winnings and go home.'

Believe me, it was no hardship to go home with you. I had made my decision, and I was happy with it...end of story. I know that it bothered you a bit."

"It wasn't that you didn't want to fuck the dancer at your own stag party. But, all of a sudden you weren't really interested in fucking me. You started to talk about wanting to garden and cuddle. You scared me. You started to sound like a Stepford Fag...I thought I had lost you," Justin revealed.

"Lindsay and Melanie started to say things about sacrifice. I started to feel like I was being selfish. That you were sacrificing too much to be with me. I had to make sure that you carefully considered your options and took advantage of New York. Maybe I went a bit overboard," Brian conceded with a laugh.

"I figured that you didn't want to get married...It started to feel like you were getting married just to make me happy, and I couldn't let you do that. I couldn't gain my happiness at the expense of yours. So I agreed to go to New York, when I didn't really want to go. I missed you terribly," Justin confessed.

"I know. But, we made it work. We're still together. You took your art to the next level, and because you spent the last year in New York, you have a more promising art career. Everything seems to have worked out ok for us. We've agreed to end this living separately, and we're going to be living together. You have no idea how happy that makes me. We're really very lucky," Brian finally acknowledged with a smile.

"Yes, we are," Justin whispered in reply.

"Now, can we get back to my painting?" Brian quickly changed the mood by tapping on the laptop for emphasis.

Justin sighed deeply. "What now? You know, you've spent more time pulling my painting apart, element-by-element, than I probably spent painting it in the first place. I'm so glad that you're not an art critic!"

"My painting..." Brian said, again tapping on the laptop, trying to bring Justin's attention back to the task at hand.

"What?"

"My painting."

"What about it?"

"The fire in the fireplace..."

"What?"

"I sort of figured out that the roaring fire in the fireplace was symbolic of our passion...the flame that can never be extinguished...the flame that would always burn hot."

"What?"

"That's why you have the fire raging in the room when no one is present. Otherwise, this would be a fire hazard. You never leave a fire unattended...surely you know that. It must be a part of one of those public service announcements that you so love to quote." Brian teased. "And like the fire...the same is true for our passion. That's why I kept coming to New York, so your passion for me wouldn't go unattended."

"I'm not even going to touch that one," Justin said with a laugh.

"So it looks like I got that one," Brian said with some satisfaction. With renewed confidence he continued, "And then the lovers...you and I...in a kneeling embrace. What they feel for each other transcends passion. I can see it all in the painting."

"Brian, just out of curiosity, what exactly have you been reading while I've been away."

"Just look at the painting. Can't you see how much the lovers feel for each other? They don't need vows or rings to prove how much they love each other. It's right there in the painting. But, you are right! It's time for them to be together! You put them in the painting just to drive home your point, didn't you?" Brian pointedly asked, looking over at Justin.

"Ah huh."

"And then there's the setting for the painting. You wanted to make sure I was at home when I saw the painting. The room in the painting is the living room here at Bri-tin, isn't it? The living room is one of my favorite rooms...after all, we were standing in the living room when you agreed to marry me."

"You remembered..."

"Of course, I remembered. I had to work really hard to get you to say yes. But, you did say yes...and that was all that mattered. But as much as I love this room, it felt really empty when you were gone. So you were right when you sent the painting here to the house. Although you drove me crazy waiting to see it, your message was that much more poignant because I viewed the painting here at Bri-tin for the first time."

"Wow! Are you done?"

"I think that about covers the painting. Did I miss anything? Surely you have something to add? Something that I overlooked?"

"I see that you have spent a lot of time analyzing this painting...I was only hoping that you didn't miss the overall message of the painting. But, I also hoped that you would actually like the painting. I know I was experimenting with a new technique but..."

"Of course, I love the painting. That's why it's hanging near my desk, so I can look at it whenever I'm working here at home. I'm not sure that I ever thanked you properly. I'll have to be sure to do that...as soon as I regain my strength."

They both laughed.

Brian looked down on the counter and started to stare at the letter. Justin followed his line of sight.

"Oh no you don't!" Justin insisted rather strongly with a laugh. Brian looked back at him with a look of complete innocence. "Don't even try to go there! We're not going to talk about the letter tonight. Tomorrow or Sunday, maybe! We're going to Babylon tonight!"

"But, what about dinner? We have time to talk about the letter while we're eating dinner," Brian innocently suggested.

"Oh no! We talked about the painting, and I'm still hungry. We are going to enjoy a peaceful dinner, and then they we're heading out to Babylon. I really just want to dance with you." Justin pleaded.

"And you know how I love public displays..." Brian said with a smile.

Brian stood up and walked into the kitchen. He took Justin in his arms and kissed him, and then Brian continued to linger there holding Justin in his arms after the kiss.

Brian volunteered to set the table while Justin finally placed the food on the plates.

Dinner was completely relaxed with Brian and Justin using every opportunity to gently touch each other, while they lingered over the meal. Brian complimented Justin on his latest recipe creation, as he eagerly reached for seconds...here was a meal that Brian could eat without guilt, and he thoroughly enjoyed every forkful.

After dinner, they quickly cleaned away the dishes and loaded the dishwasher.

Brian closed the laptop, but left it on the counter. He wanted it close at hand, if necessary, for any future discussions.

Justin smiled as he watched Brian with the laptop, wondering what Brian was thinking up now.

Deciding a quick shower was in order before they dressed for the evening, Brian and Justin opted to shower together. Obviously, the shower was neither quick nor efficient.

After a round of fucking in the shower, they emerged totally content and ready to dress for the evening.

Brian dressed in his club clothes keeping in mind two criteria. He wanted to be sure he wore an outfit that was one of Justin's favorite, and he wanted to be sure that the feel of his outfit was soft to the touch, since he planned on holding Justin close all night. Dressed in his traditional black, he selected black slacks and his softest, sluttish club shirt.

Justin made sure that is outfit was just the right color to emphasize his eyes, and tight in all the right places to cause Brian to take notice. They both knew that all eyes would be on them tonight at Babylon. Justin dressed in Brian's favorite color of blue, wearing navy slacks and one of Brian's favorite light blue club tops.

They each took one last look at themselves in the mirror. Finally, Brian leaned his forehead against Justin's and said softly, "Let's go!"

Chapter 41 – Something's Up

Late Friday Night at Babylon...(Day 33)

As always when approaching Babylon, the thumpa thumpa could be heard before they exited their car. And Brian and Justin could smile at each other as they thought about the familiarity of it all.

It was still early, and yet, the line was already long. "Well Sunshine, I don't think we have to figure out any new strategies to get them in the door." Brian commented as they walked past the waiting people. "They all seem to know where the place to be is these days," Brian said with a laugh, pulling Justin closer to him. "Let's go in."

"Hopefully, everyone is already filling the backrooms...so we'll have a little space on the dance floor," Justin suggested hopefully.

"I wouldn't worry too much. You and I seem to know how to clear a dance floor," Brian said, just as he leaned down and kissed Justin on the cheek.

Brian and Justin headed for the bar to get drinks. The bartender saw them approaching and smiled. He automatically began pouring two shots of Beam to hand to them by the time they reached the bar.

"Things are going to be hopping tonight, it's good that you're here. Everyone has missed you," The bartender said to them.

Brian and Justin just smiled.

While Brian and Justin were lingering at the bar, enjoying their drink, they heard a familiar voice over the thumpa thumpa.

"Oh my gawd! Look who's here?" Emmett exclaimed. "I didn't know that you two were coming out tonight. Welcome back, Sweetie!" he exclaimed, reaching out to wrap his arm around Justin.

Emmett was immediately surprised as his arm was intercepted...by Brian. "You seem to have lost this," Brian said with a smile.

"I see. We're in that kind of mood tonight, are we?" Emmett commented with a smile.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Em. He's just giving you a bad time." Justin said, leaning in to give Emmett a hug, then immediately wrapping his arms back around Brian again, eliciting a smile. "Can we order you a Cosmos?"

"In view of my harsh treatment at the hands of your partner...that would be a good idea," Emmett teased. Once the drink arrived, Emmett immediately took a sip. Then, turned back toward Brian and Justin and commented, "Well, this is an unusual crowd for a Friday night. They must have known that you two were going to be here."

"Obviously," Brian said with a smile. "Why else would they come?"

"Why indeed?" Emmett teased.

"Well, shall we test out the dance floor," Brian asked. Justin nodded yes, and they were off.

It didn't take long before they danced as one on the dance floor, touching each other and kissing all during the dances. Seemingly lost in a world of their own, Brian and Justin continued to dance.

While they were dancing, Ted arrived at the club for the evening and found Emmett at the bar. "Hey Em," Ted said in greeting, "I would buy you a drink, but I see you already have one."

"I'm good," Em responded. "Maybe later."

Ted gave the order to the bartender for his cranberry juice cocktail. Ted noticed that Emmett seemed to be watching something very intensely. Ted tried to follow Emmett's line of sight. "What are you watching?" Ted asked.

"Brian and Justin." Emmett responded.

"Where are they?"

"See! They're on the dance floor. Can't you tell?" Emmett said actually pointing.

"I didn't see them come in? Did you know they were coming here tonight?"

"No, maybe it was a spur of the moment decision. After all, Justin must have just gotten back into town. Hasn't he been in New York all week?"

"Yeah. But you've seen Brian and Justin on the dance floor before, what's so special about this time?" Ted asked, trying to peer over toward the dance floor to see what Emmett saw.

"They both look especially hot tonight. Wait until they take a break, and you'll see what I mean. Something is definitely up with those two," Emmett suggested.

"What do you think is going on?"

"I have no idea. With Brian and Justin you can never be really sure." Emmett confirmed.

"Aside from the fact that Brian took the day off from work today, what's so odd about them being here at Babylon tonight?" Ted asked still quite perplexed.

"Brian and Justin are each dressed in their sexiest club clothes. They both look especially hot tonight."

"So?"

"Everybody still drools over them here at the club no matter what they wear. They're still the hottest couple around. They don't have to dress to attract attention."

"Yeah?"

"They didn't dress that way to draw attention from the crowd. They dressed that way to impress each other. Because although Brian and Justin are in this club with hundreds of hot guys, as far as they're concerned, they're on the dance floor...just the two of them...alone. Something has definitely changed between them."

"And you know this how?"

"I just know. Trust me on this one! Wait until they take a break. You'll see for yourself."

"Maybe. What are you doing here alone tonight?"

"Drew had to go out of town again. Where's Blake?"

"He's studying for a certification. I thought I'd come here and check on things so he could study in peace. Of course, if I had known that Brian was going to be here..." Ted explained.

"Do you think that Michael and Ben are going to show up tonight?" Emmett casually asked.

"Not unless one of us plans on calling them. So are you calling?"

"Not me! I'm not up to dealing with Michael coming face to face with what I'm seeing here tonight. Are you calling?"

"I'm still trying to figure out...what you think that you're seeing."

"Teddy, look at how they're looking at each other?"

"What about it? They're a hot couple."

"That's not what I mean. This is totally different."

"How many of those Cosmos did you have?"

"Never mind! Just dance with me, Teddy?" Emmett finally asked.

Emmett led Ted onto the crowded dance floor. A few moments later they returned to the bar, with Ted complaining as usual.

"You know we can't dance on the same dance floor when those two are out there. Things are just too hot. How did I let you drag me out into all that heat in the first place?" Ted complained.

"I told you things are different." Emmett reiterated once again.

"It's always hot when they dance together. Wait a minute...it looks like they might finally be taking a break." Ted commented. Brian and Justin approached their friends at the bar, and Ted couldn't resist a comment, "Well, did you decide to let the club air conditioners have a chance to cool down the dance floor? That was nice of you."

Brian ignored Ted and looked directly at Emmett, with his arms still around Justin, and said, "Is someone speaking?"

"Never mind," Justin said, "It doesn't matter. I'm not going to let you torture Ted tonight. I said that we would make it an early evening, and I'm going to be true to my word."

"Does that mean that you're ready to leave?" Brian asked, leaning down to kiss Justin on the cheek.

"It has been a rather long day," Justin suggested. "Let's go home."

"Let's go home." Brian said as he pivoted Justin to leave. "Theodore, Em, we'll see you later." And without any further comment, Brian and Justin left Babylon with their arms wrapped around each other.

When Brian and Justin had left, Ted and Emmett ordered another round of drinks.

Emmett waited a while before saying anything, but he couldn't hold his tongue much longer, "Well Teddy, did you see what I mean?"

"What was I supposed to see?"

"Did you see it? Did you see the way they were together? Brian and Justin never stopped touching each other all evening. Listen Teddy! Something has changed between those two. Just remember, you heard it here first."

"Duly noted!" Ted replied. "But Em, I do wish you would stop watching those Lana Turner movies."

Chapter 42 – Muffins

Saturday Morning... (Day 34)

After a wonderful night at Babylon, Brian and Justin decided to once again stay at the loft. Brian awakened to one of his favorite sensation, his nose being tickled by soft blond hair as Justin snuggled in close to his chest. Brian still marveled that after six years together, waking up with Justin was still one of his favorite pleasures.

"You can't lay there and think about me 'tied to the bedpost'," Justin mumbled as he noticed that Brian was already awake.

"And why not?" Brian asked with a smile.

"Because it's not politically correct."

"Pfff...like I care..."

"Well, you will when the fantasy police arrest you,"

"Will they put me in fantasy jail?"

"Absolutely. And probably throw away the fantasy key."

They both had to laugh at the last statement.

"So you decided not to sleep the day away after all," Brian commented, needing to change the subject.

"Only because I'm hungry," Justin added, snuggling in closer.

"It's Saturday morning...what could you possibly want to eat?"

"I'm not even going to touch that!" Justin replied with a smile. "Can we call Ben?"

"The Professor, why?" Brian asked, trying to figure out the workings of Justin's mind.

"I just want to see if he made those healthy muffins that you're willing to eat."

"You mean the ones that you drowned in butter last time to improve the taste?"

"They were good that way if you will recall."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Besides, you can see Michael, and then, we can go back to the house, and you can watch me paint."

"Who said that I wanted to watch you paint today?" Brian teased. "I wanted to do that yesterday. Now, I think that I've changed my mind. Now, I have more elaborate plans for you in mind."

Justin gave Brian THAT look again, and Brian decided that reaching for the phone was probably a good idea. "Good morning, Professor," Brian said into the phone.

"Brian? Hi. Are you looking for Michael?" Ben finally said, after he overcame the shock that Brian was on HIS cell phone.

"No...strange as it may seem...I'm not. Justin asked me to call." Brian paused for a moment to let that revelation sink in. Then, he continued, "Justin wanted to see if we could invite ourselves over to brunch."

"When did you have in mind?" Ben curiously asked, trying to wrap his mind around the newly developing events.

"We were thinking about today." Brian commented nonchalantly.

"What's the occasion?"

"Sunshine woke up with a craving for your muffins. So he forced me to call to see if you happened to have made them today."

"Of course, I make those every Saturday. I was just about to pop a batch in the oven."

"I know it's an imposition, Professor, but do you suppose that you could put up with two guests this morning."

"You and Justin aren't guests. Sure, C'mon over."

"Just give us a chance for a quick shower, and we'll be right over."

"I'll see you then." Ben said with a smile as he closed his phone. Ben was about to speed up his preparations for brunch. Then, he remembered that this was Brian...and Justin...and a shower. Ben realized that he had plenty of time to continue with his leisurely mealtime preparations.

Meanwhile, Brian hung up the phone and grumbled to Justin, "Well we had better get up, get a shower, and get over there. Ben is now expecting us. This so not how I envisioned spending my Saturday with you, Sunshine."

"I'll make it up to you."

"On the bedpost?"

"No! Of course not."

Brian knowingly smiled, "Let's get a shower."

Back at the Novotny-Bruckner's, things were getting interesting.

"Who was that?" Michael asked as Ben was closing his phone.

"It appears we're about to have company for brunch this morning," Ben answered.

"Oh! Who?" Michael asked with intense curiosity.

"Brian and Justin are on their way over."

"You're kidding. Brian doesn't do brunch," Michael said, informing all who could hear.

"He was calling for Justin. It seems Justin likes my muffins." Ben professed. "So they're on their way over. See! Someone in the family appreciates my recipes. A true gourmet among us!"

Hunter had been quietly observing the exchange. Now, he decided the benefit of his wisdom was called for, so he decided to join the conversation. "I wouldn't get too excited if I were you, Ben. This is Justin we're talking about, and Justin will eat anything. And you've seen the amount of food he can put away...you wouldn't expect it because he's so slender. He's deceptive that way. But his stomach must be a bottomless pit."

"I sure that after being a starving artist in New York, it stands to reason that he would want a healthy, home cooked meal." Ben tried to point out as the voice of reason.

"Ben, Justin is not that health conscious. I wouldn't get overly excited." Hunter continued to remind him. "And, you've seen him eat."

"Well, if they're coming over, it will give you a chance to apologize to them for barging in on them at the loft," Ben suggested looking directly at Michael.

"Why should I apologize? Brian wasn't returning my phone calls. I saw the lights on at the loft. I thought that he was alone there. How was I supposed to know that Justin was back?" Michael insisted, making his position perfectly clear.

"Michael, you're going to have to come to terms with certain facts: Justin is in and out of town so often that it's going to be hard for anyone to keep track him; Brian is going to be unusually busy at work. Even Ted has commented about it. So I guess that we're just going to have to get used to this arrangement," Ben suggested, hoping this information registered with Michael, and one of his fits was avoided.

"But I hardly ever get to see Brian or get to spend any time with him." Michael insisted.

Ben realized with that response from Michael that he had been overly optimistic.

"Thank goodness, then, for Sunday dinners," Hunter interjected, definitely wanting to add his two cents to the conversation and hoping to help Ben out of a tight spot.

"What do you mean?" Michael sheepishly asked.

Hunter continued, "While Justin lived in New York, Brian rarely came to Sunday dinners. Did you notice that?" Hunter suggested.

"Yes, I know. He was always too busy," Michael sadly admitted.

"But since Justin's been back, they have made it to Sunday dinner almost every week. And so, you get to see Brian practically every week. Plus, Brian seems to call you to go to Babylon pretty often. I would say that Brian is quite visible and quite available...even if he does lives so far away," Ben said calmly.

"I guess you're right," Michael finally conceded.

"And I get the pure entertainment value of watching them every week," Hunter added with a joyous sigh. "You have to admit that Brian and Justin are the best show in town...even Molly agrees with me."

"They aren't that interesting," Michael insisted. "Besides, you shouldn't idolize Brian the way you do. He's not a good example for you."

"I beg your pardon?" Hunter challenged, looking at Michael in complete disbelief. Hunter couldn't help wondering what alternate universe he had suddenly walked into.

"I haven't forgotten the stuff you were involved in just because you got hooked up with Brian and Justin during the Stockwell campaign. Brian let you get yourself in a dangerous position, and I haven't forgotten it," Michael reminded Hunter.

"You really can't blame Brian for everything that happens in the world," Ben added, leaning down to gently kiss Michael. "As much as you and Justin would like to think so... Brian really isn't Rage."

"What does the Boy Wonder have to do with this?" Michael quipped sharply.

"Nothing, of course," both Ben and Hunter said in unison. Then, they both looked at each other and started laughing.

"Of course, you've got to admit, it's kind of strange for Brian to call and invite himself over. Normally, he would just show up unannounced," Michael pointed out to everyone.

"Brian said that Justin asked him to call," Ben relayed as a point of clarification.

"Right, like Brian pays any attention to Justin. Something else must be on his mind. I'll have to find out about it when he gets here. We're best friends after all." Michael continued.

Once again Hunter and Ben had to roll their eyes and laugh at the last statement.

About this time, the doorbell rang. Hunter opened the door to admit Brian and Justin while Ben removed a pan of oversized muffins from the oven.

"Something smells good," Justin commented as he entered. Then, he finally greeted Michael and Hunter with a wave, and quickly made his way to the kitchen.

"Hey, Mikey." Brian said, leaning in to give Michael his usual kiss. "Thanks for letting us drop in like this."

"No problem." Michael said softly.

"Well kid, how's it going?" Brian asked Hunter. "I'm surprised to find you here."

"It's going ok. But when I heard that you called, I decided to stick around. Just in case you have finally came to your senses and decided to ditch the bleached blond."

Brian gave Hunter's hair a tussle as he walked past and laughed. "In your dreams, kiddo, but you hold that thought if you like."

They all entered the kitchen to find Justin was there ahead of them in conversation with Ben. Justin was already perched on a stool and munching on one of the muffins.

"I hope you're happy now, Sunshine." Brian couldn't resist saying. "Professor, your muffins are the only things he wanted to talk about this morning. I hope now that he's managing to eat one those monstrosities, he'll be more open to other possibilities."

"You mean like you tying me to the bedposts...not likely." Justin quickly corrected him.

"I, on the other hand, might find it an option worth exploring." Hunter volunteered.

"No you won't!" Michael demanded. "Will you two stop corrupting our son?"

"It's a bit late for that isn't it?" Brian insisted.

"Will all of you behave yourselves?" Ben insisted. "I'm glad you like my muffins, Justin."

"Have you considered marketing these?" Justin asked, taking another bite. "I bet they would be a hit at the health food stores. Let's see, we need a name for these...how about Ben's Bountiful Bouncers?"

Ben picked up the idea and continued with it. "I'm not sure that the health food stores are the proper venue. In this health conscious society that we live, we should go directly to 'your grocer's shelf', don't you think Brian?"

"Brian, can't you make them stop?" Michael whined.

Brian simply pointed to his mouth, which was momentarily full of muffin that he had swiped from Justin's plate.

Hunter merely continued to watch the interchange, laughing.

"Maybe adding them to the delicacies at Starbucks. You have to admit, they would go great with your morning latte?" Justin continued, reaching for another muffin to butter.

"Although Justin, I think that you negate a lot of the nutritious impact with the amount of butter you seem to be adding to my innocent muffin," Ben finally had to comment.

"You know Professor, I have often made the same comment," Brian interjected while once again, removing buttered muffin pieces from Justin's plate and popping them in his mouth.

"You know, Brian, I have a plate here for you." Ben suggested with a smile.

"No. No. That isn't necessary. I would feel guilty using another plate. Justin and I are managing just fine with this one."

"Would you like some sliced fruit to go with that muffin?" Ben was finally able to offer.

"That would be great," Justin responded for them both because Brian was in the process of swallowing a mouthful of stolen muffin.

Ben poured everyone a fresh brewed cup of coffee. Brian reached for his cup of coffee and began to add his usual ration of sugar.

"How do you drink that stuff?" Ben commented. "Why do you even bother?"

"Please, I need all the energy source that I can get to be able to keep up with the Twink."

"T M I." Michael immediately pointed out. "Besides there are children present."

"Are you are referring to yourself, Mikey?" Brian had to ask. Michael scrunched up his face in response.

Once again Hunter couldn't contain his laughter. "See, I told you they were entertaining."

Ben looked around and noticed that everyone had perched themselves on stools and crowded in the kitchen. "You've all made yourself comfortable in here. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer moving to the table?" Ben suggested, trying to be a good host.

"I'd like to believe that we're not going to be here that long," Brian mentioned. "We're on our way out to the house. Sunshine actually said something about wanting to paint today."

"How did the project go? You know the one that you ostensibly brought Justin home to work on?" Ben couldn't resist teasing Brian. It was after all a rare opportunity.

"What do you mean ostensibly? Justin was a big help. Kinnetik landed the contract. We're going to be quite busy because of his help," Brian insisted.

"If you say so, Brian," Hunter joined in, showing his disbelief.

"So Michael, I guess I wasn't in New York long enough for us to look at the story ideas that you wanted to talk about. I've got a few moments, do you want to go over them now?" Justin asked as Michael's eyes got large with excitement.

"Are you sure that Brian doesn't mind?" Michael tried to ask calmly, now being torn between competing desires of wanting to work on story ideas for Rage, but also wanting to spend time with Brian.

"We won't be that long...do you think?" Justin suggested.

Michael and Justin moved to the living room, leaving Ben and Brian together in the kitchen with Hunter.

"So Professor, did Justin talk you into marketing your muffins? You know Kinnetik is always looking for new clients," Brian teased.

"Brian, I don't think I'm quite ready to take the muffin-world by storm yet. Everybody else in the family was merely polite when they received their muffin-samples. Justin and Hunter are my only enthusiasts. Michael tries to be polite. So I think the world at large is safe...for the moment."

"You know they aren't really that bad, Professor," Brian said, taking another small bite.

"Wow! I take that as a complement coming from you. But now that I think about it, you also like my millet and leeks casserole, but I thought that was simply because you're so health conscious."

"It really is one of my favorite dishes," Brian honestly admitted.

Hunter decided with Justin in the living room with Michael, the interesting part of the things was obviously over, so he finally stood up to leave. "Well, I'll see everyone later. A group of us are getting together this morning to work on a project for class." Then, Hunter leaned against Brian's shoulder and looked up longingly at him and said, "Unless of course, you want me to stay so we can plan our getaway while Michael has the blond distracted?"

Brian gently pushed Hunter's head away saying, "In your dreams, kid."

Ben, on the other hand, couldn't help laughing. Then, he kicked into parental mode, "Hunter, you said something about leaving."

"Oh, yeah. I'll catch you later." Hunter said with a wink, as he was finally leaving.

Ben and Brian just shook their heads and laughed. Then Brian and Ben began to talk.

"So Brian, are things going ok? I know that you must be glad to have Justin back. It's good to see that you came to your senses. I have to admit the two of you have never looked happier," Ben began.

"Yeah...well..."

Ben realized that he was in uncharted waters and quickly changed the subject. "You know Lindsay and Melanie and the kids will be back in about two weeks. We're really looking forward to seeing JR again. I know that you'll be glad to see Gus. You all seemed to have such a good time when he was here last time."

"That's thanks to Justin. There seems to be no end to the things that he can come up with. Gus is crazy about Justin, but then you know that."

"Yeah, I know Justin is good with Gus. But I've seen you with Gus too. You and Gus are good for each other too. I just wonder what's really going on with Melanie and Lindsay?" Ben began to question aloud. "But something is definitely going on."

"What makes you think something so?" Brian cautiously had to ask.

"First, they stay away for a year...then they visit for a full week...then they began to plan to come back once a month. I think it's a good thing that they visit each month...especially for Debbie. But you do have to wonder, what's really happening in Toronto? Something is just not right."

"Munchers...who knows what's really going on with them, but they seemed to be doing ok when they were here, don't you think?" Brian asked.

"I'm not sure. I'm sort of taking a wait and see attitude."

"Did Michael say anything?"

"No, Michael is so thrilled to be seeing JR that he's not looking for anything, and I sort of want to keep it that way."

"What do you mean?"

"If something is going on, I want to give Melanie and Lindsay a chance to work it out in peace without the whole family getting involved. Because you know once Debbie and Michael get involved, whatever it is will get blown completely out of proportion."

"Very good observation, Professor. Maybe I will go back to calling you Zen Ben once again after all."

"Are we back to that?" Ben said with a laugh. "By the way, are you getting used to the house? From what I've heard, it's got to be quite a change from the loft."

"Yes it is. Justin and I can both be working, without getting in each other's way. Mainly he can paint in peace, without constant interruptions. And I will admit the house has several amenities that the loft doesn't."

"Michael kept looking for you at the loft the whole week that Justin was in New York."

"I stayed out a the house. Somehow, it's starting to feel more like home."

"I bet you liked the privacy."

"Yeah, there's that too," Brian said with a laugh.

"Are you ever going to invite the family out to see it?" Ben asked, with a teasing tone. "Like by Christmas, would be good. No pressure...just a suggestion."

"Like I said before, making sure that Justin can paint in peace for the next three months is my primary concern. After that, we'll see. Christmas? I don't know. That's a long way off." Brian said with a laugh, before refilling his cup with coffee.

"So now that you and Justin are addicted to my muffins, can I expect you to drop in for muffins every weekend," Ben began to tease.

"Well next weekend, we're going to be in Cincinnati...so I think your muffins are safe."

"What's in Cincinnati? I thought Justin's show wasn't for several months."

"No. No. This isn't for a show. You remember meeting Paul and Jason? Well next weekend is their son's fourth birthday. So Justin and I are flying in to help him celebrate."

"Loaded with gifts, I bet."

"No. Not really. Justin had everything shipped already. You know what a nightmare it can be getting presents through airport security? So the only thing I have to do is be sure Justin is free of paint when we gets on the plane. We haven't seen Paul and Jason in a while, so I'm looking forward to visiting them. Of course, Nicky is crazy about Justin."

"Yes, he does have a way with kids. I've watched him with Gus and with JR. Maybe because he's so small, they think he is one of them. He does look like a kid, you know?"

"I have noticed that. But trust me Professor, I assure you that he's not."

"He couldn't be and have...not tamed exactly...because that's not possible, maybe settled...no, no that doesn't work either...I find that I'm at a loss for words. Help me out here, Brian, words are your stock and trade."

"Just leave it alone, Professor, let just say he's my partner. And that should say it all."

"You know, it really does!"

"Well, I guess I had better go and see how things are going on the Rage story line. You were right Professor, they definitely forget all about us during the creative process."

"I wouldn't worry about it too much, Brian...they seem to remember us as soon as they're done."

As if on cue, Michael and Justin re-entered the kitchen.

"So, don't tell me, the another creative crisis has been averted?" Brian teased.

"Brian!" Michael objected.

"Well, come on Sunshine. Say goodbye. You've been allowed to roam free long enough. It's time for me to sequester you back at the house."

"Brian!" This time Justin objected.

"Yep, back in the dungeon for you," Brian said, finally putting is arms around Justin. Then he whispered in Justin's ear, "And I've got just to place to tie you down."

Justin grinned. Then he turned to Ben and Michael and said, "I guess we have to go."

"Should I wrap a couple of muffins for you to take home with you?" Ben asked.

"That would be great," Justin insisted.

Ben made a little package containing a few muffins and handed them to Brian as they were leaving. Brian and Justin said their goodbyes and were now on their way back to Bri-tin.

Meanwhile, Ben and Michael were cleaning up after the impromptu brunch.

"Is everything ok with Brian?" Michael asked. "I noticed that the two of you were talking."

"He's just been incredibly busy, and from the sounds of things, that's not going to change anytime soon. But he actually seems happy, don't you think? I think it's good that Justin is back, don't you?"

"Yeah, I got that problem with the storyline all worked out while Justin and I were in the living room. Now all that Justin has to do is the illustrations. Yeah, you're right, it's good that he's back."

Ben just shook his head, but said nothing. He couldn't help wondering if Michael would ever get a clue about Brian and Justin.

Chapter 43 – The Talk, Part 4

Saturday Afternoon At Bri-tin...(Day 34)

Meanwhile at Bri-tin, Brian and Justin quickly changed clothes.

Justin went to work in his studio, stretching canvas. He had already taped to the second easel the drawing of the sleeping Brian that he had sketched yesterday.

Brian wanted to jot down a few campaign ideas so he stopped first at his study for a few moments.

Once Brian had finished in his study, he stopped in the kitchen to grab some water. There on the kitchen counter he saw the laptop and the letter. The water was quickly forgotten. Now Brian remembered only the really important things.

Brian smiled to himself as he stopped and grabbed the now fully recharged laptop and Justin's letter from the kitchen counter and finally headed for the studio.

Brian grabbed two bottles of water from the studio refrigerator and then pretended to test out the futon for comfort...while he slid the laptop underneath it...out of the way...out of sight.

Noticing all the movement in his studio, Justin finally looked. Brian stood up, handed him a bottle of water, and innocently smiled.

"Thanks," Justin said, accepting the water and watching Brian making himself comfortable.

Justin starting mixing small quantities of paint, when he turned around and saw Brian just watching him.

"Do you think I'll be safe over here?" Brian asked with a smile.

"That depends," Justin teased. "What are you trying to be safe from?"

"See these," Brian said, motioning to his sweat pants and wife beater, "Expensive, no paint spatter allowed over here. That Prada shirt that you're wearing is my only contribution to the your painting effort."

Justin couldn't resist a sinister smile.

"By the way, exactly how many of my designer shirts do you have?" Brian inquisitively asked, after noticing the Prada shirt Justin was wearing.

"Not nearly enough. I'm just thinking that as I start to have studios in Kinnetik offices all over the world, I'm going to have to stock each studio with at least one of your shirts, just so that I'll be able to paint. You're going to be famous. The critics will ask what is the secret to my success, and of course, I will have to tell them about your designer shirts." Justin reminded him.

"So you're telling me that I need to include in my expansion budget, a major shopping spree associated with the opening of each new Kinnetik office."

"Only if you plan on continuing to wear designer shirts," Justin teased.

"I'll be sure to mention it to Theodore. And, by the way I have noticed that the lovely shirt of mine that you're now wearing has very little paint spatter on it."

"Now, that could either mean that my technique has improved, or that I'm just starting to paint in this particular shirt." Justin explained, carefully watching for Brian's reaction.

"Justin!"

"I didn't have any choice. Gus insisted that he take the other shirt home with him to wear when he paints."

"What?"

"He decided he needed one of your shirts to wear when he was painting in Toronto."

"Lindsay didn't mention anything about that when we talked. She only complained that Gus's finger painting technique had gotten decidedly messier since he painted with you here in your studio."

"It's not good for Gus's creativity to have be neat while he finger paints," Justin pointed out in all seriousness.

"Thank you Dr. Taylor, for that public service announcement."

"I'm not sure what Lindsay was thinking about when she complained about that to you in the first place."

"She probably had a lot on her mind. Things are probably still not great between her and Melanie. Even Ben is now concerned about what's going on in Toronto. It seems that he has picked up something, some vibe, during their recent telephone chats."

"Well, he doesn't know everything that you know. I'm sure Mel and Linds haven't confided in him yet...so it must be his Zen training. Do you think Mel and Linds are going to be alright? Do you think that they might be thinking about moving back to Pittsburgh?"

"Who knows with the Munchers? I suspect that life is much harder for them in Toronto than they originally expected. Whatever Melanie hoped to accomplish with this move away from Pittsburgh, I have the feeling that it hasn't quite worked out the way that she envisioned. Give them a few months of visiting, and I'm sure they'll figure things out. The counseling sessions should also help."

"I guess that I had better get to work on that painting for Gus's room. He and I sketched out an idea when he first picked out his room. I promised that I would have it finished by the time he got back for a visit. So I guess I really have to get to work."

"Gus is going to love whatever you paint...whenever you paint it. You know that."

"Yeah, I know. But I still want to paint something special."

"Do you want some help? I can make some suggestions. Where's your sketchpad?" Brian asked always eager to help.

"Here." Justin handed his almost-full sketchpad over the Brian, who immediately started flipping through the pages.

Brian suddenly came to one page and stopped. Then he continued flipping pages and stopped once again "How did you sketch these?" Brian asked with surprise. "I was there. You didn't have your sketchpad with you."

Justin leaned over to look at the pages that Brian was referring to, "Oh that one, I sketched it from memory...you and Gus on horseback. I thought that would make a great painting. What do you think?"

"This painting would silence all the nay sayers, who think that I can't ride. I have to admit that with you around, I seem to be having quite a few new experiences," Brian smirked. "And, they're all well-documented for everyone to see."

"You haven't seen anything yet!" Justin assured him with a smile.

"That's precisely what I was afraid of." Brian said with a laugh.

Justin took back the sketchpad and flipped through it once again. "I just can't figure out what to paint first."

"Just dip your paintbrush into the paint, miraculously a painting will appear! So are you going to turn my sketch into a painting? I see it taped up there?" Brian said pointing to the image of himself.

"I was thinking about it? Starting it at least."

"How much canvas did you stretch? Do you need any help?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm just trying to think about what I really want to paint."

"Well, while you're having your painting dilemma, how about answering a few questions for me?"

"Sure, what's on your mind?"

"I want to talk about my letter."

"Brian, the letter was self-explanatory. It was written to drive home the simple point that it was time for us to be together. Don't tell me you're going to try to pull it apart like the painting? You keep looking for phantoms that just aren't there!"

"Oh, I don't know. Like your paintings, your letters always tend to have so many layers to them. Poor Mikey's little head almost exploded in response to the letter that you attached to his painting. Melanie and I seemed to have fared a little better with our letters. Still, I don't know..." Brian started to ponder. "There still seems to be so much here."

Justin looked at the reclining Brian, with that innocent expression on his face. Justin smiled as he began to wonder what Brian was up to now.

Legends have told us that the Ancients would craft a Talisman, a sacred object forged at the astrologically auspicious time when all the forces of the universe converged, to consecrate the energy of the spirit within the object. For the Talisman could only be created at this one moment in time and space.

"Justin, do you think that the moment we met under that street light was one of those moments in time and space?" Brian quietly asked.

"What?"

"I was just wondering if you thought when we met was one of those moments in time and space?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You have to admit it was pretty amazing that out of all the people on Liberty Avenue that night that you and I even met." Brian pointed out thinking back to that moment.

Beginning of Flashback.

"Had a busy night?" Brian asked, moving in closer after first seeing Justin standing there.

"Just checking things out. You know Boytoy, Meathook." Justin responded confidently.

"Meathook? So you're into leather?"

"Sure..."

"Where are you headed?"

"No place special..."Justin said nonchalantly.

"I can change that!" Brian insisted with confidence.

End of Flashback.

"I should have known that you wouldn't just go away after we met. I should have known something was different about you. But no, I was so blinded by your ... Little did I know how much trouble you were actually going to cause me," Brian conceded with a laugh.

"Yeah, but I was so worth it!" Justin said, giving Brian one of his the full-wattage Sunshine smiles.

"That remains to be seen," Brian quipped, trying not to be blinded by THAT smile.

"I can still see you standing in the loft asking me, 'Are you coming or going...or are you coming and then going...or are you coming and staying.' I can still see you, with open arms, waiting for my answer," Justin said, with wistful remembrance.

"I think I might have given you too many choices...I'll definitely have to work on that pitch," Brian teased. "Yes, it definitely needs some work."

"Brian!"

"Don't worry. After all the trouble I got myself into the last time I presented it. I pretty much think...we can safely say...that I have put that whole line of questioning to rest," Brian affirmed with a laugh.

Brian's tone became more serious. "You know once upon a time, I actually liked living alone. Then, you came along. And now things are never right when you aren't around," he quietly admitted.

"So our actually living together seems to make more and more sense, don't you see? Justin asked, joining Brian on the futon.

Justin lay down, inclining his body to cover Brian's. "And don't you think that you might give up working on that pitch thing too?"

"You're not painting," Brian commented, rather than answer the question at hand.

"I got distracted." Justin said, sliding up to give Brian a kiss.

Brian wrapped his arms around Justin, but carefully raised the letter up to eye level, so he could continue to read it while holding Justin.

"Don't tell me you would rather spend time on the letter rather than be in me? Are you sure you're ok?" Justin teased.

"Now that you're going to probably be around all the time, I can fuck you anytime. Right now I've got you almost focused on the letter. This is probably my only chance to get you to talk about it...so back to the task at hand...now stop procrastinating!"

"Brian!"

"You know time and space MUST have converged at the moment we met!" Brian insisted, still trying to resist Justin's kissing him in that certain spot on his neck.

"Why do you say that?" Justin paused to consider what Brian was saying.

"Because you and Gus arrived at the same time. That must obviously prove your point...that night was 'one moment in time and space'. How else do you explain everything that happened?"

"Coincidence?"

"Two people who would make such a big impact on my life, arriving at the same time. No, it's too big to be simply a coincidence."

"I guess you're right. I hadn't thought about it that way."

"Everything changed for me that night...in ways I'm only now beginning to understand," Brian whispered. Justin resumed nibbling on Brian's ear. "Will you stop that? I'm having trouble formulating my next question when you do that."

"Hmmmmmm," Justin responded, while continuing to nibble.

"Is that the reason that I'm eluding time?" Brian struggled to finally ask.

"What?" Justin asked in between nibbles. "Where did you get the idea that you were eluding time?"

It was said that with the proper Talisman, time could be eluded.

Some have said that with the proper talisman, time would have no meaning...one could travel at will...back in time to the past... or forward in time into the future.

Still others have said that the talisman can be used only once...one time to change a moment of the past or one time to change an instant of future.

"You know...I hoped that I would achieve that...somehow elude time...when I came to your prom. I guess I had hoped to recapture part of my youth...to forget that I was getting older. But no, in truth, I think the eluding time thing really happened much later. I think it was about the time that Stockwell was defeated."

"When you lost everything?"

"Not everything," Brian said with a smile. "I sort of realized then, that time wasn't so bad, if I could spend it with you."

"Really?"

How often have we wished to go back in time to change the outcome of a moment? How often have we asked "what if"? And how often have we desperately clung to some single moment hoping it would never end?

We have had our moments, you and I...moments when all the forces of the universe converge. We have known both moments of extreme joy and moments of utter despair. And through it all...through all the ups and downs...we come here to this moment in time...here in the present...when We are still US...when we are still together.

"Really. Now, that doesn't mean that I'm eager to grow old or anything... But somehow with you around, it doesn't seem like such an unbearable prospect."

"Brian, I think that's probably the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"Well, don't repeat it. I still have a reputation to consider."

"Your secret is safe with me," Justin said, sliding his hands under Brian's top and coming in contact with his skin. Justin began kissing a path down Brian's chest.

Brian tried to pretend that he was ignoring whatever Justin was doing, but as always, he was having some difficulty ignoring Justin.

"I'm really having trouble concentrating here," Brian admitted, hoping that Justin would take pity on him.

By this time Justin had slid down to Brian's waist, lowering Brian's sweatpants just far enough to reach his cock, and Justin simply whispered, "That's the general idea," as he slid his mouth over Brian's cock.

Brian groaned with pleasure and dropped the letter, choosing instead to grab Justin's hair as he thrust himself forward. Brian groaned and writhed beneath him as Justin administered one of his slow, protracted blow jobs until he finally allowed Brian release, and he came down the back of Justin's throat.

Brian finally collapsed completely spent, as Justin slid back up Brian and kissed him, allowing Brian to taste himself. Brian tightened his arms around Justin, holding him in the confined space that was the futon.

"That was hot," Brian finally whispered, leaning in to give Justin a gentle kiss. "But, you made me drop my letter."

The shadow of the lovers' embrace is the ultimate Talisman of Time, for the love that is shared is transcendent.

We choose what we'll do with the time that has been given to us.

"Imagine that?" commented Justin with a victorious smile, shifting his position a bit trying to make himself more comfortable.

Brian carefully rolled them both over in the confined space of the futon, reversing their positions, placing Justin on his back the on the futon looking up at him. "Did you really think that I was going to let you get away with that?" Brian coyly asked with a smile. "No matter how much I enjoyed it."

"Brian! I can't paint from this position!"

Brian leaned down to kiss Justin gently, "Obviously," he whispered.

Finally Brian retrieved his letter from the floor, where it had previously been tossed. He smiled the knowing smile of victory when he said, "Now back to my letter."

Can't we simply choose to find some way to share a love without sacrificing a life? Can't we find some compromise? Can't we find some way to be together?

'It's only time, isn't good enough, Brian.

This is the moment for which our Talisman of Time was forged. Now is the time!

"It's going to be interesting living with you in New York." Brian quietly said, leaning down to kiss Justin gently. "Are you sure that this is what you want?"

"It doesn't matter where we live as long as we're together." Justin reassured him. "Brian, even if we're simply vagabonds and move from place to place, as long as we're together, that's all I care about."

"Vagabonds...huh?"

"So we can move from place to place, and it's ok with you as long as we're together?"

"Yes!"

"And, you have a place to paint no matter where we are?"

"Well..."

"Promise me something?"

"What?"

"Promise me that you won't stop trying to take the art world by storm just because we're together. Conquering the art world has been something that you have always talked about. You've worked so hard. I don't want you to give up."

"I don't plan to give up. I just want to be able to do other things besides painting nonstop..."

"You mean like Kinnetik projects?"

"Among other things..."

"I'll put Theodore to work figuring out how to make our living together happen. Now are you going to promise me that you'll continue to take the art world by storm?"

"I promise," Justin whispered.

"Ok."

"And..."

"What do you mean 'and'? I thought we were done."

"Not quite."

"What now?"

"No more making decisions about us without me...we figure things out together."

"Even the hypothetical and the speculative?"

"Especially the hypothetical and the speculative! Brian, we aren't always going to agree on everything, but we should at least talk about stuff," Justin pointed out.

"Preferably in the hot tub," Brian commented. "Look, I get it! No more decisions without you, and we'll figure things out together. I promise."

"Now will you release me so can I get back to painting?"

"I don't think so, Sunshine. We just made a pact! I think that's cause for me to at least fuck you into the mattress...a mattress, which by the way, we spent the night away from last night because we stayed at the loft." Brian pointed out with a smile.

"Ever the romantic!" Justin said with smile.

The ringing of Brian's cell phone interrupted this tender moment. Brian noticed the caller ID and decided to answer, "Lindsay?"

"Dad? Hi," the little voice on the line said.

"Well hello, Sonny Boy. How's it going?"

"Ok, I guess. Dad, is Justin there?"

"Yes, he's right here. Why Gus?"

"Can Justin come and get me?"

"Come and get you? Where are you, Gus?"

"My house."

"Why do you want Justin to come and get you?"

"I want Justin to come and play with me," Gus said sadly.

"But you'll be back here to play with Justin in less than two weeks, did you forget?"

"No...it's just that..." Brian could hear Gus sound as if he was starting to cry.

"Gus what's the matter. Talk to me."

"Dad, can I talk to Justin?"

Brian handed his cell phone to Justin. "Hey Gus, what's going on?" Justin immediately asked.

"Jus, can you come and play with me?" Gus asked in reply.

Justin heard the request and realized that even at six years old, Gus already spoke Kinney-speak. Being well versed in the language, Justin knew just how to respond. "I miss you too, Gus," he said.

"I don't have anyone to play with. Come and play with me! Please!"

"Where are your mommies?"

"They only play with Jenny. They don't have time to play with me anymore. Justin, can you and Dad come and play with me?"

"Is it really that bad, Gus?"

"Please come play with me Jus?" Gus pleaded, sounding as if he was going to cry.

"Gus, don't cry. Give your Dad and me some time to work on this. Ok?"

"Ok."

"We'll talk to your mommies, and we'll see what we can do. Ok?"

"Ok. I love you, Jus."

"I love you too, Gus. Now, here's your Dad."

"Gus, are your mommies home?"

"No, Mommie went out. Mama's here, but she's with Jenny. Is Justin going to come and play with me?"

"We'll see, Gus. I'm going to hang up and call Mommie on her cell phone. We'll see what we can do. Ok?"

"Ok, Dad."

"I love you, Sonny Boy."

"I love you too, Dad."

"Later, Gus."

"Bye, Dad."

Brian closed his cell phone and looked at Justin. "What the fuck is going on? Why is Gus asking that you come and pick him up in Toronto?"

"I don't know. He just asked me to come and play with him. He just sounded so sad and so alone."

"Lindsay told me that she marked off the days on the calendar so that Gus could see when everyone was coming back to Pittsburgh for a visit. I thought he was ok with everything. I've talked to him every week since he left, and he seemed ok. What happened?"

"Brian, he's six years old. A month must seem like an eternity to him. Why don't you call Lindsay, while I see about reservations? It's only an hour flight. We can fly into Toronto tonight, visit with Gus, and fly back home tomorrow night."

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," Brian said sadly. "Gus was supposed to be happy. What am I going to do?"

"Don't jump to conclusions. Just call Lindsay on her cell phone and find out what's going on."

Brian reached under the futon and retrieved the laptop from its hiding place. He unceremoniously handed the laptop to Justin.

"And just what is that doing here?" Justin asked with some surprise. Then, he turned on the screen, and the image of the painting reappeared. "Brian!" he said, glaring at his partner.

"Not now, Sunshine," Brian said, trying to deflect the potential drama princess moment about to happen. "You have work to do," he said with a smile, tapping the edge of laptop for emphasis

Brian decided that a little distance was probably a good idea at this point too; so he grabbed his cell phone and moved into the study to call Lindsay.

Chapter 44 – We're Off

A Little While Later...(Day 34)

"Hello." Lindsay said, answering her phone without checking her caller ID.

"Lindsay, it's Brian. "What's going on?"

"Not too much. Melanie and I are really busy making up for lost time at work and trying to get ahead of things to get ready for our return trip. Why do you ask?"

"How are things going between you and the dragon witch?"

"Brian, really! We're trying to hold on until we can get back to Pittsburgh for another counseling session. We're being overly polite to each other. We're still working on things, but it's really hard."

"You need to move back, Lindsay. You and Melanie need the support of family and friends. Surely you see that."

"Family and friends is part of what we moved to Toronto to get away from."

"That may be great for Melanie. It may even work for you. But what about the kids?"

"The kids are fine."

"Are you sure about that that?"

"Of course, the kids are with Melanie. I had to work today. What makes you think something is wrong?"

"I'm not sure."

"Justin and I were thinking of coming up for a visit. We were thinking of flying in tonight. Maybe pick up Gus. Maybe he could have dinner with us at the hotel and stay overnight with Justin and me, and then we could spend the day with him tomorrow. We would get him home in time for bed tomorrow. How does that sound?"

"That isn't really necessary, Brian. Gus is fine."

"I'm sure he is, but he probably really misses Justin. And two more weeks can seem like an awfully long time when you're only six years old. I know it's kind of spur of the moment...but I think it might make Gus happy."

"I know it would make Gus happy," Lindsay confirmed.

"You're worried about Melanie's reaction?"

"A little. But don't worry. It sounds like a great idea. I'll talk to her and call you back. In the meantime, I guess you have to figure out reservations and such, so you'll have everything worked out on your end by the time I call you back."

"Yeah. Justin is working on reservations as we speak."

"Good. So then I'll call you back," Lindsay said

"I'll be waiting," Brian admitted

"Bye."

Brian paused for a moment, trying to determine if Justin had enough time to calm down and forget about the laptop under the futon incident. Deciding the coast was probably clear, Brian returned to the studio to find out what Justin had figured out about reservations.

Justin had indeed figured out possible plane reservations with car rental through Liberty Air, and the laptop incident seemed to be forgotten.

"Well, I guess we should grab a quick shower and pack a few things," Brian suggested, "while we wait to hear back from Lindsay...she said she would talk with Mel and call me back."

"What do you think is going on?" Justin pensively asked.

"The Munchers have probably been really busy since they got back to Toronto. And, they haven't had a lot of time to spend with Gus. They can't ignore Jenny because she's still a baby. But they probably tell Gus that he is a big boy and should be able to play by himself. They probably send him off to his room alone to play with his toys. Why else would Gus ask for you to come?"

"He asked me to come and play with him," Justin reiterated.

"He still thinks that you are HIS Justin. At some point I will straighten him out on the facts, but this isn't that time," Brian said with a smile. "Look, I know I promised you the whole weekend..."

"Don't be ridiculous, we'll go up and play with Gus and make him happy, and then we'll come back home," Justin said, gently kissing Brian on the shoulder.

"C'mon, we better pack while we're waiting."

"Brian, Gus sounded really unhappy. If Melanie and Lindsay are having really big problems like before, they can't hide it from Gus this time. He's older now; he has to know. This can't be a good situation of him. He's really going to need you."

"I'll always be there for Gus, you know that."

"Yes, I do know that."

They went upstairs, quickly showered, and each packed a small bag. Brian made the calculations of time required to reach the airport, etc, and he confirmed plane reservations and a rental car in Toronto. They loaded their bags in the car and closed up the house. Justin stopped by to tell Thomas and Teres of their plans, and then, they headed back toward Pittsburgh for easier access to the airport.

While they were driving Brian's cell phone rang, and it was Lindsay saying that it was ok for them to come for their visit. Brian updated Lindsay on his estimated arrival time, and Lindsay agreed that Gus would be ready.

Brian was about to hang up, when he asked her to hold on...Justin was muttering something to him.

"Ask her if she and Mel and the kids will have dinner with us tomorrow night before we leave?" Justin suggested to Brian.

"Good idea," Brian commented, handing the phone to Justin.

"Hi, Linds. It's me."

"Justin."

"Brian and I were wondering if you and Mel and the kids would like to have dinner with us tomorrow night before we leave."

"Oh Justin, that would be great. Mel and I don't get a chance to go out to dinner much. Thank you. I'll let her know. We'll see you in a couple of hours. Call us when you get in."

"Ok bye, Linds."

Justin closed the phone and handed it back to Brian.

"Well?" Brian asked, trying to find out the result of the dinner invitation.

"She actually seemed excited about dinner. It seems that she and Mel don't get out much." Justin informed him.

"What are you up to Sunshine?" Brian asked suspiciously.

"Why would you assume that I'm up to anything? I just thought it was a nice gesture. You know how I feel about 'killing them with kindness'. We want to keep things mellow so there are no problems when you want to see Gus, right?"

"Yeah."

"Plus, this will give you a chance to see what's really going on between Mel and Linds, when they least suspect that they're being watched," Justin quietly explained.

"My, my, my. You are more than just a pretty face, aren't you?" Brian said with a touch of amazement.

"So I've been told before," Justin said with a smile.

"I really don't give a damn what's going on between Mel and Linds. What I do care about is that my son is upset? Don't think I didn't notice that Gus called ME to ask if YOU would come and get him."

"He probably figured you would be too busy. In Gus's mind I don't do anything except play with paints. So of course, I would have time to drop everything and come and get him. Otherwise, I'm sure he would have made the request of you from the beginning."

Brian laughed. "You know my Gus! Sometimes I don't think he makes any distinction between you and me. He probably thinks that we're just some kind of a package deal. In his six-year-old mind, he probably thinks he's just lucky to have you. I'm sure he thinks that everybody has got dads and mommies...but only he has a Justin," Brian said, starting to laugh.

Brian then entwined his finger with Justin's and raised Justin's wrist to his lips and gently kissed it. Justin leaned over and rested his head on Brian's shoulder for the remainder of the trip to the airport.

During part of the flight, Justin had the laptop open, researching possible attractions that the Toronto area had to offer. But knowing Gus, Justin figured the zoo would figure most prominently on Gus's to see list.

Their plane landed at 6PM, and Brian called Lindsay to let her know that they had arrived. Brian and Justin got their bags and picked up the rental car. They began the short drive from the airport to Melanie and Lindsay's house.

Brian remembered the last time he was in Toronto. Melanie had called him at the office, telling him that it was imperative that he traveled to Toronto. When he had arrived, Brian saw the first of Justin's paintings from the Santa Barbara Exhibit.

Melanie had received Sparring Partners, a painting that so immortalized on canvas the relationship between Brian and Melanie...the painting showed two dark haired figures wearing boxing gloves, one male and one female. They're sitting on the edge of the boxing ring exhausted. Their legs were dangling over the side of the ring. In their exhaustion they each had one armed draped over the shoulder of the other for support. A blond hair referee silently watched the two exhausted fighters.

Thinking to himself about all that had happened since viewing that first painting, Brian had to laugh to himself and think how much his life had changed because this blond, riding beside him now, had decided not to sell three paintings at an exhibit less than two months ago. Brian laughed as he thought about the impact of those paintings on all who received them.... Melanie.... Michael...himself.

"What?" Justin asked, trying to figure out what Brian could possibly be thinking about.

"Nothing...nothing at all," Brian said, with a knowing smile.

At that moment Justin's cell phone rang. Justin smiled as he looked at the caller ID.

"This is trouble, I can feel it!" Justin said, before answering the phone with a laugh.

"Who is it?" Brian asked.

"Hel..." was all that Justin could get out before he was interrupted.

"So are you coming?" Jason asked with impatient overtones before Justin could barely say hello.

"Of course, we'll be there. Cynthia made our reservations, so it's not necessary for Paul to pester Brian about this. You know, we wouldn't disappoint Nicky on his birthday."

"I knew that would get you here," Jason smirked. "I believe in doing whatever works."

"I noticed that." Justin confirmed.

"So are you coming a few days early?"

"Jason!"

Brian started to laugh, finally hearing who was on the other end of the line. He somehow knew that Justin was going to have his hands full in this conversation.

"Brian is swamped with this new account. I'm trying to get the paintings done for my shows. I really don't know how I can swing it. You wouldn't want me appearing at my shows with no paintings to exhibit, would you? That would truly be embarrassing, don't you think?"

"So I guess asking you to come out a few days early is really out of the question, huh? I'm just really having trouble with the decorations," Jason sighed pitifully.

"Jason, you're an artist. The decorations for the last three parties have been spectacular. Why do you think this one will be any different?"

"That's just it. All my creativity was used up in Nicky's earlier years. I was relying on you to get me through until he was 18. Then I figured my creativity might miraculously return by then. It's really is part of you duties as godparent! Didn't you read the manual? Please Justin, you're the real artist between us. You have got to help me on this! You're good at this sort of thing."

"Jason, you're so pathetic. Right now I'm in Toronto, we're on our way to visit Gus. Let me call you when I get back home. I'll talk to Brian, and I see what we can work out."

"Perfect. Just let me know your flight so Nicky and I can pick you up at the airport."

"Jason!"

"I'll even let you use my studio at the house so you won't get behind in your painting."

"Jason, you don't have a studio at the house."

"Look, I'm desperate here. Let's not focus on minor details."

"Jason!"

"Ok...ok...I'll behave...I'll wait to hear from you. How's that?"

"Much better. I'll talk to you later."

"Are you bringing Gus with you to help Nicky celebrate his birthday?"

"I don't know. Hold on." Justin turned around to ask Brian the question.

"Jason is on the phone. Aside from the fact that he wanted me to come out early, which I'm not even considering yet, he also wants to know can we bring Gus with us to visit Nicky for his birthday party? What do you think?"

"It will be a logistical nightmare, like everything Jason and Paul get us involved in, but I'll see what Lindsay and Melanie think of the idea."

"Ok, Jason, we'll let you know whether Gus is coming with us or not."

"It would be good if you could bring him. Then Gus and Nicky would get to know each other, and they would great playmates for one another when we go to Milan this summer for vacation."

"Jason, I've been meaning to ask you, what drugs do you take when we're not together that causes your mind to wander down these circuitous pathways especially about Milan?"

"I learned from the best Jus," Jason quipped. "Have a good time in Toronto. Call me when you get home. And, I'll see you in a few days."

"Right. I talk to you later."

"Bye."

Justin closed his cell phone, shaking his head. Justin turned to Brian to relay parts of the conversation.

Brian couldn't resist laughing. Justin was such a pushover, and Jason always attempted to take every little opportunity he could. Every time Justin gave an inch, Jason would find a way to take a mile. They were so much alike it was uncanny.

Jason and Justin had become instant friends so many years ago, and they had challenged and tormented each other ever since. Brian laughed as he remembered that he and Paul would just sort of lingered back and let their partners have free rein. The four of them had always had an interesting time together.

"I don't know how to tell you this," Justin began. "Jason thinks that Gus and Nicky would be such great playmates when we go to Milan this summer."

"You know Paul obviously isn't keeping Jason busy enough. He has done nothing but plot and plan ever since you visited a few weeks ago."

"I just thought I should warn you."

"Well, if your art is in the exhibit at the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana this summer, Lindsay will probably want to go see your work. So it isn't beyond reason that Gus would tag along."

"Assuming I qualify for the exhibit."

"Yes, assuming that."

At that point, they arrived at Lindsay and Melanie's house. As Brian parked the car, Lindsay appeared at the opened doorway, and a little person appeared by her side.

As Brian climbed the steps leading to the house, Gus ran out yelling, "Dad! Dad!"

"Hey there, Gus!" Brian said, grabbing his son and swinging him in the air before pulling him into a tight hug.

Meanwhile Lindsay and Melanie were hugging Justin. Gus finally looked up and realized that Justin was here too. He ran over and hugged Justin's legs.

"Dad, you brought Justin to play with me," Gus said, never releasing his grip on Justin's legs.

"It does appear so," Brian said, shaking his head.

"C'mon inside," Lindsay suggested, "I was hoping that you would stay for dinner before you took off for the hotel.

Justin looked at Brian for his reaction. Brian merely sighed and nodded his agreement. Justin smiled and said, "We'd love to stay for dinner."

Gus merely cheered, "Yeah!" As they all moved inside the house, with Gus never releasing his hold on Justin, Brian just smiled and remembered the letter.

We have had our moments, you and I...moments when all the forces of the universe converge. We have known both moments of extreme joy and moments of utter despair. And through it all...through all the ups and downs...we come here to this moment in time...here in the present...when We are still US...when we are still together.

We choose what we'll do with the time that has been given to us.

Chapter 45 – The Play Date

Early Saturday Evening in Toronto...(Day 34)

Shortly after Brian and Justin's sudden arrival in Toronto and the excited greetings all around, everyone sort of settled down into relaxed comfort with each other.

Lindsay, having only recently arrived home from work, relaxed on the living room sofa. She watched with amusement as Brian and Gus were on the floor building a fort with Lego blocks. Gus had already played for a while with Justin, and finding that Brian was willing to help him build a fort, he was willing to release Justin to talk to Melanie.

Melanie was in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on dinner, and Justin decided to see if he could help. When Melanie indicated that she had everything under control, Justin contented himself with playing with Jenny...the same Jenny, who was now confined in her high chair in the kitchen, since she had already tried on several occasions to destroy her brother's fort in the living room. However having Justin pay attention to her, suddenly made her confinement quite bearable.

"Gee, Mel," Justin began, "It was really nice of you and Linds to invite us to dinner. I know our trip was short notice so we really didn't expect this."

"Ok, Justin. I know the Asshole won't tell me anything. But, maybe you'll tell me what prompted this sudden trip to Toronto."

"I don't know how to answer that exactly," Justin began sweetly, looking for just the right words. "I was talking to Gus on the phone, and he sounded so sad. So Brian and I thought that we would come and see him and try to cheer him up."

"Why was Gus sad?" She asked with real concern. "He was supposed to be in his room playing with his toys."

"Oh come on, Mel. Think about it. He's six years old. It's a Saturday afternoon. He should have played himself to exhaustion with his friends or been having a sleeping over with his friends or having one of his friends sleep over here. He should be doing anything...except be all alone in his room, don't you think?" Justin quietly asked, drawing upon his own childhood experiences.

"He doesn't have that many friends since we moved here, except at school. We haven't had a chance to make that many friends here ourselves. With our schedules we stay so busy. And then there's something about us being American that seems to be a problem here in Canada," Melanie continued to explain.

"That's pretty bad. It's one thing to be discriminated against because you're gay. But because you're American...who would have guessed?"

"Yeah, they don't mention that in the brochures that talk about acceptance of gay marriage," Melanie said with a laugh. "Did he really sound that sad?"

"We're here aren't we? That should pretty much answer your question."

"I admit sometimes I don't know what to do. I guess you know that Lindsay and I are having some problems, but we're working on them. There just aren't any quick fixes. But, I think it's amazing that Brian dropped everything to see about his son."

"I've told you before that Brian loves his son. When are you and Lindsay going to let that simple truth sink in?"

"I'm starting to get it, Justin. You can get off you soapbox," Melanie teased. "Gus was such a happy little boy the week he spent with you and Brian. He got to set up his room. He got go camping. He went horseback riding. He painted with you. He played ball with Brian. He watched movies with you. He talked about staying up to keep Brian's company while he worked. You and Brian made him feel so special. He was even more special because his visit was so totally unplanned."

"We only scheduled a few thing just for Gus, most of what happened while he was there was stuff that was happening anyway. We just made sure that Gus was a part of everything."

"You're good with him. You always were. So is Lindsay. I don't really think I was cut out to have kids."

"How can you say that? I've seen you with Jenny."

"Justin, I'm not touchy feely like you and Lindsay. Look at how Jenny Rebecca is all over you. She misses you. I guess I seem more standoffish with the kids, maybe I just seem angry to them all the time."

"Do you know why?"

"Lots of reasons. Some of which are just starting to come to light. I've made so many mistakes," Melanie admitted sadly. "I had such high hopes for us when we moved here. Now, I'm not so sure."

Justin stood up and put his arms around her. "It's going to be ok, Mel. Just give it some time. We're all here for you. You know that. And, you can always move back."

"I do know that. Enough about me."

"How are things going with you and the Ass...I mean Brian?"

"We're fine. I just got back from New York. I met with my agent. There are three galleries that are interested in carrying my work. So I guess my career is on track. I am still waiting for that solo exhibit in New York, but in the meantime, I'm definitely keeping busy."

"Lindsay and I are really proud of what you have accomplished. The rest will come in time."

"I hope so. There has been so much going on that I haven't had a lot of time to just paint. Maybe when I get back from Cincinnati."

"What's going on in Cincinnati? I thought the exhibit wasn't for several more months?"

"Oh, it isn't that. You remember Paul and Jason?"

"Oh yeah, they stopped by several times to see us when we lived in Pittsburgh. I think Paul went to college with Lindsay and Brian."

"Yes, that's right. Anyway, they now have a son Nicky. He'll be four years old next week. Brian and I are flying in for his birthday. We're Nicky's godparents."

Melanie started to laugh. "Oh yes, I did hear about that. Somehow I can't picture Brian in a room full of four year olds. But, for you this should be fun."

"I'm still trying to figure out who's the biggest four year old Nicky or Jason," Justin said with a laugh.

"If I remember correctly, Jason likes to torment you. Are Paul and Brian still competitive? I have to admit the four of you are so much fun to watch. So you're going out there for a visit?" Mel said with a laugh. "Take me so I can watch!"

"Gee thanks, Mel."

"I just couldn't resist."

"You're going to have to try harder, Mel." Justin quipped with a scowl.

Melanie was now laughing harder.

"Well, if this is your attitude, I think I'm going to go back and play with Gus." Justin said as he turned to leave.

Justin left the kitchen with Jenny Rebecca in his arms and returned to the living room and flopped down on the couch beside Lindsay with a huff. Lindsay could hear Melanie still laughing in the kitchen.

"What's wrong," Lindsay inquired, pulling Justin into a hug of consolation.

"I was telling Melanie about the fact that Brian and I are going to Cincinnati next weekend to see Paul and Jason. We're godparents, and it's Nicky's fourth birthday."

"I'm picturing Brian in a room with bunch of four year olds," Lindsay said with a laugh.

"C'mon Lindsay, give him a break. Not you too."

"I'm sorry. I just needed a good laugh." Lindsay said. Brian looked over at her and scowled.

Gus decided that everyone else had occupied enough of Justin's time. He stopped abruptly playing with his blocks, and climbed onto Justin's lap, throwing his arms around Justin's neck.

"Jus, I've missed you so much." Gus said.

"I've missed you too." Justin whispered.

"You were gone." Gus complained. "Whenever I talked to Dad."

"I had to go to New York, but I was only there for a few days," Justin explained.

"How did things go with Catherine?" Lindsay asked.

"Pretty well. Three galleries are interested in carrying my paintings. So it was a productive week. But, I was glad to get back home."

"I'll bet. That's what I was worried about. See..."

"Not now. Lindsay. This isn't open for discussion."

"I'm sorry. I guess I'd better see if Melanie needs a hand," Lindsay said, picking up JR in the process and carrying her back into the kitchen.

"You might also see if she has stopped laughing at me yet." Justin said, raising his voice slightly so Melanie could hear.

"Not a chance, Justin," Melanie echoed from the kitchen as Lindsay entered.

Brian joined Gus and Justin on the sofa, wrapping his arms around both of them.

"Are you ok now, partner?" Justin asked Gus.

Gus nodded yes. "I was all alone," he reiterated. "I wanted you to come and play with me."

"Well, you get to spend the night with us. How does that sound?" Brian explained. "Maybe tomorrow, you and I will even take Justin out to the zoo."

"The zoo, Dad! I think Justin will like the zoo," Gus explained.

"Do you think so, Gus?" Justin asked. Gus again nodded yes.

"Gus, do you know what Justin was about to do when you called?"

Gus shook his head no. Brian continued, "He was about to start painting the picture for your room."

"He was?"

"Yep. And he was so worried?"

"He was?"

"He was afraid he wasn't going to have time to get the painting done before you got back for a visit. He was afraid you were going to be sad?"

Gus put his arm around Justin's neck and squeezed really tight and said, "Don't be afraid, Justin. You played with me. We can paint my picture anytime."

"Why thank you Gus. That makes me feel so much better," Justin said with complete surprise. "Are you sure you're not going to be sad if the painting is not done for your room when you come back for your visit?"

"It's ok. But, can we go see the horses we I come back?" Gus asked.

Justin thought to himself, Gus had inherited Brian's art of making a deal. Gus was willing to trade his painting for another visit with the horses. Justin just smiled.

"I think that can be arranged," Justin whispered, looking over at Brian, who tried to hide his smile.

Lindsay watched the scene on the sofa, just before she announced dinner. She suggested that everyone go and wash their hands. Gus held hands with both Brian and Justin and led them into the bathroom for the required hand washing. Then everyone settled down for a quiet dinner.

After dinner, Justin played with Gus and Jenny, while Melanie quietly watched from the sofa.

Lindsay agreed to clean up duties, and Brian agreed to help...correction, make that agreed to keep her company while she cleaned up after dinner.

"So you want to tell me what going on?" Brian asked. "Are you ok?"

"We're really trying to get along. Surely you can see that?"

"I can see that," Brian acknowledged.

"We're just really busy. Our schedules don't leave us a lot of time to spend with the kids or with each other. Being here is really hard, but if we can make it work, it will all be worth it in the end."

"Lindsay, I'm not going to tell you how to live your life. But your kids can't get their childhood back. Whatever you and Melanie are trying to achieve won't matter if Gus and JR have miserable childhoods. I know. I've been there."

"The kids are fine."

"The kids aren't fine. Look, when I was a kid and things at home were horrible, I had places I could escape to. Gus is so little that he doesn't have that refuge. So he did the only thing he knew to do, he called me to talk to Justin. I talked to a sad little boy earlier today, who asked me if Justin to come and get him."

Lindsay was shocked to hear this. "Oh Brian, I had no idea. I'm so sorry."

"Don't apologize. That's not what this is about. But, Lindsay, you can't send a six-year-old little boy to play alone in his room on a Saturday afternoon while Melanie plays with Jenny Rebecca. He deserves better than that!"

"You're right. Melanie just can't seem to handle both kids as well I can, and I had to work unexpectedly today. It's easier when we're both here. I promise you, this won't happen again," Lindsay assured him.

Lindsay suddenly flashed on all the stories she had heard of Brian's childhood. She had heard how his parents had pampered Claire and ignored Brian...until the neglect had turned to abuse. Lindsay wanted Brian to know that was not going to happen to Gus. Whatever the problems between her and Melanie, she would never allow that to happen to Gus. Lindsay also knew that she had to work harder to find little play dates for Gus.

"You know that can't be an excuse?" Brian said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"It can't be an excuse that Melanie can't handle two kids as well as you do. She has to find a way. I know that you love both your kids. I'm sure that Melanie does too. But Gus doesn't get to suffer because she can't handle two kids. She has responsibilities to Gus, as well as Jenny, and I expect you to hold her to it. If you need anything you let me know, but I told you before that I'm not going to sit idly by and let Gus suffer as the result of whatever problems you and Melanie are having."

"You know that Melanie loves Gus. We'll fix this, I promise."

"Linds, if you leave him alone in his room to play on a Saturday, what do you two do for punishment? Huh? Remember, there are all different kinds of abuse."

"Oh Brian! That's not what's happening here. I promise you. This won't happen again." Lindsay insisted. "There is no need for you to worry."

There was a long silence between them. Then Brian finally broke the silence with a change of subject.

"I was wondering," Brian began. "You know next weekend, Justin and I have to go to Cincinnati."

"Yeah."

"When we were on our way here, Jason called to ask if we would bring Gus with us to Nicky's birthday party. I said I would ask you to see what you thought? I know you will be in Pittsburgh the following weekend, but I thought this might be fun for Gus. I know Nicky would love it."

"It's an interesting idea, Brian. Let me talk it over with Mel."

"Sure."

"So how are you and Justin doing? Is he getting any painting done?"

"Some."

"Three galleries want to carry his paintings. That's pretty good."

"For being in New York less than a year, I would say so. What has he decided?"

"You know, Justin doesn't like to be told what to paint and when to paint it. He will be getting ready for the Cincinnati and New York shows, so he'll be at the house painting, going to New York when he needs to. I'll be busy handling this new international account, so we really won't see too much of each other. But I have to admit I like having him around. I miss him when he's away."

"Why Brian Kinney? I never thought I would hear you admit that."

"Well, now that you have...don't let it get around."

"Your secret's safe with me, dear. Let's go back in the living room." Lindsay suggested.

Lindsay and Brian returned to the scene of Jenny and Gus spooned together with Justin, and he was tickling both of them, and they were laughing and rolling around on the floor. Melanie was watching the interaction in disbelief as Justin managed to keep both children completely enthralled. Melanie was amazed at how adeptly Justin seemed to manage both children at the same time.

Brian rescued each kid by sliding one giggling kid...and then the other...under each arm, lifting them up, and moving them across the room away from Justin. Although both Gus and Jenny were thrilled to be carried at the new height elevation...as evidenced by the squeals, neither of them was going to allow this separation from Justin to happen. Nope, no way! And within minutes, both kids were nestled back around Justin again.

Everybody laughed.

Justin and Brian played a while longer with Gus and Jenny until Melanie announced that it was Jenny's bedtime.

Since this was Justin's first visit to the house, Gus wanted to be sure to give Justin a guided tour of his bedroom, while Melanie and Lindsay got Jenny ready for bed.

During the room tour, Gus put his arms around Justin and said, "I can't wait to get back to my room at big... big house."

"Big house?" Justin reacted with laugh. "Oh, you mean Bri-tin."

"Yes, Bri-tin." Gus repeated.

Justin once again laughed as Gus tried to pronounce it.

When Mel and Linds returned to the living room, Brian decided it was time for them to leave for the hotel. So he called to Gus and Justin.

Melanie and Lindsay offered Brian and Justin the use of their guest room, but Brian declined, knowing from his last trip that Gus had his heart set on the sleeping in the big bed at the hotel.

Brian and Justin gathered Gus and his suitcase. There were waves and hugs all around of goodbye. They all agreed to meet for dinner at the hotel tomorrow.

Gus joyously scampered off with two of his favorite people for his adventure at the hotel for the night...complete with room service in the morning.

But most of all Gus could hardly wait for tomorrow, when he and his dad took HIS Justin to the zoo.

Driving towards the hotel, Brian once again reflected on his letter:

Legends have told us that the Ancients would craft a Talisman, a sacred object forged at the astrologically auspicious time when all the forces of the universe converged, to consecrate the energy of the spirit within the object. For the Talisman could only be created at this one moment in time and space.

Some have said that with the proper talisman, time would have no meaning...

And Brian knew that the Legends were true.

The End

**Between Now And Then**

**(Sequel to Talisman of Time)**

Chapter 1 - The Discussion (Sidebar)

Late Saturday Night...(Day 34)

Melanie and Lindsay had just said goodnight to Brian and Justin as they left with Gus for their adventure of a night in the Toronto hotel. The trio was spending all day Sunday together, as well.

Mel, Linds, and Jenny had plans to meet Brian, Justin, and Gus at Brian's hotel for Sunday dinner.

Melanie and Lindsay were both actually looking forward to having dinner with them tomorrow evening. It had been a long time since they had an occasion to dine out, and they knew that Gus would have lots to tell about his adventures with Brian and Justin. They could only imagine!

But at this moment, Mel and Linds had the house pretty much to themselves since Jenny Rebecca had already been safely tucked away in her bed hours ago.

"I can't believe that you invited Brian and Justin to spend the night here?" Lindsay casually mentioned to Melanie as they were starting to turn out the lights downstairs.

"Why? Brian has stayed with us before. In fact, he stayed with us for one night, the last time he visited Gus; besides Justin was with him this time," Melanie reminded her.

"So?"

"You know how I feel about Justin," Melanie said with a gleam in her eyes.

"Yes, I do. You have always liked Justin...well except for that naming Gus thing," Lindsay reminded her with a laugh.

"I think I have kind of gotten over that. But let's not tell Justin, ok? Even after all this time, he still blushes when he's teased about it." Melanie said with a laugh. "And I still just can't resist teasing him about it."

"I have noticed that," Lindsay said with a laugh, flopping down on the living room sofa.

"Lindsay, I'm so sorry about Gus," Melanie said, flopping down beside her. "I had no idea that he would feel so miserable and alone that he would call Brian."

"Why did you send him to his room?" Lindsay wondered.

"He and Jenny were playing together. Jenny got cranky. He couldn't play with his toys in peace. So I suggested that he go to his room and play with his toys, and I played with Jenny," Melanie casually explained.

"Melanie, why didn't you put Jenny in her play pen and play with Gus for a while. You two could have built a fort together or something."

"You weren't here, and I had two kids both demanding my attention. I guess I felt that Jenny was just a baby that she needed me whereas Gus was older and could play by himself and be ok."

"Are you sure that it wasn't simply that Jenny is your daughter, and she came first?"

"No Linds, how could you think that?"

"Something that you said in counseling started me start to wonder. I'm still sorting it all out in my own mind, so I haven't worked it through yet. It's just this gnawing feeling. You just seem so dedicated to Jenny...at times you even seem to be losing interest in Gus now that Jenny is around."

"It's just that she is such a baby still, and I'm all that she has."

"Excuse me? Melanie, do you remember me, your wife...your partner. When childcare duties are my responsibility, I take care of both kids. I love them both. I don't make distinctions."

"I'm not you Lindsay. I can't love like that. I'm never going to be that kind of mother to Jenny. That's why it's so important that she has you in her life. Hell, even Justin mothers better than I do."

"What?"

"We talked about it while he was here. All that time that Gus spent with Brian and Justin, very little of that time was made up of special activities planned especially for Gus...camping and horseback riding, maybe...but Justin said they just included Gus in whatever they had going on. That's why Gus came back and couldn't stop talking about how he stayed up and kept Brian company when he was working one night or why Gus now has to make a mess like Justin when he paints. I don't know how to do what they do or even what you do with Gus. I love Gus. But for me he is just becoming a handful, and this isn't the first time."

"But Gus is only six years old," Lindsay reminded her.

"I know how old Gus is," Melanie responded sadly.

"If you're having this much trouble now, what are you going to do as he get older?" Lindsay asked with concern starting to seep into her voice.

"Believe me, I'm starting to ask myself the same question," Melanie said with a sigh, pulling Lindsay into her arms.

"And what did you come up with?" Lindsay asked, cautiously snuggling in.

"I have to be nicer to the Ass...I mean Brian."

"What?"

"Don't sound so surprised. Didn't you notice that we didn't snipe all evening?" Melanie reminded her.

"I did notice. Justin kept you two separated most of the evening, and I kept both of you busy during dinner, and then everybody left soon afterwards, so I just figured that you didn't have a chance to attack each other. I must admit that it was a rather pleasant evening."

"Gus has made it abundantly clear to anyone who will listen that he needs Brian and Justin in his life. So if that what he needs, we need to find a way to co-parent with them. And if we're going to co-parent with them, Brian and I have to find a way to be in the same room with each other without sparring all the time...or at least not sparring over Gus. Believe me Brian and I in the same room have infinite opportunities to spar over things without Gus being in the mix." Melanie relayed matter-of-factly.

"When did you decide that Brian and Justin needed to co-parent with us?"

"I didn't decide it. That's too big a decision for me to decide alone. Let's just say that I was starting to play with the thought. While I was tossing the idea around in my head, Brian magically appeared, so I wanted to test out my hypothesis."

"Not that I understand what you just said, but what did you figure out?"

"I have been doing some research on children for some cases I have been working on."

"Yeah."

"You know everyone talks about the effect of a gay or lesbian household on kids. And they like to compare those kids raised in gay and lesbian household versus kids raised in heterosexual households."

"Yeah."

"The studies show that kids raised in gay or lesbian households fare the same as kids raised in straight families. Of course now that I think about this, it makes sense. This is why we agreed to have Gus in the first place. But the more I think about it, the more I think we have used the wrong comparative model for a family like ours."

"You do?"

"Where Gus is concerned especially, we should look at the studies of kids raised in gay and lesbian households versus the kids raised by cooperative divorced parents, who have placed the good of the kids above whatever their parental emotional conflicts once were."

"Where did that come from?"

"I told you, my hypothesis. It's just something I've been thinking about lately."

"Go on, I'm listening."

"We all look at our parents' marriage and formulate ideas about relationships in general. Some of us have good examples, others not so good. It's our parents as role model that we grow up to synthesize. We take what information we have gathered over the years and formulate how we want our own relationships to be. We selectively decide how parts of our relationships should identical to our parents, and how other parts of our relationships should be really, really different."

"Ok, I'm with you so far."

"I think kids of divorced parents after some requisite adjustment period of about two years, learn to function as a member of two different households. And in learning this lesson of functioning in two different households, they start the process of examining relationships at an earlier age. Once they have to function as members of two distinct households, they learn to adept to new situations. They learn to understand differences. They have multiple relationships from which to formulate the good and the not so good about relationships. So I think they get to do the relationship synthesis thing sooner. In theory... in theory, they should make better relationship choices."

"So this is what you think?"

"Yes. Gus is clear that things are one way with Brian and Justin and a totally different way when he's with us. He has very different experiences when he's with each of us. And I think that's a good thing...now that I'm sure that's those experiences for Gus don't include watching Brian perform as the Stud of Liberty Avenue. Look, Linds, we're sooooooo far way from the model family we envisioned when we talked about having Gus. Brian is not simply a sperm donor with minimal involvement in his son's life. As much as I hate to admit it, Brian is always going to be Gus's father. Even signing over his parental rights didn't change that reality."

"I can't believe that I'm hearing you say this."

"Brian earned my respect when he got on a plane and came here to play with Gus, especially when you think about how little time Brian and Justin actually get to spend together, with Justin going back and forth to New York. Brian put Gus first, and this isn't the first time he's done that."

"When we were in the kitchen, Brian and I talked about our childhoods. Both Brian and I know what is like to watch your parents favor one child and neglect the other. Brian sadly watched that neglect turn into physical abuse. He wanted to remind us that there are all different forms of abuse, and he didn't want any of those forms of abuse to touch Gus," Lindsay continued.

"Neither do I," Melanie asserted.

"I think Brian felt if we just became more aware of what were doing that we would be more careful."

"I do understand that. And..."

"And?"

"And Justin has made his point about Brian being a good parent; he has pointed out so much stuff to us...you have to admit, it's pretty hard to ignore. Especially when Justin can be relentless when he's making a case about something. You know he would have been a good lawyer," Melanie pointed out.

"I have often thought that. And, I know Justin can be relentless once he set his mind to something. How else do you explain that he and Brian are together?" Lindsay agreed.

"Lindsay, Brian is exactly where he wants to be. Brian's only problem was that he didn't know how to get here. Fortunately, he had Justin to show him the way. Brian still loves you, but Justin has Brian's heart. And he's so different because of it. Even I can see it, and you know how I feel about the Asshole."

"Yes, I do know," Lindsay agreed. "Now, you were saying about your hypothesis?"

"Oh yeah. So I'm taking a wait and see attitude on my hypothesis."

"About what?"

"I'm gathering data points about Brian and Justin co-parenting Gus with us. I'm not ready to really discuss it. But, I have decided to NOT create a major crisis for you every time Brian wants spend time with Gus."

"Are you sure?"

"I know it won't be that often, and Gus really wants and needs to spend time with him and Justin."

"I'm glad that you feel that way."

"Are you now? Why?"

"It seems that Jason called Justin while they were on their way here. Jason and Paul want Brian and Justin to bring Gus with them for Nicky's birthday party in Cincinnati."

"So they're willing to take Gus along," Melanie said wistfully. "You have to admit that it would definitely be a new experience for Gus...someone new for him to play with. Sure, why not?"

"You're serious."

"Don't be so surprised. I'm trying here."

"Yes, you are. I can see that you really mean this."

"I really do love Gus, Lindsay, and I really do want what's best for him. There're a lot of things I need to protect him from, but no matter how I try to slice it, I just can't make Brian or Justin one of those things." Melanie said with smile.

"I'm glad that you finally realize this," Lindsay said with a smile.

Melanie continued, "Besides when I was doing my research, little boys raised without a strong father influence are more likely to become a statistic in the criminal justice system. The studies I read were frightening. I don't want to take any chances where Gus is concerned. Brian and Justin being involved in Gus' life will shield him from that possibility as well. As I see it, Gus would win all around."

"You really do love Gus, don't you?"

"Of course, I love Gus. I have told you that, but I see my primary role is to protect him."

"But, you have to also show him that you love him too. You can't always choose to give Jenny all the attention and neglect him. It's important for a little boy to know that he is loved by his parents, and in this case that's you and me." Lindsay pointed out.

"I know. I'll be more careful." Melanie promised.

Lindsay leaned up and gently kissed Melanie. For some reason, Melanie was completely surprised by the maneuver, but she quickly responded to the kiss and allowed it turn passionate.

"I think that we should move this discussion upstairs to our bedroom," Melanie suggested. And, together, arm-in-arm, they made their way upstairs.

Chapter 2 – Lazy Sunday

Sunday Morning In Toronto...(Day 35)

In the hotel room the next morning Brian awakened to an empty bed and the sounds of Gus and Justin plotting over the room service menu. Brian thought to himself that they were co-conspirators in that regard, and he didn't want to think about the amount of food that was probably about to appear on the room service cart.

With their room service selections entered electronically, Gus and Justin were huddled over the laptop considering possible activities for today.

Gus was telling Justin about Brian's last visit to Toronto, and their trip to Castle Loma where Brian was the king, and Gus was the little prince. For some reason the way that Gus described everything caused Justin to begin laughing hysterically.

It was Justin's laughter that let Brian know it was definitely time for him to get up.

Brian finally propped himself up in bed to let Gus and Justin know that he was awake. "You two can stop whispering now," Brian said sarcastically since no one seemed to notice that he was now sitting up in bed. "As you can see, I'm awake."

"Dad!" Gus said, propelling himself onto the bed and into Brian's arms.

"Gus and I thought you might wake up soon, so we took the liberty of ordering breakfast for you," Justin said with a sinister smile.

"What exactly did you order?" Brian asked, while tickling Gus.

A knock on the door and the appearance the breakfast cart would soon answer Brian's first question of the day. It seemed that between Justin legendary appetite and Gus' inability to make decisions, the breakfast cart was unusually laden with entrées.

Over breakfast, Brian formulated his second question of the day. "So Gus, what do you think we should do today?"

Gus reminded Brian that they were taking Justin to the Toronto Zoo, where Gus pointed out that a zillion drawings would be made to record this particular outing in detail.

Justin counter suggested, "The zoo sounds like a wonderful idea. But how about we pick up one of those disposable cameras. I can take a few quick snapshots, and that way I can actually get to see the zoo."

Gus pondered this idea for a few seconds and finally agreed that the camera idea would probably be ok. Brian found the whole negotiation thing between Justin and Gus to be amusing.

A little later that day at the zoo Brian would make a random comment to Justin. "I had no idea how much money we've saved over the years because you documented everything in your sketchpad. If you had chosen photography as your medium of expression, I'm sure by now we would have been bankrupt," Brian said, as they purchased their fifth disposal camera of the day.

Towards the end of the afternoon, everyone went back to the hotel to have a quick nap and a shower before meeting Melanie, Lindsay, and Jenny for dinner.

It had already been decided the previous night that they would all have dinner at the hotel since it was easiest for Brian and Justin. Dinner at the hotel was also a real treat for Mel and Linds...after all, how often do they get to have dinner at a four-star hotel?

Dinner conversation was kept light and easy, and Gus made sure to fill his mommies in on all the details of Justin's busy day at the zoo. The descriptions of a six year old and Justin's constant protests were enough to keep everyone laughing during dinner.

After dinner everyone said their goodbyes, and Gus went home with his mommies very excited...for they told him during dinner, that he would be going with Brian and Justin to Cincinnati for Nicky's birthday party the following weekend.

Brian and Justin returned to their hotel room for the night, since their flight didn't leave until first thing in the morning.

It had been only a few days since Justin had left New York City to return home. He and Brian had worked through a lot, and they had made a lot of decisions. At least now, they were on the same page about things, but the days had been one roller coaster ride after another, culminating in an abrupt trip to Toronto in response to a sad and lonely phone call from a six year old to his dad.

Now, Brian and Justin had a few moments to just be together, and they curled up together in their hotel room.

"Crisis averted," Brian mumbled as Justin spooned against his chest.

"Rage once again saves the day!" Justin added, snuggling into closer into place.

"How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not Rage saving Gayopolis? It's not my thing," Brian said in whispered protest.

"So then you think that Michael and I need to invent another superhero.... something like Super Dad? No. No. Wonder Dad? Maybe, Dad O' Might?" Justin kept trying to make suggestions.

Brian silenced Justin's suggestions with a kiss as he wrapped his arms and legs around him. "You have really been hanging out with Mikey too long...you know that?" Brian insisted with a laugh.

"It doesn't matter what Michael and I think...your son thinks that you're pretty wonderful."

"Yeah...he does," Brian agreed in a whisper.

"So launder your tights and your super suit...because you have to make an encore appearance this coming weekend," Justin said with a laugh. "Since, Gus will be going with us to Cincinnati."

"Are you done?" Brian asked, pivoting Justin around to face him.

"I think so," Justin admitted, leaning in a giving him a gentle kiss.

Justin straddled Brian forcing him to lean back a little. Their hard cocks came in contact with one another.

Brian eventually leaned back and gave Justin THAT look...a look Justin hadn't seen since the end of the Stockwell campaign when they were celebrating in the streets.

"What are you doing?" Justin asked with a laugh.

"I'm using my powers of mind control," Brian said, without changing his expression.

"Drop your pants, bend over." Justin repeated from memory. "Surely, you can, ah, use your amazing superpowers for something more constructive?"

"Try as I might, I can't think of anything else," Brian said with a smile, pulling Justin into a passionate kiss and rolling him over onto his back.

Chapter 03 – New Visions

Monday Morning ...(Day 36)

When Brian and Justin were seated on the plane for the ride back to Pittsburgh, Brian silently interlaced his fingers with Justin's. He quietly lifted Justin's arm, and gently kissed his wrist. Justin leaned his head over and rested it on Brian's shoulder. This was a moment of perfect understanding between them, and words were absolutely unnecessary.

"You realize that we're going to have talk to Theodore if we are going to make this work," Brian said as they were driving directly from the airport to Kinnetik.

"Let's do it," Justin said as they walked into the building.

They were sitting in Brian's office. Justin was using the office phone. Brian was just sitting at his desk watching Justin with amusement.

"Hi, Ted. It's Justin." There was a pause.

"Can you come to Brian's office?" Another pause.

"Yes, now..." Another pause.

"Ok. Bye," Justin said gently before hanging up the phone. Justin turned around and found Brian glaring at him. "What's wrong?" he innocently asked.

"Oh, I see we have lots of work to do if you're going to be around here," Brian insisted smugly.

"Excuse me?" Justin said, glaring back at Brian in total disbelief.

Brian continued to rant at Justin, ignoring the fact that Ted had already walked into the office. "You've got to be more forceful than that, or Theodore will never know that you mean business," he teased, shaking his head in disbelief.

"But Brian, he came immediately, and he's standing right there." Justin motioned in the direction of the now puzzled Ted. "So you've got to admit, additional forcefulness just somehow seemed unnecessary," Justin said with a smile, confidently taking a seat in one of the chairs near Brian's desk before he sarcastically asked, "I'm sorry, did I interrupt? Was there a point you were making?"

Brian rolled his eyes. 'Justin could be so trying sometimes,' he thought to himself with a smile.

Ted just smiled at the exchange between the two men and waited to see what would happen next. He didn't have to long to wait.

"Theodore, I'm so glad that you're finally here." Brian began. Ted shrugged in total disbelief at THAT comment, but he said nothing. " I want to share with you my new vision," Brian stood up and started to pace for emphasis.

Brian knew that he was about to enjoy what was going to happen.

"Excuse me?" Ted said, grateful to be off the hot seat. But he did clearly notice the distinct change of topic. He experienced a moment of confusion; so he had to ask, "Did I miss something?" remembering that with Justin around, Brian's agile mind tended to shift topics even faster than usual.

"Try to keep up, Theodore!"

"Right. Right."

"As I was saying...I want to share with you my new vision," Brian repeated again for emphasis as he looked out the corner of his eye to watch for Ted's reaction.

"Ooook."

"Let's say...we have Kinnetik offices all over the world," Brian wistfully began, allowing himself to become momentarily dreamy-eyed for effect.

"Kinnetik World Wide Incorporated...I'm with you so far, Bri."

"Let's say in our office buildings we have living quarters for Justin and me...for when we visit each office. After all, we have to live somewhere as we travel from place to place."

"Ooook. I understand that you need residence quarters in each location. And these quarters should be, not just for you alone, but should be for you AND Justin? Got it." Ted said, trying to sound nonchalant but efficient.

"Right! It's good to see that you're with me so far." Brian said with a smile.

"I'm trying here. You haven't lost me yet," Ted acknowledged, deciding at this point that he really needed to sit down if he was going to take in the remainder of Brian's performance. So he moved to the nearest chair.

"And, of course, with Kinnetik's expansion," Brian continued, "Part of our staff will need to be lithe and mobile, and so I guess, we have to have temporary residences everywhere as they travel, preferable within our company owned buildings."

"Of course," Ted said, starting to wonder if any drugs still lingered in Brian's system from his weekend at Babylon. Maybe that would explain these new delusions. He also wondered if he was going to need to place a call to Blake to coach him through how to handle this newly developing situation. But Ted decided, at this point, it was still better to humor Brian and to see where he was going with this. He could always take more drastic actions later, if necessary.

Brian continued once again. "And of course, Justin has to have adequate studio space as part of the design within every Kinnetik World Wide building...so that he can paint whatever he wants...whenever he wants...from wherever he happens to be..."

"Absolutely!" Ted agreed, casting his glance over toward Justin, who was smiling in agreement with all that Brian was saying. Ted began to wonder if maybe they had been doing drugs together this weekend after they left Babylon.

Ted's thoughts were interrupted as Brian resumed, "And, Kinnetik World Wide will probably have to work out some rental arrangement with Justin, maybe charge him rent for his studio space because he's going to be a rich, successful, world-renown artist, and money will, of course, be no object."

"Of course."

"But we'll try to be somewhat accommodating with him. Kinnetik World Wide would probably agree to defray part of his studio rental costs if he will agree to work on projects for Kinnetik from time to time...as his schedule permits."

"Absolutely! Which is really a good thing because Murph is already complaining about how the art department missed Justin the week he was in New York." Ted interjected, finally finding his voice and now, having something to contribute to the conversation.

"Theodore, what are you talking about?" Brian asked with total surprise...even a bit annoyed that his performance had been interrupted.

"To quote Murph, 'the art department felt that it lacked creative direction during the week of Justin's absence'. Just thought you should know," Ted said with a smile. And in that instant, Ted suddenly understood why Emmett so loved to relay gossip. "But forgive me...I digress...you were saying?"

Brian once again resumed control of his interrupted presentation. "Well, what do you think about what I have just presented to you? I realize that this may be a slight departure from the way we have traditionally thought about Kinnetik's expansion." Brian said innocently.

"I would have to say, that's a major understatement!" Ted agreed forcefully.

Justin had been quietly watching the exchange between Ted and Brian with intense interest, but Ted's last statement caused even Justin to laugh.

"So with these new parameters, I need you figure out what we need to do...to open our New York City office."

"What? What? When?"

"I would like to be settled within four months. Is that enough time? If I need to delay because of renovations, I suppose Justin would let me crash at his loft temporarily until more permanent quarters are ready," Brian said, looking over at Justin with a smile for confirmation. Justin gave him a nod yes and a full wattage smile.

"What? What?"

"Theodore, get on the ball! You have work to do! Figure it out! Make it happen! But breathe a word of this, and you're so fired. Get back to me when you have something concrete to show me."

"Bri, this is good news. Anything else?"

"Well, in addition to all that I just laid out for you, we still have to roll out Collezione Fiero without missing a beat. In fact, I want to come in ahead of schedule. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly."

"I expect the bonuses on that account alone to make selling the house in West Virginia unnecessary...Justin and I love the house and would rather not sell it unless we have to."

"Got it. Is there anything else?" Ted asked with a sigh.

Brian looked over at Justin. "Have I forgotten anything?" he asked and paused to see if Justin had anything to add.

"You mean other the shopping spree necessary with each new office opening?" Justin added

"Ah yes," Brian said with a laugh, "How could I forget? Theodore, I need a clothing allowance for me added to the opening expenses for each new Kinnetik World Wide Office opening. Do you think you manage that?"

"What? I can manage all the other stuff. But an additional clothing allowance for you on top of everything else? That's really asking a lot, Brian! I can only do so much here! You're going to have to drum up significantly more accounts per location than we previously forecasted to be able to handle that!" Ted rambled on. He had endured enough of Brian's performance, but the last request was just over the top.

"I see! Well, it's all Justin's fault; so maybe we can factor my clothing allowance into his studio rental costs. Yes, I can see that he is going to have to spend a lot more time working at Kinnetik World Wide than he had originally planned. We're obviously going to have to press him into all sorts of service," Brian rambled on aloud.

"I'm not going to even touch that!" Ted said, holding up his hands to shield his mind from the thought. "As relieved as I am that you've stopped torturing me, I can't stand idly by and watch you pick on Justin either." Ted finally stood up and took a few steps forward. "Now that I understand the new parameters, I'm going to my office to see if I can reforecast the entire Kinnetik Universe."

"Thanks Theodore," Brian said with a smile. "I knew you would take care of everything."

"You realize that I'm sitting on the hottest story of the century...and I can't say a word! You know that this is going to be killing me!"

"Theodore!

"But I'll keep my mouth shut! Anyway, I'm happy for you," Ted said, hugging Justin.

Brian allowed a one second hug, and then said coldly, "You said something about going back to your office?"

"Leaving. Leaving." Ted finally said, starting to walk out of the office with a smile. Some things never change.

Once Ted had left the office, Justin walked into Brian's arms and said, "You were having such a good time, weren't you?"

"Did it show?" Brian asked.

"Only to me. Remember, I'm on to you?" Justin reminded him.

"Oh, thank goodness," Brian said, leaning down to give Justin a gentle kiss.

Cynthia chose that moment to enter Brian's office without knocking.

"Does the concept of knocking ever occur to you?" Brian tried to bellow at Cynthia, who as usual, paid no attention to him.

"How often have I told you to lock the door whenever Justin visits you," she reminded him. "Besides I didn't come to see you, I wanted to be sure that Justin got his courier package from Milan."

"Oh. Well, in that case, I guess you're forgiven," Brian said, finally releasing his hold on Justin and turning back to his desk.

"And I guess I'd better go and see Murph," Justin said, turning to leave.

"Your package is on the corner of my desk," Cynthia yelled to him as he was leaving.

"Got it. Thanks," Justin yelled back from the other room.

Once Justin was gone, Cynthia turned her attention to Brian again. "I'm not going to ask what's going on because you'll tell me in your own good time. But, just answer one question, why is there a suitcase in your office?"

"Justin and I just got back from Toronto this morning. We went to visit Gus. Oh yes, by the way, Gus is going with us to Cincinnati. Justin is leaving early. So I guess we have to figure how I can get Gus in Toronto and still get to Cincinnati no later than say Friday. By the way when is my New York meeting with The Pentland Group?"

"Andrew David called. He wants to know if you can you reschedule your meeting with him for sometime Thursday."

"Sure, no problem, if you can make it fit the schedule."

"How's Gus?"

"He's good. He and I took Justin to the Toronto Zoo," Brian explained, announcing it just that way as if it was a perfectly normal occurrence for Justin to be taken on these outings by father and son. "And by the way," Brian said, while digging in the suitcase and pulling out the disposal cameras one at a time while they talked, "Can you send these out for processing?"

"What are those?" she asked, watching Brian still pulling out cameras.

Still removing cameras from the suitcase, Brian said, "This is what happens when Justin tries a new artistic medium. Don't ask!"

"Brian, most families can barely get through one of these, how many days were you at the zoo?" she asked, continuing to accept cameras that were handed to her.

"We were only there few hours," Brian said with a sigh, finally re-closing the suitcase.

Cynthia burst out laughing, struggling with the armful of cameras. "I love my job," she said as she left his office still laughing.

Brian just shook his head and made himself comfortable once again at this desk, trying to erase from his mind the sight of Cynthia juggling a stack of disposal cameras in her arms.

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Meanwhile in the art department, Justin was sitting at one of the spare boards, going through his packet from the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana while waiting for Murph and George to finish with their meeting. Justin was carefully reading through the information in Italian, page by page, before he finally located the pages written in other languages, including English.

His presence in the art department did not go unnoticed.

Different people in the art department noticed he was there. They looked over his shoulder at what was he was reading and became involved. Everyone was looking at various pages, choosing the language version that they partly understood. Each person wanted to do their part to help Justin wade through the volume of information. Everyone was huddled around Justin talking at once, talking about the international exhibit and the requirements. Each person was finding some little tidbit of information to share with Justin, who just smiled at the entire fiasco.

When Murph and George appeared, Justin asked if they had a moment.

Seeing that they were now available, Justin thanked everyone for their help, as he refolded the papers and re-inserted them in the courier pack.

"Murph, I've been meaning to ask you a question," Justin said, making himself comfortable on one of the stools.

"Sure Justin, what's on your mind?"

"Let's say that I'm in my studio in New York or even at home," Justin began.

"Ok."

"And let's say that you wanted to have a art department meeting, and you wanted me there too?" Justin continued nonchalantly.

"Yeah?"

"How would we do it?" Justin finally stopped and looked directly at Murph for an answer.

"You know I have been giving this a lot of thought," Murph said with a big smile.

"You have?"

"We got this new video conferencing software. We were going to install it on Brian's laptop, but you were in New York, and he was so driven and working us to death as it was. So we just didn't tell him the software was in. The only rest we ever got was when he finally went home. If he knew we had this software, he would have even worked us from home, and we would have never experienced the concept of rest. So we just sort of didn't mention it to him." Murph explained.

"I see," Justin said with a laugh.

"But we can add the software to your laptop, and you can conference with us whenever you want...from anywhere in the world. We can handle file transfers and stuff, and then we can all see and work on them across the network at the same time. Everything is encrypted, so it's secure. Do you want to see a demo?"

"Not right now, I was just checking on what the options were."

"Great minds think alike, Justin. Only, can we sort of not mention this to Brian just yet, unless we have to."

"Murph, you know how he hates to be kept in the dark," Justin suggested. "I think you better tell him or confess to Cynthia and Ted at least. They will know how to best broach the subject with him."

"That's a good idea. It's good to have you around." Murph said. Justin just shook his head.

A few minutes later, George returned with a box and handed it to Justin. "Murph and I were trying to find the right moment to give you this," George said.

"What is it?" Justin asked.

"It's your copy of the video conferencing software and a few other items we thought you would need. It's sort of like what we give new employees so they can function as part of the department. We put this together for you while you were in New York, just in case we could entice you to still work with us once you got back. You should get everything set up and tested before you have to leave again." George said, handing the box to Justin.

"Gee, I don't know what to say," Justin grinned and as he looked up, and the rest of the art department was also standing around and smiling.

Justin thanked everyone and gathered everything up and made his way to put everything in the car, still trying to wrap his mind around what just happened.

Justin stopped in to see Brian before heading off to Bri-tin to bring him up to date on what had just happened.

However, as soon as he entered Brian's office he heard, "So, is the great conspiracy between you and my art department complete?" Brian said with a smirk, without looking up from his computer. "And, I see that in accordance with our most recent pact, you and I now probably have a date in the hot tub, not to mention an overdue fucking into the mattress to schedule. How does this evening work for you?"

"I'm not sure you can necessarily blame me for out next round in the hot tub, I just came back in to tell you about my meeting with the art department." Justin honestly admitted.

"I know that you did." Brian whispered, standing up and walking over to give Justin a gentle kiss on the cheek. "I already know the general stuff, but for the life of me, I don't know why my staff thinks that I don't look at invoices." Brian said as he sat back at his desk. "There's a great story here that I'm just dying to hear. So go home and paint...take the car. I'll take a limo home tonight after work...after I fire my entire art department," he continued to tease.

"Brian!"

"Ok. Ok. I promise, I won't let on that I know a thing. But I want all the gory details," Brian insisted. Then he smiled, "Fuck, I sound like Emmett. I can't believe what's going on within my own company. Where did I go wrong?"

"I'll see you tonight," Justin said with a smile, wiggling his hips as he was leaving.

"Justin!" Brian called out into the empty air as he his cock twitched at Justin's departing image.

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Ted was sitting in his office replaying in his mind his meeting from earlier today with Brian and Justin. Ted shook his head as he acknowledged that things were always more interesting with Justin around. This morning's meeting just proved his point.

Starting to work on revising his projections, Ted's thoughts were racing away. 'He was sitting on the hottest news story of the century'. He alone was privy to it...and he couldn't say a word. What a powder keg! Wait until Deb and the Liberty Avenue family found out! Brian and Justin were not just a couple...they were a committed couple...as good as married some might say...without the fanfare of ceremony or rings or vows or papers or anything!'

Ted was still trying to get his mind around the fact that Brian had stood in his office and pitched the great redefinition of Kinnetik with one big change...that Justin was now quietly included prominently, in everything. Everything was now different.

Ted's musings were interrupted as Murph entered his office.

Ted couldn't wait to hear what revelations Murph had to tell him this time, especially since Murph didn't come alone. He came accompanied by his loyal assistant, George. 'Oh, this has to be good!' Ted thought to himself.

"What can I do for you two?" Ted asked right away. " But I have to admit, you two already look like the cats, who just swallowed the canary. What happened did Brian catch you fawning over Justin? You know Murph, I warned you about that before," Ted rambled on, continuing to tease. "You should have listened to me."

"Will you be serious? I think we're in trouble." George cautiously offered.

"Justin said that we had to tell you," Murph explained.

"Justin?" Ted exclaimed, knowing immediately this had to be big.

"But you can't tell Brian," Murph added.

"Let's talk about this. Then, I'll decide whether or not to become a co-conspirator with you."

George and Murph relayed about the initial purchase of the video conferencing software to make Brian's life easier. But because until lately he was so driven, they didn't bother to mention to him that the software had arrived. They explained that now with Justin around, the department wanted him to be able to participate in meetings with the art department from wherever he happened to be; so they gave him a copy of the software to load on his laptop.

Ted couldn't help but laugh. "Your secret is safe with me, but knowing Brian, he is going to find out. And he will retaliate when you least expect it. So you should be prepared. You know how nothing gets pass him."

George and Murph nodded, but they still crossed their fingers and hoped that luck was on their side. They both really liked working for Brian after all these years, dating back to their Vanguard days. Brian always threatened pink slips, but he rarely followed through. They definitely hoped that luck would continue to be on their side.

Ted smiled to himself as he realized that it had been less than a month since Justin's return to Pittsburgh. Ted's analytical mind was already ticking off events: 'A six year old had staged a hunger strike; there had been an international incident, involving an intermediary delivering an apology; and now, there was a conspiracy brewing within Kinnetik. So much intrigue...in so little time...

Ted found himself, echoing aloud Cynthia's famous words as he turned back to his work, "I love my job."

Chapter 4 – We Need To Talk

Late Monday Morning...(Day 36)

Meanwhile Justin headed out to Bri-tin. The drive was leisurely since it was still early in the day. Justin knew that he needed to make four phones calls on his way home.

The first call was made to Jennifer...just to touch base.

Justin felt a little guilty that he had been out of touch for almost two weeks, especially since he had returned to town from New York and then had immediately left town again for Toronto. Of course, Jennifer knew none of this, and Justin had no plans to fill her in on the details.

"Hey Mom," Justin said when Jennifer finally answered her phone.

"Justin, when did you get back? How was New York?" Jennifer immediately asked.

Justin brought Jennifer up to date on everything that happened in New York with Catherine and the galleries wanting to carry his paintings. As always, she was extremely proud of everything that Justin had accomplished in spite of the odds. For back when Justin was in high school, she had once said that Justin was unlikely to be able support himself as an artist. Now, as she remembered that conversation with the teenaged-Justin, she was pleasantly surprised to see that he had continued to prove her wrong.

But then she had been wrong about so many things...including Brian. Once, she had tried to simply come to terms with the Brian and Justin relationship; now, she found herself genuinely thinking of Brian as family...with or without the marriage that didn't take place a year ago. And Jennifer still smiled every time that Brian called her "Mother Taylor".

"So, when am I going to see you?" Jennifer asked, quickly coming out of her thoughts.

"Maybe when we get back from Cincinnati; we're flying out this week for Nicky's birthday," he reminded her.

Jennifer could hear that Justin was looking forward to this trip.

"Oh yes, I forgot," she said with a smile

"I'll call you next week, and maybe we can get together for dinner," Justin suggested

"Are you going to invite me out to the house?" Jennifer asked, hopefully planting the seeds of suggestion in her son's mind.

"Mom!"

"Just asking, dear. You know, the last time that I saw it, the house was just an empty shell. I only have Gus' version of how the house looks all furnished. You do see, Honey, that my information is a bit limited?"

"Ok Mom, I get your point," Justin said with a laugh, "I'll see what I can do."

"That's all I needed to hear. But even more than the house, I just need to see you.

It's been so long, you know? How will I remember what you even look like?" Jennifer knew she was laying it on a bit thick, but she wanted to make her point while she had Justin's attention.

There it was laid out before him...the full measure of applied mother's-guilt. 'How will I remember what you even look like?' Justin rolled his eyes at the question, and he wanted to answer, 'Have you looked in the mirror lately, Mom?' Instead he simply smiled and said, "Sure, Mom."

"So that means that you'll call me next week, right?" Jennifer tried to confirm once more.

"Yes, Mother. I'll call you." Justin said with a sigh.

"Bye dear," Jennifer said triumphantly as she ended the conversation.

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The second call that Justin made was to Catherine Mann, his agent in New York.

Justin had some real concerns about the idea of producing painting after painting for the galleries. Brian had suggested that he talk to Catherine about his concerns before he made any final decisions. Now that he had a chance to think things over, he was ready to give voice to some of his concerns.

When Justin's call to her rolled into voice mail, he simply left a message, asking her to call him back.

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The third call that Justin made was to Sidney Bloom of the Sidney Bloom Gallery. Justin called to invite Sidney to lunch.

Sidney was most eager to accept. After teasing that he's always available to accept a free lunch, Sidney indicated that he was most eager to hear all about Justin's year in New York. They agreed to meet at the gallery tomorrow.

Sidney couldn't resist reminding Justin that he was still the hottest young artist around. Let's remember that Sidney wasn't gay...so he was referring to all the press Justin had received for his most recent shows.

Justin wanted to explain the reason for the lunch. Sidney indicated that he didn't really care about the reason, but that they would discuss everything when they saw each other.

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The fourth and final call Justin had to make caused him to hesitate. Justin sat in the driveway at Bri-tin about to make that fourth phone call, and then decided that he would save himself untold grief by simply sending a text message instead. So he opened his cell phone and sent a text message to Jason letting him know that Gus would be coming with them to Cincinnati for the weekend.

Justin exited his car and stopped and talked to Thomas for a bit. Thomas then helped him unload the luggage and box from the car.

Teres was in the kitchen unloading a bag of groceries. Justin and Teres greeted each one another, and then they chatted together for a few minutes.

"Thanks for picking up all that stuff," Justin said.

Teres simply smiled. She knew it was part of her job, and she really liked doing it, but she also liked the way Justin always made it seem like she had done something special.

"So how is your low carb, low fat cooking going?" Teres asked teasingly.

"I'm still coming up with recipes...but I'm starting to run out of ideas. Fortunately, Brian isn't really big on variety when he eats so I get to recycle his favorite recipes."

"You know I was watching PBS over the weekend." Teres continued. "And they were talking about the idea that for healthy eating, we needed to eat the way they did in Europe during the 1500s. That was supposed to be the time when, due to trade, a variety of whole foods and spices was abundant so the diet was both healthy and varied."

"You know I had heard about that. Something to do with a way of eating based on the Da Vinci Code," Justin added.

"Well, someone wrote a new book talking about how to use this as a basis for weight management. But as I got to thinking about this, I thought it might give us a new set of recipe ideas that we could try on Brian. What do you think?"

"Sounds like it's worth a try, but you know we do order in quite a lot?" Justin reminded her.

"But if you're going to be painting nonstop, and if Brian's going to be working late at the office, it's going to be my job to be sure that you both stay healthy and don't keel over. I get to especially make sure that you two eat. You're probably not going to be a problem because you have a healthy appetite, and I can force fed you in your studio," she teased.

"Yes, but we have to be sure that Brian doesn't gain a pound," Justin reminded her with a laugh.

"Brian is going to be a real challenge, but I'm going to make sure that both of you are taken care of," she said with a laugh. Thomas ventured into the kitchen at just that moment and gently kissed his wife on the cheek, "And Thomas too."

Everyone laughed. Justin reminded them that he and Brian would be going out of town this week. Teres saw this as time for her to do her recipe research. Justin also mentioned that Gus would be in town the following weekend, and that another family horseback riding adventure was on the schedule.

Thomas and Teres laughed as they remembered Gus' account of his last adventure with the horses. Teres promised to plan another interesting dinner for Gus to celebrate this new occasion, as well.

After chatting a little while longer with Thomas and Teres, Justin quickly changed clothes and settled down into his studio to work.

To no one's surprise his cell phone began ringing with Jason's characteristic ring, which always meant trouble. Justin thought he even detected a note of irritation, even in the ring tone.

"You sent me a text message," Jason complained, before even saying hello.

Justin just sighed deeply. "I didn't want to disturb you," he tried to get away with saying. Justin knew he only had a 50:50 chance that Jason would let things slide. His only hope was that Jason would focus on the context of the message and quickly get over the method of delivery.

"I think it's great that Gus is coming. Is Lindsay coming too?"

"I'll admit that the usual logistical nightmare you've created would probably be easier if she did come, but I doubt if she has the time. Especially, since Lindsay and Melanie and the kids will all be here the following weekend. Of course, you could always have Paul talk to her, and ask her. But whether she comes or not, we'll manage somehow to get Gus back and forth between Cincinnati and Toronto so don't worry about it. And Cynthia will handle getting Brian and me there; so you can stop fretting."

"I wasn't fretting," Jason lied in protest. Then guilt set in for he knew that he had been a pest for the last couple of weeks. So he said, "I promise you, Jus, the logistics for Milan, this summer, aren't going to be a nightmare."

"Assuming we get to go, what are you going to do, have Cynthia schedule everything?"

"How did you know? I think she's starting to like me."

"You're such a dreamer. You might want to wait a few weeks before you mention that to her. You want her to forget how much work she had to do for this weekend." Justin teased.

"I guess Paul and I had better start sending her little gifts too. You think that we need to incur her favor?"

"Couldn't hurt!" Justin said with a laugh. "You know I got my application packet for Milan today. It's really pretty exciting. I know it just another joint showcase, if I'm accepted, but still it's Milan."

"Just show them what you can do, and I know that the artistic committee will love it. Just relax and paint like you always do. I just want you to know that we're all behind you...all kidding aside."

"I know that, but thanks for saying it anyway."

"You're welcome. Now that we've had our moment, can I go back to torturing you?"

"No!"

"Ok. Ok. Seriously, are you going to be able to get away early? I really miss you. So does Nicky."

"I'm not sure. I still have to coordinate things with Brian. He has a meeting in New York this week. I would really like to avoid multiple trips to the Pittsburgh airport from West Virginia, if I can avoid it."

"Why don't you use the West Virginia airport?"

"I know it's in Charleston, but I think Pittsburgh is still closer. Anyway, I'm just not eager to go driving all over West Virginia looking for the airport."

"I do understand. Plus there're probably more flights from Pittsburgh anyway. Just email me when you're coming."

"I will. Jason, answer me something?"

"Hmmmmm"

"Why am I coming early to work on decorations if Nicky is having his birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese?"

"Where did you hear that?" Jason protested. Then he laughed. "You know that Paul and I would be content to have Nicky's birthday party there. It would surely be easier for us. But noooooo, Nicky's godfather is Brian Kinney, and so a normal birthday party is out of the question. You know it's a wonder that Gus made it to age six. How did Lindsay slide these parties past him?"

"You'll have to ask her when you talk to her. Brian doesn't have happy memories of his own birthday from when he was a kid. Gus managed to slide because Brian was indifferent about birthdays and birthday parties a few years ago," Justin tried to explain with a touch of sadness in his voice.

"I know. Now he wants to make sure that each of Nicky's birthdays are extra special, even if he is too little to remember. By the way, we got the presents that you sent. Did you leave anything in the store? Every package is individually wrapped. We won't let Nicky open anything. You know you're driving your godson crazy as he tries to guess what might be in each box. I hope you and Brian plan to pay for his therapy?" Jason rambled on.

"Will you give a rest?" Justin tried to insist to no avail. "Jason, explain to me again, why I'm coming early? If I remember correctly, the Moms usually pretty much take over and scoot us out of the way. Are you sure I won't be in the way?"

"I'm sure. They told me expressly that they're waiting for your grand designs...then they'll scoot you out of the way," Jason smirked. "But not until they have those designs in hand."

"I get the picture. I'll talk to you later, as soon as I know something definite."

"Ok. And I'll have Paul talk to Lindsay."

"That's going to be a lot a people, are you sure you're up to this?" Justin asked with some concern.

"Oh please, you've seen our family, the more the merrier. They're like Debbie."

"Say no more! I remember! I'll see you in a few days." Justin conceded.

"Good! We'll all be waiting." Jason said, finally hanging up.

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Later That Night At Bri-tin

The limo dropped Brian at Bri-tin that evening. As Brian departed the car, he waved to Thomas. Brian took a deep breath and realized how much he had missed Justin so he headed immediately for the studio without stopping.

Brian stood at the opened doorway, watching Justin paint and smiled as he admitted to himself that he was exactly where he wanted to be.

Justin sensed his presence. "Are you just going to stand out there and watch me paint?" he asked with a smile.

Brian took that as his permission to enter. Dropping his stuff on a nearby table, Brian wrapped his arms around Justin from behind and gently kissed his neck.

Justin leaned into the embrace. "You're going to get paint all over you."

"I don't care," Brian whispered, kissing Justin once again. "How was your day, dear?" Brian asked, using his usual singsong fashion.

"Pretty busy, but I'm glad you're home," Justin said, again leaning into Brian. "Did you eat?"

"No, but I thought we could order in. I'm going to change. What would you like me to order?"

"That isn't necessary. Dinner is ready."

"As much as I love your little housewife routine, you realize that isn't necessary?"

"Fuck you! You have Teres to thank. She's very serious about her work. So you be nice to her," Justin insisted, nudging Brian with his hip for emphasis.

"Yes dear," Brian said with a smile. "I'm going up to change, I'll be right back," he said, nibbling on Justin's earlobe as he was leaving.

Then Brian came immediately back into the studio and handed Justin an overstuffed packet. "Here!" he said, "You've probably been waiting for these."

"Oh great!" Justin remarked, immediately opening the package and scattering the contents, as if trying to look at all of them at once. "The pictures from yesterday with Gus...these are great!" he commented, trying to read the pictures with his fingertips. "Thanks."

Brian realized that Justin was about to drift into the deep realm of artistic thought. Unfortunately Brian had other plans, and he was not about to be deterred. "You might as well clean up while I'm changing. Did you forget that we have a date in the hot tub this evening?" Brian reminded him with a smirk, actually leaving the studio this time.

Justin shook his head, thinking to himself that Brian has had way too much fun all day today.

Brian changed clothes into sweatpants and a tank top. As usual, his feet were bare. Brian was completely relaxed.

They quickly set the table and settled in to enjoy the dinner that Teres had prepared.

"So are all your jeans still at the loft," Justin casually asked during dinner.

"No, they're here. I just prefer to wear these instead," Brian said, looking down, "So you can get me out of them easier. I have noticed that with you around, I tend to spend a lot of time undressing," Brian smirked. "Hopefully, these make it easier for you?" he said with a smile, spreading his arms and checking himself.

"Are you done?" Justin asked with mock exasperation, "It was just a simple question."

Brian just laughed. "Of course, Sunshine."

During dinner, Brian commented that dinner 'wasn't bad'. Justin made a mental note to tell Teres that Brian enjoyed dinner.

After dinner, they loaded the dishes into the dishwasher and cleaned up the kitchen together.

Brian slid his arm around Justin's waist, and they headed upstairs.

"I think we should use this hot tub," Brian said, when they reached their bedroom. "After all, we do have a date."

"Explain to me again, why we're getting in the hot tub this time?" Justin asked as he was getting undressed.

Brian began to mindlessly start to light a few candles. "You obviously have a rather short memory, Sunshine," he teased as he himself quickly undressed and stepped into the swirling waters. He wordlessly extended his hand to help Justin join him.

They settled into the warmth of the water. Then, they spooned together to relax, with Justin once again leaning against Brian's chest.

"Now, what is this about my memory?" Justin asked, running his fingers mindlessly through the water.

"Obviously this trip to the hot tub is only for a minor infraction, you'll notice that we're using the upstairs hot tub," Brian pointed out, wrapping his arms around Justin.

"Minor, huh?"

"So what's going on between you and my art department?" Brian asked.

"What makes you think anything is going on?"

"Justin?"

"Ok. You know that they gave me the video conferencing software to load on my computer."

"That I know. But the question is, why would they do that?"

"So I can participate in meetings and stuff from my studios...without making a trip into the office."

"This would be the same video conferencing software that they kept brushing me off about for months now. The same software that they kept telling me, because of customizing and encryption issues, wasn't available yet or ready for my use?"

"Yep, that would probably be it. See, if you didn't drive your staff so hard, they might have been willing to share these tidbits of information with you to begin with," Justin explained. "You do know that Murph and George love working for you? You must have been brutal while I was gone. It's a good thing they to don't have to worry about that anymore."

"Yes, I would say it's a good thing," Brian reluctantly agreed, leaning down to give Justin a gentle kiss.

"So is there any other reason we're in the hot tub?" Justin had to ask.

"You mean besides me trying to find out why you had to corner the Toronto market-share on disposal cameras while we were at the zoo?"

"I have a project I want to work on. Did you notice the number of same-sex couples at the zoo? They were so open. I guess I understand why Mel and Linds want to live there."

"Yeah, but there were a lot of straight couples too."

"That's my point."

"What?"

"Families are diverse. In Toronto they did seem to be more open about the diversity. It is strange though that they recognize gay marriage, but they have problems with Americans."

"Yeah? So where are you going with this?"

"I'm not sure. I'll let you know when I get it all figured out."

"Ok, I guess I can live with that. So is there anything else we need to discuss, before your skin starts to wrinkle?"

"Oh, just that I have a meeting tomorrow with Sidney Bloom to talk with him about the issue of the sale of my paintings to the New York galleries," Justin revealed, leaning back into Brian again for support.

"Why didn't you talk to Lindsay about it while we were in Toronto?" Brian asked, once again wrapping his arms around Justin.

"There really wasn't time. And I wanted to think about this before I get Lindsay's opinion. She still isn't exactly completely unbiased."

"No, she isn't. But, she still wants what's best for you, you know?" Brian reassured him.

"I know. But she doesn't understand that what's best for me happens to be you."

"So you've said," Brian teased with a smile. "Well, Theodore is working on making it happen."

"After he gets over the initial shock of it all," Justin said with a laugh. "How long do you think it will be before he lets something slip?"

"He's usually pretty good about keeping a secret...he does like his job after all. Also, he's going to be so incredibly busy, he's not going to have a chance to say anything even if he wanted to. If someone does figure things out and ask, I'll probably just confirm it. I don't really have any reason to lie."

"Ok."

"Except you had better talk to Daphne. Does she know that you're painting here at the house for the next three months?"

"What? No. She's working on a graduate research project, and she's not due back in the country until my New York show. She's been really hard to reach."

"In that case...if you don't reach her soon, you had better send her email to let her know where you are."

"Since when are you scared of Daphne?"

"She can be vicious. So please spare me! She'll find out. She'll be pissed. She'll make me the bad guy. Oh no! You need to tell her of your decision to paint here."

"All right. I'll take care of it." Justin agreed. "I also talked to my mother. She wants to see the house. She wants us to call her when we get back from Cincinnati."

"She's right, you should invite her out to the house when we get back. She did help us get everything set up, so it's only fair. We should probably also take her out for dinner too." Brian suggested. "I really like it when I stay on Mother Taylor's good side."

"Don't tell me you're scared of my mother too?"

"You got to admit, Daphne and Jennifer are fearsomely protective where you're concerned. So I just like to stay on their good side. Plus, the last time Daphne was angry with me, she pinched me. I thought the bruises would never heal."

Justin laughed, "When exactly was that?"

"Right after you first came to live with me. You remember when you stole my credit card and ran away to New York. She pinched me to make the point that I had to go find you. She looks fragile, but she's tough and mean."

Justin burst out laughing.

"I see nothing funny," Brian said, nudging Justin to make his point. Finally, Justin stopped laughing.

So Brian continued, "Besides, once Theodore firms thing up a bit, we'll tell Jennifer about our plans to move to New York, because I have the feeling we're going to need her help to pull everything off. And, it wouldn't be right for her to hear it from anyone but you and me. When the time comes we'll swear her to secrecy, and since it's business, she probably won't say anything to the rest of the family."

"You have this all worked out, don't you?" Justin asked.

"Not quite, but I still have a little bit of time to keep my promise. Now, can we get out of this water, while you still have skin? We have a long-standing date for me to fuck you into the mattress, and I intend to deliver on that promise. I want to take care of that before your skin becomes overly sensitive, and I have to be gentle."

"I think that can be arranged," Justin said with a laugh as he stood up and began to exit the hot tub. "Besides, I'm really tougher than I look."

They managed to dry each other off with the fluffy heated towels, and they both flopped down on the bed, completely relaxed. Brian turned on the fireplace for warmth, before taking Justin into his arms.

"The weather will be getting warm soon," Justin suggested, "I'm think I'm going to miss all the fires in the fireplace."

"Ah, but the pool will be available," Brian offered as a counter possibility. "I'm sure we'll figure something out."

"That's something to look forward to," Justin said, snuggling closer to Brian's chest.

Justin enjoyed the closeness of the skin-to-skin contact and the warmth of the slightly damp skin.

"You know with the paint fumes and everything lately, I'm a bit confused. Now exactly who is supposed to fuck whom into the mattress this time?" Justin asked teasingly.

"When in doubt, believe me, you can safely assume how things are suppose to go," Brian said with a smile, rolling them both over and placing Justin onto his back for emphasis. He leaned down and started to kiss him passionately.

When the need for air caused them to break apart Brian asked, "Is this helping you remember things better?"

"I think I'm starting to get the picture," Justin said, leaning up and pulling Brian back down into the kiss.

Chapter 5 – Conversations

Tuesday Morning...(Day 37)

Justin arrived early at the Sidney Bloom Gallery to give himself time to casually see the exhibits before his lunchtime meeting with Sidney. It had been a year, and the exhibits were all new so Justin was enjoying himself.

While leisurely looking over the works of the artists on display, Justin heard his name, and he turned to see Sidney Bloom approaching.

"You're early," Sidney said with a smile and greeted Justin with a handshake. "Have you been here long?"

"Hi Sidney, not really," Justin responded. " I just wanted to spend some time checking out your new exhibits."

"Well, what do you think?"

"The exhibits are wonderful as always."

"I know it's not New York, but we try here in our little gallery," Sidney said with a laugh. "Why don't you come back to the office so we can talk before we go to lunch?"

Justin nodded his agreement and followed Sidney back to his office.

Sidney made himself comfortable at his cluttered desk, and Justin took one of the available chairs nearby.

"So how is New York?" Sidney asked, trying to stack up papers while they talked. "Tell me everything."

"I guess you know that I've been in New York for the last year. I've been fortunate enough to participate in several joint showcases at galleries in the City. I've gotten a few commission assignments. I've even managed to do a few out of town exhibits. But, I haven't reached the point where a gallery has offered me a solo exhibit yet."

"You're still young, Justin, give it some time. I've been reading about you though. The critics love you. You do seem to sell out each time that you exhibit. That's the good news. In time you will have even more exhibits, and then the solo exhibit will come. Are you surviving ok?"

"I have managed to have my own studio in the City, and I live in a small loft. And I've managed to sell enough paintings and do some freelance work so I haven't had to resort to my original profession of waiting tables," Justin added with a laugh. "I'm still drawing the comic book Rage. So I guess, all in all, I'm doing ok."

"You're doing more than ok. You managed to do all of that your first year; you should be very proud of yourself." Sidney commented. "So what brings you to town? And how long are you here for?

"This is my first trip home in a year. I came back to work on a project for Kinnetik. I have studio space here and several upcoming shows to prepare for so I decided to just stay here for a few months and paint."

"Can you afford to be away from the city?"

"I have an agent, who works to get me included shows in New York. If I didn't have Catherine, I couldn't pull off staying here in town as easily. As it is, I'm only an hour away, so I can fly back to the City whenever I need to for meetings and such. But right now my primary focus is preparing for the opening of the new wing at the Cincinnati Art Gallery."

"I had heard that you were going to be the featured artist. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"And, I'm part of a joint exhibit at Thornton Galleries in New York City shortly thereafter. So with two major shows coming back to back, I guess I really am pretty busy."

"The Thornton Galleries are pretty prestigious. You have really done well for yourself in New York. I also heard about Santa Barbara. You really took 'arts gratis artis' (art for art's sake) to the limit...brilliant move by the way!"

"I didn't plan it that way. But I will admit that I got a significant number of private commissions from that exhibit. I was just experimenting with new painting techniques. What I found out was that people actually liked the new stuff. I was surprised to find that it was commercially viable. I had hoped to experiment under the radar of critics, but unfortunately the media was there. Anyway, things worked out. The gallery was happy. The clients were happy. I earned enough from that show to pay for my loft and studio for a while, so all and all, things worked out...except for the fact that the press had a field day...it was good news all around."

"So what's next for the hottest young artist around?" Sidney asked.

"Several New York galleries are interested in selling my paintings," Justin quietly admitted.

"That's every artist dream, Justin. Why do I detect that you aren't exactly thrilled?" Sidney asked, now stopping everything else to give Justin his undivided attention.

"I love doing the shows. I love that I get to explain my work and talk to the attendees. I will admit that I have been fortunate that all my paintings sell out during shows."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I'm not sure that I want to go into production mode and be required to produce 'x'-amount of paintings per month. Producing paintings for shows is one thing, but just producing paintings that just randomly hang in galleries and hope that they sell, is something entirely different."

"The thing is that for a show, you usually only have a limited number of paintings to exhibit. By producing the paintings for the galleries, your body of work would expand. Clients of the gallery, who didn't get chance to acquire your paintings during the shows would get chance to make a purchase at a later point. The theory is that having these galleries sell your paintings...you'll be able to live off your art."

"I do understand that part."

"You know that so much of the dealings between artist and gallery are informal...so just be sure that you're clear about what you want out of the deal, and be sure that everything is in writing. Besides, painting like this, will help you build up that body of work, so that when someone offers you that solo exhibit you will be ready. I just wanted to present to you the other side of the argument. Believe me, I see your point though. No artist wants to be told what to paint and when to paint it. So you want to be sure to negotiate carefully in this regard."

"Thanks, that's what I needed to hear."

"So now that you have heard, are you going to give me a guided tour of your website?"

"Sidney."

"Oh, I know, I could surf it alone, but who could pass up the chance to have the guided tour by the artiste himself?" Sidney teased with a smile.

Justin was more than glad to oblige with the guided tour of his website. Sidney periodically would interrupt with questions, but basically the two were content to click through Justin's website images and descriptions.

"Justin, your website is outstanding. Not just for the content, but I like the way that you have laid it out. A person could just linger here for hours looking at your work. It's as close as you can get the gallery experience without actually walking through the gallery halls."

"Thank you. I have been doing some freelance work, designing websites for clients in New York. So I guess I tried to incorporate what I had learned into my own site."

"Well, you did a great job. You're very talented Justin. You're going to have a great career. You just have to be patient."

Justin noticed the time, "I guess it's getting late, and I did promise you lunch."

"I made a reservation at the restaurant nearby. I hope you like Italian."

"Perfect."

"And while we're having lunch, maybe we can discuss the possibility of a future exhibit here at the gallery."

"What? I'm flattered Sidney, but that wasn't the purpose of my visit."

"I know that. You already have a following here in Pittsburgh, so you have to admit it's not a big stretch. I know that you have a rather full calendar at the moment, but I just wanted to extend the offer. We can work out the details later. After all, your talent isn't going anywhere." Sidney said with laugh. "But for now, I'm hungry. Let's go to lunch!"

While Justin and Sidney had lunch they chatted easily, and Justin now had a better sense of how he wanted to handle things with Catherine and the New York galleries.

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Later Tuesday Afternoon...(Day 37)

Brian and Cynthia were going through the research data on The Pentland Group in preparation for Brian's upcoming meeting in New York with Andrew David.

"Just be sure to talk about their websites," Cynthia suggested in conclusion.

"I will if the opportunity presents itself," Brian confirmed with a laugh. "I guess I should use the words, 'I have it on good authority that your websites need the Kinnetik touch'...is that what you mean?"

"Are you done? You know, I'm right. You just don't want to admit it."

Brian decided to change the subject. "Were you able to work out the reservation problems and Gus?" Brian casually asked.

"It took some doing, but I got everything worked out," Cynthia confirmed.

"Good job as always."

"Thanks."

"Now that I have your attention, I need to talk to you about something," Brian hesitantly began.

"Sure, what's on your mind?"

"First of all. I want everything on Collezione Fiero to come off ahead of schedule."

"I know. Ted told me about that. All departments are working on it. You and Justin did the majority of the work before the presentation. We're working on refining the script for the commercial that you created. We're dealing with agents for actors and film crews. Location sites are being scouted. Everything is on target."

"Good."

"Part of the reason that you're flying into New York on your way back is because you have meetings with Eyeconics and Liberty Air scheduled. Both of them asked to meet with you. New York seemed to be the best location rather than Pittsburgh."

"Do you have any idea what's going on?"

"They each just asked for a meeting."

"Ok. I wish I had more time before my trip, but I guess I'll just have to be brilliant on short notice," Brian quipped. Then his expression changed. "Cynthia, I need to talk to you about something else."

"Sure."

"I have Theodore working on this. He's going to see if we can make it happen. I'm thinking of opening the New York office of Kinnetik," Brian began then paused to let the idea sink in.

"When?" Cynthia asked. She wasn't surprised by this latest development, in fact she had been expecting as much ever since Justin had moved to New York, but she knew Brian was cautious and would make the move in his own time.

"Sometime within the next four months. That means that this office needs to be fully functional in my absence, as well as the New York Office being fully staffed at that point. I'm really going to need your help to make it happen." Brian stopped and waited for her reaction.

"That's great! You have always wanted to be in New York ever since I've known you. It's risky, but then so is everything that you do. We've already spent the last year researching the market so it's not as if this is a whim on your part."

"You have to admit the timing is perfect. We should be a settled and established presence in time to capture the holiday advertising season if we play our cards right."

"I'm sure one little blond artist is very happy about this decision." Cynthia slyly commented.

Brian mode became most serious. "Cynthia, this is a business decision. You're right this is something that I've wanted to do for a long time. The fact that it makes one little blond artist happy doesn't hurt either." Brian admitted with a smile. "I just need to be sure the timing is right."

"This means you and Justin will pretty much really be together all the time. That will be good news for the staff...although I assume that we're keeping this quiet for the moment," Cynthia said with some excitement. Brian merely nodded his head in agreement. "You have to admit, you're so much easier to deal with Justin is around."

"As you have seen, having Justin around doesn't necessarily promote peace and tranquility in the office." Brian said with a laugh. "So I would reserve judgment if I were you."

'Things may not be peaceful, but they sure are interesting," she reminded him. Brian had to again nod his agreement with that.

Then Brian sighed and an unexpected tenderness entered his voice, "I just want him to be able to paint without being harassed. Of course, my art department seems to have other ideas. I understand they have arranged to load our video conferencing software on Justin's computer. Of course, I'm not supposed to know anything about this. So you and Theodore had better get the word back to Murph and George that I don't want Justin disturbed unnecessarily. He has a grueling painting schedule ahead of him, and I just have to guard his time. You might mention the magic words 'pink slip' to get their attention."

Cynthia burst out laughing. "I'll make sure that they get the message," she said.

"I'm surprised that there hasn't been greater resistance to Justin being around here. I would have thought that a few people in the department would have felt threatened somehow, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

"Brian, Justin isn't just a pretty face, you know. He adds something to the art department. And let's face it. His presence keeps everyone on their toes. Plus, he's easy for everyone to work with, and they genuinely like him."

"I have noticed that. Justin was going through his packet from Milan in the art department yesterday, and everyone tried to pitch in to help him figure out every little tidbit of information. I just hung back and watched the interaction without anyone seeing me. It was interesting to watch."

"So you have resorted to lurking around the company. That is so unlike you, Brian. Justin seems to have an unique effect on everyone," Cynthia quipped and waited for his reaction. She didn't have to wait long.

"Didn't you say that you had work to do at your desk?" Brian suggested firmly, using his hand to point Cynthia in the direction of the door, and her office just beyond.

"I'm going, I'm going. But I'll be back. You can't get rid of me that easily," Cynthia added, leaving with a wave over her shoulder and a twist of her hips. Brian had to smile.

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Brian talked to Leo Brown, who once again reiterated the importance of the meeting with the Pentland Group. "Brian, this is a personal favor to me," he reiterated.

"You know Leo, I'm still trying to grasp what the importance of The Pentland Group is to Brown Athletics."

"We're still exploring opportunities to exploit our product mixes. Brown Athletics has real opportunities here. So all you have to do is dazzle them like always, and everything will be fine. You know what to do. I'm emailing you a confidential file so you can see what I'm thinking. Just take a look...then just be you."

"I don't suppose you want to tell me anything else?" Brian asked with a laugh.

"No, my file will tell you what's in the works. Of course, this is for your eyes only, but at least you will understand how important this could be...to all of us."

"I see. No pressure here or anything." Brian said with a laugh. "I'll talk to you later."

Brian knew that he had a few minutes to wait for the file, so he leaned back in his chair to try to process what he knew so far. Both Brown Athletics and Collezione Fiero were interested in negotiating some sort of cross marketing arrangement with The Pentland Group...both of these could be potentially interesting prospects.

But, Andrew David had indicated he also had his own agenda to discuss with Kinnetik. There were just so many unknown variables here, and Brian liked to have a better handle on information. Brian finally shrugged his shoulders. He would simply do his homework and then, be prepared for anything. 'Sort of like dealing with Justin,' Brian thought to himself.

Brian's thoughts were interrupted as an unexpected visitor quietly entered his office.

"Hey," the visitor quietly said.

"Hey," Brian said in response with a smile. "What are you doing here?" he asked ever so gently for he was never happier to see someone.

"I just finished lunch with Sidney," Justin explained. "So I thought I would stop in and see you before I went home. Cynthia said that it was ok to just come on in."

Justin locked the door before walking the remaining distance to Brian's desk. Brian smiled as he heard the click of the lock.

"I just got off the phone with a client, and I'm waiting for them to send me a file," Brian explained. "How was your lunch with Sidney?"

"We talked about the 'producing paintings for the galleries' thing. Sidney wanted to give me the other side of the argument. So I'm glad I talked to him. He floated the idea of me participating in an exhibit at the gallery when my schedule permits. So I feel a little better about things."

Justin walked over and straddled Brian in his chair, leaning forward to give him a gentle kiss. Brian surrendered to the kiss and allowed it to deepen. They wrapped their arms around each other as the kiss turned passionate, and their tongues began the battle for dominance.

"I just thought since I was nearby, I thought I would drop by to see if you were up for one of my blowjobs?" Justin suggested when they had to break for air. "That's if you have a few minutes."

"I love the way you think," Brian struggled to say as he tried to regain his breathing. "But we have time for a quick fuck if we move this in there," he continued, pointing to his private washroom.

"Ever the romantic!" Justin quipped, allowing Brian to tug him across the room by his collar.

"After all, I have to do what I can," Brian smirked. "You're leaving me in the morning."

Chapter 6 - A Long Awaited Meeting, Part 1

Wednesday Afternoon in Cincinnati...(Day 38)

Jason and Nicky had arrived at the airport a few minutes early. Nicky liked to watch the planes land and take off. He also liked to watch all the service trucks under the planes. The combination of the planes and the trucks kept the Nicky occupied until Jason heard the announcement that Justin's plane had arrived, and they proceeded to the gate.

The area near the gate was crowded so Jason raised Nicky up to his shoulders so he could see above the crowds as they both watched for Justin.

Only Jason saw Justin coming through the gate, and they simply nodded and smiled at one another. When the crowd had separated enough for Justin to be clearly seen, Jason lowered Nicky to the floor but tried to hold on to his hand.

Unfortunately, at that moment Nicky saw Justin clearly and that ended all control. "Jusssssstin!" Nicky called out as he started to run as fast as his little legs would carry him in the direction of Justin.

Justin, being quite used to little people projectiles aimed in his direction, simply went down on one knee to accept the running toddler. Justin caught the little person and lifted him in the air and swung him around before he said, "Wow, Nicky. You got sooooooooo big while I was away."

"I'm really big now." Nicky informed him in no uncertain terms. "I'm gonna be four years old," he proceeded to remind Justin, in case there was any doubt about his approaching birthday.

"You know, I did hear something about that," Justin teased with a laugh, giving Nicky a big hug.

Justin then let Nicky slide down to stand on the floor, and he reached over and greeted Jason with a hug.

"You're here at last," Jason said with a sigh. "You have no idea how much I've missed you."

"It's good to see you too," Justin whispered. "Of course, I can't complain about my welcoming committee," Justin added, reaching down to take Nicky's hand and getting a big smile in return.

"You have made one almost-four-year-old very happy," Jason pointed out with a laugh. "He could hardly wait for you to get here."

"Me too," Justin admitted.

The trio proceeded to the luggage carousel to retrieve Justin's bag, and then, they headed out of the terminal and quickly settled into the car.

"Now, it's time for you to get busy. After all, you have a lot of work to do." Jason reminded him as they were driving away from the airport.

"So I don't even get a chance to rest from my long flight...maybe get a chance to unpack before you press me into service?" Justin questioned with mock surprise.

"Are you kidding? Everyone is waiting for you back at the house. They're as excited about your visit as Nicky and me. I'm just glad you came early."

"Now that I'm here, what is this about you soundproofing the guest room?" Justin quietly asked.

"Oh that! You'll see when you get to the house," Jason remarked with a sinister grin.

"I can hardly wait."

"We're hoping that you and Brian will be so impressed that you'll visit more often. You do know how much we love you guys."

"So Nicky, did all your birthday packages arrive?"

Nicky shook his head yes. Then his expression grew rather sad. "But Dad and Daddy wouldn't let me open anything. He said I had to save them until my birthday."

"Did your daddy tell you that Gus was coming?"

Nicky immediately showed his excitement by bouncing in the back seat. "Have I ever seen Gus?" Nicky finally asked.

Justin thought for a moment and said, "I don't think so. But I have a picture to show you, if you want to see it."

"Yes. Yes. Yes!" Nicky said all excited. He could barely wait for Justin to open his wallet. Justin reached into his wallet and removed the picture of Gus and Brian and handed it to Nicky.

"See that's Gus," Justin said as he watched Nicky's eyes grow wider.

"He's little like me?" Nicky observed.

"Gus is a little taller than you because he is 2 years older, but he is really excited about meeting you too. See Gus has dark brown hair, and you have red hair. Gus has straight hair, but you have curly hair. See?"

Nicky finally looked at the picture and got it. "There's Uncle Brian too," Nicky added after taking a closer look at the picture.

"Yep, that's him."

"See, Gus sort of looks like Uncle Brian the way you sort of look like Daddy and me," Jason tried to explain without looking at the picture.

"Ah huh. Does Gus look like Justin too?" Nicky immediately asked.

"Gee Nicky, I don't know. No one has ever asked me that before," Justin looked over at Jason for answers.

Jason as usual, was going to be no help. He simply smiled at the question and waited to see how Justin was going to get himself out of this one.

"I'll tell you what...when Gus gets here, you can look and see if Gus looks like me, ok?" Justin suggested, totaling realizing why Nicky would ask the question.

"Ok," Nicky said nonchalantly.

"But it really doesn't matter if Gus looks like me. I still love him very much. Just like I love you."

This answer seemed to satisfy Nicky for the moment as he reached out to touch Justin's hand with a smile. "I love you too, Jus," he said.

Nicky continued to have a private talk with the picture of Gus for the remainder of the trip home.

Jason and Justin remained deep in thought. Both of them were thinking the same thing. How do you explain complex family relationships to an almost-four-year-old? And once it was explained, would this topic resurface over and over again in the course of this weekend.

For Nicky's biological mother was Gabrielle, and Gabrielle was Paul's sister. Jason was Nicky's the biological father. So of course, Nicky sort of resembled BOTH his dads, Paul and Jason. But Justin knew that was not usually the case. Usually kids in gay and lesbian families were lucky to resemble one parent. Nicky just happened to look like both his parents.

Nicky thinks of both Paul and Jason as his dads the same way that Gus thinks of BOTH Lindsay and Melanie as his mommies.

Justin is pretty sure if asked, Gus would explain things a little differently to anyone, who would listen. Gus would say that he has two mommies, one dad, and something no one else has...A Justin. This description seemed to cause Brian to laugh every time he heard it, for it so adequately described the way things were for Gus.

Justin had a feeling that he would hear many descriptions of a family over the course of the upcoming weekend, and he remembered what he saw at the Toronto Zoo. He also thought about his Liberty Avenue Family and smiled. As Justin pieced it all together, 'diversity' and 'family' both were developing new meanings for him.

The car pulled into the driveway of the house. Once again, Nicky took Justin's hand to lead him to the front door. Jason walked behind carrying Justin's suitcase. Nicky still had Gus' picture clutched securely in his other hand.

When they reached the front door, it opened immediately, and Paul came forward and gave Justin a big hug. "Justin," he said, "You're finally here."

"Paul," Justin whispered, enjoying the embrace.

"Justin, it's good to see you. And let me get my hugs in now...before Brian gets here," Paul teased, while still holding on to Justin.

"C'mon Paul, he's not really that bad," Justin countered as he started to lean back. "You must have him confused with someone else. Remember Brian Kinney doesn't do jealousy."

"Of course he doesn't," Paul agreed with a sarcastic tone. "He's just so possessive that he has this internal sensor, which calculates how long anyone is allowed to hug you. When his internal timer goes off, that's it. Brian wants all hands off of you. I don't blame him. I feel the same way about Jason," he said, leaning over and giving his partner a kiss.

Nicky decided at that moment that he had been ignored long enough. "Me, Daddy."

"I'm sorry, Nicky," Paul said, reaching down to pick up his son. "How's my big boy?"

Nicky bounced with glee, putting is arms around his daddy's neck and giving him a very wet kiss. Everyone just laughed.

As Paul lowered Nicky back down to the floor, he noticed that Nicky had something in his hand. "What do you have there?" he asked, trying to get a better view of the picture. This view was obstructed by Nicky's thumb as he tightly clutched the picture.

"It's a picture of Brian and Gus," Justin explained. "I was showing Nicky what Gus looked like."

Nicky handed the picture to Paul, who took a look at the picture and said, "Gus has sure grown since the last time we saw him, hasn't he Jason?"

Jason got his first look at the picture and said, "Yeah. He was just a baby then, no more than 2 years old. And I remember that in a room full of people to choose from, he clung to Justin like there was no one else in the world," Jason said with all seriousness.

Justin just blushed at the comment.

"Come on in and sit down, I have another surprise for you," Paul said with a gleam in his eyes.

They removed their coats, and everyone moved into the living room. Justin curled up in his favorite oversized chair, and Nicky immediately climbed in with him, just as he had always done whenever Justin visited.

"I don't know what we're going to do when you get bigger Nicky, and when we both might not fit in this chair together anymore." Justin casually mentioned.

"I'll obviously just have to get a bigger chair," Paul commented with a laugh. Then he made the suggestion to his son, "You know Nicky, you could come over here and sit with me?" Paul said, making himself comfortable on the sofa. He then, patted the space beside him as a hint to Nicky.

Nicky looked at Paul as if he had suddenly grown an additional head and proceeded to snuggle in closer to Justin's chest and to make himself more comfortable.

"I see the answer is no," Paul quipped with a laugh. "Justin, he has talked about nothing but your coming for weeks. He really is glad that you're finally here."

"Me too." Justin whispered, giving Nicky another hug.

"I'm sure after that long flight, you're probably ready for a snack," Jason suggested as her re-entered the living room with a tray of cold drinks and sandwiches for everyone. As Justin went to reach for his plate, he noticed that there was someone else in the room.

Justin looked past Jason and noticed another figure approaching, "Gabrielle," he said with a smile, struggling to stand up and give her a hug. Nicky wasn't about to release his grip so he was brought along for the hug. "What are you doing here? I didn't expect to see you until later."

"Justin, it's good to see you like always. I just wanted to be here to welcome you properly. Nicky has been learning to tell time so he has been counting down the time until your arrival." Gabrielle said, rolling her eyes. "You have no idea, how glad we all are that you're finally here. Where's Brian?"

"Brian had a meeting in New York. Then, he's going to pick up Gus so they'll be here probably on Friday, whereas I came directly from Pittsburgh, well the house in West Virginia actually."

"Oh yes, I've heard about the house. The prevailing rumor is, that it's a mansion. Brian never does anything in a small way so I'm not surprised. I can hardly wait to see it. But what I really want, is for you to tell me all about New York?" Gabrielle said with a laugh. "I only know bits and pieces from these two here. I didn't press because I knew that I would get the true scoop from you as soon as you were in the door."

"Well, there really isn't too much to tell. I have a small loft there. I also have a separate studio too. I have been there for the year while Brian's been in Pittsburgh. Brian and I see each other whenever we can. I've managed to be included in a few exhibits with other artists. And now, three galleries want to carry my paintings. I've done a few shows in a few other cities. I recently did a show in Santa Barbara," Justin relayed. "I guess, that just about sums it up. Except...I guess, you know that I'll be here, for the opening of the new wing of Cincinnati Art Gallery," Justin said innocently.

"Justin, everybody knows that you're going to be here for that opening...it's already been in all the papers," Gabrielle pointed out, feeling like she was stating old news.

"What?"

"Didn't the gallery tell you?"

"No. Well, I guess that I've been moving around a bit. Maybe the news hasn't quite caught up with me yet."

"Don't worry, we saved the article," Jason said. "You're famous now."

"You should read the article. It's very interesting," Paul commented. "It seems that you're going to be the 'Featured Artist'. The whole article is mostly about you."

"You're kidding?"

"When were you planning on telling us, Justin?" Paul demanded to know, trying to scowl so that Justin would understand the seriousness of his omission.

"Excuse me?"

"When were you planning on telling us about you being the Featured Artist?" Paul repeated his question for emphasis.

"C'mon Paul, don't make a big deal about it. You would have found out when you attended," Justin pointed out, without showing any remorse. "Then, it would have been a nice surprise for you."

"Not good enough, Blondie. Please tell me that, at least, you told Brian about this?"

"Of course, I told Brian. We don't keep secrets from each other."

"So Paul, did you get tickets for the ENTIRE family to attend the Justin's exhibit?" Gabrielle asked with hands on her hips. "Or, only for you and Jason?"

Justin watched her and thought she must have taken lessons from Debbie about how to get her point across.

"See how much trouble you cause, Justin. It would have been so much simpler if you had told me everything when you were here weeks ago." Paul persisted. "I would have purchased tickets for everyone right from the start. Now I have to go back and get the remaining tickets. See how much trouble you cause? Is there anything else you would like to tell us? Let's get everything out in the open, right here and now."

"I can't think of anything," Justin said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I see." Paul said and immediately got up and went into his study. He returned, carrying a folded glossy newspaper. "So, it's going to be like that is it?"

"What do you have there?" Justin innocently asked.

"You mean, you don't know?" Paul continued.

"C'mon Paul, give him a break. He probably hasn't seen it. After all, he's been traveling all morning."

Paul took great pleasure in the opportunity to make grand, sweeping gestures.

First he unfolded what was in his hands just enough to show Justin the name of the glossy newspaper. "Here, see the title of the publication. Does the name Advertising Age ring a bell?"

"Should it?" Justin asked with some confusion.

Paul sighed with exasperation. "Jason, help me out here."

"Justin, what my partner is trying to tell you, is that Adz Age, which was delivered this morning, included in this issue a list of the nominees for the Bronze Quill Award."

"Oh. That's nice. What does that have to do with me?" Justin innocently asked as he went back to eating his sandwich.

Paul opened to the page with the listing of the nominees and handed the page to Justin. Then, he leaned back into the sofa and waited for Justin's reaction.

"My name is listed," Justin quietly acknowledged. "I can't believe it." Justin sat there in stunned silence.

"Justin. Justin. Say something." Jason demanded. "We didn't even know that you were nominated until we saw this. Why didn't you tell us?"

"I don't know what to say," Justin answered.

"Keep turning the pages. There's background information about each of the nominees in each category. So you should read about yourself." Paul simply announced to everyone present. "I'm going to call Brian."

Paul pulled out his cell phone and placed the call. "Hi Cynthia, it's Paul Dunbar. Is Brian available?"

Cynthia immediately announced who was on the line and transferred the call to Brian.

"Paul," Brian began, "To what do I owe this call? I take it that Justin has arrived. Is he ok?"

Paul chuckled a bit and then continued, "Justin is experiencing a bit of stunned silence at the moment, but otherwise he's ok. I did want to let you know that he arrived safely. Nicky is thrilled."

"Well, that's good. Paul, but why is Justin experiencing stunned silence. We both know there're a lot of terms one would use to describe Justin, but 'silence' has never been one of them. What going on?"

"Brian, did you get your copy of Adz Age this morning?"

"Yeah, but I've been in meetings... It's here in the stack on my desk. What about it?"

"Can you pull it out of the stack?" Paul requested.

"What going on, Paul?"

"Just humor me." Paul could hear the rustling of papers.

"Ok Paul, I've got it."

"Turn to page 3." Paul said, and then he paused and waited. "Do you see it?" Paul patiently waited for Brian to search the page. "The nominees for the Bronze Quill Award are listed," Paul said and then waited again. "Now do you see it?"

"Holy shit, Justin's name is listed!"

"Turn to page 6. They included background information on him as well."

"Holy shit!"

Paul thoroughly enjoyed Brian's reaction and couldn't resist the opportunity to tease. "Well, I'll see you when you get here, Brian. In the meantime, I have a Bronze Quill Nominee under my roof. This is the recruiting opportunity of a lifetime. I'm going to see if I can get Justin's signature on a contract while he's still in his stunned state," Paul took great pleasure in mentioning all of this, knowing full well this would upset Brian.

"Paul, we've had this discussion before!" Brian said sternly. "You agreed to leave Justin alone about that job! You promised not to try to recruit him!"

"Oh, that was when he was a lowly student at PIFA. Now he's a Bronze Quill Nominee, it's a whole new ball game," Paul said, reminding Brian that the original ground rules, which dated back to when they first reconnected years ago, were no longer in effect. Paul was enjoying every minute of Brian's discomfort.

"Will you stop gloating long enough to tell me if he's ok?" Brian demanded, having some difficulty getting Paul to cooperate with him.

Paul handed his phone to Justin.

"Hey," Justin said.

"Hey. Are you ok?" Brian asked immediately with some concern, knowing that Justin might be having some difficulty accepting the news.

"I'm just a little bit stunned. I know that we talked about this, but I never expected to make it this far," Justin admitted. "The competition was pretty stiff, and I have very little experience."

"I'm not surprised. In fact, I'm very proud of you. Congratulations. Wow! This is something else!" Brian said, allowing his excitement for his partner to show through. "Are you going to be ok?"

"I think so," Justin whispered.

"Now don't let Paul pressure you into anything until I get there. You can't work for Dunbar and Smith," Brian insisted. "It's not even an option. We have plans. We made promises," Brian reminded him.

Justin relaxed a bit and smiled at what Brian just said.

"I know," Justin whispered. "Paul was just giving you a hard time. All he did was show me the article," Justin confessed with a sigh.

"Oh well, that's good. I see that Paul has been spending too much time with Jason again. Jason's bad habits seem to be rubbing off on him."

"I would definitely have to agree with you," Justin said with a laugh.

"Look, I'll see you in a day or so, but I'll talk to you later tonight." Brian said.

"Later." Justin said, and then he handed the phone back to Paul.

"Brian...I'll see you when you and Gus get here. We'll have lots to talk about," Paul teased, unable to resist the urge to get in one more dig.

"Will you try to behave yourself until I arrive? Justin's under enough pressure as it is with the upcoming shows and Milan and all. Now this. Just don't add to things, ok?" Brian said sternly, hoping Paul would get the message.

"Got it. You don't have to worry. Jason and I will take good care of him. See you soon," Paul finally said.

By the time Paul closed his phone, Gabrielle was sitting on the arm of Justin's chair with her arm around him. "Don't pay any attention to that brother of mine. He's just trying to upset Brian. Let's face it, it's one of his most favorite past times," she reminded him, scowling at Paul as she spoke.

Paul and Jason couldn't resist laughing.

Justin took a few sips of his drink and let everything settle in. "I'm a finalist for the Bronze Quill. I still can't believe it." Justin said aloud.

"Believe it, Sweetie," Gabrielle insisted. "From what I can tell, you have entered the big leagues. It's probably a good thing that you're here in Cincinnati. The press is probably camped on your doorstep in New York, trying to get an interview."

Justin smiled and leaned against over against her. "Gabrielle, this is the Bronze Quill, not the Academy Awards. I may get written up in the trades, but that should be it," Justin said as a way to halt Gabrielle's fantasies.

"Are you ok now?" Jason finally asked.

"I think so," Justin acknowledged, sliding lower in his chair and accepting another hug from Nicky in the process.

"Good. Because according to my calculations..." Jason began until he was interrupted.

"Jason, you're an artist. Please leave the calculations to people like Ted," Justin teased.

"I will have you know I finally finished my MBA program. So please?" Jason tried to make his point again. "So as I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted... according to my calculations, your exhibit at the Cincinnati Art Gallery, your exhibit at the Thornton Gallery in New York, the emerging artist exhibit in Milan, and the awards ceremony for the Bronze Quill should all be happening at about the same time."

"You don't know the half of it," Justin said with a smile, thinking about the recent decision for he and Brian to move to New York together.

"Well, I guess with this little piece of news, we should at least allow you time to unpack and maybe even let you rest for a moments before we put you to work," Jason finally said with a smile, "C'mon let me show you to your room."

Paul grabbed Nicky into a big bear hug, so he was content to remain in the living room with him and Gabrielle while Jason led Justin to the guest room.

Chapter 7 – Aftermath, Part 1

A Few Moments Later in Pitts...(Day 38)

Brian hung up the phone after the call from Paul. He finally allowed himself the luxury of a simple laugh at Paul's antics.

His laughter was interrupted as Cynthia entered his office. She noticed Brian's good mood and couldn't resist asking, "What's going on?"

"Justin is a finalist for the Bronze Quill Award," he said to Cynthia, showing her the Adz Age article. "He's been nominated for innovative website design."

"Oh my gosh!" she said, taking a seat to get a closer look at the article. "That's quite an honor. Was that why Paul called?"

"Yeah, Justin just arrived so he didn't know. Justin knew he was in the running, but he figured that he would be eliminated before they got to the final round, so he never bothered to mention it to anyone. He was pretty shocked a few moments ago when Paul broke the news to him."

"Gee Brian, he's already made a name for himself in the New York...not just in art...but in this too."

"I know. I always knew he was talented. He's a magnificent painter and a great comic book artist, but he's so smart he keeps applying his talents in new ways that keep amazing me. It's hard to believe that he's even managed to do free lance work in New York."

"Look Brian, I know that you win Clio awards all the time, so for you this is probably just another day at the office. But for Justin, this is probably a really big deal."

"I realize that, and to think that I once suggested that he needed to go back to school, to finish his education, in order to have the freedom to do whatever he wanted to do in life," Brian said with a smile. "He may have enough talent to be the exception to the rule."

"You're just figuring that out?" Cynthia teased. When he glared back at her, she took the subtle hint. "I know. I know. Now would be a good time for me to return to my desk," she said as she stood up to leave. "Just tell Justin that I said congratulations."

"I'll do that." Brian said. Then he paused for a moment before he said. "Cynthia?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you see if you can shift my schedule for tomorrow?"

"To what?"

"See if you can move my meeting with The Pentland Group up a few hours. If that works, I'll fly out first thing in the morning...then see if you can get me in and out of Toronto and into Cincinnati by sometime tomorrow night, instead of arriving on Friday afternoon.

"Why?"

"Now that I think about it, that is probably better for Gus to travel when he sleepy. That way he'll sleep for most of the flight and be less anxious. It will probably make it easier on a kid," Brian suggested.

"Good idea. It will probably mean a few more limos, but I think I can work it out," Cynthia assured him. "Let me go and see if I can reschedule everything...again," she said cheerfully.

"Thanks."

"No problem," Cynthia said. "This is going to take some time. Do you need anything else before I get started?"

"No that should be it."

And with that Cynthia left his office while Brian sat back in his chair and just smiled.

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Meanwhile In Cincinnati...(Day 38)

"Oh my!" Justin remarked as they were walking into the guest room. "I see that you really remodeled his part of the house. This is wonderful. I love it."

"I told Paul that you needed more space. And, we added soundproofing to this room so that you and Brian don't have to try to be quiet. Quiet has never been what you two were good at," Jason teased with a laugh. "Now, you don't even have to bother trying."

"So that's why Nicky was talking about trucks."

"Yes, that's when his love affair with trucks began. You should have seen him at the airport. He thought the planes were nice and everything, but the trucks servicing the planes...that's what really drew his attention!" Jason said with a laugh.

Justin looked around the new guest room, "I love it," Justin said, flopping down on the bed, "And I love the new bed; it's so much bigger."

Jason flopped down beside him. He took a minute and gently touched his friend's cheek before he said with complete seriousness, "There really is a lot going on for you, isn't there?"

"More than you know," Justin whispered.

"Are things ok between you and Brian? You know Paul and I have been worried because you were in New York, and Brian was in Pittsburgh. We were so excited when you were supposed to get married, but then you cancelled the wedding. Maybe you two should have gone ahead and gotten married. You two are so good together. Brian always seems at loose ends without you."

"I really appreciate your concern. But Brian and I are fine...better than fine. Just because we didn't get married, doesn't mean that we aren't together. At the moment we're staying at the house, and I'm going to be in my studio at the house for the next three months. I still have my studio and loft in New York though, and I'm only an hour away...if for some reason I really need to be in the City. I have an agent in New York, who works to get me into additional shows. So I'm almost to the point that I can live anywhere. I just want that anywhere to be with Brian. We're still trying to figure out how to make that happen. But Brian and I are together, and we're ok."

"You know how Paul and I feel about you and Brian. I'm glad you two are ok."

"Me too."

"So how was your visit with Gus over the weekend?"

"Gus got to spend the night at the hotel with Brian and me. Then the next day, we all went to the Toronto Zoo. Linds, Mel and the kids joined Brian and me for dinner. So all in all, it was a nice weekend. Gus sounded so sad when he first called Brian, and asked if I could come and play with him. But by the time we left Toronto, everything was ok...especially when he found out he was coming here to Cincinnati with us."

"It must be hard on Mel and Linds to be so far away from family and friends. They live in Toronto, right?"

"Toronto, where they recognize gay marriage but discriminate against Americans..." Justin said, shaking his head. "Who knew?"

"You know, Jus, people have to discriminate against something. But I agree with you. What you just described is crazy! Who knew? It doesn't make any sense." Jason commented, shaking his head too.

"I agree. By the way, are you ok about Nicky's questions in the car?"

"Nicky's pretty resilient. He has had so much to deal with. He knows that he resembles both Paul and me. He understands about Gabrielle's role in everything. He knows he had a twin, Alex, who died. He's only four years old. So he's just getting to the age where the questions are starting. He has friends with two mommies. He has friends with two daddies. He has friends with only one parent for various reasons. He has friends with straight parents. So he sort of takes it all in stride. I'm sure that he had a lot of questions because Gus is someone new. Things will eventually settle down. Paul, Gabrielle, and I will talk to him and make sure of it."

"That's good."

"Now, are you prepared for YOUR problems this weekend?"

"Me, what problems?"

"Both Nicky and Gus are used to having you all to themselves. Do you think they'll be able to share you this weekend?" Jason wondered aloud, envisioning the kids in a tug-of-war over Justin.

"First of all, remember that Gus has a little sister, Jenny Rebecca. She's almost two. Gus is used to seeing me with both he and Jenny, and it's never been a problem for him. Nicky has so many loving people around...including Brian, whom he is crazy about, and all of your family. I expect that we will all get through this weekend without a hitch. And our biggest problem will be, trying to figure out how to arrange play dates between Gus and Nicky in the future," Justin explained with a smile.

"You're probably right," Jason said, not believing a word of it.

"Of course, my big problem, at the moment, is to make sure that you stop torturing me," Justin said with a laugh.

"Now that you're here...I'm on my best behavior," Jason admitted, holding up his hand to imply scout's honor.

"Yeah right!

"Paul has probably already put Nicky down for his nap. I'll give you a few moments to yourself. Come back down once you're ready. Take your time. Paul and I will be in the study." Jason said quietly. Then, he turned and left the guest room.

Justin just lay there across the bed and tried to let everything sink in.

Chapter 8 – Aftermath, Part 2

A Little Later...(Day 38)

Justin's cell phone rang, and he answered the unfamiliar ring with a simple, "Hello."

"Taylor is that you? Where the fuck are you? You aren't answering email. You aren't in your studio. You haven't been to your loft. How do you expect anyone to reach you? So, I finally had to call your cell phone. Talk to me!" The voice demanded.

"Spyder?"

"Who the fuck else? Well, go ahead! Start explaining! I'm waiting!" Spyder demanded.

Justin just sighed. "Spyder, how can I explain anything, when you won't let me get a word in, between your rants. Now, if you'll just calm down..." Justin said quietly.

"How can I calm down? Taylor, where are you?"

"Well, at the moment I'm in Cincinnati. I was just in New York last week. Then I went back to Pittsburgh for the weekend, well West Virginia actually, and then we had to go to Toronto. I guess with everything going on, I must have forgotten to check my email. Now that you have me, what has gotten you so excited?"

"The final nominations for the Bronze Quill were reported in the press today. Our website is still in the running."

"I know. I saw the announcement in Adz Age. Someone read it to me when I got here."

"Oh ok. So you know?" Spyder said calmly. "I just didn't want you to be surprised. Usually you're sequestered away in your studio, and you don't know what's going on in the greater world. I just didn't want you to be uninformed. How's the painting going, by the way?"

"Pretty well, I guess. I'm a bit off schedule, but nothing I can't recover from." Justin said with a laugh. "I'm painting in Pittsburgh until the shows...well West Virginia actually."

"You're an artist Taylor, your ass belongs in New York...where your design-partner can locate you. We have another potential job if you're interested."

"Of course, I'm interested."

"We need to meet with the client on this one. When will you be back in the City from your world travels? " Spyder said sarcastically. "So I can schedule a meeting."

"I'm leaving here on Sunday. So it should work if you set something up for Monday or Tuesday. How does that sound?"

"I'll email you the information I have. It seems simple; it just needs your spectacular, artistic touch. After all, we work so well together, you know. I hate to break in a new partner. After all, until I hooked up with you, I was never nominated for a Bronze Quill Award before. So I figure, what the hell, why tamper with success?"

"Gee thanks, Spyder, I love you too." Justin said with laugh.

"Those are the magic words I love to hear," Spyder teased. "We should touch base when you get back, and maybe we'll be able to actually get together. I'll try to set the meeting up for Tuesday."

"Ok."

"I'll let you get back to whatever. By the way, why are you in Cincinnati? Your exhibit isn't for months."

"No, this time my godson is having his fourth birthday. I'm being pressed into service to design the decorations." Justin easily explained. The next thing Justin knew, there was hysterical laughter on the phone line. "Spyder? Spyder? What's so funny?" Justin innocently asked.

"Oh, I have got to tip off the New York Art Critics on this one. Wait until they find out they have to crash a four-year old's birthday party to find out about the latest artistic works of one Justin Taylor Artist...a birthday party that is being held, not in New York...but in Cincinnati no less. Oh yeah! You're going to owe me big time for my silence on this one," Spyder continued to tease.

"Are you done? You know with your attitude, I could just as easily, simply go back to West Virginia and paint," Justin pointed out.

"No! No! I'm sorry! You know that I need you! I take it all back!" Spyder immediately started to grovel.

"That's much better."

"Seriously, have a good time. I'll talk to you when you get back to civilization."

"Bye, Spyder."

Justin just shook his head at the antics of his design-partner.

He was about to put his cell phone away, when he realized that with the announcement about the Bronze Quill Awards, he had better update Catherine.

She had already been upset because he had neglected to mention his nomination in the first place. It would be better if she at least received this update on the award nominations from him personally. So he reluctantly placed the call.

"Catherine, it's Justin Taylor," Justin said when she answered the phone.

"Justin. How's my favorite painter?" Catherine immediately asked.

"Just painting away," Justin said, figuring that any other response would bring about a lengthy discussion that he really didn't want to get into.

"That's what I like to hear," Catherine teased.

"Look Catherine, I don't want to take up a lot of your time. I just wanted to let you know that evidently the nominees for the Bronze Quill Award were published today. And it appears that I'm still in the running."

"Oh Justin, that wonderful! Now, dare I ask where you are?"

Justin sighed as he realized that answering her question was inevitable. "I'm in Cincinnati...since you had to ask."

"You know every other artist is trying to get into New York City. You're already the darling of the critics, and we can't keep you here. What mischief are you into this time?"

"I here for my godson's fourth birthday party. I'll be back in New York on Monday. I was hoping that we could talk about my paintings and the galleries when I get back. My schedule is a little indefinite at the moment, but I hope that I can call you on Monday and set something up."

"Sounds good. As I said, I like an artist that doesn't camp on my doorstep, but in your case, I'm probably going to have to rethink my position. However, I'm so flattered that you at least want to meet with me from time to time," she said with a laugh, "So what have you done now?"

"Catherine, how can you ask these things? Why do you think I've done anything?" Justin asked defensively.

"So what other gallery is interested in having you exhibit now?" she asked. "You might as well tell me. I really need to know these things." Catherine demanded.

"Not this time, Catherine," Justin answered confidently. Then he remembered his lunch with Sidney Bloom, and he realized that he needed to backtrack. "Although..."

"See, I knew it," she said with a sigh, as if she was expecting this, "Go on...tell me!"

Justin let out a protracted sigh. "I had lunch with Sidney Bloom when I was in Pittsburgh, and he wants me to exhibit a few pieces when my schedule permits. He owns the Sidney Bloom Gallery there," Justin easily admitted.

"Justin, not again! Just as I suspected! Now, tell me again, why you have an agent?" Catherine protested.

"Catherine, I think we've already covered this the last time we met, don't you remember?" Justin said with sigh, trying desperately to refresh her memory to avoid the inevitable prolonged discussion.

"Oh yeah...that's right...I forgot," Catherine finally conceded. "I'm sorry."

"No problem."

"Just call me when you get back to The City. We'll arrange to meet. Maybe we'll even have lunch."

"That sounds good. I'll talk to you later."

With those two calls out of the way, Justin unpacked his suitcase. Then he slowly made his way down to the study to rejoin Jason and Paul.

"So you decided to join the us after all?" Jason said, as Justin entered the study and leaned against the doorway.

"I'm all unpacked. I made a few phone calls. I guess I'm ready to deal with you again." Justin teased. "Where's Gabrielle?"

"She decided to go home, but she and the kids will probably be back this evening," Paul added.

"Where's Nicky?" Justin asked.

"He's asleep. He was so excited about the fact that you were coming; I think he finally wore himself out once you got here. The last time I looked in on him, he was sleeping with the picture of Gus next to his pillow," Paul said to update Justin.

"This is truly going to be a birthday he'll remember, with you and Brian and Gus being here," Jason reiterated once again to Justin with smile. He thought for a moment and then turned to Paul and said, "Gee Paul, we may never be able to top this birthday for him. The rest of his childhood may be such a letdown."

"I wouldn't worry, Brian and Justin would never let that happen," Paul stated with certain confidence. "Right Justin?"

"Are two done now? You can both cut it out. I get the message! So you can give it a rest!" Justin said sternly and then laughed. "Ok Jason, now that you've got me here...days early...we have decorations to deal with. Let's get started. First of all, where is Nicky having his party?" Justin asked finally ready to get down to business.

"Here...in the new addition. Let me show you the space," Jason said, standing up to leave.

Justin held out his arm and stopped him. "You better grab your sketchpad, I think we're going to need it." Justin insisted. "I'll grab mine on the way. Are you going to join us Paul?"

"Oh no! The two of you with sketchpads...I might as well disappear. Neither of you will even notice that I'm gone," Paul teased. "I'll be glad when Brian gets here so at least, I'll have someone to talk to. Because once you two bring out sketchpads, I know that I'll never see either of you again."

Jason went over and put his arms around Paul. He leaned down and kissed him gently on the lips. "Don't tell me you feel neglected?"

"I will admit this is better," Paul admitted with smile as he returned the kiss.

Justin stood back and just smiled at the antics of his two friends. He, too, wished that Brian were here.

Jason finally gave Paul one more kiss, and slid out of his embrace. Jason grabbed a sketchpad and a pencil, and he and Justin proceeded down the hallway to the new addition.

Justin stopped in the guest room to retrieve his pencil and sketchpad. Justin also took another moment to quickly dig out his laptop. He was now ready to begin.

Chapter 9 – Party Planning

A Few Moments Later...(Day 38)

Jason led Justin to a large playroom with lots of light, a few items of kid's furniture, and lots of cushions and beanbag chairs scattered about the room. There were toys constrained in several odd shaped containers throughout the room.

Justin made himself comfortable on one of the cushions. "Ok, Jason. What did you decide was the theme for the party?"

"I have no idea. That's why I was pleading with you to help. I really am stuck. Ideas are your department. I make a great graphic assistant, but I just need creative direction. So go ahead...direct me creatively!" Jason suggested.

"You know, you're really pathetic? Ok, give me a few minutes," Justin said, as he started to roam about the room. He walked once around the room. He looked at the toys stored in each of the bins. He looked out the windows into the yard. Justin then covered the room a second time.

Finally, Justin flopped down on his cushion again, and fired up his laptop. He rapidly started tapping on keys, and internet images were soon flying across the screen.

Jason meanwhile just sat back and watched his friend with amazement.

Jason opened his sketchpad and begin to sketch the picture of Justin curled up over his laptop. With every pencil stroke, he remembered how much he loved to draw Justin...especially Justin at work. He had truly missed this.

Silence began to pervade the room. The only sounds were the clicking of the computer keys and the scratching of the pencil on the sketchpad.

Finally, the aura in the room was interrupted by Justin's voice.

"I think I have an idea," Justin said hesitantly. "It will be a lot of work, but I think we can pull it off."

"I'm listening," Jason said, pulling over another cushion sit beside Justin.

"At this precise moment in time," Justin began, "Nicky's in love with trucks. Right?"

"Yeah. So?"

"How about if we use the theme of trucks to make the birthday decorations for him? What do you think?"

"That's a perfect idea...pure genius. Now, how do we do it?" Jason asked.

"Well, I think that we can purchase most of what we need. But to give it the creative expression that I have in mind, you and I will probably need to create the finishing touches. What do you think?"

"I'm at your service," Jason announced. "But before we get started, let me go and check in on Nicky."

"Sure, go ahead. In the meantime, I need to do some more checking on what's available," Justin said, still clicking on his laptop.

"I'll be right back."

"Ok."

When Jason returned a few minutes later, he found Justin, this time bent over his sketchpad.

"I think we're ready," Justin said, when he realized that Jason was back. "Just out of curiosity, Jason, what did you originally plan as decorations for Nicky's birthday in the event that I couldn't get here early?" he asked with a laugh.

"Paul and I decided on the traditional birthday stuff, you know streamers and balloons and things. You know...the usual stuff."

"I like your idea of streamers and balloons, we just have to incorporate the truck theme. Now what did you do about the cake?"

"Basically taken care of. Now that you're here, you can add the finishing touches."

"Jason, help me out here. Where did you get the idea I was an artist capable of working in all mediums? And who said that I was working on the cake?"

"They taught you everything a PIFA. I read all about it on the web," Jason went on to explain. "They taught you to manipulate classical form and function in all mediums. Didn't they tell you about it while you were there?"

"You know after doing this little project with you, maybe it's time for me to give in to Brian and tell him that I'm ready to go back and get my degree. Maybe he and I should even discuss the possibility of grad school...because, my skills are really lacking here," Justin admitted pensively.

"Are you really seriously thinking of going back to PIFA?" Jason asked.

"I wasn't until this very moment. Now I'm beginning to wonder if maybe I made a mistake. I was finally readmitted to school after the Stockwell defeat, but I left to go to LA to work on Rage, The Movie. When the movie was cancelled, I returned to Pittsburgh to try to figure out what to do next. I decided to try my hand at painting. I was written up in Art Forum, and then I was off to New York. Brian has never really let the issue drop about my education though. Maybe my decision was a mistake. Maybe I still have a lot to learn."

"You have to be kidding?" Jason protested.

"Maybe if I had stayed in school, helping you with Nicky's birthday decorations would have been so much easier. I think I may have failed you somehow," Justin said sadly.

"Listen to me Justin Taylor. The most exciting thing to Nicky about turning four is that you and Brian were coming to visit. The added bonus is that he will get to play with Gus. The party is just family and few friends. Anything you come up with will make this a memory for your godson. We'll save the pictures for him, but all he will remember is how happy he was. So don't you dare have a drama queen moment on me." Jason says, wrapping his arms around Justin.

"Ok, I'm sorry," Justin finally said. "Well, if we're going to do this, you had better let me make a few phone calls." Justin reached for his cell phone and punched in the first number.

"Hi, Em, it's Justin."

"Hi, Sweetie, where are you?" Emmett immediately asked.

"Cincinnati."

"Oh that's right. What's up? Why in the world are you calling?" Emmett had to ask.

"I need a favor."

"Anything Sweetie, you know that."

"Jason and I are here trying to finish the plans for Nicky's fourth birthday party. We're using trucks as a theme. What do you think?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea for a little boy. I know that you'll create the cutouts and streamers. Just don't forget the posters. Kids like visuals. Oh yeah and don't forget the trucks for the cake. I would normally suggest buying them, but you can just sculpt them."

"Em, what am I going to sculpt them from?" Justin asked incredulously.

"I was originally thinking about blocks of fudge. But baking a little loaf cake is probably a better idea for you since you're an artist," Emmett suggested effortlessly.

"You've got to be kidding, Em. What makes you think that I can do that? I'm a painter, have you forgotten. God, you're as bad as Jason!"

"We just know what you can do, Sweetie, even if you don't. So get to it!" Emmett insisted with a laugh.

Then Emmett continued to talk to Justin a little while longer, giving him a few more suggestions. Justin made notes in his sketchpad.

Finally, Justin said, "I got it, Em. Thanks a lot. Bye, Em."

When Justin got off the phone with Emmett, he found Jason was sitting there laughing.

"What do you find so funny?" Justin had to ask with raised eyebrows.

"I'm sorry." Jason said, trying to be serious. All he had heard was Justin's side of the conversation, but Jason had met Emmett, so he could just image the other side too.

Finally Jason managed to pull himself together and ask with a serious tone, "What did Emmett say?"

"Em wanted to be sure what I was going to sculpt little trucks for the cake," Justin said, still shaking his head in disbelief.

"That's perfect," Jason agreed.

At this point, Justin couldn't help breaking out laughing. "Oh you're no help!"

"Me?"

"Never mind." Justin said once he returned to seriousness. "Em, also said that we needed to be sure that we have Pizza, because every four year old wants to go to Chuck E. Cheese...like we didn't know this?" Justin quipped.

"He must have heard our phone conversation about Chuck E. Cheese...but he also knows Brian. No surprises there! So what did he suggest?" Jason continued.

"He said that a pizza would be too much for a kid's tummy at a party with everything else they're going to be eating and everything else that's going on. So he's emailing me his recipe for Pizza On a Stick."

"I love it!" Jason said gleefully.

"By the way is Nicky having a cake or cupcakes? What kind of cake is he having?"

"I never know these things. You have to talk to Mom."

"Oh great," Justin said with some exasperation.

Justin thought for a few moments.

"Well, I have one more phone call to make." Justin announced as he was punching in the number, "You're going to owe me big time for this one."

There was a pause.

"Ah, Spyder..." Justin said hesitantly.

"Taylor?"

"Yes, it's me." Justin said with a sigh.

"Spider?" Jason mumbled quietly to himself, "Who the hell is spider?"

"Shhhhh!" Justin said, trying to quiet Jason so that he could talk on the phone.

"Taylor, didn't we just talk? Don't you remember?" Spyder teased, now that he was sure who was calling.

"Spyder, you remember those cartoon sketches of trucks that you did for that commercial?"

"You mean the ones that you had to replace with fine art? You promised that you would never to mention them again, Taylor." Spyder protested. "So why are you mentioning them now?"

"How would you like to email me that file?"

"Oh no! Then you would have a permanent record of my shame and disgrace. I'm keeping my drawings sequestered on my computer. Right now, it's just your word against mine," Spyder continued to argue in protest. "Why do you want them?" he eventually asked, his curiosity getting the better of his pride.

"Remember those decorations for the birthday party we discussed? Well, we're using his love of trucks as a theme for the party. I have the perfect setting where your drawings will be properly appreciated. That's if you can locate the file, and will agree to sell them to me?"

"So now you're telling me that my work is appropriate for four year olds?" Spyder began to sulk.

"Give me a break, Spyder. You know my hand wouldn't hold out for that kind of detailed drawing. And you are, after all, the master at this sort of thing...even if our client didn't fully appreciate your work."

"Ok. Ok. I found the file. I've already sent it to you. Do whatever you want with it? But you better take lots of pictures. I want to see everything. There's no charge. I'm letting you have them only because I love you. You know that? Well, that and I can't resist having you eternally indebted to me," he added with a laugh.

"Thanks, Spyder. See you when I get back to the City." Justin closed his cell phone and turned to face a very puzzled Jason. "What?" Justin asked.

"Does Brian know about the insect?" Jason asked with a certain concern in his expression.

Justin burst out laughing. "What Insect? Oh, you mean Spyder? Spyder and I work on design projects together. We worked together on the website that is nominated for the Bronze Quill. We decided we liked working together, so we have done a couple of other projects together...a few websites and a few commercials. He is basically a computer whiz with an artistic flair. Unfortunately, he gives me as much trouble as you do."

"And that's all?" Jason tried to confirm.

"That's all! What did you think? Let's see if that file has arrived in my email yet." Justin reached over to his computer and checked his email. "Yep, they're here," he said, directing Jason's attention to images on the screen. "See?"

"Those are great! Nicky is going to be thrilled. What are we going to do with them?"

"Well, as much as I would like to paint a mural on your wall or something, there isn't time. But I can produce a couple of quick posters to add to the room. This was Em's suggestion too. Then with the cut out's that you and I are going to make, I think everything will be ok. You'll see...everything will come together...especially if we use the new copier at your office for the posters," Justin explained, with a reassuring smile

"No problem. You should get to work on the posters," Jason suggested nonchalantly. "By the way, have you figured out the design for the cake or the cupcakes? We probably should get them to Mom and Gabrielle tonight."

Justin put down everything in his hand. "Jason, we sort of agreed to decorations. When did I get assigned cake design duties too?"

"You always design the cake...why should this year be different?"

Justin started to open his mouth to protest, but decided to save his energy. He was starting to figure out that arguing with Jason was useless because whenever Jason was losing an argument he just became illogical.

Instead Justin asked the riddle of the ages, "Jason, just out of curiosity, what were you planning on your contribution to Nicky's party being this year?"

"I got you and Brian to agree to come here. After that, my work was done," Jason explained as he started to stand up. "I'm the understudy here, studying at the feet of the master!" Jason knew he had laid things on bit thick at this point, and he knew that he had really tried Justin's patience. So, in his own defense he reminded Justin, "I told you I was ready to help."

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Later that evening, while Justin and Jason were still in the playroom, the doorbell rang as Gabrielle returned, this time with her husband, Ryan, and their two kids.

Fran Dunbar, Paul and Gabrielle's mother, was the next to ring in, with Katie and Lee Smith, Jason's parents, being the final arrivals.

Everyone came bearing food since dinner was a potluck. This had become the custom whenever the two families got together. It was easy to see that these were two families that spent a lot of time together. There was easy conversation and banter between everyone, and many hugs were given all around.

But tonight, the clan had gathered together just to see Justin.

Paul and Nicky walked toward the playroom to retrieve Justin, who was already busy at work on his designs.

Hearing the approaching little footsteps, Justin smiled to himself and quickly managed to gather up everything and close the laptop before Nicky reached him.

Nicky immediately broke free and ran to Justin, throwing his arms around his neck, "Dad sent Daddy and me to get you 'cause it's time to eat."

"Thanks, Nicky," Justin said, giving Nicky a kiss, "You know, I think I'm really hungry."

"What a surprise!" Paul commented, from his standing position at the entrance to the room. "Well let's go. Everyone is waiting for us."

Nicky managed to pull Justin into a standing position, and tugged him out of the room.

Nicky allowed him to stop long enough to use the bathroom and wash his hands, before ushering him to the dinner table.

Paul couldn't help but laugh to himself as he watched his almost-four-year-old son bossing Justin around like he was one of his playmates...like another little kid.

Nicky was going to make sure that Justin made it to dinner...he was going to personally see to that.

There, in the dining room, Justin came face to face with the Cincinnati equivalent of the Liberty Avenue Family.

Oh this wasn't the first time that Justin had encountered this group. In fact, The Durbars and The Smiths had embraced both Brian and Justin as family even before Nicky was born. But in the face of the emotional roller coaster surrounding Nicky's birth, the bonds were made even stronger.

Justin greeted everyone, and then everyone started to fire questions at Justin all at once.

They wanted to know where Brian was. They wanted to know about New York. They wanted to talk about the article for the opening of the new wing of the gallery. Every now and then someone would take a breath, and Justin could get caught up on what had been going on with everyone here since his last visit.

After dinner, Jason and Justin retrieved their stuff from the playroom, and the two of them were ready to meet the Moms in the dining room with their ideas for the party, while the rest of the family appeared to scatter in several different directions.

Nicky and other kids disappeared to watch TV or videos together, in another part of the house.

Ryan challenged Lee to a pool rematch. Something was said about Lee winning rather consistently, and Ryan wanted another chance at revenge. Lee couldn't help laughing at the arrogance of youth that didn't understand the value of years of experience. Nevertheless, Lee agreed to humor Ryan with another game, so off they went to the recreation room.

Paul went to the kitchen to microwave some popcorn for the kids, but he made sure he was in the perfect position to hear all that was happening at the dining room table.

"Ok, Justin. We're only here to pick up your designs. Then, you and Jason can go off and do whatever it is that you two do when you visit." Katie teased.

"Yes, Katie and I have the task of the cake...like always. So what are we doing?" Fran added. "So, where are the designs, Justin?" she demanded teasingly.

"Gee, Fran I just got here," Justin teased in reply, "Don't I get any time?"

"Of course, dear," Fran said with a laugh. She paused a moment. "Ok, now, have you had enough time.

"Fran, wait until you see what WE came up with this time," Jason began. "But, Justin does a better job of explaining things, so I'm going to let him tell you."

Fran and Katie rolled their eyes at Jason's antics, and then they laughed. They knew Jason really well...especially when he and Justin were together.

Justin looked at Jason in complete disbelief.

Paul just laughed from his position at the microwave since he knew that Jason had very little to do with anything that was about to be explained.

"So that's how it's going to be, is it?" Justin knowingly said.

Justin glared at Jason.

Jason, knowing that he was probably in trouble, took a moment to be sure that his mask of innocence was securely in place...then he just smiled innocently at Justin.

"Ok. Fran...Katie...I think that we have everything worked out. Since Nicky seems to be so in love with trucks at the moment, we thought we would use trucks as part of this year's birthday theme," Justin continued.

"That's an excellent idea. He's going to love it. He's going to be so surprised too," Paul rambled on from his distant position.

Fran and Katie nodded their agreement with smiles. Evidently, Nicky's love of trucks was not a secret from the rest of the family. Gabrielle just rolled her eyes, since she had heard about this endlessly. Nicky and Gabrielle had spent LOTS of time together.

"Jason and I still have quite a bit of work left to do. But the general idea is that the cake needs to be decorated with traditional birthday designs, and the little trucks designs will be added to them as well. The designs are all worked out, more or less, I just have to print everything out for you." Justin explained.

"I love the additional trucks on top of the cake." Katie added. "Are you planning on us doing that with the decorator...using the icing?"

"No, that would be too simple," Justin said with sigh. "I was thinking of making the trucks on the cake...three-dimensional."

"So we're going to use plastic trucks?" Katie asked rhetorically, thinking the answer was probably obvious. "That could be really cute too."

"Only if we have to..." Justin continued.

"No Mom, Justin is going to sculpt little trucks...from a cake," Jason said nonchalantly.

"How is he going to that?" Fran asked, trying to picture the process in her mind.

"It has been suggested that maybe when you bake the regular cake, you could also bake a second loaf cake. That should give me enough cake to try and sculpt into little trucks. Then you can decorate the little trucks and add them on top of the decorated cake," Justin explained.

"Katie, that means we get to REALLY decorate this year. We get to decorate the cake, AND we get to decorate the little trucks. We're going have so much fun...you and I," Fran added with a laugh.

"Just you and me. This is going to be great!" Katie added with excitement.

"Justin, please tell me you made a picture like always. Otherwise, these two will have too much fun, and the cake will never be finished." Gabrielle said with laugh. The mothers rolled their eyes at her and went back to discussing the cake.

"Gee Justin, I didn't know that you did sculpture as well...and in cake no less. There really is no limit to your talents," Paul teased, as he passed by with the bowl of popcorn for the kids. Everyone just smiled and nodded agreement.

Justin glared back at him as he passed.

"Is there anything else you want us to work on?" Gabrielle asked.

"Well you need to be sure to get the ice cream...after all, what would a birthday party be without cake and ice cream?" Justin suggested.

"Already taken care of." Gabrielle confirmed.

"And then we have a few ideas for food for the party. Right Justin?" Jason interrupted.

"You know we talked about ordering pizzas. Well Justin has a better idea ...Pizza on a Stick. We could prepare them in advance and bake them right before they are served. This would be easier for the kids to handle and much less mess."

"That sounds easy enough," Gabrielle added, "And the portions seems small enough that their little tummies shouldn't be too stuffed. They'll still be ready for the cake and ice cream."

"I was also thinking." Jason interrupted hesitantly, "I heard about the miniburgers that you made for that camping thing for Gus."

"What? How did you find out about that?" Justin asked with surprise.

"Brian complained to Paul that you and Gus forced him to eat toasted marshmallows...you know carbs after 7 pm thing...during the camp out in the living room. I think that he was trying to get sympathy from Paul...an exercise in futility I will assure you," Jason added with a laugh. "But, he also talked about how much he really enjoyed the miniburgers."

"He did?" Justin said with surprise.

"Yes, so I thought we should have them for the party, and then if we add some sort of easy to eat salad, both the kids and the adults should be happy. That means we would only need to have one menu. What do you think?"

"That sounds wonderful," Katie agreed. "You know, I'm sort of looking forward to the party already."

"Let's face it...you just like to party," Fran teased.

"With four year olds...who can resist?" Gabrielle added.

"So is that everything, Justin?" Fran asked.

"Pretty much. Jason and I still have to work out a couple of details, but we should have printouts to you before you leave. How does that sound?" Justin added, and then he started thinking. "You all realize sculpture is not my strong suit, and even it were, cake would be a completely foreign medium for me?"

"And, your point is?" Paul asked, returning to the conversation. "You love to experiment with new techniques. I read that on your website," Paul professed gleefully.

"Don't worry Jus, we're all here to lend our support." Jason added and everyone else chimed in their agreement by patting him on the back or kissing his cheek.

Justin gently grabbed Jason by the collar, making sure that he didn't wander off, and the two of them took over the study.

Jason checked to make sure that the laptop was properly hooked up to the printers. "Ok Jus, you're all set," he said.

Jason and Justin jointly put the finishing touches on the cake designs, and Justin made several printouts for the Katie and Fran.

Justin finally convinced Jason to create the designs for the cupcakes, which he reluctantly agreed to do, after major protests. In spite of Jason's annoying tendency to pester Justin, he was a very talented graphic artist in his own right, so he managed to carry the truck idea over to the small space of the cupcakes with clever designs...and he incorporated the fun party theme in gumdrops on the other cupcakes. He was actually starting to get into the fun of designing for this party thing.

Justin printed out the recipes for Pizza On A Stick from Emmett's email. Emmett just happened to include a kid's salad recipe too. Justin tried to remember the steps involved in the miniburgers, and wrote notes about preparing them, and he remembered to list the things they needed to buy...like the mini hamburger rolls.

With printouts in hand, Jason returned to the dining room. Justin followed along behind.

Everyone seemed deep in discussion in the dining room as they entered.

"What's going on?" Jason asked with concern, placing the printouts on the table.

"We're just trying to figure out how many people will be here?" Katie said with a laugh. "Every time we try to compute the number, we have a problem, and we keep coming up with more adults than kids."

"Well that stands to reason," Gabrielle added. "With each kid having an average of 2.5 parents, why are you surprised at the result?"

"What makes you think all the parents are coming?" Justin innocently asked.

"It's a Saturday afternoon. The kids will be here for Nicky. Everyone else both gay and straight are so used to each other, they'll see this a purely an afternoon party or they'll be here to klatch with Gabrielle and the Moms." Paul explained.

Fran had one more bit to add, "Plus Justin and Brian will be here so I wouldn't be surprised if all of Dunbar and Smith crashed the party." Everybody laughed.

"Yep, there should be total chaos," Katie added with a laugh. "We're going to have a ball!"

"But according to my research Nicky is only going to be four, so there should only be like five people total at his birthday party," Justin pointed out.

Once again everyone burst out laughing.

"It's a good thing you're an artist, Justin. You and Jason are allowed to be dreamers and have your delusions. Fortunately, Fran and I have better crystal balls. Chaos! I promise you." Katie said with a laugh.

"Oh yeah, big time!" Fran added with a laugh. "Crystal ball confirmed!"

Everybody burst out laughing again. Justin was just shaking his head.

"Well I guess I should retrieve my kids," Gabrielle announced, "Starting with breaking up 'The Great Pool Rematch' between Ryan and Lee."

"And don't forget the little ones," Katie teased with laugh.

"Oh yeah, them too," Gabrielle teased.

Katie and Fran couldn't resist taking another look at the detailed designs for the cakes and the cupcakes. They were both thrilled and couldn't wait to get started.

They both laughed at the fun idea of both sets of designs for the cupcakes. They took a minute and looked over the recipes, and they both agreed they were easy enough to make. They were excited about everything, and they couldn't wait to get started.

The sound of voices and footsteps said that everyone had reassembled.

"So, how was the great pool rematch?" Justin asked.

"The winner and still champion," Lee said, flexing his arms in triumph. "There's always next time, Ryan."

"Oh no. I'm not going to fall into that trap again." Ryan protested. "Paul, I need intensive lessons over the next two days. We have to do something to temper Lee's persistent winning streak!" Ryan suggested. "I need to be ready on Saturday."

"If it will make you feel better..." Lee said, embracing Ryan in a hug.

With that Gabrielle and Ryan gathered their kids to leave. Fran and Katie said their goodbyes and planned to see each other tomorrow. Lee and Katie then said their good byes.

With everyone gone, the house was almost quiet.

Nicky climbed into Justin's lap and rested his head against Justin's chest.

"Well, this has been quite a day," Paul said, putting his arms around Jason and kissing him gently on the cheek.

"Thanks for everything, Jus," Jason said, "You're so great at this. I love everything that you came up with. I can hardly wait. A certain someone is going to be so thrilled."

"I hope so," Justin said, gently kissing the top of Nicky's head. Nicky snuggled in closer to Justin's chest.

"Well Nicky, I guess it's time to put you to bed," Paul suggested.

"I want Justin to put me to bed," Nicky protested.

"How about you let Daddy and me give you a bath and put you to bed. Then we'll let Justin come in and kiss you goodnight. What do you think?" Jason suggested.

"Ok," Nicky reluctantly agreed, after thinking it over, and finally reached out to his dads to be carried.

"Well, let me quickly call your Uncle Brian," Justin finally said to Nicky, "Then I'll be in to kiss you goodnight. Ok?"

Nicky nodded his agreement.

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Justin returned to the guest room to call Brian on his cell phone.

"Hey," Brian said when he answered.

"Hey,

"How's it going?"

"Remind me to kill Jason when this is all over. And Jason and Paul together, without you being here as a stabilizing influence...well, I don't want to talk about it." Justin protested. Then he quietly said, "I miss you."

"I see things are just about as I expected." Brian said with a laugh. Then he quietly responded, "I miss you too."

"It looks like I have to go back to New York when I leave here," Justin casually mentioned. "Spyder said that we have a potential new client, and I also need to meet with Catherine again."

"I have to be in New York too. Liberty Air and Eyeconics want to meet when I get back. I was hoping that I could stay at your loft, if that's ok?"

"Absolutely. But, I'm surprised that you're going to give up the amenities of the your hotel suite."

"I'm willing to suffer through it," Brian teased, "And I'm trusting that you'll make it worth my while."

"Ever the romantic!" Justin said with a laugh.

There was silence for a moment before Brian continued. "Don't worry, I'll have Cynthia take care of switching your reservations from here. We can take Gus back to Toronto, and then go on to New York together," Brian suggested. "Now tell me, what Jason has done this time to severely shorten his life expectancy?" Brian asked with a laugh.

"It will keep until you get here. I think we have much more important things to take care of," Justin whispered, "By the way, where are you?"

"I'm still at the office, but I just got a very strange call from Teres a few minutes ago, and she told me that I had to come home. You're gone one day, and she has developed this whole other tyrannical side to her now when you're not around," Brian said with a laugh. "Surprisingly, I understand that dinner is almost ready. So I'm on my way home, but I still have a lot to do tonight so I guess I'll just take work home with me."

"She's just doing her job...you leave her alone...so it sounds like you're going to be up for awhile?"

"I think I'll just take a limo to the airport from the house in the morning, but I still have to pack too. So yeah...I'll be up for awhile. You want me to call you back?"

"Yeah."

"I can probably do that," Brian suggested.

"I going to kiss Nicky good night, and then, I should be ready for at least one round of phone sex."

"Tempting," Brian said with a smile. "Later."

"Later," Justin said, closing his phone.

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There was a gentle knock on the guest room door. Justin got up to answer it.

"You now have one bathed, little person patiently waiting to be kissed good night," Jason said with a laugh when Justin opened the door.

"I just talked to Brian. He's on his way home. He said he would call me back a little later," Justin said to Jason, leaving the rest to his imagination. "So I'm all ready to say good night to the little one," he teased.

Jason started to talk as they were walking to Nicky's room. "We got so much done today, Jus, thanks to you. I really could have never gotten this far without you. I know I can be real pain, but I want you to know that I'm so lucky to have you," Jason said, leaning over to give Justin a kiss on the cheek. Justin blushed in response.

Then Jason became serious again just as they were outside Nicky's bedroom door. "You've had a rather long day, Jus. I really don't want you to stay up too late working on things tonight. I know how you are. We still have tomorrow and Friday to get everything done. Besides me, you have the entire art department at Dunbar and Smith that are just dying to work with you again. So create whatever you want. It will get produced. You aren't in this alone." Jason said, reaching over and hugging Justin. "Plus, Brian will kill Paul and me if you're exhausted when he arrives."

Jason and Justin both laughed for a moment, and then they entered Nicky's room.

Even though everyone knew that Nicky was sleepy, Nicky clearly had other ideas about how this time in his bedroom should be spent. He tried to invent all sort of excuses to get out of bed, protesting that he was no longer sleepy. He tried to persuade Justin to play games with him.

Finally, Justin climbed on the bed with Nicky and allowed him to snuggle into his arms, while Paul and Jason read him a story. Nicky finally fell asleep in no time.

"I have that effect on people," Justin whispered, "I just seem to put them to sleep."

Paul and Jason quietly laughed as they positioned Nicky properly under the covers. They turned out the lights, and everyone quietly made their way out of the room.

Paul and Jason walked Justin back to the guest room, and everyone hugged each other good night.

Justin took a shower and settled himself in the guest bed to wait for Brian to call him back.

Justin was now definitely ready for that round of phone sex.

Chapter 10 – The Wake Up Call

Thursday Morning in Cincinnati...(Day 39)

Justin was hoping to sleep late because yesterday had been a really long day. The trip, the news about the Bronze Quill Award, dealing with Spyder and Catherine, and starting to plan for the party had taken its toll. So Justin was contented to just sleep-in this morning.

Unfortunately, Nicky had other ideas. There was a quick knock on the door...the rapid patter of little feet across the floor...the inevitable bounce on the bed...and then the feeling of not being in bed alone.

All these little clues served to let Justin know that sleeping-in was not going to be an option. Justin thought that if he lay perfectly still, Nicky would give up.

Not a chance.

Since Justin didn't move when Nicky climbed on the bed...Nicky knew that drastic measures were in order if Justin was going to pay attention to him. So Nicky started jumping up and down on the bed before falling down beside Justin.

"Jus...Jus...Jus," Nicky said.

When Justin finally turned over and managed to open one eye, he found Nicky's nose pressed practically against his nose. Justin's eyes flew open. He grabbed Nicky and rolled him over. Then started to tickle him.

By the time Jason finally arrived to rescue Justin, Nicky was already laughing away.

"Sorry Jus," Jason tried to explain. "I tried to catch him, but he just moves too fast. Good morning. How did you sleep?" he sounded totally unconvincing.

"Until this little monster decided it was time for me to get up, quite well," Justin said with a laugh. He finally managed to get his eyes completely opened as he looked at Jason. "I see that you're dressed. So I guess you and Paul are going into the office. It's ok. I don't mind being here alone. I'll just go back to sleep," he continued.

"Blondie, we still have work to do. I'd go ahead and do everything, but unfortunately you're the only one who knows what 'everything' is. So I need you," Jason said, gently sitting down on the side of the bed. "We need to go shopping."

"Shopping?" Justin questioned.

"You know, like the mall..."

"I thought you and Paul would do that," Justin explained, trying to slide under a pillow that Nicky was pulling away.

"Get real! Paul doesn't like the mall. Think Brian! Need I say more?"

"Right! Ok, I got it."

"So I guess it's just you and me. See I told you I needed you. We'll drop Nicky at Gabrielle's after we eat breakfast."

"Breakfast! Did you say breakfast? All right...I'm Up! Give me a chance to shower. I'll be right down," Justin said, reaching over and grabbing Nicky and tickling him one more time before giving him a big hug.

"C'mon Nicky...your work here is done...Jus will see us for breakfast...I guess I'd better get you dress," Jason rambled on, talking to Nicky after he gently lifted him out of Justin's arms. As Jason was leaving and carrying Nicky out the room, he looked back over his shoulder at Justin and smiled.

Justin shook his head as he finally got out of bed, wondering if his torture would ever end at the hands of Jason...and now Jason was using Nicky as an accomplice.

Justin quickly showered and dressed.

When he made his way to the kitchen, he arrived to find Paul fixing breakfast. Paul immediately handed Justin a cup of coffee.

"Thanks," Justin said, accepting the cup of coffee, "I really needed this."

"I heard about your wake up call," Paul said, as he burst out laughing. "I'm sorry...I know...I'm not suppose to laugh."

At that moment, Justin knew Nicky's invasion was part of a well-planned conspiracy. He just smiled to himself and started plotting his revenge against both Paul and Jason. He could hardly wait for Brian and Gus to arrive. He was going to need help; at the moment, he was outnumbered, but that would soon change.

Justin took a few sips of coffee, and then reached for his sketchpad, which Jason had just brought into the kitchen, along with one of his own.

"Jason...Justin...sketchpads at the breakfast table? I don't think so! Nicky and I will feel so neglected," Paul began, already starting to pout.

"So does that means that you've changed your mind and decided to go to the MALL with us?" Jason asked, already knowing the answer. He had only asked the question to make a point.

Paul's expression said it all. Justin had received the same expression from Brian when he too, had suggested an innocent trip to the mall. Justin smiled at the remembrance while Paul immediately changed the subject to ask how everyone wanted their eggs.

Now that Paul had his reaction, Jason continued, "Ok, so the moms and Gabrielle have the food thing taken care of ...all we have to really pick up is whatever we need for decorations...like streamers and balloons and maybe a few games," Jason suggested.

"Games?" Justin asked. "What games?"

"Not the electronic kind," Paul suggested. "Think back to the vintage stuff...twister, bean bag toss, pin the tail on the donkey...whatever you think four year olds would like to play."

"Paul, you know, Jason and I have our hands full," Justin decided it was time to set the record straight. "You and Brian will need a bonding experience when he gets here. So you two can pick up games on Friday afternoon."

"You're kidding, right?" Paul quipped, not believing his ears and looking to Jason to get him out of this.

"If they truly are vintage...they'll be something that you and Brian can identify with. After all, you two are older. It's the perfect solution," Justin added with a smile. "You can't expect Jason and me, being so young to know anything about these sort of things," he continued to tease with a laugh.

"Paul, I have to agree with Justin on this one. This is a perfect project for you and Brian," Jason insisted. "And no fair calling Brian and convincing him to delay his arrival until Saturday morning!"

"What? How could you think that I ..." Paul started to argue.

"Please!"

"Ok. I was at least considering that...but Gus is coming with him, and Nicky is waiting for him," Paul finally admitted with a smile, leaning down to kiss his partner.

Justin couldn't help laughing at the exchange between the partners.

"So we'll hit the stores at the mall this morning and stop by the office this afternoon to work on the posters and stuff. How does that sound?" Jason suggested.

"That should work," Justin agreed, reaching for the bacon and eggs that Paul had just added to his plate.

"Good, then I can go to the office, since one of should probably earn money to pay for your shopping spree," Paul teased with a laugh. "And, I'll just plan getting everything done so I can leave work early."

"That sounds like the perfect plan," Jason agreed.

"What do you think, Nicky?" Paul asked.

Nicky could only nod his agreement because his mouth was full of food.

Everyone else just laughed.

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When everyone finished breakfast, Paul finally managed to extricate Nicky from Justin's arms to take him to Gabrielle's.

Paul and Jason had to faithfully promise that Justin would still be here when Nicky came home later today, in order for him to agree to the separation.

Justin finally hugged and kissed Nicky goodbye, and Nicky and Paul left for Gabrielle.

"Oh yeah, you're going to have problems with both Gus and Nicky together," Jason teased. "I can see it already. My son is hopelessly in love with you. It's a good thing he's only almost four years old because Brian strikes me as the jealous type," he continued with a laugh.

"Are you finished?" Justin said with hands on his hips. "Besides I'm just a place holder. We both know that it's Brian that Nicky is crazy about."

"That was just because Brian would rough house with him more when he was a baby," Jason explained. "I guess Paul and I were hyper-gentle with Nicky. Brian was more experience, I guess, because of Gus. So Nicky still gets to tumble with him."

"Yep, just as I said, I'm just a place holder. Once Brian gets here, he'll forget all about me," Justin professed.

"I'm still not sure, Jus. Nicky still thinks of you as just a little bigger than he is. You're like this bigger kid. You know the 'missing link'." Jason suddenly burst out laughing at his own revelation.

"Are you finally finished? Have you gotten it all out of your system? Can we now get back to work?" Justin said, with hand on his hips.

Jason took a deep breath, "I think so." Then he paused. "Now what are you thinking?"

"Well, I figure since we've gone this far over the edge with the decorations for the party, we might as well go all the way and make the piñata." Justin calmly suggested.

"Justin, are you crazy? We can buy one while we're out."

"Not if we want it to be a truck, we can't."

"Who ever heard of a truck piñata?"

"It's the latest creation of Taylor and Smith Designs, haven't you heard?"

"You're serious?"

"Fortunately, I had a mother that was big into craft projects when I was growing up."

"Jennifer..." Jason whispered with affection. "So now Jennifer is going to be blamed for what's about to happen?"

"No. My mother, and her ongoing craft projects for my sister and me, is all the proof I need that you and I can do this. The biggest obstacle that I can see to this whole piñata thing is drying the strips. We won't have to paint anything because we'll be covering it with crepe paper. But drying the piñata is still going to be a problem. Otherwise, I know that we can do this...you and me," Justin suggested with a smile

"I think I know how to take care of drying it," Jason said, wanting to offer his bit of help.

"Good. Perfect!"

"Justin, what makes you think WE can do this?"

'Jason, we're two artists. The biggest problem I see two artists having, is agreeing on the shape of the truck. The rest of it is child's play. I guess we could get Nicky to help us if we really get desperate," Justin said sarcastically.

Jason burst out laughing. "Ok, you just convinced me." Then he mumbled to himself, "Sure I can see it now...we'll get Nicky to help. Paul would take pictures, and I'd never hear the end of it."

Justin laughed too. "It was just a suggestion." Then he extended his hand to Jason, "So we're agreed."

Jason took his hand and smiled. Then he shook his head and said, "We're agreed."

They each took a moment to jot down some notes in their sketchpads, and now they were ready to go to the mall.

On the drive to the mall Jason and Justin continued to compare notes and update their lists.

By the time they actually reached the mall, they were able to shop quickly and efficiently...the way only two true mall aficionados could.

But this was more than a simple chore to be accomplished...Jason and Justin actually had fun shopping together at the mall, and lingered longer than they originally intended. It really didn't matter; the two friends just had fun hanging out with each other. They enjoyed the morning together.

Both of them having healthy appetites, they had lunch at the mall before heading down to the offices of Dunbar and Smith to handle the remaining artwork.

Their day so far had been most productive...now they were both looking forward to the project of the piñata this evening...with or without Nicky's help.

Chapter 11 – Another Wake Up Call

Thursday Morning at Bri-tin...(Day 39)

"Good Morning, Lindsay," Brian said easily into his cell phone, as he was pouring his morning coffee.

Lindsay looked at the clock on her nightstand in Toronto. "Brian? What are you doing up this early? Don't you sleep well when Justin's not around?" Even the earliness of hour could not prevent her from teasing a little, after all Brian deserved it for waking her up.

"Actually, no, but I don't want to get into that with you," Brian said nonchalantly.

"What do you want, Brian? Oh no! Don't tell me you're canceling Gus' trip? He'll be so disappointed. You can't do this to him; he's just a little boy. He won't understand."

"Will you stop jumping to conclusions? I'm not in the mood for your drama this morning, Lindsay. I haven't even had my coffee yet. So get a grip. I just need you to pay attention."

"I'm sorry."

"I need you to listen. Are you listening?"

"I'm listening," Lindsay asserted.

"I want to change the travel plans. I know we originally planned that I would fly into Toronto tonight and stay over. And then Gus and I would fly out in the morning for Cincinnati. But there's a late flight out of Toronto this evening at about 9pm that gets into Cincinnati around 11:30pm. I was thinking that it would be easier on Gus to fly for that length of time while he's sleepy. That way he'll probably sleep through the entire flight. What do you think?"

"I think that's a good idea," Lindsay agreed.

"Ok. I'm on my way to New York for a business meeting. Cynthia arranged for a limo to pick me up in Toronto. That way it will be easy to pick up Gus and head back to the airport. You and Melanie can ride there too if you want. I'll even spring for dinner if time permits. Then, the limo will take you back home afterwards. I'll try to keep in touch with you during the day so that everything will go smoothly."

"Don't worry, Brian. Between Melanie and me, we'll make this work on our end," Lindsay assured him with some excitement in her voice. "Gus is going to be so excited."

With that taken care of, Brian closed his cell phone and finished drinking his coffee.

Brian poured himself a glass of guava juice. He was going to need all the help he could get for the grueling day ahead of him.

But the way he saw it, at the end of the day, he would crawl into bed with an arm full of his favorite blond. Knowing how the day was going to end would make getting through the day a lot easier.

Brian held that thought as he showered and dressed.

He heard the horn of the limo blow outside. Brian checked himself in the mirror. Satisfied with what he saw, he picked up his suitcase and briefcase and headed out the door.

Thomas and Teres waved goodbye from their window, and Brian returned their wave. Although the waves between them were now almost habit, Brian started to wonder with a laugh if Thomas and Teres ever slept.

The ride back into Pittsburgh was quick since it was early morning, but Brian was very glad that he wasn't the one driving. In fact, Brian had time on the trip from the house to the airport to review his notes for the meeting with The Pentland Group.

Since the limo dropped him directly at the terminal, Brian didn't have to waste time thinking about parking and shuttles and such. So he leisurely made his way to the gate with time to spare.

Brian couldn't believe how relaxed he felt. He was sure the thought of seeing Justin at the end of the day was responsible for his good mood.

The flight itself was uneventful. Brian tried to consider The Pentland Group and wonder what it was about this company and its products that would make it important to both Rudolpho Silvestri and Leo Brown.

Cross marketing was the new hot trend, but Kinnetik had been riding that wave for some time now. Once again, business seemed to have returned to the age of mergers and acquisitions, but as he had seen with Belluss Occhiali and Eyeconics, when mergers weren't in the cards...companies would resort to joint ventures to pursue their mutual interests.

On the flight, Brian's agile mind kept running 'what if' scenarios. By the time the plane landed in New York, Brian felt he could handle any possibility that was thrown his way.

Cynthia had arranged for a limo to pick Brian up at the airport. On the ride from the airport to the meeting with Andrew David, Brian continued to run through his mind additional scenarios of what possible agendas The Pentland Group could possibly have in mind. By the time he reached the office building, Brian was truly ready for anything.

As Brian entered the building for his meeting, his driver made himself comfortable in the limo to wait for Brian's return.

Brian identified himself to the receptionist and was immediately escorted into a plush office where Andrew David was waiting.

"Mr. Kinney, I'm Andrew David," he said, extending his hand as Brian entered the office. "I've been looking forward to meeting you. Rudolpho Silvestri simply hates advertising types. But he can't stop singing your praises. That alone would be reason enough to want to meet you. Can I get you coffee, tea or anything?"

"It's Brian, and I'm pleased to meet you as well, Mr. David. No thank you, I'm fine."

"Have a seat. And it's Andrew, please."

"Andrew. Judging from my conversation with Rudolpho Silvestri, I gather that you and he are old friends," Brian began.

"Let's just say we travel in the same circles. We form alliances when it suits our purposes. Needless to say, we work together quite a bit," Andrew said with slight laugh.

"I see."

"Rudolpho is the only person I know who carries agreements and releases with him at all times. I should have known he was up to something when he suggested that we simply have drinks. The mind of Rudolpho Silvestri never sleeps."

"I have noticed that," Brian confirmed with a smile.

"But this time our purposes were aligned. I want to have Speedos included in the ads for Collezione Fiero. I especially want to be included in that commercial that you've created. I love the concept. That commercial, as Rudolpho described to me, would appeal to both our gay and straight market segments without offending either. Of course I want to see a preliminary cut. It's such a fun concept...but still kind of edgy."

"My staff has already been looking over the entire Speedos line and thought that all of your products were impressive, but that several items would be a possible fit for the commercial."

"You're the expert here. I already signed an agreement allowing Kinnetik to use as many or as few of our products as you desire for cross marketing purposes," Andrew said, handing Brian the document. "It's the standard industry agreement, I just didn't want to waste any time."

"Thank you. That makes things simple."

"But The Pentland Group wants something in return," Andrew said, pausing for effect.

"Such as?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"We want to increase our market share among the gay and lesbian communities. We see this as an even larger potential market than it already is for us today. At the moment, these customers buy our products with minimal advertising effort on our part. We would like to actually market directly to them, and possibly increase our market share even more...without offending our regular, athletic customer base. Rudolpho has pointed out that Kinnetik is the only firm that can handle this. Rudolpho has good instincts about these things."

"Well, I must admit that I'm flattered. But we're mere mortals, and the things you're suggesting, take time," Brian cautioned. "You're not looking for a miracle, what you want is sustainable growth."

"Absolutely. You get to set the pace. The results will obviously be measurable. We definitely want them to be sustainable." Andrew agreed. "Are you up for it?"

"This would indeed be most intriguing."

"We've already seen what you've done for Brown Athletics. We hope to be working with Leo Brown in the future. In the meantime, we want you to handle this and do the same for us."

"That seems reasonable."

"You should coordinate future details through Millicent. She's the only one who knows everything. Our products are outstanding, but our corporate image is a bit stodgy. I take it you'll fix that little problem as well," Andrew said with a little laugh. " Kinnetik is a boutique agency. You're agile enough to handle change, and we definitely need to change without totally losing our corporate identity."

Andrew and Brian continued meeting for another couple of hours and drafted the basic contract terms.

"We'll do our best," Brian said.

Brian indicated that Cynthia or Ted would contact Millicent to work out any remaining the details necessary to get things moving forward,

"We were hoping that your legal department and mine could hammer out the final details for let's say a two-year agreement with an option to renew," Andrew suggested.

Then Andrew escorted Brian to lunch in the executive dining area, where Brian met with a few of the New York based executives of the firm. While they were having lunch, Brian thought about how glad he was that he and Justin would soon be moving to New York. The size of this account alone would require a local office to effectively work with their top management.

At the end of the meeting, Brian and Andrew were both pleased with the progress of events. Brian faxed his contract notes back to Ted and indicated that Kinnetik's legal department would handle the final contract.

Andrew David and Brian Kinney warmly shook hands with each other and said goodbye.

Brian greeted his driver as he entered the limo.

On the ride to the airport, he called Kinnetik and talked to Cynthia and Ted, giving them further instructions of additional things that needed to be handled while he was away.

Brian was now ready to leave New York City. It was now time to go to Toronto.

Brian had finished earlier than he had planned.

Chapter 12 – A Change In Plans

Later Thursday Afternoon...(Day 39)

Brian arrived in Toronto and called Lindsay at the gallery. They had originally planned to pick up Gus together from his after school program. But since Brian had arrived much earlier than planned, Brian and Lindsay planned to simply pick up Gus directly from school.

Brian exited the terminal and entered his waiting limo. Brian smiled to himself as he thought about how smooth and efficient Cynthia had made his travel life, even with all the constant changes to his travel plans.

As the limo pulled up in front of the gallery, several heads turned to see who would emerge from the limo.

When Brian emerged, everyone...both men and women...turned to stare. Brian dressed in Armani was always impressive...even in the middle of a very long day. Brian smiled at his admirers as he entered the gallery to retrieve Lindsay. Of course, they all smiled back.

"Hi, Brian," Lindsay said as he was ushered into her office. She leaned over to kiss him hello. It had only been a few days since his last visit, but she was still glad to see him. "I called the school, and Gus will be waiting for us. Do you want me to drive?"

"No. No. I have a limo. I think it will be more efficient."

"Well, I'm not one to say no to a limo ride. You know that," Lindsay said with a laugh, as they started walking toward the exit.

Lindsay noticed the looks that they received as they walked through the gallery, and she smiled at the attention. She knew that she and Brian made an impressive couple. She knew that even back in college. Unfortunately, she found out this was a coupling that was never meant to be. But for this brief moment in time, she could enjoy the fantasy and bask in the attention, and Lindsay could genuinely smile...as Brian slid his arm around her waist.

Once they were settled in car, and the address of the school had been given to the driver, Lindsay asked about Justin.

"Where's Justin?" she asked with a laugh, knowing that with Justin, he could be anywhere in the world.

"Justin's already in Cincinnati. He flew out yesterday. He just found out yesterday that he's a finalist for the Bronze Quill Award for innovative website design, so he's pretty excited. Paul and Jason had to give him the news when he arrived."

"I didn't know that Justin was doing websites," Lindsay said with some surprise.

"Justin has been doing free lance work in New York in between shows. A loft and a studio are expensive in the City...not to mention the cost of paints and canvas."

"I though you might be helping out with that. After all, he's been in New York for almost a year," Lindsay reiterated as if she needed to restate the obvious. Then she quietly said, "I don't know what I thought."

"No Lindsay, Justin has pretty much sustained himself. He's done this starving artist thing to the hilt. He's proven himself...not that he needed to, and I'm extremely proud of his accomplishments."

"You were extremely proud of him when he was just a busboy at the Diner. You have no objectivity where Justin is concerned. So you might as well admit it," Lindsay teased with a laugh.

"Probably not," Brian admitted with a laugh, "But just let's keep that our little secret."

Lindsay burst out laughing and said, "Sure, Brian. Your secret's safe with me."

The limo arrived at Gus' school. The driver parked, walked around the car, and opened the door for Lindsay to exit.

She went into the school to retrieve Gus and exited a few minutes later with him, skipping beside her.

Brian watched them approaching the car, and he couldn't help but smile. The sight of Gus always warmed his heart.

Brian didn't wait for the driver to open his door. He opened it himself and stepped out of the car, holding the door open. Gus immediately covered the distance the moment that he saw Brian.

"Dad! Dad!" Gus said, running over to give him a big hug.

"Hello there, Sonny Boy. How was school today?"

"It was my last day," Gus said, jumping for joy. "Gee Dad, I love the car."

"Why thank you, Gus. Me too," Brian teased.

Everyone settled back into the limo, and they were off.

Once they were settled, Gus continued to look around the interior space of the limo.

"What's the matter Gus?" Lindsay asked, already knowing the answer, for some things never change.

"Where's Justin?" Gus asked with a touch of sadness.

"Justin isn't here," Lindsay began to explain, "But you'll see Justin later."

"I will?" Gus asked his dad, looking for the reassurance.

"Yeah, Gus. Justin is already in Cincinnati. He's there waiting for us," Brian confirmed. "We'll see him later tonight."

Gus seemed to accept this explanation. "Oh..." he said. Then Gus thought about it for a second. "Can we go there now, Dad?" Gus asked, looking up at his dad.

"You mean you want to leave now? You don't want to wait until later tonight?" Lindsay asked with some surprise. "Aren't you hungry? Wouldn't you like to have dinner first? Don't you want to take a nap? Don't you want to say goodbye to Mama?"

"Can we go there now, dad?" Gus repeated to his dad, completely ignoring Lindsay and her list of questions. Brian couldn't help but smile... for this was truly his kid.

"Gee Gus, I thought we would have more time. Well, I guess we could reschedule our flight. Let me check the Liberty Air schedule," Brian said with some surprise. "Ok, Lindsay, so how long will it take us to pick up his luggage at the house?"

"We're only a few minutes away," Lindsay confirmed with a sigh. "Everything is all packed."

"So you want to go to see Justin now?" Brian tried to confirm, while trying to check plane schedules on his cell phone.

Gus nodded his head, and then looked up at Brian again with sad eyes.

"Ok, so we'll take the next flight to Cincinnati. It looks like we have just enough time to get to the airport. How does that sound?"

Gus beamed a smile back at his dad that would almost rival Justin's sunshine smile. Brian realized that he was so fucked...a six year old had him wrapped around his finger.

They stopped at the house and retrieved Gus' suitcase, and Lindsay handed Brian an envelope of legal papers to make it easier to transport Gus into/out of the country.

Lindsay also handed Brian a small backpack of books and games for Gus to play on the plane.

Brian looked at Lindsay in complete disbelief that she would even think that his son would carry a backpack through an airport. He raised an eyebrow as he looked at the hideous backpack.

It was not so much that Brian had a problem with Gus wearing a backpack...it was that Brian was not going to walk through an airport with Gus wearing the backpack. After all, image was everything.

Finally, Brian quickly placed the contents of the backpack into his own brief case, and he stuffed the offending backpack into Gus' suitcase.

Lindsay couldn't help laughing at the entire maneuver. This was so Brian.

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Lindsay asked to be dropped off back at the gallery, since it was obvious that she wasn't really needed now that Brian and Gus were together.

Lindsay remembered the days when Gus was just a baby, and she was always dropping in at the loft in Pittsburgh so that Gus and Brian could spend time together. Lindsay now understood that times had changed. She wasn't sure when it happened...but she knew that somehow it had.

Lindsay called Melanie at her office and explained about the change of plans, and Gus had a chance to cheerfully say his good byes to Melanie by phone.

At the gallery, Lindsay and Gus said their good byes with hugs and kisses all around. Lindsay also kissed Brian goodbye.

Then, without a moment's hesitation, Gus happily got back in the limo with Brian and waved goodbye to Lindsay once again. At that moment, Lindsay realized that Gus wasn't her baby anymore.

Brian and Gus arrived at the airport and checked their luggage. They went to the head of the long lines to pass through all the security checks for Liberty Air due to Brian's VIP status.

Brian picked up a few light snacks for Gus to eat and gum for him to chew on the plane.

While they were at the concession stand, Gus noticed a pack of UNO playing cards at the register. Gus asked Brian to buy a deck for them to play on the plane. Brian wasn't really sure about this...especially since he had the sinking feeling that Gus was suggesting a game in which he was an expert. Brian couldn't help but smile as he paid for the cards. Yep...this was his kid.

They had a few minutes before their flight was announced, so Brian reached for his cell phone, and he called Paul to update him on the change of plans.

"Paul, it's Brian."

"Brian, what's going on?" Paul asked, upon receiving this unexpected call

"How's Justin?"

"He's fine. He misses you. So do I. When will we see you?"

"That's why I'm calling. I'm in Toronto. Gus wants us to take the next flight. So it looks like I'll get in at about 8 pm. I just wanted to make sure that wasn't going to be a problem. I can easily take a cab from the airport to the house."

"No Brian, we'll pick you up. We'll see you in few hours. Just call me from the terminal when you land in Cincinnati."

"Ok. I'll do that." Brian said to Paul. "Hold on a minute, Paul." Brian looked down into the pleading eyes of his son. "Is Justin around?"

"You want to talk to Justin?" Paul said with a laugh. "Now that's a surprise. He's right here."

"I guess I had better let Gus talk to Justin. Otherwise, the flight is going to seem really long," Brian teased.

Paul laughed, showing that he fully understood what Brian was trying to say...traveling with an anxious child was never any fun.

Paul handed his cell phone to Justin, and Brian handed his cell phone to Gus.

"Justin?" Gus said all excited as soon as the phone was in his hands

"Yes, hi Gus," Justin said. "How's it going?"

"Ok," Gus answered, but then he couldn't contain his secret any longer. "I'm at the airport," he tried to whisper to Justin.

"You are?" Justin said with a laugh and some surprise. "All by yourself?" he teased.

"Nooooo. Dad's here." There was a pause. "Dad said to tell you that we're on our way."

"You are? That's great, Gus. I'll see you soon then."

"I love you, Jus."

"Love you too, Gus."

"Here's Dad," Gus said, handing the phone back to Brian.

"Why thank you Gus," Brian teased. "Hey," he said in greeting to Justin.

"Hey, I heard a rumor that you're at the airport," Justin teased.

"Yeah, our flight leaves shortly. Gus wants to see you. He didn't want to wait. So, it looks like we'll be there in a couple of hours."

"I'll be waiting," Justin said softly.

"I'm counting on that," Brian whispered. Then he changed his tone to ask, " So, how are the party plans coming?"

"Next year we're going to send Em out to Cincinnati to handle this," Justin responded with a laugh.

"And is Jason still alive?" Brian thought he should check...just so he would know what he was walking into.

"Just barely."

"That's about what I expected," Brian teased with a laugh. "Now don't do anything drastic until I get there."

"Ok," Justin agreed. "Later."

"Later," Brian said as he closed the phone.

Now father and son could settle down and wait for their boarding call.

When it was announced that they could board, Brian leaned down to Gus and asked, "So are you ready to go see Justin?"

Gus immediately got all excited. "Let's go, Dad!" They both confidently boarded the plane together.

Brian and Gus watched out the airplane window as the City of Toronto faded away during take-off. They were now on their way to Cincinnati...and Justin.

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Justin closed the cell phone and paused for a moment to take in the news that Brian and Gus would be in Cincinnati in just a few hours.

Paul interrupted his thoughts. "So Brian will be here tonight. That's great. We'll have some time to spend together," he said with this big smile across his face.

"All right, Paul. You can go ahead and admit that you're excited. You're as bad as Nicky," Jason teased, shaking his head at his partner's expression.

"Maybe," Paul added. "Brian and I might talk all the time, but it's been awhile since we've seen each other. And so much has happened."

"Well, fortunately Justin and I had a productive day. We picked up a few things at the mall, before we got here to the office. We've been creating most of the afternoon. Wait until you see the wall hangings and stuff that Justin created. They're all amazing. No one is going to recognize the playroom, when we're done."

"Did you remember to get balloons?" Paul quietly asked.

"Oh yeah! Justin and I got loads of balloons," Jason confirmed, leaning down and giving Paul a reassuring kiss. "Among other things. Wait until you see the piñata that we started. It's too bad it's going to be destroyed, but I think Nicky will love it."

"What did you do make it in the shape of a truck?" Paul asked sarcastically, not being able to resist an opportunity to tease.

Justin suddenly burst out laughing.

"How did you guess?" Jason asked with surprise.

"I was only kidding? I really should have never left you two alone! You too are really over the top. I'm so glad that Brian is on his way here. I'm going to need all the help I can get," Paul tried to protest in between his fits of laughing.

"You two can laugh if you want. This is going to be the best birthday ever for Nicky, and that's all that matters. I'm sure Brian will agree with me," Jason insisted, leaning down to give Paul another kiss.

"Look, I'm going down to the art department to check on things," Justin said, turning to leave, wanting to give his friends some privacy. "The copies should be done by now. I'm going down to check with Glenn," Justin announced as he was leaving.

As Justin left he had a certain bounce in his step as he tried to contain his own excitement that Brian and Gus were on their way.

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Early That Evening In Toronto...(Day 39)

Melanie and Lindsay were alternately preparing dinner and playing with Jenny, who really loved all the additional attention.

"I just don't see why Brian couldn't stick to at least one of his original plans," Melanie began. "Gus is probably starving to death. I wonder if Brian will think to at least get him snacks at the airport. Oh, why couldn't they stay for dinner and then leave?"

"Because Gus wanted to get to Justin. He didn't want to wait." Lindsay answered quietly.

"So he just got in a limo with Brian and happily drove away. Is that what you're trying to tell me?" Melanie asked again for confirmation.

"He's not a baby any more. He smiled at me and waved goodbye."

"Because Gus knew he was going to see Justin, I bet he didn't even put up a fuss about getting on the plane. Of course, once on the plane, he gets to fly first class with Brian and his VIP status so I'm sure he's going to have tales to tell about that too."

"I knew I would have separation anxiety when Gus was 18, and he went off to college," Lindsay said with a laugh. "But who knew that he would be so fiercely independent at six years old."

"I guess the hunger strike to see Justin should have been the first clue, huh?" Melanie teased. "Are you going to be all right about this?"

"It's a little harder than I thought, and I know he'll be back in three days. And I know that Brian will make sure that he calls. So I'll be all right, just give me a bit. What about you?"

"Same here. He sounded so happy on the phone though when he called me. That's all I've ever wanted. And like you said, he'll be back in three days."

Melanie walked over and put her arms around Lindsay and kissed her gently. They knew they still had each other.

At that moment Jenny reminded them that she was still in the room and felt neglected.

Chapter 13 – A Long Awaited Meeting, Part 2

Early Thursday Evening...(Day 39)

Once the plane reached cruising altitude, Gus immediately wanted to play UNO.

Brian cautiously removed the special deck of cards from his brief case. Before they started playing, Brian insisted on reading the directions over Gus' laughing protests. He also asked the flight attendant for water for both of them to drink.

Brian and Gus tried to discuss the directions together. You can imagine how this went.

But after getting through the exercise of reading them through everything, Brian was now ready to accept the competitive challenge of playing UNO with a six-year-old master.

Fortunately, dinner arrived, which gave him a momentary reprieve as both Brian and Gus realized that they were hungry, but as usual, Brian and Gus only picked at their food.

Once the trays were cleared, Gus made it absolutely clear that that it was time for the games to begin, and no excuses were acceptable.

So Brian accepted the inevitable with a sigh and reached for the UNO cards. The cards were shuffled, and Brian and Gus started to play.

The flight attendants would pass by occasionally and hear Brian groan and Gus laugh. They knew immediately what the outcome of a particular hand had been.

It was odd for the attendant to see a man clad in Armani willingly, playing UNO with a child in first-class so Brian and Gus caught the attention of the flight attendants each time one would passed by.

The other passengers in first class were also keeping an eye on the progress of the game, smiling to themselves from time to time.

The time seemed to pass quickly.

Finally there was just enough time for a quick trip to the bathroom before the captain announced their approach to the Cincinnati Airport.

With that announcement, to Brian's relief, UNO was immediately forgotten, and once again father and son looked out the window. This time they were focused on the approaching lights of Cincinnati.

They both could hardly wait for the plane to land.

Once the plane landed, Gus and Brian exited the plane and headed for the terminal.

Brian had the advantage of height, and he immediately saw Paul as they entered the terminal. They smiled and nodded at each other.

As the crowd dispersed Nicky caught sight of Brian, and once again he could not be contained. "UNCLE BRIAN! UNCLE BRIAN!" Nicky said on the run.

Gus smiled as he saw this little person running in their direction. Gus wisely moved to stand behind his dad for protection. Gus too knew a lot about little people projectiles.

Brian went down on one knee to sweep up the approaching Nicky. Brian picked up Nicky and tossed him into the air.

Due to Brian's height, Nicky really enjoyed being tossed. He was hoping that Brian would toss him again. He wasn't disappointed.

"Nicky, you got so big while I was away," Brian said. "Let me get a look at you."

"I'm going to be four years old," Nicky pointed out so that there would be no confusion.

Gus stood back and smiled as he observed the mass of red curls and freckles up in the air. With all the movement, he was having some trouble sizing up the little dynamo. Finally Brian lowered Nicky to the floor. Then Gus was able to finally see.

Nicky walked over to Gus. "Hi," he said to Gus. "I have your picture."

"You do?" Gus asked with a smile.

"Gus, this is Nicky," Brian said as a way of introduction.

"Hi, Nicky," Gus whispered.

Then the two of them just stared at each other.

Gus extended his hand and gently touched Nicky's cheek. "Freckles," he said.

"I know," Nicky said with a smile.

"I think they're neat," Gus said with a smile

"Me too," Nicky added.

Paul and Brian just stood back smiling, but they didn't say anything. They were just waiting to see what would happen.

Then, Paul got down one knee, "Hi Gus, I'm your Uncle Paul. I'm Nicky's daddy. The last time I saw you...you were just a little thing, but now you're so big."

Gus smiled at this. "You're my uncle," he said, thinking he didn't have very many uncles, and he could always use one more.

"Yep. I sure am, and I'm glad you're here." Gus walked the few steps and gave Paul a hug.

When Paul stood up again, he and Brian could finally hug each other.

Paul finally said, "Well, let's go get your luggage so we can get you guys to the house. Everyone is waiting for you there...just in case you're wondering where Jason and Justin are..."

"So you left the two of them...alone...together...unsupervised. Aren't you afraid they'll kill each other?" Brian teased.

"They're finishing a project together. They need each other for this one. So they have to keep each other alive at least until they're done. I figured, we'd be home before the blood letting began," Paul smirked. "You know, you and I run multi-million dollar companies with less drama than the two of them have caused in the last 2 days for a simple birthday party."

Brian couldn't help laughing at the image. "I guess you've forgotten that either Jason or Justin alone can be intriguing...but put them together and chaos ensues."

"Brian, you wouldn't believe the chaos that has developed. They have been creating in the art department together all afternoon. Mom is betting that all of Dunbar and Smith will crash Nicky's party on Saturday just because you and Justin are here. Katie and Gabrielle did the guest list and are expecting more adults than kids. The Moms are talking about crystal balls for their forecasts. You left me here all alone in this mess for a whole two days. But now that you're here, we can get everything straightened out. You can rein in Justin...after all, he's really the trouble maker."

"Hello, let me introduce myself," Brian began. "I'm Brian Kinney. I'm the man that Justin Taylor stalked for five years, until I asked him to marry me. Oh yeah, me rein in Justin," Brian said with a laugh. "That should work!"

"But you didn't get married. So what's the big deal? You live in Pittsburgh...He lives in New York. Evidently you escaped...although I'm not sure that was to your advantage," Paul couldn't resist teasing.

"Justin comes back to work on one tiny little project. He creates an international incident. An intermediary is brought in from Milan to apologize. Now, my art department is conspiring with him to keep things from me. I won't even tell you about the rest," Brian rambled on. "I so escaped...right...now he has us moving back in together."

"What?"

"Me rein in Justin? What a laugh!" Brian said with a laugh, "I see that we definitely have a lot to catch up on."

"I can see that," Paul said with a laugh, totally enjoying the joke.

"So dare I ask, what project our two partners are working on, that managed to extend each of their life expectancies?"

"Wait until you see." Paul teased, casting an eye at Nicky and Gus and then, bursting out laughing again.

They retrieved the luggage, and everyone settled into the car.

Surprisingly, Gus and Nicky were happily carrying on a conversation between themselves in the back seat that neither Brian nor Paul could hear.

Finally, Brian turned sideways so he could join in the their conversation in the back of the car.

"I have a dad too," Brian heard Nicky say, and he noticed that Gus was a little confused by the statement.

"Nicky is trying to tell you that he has another dad," Brian said, trying to help a little. "That would be your Uncle Jason."

"Oh, I have another uncle," Gus said with glee, noting that his number of uncles is steadily increasing.

"Ah huh," Nicky said. "Dad."

"Oh," Gus said in reply. "I only have one dad, but I have two mommies. And I have A Justin."

Paul burst out laughing. "Yep that about sums it up!" Then he said, "Wait until you meet all your other aunts and uncles. You have an entire family you haven't met yet."

"I have?" Gus asked with his eyes as big as saucers.

"Yep, there's Gabby, she's my mommie," Nicky said, "Granny Fran and Granny Katie and Grandpa Lee and everybody."

"Let's not scare him, Nicky. He just got here," Paul teased.

"He'll be fine. Right, Sonny Boy?" Brian asked just to make sure.

Gus eagerly nodded yes.

The car made a stop at the Thai Garden Restaurant. "I know that you probably didn't have time to eat so I took the liberty of ordering a few of your favorites. I'll be right back." Paul said before he exited the car.

Paul quickly returned with several bags of food, and they were on their way again.

They arrived at the house, and Nicky took Gus' hand to lead him to the door, while Paul and Brian grabbed the food and luggage.

Paul smiled watching Gus and Nicky together.

By the time they reached the front door, Jason was waiting for them. "Brian," he said softly, while embracing him, "I'm so glad to see you."

"Ok, enough of that," Paul teased. Brian just shook his head as he released Jason...for some things never change. "I want you to say hello to Gus."

Jason went down on one knee. "Hello Gus, I'm you're Uncle Jason."

Nicky said something to Gus, and Gus walked over, gave Jason a hug, and said "Hi."

Everybody walked inside where Justin was waiting.

Gus took off running at him first, "Justin!"

Then, of course, Nicky had to follow suit, "Justin!"

So after they each got a big hug from Justin, they both had him pinned to the floor as they tried to tickle him and hug him at the same time. Everyone was laughing.

Brian gave them a minute and then, decided that he had had enough of this.

He walked over and picked up Gus under one arm and Nicky under the other. The two kids never stopped laughing. The two of them also never stopped wiggling. Of course, they both loved to be raised high, since Brian was by far the tallest and strongest.

Brian allowed time for Justin to once again stand up. Justin leaned up and gently kissed Brian amid the wiggly kids, and they each finally said a quiet "Hey" to each other.

Brian then gently dumped a laughing Gus on one end of the sofa in the living room and dumped a laughing Nicky on the other end. He immediately went back and swept Justin into his arms and gave him a proper hello, complete with a passionate kiss. When the need for air caused them to break apart, Brian left his arm around Justin's waist.

Brian looked over his shoulder at Gus and Nicky, and they both had their eyes covered with their hands. They were still giggling on the sofa.

Everyone else laughed too.

"Nicky, why don't you and I show Gus to your room? He can unpack and freshen up before dinner." Paul suggested.

Nicky again took Gus by the hand again and led the way with Paul following.

"Look, you know I love Armani. But can you give me a minute to take a quick shower and change clothes. It's been a really long day," Brian said, still gently holding onto Justin.

"Let me show you to your room," Jason said with a smile. He knew that Justin knew the way, but he wanted to see Brian's first reaction to the renovation. "Here we are," he said as he opened the door.

"So you really did renovate. I'm impressed. Nice job," Brian said. "I heard a rumor that soundproofing was added too."

"Yes. Now, you have no reason for not visiting more often." Jason teased. "Notice the bigger bed too."

"Thank you," Brian said, leaning down to kiss Jason's cheek. "You have no idea how much this means to me."

"I think I do," Jason whispered. "Now will you and Justin get a quick shower? Justin has managed to get glue and paste all over him so he really needs a shower too," he commented. "But Brian, please make it quick. We're all hungry," he finally said with a knowing smile.

"Got it," Brian said with a laugh, leaning down to kiss Justin.

Brian quickly grabbed what he needed from his suitcase, and then both he and Justin quickly stripped out of their clothes and entered the shower.

Brian adjusted the water temperature and the height and angle of the shower spray.

Brian placed himself under the shower spray as he wrapped his arms around Justin. He had waited all day for just this.

"Hmmmmmm, you feel good," Brian said, "I've been looking forward to this all day."

"I glad you're finally here too," Justin whispered. "I've missed you," he admitted.

"I've missed you too."

Brian poured a bit of shampoo in his hand and started to shampoo Justin's hair. Justin groaned softly and leaned into his touch.

"I see your artistic technique hasn't changed while you've been gone. But, tell me how did you manage to get glue everywhere?" Brian teased.

"It's unavoidable."

Then Justin poured a small amount of gel into his hand and started to wash Brian's back. Brian leaned into Justin's gentle touch.

"You're tense," Justin said. "It must have been a hard day."

"You have no idea, but I can't complain about the ending."

They both enjoyed the pleasure of on another's touch as the shower continued, and they continued to wash one another.

"Jason said we had to make this quick," Brian reminded him, "And I know you're hungry. So are you up for this?" he asked gently, nodding so Justin would get his meaning.

Justin nodded yes.

Brian reached for the condom and lube. It was a fast fuck in the shower, but it was precisely what that both needed, and they both came quickly. They both knew that there would be plenty of time for leisurely lovemaking later.

They quickly dressed in sweatpants and sweatshirts and returned down to the kitchen to join Paul and Jason. Nicky and Gus had returned too.

Although, Brian and Gus had nibbled on the plane, they found that they were both ready for dinner. Brian found a few temping morsels to give Gus and Nicky something to munch on while Jason was making something more suitable for he kids to eat.

"Where's your project?" Paul asked, looking around the kitchen, as they were about to eat dinner.

"We put it in the garage to dry?" Jason explained with a smile

"Good idea." Paul said with a laugh, while shaking his head. "I still can't believe that you two decided to do this."

"Blame Justin," Jason said quickly. "You know that I would never even think of doing anything like this on my own," he said innocently. "I'm just a tag-a-long here."

"Somehow, I sincerely doubt that," Brian said with a laugh in Justin's defense, without knowing any of the particulars, but figuring that Justin had probably had to defend himself against these two for long enough.

Jason just glared at Brian, already sensing that he was going to stir up trouble.

"Please, please. Behave yourselves. There are children present," Paul added with a laugh. "Will you two behave? We have to be on out best behavior for Gus and Nicky."

Gus and Nicky started to giggle at the mention of their names.

"Oh please, both of these kids have lived their entire lives watching Justin's antics. So I'm sure there's nothing new here," Jason said. "Here I'll prove it to you."

"What do you mean?" Justin asked innocently. Then he started to worry about what Jason was up to.

"Oh Gus, dear" Jason began with a smile, "I heard that you and your dad went camping with Justin...why don't you tell Nicky and your Uncle Paul and me, ALL about it?" he said with a laugh, turning back to the stove so that he didn't have to witness the death-glare he bet that he just received from Justin.

"Jason!" Justin protested.

Gus looked at Brian. Brian simply smiled and nodded at Gus.

Gus proceeded to relay the entire camping in the living room experience at Bri-tin. Starting with arriving in the dark. The flashlights. Calling out to Justin. The rocks. The trees. The sounds. The lantern. The campfire.

"The fireplace," Brian had to correct.

Gus resumed talking about the camping details after the interruption. The miniburgers. The salad. The Torch. The toasted marshmallows. The campfire stories. The problems with the little tent. The sleeping bags. Sleeping with Brian and Justin in the big tent.

Gus held everyone spellbound with his re-telling of his camping experience. "I had fun," he said at the end. "The end!" he said, needing a hug from Brian when it was all over.

Brian realized his kid was a natural ham.

Everybody laughed and clapped.

Justin couldn't believe that Gus still remembered all that, for the camping adventure had been almost a month ago. Justin covered his eyes with his hands to hide his blush.

Nicky enjoyed the story and was clapping too.

Jason and Paul couldn't believe they were finally hearing ALL the details of the infamous camping night...for they had only heard bits and piece before when Brian was trying to elicit sympathy.

They had no idea it had been such a full-scale production. They always knew they had to watch Justin very carefully. Now they had proof from the 'mouths of babe'.

Now that they knew how over the top Justin could be for one six year old...they now understood that it was no wonder he had gone so far overboard for an entire party for a soon-to-be-four-year-old and his friends.

"And I rest my case," Jason simply said a laugh, placing the grilled cheese sandwiches in front of the kids.

"Are you done?" Justin glared, finally removing his hands from his eyes. "It was easy. It was the day before all the furniture was delivered," he tried to explain in his own defense. However, neither Jason nor Paul paid any attention to his explanation.

"Oh yeah. That explains it," Paul added. "See why I want to hire him...he'd be perfect at the firm," he couldn't resist teasing Brian.

"And can't you see Justin and I together in the art department? Imagine the graphics we could produce?" Jason wanted to add his contribution to helping his partner tease Brian.

"Not going to happen Paul. Give it up! We're moving back in together."

"But, you live in Pittsburgh. He lives in New York. I will admit your mansion in West Virginia is neutral territory. But..."

"My partner and I have decided to live together. That's all you need to know for the moment."

"Ok. I won't press." Paul said. "I will admit that it's the smartest decision you've ever made, Brian."

"Yeah...well..." Brian stuttered.

"I'm happy about it," Justin added.

"Me too...actually." Brian agreed softly. Then he wanted to change the subject. "So How's Gabrielle?"

"She's ok," Paul announced. "She was here among the chaos last night. She'll probably be back tomorrow, especially when she finds out that you're here."

There was easy banter back and forth during the remainder of the meal. Eventually, Nicky crawled into Brian's lap, and Gus crawled into Justin's lap.

Both kids curled up and made themselves comfortable while the adults continued to eat and talk. Occasionally they would beg for a morsel from one of the adult-plates, but basically they were content to just be in the midst of all the activity.

"I played UNO on the plane," Brian reluctantly admitted. Then he looked over at Gus for his reaction. Gus just grinned victoriously.

"You did?" Justin asked with some surprise.

"My son is a card shark. It was embarrassing. He beat me," Brian finally admitted with mock sadness and defeat.

Gus was now laughing into Justin's chest. Brian just shook his head. "Well, I guess we should call Linds and Mel so Gus can say good night."

"But I don't want to go to bed yet," Gus started to protest, afraid that he would miss something important.

"I know, but your mommies may want to go to sleep. So we should call them now, ok?" Brian strongly suggested.

"Ok," Gus finally agreed.

"Then, you and Nicky can watch a video until you fall asleep. How's that?" Paul suggested, knowing that they would probably last maybe ten minutes top.

Nicky and Gus reluctantly agreed.

So Gus called Lindsay and talked to both his mommies. He told them about meeting Nicky and about Nicky having two dads. He told them about meeting his Uncle Paul and Uncle Jason. He took great pleasure in telling them about the plane ride and about beating Brian in UNO. Both Melanie and Lindsay were in hysterics by the end of the phone call. They were glad that Gus was having a good time. He told his mommies that he loved them, and then he said good night.

Gus and Nicky went in to watch a video.

Brian talked for a few minutes to Lindsay to reassure her that Gus was really ok. Lindsay also talked to Justin and congratulated him on his Bronze Quill nomination. Lindsay and Melanie talked to Paul and Jason. Then they all said goodnight.

Ten minutes had passed and Paul and Justin went to tuck the little ones in while Jason decided to handle kitchen cleanup, and Brian kept his company.

"I'm so glad you're finally here, Brian," Jason said again.

"Me too," Brian agreed.

"Gus and Nicky are cute together. Did you see the way he kept taking Gus' hand?"

"Your son is a pushy little devil at only three. I can just imagine what going to happen when he reaches four," Brian teased with a laugh. "The cuteness and freckles are only going to carry him so far."

"Oh, I don't know, look how far Jus has gotten on those innocent blue eyes and blond hairs? There's still hope for Nicky."

They both shared at laugh.

They all reassembled in the living room where Paul had turned on soft lights, and Jason returned with nightcaps of Beam for everyone. Jason and Paul spooned together on the sofa, and Brian and Justin spooned together in Jason's favorite oversized chair.

"I do love your hospitality," Brian teased, taking a sip of his drink.

"Just as long as you take advantage of it more often. I knew I should have convinced you to join me in that partnership years ago," Paul started, "Then, I wouldn't have to miss you so much. The four of us would have worked well together all the time."

"You've got to admit we would be a force to be reckoned with. The four of us could have taken New York by storm," Jason added.

"Maybe, but this way we get to play together," Brian suggested with a smile.

"And I wouldn't miss that for the world," Jason added, lifting his drink in a mock salute.

"Tell me about the Milan account. I've been dying to hear the details on that one," Paul said.

"I'll have to tell you when we're alone. Justin is still a little sensitive on that one, even though we got the account." Brian teased, leaning over to give Justin a kiss, "and then some."

"That's right. You've already had your laughs at my expense for the evening," Justin pointed out.

"Well, we're going to Milan this summer," Jason suggested. "I'm really excited."

"Only if I get accepted for the show," Justin protested.

"No! I think we should plan on going to Milan anyway...maybe add a few other cities if we can. Somehow I think that Paul and I can find a few places to shop in Milan, and there should be enough museums and galleries in the other cities to keep you and Jason amused. This will make up for the vacation that was interrupted four years ago. And, I want you to prepare your application for Pinacoteca Ambrosiana without any unnecessary pressure," Brian insisted, making a point to Justin.

"That sounds like a perfect idea," Paul agreed.

"The packet I received said that I have less than a month before the committee meets. So I think that I'll just lock myself in my studio until I get the painting done. As I've said before, whether I'm accepted or not it's an honor to have been asked to apply," Justin pointed out.

"That sounds nice, Jus, but as competitive as you are...I know that you don't mean it," Jason said with a laugh. "But it's a nice thought. So do you have any idea what you want to paint?"

"All of my body parts are still available for your consideration, just remember," Brian couldn't help adding. "Let me know when you want me to pose?"

"Brian, assuming I was planning on using your body parts, do you really think I still need you to pose?" Justin asked with raised eyebrow for emphasis. "But if it's any consolation, I sort of know what I want to paint. So you can all relax. Now can we move on?" Justin suggested with a laugh.

"Well if that's all settled, I think it's time to take you to bed, and it's time to test out the soundproofing in the new guest room," Brian suggested. "You know that Paul and Jason have been waiting for us to test things out," he smirked.

"This is true," Paul attested. "We told them the contractors that we wouldn't pay for it until you two tested it out to prove their warranty," he added. Then Paul and Jason started laughing.

"So we'll see you in the morning," Brian said, pulling Justin up to standing position.

"Be sure to lock your door. For some reason, which I can't figure out yet, Nicky loves to wake up Justin. Oh, he knows that he's suppose to knock, but he doesn't understand about the part that he's suppose to wait to be admitted. So he just walks in." Jason explained with a laugh. "We have to work on the 'wait to be admitted part'. So just to be on the safe side, be sure to lock the door."

"Ok." Brian said, engulfing Justin in his arms and heading out of the living room. "Good night," they both said quietly.

Brian slid his arm around Justin's waist as they walked the short distance to the guest room.

Chapter 14 – So Much To Tell

Early Friday Morning...(Day 40)

Justin awakened in the morning to hear Brian on his cell phone already in conversation with Rudolpho Silvestri.

"Yes Rudolpho, the meeting with Andrew went well. He sends his regards," Brian was saying with a laugh.

"That's wonderful, Brian. So we get to use Speedos in our commercials. That makes me happy," Rudolpho said joyfully.

"Rudolpho, you knew that before you sent me off to New York. So, if that was the purpose for my trip, you know I could have just as easily stayed in Pittsburgh."

"But, Brian..."

"No. You can relax. I called to thank you for your glowing recommendation. I must admit that after our dealings, I was a bit surprised to find that you thought so highly of me...especially since you've already told me that you thought that dealing with Justin would be so much easier," Brian teased.

"That's true...and you're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"Not really." Brian teased. "I want you to feel my pain."

"Right! But I love the work that you and Justin produced, and you and I understand each other," Rudolpho smirked. "Get over it Brian! How is my campaign coming?"

"We seem to be right on schedule with everything. I'm meeting with Susan and Kellie at the beginning of the week. I have no idea what that's all about. You wouldn't want to enlighten me would you?"

"No. No. It's a surprise. My lips are sealed," Rudolpho said slyly.

"Why does that not give me a warm feeling?" Brian commented with a laugh.

"You have to trust me, Brian. You have to forget the old me. I'm new and improved. Justin has changed me. I have to be on my best behavior now. I'm running out of friends to act as intermediaries," Rudolpho teased.

"Somehow I doubt that, but it's probably best that you believe it," Brian continued to mock. "If it will make you behave yourself."

"I really do have to go, they're calling me for a meeting. I'm glad to hear things went well with Andrew. I'll see you soon. Ciao."

"Ciao, Rudolpho," Brian said, closing his phone, still shaking his head. Brian was trying to imagine what Rudolpho was up to now, especially when he knew that the mind of Rudolpho Silvestri never slept.

But all these thoughts were pushed aside, as Brian turned around to see a pair of blue eyes staring up at him, and in that instant, nothing else mattered.

"Good morning, Sunshine." Brian said, leaning down to kiss Justin. "I'm sorry if I woke you, but I had to call your friend, Rudolpho Silvestri, and this was the only time. I'm really surprised he didn't ask to speak with you," he teased. "After all, we know he only tolerates me...because he has to."

"Brian..."

"Just teasing, Sunshine," Brian said with a laugh, "I couldn't resist."

"No problem. How was your meeting in New York? We didn't get a chance to talk last night."

"It looks like we got not only the cross marketing agreement from The Pentland Group, but it looks like we also got a two year agency agreement with them as well," Brian explained. "It seems the company wants to increase its market share among the gay and lesbian community, and they chose Kinnetik to make that happen."

"That's great. It was a wise choice on their part," Justin echoed confidently. "No one understands the gay market the way you do."

"Why thank you, Mr. Taylor, for that vote of confidence," Brian said, leaning down to give Justin another kiss. "That's what Rudolpho Silvestri and Leo Brown apparently told them too. Pentland signed an agreement, without Kinnetik having to make a formal presentation. That doesn't happen very often. So Andrew David gave a lot of credence to someone's recommendation," he noted quietly.

"You have to admit the recommendations from such diverse sources as Rudolpho Silvestri and Leo Brown...those two are such an unlikely pairing...why bother to question their advice?"

"Yet they're both interested in working more extensively with the Pentland Group. And for some reason Andrew David is extremely interested in the commercial we're planning for Collezione Fiero and wants to see a first cut."

"You think there's a lot more going on that we don't know about, don't you?"

"You have no idea. At this rate, we're going to need the New York Office up and functioning probably sooner that we expected."

"Really?" Justin said with a big smile.

"I may even have to think about temporary space. I'm not sure yet. I think I'm going to have another meeting with Theodore."

"Oh Brian you can't! You can't give him a new set of changes already! Ted is an accountant, he hates it when you do that," Justin tried to explain first with excitement and then with a laugh. "He's still probably reeling from the last bit of information you gave him a few days ago."

"Theodore will be fine. But, I want to talk with Mother Taylor as soon as we get back. I think we're going to need her help to make all this work, and we're going it a lot sooner than we originally thought."

"Oh, she'll love that."

"And Rudolpho Silvestri is up to something."

"What?"

"He just handed me a bunch of bullshit that he's a changed man, and how he's out of available intermediaries. So he has to be on his best behavior."

"What does that mean, Brian?"

"How the fuck should I know? But I have the feeling, we'll find out when I get to New York," Brian said with a laugh. "I'm just glad you're going to be back in New York too."

"Me too."

"Now fill me in on what been going on here. If we were at home, I would suggest that now might be a good time to get in one of our hot tubs...probably the one, upstairs. But since Paul and Jason forgot to add that little feature on their latest renovation, we're probably going to have to manage without it," Brian teased

At this point, Brian opened his arms and pulled Justin in close. They spooned together on the bed. Justin spooned into Brian's chest. Brian wrapped his arms tightly around Justin.

Brian couldn't help but think how much he loved being like this with Justin.

"I do miss the water part," Justin teased, adding that comment for good measure, "But at least you don't have to worry about me wrinkling."

Brian just smiled.

"Ok, I have to deal with Paul and Jason, and you know, how daunting that can be. I managed to slide through last night because they knew I was tired. Of course, Gus handled things rather well I'd say, after all he IS my son," Brian added with a laugh, "But today is going to be a different story."

"I'm surprised that Gus could remember all that stuff about camping in the house. Now, I have a lot to live up to."

Brian leaned down and kissed Justin, "I told you that you made a special memory for Gus. Maybe now you'll believe me."

"Maybe," Justin said with a smile, blushing slightly.

"Now tell me? According to Paul, you and Jason have to been over the top about Nicky's party; so what have you done? I'm your partner...fill me in!" Brian continued to press for information.

"Ok. With this thing that Nicky has about trucks, we decided to use trucks as a theme for his party. We have truck steamers; we have truck cut outs; we have cartoon trucks and truck posters for the walls."

"Oh no! Are you back into posters again? The last time you did posters you toppled a politician...I got fired...I had to find a new job. What do they say this time?"

"This time they're aimed at a four year old audience, so I think your position at Kinnetik is secure," Justin teased with a laugh. "But I used Spyder's drawings, and he wants lots of pictures in return. I was surprised that he actually gave me his drawings. So..."

"Don't worry about it. Paul and I will take care of the pictures."

"We purchased the usual party decorations of streamers and balloons and party stuff to go with the truck stuff. Gabrielle has taken care of the ice cream. The Moms have taken care of the food. Jason and I made a piñata last night."

"Is that why you were all sticky when I arrived?" Brian asked with a laugh. "What I don't understand is, if you and Jason were working together on the piñata, why was he so neat and clean when I arrived, and why were you the one that was all sticky and had to take a shower?"

"Because, as usual, I do all the dirty work. Jason will cut and tear paper, but he doesn't mess with paste and glue. Nicky is going to have a warped childhood. Jason is lot like Lindsay with this compulsive, neatness thing," Justin said, scrunching his nose up for emphasis. "They're stifling their kids' creativity if they can't make a mess. Gus will be ok because he spends enough time with me in my studio, but I'm not sure what we'll do about Nicky," he said with added seriousness.

Brian listened carefully and then burst out laughing. "Well, if this is going to upset you this much, we'll have Nicky come out to the house when Gus is there for play dates...so he can learn to be messy too. How does that sound?" Brian suggested, as he burst out laughing again. "Then Jason, as well as Lindsay, can complain about how you're artistically corrupting their kid. We'll just be sure that Paul sends HIS designer shirts for Nicky to wear when he finger paints."

"Are you finished?" Justin asked, gently hitting Brian on the arm to show his displeasure.

"Ouch!" Brian tried to utter in mock protest.

"Oh, by the way, you and Paul have to go shopping today. You're responsible for the vintage games, suitable for four year olds."

"You're kidding?"

"Jason and I figured that it would be a bonding experience for you and Paul. There's no need complaining to me...Paul isn't any happier about this than you are. But everything else is taken care of ...except this."

"Ok, I guess Paul and I can manage to handle this somehow...without going to the mall," Brian said, emphasizing the last part about the mall.

"Somehow I knew that went without saying," Justin said with a laugh, knowing that both Paul and Brian shared in common a dislike for the mall.

"By the way, how many people are coming to the party?"

"When I did the research, it said that Nicky got to invite four little friends. Gabrielle said that there are 2.5 parents per child attending the party. The Moms thinks that all of Dunbar and Smith will show up because you and I are here. Fran and Katie were talking about their crystal balls. Who the fuck knows how many people will be here?"

Once again Brian was laughing. He leaned over and kissed Justin on the cheek. "Don't worry about it. It's always like this...there will be tons of food...lots to drink...and an all day party...people will be coming and going all day long," Brian said, stating the obvious.

"I'm not worried about that," Justin confessed quietly.

"Then what are you worried about?"

"They expect me to sculpt little trucks out of cake, so that there will be decorated three-dimensional trucks on top of the regular decorated cake," Justin confessed.

"What?" Brian asked, bursting out laughing again, "Whose brilliant idea was that, or shouldn't I ask?"

"Emmett's..."

"You called Emmett for advice! Have I taught you nothing?" Brian asked in his characteristic singsong fashion.

"Jason was no help...I was all alone...you were busy. So I called Em. This was his idea."

Brian couldn't hold back the laugh. "You know Emmett is always over the top...why would you even listen to him?" he said, still laughing.

"Because I was desperate...besides if it works, it will look great!"

"So is there anything else you want to tell me about?"

Justin shifted his position slightly so that he was now facing Brian. "Well, I was hoping that now that you're here you could figure out some way for Nicky to have a ride on a truck on Saturday. A fire truck or a Liberty Air Lines service truck or something...I don't know...I have been too busy with decorations...I haven't quite had time to figure this one out," he said, leaning in to gently kiss Brian on his neck.

"Sunshine, we aren't in Pittsburgh. Haven't you noticed? I'm a little out of my element here for making things happen," Brian teased, trying to resist Justin's closeness.

"I'm sorry, it was just a thought," Justin said quietly while gently, nibbling on Brian's ear. "It's just that it would make Nicky really happy," Justin continued.

"I'm sure it would, but Justin...I don't know," Brian tried to protest, as Justin was now kissing his neck.

"It was just a thought. I know that it's a lot to ask," Justin said as he continued to kiss his way down to Brian's shoulder.

Brian let out a sigh, "Don't worry about it Sunshine, I'll take care of it," he finally said.

"Anything else?" he quietly asked, having a hard time forming a question as Justin was working is way down to his chest.

"No, I think that's it," Justin mumbled against his stomach.

"Good," he said, rolling Justin onto his back and starting to kiss his way to that certain spot on Justin's neck. "I think it's still pretty early." Brian kissed his way down to Justin's shoulder. "Everyone should still be asleep." Brian continued licking and nipping and kissing a path slowly down Justin's chest. "I still have time to fuck you into the mattress before everyone is up," Brian said, before taking Justin's cock in his mouth.

Justin body began to thrust to meet Brian movements. Justin groaned as he felt Brian bringing him to the edge, and he came down the back of Brian's throat. Afterward, Brian kissed his way back up to Justin's lips as he allowed him to taste himself and they snuggled together to enjoy the closeness.

"That was nice," Justin said with a smile.

"Sunshine did I hear you use the word 'nice'," Brian complained.

"It's a perfectly acceptable word, don't you think? Do you have a better word in mind?"

"I was hoping for earthshaking...mind blowing...I'd even settle for 'hot'...but 'nice' is a problem."

"So what do you think we should do about it?"

"I think we should wait a few minutes...then you should give me another chance to really fuck you into the mattress. The door is locked. The room is soundproof. What do you say? I guess I need more practice. I promise you I can do better than nice," Brian said with a smile.

"Ever the romantic!" Justin said with a laugh, pulling Brian down into a passionate kiss. Justin wanted to give Brian every opportunity to follow thorough on his promise.

Chapter 15 – Joyous Morning

A Little Later...(Day 40)

After several rounds of lovemaking and a leisurely shower, Brian and Justin decided they could probably face the day ahead.

Especially after Brian extracted a promise from Justin to avoid certain limp word choices when describing his blowjobs, and Brian promised to give Justin blowjobs more often in exchange.

Clad in pajamas, they were just lying in bed talking to one another. Justin was leisurely sketching, so they decided to release the lock on their bedroom door.

A few moments later, there was the familiar knock...the immediate open door...the patter of two pairs of little feet...and the appearance to two little faces at the foot of the bed.

Brian wondered if Gus and Nicky had been lurking in the hall, just waiting for the lock on their bedroom door to be released. He knew that wasn't possible since Nicky's room was some distance away, but he had to wonder never the less...their timing was just too perfect.

Justin and Brian smiled at each other, before Justin patted the space between them, and both Nicky and Gus scampered up on the bed.

Nicky crawled over to Justin and gave him a wet kiss, before making himself comfortable.

"What are you two doing up so early?" Justin asked.

"We missed you," Gus explained, crawling up the middle of the bed to hug his dad first, and then Justin. "So we came to see you."

"You did?" Justin said with some amazement, curious why the duo bypassed Paul and Jason's room all together.

Brian couldn't help laughing at the image of two kids huddled around Justin; he wished he had a camera handy.

Brian reached for his robe. "Well, since I'm not really needed here," he said with a laugh, "I'll go and check to see that the coffee is started. I'll be right back."

At his point, Gus and Nicky were in some sort of deep in conversation with Justin, so Brian merely shook his head, as he was leaving the room.

Brian ran into Paul and Jason in the kitchen.

"I see you're alone," Paul began to tease, "That can only mean that Gus and Nicky somehow found their way to Justin first thing this morning. We noticed they weren't in their room."

"So you didn't lock your door? We warned you!" Jason chimed in. "Nicky just seems to be homing in on Justin first thing in the morning...like I said."

"Justin and I were already up. When I left the room, Nicky and Gus were deep in conversation with Justin. I've never quite understood what they can find so engaging to talk about so early in the morning," Brian commented.

"It's a wonder," Jason added with a laugh.

Paul and Jason and Brian talked for a few minutes longer, before they all went back to the guest room to rescue Justin from his little captors.

Tickles and hugs all around and alternate loving arms seemed to encourage Gus and Nicky to leave Justin's side.

The fact that Brian was willing to lift Nicky in the air and gently drop him in the middle of the bed, where he was tickled and hugged was enough to temporarily make him happy, whereas Gus only needed to be tickled by his newly acquainted uncles.

When the kids settled down, Brian picked up Gus, and Paul picked up Nicky, and they headed back down to Nicky's room to help the kids get dressed.

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Brian and Justin later managed to dress casually in jeans and sweaters and found their way down to the kitchen for breakfast.

Brian had his usual dry toast and coffee, while Paul and Jason and the kids settled for cereal with fruit. Only Justin had bacon, egg, cheese, buttered toast, and fruit.

Everyone kept distracting Justin during breakfast. Gus and Brian shamelessly enjoyed various elements of Justin's breakfast as they talked, laughed, and stole morsels of food while feigning complete innocence every time Justin looked up.

At the end of breakfast, Justin made some comment about still being hungry, which caused Gus and Brian to burst out laughing as they were leaving the table.

"I get the feeling this is the way that breakfast usually goes when you're all together," Jason commented. "You know I would have fixed a bigger breakfast for them if they had only let me know," he tried to rationalize as a way of apology to Justin.

"It wouldn't have mattered," Justin explained with a sigh, gently touching Jason on the arm in consolation.

About this time, Brian and Gus passed through the room, "Justin does such interesting things to his food, doesn't he Gus?" Brian smirked. Gus nodded his agreement.

The father-son duo disappeared again.

"I see," Jason added with a laugh. He had accepted long ago that he would never understand Brian and Justin. Now he was starting to think that he would never understand Gus either.

"So what's the plan for today?" Paul asked.

"Well, you and Brian have to go shopping for those games," Jason reminded him.

"The moms will be over shortly with the loaf cakes for Justin to sculpt, and Jus, we have to finish that piñata too," Jason reminded him with a smile.

"And Jason, what did you say you were doing today?" Paul mockingly asked.

"I'm going to be Justin's assistant like always," Jason clarified as if that was unnecessary. Then he added for good measure, "You know, I really don't understand why you keep asking me that ridiculous question."

Paul burst out laughing first. Then he said in his own defense, "Because now that Brian is here, I have a lot of explaining to do. I actually have to be prepared with quick answers," he tried to explain with a serious tone.

"Since when are you afraid of Brian?" Jason had to ask.

"Since he made it clear, when he got off the plane, that he's not putting up with any bullshit," Paul explained. "And, he's relying on me to help keep you two in line," he tried to say sternly.

Jason and Justin looked at each other and burst out laughing. Paul simply glared at them.

"I know...Brian and I have to go shopping, but before we go anywhere, we have to call Mom. You know how she feels about Brian, and she doesn't even know that he's here yet."

"Good point," Jason agreed. "Well, give me a hand with kitchen clean up, and then we'll call her. Gabrielle will probably drop by here later too."

"You think so?" Justin asked.

"Yeah. My Mom is probably with her too huh?" Jason pointed out.

"Sometimes it's hard to believe our moms hang out together as much as they do."

"That's like my mom and Debbie," Justin added. "They just seem to enjoy each other's company. You wouldn't think they would because they're so different. But they do seem to spend a lot of time together."

"Well," Brian said, walking back into the kitchen, "They're both comparing notes on what you're up to. It's the only way that they think they can keep tabs on you."

"Brian!" Justin complained.

"Don't blame me, Sunshine. I'm just setting the record straight."

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A few minutes later the front door opened and in walked Fran Dunbar.

"Brian," Fran said, ignoring everyone else. "When did you get in?" she asked, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

Brian was reminded of Debbie, but with the exception...that his ability to breath was still intact.

"Last night," he answered, lingering in her embrace. "So did you miss me or what? You know Pittsburgh isn't that far?" he teased.

"My son is keeping me a prisoner here in Cincinnati," Fran mockingly professed. "But one of these day's I'm going to surprise you," she teased as she finally decided to release him. "Of course, if the rumors are true you aren't in Pittsburgh anyway, but hiding out with Justin in that mansion...some place where no one can find you," she persisted in her teasing.

"Now Fran, your son is in advertising, you know better than to listen to rumors," Brian bantered back.

Everyone burst out laughing at the easy banter between them.

Katie entered a few moments later and caught sight of Gus. "So Nicky, who's your little friend? He's cute...looks surprisingly like Brian," she commented with a laugh.

"That's because he's my son, " Brian said with a sigh over his shoulder to Katie. "Gus... this...is Granny Fran," he said, motioning to the woman, who just hugged him to death.

Gus cautiously approached and accepted a hug from Fran. Then he whispered to Justin, who was standing close by, "She's just like Grandma Deb."

Everybody laughed.

"And this is my mom," Jason said, reaching out and hugging his mom, "This is your Granny Katie."

Nicky made sure that Gus got another hug, as well as accepting one himself from Katie.

"What's in the tin, Mom," Jason asked.

"Fran and I baked chocolate chip cookies, and we thought that Nicky and Gus might like some," Katie explained.

"Justin might like some too. I don't know about the rest of you since you have to watch your waistlines," Fran teased.

"By all means, we have to feed Justin, he needs to keep up his strength to do his work," Jason said.

"Oh yeah. The cake. I have the loaf cakes for you too, Justin. So you can get started." Katie said.

"The cakes are important, but you haven't seen Justin's latest creation! You don't even know about this one yet now, do you?" Jason was being very mysterious. "Come with me, Mom," Jason said, guiding the moms into the garage. "You have to see this to believe it."

"Now this is only the skeleton, but I think that you'll get the general idea," Jason said, pointing to the now dried, but unmistakable shape of a truck. "It's a piñata," he added just in case they couldn't tell what it was in its bear-bones condition.

"It's a truck piñata!" Fran exclaimed. "I can see what it is."

"Oh my god. Nicky is going to be so thrilled," Katie added with a laugh.

"We just have to add the creped paper," Jason pointed out, showing the brightly colored pieces that were going to be the planned additions to the surface of the piñata.

"Who ever heard of a truck piñata?" Fran finally asked.

"Leave it to the creative mind of Justin," Katie continued.

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They walked back into the dining area to find Gus and Nicky feeding the last of their cookies to Justin, while everyone else in the room was laughing and pretending not to notice.

Paul and Brian helped their kids clean their hand and gave them each a small glass of milk to drink.

Justin was starting to settle down. After all he had work to do. Justin made himself comfortable on one side of the table; Gus and Nicky decided to sit across from him. Justin began the task of shaping the cakes using a very sharp scalpel.

"What are you doing?" Gus asked, receiving the sliver of excess cake that Justin offered him and immediately sharing a bit of it with Nicky.

"I'm trying to shape a truck out of this cake," Justin answered, continuing to sculpt the cake, but watching carefully Nicky's reaction to what was going on.

"What kind of truck?" Nicky asked with renewed interest, upon hearing the word 'truck'.

"I have no idea yet," Justin commented, "We'll have to wait and see."

Obviously this was the wrong answer, because Nicky began immediately coaching Justin about the proper shape of the trucks.

Finally, Justin had to stop sculpting to hear everything that Nicky had to say about trucks.

Then Gus wanted to add his limited knowledge of trucks to the mix.

Justin listened intensely, trying to remember when he sent out a call that he needed assistants.

"Wouldn't you two like to take a nap," Justin teasingly suggested.

"Noooooooooooooo" they whined in unison and then continued to offer their guidance as only an almost-four-year-old and a six year old can.

"Haven't you heard that an artist like to work alone?" Justin continued to tease.

Of course, they paid no attention to this comment, since Gus and Nicky decided that it obviously had nothing to do with them.

Brian and Paul suggested that Gus and Nicky might like to go shopping with them.

"No, Dad," Gus said, "We can't leave Justin all alone."

"He needs us," Nicky chimed in. "We help," he explained, spreading out his arms and making sure that neither Paul nor Brian came too close to them.

"Sorry, Jus. We tried," Paul said in defeat.

"That's ok," Justin said with a deep sigh, looking at the two little faces staring up at him. "It's obvious that I need their guidance, so here," he said handing them paper and crayons, "Go ahead and show me again how it's supposed to look?"

With the last statement, all the adults had to make their way into the living room. They didn't want to burst out laughing in front of the kids.

Justin glared at them as they were leaving.

When Gus and Nicky began working on their drawings on paper, they got very quiet and the suggestions that they were offering Justin about what he should be doing were greatly reduced.

As Justin was working, he could hear periodic laughter from the living room.

Gus and Nicky periodically would have Justin look at their drawing, and he seemed to manage to adjust the shape of his sculpted truck to what he perceived Gus and Nicky had indicated with their crayons. Justin made Gus and Nicky very happy.

Yep...Justin sure had a way with kids.

The adults were trying to recompose themselves in the living room from their laughter over watching Justin and the kids and the in depth discussion about all things trucks.

Fran and Katie managed to secretly photograph moments between Justin and Gus and Nicky without their knowledge.

"We've lost our kids," Jason said.

"Like what else is new," Paul added. "You should have seen them earlier, Gus and Nicky were feeding cookies to Justin. They must think he's this helpless little kid," he laughed.

"Some things never change," Brian said with a smirk. " But trust me, Justin's no kid!"

"Nicky's just a little control freak," Jason commented with a smile. "He's been orchestrating Justin and Gus ever since they got here."

Brian saw a perfect opportunity to discuss a touchy subject.

"By the way, I have it on good authority that you're stifling Nicky's creativity by forcing him to do his art so neatly," Brian pointed out earnestly.

"Oh, this is obviously from the world according to Justin Taylor Artist," Jason said with a laugh. "You saw the difference between us when you arrived last night. He had to stop and take a shower," Jason chimed in, "While I was still neat and clean."

"Let's not completely discount what he says," Paul interjected, "How much did you say his last paintings sold for?"

"Try $50,000 in Santa Barbara," Brian commented with a certain amount of pride.

"Maybe we shouldn't so easily discount everything that he says," Paul suggested, "You have to admit that Justin is pretty creative."

"Well, of course, you'll all have a chance to judge for yourself during the opening of new wing of the gallery in a few months," Brian reminded them

"I'm really looking forward to it," Fran added. "So Paul, while you and Brian are out, you might as well pick up the additional tickets."

"What happen, Paul, did you miscount?" Brian asked sarcastically.

"Don't be a smart ass! Justin only told us that he was going to be part of the exhibit. He didn't tell us he was going to be the featured artist. Then recently, there was a big article in the paper about the opening of the new wing, and the whole article was pretty much about Justin. You should have told us," Paul protested.

"Justin got you to agree to come to the opening. You would have noticed once you were there that he was the featured artist. What's the problem?" Brian had to ask with a smirk.

"Mom, Katie, Lee, Gabrielle, Ryan," Paul added, "Need I say more."

Brian started laughing.

"Why are you laughing? Do the Pittsburgh and Toronto contingents know about his featured artist's thing?

"I think that only Lindsay knows...but I don't think that Justin has said anything to anyone else," Brian said on reflection.

"Just wait until they find out? And if you aren't nicer to me, that's just what going to happen," Paul suggested with a subtle, threatening tone.

"Are you finished?" Brian said, hitting Paul on the arm for emphasis. "I'm going to see what going on in the dining room."

As Brian entered the dining room and looked at all the intense faces hard at work, he couldn't help but smile. He simply kissed everyone on the top of their heads and started to leave the room.

So as the truck was being sculpted from the cakes, Justin's assistants were actually quite pleased with their contributions to the final product.

"Brian, don't forget that you and Paul have work to do," Justin said with a laugh, "I just don't want you to forget," he teased.

"No problem, Sunshine."

Brian returned to the gang in the living room, "Katie, can you and Fran stay here for a bit. Paul and Jason and I have a few things to take care of."

"No problem. We'll rescue Justin, if necessary."

"Thanks, we won't be too long," Brian said, grabbing Paul and Jason by their collars and pulling them out the front door.

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A few moments later, Gabrielle dropped by. She was not surprised to find the moms there. She was, however, surprised to find that Nicky had a new playmate.

"Hi Mom, I really hate to say this. But Nicky's new playmate looks like a miniature version of Brian Kinney," she said with a laugh.

"It good to see my children still have their keen powers of observation," Fran teased. "That's because, there, in that room, IS a miniature version of Brian...that's his son, Gus. Brian arrived last night."

"Brian's in town. God, his son looks just like him. Where is he?"

"Paul and Jason and Brian left together. Justin assigned them a few last minute chores. So they won't be gone long."

"So Mom, are you having a good time with Justin and the kids?" Gabrielle asked teasingly.

"Yeah, but it's fun to watch Nicky and Gus with Justin," Fran reported, "They think he's some lost kid...some missing link...earlier they were feeding him cookies."

"Well you have to admit, Justin is always hungry. To remain so slim and eat like he does, it's always possible that his being a missing link would really explain everything."

"You leave Justin alone. If it wasn't for Justin, I don't want to think about what this party would be like. Fortunately Justin is so over the top that even with Paul and Jason teasing him, he still does masterful work. No wonder he's so successful as an artist." Fran said lovingly in Justin's defense.

"Did you see his sketch for what the playroom should look like once all the decorations and everything are in place?" Katie asked as she reached for the page that Justin had given her earlier.

"Ryan, Lee, and the guys have agreed to put up the decorations tonight, now that we have Justin's sketches. We will have no trouble putting everything in place. Justin's drawings are like a map of where everything should go," Fran added.

"Are you two all prepared for tomorrow?" Gabrielle asked

"Our crystal balls told us that people will be at the house all day. We have enough food to feed an army. The liquor cabinet is stocked, I understand. Justin sent Brian and our sons off with last minute things to handle and to buy games for the kids. So the day should be fun. Then I guess everyone will disappear over to Pipeline for the old thumpa thumpa to close out the evening," Fran revealed, dancing a bit as she said this.

Gabrielle burst out laughing. "Mom, what do you know about the thumpa thumpa of the Pipeline?" she asked.

"I only look innocent," Fran answered with a smile. "I have ears. I hear things," she added with a laugh. "Besides, Katie and I compare notes," she added.

"So that's why you two spend so much time together," Gabrielle teased. "Please tell me you two didn't visit the club on one of your girls night's out?"

"Why would you think such a thing? Just because they have separate areas for lesbians?" Katie added. "Doesn't mean that we know anything?"

"Besides, it's not polite to go and tell!" Fran quipped.

Once again, Gabrielle burst out laughing.

She made a mental note that she had to tell Paul and Jason that their mothers have developed some nocturnal habits that bear much closer watching.

Chapter 16 - Nicky's Back Story (Sidebar)

Author's Comments: This sidebar is really a gapfiller between Defining Moments by Lois and the reappearance of Paul and Jason in Talisman Of Time and Between Now and Then. I want to thank Lois for her help in preparing this Sidebar.

I'm sure some of you, especially those with kids, have wondered about the passiveness and quietness to Paul and Jason, as they are planning for Nicky's fourth birthday party. Usually with the approach of a kid's birthday party, the parents would be especially bustling around with last minute details. Yet that is clearly not the case here. Instead, you have witnessed Justin driving to put the party elements into place.

You are probably wondering why Justin would allow his friends to take advantage of him this way. Hopefully this Sidebar will help you understand. Also, since Justin arrived in Cincinnati, there have been passing references to Alex. Hopefully, this Sidebar will help to clarify those frequent references to Alex as well.

Warning: This Sidebar contains unavoidable references to Death Of A Child.

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Once upon a time, some years ago, the time is a little vague because of the two-year gestation of Jenny Rebecca, Paul Dunbar and Jason Smith began a history with Brian and Justin. You know this because by now, you have read the two stories by Lois: See Me Through and Defining Moments.

You know from those stories that Paul, Brian, and Lindsay went to college together and were close friends back then; however, Paul lost touch with everyone over the years after business school.

In See Me Through, you have the story of how Paul and Brian reconnected at a conference in Atlanta, and the initial meeting of Jason and Justin...when Justin was only 18 years old.

In Defining Moments, Paul and Jason visit Pittsburgh on the way to New York. The main reasons for the side trip was so that Paul could reconnect with Lindsay, and both Paul and Jason were most eager to meet Gus, who they had heard so much about.

Paul and Jason had been thinking of adding kids to their family. Paul was from a large family and always knew he wanted kids. Jason was an only child and had not spent a lot of time around kids. He knew he wanted a child, but he just wasn't sure how he and kids would get along. And Jason knew that kids were not something that could be returned; so he was being very cautious about his decision.

It was hoped that on that trip to Pittsburgh and the visit with Lindsay and Gus, that Jason would get a chance to spend some time with Gus and play with him and become more comfortable with any decision he ultimately made. Paul just wanted Jason to make a choice he was happy with rather than be forced into a decision he would later regret. So Paul was prepared to wait.

Paul and Jason eventually made the decision to have kids, and they dreamed about a child that was as biologically as close to the two of them as possible. To help the couple come as close as possible to their dream, Gabrielle, Paul's younger sister, wanted to be the surrogate, with Jason as the biological father.

Gabrielle was married to Ryan, and they already had two children. They had been living away from Cincinnati for a few years due to the nature of Ryan's work. Gabrielle and Ryan talked things over, and they agreed to Gabrielle's surrogacy so that Paul and Jason could have their dream of a family.

Gabrielle was artificially inseminated, and she eventually became pregnant with twins.

Paul and Jason were thrilled with the idea of twins...even if the daunting prospect of the twins took some getting used to. But over the course of the pregnancy everyone was excited about the birth to the twins and couldn't wait for their arrival.

Now, in the world according to Brian Kinney, Brian believed that Paul and Jason would never have time for a vacation...ever again in life...once the twins arrived; so Brian and Justin and Paul and Jason decided to take a European vacation together before the babies were due to be born.

While they were on vacation and lounging in the sun of Italy, Paul and Brian had teased one another that they planned to "kick the idea around" of maybe working together...maybe forming a partnership someday.

They never got a chance to "kick the idea around". While they were in Europe, problems developed with Gabrielle's pregnancy. So the foursome made a hasty return to the States. Paul and Jason made it back in time for the birth of their kids accompanied by Brian and Justin.

They could see when the twins were delivered prematurely that something was wrong. Alex was extremely pale and Nicky was extremely dusky red. Both twins were extremely small. Things were touch and go for sometime because the babies suffered from Twin to Twin Transfer Syndrome, a condition that is usually fatal to both twins. In this syndrome, one twin literally gives the other twin all his blood.

And as it turned out, Alex died after a few hours, and things were difficult with Nicky for a while, with him being born prematurely and weighing less than 3 pounds.

At the time of Alex's death, the family made a decision for cremation rather than burial. They wanted Alex's spirit to be free to soar, rather than be trapped here on earth in a single place. In later years, when Nicky was older, that is how they wanted him to think of Alex too.

But for the present, Nicky was a premature infant, requiring constant nurturing by Paul and Jason and the entire family during the time immediately surrounding his birth. It took a while for Nicky to gain the necessary weight to be released from the hospital.

Paul and Jason were at the hospital pretty much nonstop feeding and taking care of Nicky as well as seeing to Gabrielle's recovery.

The agency that was Dunbar and Smith was pretty much neglected.

Paul and Jason had built an ad agency of talented individuals but without both of its leaders, the staff was rudderless...lacking both management guidance and creative direction.

Paul was afraid of losing major accounts, so he pleaded with Brian to step in and run the agency until things could be stabilized with Nicky. Paul suggested that Brian keep Justin here to help with the creative end in the art department. So Brian took a leave of absence just before the Ryder/Vanguard transition and since Justin was able to negotiate with his professors for independent study at PIFA, the two of them remained in Cincinnati to help out their friends.

The ad execs at Dunbar and Smith were excited to be working with Brian, since they were aware of his reputation. Glenn and the other members of the art department pulled together with Justin, under Brian's leadership of the agency. No one felt threatened due to the circumstances. The employees were all loyal to Paul and Jason. However, they developed a genuine fondness for Brian and Justin too.

Brian and Justin stayed at the house with Paul and Jason, living in the guest room.

The extended Dunbar-Smith family was already fond of Brian and Justin, but the events of Nicky's birth cemented the bonds between them all. Both Fran Dunbar and Katie and Lee Smith considered Brian and Justin as their other sons.

Brian and Justin stayed in Cincinnati for about a month until Nicky was strong enough to come home from the hospital. Then they remained in Cincinnati a little longer until Nicky's daily routine was set, and Paul and Jason could resume some sort of schedule at their agency.

So Brian and Justin have spent a lot of time with Nicky ever since he was a baby.

Paul and Jason asked Brian and Justin to be Nicky's godparents. These are duties that Brian and Justin had always taken very seriously.

Even when Nicky was too small to remember, Brian and Justin came for his birthday celebration. Nicky had the pictures to prove it. He was fascinated by pictures of his birthday, and he had lots of pictures of Brian and Justin.

When Nicky was younger, his birthday celebrations were pretty much, simply extended family affairs. Fran and Katie always made the cake and decorated it, but each year, Justin would always add special design touches to the cake decorations special.

For a baby, the party decorations themselves tended to be relatively simple, so Jason usually created those with the help of Paul. Justin might add a touch here and there to make them kind of special, if asked.

The families never said anything, but Paul and Jason were a little quieter each year around the time of Nicky's birthday. As expected, their happiness would always be tinged with a touch of sadness and thoughts of Alex. Each year things got better and better. So Brian and Justin just assumed the quietness would eventually past with time.

And it was passing, Paul and Jason were moving forward until the approach of Nicky's fourth birthday party.

The change was sort of subtle at first, but something clearly happened.

Since Jason's favorite pastime has always been torturing Justin, the same way that Paul and Brian teased each other, no one thought it odd that Jason began to negotiate for Justin's help almost a month in advance, and no one thought it particularly odd that he kept up the annoying reminders about coming early for Nicky's birthday in every phone conversation. This was just considered to be Jason being Jason.

However, any wavering on Justin's part about coming to Cincinnati early would definitely set off panic alarms for Jason, and he turned up the whine factor...and on occasion, he could even rival Michael in this regard. If anyone noticed, no one said anything.

So much was going on for Brian and Justin that they couldn't easily recognize that this was more than just Jason being his usually annoying self.

Brian eventually started to notice the increased volume in Jason's pleadings just before Justin left, but he didn't want to sound the alarm unnecessarily. So he said nothing.

But something was making this birthday different.

Brian knew he would eventually get to the bottom of things. So he kept monitoring the situation until he could arrive in Cincinnati himself. Then, he would find out exactly what was going on.

And that is where our story is now...

Chapter 17 – I Want Answers

A Few Moments Later...(Day 40)

It was late morning as Jason, Paul, and Brian piled into the car.

"Ok, does anybody have any idea what we're suppose to be doing?" Paul asked, as they were driving off.

"You two are supposed to be bonding and buying games for the party. I have no idea why Brian made me tag along. As usual, I'm just an innocent bystander, who was roughly pulled into his web of intrigue," Jason protested from his perch in the front seat.

"Give it a rest, Jason, just so you'll know...if I was in as much trouble as you're in right now, I would have a distinctive change in attitude," Brian told him, turning sideways on the back seat of the SUV to make himself more comfortable.

"Me...trouble...what did I do?" Jason protested. "I didn't do anything!"

"And therein lies the first problem," Brian declared.

"You're going to have to be more specific than that, Brian," Paul interrupted, "Because as far as I can tell, I didn't do anything either."

"And therein lies the second problem," Brian added.

There was a moment of hushed silence in the car, as Paul and Jason looked at each other.

"What the fuck is going on?" Brian asked, harshly breaking the silence.

"What do you mean?" Paul tried to innocently ask, reaching for Jason's hand across the front seat for support. For though he might not know why, one thing was abundantly clear...Brian Kinney was clearly pissed.

"You can cut the bullshit, Paul! I want answers, and I want them now! It's one thing to ask Justin to come out and help with decorations. It's another thing to abdicate completely the planning of Nicky's fourth birthday party!"

"Brian, we didn't do that!" Jason protested. "We..."

Brian didn't give him a chance to finish his thought. "Don't bullshit me, Jason? Look again!"

"Maybe we..." Paul began, but he too was interrupted.

"Maybe? Did I hear you say, maybe? Paul, that's bullshit too, and you know it!" Brian said harshly and then paused for a breath.

"What do you want us to say?" Paul asked quietly.

"Well, maybe this isn't the best discussion for a moving car, especially when you're the one driving. So I guess you should pull over, and then, I can get out and have a cigarette." Brian demanded.

Paul complied since they were near the park, and there were assorted benches nearby.

Jason was already wondering if Brian had orchestrated his tirade to coincide with the perfect location. Then he realized that even Brian couldn't be that much of a control freak. In spite of his current predicament, he couldn't help smiling at the random thought, and he couldn't keep himself from wondering about Brian.

"I don't get it," Brian began, once he was facing the couple across the picnic benches. " You two are the best in the business...second only to Kinnetik in this respect. What's going on here? Paul, you can create spectacular advertising campaigns and glittering events for clients. I know. I've seen them. And Jason, the graphics and artwork you create are spectacular. So tell me why the fuck a simple birthday party for a four year old is giving the two so much trouble?"

"Brian, we..." Paul tried to answer.

"Tell me why you pulled my partner away from an impossible painting schedule...that you were completely aware of...to beg him to fly out here...days early... to do something that the two of you were perfectly capable of doing...alone...without him?"

"Brian, we..." Jason tried to answer.

"And tell me why, once Justin got here, you have allowed him to handle everything with regard to the party planning, so that now everyone is depending on him for everything?"

"Brian, we..."Jason tried again to answer.

"Tell me why my partner is being subjected to that kind of pressure, and why the two of you get to sit back and tease and criticize him?"

"Brian, we..." Paul tried to speak.

"So the two of you exactly five seconds to start talking, or I promise you that Justin, Gus, and I will be on the next plane out of here," Brian calmly stated, and then he coldly started to count, "Five...four..."

"Wait, Brian..." Jason protested.

"You said something?" Brian asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Brian, look we have given him a hard time ever since he arrived, but if Justin had not arrived and taken over like he did, I'm not sure that Nicky would be having a party anywhere near as amazing as the one he is going to have."

"I already know that," Brian admitted, "Tell me something that I don't know? Five...four..."

"Brian, will you shut the fuck up!" Paul demanded. "I so hate it when you're like this! And you get like this, whenever Justin isn't around."

"And therein lies the third problem. Because if you two had done what you needed to do, Justin would be sitting here enjoying the morning with us...if you get my drift, instead of working on party stuff back at the house! Five...four..."

"Ok, we'll tell you!" Jason shouted. "Can I have a cigarette?" he quietly asked.

"When did you start smoking?" Brian asked, handing him the pack of cigarettes and the lighter.

"Since I have to start talking to you," Jason quipped.

Brian smiled. "I'm listening."

Jason managed to get the cigarette lit through trembling hands, and he took a drag.

"You know that we love Nicky, and he is truly the light of both of our lives. He is a great kid, and we know that we are lucky to have him. But something about this time of year, a certain quietness sets in too...about Alex. It was really hard when everything happened. And it has gotten easier to handle with each passing year, but it just doesn't seem to completely go away."

"I know that," Brian almost whispered.

"We are beyond the tears, and we are beyond the sadness. This is a year that even the quietness was a problem. This year, for some reason, we couldn't get over the quietness to plan the party. This year we were frozen in our tracks until Justin arrived. Once he was here, he was so over the top with ideas for the party that he just pulled us along for the ride, and we just pitched in and followed his lead. But we really needed him to drive the process," Jason continued.

"You're going to have to do better than that," Brian pointed out calmly.

"We love Nicky and we're crazy about him. We realize that we're so lucky to have him, but there still seems to be this quietness in our heart," Paul added, reaching for the pack of cigarettes and lighting one for himself.

"Be careful, don't let your 'quietness' drown out Nicky," Brian simply said.

"What? How can you say that?" Paul challenged.

"Isn't that what you've doing. You crawl into that quiet space, and you think Nicky doesn't notice because he's just a little boy? Don't you think Nicky is asking himself in his little kid subconscious: 'Why are my parents, who are pretty happy the rest of the year always quiet around my birthday?' He starts to think: 'Maybe my parents didn't really want me after all?' And he starts to wonder," Brian suggested.

"What?" They asked in unison to Brian's outrageous statements.

"Or once he fully understands the concept of Alex's death, the conversation between Nicky and his subconscious changes to ask the questions: 'Why aren't I good enough?' 'I'm here...why aren't I enough?' Don't you think Nicky isn't going to ask himself someday: 'Why didn't Alex live, and I be the one to die...so then maybe my parents wouldn't be sad...wouldn't be quiet.' Think about it?" Brian continued.

"Those are terrible things to suggest, Brian. How can you say such things? You know that we love Nicky," Jason challenged.

"This isn't about loving Nicky. This is about the unspoken conversation you have with your son. I know about birthdays and these unspoken conversations. I lived through them with my own parents. I almost lost Justin because of it. I don't want to see you make my mistakes. Besides, Justin takes up the slack with me...you can't ask him to take up the slack for you two assholes too."

"You do have a tendency to make sense," Paul suggested.

"No shit! Brian agreed.

Some of the tension between the friends was relieved. Brian pivoted sideways on the picnic bench to stretch his legs and make himself more comfortable. Paul and Jason knew at that moment that this discussion was a long way from being over.

"So...are you going to tell me what's going on here, that so drastically changed things this year?" Brian asked, returning to his original question.

"A few weeks ago, Nicky started with asking for a little brother or sister," Paul said quietly.

"What?" Brian responded.

"And I guess we started thinking again that if Alex had lived, this would be a moot question. I know it must get lonely for him at times being an only child. I know how he feels. He has lots of playmates and friends, but still I watch him sometimes, and he just seems so alone. And then I guess the loss of Alex came up for us all over again," Jason explained sadly.

"Quite of few of Nicky's friends are twins so he's much more aware now that he's getting older, and the questions are really starting," Paul added.

"Although he only asked a few weeks ago, Nicky was making it clear that his approaching birthday was the perfect time to have said brother or sister delivered as a birthday gift," Jason wanted to add so that Brian could understand their dilemma.

"So where does he think babies brother and sisters come from?" Brian couldn't resist interrupting with a laugh, "Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Nicky's at the age where other kids make up bizarre stories about where babies come from," Jason pointed out.

"Sometime after the renovation Nicky must have heard a story about babies being delivered by special trucks, and it must have resonated with him," Paul tried to explain.

"Trucks!" Brian began laughing hysterically, "What happened to the pumpkin patch or the stork?" he asked, "Don't kids know anything about the classics?"

"Those must be too last century?" Paul informed him.

"Now you sound like Mikey," Brian laughed. "When he and Justin talk about superheroes and villains."

"It must be true about where babies come from too," Jason added with a smile, realizing only Brian would look for the classical touch in this situation.

"And when this all started Nicky pointed out that he wanted us to be sure that all the trucks in the universe were in perfect working order and were given the proper instructions so that his brother or sister could be delivered ...without getting lost or misdirected. He wanted no more mishaps like what occurred with Alex to happen again. He, Nicky, was here this time to make sure everything went perfectly. And he wanted his brother or sister delivered to right address. No more of this misdirected to heaven stuff," Paul explained.

Brian burst out laughing.

"Oh, you think this is funny?. Try talking about the bird and the bees to a three year old. And let me tell you that our parents are no help on this one. It's a very different talk when you happen to be gay or lesbian parents."

"Serves you right," Brian said, before laughing again.

"I don't know why, you're laughing," Jason said quietly, "Just wait until you and Justin have kids, and then see how funny it is."

"We're already past that point with Gus. Lindsay and Melanie handled everything," Brian said seriously.

"I'm not talking about Gus," Jason continued. "I mean when you and Justin have a family of your own."

"Jason, that cigarette must have damaged your brain cells. Where did you get an idea like that?"

"Oh come on, Brian! You only have to watch Justin with Gus and Nicky to see how much he loves kids, and how much they love him," Jason started.

"That's true, and fortunately my partner and our kids adore each other. What's your point? Or maybe that's a conversation for another time, when you're not in so much trouble?" Brian scowled.

Jason heeded Brian's caution and returned to the subject at hand.

"Nicky's questions, made us think about Alex again. He just brought up everything...all our feelings...closer to the surface again. This time it was just coincidental that it was near his approaching birthday. Jason and I have had try to deal with Nicky while we to examine the issue of whether or not we wanted another child. At the time we were so overwhelmed that our only hope was to keep things together until you and Justin got here. You do realize, that this isn't something we can discuss with the family...at least not yet?" Jason explained.

"Yeah, they would be all over you on this one. Ok, but you should have mentioned this to Justin and me before we got here. Surely you realize that?" Brian agreed.

"And you know I wouldn't disrupt Justin's painting schedule with all the shows coming up unless it was important. We were scared, desperate, and at wits end," Paul added.

"I guess I can see that...but now you're going to have to explain things to Justin," Brian told them.

"What?" Paul couldn't believe his ears.

"I don't see where you have any choice. I know that he's probably ready to kill Jason. I'm sure because he's mentioned it several times. Your fate Paul may be equally uncertain," Brian said with great pleasure. "So as I see it explaining things to Justin may be your only chance for continued survival."

"We thought you would help us out here," Jason pleaded.

"We'll have to see how I feel after I see about these tasks that Justin has assigned for us to do." Brian was totally noncommittal. "We need to get a Latte so we can map out our strategy," Brian suggested. "You're buying, I presume!"

They got back into the car, and Paul resumed driving again. He and Jason just looked at each other. Brian was just as unbelievable as ever and just as impossible to deal with. They shook their heads at one another, and then smiled. Everything would eventually be ok.

"Jason, what notes did you and Justin generate in your sketchpad that would help us out here?" Paul finally asked, getting things back on track. "Because whatever Justin wanted done, that he assigned to Brian and me, had to be fairly simple. And I do realize that we had better not blow it, or we'll never hear the end it."

"Justin is already complaining about how we've stunted Nicky's growth artistically. If you don't make a proper games selection, he will probably start to worry about Nicky's over all childhood development," Jason pointed out with a decided laugh. "Oh yeah, Starbucks sounds like a great idea.

They pulled into Starbucks, placed their orders, and settled in at one of the tables to try to figure out what to do next.

"Justin had this idea that you two would have a bonding experience while you were shopping for the games for the kids to play at the party. I know the actual assignment was to pick up a few vintage games, but I think the kids can play Musical Chairs or Simon Says. Neither of these will require that you to buy anything. You can pick up Twister maybe or if you want to, you can add a Ring Toss or A Bean Bag Toss ...then I think that your work will be done," Jason suggested. Then he laughed, "I really don't think that Justin thought that all three of us together were necessary to handle this task either," he teased.

"You can't be too careful," Brian quipped as he and Paul were taking notes.

"Ok, so it looks like we have the games covered. Now what else do we need to do?" Paul asked.

"Justin and I were talking this morning, and he's worried about the pictures. I told him, Paul, that you and I would take care of them.

"We have the pictures covered," Jason said with a smile.

"That's a relief. Because as I understand it, Spyder gave Justin his drawings, and in exchange, I guess, Justin promised to take lots of pictures for him. We're going to New York when we leave here, so I was hoping we could at least send the digital images ahead or take them with us when we leave."

"I heard Justin on the phone when he was making those promises to Spyder," Jason mumbled, "They seemed awfully cozy. I didn't know what to think. So you know about Spyder?" he asked hesitantly. "His drawings were amazing...at least, once Justin finished with them for the posters anyway. This was just the first that I had ever heard of Spyder...you know...I was concerned."

Brian burst out laughing. "Jason you sound like a jealous lover. Spyder is Justin's design-partner in New York. The two of them seem to have carved out quite a niche for themselves in The City, and now with the Bronze Quill nomination, they should become even busier. But don't worry... Spyder will never replace you in Justin's heart. I'm just surprised that Justin used Spyder's drawings...instead of drawing them himself."

"He's been working really hard, Brian. And I heard him say something about his hand holding out," Jason conveyed nonchalantly.

"Fuck, he hasn't complained about his hand, giving him trouble, in ages. I don't like the sound of this," Brian said, allowing his concern level to rise.

"I couldn't draw what he wanted because I can't draw that particular style," Jason said in his own defense. "That's what makes Justin such a great artist. He can usually draw in a lot of different styles to suit the situation and yet not have the quality of the drawing deteriorate with the style-shift. I guess the same is true about his paintings too."

"That's part of it," Brian whispered. "But there's so much more."

"Anyway, the posters are all done now...they just need to be hung. We'll have help tonight to help make sure that all the decorations are put up," Paul added. "So what else do we have to consider?"

"Justin and I talked about one more thing. You two need to make a visit to the fire station."

"The fire station why?"

"Because they have this program where they will take kids for a ride on a fire truck. Usually, we need to schedule it days in advance. But I'm sure that Dunbar and Smith can use its influence, not to mention its checkbook, and pull out all the stops to make it happen. Justin thinks this would make Nicky's birthday just about perfect."

"Brian, what are you talking about?" Paul asked totally confused.

"Aren't you two listening to me? You need to arrange for Nicky to have a ride on a fire truck for his birthday. You've had Justin so tied up with decorations and stuff that he didn't have time to figure out all the details. We talked about it this morning, and I told him that I would handle it. And, since I have no intention of facing my partner tonight and explaining to him that I was unable to do this. I expect you two to make it happen. So take care of it! Is there a problem?"

"No. No. Jason and I will take of it," Paul groveled. "It's not a problem. We really should have thought of this ourselves."

"Now, that's better!" Brian laughed. "That's quite a relief, in fact."

"What else do we have to do?" Paul asked.

Brian continued, "We also have the little problem of the tickets for the opening of the new wing of the gallery. "Fran and Katie...you remember them...absolutely vicious women when riled. I suggest you take care of this ticket problem so that all they have to worry about are things like 'what they will wear'..."

"What?" Paul asked.

"What about 'purchase the additional tickets' did you not understand?" Brian restated.

"I'm sorry. I know that you're right. We'll take care of it," Paul agreed.

"So since you two are taking over the last minute details, I think you should drop me back at the house so I can rescue Justin."

"Rescue Justin? From what?" Jason asked.

"Gus and Nicky for starters," Brian insisted. "You know they aren't going to voluntarily leave his side. I'll probably have to kidnap Justin to begin with. But even more, I'm really concerned...if he's been complaining about his hand...I just don't know...he still has all that painting...for the shows. I just want him to rest that hand."

"Brian!"

"That would pretty much mean, Jason, that you and Paul will be finishing up the piñata. Justin can direct but that's it! He needs to rest that hand starting now. If I had known about the problem with his hand, he would not be sculpting that cake. I knew I should have convinced him wait for me before he left home to come here to deal with you two. He always tends to overdo," Brian rambled on.

Paul interrupted Brian's ramblings with a laugh. "You are a bastard when you drop into full protection-mode where Justin is concerned, aren't you? Oh, I've heard the rumors, but I have never seen it first hand. Until now, I only had Lindsay and Michael's description of what you were like. Brian, will you calm down? I'm sure that Justin is ok. He would have told us if anything were really wrong."

"Well, it's obvious that I can't rely on the two of you to look out for Justin," Brian reminded them with a scowl.

"We're sorry, Brian." Jason added, "When Justin was talking about his hand, it didn't register that he was having pain or anything...so red flags didn't go off for us. If we had any idea that anything was wrong...you know we would have stopped Justin or at least called you. You know that."

"I guess we just got carried way. Maybe we weren't paying close enough attention," Paul whispered penitently.

"So will you take me back now so I can check on him," Brian demanded.

"Sure," Jason said quietly. "But why don't you call him on his cell phone, that will at least ease your mind."

Brian gave himself a minute to try to calm himself before he placed the call to Justin's cell phone, and just as he expected, the call rolled over into voicemail.

Paul called on his house phone and Fran answered.

"Mom, I see you're still there. What's going on?" Paul casually asked.

"Justin finished the little trucks. They are great. Katie and I are just waiting for you to get back. Gabrielle was here for a while, but she left. She said that she'll be back later tonight."

"Where is everyone now?" Paul innocently asked.

"Justin announced that he was going to lie down. Needless to say, Gus and Nicky decided that he couldn't be left alone, so they curled up with him. They're in the guest room. Tell Brian he had better hurry back or Gus and Nicky will take over his place," Fran said with a laugh.

"Don't worry, Mom," Paul said with a laugh, "We're on our way back. We'll be there in a few minutes."

"Good, because Katie and I have work to do."

"We're on our way, Mom," Paul said, closing his phone. Paul took a moment to update Brian and Jason.

"Well, whatever thoughts we had about taking Gus and Nicky shopping with us have pretty much gone out the window if the kids are resting with Justin," Jason said with a laugh.

"I just want to get back to house and check on Justin. Then, you two can go on without me." Brian insisted. "The kids can stay with me."

"We'll just check on them and then be off," Paul insisted. "We want to be sure that Justin is ok too."

Chapter 18 – The Final Day

A Little Later...(Day 40)

After the planning session at Starbucks, the car containing Brian, Paul, and Jason finally arrived in front of the house; Katie and Fran were waiting near the door ready to leave.

"Mom," Paul said as he approached, leaning in to give her a kiss. "Is everything still quiet?"

"The room is soundproof, remember? I have no idea what Gus and Nicky have done to Justin," Fran said with a laugh.

"Remember they wouldn't let you near Justin before you left, so Nicky may have locked them all in the guest room," Katie added just for good measure. "I hope you have a spare key."

"Mom!" Jason quipped. "Are you done? You and Fran said something about leaving?"

Katie and Fran couldn't help laughing at Jason's suggestions.

"Bye dear. I'll talk to you later," Katie said, kissing her son on the cheek. "Let's go Fran, did you get everything...Justin's trucks and all?"

"I've got them right here," Fran said, touching a small bag in her arms. "I guess I'll see you later, Jason. Oh, and Paul, don't pay any attention to anything that your sister tells you."

"Mom, what have you done?" Paul asked with a sigh.

"Me? Nothing, but you know what a vivid imagination your sister has. I don't know where she gets it, but I have to go. I'll talk to you later."

And with that, the two whirlwinds known as Katie and Fran left their sons and Brian standing there at the door and shaking their heads and smiling.

"I'm going to go check on Justin," Brian said, turning to walk down the hall.

Brian approached the guestroom door and slowly opened it.

He found Justin, sitting against the head of the bed propped up on pillows, sketching two little sleeping figures at the foot of the bed.

Brian removed the pillows from behind Justin and spooned in behind him. He wrapped his arms around Justin, and Justin leaned into his chest. Brian put aside the pencil and sketchpad and started mindlessly massaging Justin's right hand.

"Hey," Brian finally whispered.

"Hey yourself," Justin replied, "That feels nice. Thanks."

"Justin, you scored 1500s on your SATs, can't we expand your vocabulary beyond your present choice of four letter words," Brian suggested with a laugh.

"I knew it was a mistake to let you leave with both Paul and Jason. See, now you're in this foul mood," Justin protested, reaching up to give Brian a kiss.

"Did I hear our names mentioned?" Paul asked, entering the room without knocking since Brian left the door open. Jason followed behind him.

"They look like little angels, when they sleep, don't they?" Jason added, looking down at Gus and Nicky. "But they'll be awake soon."

The sound of voices finally caused Gus to stir. "Dad," Gus said, starting to stretch up and out. "We fell asleep." Gus started crawling forward to reach his father and Justin at the head of the bed.

"They were sitting for the drawing I was working on. They have been very good models," Justin said, kissing Gus on the top of his head when Gus finally reached him.

"You've been sketching?" Jason asked, wondering why Justin was sketching if his hand was bothering him, but he didn't want to bring up the issue of problems with Justin's hand.

"Yeah, why?" Justin answered. "I don't usually have kids around, so I thought I would get some sketching in. My assistants have been very willing to sit for me. Except they keep falling asleep," he said with a laugh.

Jason reached down to pick up Nicky, who was also just starting to wake up.

"Well, hello Nicky," Paul said, leaning forward to kiss his son, who was now being held in Jason's arms.

"Daddy," Nicky finally managed to say as he then snuggled closer into Jason's chest.

"Well Justin, I see you put everyone to sleep as usual," Jason quipped. "What happened to that sunshine personality you used to have?"

"I have noticed that every time Nicky gets within a few inches of you he falls a sleep," Paul added with a smile.

"That is when he's not waking you up first thing in the morning," Jason added.

"If you two didn't wear out Nicky so badly, he wouldn't be tired all time," Justin teased. "It's probably that compulsive neatness thing that you two have going on all the time."

"Oh no! Are we back to that again?" Paul asked. "Brian's already pointed out your theory to us."

"We're going to have to think about this," Jason added with a laugh, looking down at Nicky.

Nicky had a chance to yarn and stretch and wake up a little bit more.

"Nicky, would you like to join us over here, your dads have to go out," Brian teased. "So it looks like you're going to be stuck with me."

Nicky immediately reached his arms in Brian's direction, so Jason lowered him back down to the bed, and Nicky slowly made his way over to the cluster of Brian and Gus and Justin.

Nicky found a comfortable spot and settled into Brian's arms, next to Justin.

"Since everything seems ok here, I guess that we'd better get going," Jason said with a smile as he looked at the cluster of people on the bed. "We still have a few things to take care of. We shouldn't be gone too long."

"We'll leave you the keys to the other car on the kitchen counter, just in case you want to go out," Paul added.

"Don't worry, Paul and I can handle everything on the list, and we'll get back as soon as we can," Jason said once again.

And with that, Paul and Jason left on their appointed rounds.

Everyone on the bed seemed very comfortable, and no one was making any moves to get up.

"Why are Jason and Paul finishing things up? You and Paul were supposed to be doing that. You two were supposed to be bonding while you were shopping," Justin pointed out softly, while leaning back into Brian as he spoke.

"Paul and I have already had our bonding experience for today. I laid everything out. Paul and Jason were assigned follow through," Brian smirked. "I'm very good at delegation."

"Brian, this isn't Kinnetik. You can't go around issuing orders. Terrorizing people..." Justin pointed out.

"Oh really?" Brian asked, raising one eyebrow for emphasis, although no one could see.

"No. You have to behave yourself and set a good example for Gus," Justin said, looking down at Gus to check his reactions. Both Gus and Nicky were laughing at the discussion between Brian and Justin, but still no one was moving from their comfortable positions.

Then, there was a familiar rumbling sound.

"I guess that's our cue to get up. It's obvious that I have to feed you," Brian said with a sigh.

"You know for some reason, I was still hungry after breakfast, and that was hours ago. So yes, feed me!"

Brian and Gus laughed about the 'still hungry after breakfast' comment, but then Justin's stomach rumbled again.

"Ok. You win. We'll go to the mall. If I remember, they have a play land there, so certain little ones can get a little exercise," Brian suggested.

"You want to go to the mall?" Justin asked with some surprise, knowing how Brian felt about malls, "Are you feeling ok?"

Brian sighed. "We sometimes go to the mall, don't we Gus?" he asked with a laugh, "Gus, please help me out here?" he pleaded.

"Jus, Dad and I go to the mall," Gus pointed out to Justin while Brian sat there smugly and listened.

"So sorry," Justin smirked. "You do have to let me in on these things."

"So let's get ready," Brian suggested, and everyone reluctantly started to move.

"I really should finish that project before we go. It shouldn't take too long," Justin suggested, turning to look pleadingly at Brian.

"No, Paul and Jason will finish it when they get back. You did all the hard work. All they have to do is glue on the crepe paper. How hard can it be? If they can't handle that, then Gus and Nicky can give them a hand when we get back," he teased, looking at the laughing faces of the kids for agreement. "But at any rate, your work is done. So, get ready to go." Brian left no further room for negotiations.

So every one got up, splashed water to fully revitalize themselves, and got dressed. Then everyone was off to grab a bite to eat and to visit play land at the mall.

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A few hours later, Paul and Jason returned from their appointed rounds to a quiet house.

"Let me see if they're hiding in the guest room," Jason suggested, turning to go in that direction. Then he returned a few minutes later. "No one's in there, and Justin's sketchpad is missing."

"I guess Justin's hand must be ok. That's a relief. Although it doesn't change the fact that Brian's not real pleased with us right now...I think he at least understands now. I'm just so glad that Justin's hand is ok. Neither of us was thinking when he made the remark about his hand. Brian was right...we have to be more careful with Justin. We were lucky this time," Paul added. "But for the moment Brian is still speaking to us, he did leave us a note, telling us that he and Justin have taken the kids to play land at the mall. Brian Kinney at the mall...it's a wonder," he explained.

"You leave Brian alone about the mall when he gets back. We better go finish the piñata," Jason suggested, pulling Paul into the garage and setting up to work.

"What do you mean...we?" Paul challenged, settling down to be helpful.

As they started to work together, they continued to talk.

"Justin and I already cut the paper," Jason explained, "So all you and I have to do is just glue things into place. I figured I could get you to, at least, hold the glue for me...how hard can it be?" Jason teased, "And you're going to have to change you attitude about getting messy, or Nicky's artistic expression is going to be severely stunted. You heard Brian and Justin complaining."

"Since when have you started listening to Justin...except when he was leading you into mischief?" Paul asked, as he was working.

"Since I watched the way Gus and Nicky look at Justin, and the way he looks at them. The kids are truly crazy about him," Jason commented, "Gus I understand. He's always adored Justin, but Nicky too. Most kids cling to their parents. Not Nicky, when Brian and Justin around. I think Gus and Nicky must think that Justin is just a bigger version of themselves, and that's why they're so comfortable with him. That's different than the way they think of you and me and even Brian for that matter."

"Mom and Gabrielle think Justin is some kind of missing link. Do you think that explains it?"

"It may explain his appetite and yet he stays so slim, but I don't think that's what you're referring to."

"Maybe. But then look how Justin handles Brian?"

"They have such different strengths; they compliment each other really well. But Justin got Brian to agree to live in the mansion for three months, and now they are going to be moving back in together permanently. So we may like to think of Justin is this big kid, but to handle the mighty Brian Kinney so skillfully, I would have to agree with Brian that Justin is no kid," Paul said with a laugh.

"We'd better get back to work. I don't want to push my luck with either of them if that piñata isn't finished when they return," Jason insisted.

"Glenn called while you were in the guest room," Paul revealed nonchalantly.

"What did he want?"

"He called to let me know that he will be over to the house this evening to help put up the decorations. He mumbled something about he saw all the decorations that Justin created, and he just wanted to make sure that you and I didn't ruin everything by putting them up incorrectly," Paul explained with a laugh, "If you can believe that?"

"True, he commandeers decorating at the office with the same argument," Jason confirmed with some amusement, "Why are we not surprised?"

"Yeah, but I think this time he's volunteering to do this just so he can hang out with Brian and Justin this evening. You know how fond he is of both of them. So this is his way of inviting himself over. He said that he will be here with his personal crew at about 8pm," Paul continued.

"Glenn assembled a crew?"

"You know Glenn has his own people. So we better make some copies of Justin's sketch, and then be prepared get out of their way. Remember what he's like when he's decorating the office. Need I say more?"

"I'll see what we can do about some snacks for them."

"Good idea," Paul commented, "The good news is Glenn and his crew will have everything up in no time. The tough part may be getting them to go home. It's going to be a long night. I wonder who's in that crew?"

"It doesn't matter; I'm already focused on tomorrow. I can hardly wait until everyone is here. I can't wait to see the cake," Jason proclaimed.

"Me either."

"I'm getting excited about the party. I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep tonight," Jason added, moving about with a certain bounce to his step.

"I wonder what's in all those boxes that Brian and Justin sent to Nicky. Why can't they send one present like normal people? They have to show the rest of us up. What's with them anyway?" Paul wondered with a laugh.

"Like Nicky, we're just going to have to wait until the morning to find out," Jason insisted, continuing to add the finishing touches to the piñata. "I'll tell you what, when Brian and Justin have kids, we get to pay them back. We'll get to send their kids lots of presents for birthdays and holidays. Won't that be fun?"

"I wouldn't hold your breath for Brian and Justin to have any kids beside Gus. You heard Brian's reaction today."

"Maybe, but he once reacted the same way about marriage, and look what happened? Plus he's been really supportive of us."

"Brian was supportive of our decision because of how he feels about us...not because he agrees with the decision. And he loves Nicky, without regard for how he came to be. So just because he accepts our decision, that doesn't mean he thinks it's right for him and Justin. And if you want to live a long and healthy life, I suggest you not mention it to him again," Paul reminded him, "Just keep in mind what happened earlier today."

"Yeah, I know. It's just that I want Brian and Justin to be as happy as we are," Jason whispered. Then he stepped back at moment and took one last look at the piñata. "Well, that's done!" he said emphatically.

"Yea!" Paul quipped, "We better get everything moved to the play room. So it will be there and ready for Glen and crew when they arrive. It's really coming together, isn't it?"

"Thanks to Justin."

"Yes, thanks to Justin," Paul said, leaning in to kiss his partner.

"We are really going to have to figure out something special to do for Justin. Brian was right. Just because it's Justin's nature to go over the top, planning this sort of thing was no reason for us to take advantage of him. I really didn't know what else to do. And I was afraid that if he didn't come early, like he did, that Nicky would have just had a quiet little family party. But I knew that Justin would make a memory. I just couldn't do that," Jason admitted.

"I know I couldn't have done it either. I didn't even think about Nicky having a memory on this birthday until I heard Gus describe what it was like when Justin did the camping thing just for him. That's when I realized exactly what Justin was planning. I never expected him to go to such lengths for Nicky, but I'm so glad that he did," Paul added.

"Brian is going to make us talk to Justin, you know?"

"I know, and I'm not looking forward to it."

"But Justin has probably given Nicky such a memory for his fourth birthday, that for the life of me can't think of anything we can ever do to begin to make this up to him," Jason admitted softly. "So I guess having to talk to Justin is a small price to pay."

"I know."

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A little while later Jason came out of the study, "Have you heard anything from Brian and Justin?" he asked Paul, who was reading the evening paper.

"No, and they've been gone quite awhile. Considering how Brian hates the mall, I guess I thought they would be back by now," Paul commented.

"Ah, but he went to the mall with Justin. Brian may complain, but he really will put up with anything for Justin. So picture it for yourself, Justin and two kids at the mall; Brian is probably having an adventure, I would think."

"Well, I guess I should call Mom and everyone to let them know about Glenn and the crew coming over. You know how the family usually shows up for potluck and to help put up the decorations. Anyway, it's just as well that they don't have to come...I'm not sure how to explain to them that we lost Brian and Justin and the kids," Paul teased, "One of our mother's would probably have a lot to say on the subject."

"First of all they aren't lost," Jason protested. "Brian knows his way around Cincinnati from before. And if he were lost, he would have called. So stop worrying. He's probably just trying to tire out the kids so they will be ready for bed. Brian doesn't seem to get that this is wasted effort because Nicky likes to try to stay up with us, and so does Gus."

"Nicky curls up on Brian, and Gus curls up on Justin, and the kids are just happy to be in the center of things. They don't want to go to bed because they think they'll miss something important, so they fight to stay awake."

While they were talking the doorbell rang.

Paul answered the door and was surprised to find a delivery guy with bags of food. He accepted the bags, placing them on the counter.

"What are those?" Jason asked somewhat surprised by the delivery, "Did you order from the Silver Dragon?"

"No. That's Brian's favorite restaurant. I've never figured out why he likes that place." Paul starts to examine the contents of the bags. "Strange this bag seems to contain most of Brian's favorites. How odd?" he teased, "Although he seemed to remember quite a few menu things that you and I liked too."

Before the mystery could be solved, the doorbell rang again. It was Brian, Justin, Gus and Nicky.

"I saw fishes and sharks," Nicky said as he ran in the door and hugged both his dad.

"I saw turtles and starfish," Gus added

"You did?" Jason asked with some surprise.

"Did you have a good time?" Paul asked. Nicky's grin from ear to ear was the only answer that he needed. Then he looked over at Brian. "You'll do anything to avoid the mall, won't you?" Paul teased. "Where did you go this time?"

"As usual, Justin was hungry so we decided to have a lunch at the Aquarium. Of course we stayed until almost closing," Brian confirmed, "But as we were leaving, I could have sworn I heard his stomach rumbling again, so I called ahead and had dinner delivered."

"Did it arrive yet?" Justin asked.

"Just a few minutes ago," Paul confirmed, pointing to the bags.

"We ordered a few things we thought the kids could safely eat. We figured you had too much to do to have a chance to cook tonight," Justin explained, "I hope that was ok?"

"That was a great idea. Thanks," Jason added

"And maybe after dinner, we can get in a game of pool. We haven't played doubles in a while. How does that sound?" Brian suggested, wrapping his arms around Justin from behind and kissing him on the cheek, "What do you think?"

"Although, we probably have decorations to put up first," Justin reminded him.

"Glenn and crew are coming over to handle that. Glenn said something about me ruining your vision, but he says the same thing about decorating the office. Paul thinks it's just to see you and Brian. So it looks like we might get a quick game in while Glenn is at work."

"Well unfortunately, a trip to the Aquarium turned into a shopping spree, so we better get the rest of the stuff out the of car. Can you guys give me a hand? I think we would have bought less if we had actually gone to the mall," Brian teased, looking at a laughing Justin and Gus and Nicky when he said it.

Jason and Paul helped Brian bring in the packages, while Justin and the kids disappeared down the hallway to wash up for dinner.

"What did you buy?" Paul asked, as he and Jason were bringing in packages to drop them in the guest room.

"Me...nothing. But, Justin...Gus...Nicky..." Brian smirked, "Well that's another story."

Paul and Jason looked at each other and laughed...for no one believed that.

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All during dinner, Gus and Nicky filled Paul and Jason in on their adventures at the Aquarium.

Although Gus and Nicky had their own plates, they did periodically get additional morsels from Brian and Justin.

"Every time you two visit, it takes forever for us to get Nicky back to his normal routine. You have got to stop spoiling him," Paul insisted.

"Did you hear something?" Brian asked Justin in response.

"Not a word," Justin agreed.

Nicky simply snuggled into Brian, for he knew everyone was talking about him. Gus laughed for he had heard the same thing said by his mommies whenever Brian and Justin were around too.

Brian and Justin along with Jason and Paul continued a light conversation during dinner, with Gus and Nicky joining in occasionally.

After dinner, Gus once again called his mommies to tell them about his day. He had a lot to report. He talked about helping Justin make trucks. Gus talked about Justin's sketching him and Nicky. Gus recounted his adventures at the Aquarium. Nicky got to say hello to Lindsay and Melanie. Justin talked to Lindsay and Melanie and clarified about making trucks and about the sketches. Brian reassured Lindsay once again that Gus was fine and happy. Everyone said good night to Lindsay and Melanie.

Gus and Nicky settled in to watch a video as the doorbell rang, announcing the arrival of Glenn and his crew.

Chapter 19 – A Quiet Evening

A Little Later...(Day 40)

"Whose brilliant idea was it that we play this friendly game of pool?" Brian asked.

Justin just smiled and prepared to finally take his shot. "Glenn insisted that we disappear so that he could work. This seemed to be far enough away. You have to admit the logic made sense since Paul and Jason would be so distracted here that they wouldn't try to help Glenn and his crew. I would say everything is going as planned."

"Thank you for that public service announcement, Mr. Taylor. This was obviously your plan. My plans work out better than this," Brian continued to complain, "I think I now know how Ryan feels when he plays with Lee," he mumbled to himself.

"C'mon Brian, stop complaining. We don't have the time to play like we used to. Nicky keeps us too busy to get in a lot of play time," Paul pointed out with a laugh.

"And you've been forcing Nicky to be excessively neat, that has obviously still allowed you too much practice time; however, once you implement the creative changes Justin suggested, I sure the pool-playing field will be leveled," Brian said seriously.

Paul and Jason couldn't help themselves. They burst out laughing.

"I knew you had some ulterior motive regarding Nicky's creativity, but this is low even for you, Brian," Jason added, still laughing as he took the next shot.

"Speaking of Nicky, what are the kids up to?" Justin asked.

"They are huddled together watching the Curious George video. I figure that as soon as you two finish losing this round, I'd go check on them again. I suspect that they have probably fallen asleep. You and Brian gave them a rather full day," Paul agreed. "Especially with the trip to the Aquarium."

"It was our pleasure," Justin added. "I think they had fun."

"Besides, we shouldn't have any problems getting Nicky to go to bed tonight. He knows that when he wakes up in the morning, he'll be four year old. That's a major incentive for him to go to sleep tonight," Jason professed.

"How so?" Justin asked.

"His little three-year-old brain uses the logic that if he doesn't go to bed tonight...tomorrow will never come. And if tomorrow doesn't come he will never be four years old. So the key is not to resist going to sleep tonight," Jason recounted. "So we won't have any trouble getting him to go to bed tonight. You'll see."

"And you know this how?" Justin asked.

"One of my psychologist friends explained this to me...how the three year old brain interprets reality. It's the same reason that little kids go to bed on Christmas Eve," Jason explained.

"Ah huh."

"And, if little kids didn't go to bed on Christmas Eve, Santa would never come and leave their presents, and Christmas morning would never arrive. Surely you see that?"

"And I thought that Michael had a vivid imagination for the stories he comes up with for Rage. Remind me to never let the two of you be alone together," Justin teased.

"Are you finished?" Jason asked, standing with one hand on his hip.

"Sorry," Justin admitted with a laugh, "Go ahead and take your shot."

"Thank you."

Brian and Paul were both now laughing hysterically at the exchange between their partners.

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Their game was interrupted as Glenn appeared at the doorway to the room.

"Justin, can you follow me? We need you to take a look at this," Glenn said with a smile. "We need to know what you think?"

"Justin? Why Justin? Don't you care what we think?" Jason teased.

"Yes, you obviously forget who you work for," Paul added for good measure.

"These are Justin's designs. We want to be sure that he's pleased, and that we carried out his artistic vision, " Glenn affirmed. "I already know from personal experience that you two are really lousy at the decorating part. That's why I handle decorating at the office. I also know this is why you keep me around," Glenn teased.

Everyone laughed.

Justin followed Glenn back down to the playroom.

Justin stopped at the doorway and took in the manifestation of his creative vision. The sketch had come to life. Justin just stood there and took it all in. He was pleased.

Paul and Jason came and stood beside him in the doorway and looked all around.

Brian came up behind Justin and wrapped his arms around him. Brian could feel Justin lean into him. Brian leaned down and ever so gently kissed the top of Justin's head.

"Glenn, it's wonderful," Justin said, "But how did you get it done so quickly? It seems like you just got here?"

"Let me introduce everyone," Glenn said, introducing the six people with him, "Sherry, Dave, Mike, Linda, Peter, Steven...meet the infamous Brian Kinney and his partner, Justin Taylor that you have heard so much about. And of course, you've all encountered Paul and Jason before."

"Justin Taylor, as in the artist?" Sherry asked, "You're going to be here for the opening of the new wing of the gallery. I read all about you. Wow!"

"Now you see why we had to handle the decorations with special care instead of entrusting them to Paul and Jason?" Glenn reaffirmed for his crew.

"I knew they were different when we were putting them up," Dave commented, "Now I understand why."

"The truck piñata was the dead give away," Steven teased, "I had never heard of a truck piñata before?"

"Created from the mind of Justin Taylor Artist," Jason said softly. "I can't wait until Nicky sees it."

"By the way, where is Nicky?" Glenn asked

"He and a friend are watching movie. They are probably asleep by now."

Brian took another look around the room.

"I know what you told me you had planned, but this room is spectacular," Brian said. " I can't believe how successfully you integrated the trucks with the party streamers and tinsel and the balloons...it's all so festive. When you were describing it the other night, I didn't know what to expect. I love the way you did posters too, to cover the walls. They are as amazing as your paintings. You can feel the power of the trucks on the walls."

"Be sure that you tell Spyder that when you see him. Those are his drawings of the trucks in the posters. I only modified them to fit the festive party theme. After all, we didn't want this to look like a construction work site, now did we?" Justin explained.

"Oh my god, it looks so much better than your simple sketch," Paul exclaimed, coming inside the room and taking one of the seats.

"I know that we worked on some of the individual pieces, but I had no idea they would look like this when everything was done...I had no idea that it would come together like this," Jason remarked, taking a seat next to Paul.

"When you decide you want to give up painting, you have a great future as an interior designer," Paul added, "That's why I want you to come and work for me," he teased.

"Really?" Glenn asked all excited, immediately picking up on the remark, "You're coming back to work with us at the agency?"

"Glenn, you know that Paul has been delusional for some time. That is still the case. I'm sure he must have sniffed quite a bit of the glue when he was working on the piñata. That has to be what must be causing this latest round of delusion," Brian said, attempting once again to set the record straight.

"Leave me alone in my delusion. I can dream if I want to, can't I?" Paul protested.

"Oh, I was already looking forward to working with the kid again?" Glenn said with a laugh.

"The kid?" Justin questioned, ""Will you ever stop calling me that me that?"

"Probably not."

"By the way, congratulations on your Bronze Quill nomination."

"Thanks."

"And Brian, everyone at the office is very proud of all your accomplishments. We always knew that you would go far, especially with Kinnetik.

"Thanks."

The conversation once again returned to the decorations.

"I can't believe the table set up for the kids," Mike said, "With the balloons and streamers all around it. And everything is kid sized."

"And then you had us set up these extra chairs for the adults to drop in, without intruding on the kids and their activities. That's great planning," Linda added. "We have to remember that the next time we plan a party. It's like there are areas set aside for everyone."

"It looks like you're expecting more adults than just kids," Dave commented with a laugh.

"My sister, Gabrielle, swears there will be more adults here than kids, and Mom is betting that part of the agency will show up to see Brian and Justin, so I guess Justin must have tried to design things to handle the total chaos," Paul said with a laugh.

"We have a rather large family," Jason added, as if that explained everything.

"And lots of friends," Glenn added, "So when we stop back tomorrow, can we have cake and ice cream? I really want to see the trucks that Justin sculpted?"

"How did you hear about that?" Justin asked with some surprise.

"I might have mentioned it," Jason admitted sheepishly.

"And what makes you think you're invited back?" Paul asked teasingly, already knowing the answer, and already knowing that Glenn had always considered himself family, so he would show up invited or not.

"Why else do you think my crew and I volunteered to handle the decorating duties?" Glenn confirmed. "Besides, my crew and I have saved Nicky from nightmares. I've seen what happens when you two put up decorations," he continued to point out, leaving the images to everyone's imagination.

Brian and Justin couldn't help laughing at the banter between Glenn and Paul and Jason. Likewise the crew was equally amused, but most of them had obviously witnessed this kind of exchange at least once before. For it seemed that Glenn was constantly making sure that Paul and Jason did not hang decorations at all costs.

"Well my work is done here so we're going to go," Glenn said, "So we can relieve all our babysitters. Brian, Justin, we'll see you tomorrow sometime during the all day party...as usual," he teasing, hugging them as he was leaving.

Paul and Jason just sighed and shook their heads.

Paul and Jason reassured everyone that they would see them tomorrow with their kids.

Glenn's crew all thanked them for the invitation, while Glenn simply smiled victoriously, as he was leaving.

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A few moments later, everyone went in to check on the Gus and Nicky. True, they were watching a video and had fallen asleep, but now that they had company, they were both fully awake and ready to play.

Justin and Brian couldn't help laughing at the turn of events.

Jason and Paul decided to give Nicky a special shower. Since this would be his last shower as a three year old, they wanted to make it a big deal and a family event.

Brian and Justin decided to take Gus to their room and give him a shower as well. They really hadn't spent much time together just the three of them since they arrived, so this gave them a chance to spend some time together.

They agreed to eventually meet back in Nicky's room once Gus and Nicky were in their pajamas and ready for bed.

"Besides Nicky, you have to go to sleep. Now you're three years old," Jason began for good measure, "The sooner you go to sleep and wake up in the morning, the sooner you will be four years old," he continued.

Justin tried to contain his smile as his listened to this logic again.

Nicky merely appeared to think it over, looking over at Gus for confirmation.

Gus simply smiled and nodded his agreement.

Brian and Paul tried to contain their laugh as they watched the nonverbal conversation between Nicky and Gus.

The kids settled down for the night and were kissed and tucked into bed. Everyone said good night and the lights were turned out.

Brian and Justin and Paul and Jason headed for the living room for a nightcap.

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In the living room everyone began to relax. Paul dimmed the lights and added soft music. Jason returned with glasses and Beam. He poured drinks for everyone.

As usual, Jason and Paul spooned together on the sofa.

"I can't believe this day," Brian said, pulling Justin to spoon into their favorite oversize chair with him.

"It has been one of the record books," Paul added with a laugh. "I can not believe how much energy Nicky has as a three years old. What is he going to be like at four?"

"I did notice that he has finally stopped bossing Gus around...just a little," Jason added.

"A very little," Brian added.

"I'm not sure that I remembered to thank you properly for bringing Gus," Paul added.

"It did make for a very long day getting here, yesterday...was it only yesterday," Brian seemed to asked himself, "But our kids really seemed to be having a good time together. I flew to Toronto from New York, and it looks like we're both going back to New York when we leave here. Of course, we'll drop Gus off in Toronto first."

"That's a really hectic schedule," Jason commented. " I had no idea."

"When will you be back at the mansion?" Paul asked.

"Maybe about midweek...by the weekend, for sure," Justin commented, "Gus visits that weekend, and we have to go riding."

"Riding?" Paul asked.

"Horseback riding," Brian said nonchalantly. "The house has stables, so..."

"I see why you want to stay there," Jason commented.

"It really has become home. I can really relax there," Brian confirmed. "Justin's studio is there. It's just home," he said quietly, leaning down and kissing Justin in the process.

Paul and Jason made note of the moment of tenderness between their friends.

"Jus, we want to thank you for everything that you did for the party. We couldn't have done any of this without you," Jason began.

"You know how we feel about Nicky?" Justin reminded them, "I did it for him." Then he thought for a second. "You realize of course that the little dynamo is going to be up at the crack of dawn. So if we want to get any sleep, we had better turn in now," he said with a laugh.

"It's been quite a day, hasn't it?" Brian commented

"This is like an normal day plus a night at Babylon combined," Justin confirmed. "How about if we go back to our room, and I give you one of my blowjobs, will that make the night more bearable?" Justin then suggested.

"Maybe...it's a start," Brian whispered, "but only a start."

"You have something else in mind," Justin innocently asked. When Brian didn't answer, Justin was forced to turn around and come face to face with...

"Brian, what are you doing?"

"I'm using Rage's mind control."

"Brian, you can't keep using Rage's powers of mind control."

"I don't know why not."

"Because you did that in Toronto."

"So. I read the comic. Mikey never wrote about any limit."

"You," Justin said with a laugh, leaning in to give Brian a gentle kiss. Brian allowed the kiss to turn passionate.

Paul and Jason were amused by the exchange and couldn't help smiling at their friends' antics.

"Well, due to circumstances beyond my control..." Justin began and was immediately cut off as Brian pushed him to a standing position. Brian immediately slid his arm around Justin's waist, being unwilling to relinquish contact even for a minute.

"Say Good night," Brian coached, gently pulling Justin along in the direction of the hall.

"Good night," Justin said in a trance-like manner.

Paul and Jason likewise responded with good night as they laughed together once more at their friends as they left.

Chapter 20 – Happy Birthday, Nicky

Saturday Morning...(Day 41)

About 4am in the morning everyone is asleep...except for Nicky.

"It's my birthday! Wake up! Wake up!" Nicky said to wake up Gus. "I'm four years old! Wake up!"

"Go back to sleep Nicky, it's too early." Gus replied, sliding back under the covers.

"No. No. I'm awake. Wake up! It has to be my birthday."

"Nicky, the sun has to be shining for it to be your birthday. Trust me. I'm older...I know these things."

"Are you sure?" Nicky asked questioningly.

"Yes. It's like Christmas," Gus explained.

"Oh." Nicky said, trying to process this new information.

"And you don't want all your presents to disappear, do you?"

"No. But I'm not sleepy. I must be four years old."

"How about if I sing Happy Birthday to you? Then you can climb in bed with me and go back to sleep until the sun comes up. Then when it's officially your birthday, we'll go wake everybody up together. How does that sound?"

Nicky pondered for a moment. "Ok," he said, climbing into bed with Gus.

Gus sang two full verses of Happy Birthday to Nicky as promised. Nicky was asleep before he finished the first verse, but Gus didn't want to take any chances.

Then Gus too, went back to sleep to wait for the sun to rise and for the real start of Nicky's birthday.

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Meanwhile, Nicky's voice activated the monitor in Paul and Jason's room. Jason, being a lighter sleeper than Paul, was instantly awake.

One look at the clock and the sound of Nicky's voice...at first Jason thought that Nicky might be having a nightmare and was about to rush in to comfort him.

Then he listened in on the conversation between Nicky and Gus and couldn't help smiling.

By the time the strains of Happy Birthday were streaming through the monitor, even Paul was awake trying to figure out what was going on. When Jason filled in his partner in on what was happening in their son's room, they were both laughing.

Once things were quiet, Paul quietly tiptoed down to check on things in Nicky room, and he found Gus and Nicky curled up together in the same bed...sound asleep.

Paul thought to himself, that he must remember to do something special for Gus. Then Paul made his way back to Jason to tell him what he saw.

The two partners shared a quiet laugh before they kissed and spooned together to go back to sleep.

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Three hours later as the sun was peeking over the horizon, Gus' sleep was once again disturbed by Nicky.

"It's my birthday! Wake up! Wake up!" Nicky said to wake up Gus, shaking him for good measure. "The sun, Gus. It's really my birthday this time. Wake up! Wake Up!"

"Happy Birthday, Nicky!" Gus finally said and tried to roll over. Gus felt Nicky bound out of bed. The next thing he felt was himself being tugged as Nicky tried to pull him out of bed.

Finally, Gus gave up and got out of bed. The two roommates made a quick trip to the bathroom. And Nicky was now on a mission, and he wanted to make sure that Gus tagged along.

"It's my birthday! Wake up! Wake up!" Nicky said as he pounded on the door to Paul and Jason's room.

Nicky turned the knob and since it opened easily, he immediately continued his chant all the way into the middle of his parents' bed. "It's my birthday! Wake up! Wake up!" he said.

"Happy Birthday, Nicky!" Paul and Jason said in unison, hugging Nicky in the process. "Good Morning, Gus," they both added, patting the center of the bed for Gus to join them too. There were laughs, tickles, and hugs all around.

While Jason and Paul headed into their bathroom, Gus and Nicky were on to their next target.

"It's my birthday! Wake up! Wake up!" Nicky said as he pounded on the door to Brian and Justin room. He then tried the lock and found that the door would open. So he ran in followed by Gus. "It's my birthday! Wake up! Wake up!"

"How can you tell? Nicky, you must be mistaken," Brian said, trying to slide his head under a pillow.

There was the inevitable patter of little feet...the pounce on the bed...the movement up the middle of the bed...this time without hesitation as Nicky was joined by Gus.

Nicky pulled the pillow away in protest. "No. No. Uncle Brian. It's my birthday! Wake up! Wake up!"

"Happy Birthday, Nicky," Justin finally said.

"Yes, Happy Birthday Nicky," Brian finally echoed, now that he was completely revealed, having lost his pillow as cover.

Jason and Paul finally made their way to guest room and seeing the party on the bed with Brian and Justin, they decided to join everyone else on the bed.

"Happy Birthday, Nicky," Paul and Jason said in unison.

"I'm four years old," Nicky said, standing up in the middle of the bed like he was conquering hero.

Justin grabbed him by his ankles and pulled him down on the bed and tickled him into a hug. Nicky was laughing so hard. He had a hard time saying one more time "I'm four years old."

Finally Nicky settled down and simply sat in the middle of the bed with Brian and Justin.

Nicky sat there like he was waiting for something.

"What's wrong?" Paul asked.

Gus just rolled his eyes. "He's waiting for all us to sing Happy Birthday to him," Gus patiently explained. "Right Nicky?"

Nicky nodded yes.

Everybody started singing the first verse of Happy Birthday, and Nicky smiled.

"Well I guess since everyone is up, we might as well get Nicky's day started," Jason said.

"Can I have Mickey Mouse Pancakes?" Nicky asked, as Paul was lifting him from the bed.

"Mickey Mouse Pancakes? How about regular pancakes?" Jason suggested, following behind the pair, "Or maybe waffles?"

"Gus says Justin fixes him Mickey Mouse Pancakes. I want Mickey Mouse Pancakes too," Nicky could be heard to say from the hallway.

When Paul, Jason, and Nicky were gone, Gus stayed behind with Brian and Justin.

Justin heard Nicky's comment, and at this point, he slid down under the covers.

Brian went under the covers to retrieve him.

Gus simply made himself comfortable on the pillows and waited for Brian and Justin to return from under the covers to rejoin him back at the head of the bed. When Brian and Justin finally rejoined him, Gus patiently climbed over next to Justin and wrapped his arms around Justin's neck.

"Jus, Nicky's never had Mickey Mouse pancakes," Gus tried to reason with Justin. "And he's already four years old."

Justin looked a Gus with some confusion. Brian tried to contain a smile.

Gus couldn't understand why Justin didn't see the problem with the Order of the Universe. After all, Gus had been having Mickey Mouse pancakes like forever. When Gus was little, he always had Mickey Mouse pancakes for breakfast, especially on his birthday. Justin always came over and made them just for him. Always.

"Gus, we're guests. I can't take over Jason and Paul's kitchen. We'll have to wait until Nicky comes to visit us at the house, and then I'll make him Mickey Mouse pancakes. How about that?"

"Dad?" Gus whined.

"Gus, I'm afraid Justin's right on this one. I'm sorry Sonny Boy."

There was a knock on the open door. Then Jason entered carrying Nicky.

Nicky immediately joined Gus and everyone on the bed, curling up into Justin's arms beside Gus for comfort.

"Nicky, what's wrong?" Justin asked with concerned.

"Jus" Jason began, "YOU have a crisis here."

"Me? A few minutes ago, Nicky was happy about his birthday. What did you do to him?"

"Nicky just found out that I can't make Mickey Mouse Pancakes," Jason said with a sigh.

"Sure you can, just draw the shape with the batter."

"Jus, I can't even make perfectly round ones. They taste ok. They just aren't...you know...artistic..."

"I don't believe this. So you want me to make Mickey Mouse Pancakes?" Justin asked in total disbelief

"Would you please?" Jason said pleadingly.

"Ok, let me get a shower and get dressed," Justin said. Nicky smiled and reached up and gave Justin a big wet kiss. So did Gus. Brian just sat there laughing.

"Thanks! Paul and I will help the kids get dressed," Jason volunteered with a smile.

Gus and Nicky were finally content to let Justin go. They all left, and Jason closed the door.

"You're so easy," Brian teased. "All it takes are a few sad eyes and a few wet kisses, and you'll do anything."

"Lucky for you," Justin replied, pulling Brian down into a kiss.

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After a couple of blowjobs plus fucking in the shower, Brian and Justin arrived in the kitchen for breakfast. Paul had coffee ready and handed Brian and Justin each a cup as they entered the kitchen. Gus and Nicky were sipping juice. Jason and Paul were sipping coffee.

Justin made Mickey Mouse Pancakes...and Gus got to help...much to the delight of a certain four year old, who even squealed as he watched the pancakes forming in the pan. Nicky was especially excited to watch the entire operation perched from his lofty position on the shoulders of his favorite Uncle Brian.

They all enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and sang Happy Birthday to Nicky...again.

After breakfast, Nicky was carried down to the playroom.

Here he got his first glimpse of his birthday decorations. He was given a few minutes to take in all in, and Gus helped him to see everything. Nicky's eyes were as wide as saucers as he tried to see everything.

Then the moment came when Nicky could finally tear into all the boxes of wrapped presents from Brian and Justin that he had not been allowed to open all this time.

He was delighted with all his gifts. Needless to say he received a fleet of trucks and a large assortment of the latest in finger painting and art supplies.

He also got his first service station set from Brian and Justin and Gus. Everyone spent most of the morning helping him set everything up...especially with all the service trucks and gear.

Nicky received a fire station with fire trucks from his parents and a brand new little bike. They also had to set up the fire station and all the associated fire trucks.

Fours adults and two kids had a very good time.

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About noon the various members of the Dunbar and Smith extended families arrived with their kids and took over the house upon their arrival. Paul's side of the family was pretty large. Jason was an only child, but both families were very close.

Nicky received a new stash a presents to be opened to the oohs and aahs of family members.

The family members went down to see the decorated playroom. All the kids' eyes were wild with excitement, no matter what their age. The adults were captivated by the integration of trucks and party theme. The family members all hugged Paul and Jason, who rightfully gave credit to Justin. Of course, everyone was glad to see Brian and Justin again after a year.

The kids all went to play elsewhere in the house.

Katie and Fran and Gabrielle took over the kitchen and the dining room, and the adults were given the first glimpse of Nicky's fully decorated birthday cake and a quick view of all the decorated cupcakes. The adults became excited by what they saw.

Having had this peek, the adults were content to disperse in little cluster throughout the house to chat with one another. Lee and Ryan moved to the pool table to resume the infinite pool rematch...only this time they had an audience of family members cheering each side on.

Nicky managed to move effortlessly, every now and then, from group to group. He accepted all the hugs and kisses from family members, but he made sure to keep Gus close at hand.

From time to time, when Nicky felt a little overwhelmed by all the people or he needed a bit of rest or comfort, he and Gus sought out Brian and Justin, climbing into their laps and resting their heads comfortably against their chests. Of course, Brian and Justin would wrap each of them in their arms, and Gus and Nicky knew they were safe.

Beginning in the afternoon, a steady stream on visitors started dropping by. Some were just friends, who stopped by to simply wish Nicky a Happy Birthday. Others were from Dunbar and Smith, who had heard about or seen elements of the decorations when they were being worked on at the agency, and now they wanted to see everything in place for themselves. Many people wanted to say hello and to talk briefly with Brian and Justin.

Nicky and Gus were perfectly comfortable in the middle of these discussions from their position in the arms of Brian and Justin. This way Nicky and Gus didn't have to miss a thing.

Afterwards, these guests ogled the cake and cupcakes, wished Nicky Happy Birthday, gave Nicky his birthday gifts, and then drifted out.

A little later, Glenn stopped by, with several members of the crew along with their respective partners and kids. They stopped by to chat specifically with Brian and Justin. Once again Nicky and Gus were in the middle of the discussions and perfectly happy since they were nestled in the arms of Brian and Justin.

"Glenn, of course you know Nicky, but you have never met my son," Brian began, "Glenn, this is my son Gus. Gus, this is your Uncle Glenn."

Gus extended only his arm to shake hands with Glenn, and he was willing to give Glenn a smile. Gus did make note of the fact that he had another uncle...he was keeping a careful tally.

"Glenn was here last night helping to put up all the decorations," Justin added.

"You were?" Nicky asked, suddenly more interested in his Uncle Glenn.

"You were busy when we arrived so we didn't want to disturb you. So we just put up the decorations," Glenn continued. "What did you think Nicky?"

At this point, Nicky was willing to let Glenn pick him up. Nicky gave Glenn a big wet kiss and big hug. "Thank you, Uncle Glenn," he said.

"My pleasure, Sport," Glenn whispered, returning the hug.

Then Nicky was immediately ready to be returned to Justin.

"Sorry Glenn," Brian said with a laugh, "It happens all the time. At family gatherings, all the kids look for Justin. They even forget they have parents. Right, Gus?" he added with a smile, looking down at Gus in his arms.

"Dad!" Gus complained with a smile.

Glen couldn't help laughing.

Paul and Jason drifted over to the conversation, both reaching their arms out in an offer to take Nicky. Nicky responded by making himself more comfortable deeper into Justin's chest.

"Well, ok," Paul said quietly. Then he laughed.

"I see," Jason said with a laugh.

"There's a message in there, Paul," Brian teased, "Welcome to my world."

"Well in that case, Glenn, come with me and let me show you the birthday cake and the cupcakes. I know you were curious about them last night," Jason suggested.

Glenn and few other people followed Jason. Glenn was specifically interested in the little sculpted trucks on top the cake. He also paid special notice to the designs in the icing of the cupcakes.

"I created the designs for the cupcakes," Jason said to Glenn with some pride.

Glenn smiled, "You really did a great job with your designs. They compliment Justin's themes really well. Maybe I'll let you apprentice on my crew someday."

"Thank you," Jason said with a laugh.

Just before the party was due to start, Brian and Justin and Gus and Jason and Paul blindfolded Nicky and took him for a short ride.

"Jus, I can't see," Nicky protested with a laugh.

"That's the general idea," Justin pointed out with a laugh. "Don't worry. It'll be ok."

"It's ok Nicky, Jus and Dad do it to me all the time," Gus added with a laugh, reaching over touching Nicky for support.

"We're here," Justin said, removing Nicky's blindfold when they stopped the car at the fire station,

"We're here?" Nicky asked, readjusting to the light. "Where?"

"Nicky, we...your Daddy and I...Uncle Brian and Jus...all of us...have an extra special birthday present for you," Jason said.

"You do?" Nicky asked.

At that moment, the Chief of the fire station came out and wished Nicky a Happy Birthday and explained that Nicky was going for a birthday ride on a real fire truck as his extra special birthday present.

Nicky was excited, but he wanted Gus to ride along with him. Nicky and Gus got to ride on a real fire truck. They also got a tour of the firehouse, including a chance to slide down one of the practice poles.

Sabrina, the Dalmatian who lived at the firehouse, had recently had a litter of puppies. Gus and Nicky got to play with the puppies while they were there too.

Brian took lots of pictures, and Paul made a video. Justin and Jason made lots of drawings.

When everything was over, Nicky and Gus each received a little fire helmet and a certificate.

Two little boys were beaming when they got in the car with their parents and Justin for the short ride back to the house. One four-year old and his six-year old, new best friend were very happy.

"That was the bestest birthday present ever!" Nicky said, as they were driving back. "Wasn't it Gus?"

"It sure was!" Gus agreed with a big smile.

Brian leaned over and kissed Justin gently on the cheek and whispered, "The bestest."

Justin just smiled.

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At 2pm various invited guests started arriving at the house. Actually, various combinations of adults, some accompanied by their kids, started arriving at the house...much as Gabrielle said they would.

Justin's research might have indicated that Gus should expect only four little friends since he was only turning four years old. However, there were single parents with children...there were lesbian couples without children...there were lesbian couples with children...there were gay couples with children...there were gay couples without children...there were straight couples with children...There were just a blend of friends and extended family all there to wish Nicky Happy Birthday. This was a gathering!

Nicky was the center of attention, and he loved it.

Kids and adults were interspersed and playing games together. People were sitting and talking together with their kids.

Music was playing softly throughout the house.

Everyone oohed and aahed over the decorations.

Everyone noticed the truck theme, and the trucks were everywhere. Everyone loved the balloons and streamers and the tinsel as well. Everything was very festive.

The truck piñata suspended from the ceiling caught everyone's eye. The piñata was huge and pretty hard to miss.

"Oh, yeah!" Jason said many times, "It's a piñata stuffed with all sorts of toys and candies."

The adults wanted to know where in the world he got it. Jason loved making the constant refrain, "Created from the mind of the artist, Justin Taylor," and pointing in the direction of Justin...wherever he happened to be.

And the adults recognized the name and wanted to meet Justin and wanted to talk about the opening of the new wing of the gallery. Justin couldn't believe how many people knew about his forthcoming show. Of course, they were more impressed with him now...after seeing his creation of the truck piñata...than they ever were from reading the article in the Arts and Leisure section of the paper.

Brian watched everyone with Justin. At that moment, Brian knew, the buzz was starting in Cincinnati about Justin. In fact, there was going to be so much talk about Justin in Cincinnati over the next few months that when the opening of the new wing of the gallery finally happened, there was going to be an overflow crowd in attendance. Brian also knew that Justin would probably be among friends that he had unknowingly made at this party today.

Brian just smiled to himself.

Nicky's friends got to meet Gus, and they liked him.

Nicky's friends thought that Justin was really "neat" too, especially as they huddled around him and watched him sketch their pictures.

Brian couldn't help smiling at the image of a smiling Justin, with a group of kids huddled around him, while he sketched.

And for once, Brian could do something that he had always wanted to do...he reached for the camera and snapped the picture. This is a picture that Brian had always wanted to take. Usually when it happened, he never had the camera handy. This time he got the picture.

And so did several of circulating photographers, who had been hired to discretely take candid shots during Nicky's all day celebration. Their trained eyes also knew this was a picture that should not be missed.

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The party continued with several rounds of Musical Chairs that produced various winners, who got to wear special hats; however, no one really cared who won...everyone was having too much fun.

Brian got to torture the little kids with several rounds of Simon Says. They were laughing so hard from playing the game that once again...no one really cared who won.

After all the games, everyone had worked up quite an appetite.

Some of the kids settled down at the table to eat with their friends while others huddled close to their parents to eat. In any case, the parents were comfortably nearby.

The Pizza On a Stick and Miniburgers and Salad were served along with punch. The menu selections were a big hit with everyone...both kids and adults alike.

Brian even managed to try the Pizza On A Stick. Somehow this turned out to be just about as much pizza as Brian wanted to deal with, but he did focus on the Miniburgers and the Salad.

Nicky and Gus, however, definitely preferred the Pizza On A Stick, but that didn't stop them from having Miniburgers and Salad too.

"Now don't forget to leave room for cake and ice cream," Gabrielle reminded everyone with a laugh in the middle of the meal.

Groans mixed with laughs were heard all around, in response, from everyone.

Brian and Justin looked at each other and couldn't help laughing too.

Now it was time for Nicky to open another round of presents.

Jason and Paul were there to help out. Even though this was at least the third haul of presents that Nicky had opened today, he was as excited about this batch as he was about the first batch early this morning.

Nicky opened all the presents that had been brought to the party. He loved all his gifts. He let them be passed around. He also showed everyone his new fire station and new service station set and all the other presents he had received earlier in the day.

Then it was finally time for the cake and ice cream.

The appearance of the cake and cupcakes caused little eyes to get really big

The decorated cupcakes had now been placed in tiered towers, and they were fun too.

The parents noticed the little trucks designed into the icing on some of the cupcakes, and they really loved the gumdrops on the others. Some of parents helped their kids to see the designs and shapes in the cupcakes.

Nicky loved his cake with "Happy Birthday, Nicky" written across the top in icing and the swirls of icing all around. There were little trucks included in the icing around the sides of the cakes.

And there on top of the cake were the little trucks that Justin has sculpted the day before. Only now, they were covered in many-colored icing so they really looked like trucks.

The little trucks on top of his cake were even more special because Nicky knew that Justin had fashioned them just for him, and his Granny Katie and his Granny Fran had decorated them for him. And Nicky was totally excited about his cake.

Nicky watched as the final pictures of the intact cake and tiered towers of cupcakes were taken.

The candles were lit. Happy Birthday was sung. Nicky made a wish. Nicky blew out the candles. Everybody cheered.

Ice cream was served. The cake was cut. The cake was served. The kids had a hard time deciding which cupcakes to choose, but some of the cupcakes managed to disappear.

Everyone finally enjoyed their cake and ice cream.

Then something else that everyone had been waiting for...Brian entered the room with very long paddles...it was time to say good bye to he piñata.

Nicky was given one last look at his intact truck piñata.

Final pictures were taken to record the piñata's existence for all posterity.

Justin applied the blindfold to Nicky again, and Brian handed Nicky the paddle. Nicky took several swings at the piñata, and eventually all the contents spilled on the floor.

The kids reached for the wrapped candy and small toys to add to their goody bags.

Everyone, individually and in small groups, stopped to tell Paul and Jason what a great time they had at the party. The adults even remembered to stop and tell Nicky that they had a good time. Nicky just grinned, and he loved all the hugs.

And with that, Nicky's fourth birthday party ended, and the guests started to leave.

Nicky shared a hug with Justin, then Brian, and then his two dads. "This has been the bestest birthday ever!" he said with this big smile.

And in years to come, whenever Nicky would talk about the birthdays he remembered most...this would be the birthday that he would always describe in painstaking detail. Once again, Justin had helped to create a memory.

Later, Brian and Justin and Gus, along with Paul and Jason watched Nicky's new birthday video with him. And Gus told Nicky that for all his happy times with Justin and his Dad, they watched this video. And Justin explained that Nicky was now four years old so he was now old enough to watch ..."The Yellow Submarine"...an extra special birthday present from Brian and Justin and Gus to Nicky

Once again Gus made his nightly call to Melanie and Lindsay to fill them in on his day. He told them all about Nicky's birthday: waking up early, singing Happy Birthday, going back to sleep, waking everyone later, Mickey Mouse Pancakes, the presents, the trip to the firehouse, the ride on the fire truck, the party, the games. Melanie and Lindsay got to say hello to Nicky and to wish him a Happy Birthday, and Nicky just beamed from the extra wishes. Brian talked briefly with Mel and Linds. Gus told his mommies that he loved them. Then everyone said good night to Mel and Linds.

Gus and Nicky had had a very long day. They were truly ready for bed.

Once again everyone wished Nicky a Happy Birthday before settling him into bed. Brian and Justin and Jason and Paul made sure that Gus and Nicky were tucked in their beds and kissed good night. They stayed with them until the kids fell asleep, before turning out the lights.

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Fran and Katie stayed over to supervise the clean up after the party with a few family members and to watch the kids so the guys could have a night out together.

Paul and Jason took Brian and Justin to the Pipeline...Cincinnati's equivalent of Babylon...where Jason and Justin immediately hit the dance floor while Brian and Paul hit the bar.

"So what does it take to get you and Justin back here?" Paul asked.

"You know we'll be back for the opening of the new wing of the gallery," Brian reminded him.

"That's not for months."

"You have to come to Pittsburgh then...our kids need play dates," Brian suggested, taking a sip of his drink.

"That's true. I can't believe how well they get along," Paul said with a laugh, "Even with Nicky bossing Gus around."

"Why shouldn't they get along? Look at our partners? You would think that after the day that they've had, that they would be tired, but look at them on the dance floor."

"And look at the way the everyone is eyeing them? I think we need to put a stop to this."

"I think you're right," Brian agreed, joining Paul in cutting in on Jason and Justin on the dance floor.

As much fun as Justin and Jason had dancing the fast dances with each other, now they each had the partner they truly wanted.

Paul and Jason wrapped themselves together and moved as one to the thumpa thumpa.

Brian and Justin still generated the heat around them for all to feel. Six years and they still loved the touch and feel of each other. Brian wrapped his arms around Justin and their bodies seemed to meld together. And those who were standing around watching the dance floor knew that a special moment was happening.

Chapter 21 – Let Us Not Forget, Part 1

Sunday Morning In Cincinnati...(Day 42)

"What are you doing up so early?" Brian asked once he rolled over and found the space next to him partially empty. "Of course, now that you are up, come back to bed, I have definite plans for you," he said, gently tugging on Justin.

"Brian," Justin complained, "Let me finish this; then you can have your way with me."

"Finish what?" Brian finally asked, trying to really open one eye. "What's a laptop doing in our bed? That has got to be a violation of one of those new rules we agreed to. If I were more awake I would remember," he continued to protest. "What are you doing?"

"We don't have any new rules," Justin laughed, "And I'm sending off emails and a few pictures of Nicky's birthday party to Em, to Mel and Linds, and to Spyder. I'm almost done...then I have plans for you as well."

"Oh..."

Justin finished transmitting the last email. The laptop was quickly closed and placed aside. Brian went to reach out for Justin, but once again his arms reached for air.

"Where did you go?" Brian mumbled, just about to sit up, when he felt his cock and balls being administered to by Justin's talented mouth. "Oh...there...well..." he smiled.

Justin used his tongue to make the slow wet circles that made Brian start to thrust in turn.

Justin smiled too as he felt Brian slide easily against his lips and tongue to aim for the back of his throat. Brian reached for Justin's hair and entwined his fingers within the blond strands for leverage as he groaned and writhed. Finally, Justin carried them both over the edge, lost in the moment, as Brian shot down the back of Justin's throat.

With practiced surety, Justin swallowed Brian's seed and licked him clean, and then he carefully slid up the long graceful lines of Brian's body to kiss him and to allow Brian to taste himself on the swollen lips of his lover. Brian savored the taste and the kiss, allowing it to be gentle at first. But kissing Justin was something that Brian loved to do, and this moment was no exception, and Brian surrendered to the pleasure, allowing the kiss to become passionate.

When the need for air caused them to momentarily break apart, the pair merely inhaled the needed breath of life and returned to kissing one another. Brian could feel Justin's renewed hardness twitch between them. Brian wanted to trap that hardness between them, as he wanted to allow his own now hardening cock to plow into Justin. So Brian reached for the lube. He applied it skillfully to stretch and prepare Justin. With his usual flair, Brian ripped open the packet to skillfully apply the condom to his own cock.

Once everything was in place and Justin's legs were gently placed on his shoulders, Brian began the slow, purposeful pushes into his favorite place. And the pushes were met with thrusts, and the slow lingering dance of tender familiarity was allowed to slowly build to its inevitable conclusion. They both slowly tumbled over the edge together, with Brian releasing into condom and Justin releasing in the tight spaces between them. And Brian finally just collapsed on top of Justin, and they both lay there joined and stuck together, with their arms wrapped around each other.

Eventually Brian will get up and remove condom and tie it off and dispose of it. Eventually he will bring back a damp cloth to Justin to allow him to clean himself before they spoon together. Eventually they will shower and dress and release the lock on the bedroom door...eventually...but not just yet.

For this moment they will just lie there and remember how good it feels to be together, and remember to tell each other how much they love each other...without anyone saying a word.

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A Little While Later...

After reminding each other what was truly important, Brian and Justin eventually showered and dressed. They released the lock on their bedroom door.

Justin began the task of packing while Brian tried to search his email, hoping for something from Ted or Cynthia to give him some clue about the reasons for the New York meetings with Liberty Air and Eyeconics.

But there was nothing.

Brian finally closed the laptop in frustration. He would just have to deal with things when he reached New York.

Knowing that he and Justin would be going to New York together had somehow made everything ok...Brian tried to tell himself.

Brian tried to forget his phone call of few days ago with Rudolpho Silvestri.

Beginning of Flashback

"I'm meeting with Susan and Kellie at the beginning of the week. I have no idea what that's all about. You wouldn't want to enlighten me would you?" Brian asked.

"No. No. It's a surprise. My lips are sealed," Rudolpho said slyly.

"Why does that not give me a warm feeling?" Brian commented with a laugh.

"You have to trust me, Brian. You have to forget the old me. I'm new and improved. Justin has changed me. I have to be on my best behavior now. I'm running out of friends to act as intermediaries," Rudolpho teased.

End of Flashback

Brian's reflections were quickly dismissed. There was the knock on the door, the turning of the knob, the immediate patter of two pairs of little feet, and the appearance of two small pajama clad munchkins on the foot of their bed.

Brian and Justin looked at each other and smiled.

"You're dressed," Nicky complained, immediately climbing into Justin's arms.

"You noticed," Brian teased.

Nicky looked up at Justin with these sad eyes, "But I don't want you to go home. I want you to stay here with me."

"My sentiments exactly," Paul echoed, coming in from the hallway.

"You're not helping," Brian pointed out sternly, "Knowing you, you probably put him up to this."

"Me? How can you..." Paul tried to protest, feigning innocence.

"Forget it, Paul." Brian said, "C'mon here, Nicky."

Nicky released his grip on Justin and willingly went to Brian. "How about this?" Brian began. "How about if you come to visit Justin and Gus and me at our house one weekend? Now how does that sound?"

Nicky seemed to brighten a bit.

Brian continued, "Of course, Paul will have to send one of his favorite Armani shirts for you to wear while you paint," he said and then waited for the reaction.

"You mean one of my old sweatshirts?" Paul attempted to quickly clarify, for he felt about his designer shirts the same way that Brian did, so he quickly wanted to set the record straight, "I think that can easily be arranged."

"No. No. Maybe I'd better let Gus explain the Taylor Artistic Universe to you so you will understand," Brian smirked, knowing he was about to enjoy the next few minutes. "Gus, tell your Uncle Paul, what Justin wears when he paints?"

"One of dad's shirts. He gets paint all over it," Gus said with a laugh. "Jus is messy when he paints."

"And what do you wear when you paint?" Brian continued his line of questioning.

"One of dad's shirts...just like Justin...I'm messy when I paint too."

"You probably need to talk with Lindsay; she's not very happy with Justin about this little technique that Gus seemed to have copied either," Brian pointed out with a laugh.

"I've tried to explain to everyone that it's hard to be both neat and creative at the same time. I don't know why you two have such a hard time with this concept?" Justin tried to explain in his own defense. "Gheez, it's only a shirt."

"A very expensive shirt," Brian added, "But I've gotten over that. You will too Paul, trust me. I just wanted to prepare you." Once again, he laughed, looking over at Paul.

Brian now wrapped his arms around Nicky snuggly and placed him on his lap. "So Nicky would it make you happy if you could come to visit Justin and Gus and me?" Brian asked, looking Nicky directly in his eyes and smiling.

Nicky looked back in Brian's eyes and smiled too, nodding yes.

"That's good, because I think you should come and visit us next weekend," Brian casually said with a smile.

"Yeah!" Nicky said, immediately starting to bounce in Brian's arms.

"What?" Paul asked in total shock, looking over at Brian, who now had this innocent smirk on his face.

Justin and Gus just sat there laughing.

"Really Daddy?" Nicky asked, leaning over and hugging Paul.

Nicky hugged Brian again and then Justin, but he didn't wait for an answer.

"I'm going to tell Dad," Nicky said, running from the room with Gus following behind.

"Now, why did you do that?" Paul said sternly.

"Do what?" Brian innocently asked. "My partner is going to have a hectic painting schedule this week. He dropped everything and gave you almost a week out of his life when you needed him. I need you and Jason to reciprocate and come to the house this weekend with Nicky to make things easier for him. It's as simple as that."

"Brian," Justin started to protest, "I can manage. That isn't really necessary."

"Yes it is, Sunshine," Brian said in that certain tone that let Justin know that Brian wanted no argument.

"It would really help," Justin finally admitted. "I just didn't know how to ask."

"We'll be there," Paul simply said, cutting a look at a smiling Brian.

A confused Jason entered the room followed by a skipping Nicky and Gus. "What is this that I hear about us going to Pittsburgh?"

"Well, West Virginia actually," Justin corrected with a laugh.

"Brian has just pointed out that we're needed at the mansion next weekend. So it appears that we...you, Nicky, and I...are going to visit Brian and Justin and Gus next weekend. Oh yes, and I have to sacrifice one of my Armani shirts for Nicky to paint in. I thought you told me painters wear smocks and berets. I've read nowhere that they paint in Armani shirts," Paul complained.

"Well, now that that's settled," Justin said with a smile. "C'mon Gus, let's see what I can do about getting you packed, and Nicky let's get some clothes on you."

Justin, Gus, and Nicky left Brian, Paul and Jason in the guest room.

"You two have something that you want to say," Brian said sternly before either of them could start to say anything. "I would be careful if I were you. I haven't made an issue with Justin yet of how much you took advantage of him with regard to planning Nicky's party. I haven't really brought it up, but I haven't forgotten it either. Just think how I could spin this? If you two would like my continued cooperation, I suggest that you think very carefully before you say anything."

"You're a bastard," Paul began, "But you know, you're absolutely right."

"It's part of my charm," Brian quipped.

"We'll be there, Brian," Jason said with a smile, "I'm really excited about it, and so is Nicky."

"Besides Nicky and Gus need a play date. Lindsay and Melanie will be in town so you can talk with them about your dilemma about another kid. It really is a win-win all around. Oh, and don't forget the Armani shirt for Nicky," he insisted.

Paul and Jason smiled at each other and just shook their heads.

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As Brian and Paul were in the process of moving the luggage to the front door, surprisingly the doorbell rang.

"I wonder who that is," Jason asked as he opened to the door.

Katie and Lee and Fran and Gabrielle and Ryan and kids stopped by to say goodbye to Brian and Gus and Justin on their way to mass.

Fran and Katie wanted to say a special thank you to Justin for everything he had done for the party.

Gabrielle swore that it was the social event of the season. She teased that the opening of the gallery wing was going to have to work really hard to surpass Nicky's birthday celebration.

Paul and Jason filled the family in on the fact that they would be visiting Brian and Justin next weekend. The family thought that was an excellent idea.

For too long, Paul and Jason had relied on Brian and Justin to do the traveling in the relationship. The family had secretly thought that Paul and Jason had been a bit selfish, but they didn't want to say anything. They tried to chalk it up to Nicky being so small and fragile. Fran and Katie were especially glad to see that things were changing.

Paul and Jason had additional news for the family that they forgotten to tell them because of all that was going on with Nicky's birthday.

"Ok quiet down. I have an announcement to make," Paul insisted, and everyone fell silent. "Ever since Justin arrived, I've had to listen to you bitch about the fact that Jason and I didn't get enough tickets to the gala opening of the new wing of the gallery. Well, that situation has been remedied. Now you all have less than three months to solve your tux and gown problems...not to mention our babysitting issues...because I got tickets for everyone," he said with a sweeping hand motion.

There was stunned silence. At first, no one said anything. Then everyone tried to talk at once. Then everyone clapped at once. There were hugs and kisses all around.

"So," Paul continued, "Now, that I know that you're all such art aficionados, this problem won't happen in the future...I promise you," he emphasized with a laugh.

Everybody smiled at him. Katie and Fran gave him a kiss on the cheek at the same time.

"Gabrielle, you and Ryan are going too," Jason quietly said, "So we have to come up with a creative solution about babysitting problems."

"Don't worry about it," Gabrielle said joyously, "We'll take care of it." She leaned in to give Jason a kiss. "Thank you. I can't believe that Ryan and I get to go. This is a formal affair too, isn't it? That means I have to go shopping."

"Me too, so it seems," Ryan added.

Finally the family turned their attention back to Brian and Justin.

"Have a safe trip, and we'll all see you all in a few months, if not before," Fran said. "We're really excited about the opening. You have no idea how happy we are, now that we have tickets."

"You take care and have a safe trip," Katie said, kissing Brian and Justin and Gus.

Fran and Katie had packed a tin of cupcakes for Gus to take to back to Melanie and Lindsay. A second little package had been packed for Justin to take on the plane as well.

The very happy Dunbar and Smith family members left for mass.

Shortly thereafter, the limo arrived to take Brian, Justin, and Gus to the airport. Cynthia had arranged for a limo because she figured that it was too emotional for Gus and Nicky to have to say goodbye to each other in an airport.

Everyone said their goodbyes. Gus and Nicky were looking forward to seeing each other next weekend. So were Brian and Paul...Jason and Justin.

Life had suddenly gotten interesting for everyone.

Chapter 22 - Let Us Not Forget, Part 2

Sunday Afternoon In Pittsburgh...(Day 42)

"Has anyone heard from Brian and Justin?" Debbie asked, as she was setting up for the usual Sunday afternoon dinner.

"Well, you know they're in Cincinnati, right?" Ben reminded her.

"It just seems like they've been gone a long time. This is the second Sunday dinner in a row that they've missed," she reminded everyone. "I haven't seen them at the Diner either, so they must be really busy."

"It does appear so," Ben added. "Although they did stop over to the house last weekend...they actually invited themselves over for brunch...it seems Justin is addicted to my muffins."

"Which just goes to prove that Justin will eat anything." Hunter added, "Once he drowned the innocent muffins in butter," he added with a laugh.

"Will you leave Sunshine alone?" Debbie insisted. "I just miss Brian and Justin at Sunday dinner...I guess I just got used to them being here all the time...especially since Sunshine came back."

"I'm keeping track," Hunter added, more in mumbling to himself than speaking to anyone in particular, "The pure entertainment value of Sunday dinners decreases significantly when Brian and Justin aren't here, and when they're here...then, Molly's here too."

"That means you have an accomplice around who's properly attuned to their nuances to help you keep watch during dinner," Ted suggested with a laugh.

Ben laughed to himself in total agreement with Hunter's mumbling, "I will admit those two are definitely a sight to behold." Then he looked knowingly at Hunter and laughed.

"All I know is that I've tried to call Brian, and I left messages everywhere, but he hasn't returned any of my phone calls," Michael complained to no one's surprise.

"Give him a break, Michael, he had a hectic schedule before he left to go to Cincinnati, and it's not going to be any better when he leaves there. It could be at least another week before Brian finally gets back here to Pittsburgh," Ted pointed out, trying to be careful not to betray any confidences.

"He has to be back by then, Melanie and Linds and the kids will be here next weekend," Michael pointed out, "Of course, it would be just like Brian to be too busy with business that he forgets all about Gus coming."

Ted looked at Michael in complete disbelief. Ted's analytical mind was already calculating how much time Brian and Justin had spent with Gus lately, and then he began to wonder why Michael seemed to be so unaware of events, but he said nothing.

"Brian is a good dad," Debbie said in Brian's defense. "You saw him and Gus together when Gus was here last month. Gus couldn't be happier."

"I don't know how Brian can be content to be this 'drop in dad' and be ok with it. I still want to be a 'real father' to JR. I want to be more involved in her life day to day. That's what a real father does," Michael pointed out. "Ben and I have been thinking that if Melanie and Lindsay insist on staying in Toronto to raise JR, maybe Ben and I should maybe consider living there too. I want JR and I to be as close as you and me," he said to Debbie. "Besides Gus probably needs Ben and me to be around for him too...especially if Brian is going to be so busy."

"What are you thinking?" Ted asked cautiously.

"Maybe I should look into opening a second comic book store in Toronto, and that way I could float between the two stores. That would give me more time with my daughter," Michael suggested, "But it's just an idea."

"You should think very carefully about that Michael," Ted suggested.

"We're just starting to think about it," Ben added, "We haven't even mentioned the idea to Mel and Linds yet."

"You don't need to think about moving anywhere! Melanie and Lindsay really need to think about moving back here," Debbie suggested, "It was stupid of them to move the kids away in the first place."

"It made sense at the time," Carl suggested, "It may not make sense anymore, but it seemed to make sense back then."

"I'm not sure it ever made sense," Michael added, "It may have been a stupid decision for all the wrong reasons."

Michael was, at this moment, clearly remembering his part in the decision of Mel and Linds to move to Toronto with the kids. Michael's thoughts were interrupted.

At that moment, Em breezed into the room with what appeared to be a stack of papers in his hand. "Lookie...lookie, what I have here?" he said always ready to spread a ray of gossip. "Just Lookie...lookie!"

Everyone laughed, but immediately turned their attention in his direction.

"Em, why do you look like the proverbial cat who swallowed the canary? Ok, it's obvious that you're dying to tell us something, so spill?" Ted pleaded, immediately laughing at the antics of his friend.

"Teddy!" Emmett squealed.

"Hunter is already complaining about a certain boredom factor without Brian and Justin around; so a touch of gossip would definitely perk up his day," Ben teased. "Provided, what you have to share is not X-rated."

Hunter gave Ben a scowl and said, "Or even if it is!"

Everyone laughed.

"I received a certain email this morning," Em began, really dragging this thing out.

"From whom?" Ted asked always eager to play along.

"You will never guess in a million years." Em persisted.

"Emmett! Will you cut the bullshit? And dish!" Debbie finally demanded.

"Ok, you forced it out of me. Justin! Justin emailed me a few pictures from Nicky's birthday party. Look!"

Everyone huddled around the stack of pages, so that they could see what was on the pages. To everyone's surprise, what had previously looked liked simple pages were really glossy, colored pictures. Emmett now had everyone intrigued.

"Why would Justin send you pictures?" Michael wondered.

"Because, Justin called to ask for a few suggestions, as he was helping with the last minute plans for the party. Now, he just wanted me to see the final results. Look at this! The decorations were amazing. The food looks scrumptious. Look, it seems like he actually sculpted the cakes like I suggested. Nicky looks so happy. My, look how Nicky has grown! Look at those curls! These are great!" Em mumbled as he flipped through the pictures and handed them around. "Oh my god, look there's Nicky hitting the...what is he hitting...is that a piñata...it's a truck piñata...Justin must have gotten carried away again...oh my god, and look at Gus..."

"Gus!" Michael interrupted, "That's not possible. Gus is in Toronto."

"Evidently not. Based on the evidence before us, I would say that a very happy Gus was in Cincinnati," Ted added, pointing to the pictures.

"I'm his best friend, you'd think that Brian would have told me that he was taking Gus with him on this trip," Michael scowled.

"Maybe it was a last minute decision," Carl tried to say to soothe Michael's hurt feelings, "Maybe there wasn't time. These things happen."

"He should have made the time. After all, we're best friends," Michael complained.

"Give it a rest. He's trying to live his life, and you need to do the same," Debbie reminded him, "Good for him. I'm happy for him and Sunshine."

"Those are great pictures, Em," Carl finally said with a laugh as everyone eventually returned the pictures to a single stack on the table in front of Emmett. "Thanks for sharing them with us."

Blake had deliberately hung back while everyone else had looked at the pictures. Now that everyone else had seen them and had moved on into the other room, Blake moved over to take closer look. Ted joined him.

"These are great pictures," Blake noted, "Aren't they? It's good to see Brian and Justin so happy."

"Yeah, it is," Ted agreed. "That must have been some party."

"Michael hasn't processed yet how really together Brian and Justin are, has he?" Blake quietly asked, "And that Gus is really with both of them?"

"No, he hasn't. Right now he's too busy being mad," Ted said with a smile.

"And self righteous..."

"That too," Ted laughed out loud.

"All hell is going to erupt when he finally puts two and two together, isn't it?"

"Probably."

"Em has already noticed that things are somehow different between Brian and Justin. I guess he hasn't said anything to Michael."

"I guess not."

There quiet conversation was interrupted by Debbie's booming voice, "Ok everyone, dinner is served!"

Chapter 23 – Let Us Not Forget, Part 3

Meanwhile in Toronto...(Day 42)

"Gus is coming home today," Lindsay said, bouncing around the house in anticipation. "I know it's only been a few days, but I've missed him."

"But Brian made sure that Gus called us every night and told us about his day. So even thought he's been gone for several days...he's really stayed in touch with us, but I agree, it will be good to have him home."

"He really has had an adventure filled time, hasn't he?"

"We have too. We talked with Jason and Paul. We even talked with Nicky. I can't believe all the things that Gus had to report to us each night," Melanie said with a laugh. "This is really wrecking havoc with my image of Brian as an asshole."

"Oh no! How will you survive? What will you do for a sparring partner?"

"I'll manage. He's still my favorite sparring partner. That will never change."

"I was hoping..."

"Silly blonde..." Melanie teased.

Lindsay left the room just shaking her head.

Lindsay returned some time later carrying what looked like several sheets of paper.

"What do you have there?" Melanie asked.

"I received an email from Justin. I printed this out so that I could show it to you."

"Oh? Is there a change in plans? Gus is still coming home today, isn't he?" Melanie asked with some concern for she was eagerly awaiting Gus' return too.

"No, No. Everything is still on track. Justin wanted to share a few pictures of Nicky's birthday party," Lindsay explained with a laugh. She handed the pictures to Melanie to look at, one at a time. "Look at the decorations. Paul and Jason went over the top for Nicky's birthday. Look at Gus and Nicky together...they really had a ball. Here they're riding on the fire truck together. Oh my, look at Gus and Nicky with the puppies. I'm going to kill Brian if Gus starts asking for a puppy," she rattled on.

Melanie looked at the pictures and noticed how happy Gus looked. She laughed along with Lindsay at the images. "Gus had a great time, you can see that."

But Melanie also realized something else...she knew that as much as she hated to admit it, Gus seemed really happy when he spent time with Brian and Justin. Gus had also made a new friend in Nicky.

Melanie couldn't wait to see how that friendship developed. She smiled.

Once again she filed the data points away as an additional validation of her hypothesis. She continued looking at the pictures of Gus and Nicky, laughing at what she saw.

Melanie was very glad that Justin had emailed these pictures to them.

Jenny Rebecca was trying to look at the pictures too. Although she was too little to understand the pictures, she was really looking forward to Gus' return. With Gus being gone, Jenny had missed him too. She needed Gus to build a fort...so that she could have something to knock down. Lindsay and Melanie would never engage in fort building unless Gus was around. Yes, Gus needed to hurry up and come home soon for one little almost-two-year-old was definitely waiting...Gus had been missed by more than just his mommies.

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The flight from Cincinnati to Toronto was uneventful. The First Class section of the plane wasn't crowded, so Gus was able to change seats during the flight, alternating between the vacant seat next to Brian and then Justin.

Brian submitted to the renewed humiliation of a few hands of UNO, while Justin was content to read with Gus or to help him draw.

The flight passed quickly and before anyone realized it, the captain was announcing their approach to the Toronto airport. Gus and Brian looked out the window of the plane and watched the City of Toronto appear.

They retrieved their luggage and got in a limo for the short ride to Lindsay's house.

In the car, Justin let his hand slide over to touch Brian's for support...for Justin was well aware that Brian really didn't want to say goodbye to Gus today. Justin simply interlaced their fingers, and Brian knew that he would get through this somehow.

When the car pulled in front of the house, Lindsay and Melanie were standing at the opened door waiting to greet them.

Gus ran to greet his mommies with hugs and kisses all around. Gus even hugged Jenny, who gave her brother a wet kiss. Melanie and Lindsay hugged Brian and Justin too.

Brian and Justin settled into the living room for an inevitable visit with Mel and Linds.

"Did you have fun?" Melanie asked Gus, knowing it was a stupid question for she had seen the pictures.

"I'm glad you had Gus call us every night," Lindsay said, "I could tell he was having such a good time, and I loved hearing about all the things he was doing."

"Did you get the pictures? Those were just the quick digitals, but I thought that you would get a kick out of them," Justin remarked.

"Pictures?" Gus said.

"Would you like to see?" Melanie said, letting Gus see pictures of himself.

Gus giggled as he saw himself and Nicky.

"That was some party," Brian added, "I'm not sure that Nicky will ever forget this birthday. And he loved having Gus there too."

"I guess Paul and Jason went all out, didn't they?" Lindsay teased

"You could say that," Brian agreed, leaning in to kiss Justin gently on the cheek.

"It was like this all day party, with people continually streaming in all day," Justin said with a laugh. "There were all kind of families mingling together, it was amazing to see."

"But Cincinnati isn't known for being an open city," Melanie pointed out.

"I know, it isn't like Toronto, but there seems to be a greater mixing between gays and lesbians and straights couples, especially when they have children. Based on what you and Lindsay have said about here in Toronto where they may recognize gay marriage, but you're still isolated from the community...for whatever reason...things were quite different in Cincinnati. Of course, I was only with one group of people. I'll know better when I go back for the gallery opening."

"How is the painting coming?" Lindsay asked.

"I, at least, know what I want to paint," Justin explained. "So all I have to do now is lock myself in the studio and paint. But I'll be ready for Gus to paint with me next weekend," he teased. "Right Gus?"

"Right," Gus said with a big smile, moving to curl up in Justin's arms.

"Well, I hate to break up this love fest, but I guess we should be getting back to the airport to catch our flight to New York, and we wanted to get a bite to eat," Brian reminded them.

"So both of you are going to New York?" Lindsay asked with some surprise.

"Yes, we both have client meetings. So we get to stay together there, but don't worry, we'll be back in Pittsburgh by Friday," Justin assured them.

So Brian and Justin got up to leave. They hugged Lindsay and Melanie goodbye. Then Brian and Justin hugged and kissed Gus goodbye. "But, I'm going with you," Gus pointed out, preparing to grab his little suitcase again.

"But Gus, you have to go to school tomorrow so you have to stay here with your mommies, but you'll be coming to the house over the weekend; how about that?" Justin explained now down on one knee.

Gus thought over his prospect, and then he finally agreed to release his hold on Justin and his suitcase. Brian couldn't help smiling in spite of himself.

Brian reached down and lifted Gus up in his arms, "So I'll see you on Friday. Now you know that you will be flying down to see me with your mommies and Jenny, right?"

Gus wrapped his arms around Brian's neck. "Ok." Then Brian lowered Gus back down to the floor.

Then Brian turned to Lindsay and Melanie, "I'll have a car take you to and from the airports. I don't want Gus dealing with all the emotional goodbyes with the family in the airport."

"Thanks that really helps," Mel said with sigh, "With all the luggage and stuff for the kids too."

"You know," Lindsay added, "You're a good father in your own convoluted way."

"Now leave him alone, Linds," Justin teased, leaning up to give him a kiss. "We'd better go." Then Justin paused and reached for the tin from Katie and Fran. "Oh, I almost forgot. Katie and Fran wanted you to have cupcakes from Nicky's party. They're decorated with the truck and the party themes and everything. I'm sure that Gus can explain ALL about it to you," he said with a laugh.

And with that Brian and Justin said their final goodbyes and returned to their waiting limo for the return trip to the airport.

"That wasn't so bad, now was it," Justin said with a smile, leaning in to touch his forehead to Brian's while they were riding in the limo.

"I guess not," Brian said, pressing a gentle kiss, "But only because you had already sent those emails this mornings," he laughed. "Mel and Linds were actually purring. It was truly a lesbianic moment."

"Will you give it a rest? Gus was ready to leave with us. Did you happen to notice that?"

"I think you handled that very well, Mr. Taylor."

"I think Gus is getting really used to spending time with us," Justin pointed out.

"He's getting demanding too, I've noticed."

"His father is Brian Kinney, what do you expect?"

"Yes, well I guess there is that," Brian teased.

"Gus knows what he wants, but he knows that he is loved too. You could see it this weekend in the way he put up with Nicky bossing him around."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, whenever anyone was around, Gus just gave in and let Nicky push him around. But I suspect when they were alone, Nicky must have listened to Gus' or the issue of Mickey Mouse Pancakes would never have come up," Justin suggested.

"So you think it was a part of some secret conversation," Brian teased.

"And Gus would have to be very secure and very loved to participate in that," Justin whispered, sealing his remark with a kiss.

"And you think that was the real reason that Nicky wouldn't let Gus out of his sight, huh? Brian asked, "You think this was the real reason why Nicky tugged Gus everywhere, even though it was his birthday? Nicky could have chosen to be the center of attention all by himself...yet he tugged Gus everywhere. Why do you think that was?"

"I think that Gus was the one that kept an eye on Nicky all day. I think Gus noticed when Nicky was a little tired or overwhelmed and that's when the two of them would scamper over to us and make themselves comfortable in our laps. Don't you remember?"

"So what you are telling me is that Gus knows that he is loved not just by Mel and Linds also by you and me too? And because of that he was able to look out for Nicky?"

"Yes."

"And we really have no idea what goes on between Nicky and Gus, do we?"

"Just imagine Daph and me..."

"Oh no...not that," Brian pretended to shudder in horror.

"What are you worried about? Daphne and I turned out ok, didn't we?"

"The jury is still out on that," Brian insisted, leaning in to make his point with a kiss.

"Brian!"

Chapter 24 – Let Us Not Forget, Part 4

A While Later...(Day 42)

The limo pulled into the airport, and Brian and Justin boarded their flight to New York.

"I have to admit that you're a much more interesting flight companion than Gus," Brian teased during the flight.

"You just like the idea of flying with someone who isn't going to challenge you to a game of UNO. By the way, what did you do with the cards?"

"I'm keeping them in my briefcase. I wasn't planning on giving Gus a chance to practice with them when I'm not around," Brian said, secretly congratulating himself for his tactical victory over a six year old.

"You're so evil," Justin insisted with a laugh.

The flight between Toronto and New York City was less than an hour, so before they knew it, the captain had announced their approach to New York City.

When the plane finally landed, Brian and Justin were both very glad that their day long ordeal of planes had finally ended.

Justin opened the door to his small loft. He almost wished that it was the door to Bri-tin, but as he gently leaned back against Brian, he smiled as he remembered that he was at his loft...with Brian. And it was ok. It was more than ok. For Brian had forsaken the comfort of a luxury hotel room to spend this night in his loft with him.

They quickly unpacked and moved the suitcases out of the way. Brian changed into his usual jeans and tank top. He settled into one of the chairs and propped his bare feet on the edge of the nearby coffee table. Brian was very relaxed.

Justin was bustling about the loft as he always did whenever he'd just returned from a trip. Brian simply smiled as he watched him.

"Is everything still here," Brian finally asked with a smile

"It seems so," Justin smirked, finally reaching into the refrigerator for water and returning with two bottles.

"Thanks."

"You know, it's been a long time since we've been here together," Justin said, making himself comfortable next to Brian.

"If I remember correctly," Brian began triumphantly, "On that occasion, you learned that I knew about Sparring Partners...the painting that you sent to Melanie. And once again were taught a valuable lesson...not to keep things from me."

"Leave it to you to bring that up."

"Oh yes. If memory serves me, it was here in this very loft that I learned that there were two additional paintings out there in the universe...with their own cosmic lessons to impart."

"Are you done?" Justin asked.

"What did you tell we when I asked to whom they were sent...you said that they would eventually turn up...well they sure did," Brian said with a laugh. "And look at the results."

"If you weren't so stubborn, I wouldn't have to resort to these extreme measures to make a simple point."

"And that point being?" Brian innocently asked.

Justin simply sighed, "That it's time for you and me to be together."

Brian smiled, "You know, I do remember that point being made abundantly clear. So now you can relax. I got the message," he teased.

"But I have to keep reminding you," Justin said, straddling Brian's lap and giving him a gentle kiss, "Because you have a tendency to forget."

"I do not!" Brian protested. "We both just have to figure out how to get through the next few months with all the work ahead of both of us. All that work has to be done as well as managing to get us moved here."

"We can do it."

"I have to talk to Theodore. We have to talk to Jennifer. This may be the last chance we have to see each other for months," Brian was now teasing, "So I wanted to take this last chance to get this one last look at you," he said, employing a wide-eyed stare, for good measure.

"Brian will you stop being a drama queen. We'll be living in the same house, or have you forgotten where my studio is? And I have a studio here in the city as well. I can paint anywhere, you know that."

"You can paint anywhere, provided you can get to somewhere to paint. What you can't do... is what I've done to you this past month...you can't paint if I keep you moving about. Not like this. So we need to be sure you're at least in one spot long enough so you can paint in either New York or Pittsburgh, but this traveling back and forth for you has got to stop. It may be ok ordinarily, but not when you have upcoming shows..."

"What do you suggest? Are you ready to be without me again?" Justin asked.

"Not even for one night," Brian whispered.

"That was all I needed to hear," Justin announced with a big smile.

"But the shows..."

"I'm ok. Really. I'm probably going to stay here and paint because I have to work on that project with Spyder. I'll be home for the weekend because of Gus."

"I knew that you would do that!" Brian protested.

"What?"

"Put your painting aside for the weekend because of Gus. That's why I asked Paul and Jason to bring Nicky for a play date."

"What?"

"Oh, I know that Gus and Nicky wouldn't be happy if they weren't finger painting with you in your studio, but I figured that most of the time Paul, Jason, and I can play with the kids and take them visiting so that you can get in some real studio time, if you manage to make it home over the weekend."

"I figured that's what you were thinking."

"Besides, Paul and Jason haven't seen Lindsay and Melanie in a long time. It's a chance for them to catch up."

"Was there anything else?"

"I figure this would give me brownie points with Molly too," Brian said with a laugh.

"What? How is that?"

"She has always given me all these points for Gus over the years. You know how she loves to have Gus around. I just thought that having another little whirlwind for her to affect would be just the thing. She's going to love Nicky."

"And you were planning on...."

"Her undying gratitude."

Justin burst out laughing.

The relationship between Brian and Molly was fascinating to watch, at best, as they both tried to figure out how to deal with each other. They were both the most ardent observer of the other. Brian was constantly trying to figure out how to curry Molly's favor, and Molly was always slyly trying to weasel something or other from Brian...from an obligatory kiss on the cheek to asking if Gus could spend the night with her and Jennifer.

"That might work," Justin finally managed to say before he burst out laughing again.

Brian had had enough so he finally nudged Justin off his lap, forcing him to stand up.

The sound of Justin's cell phone interrupted the moment.

"Hello," Justin answered without checking the caller id.

"Taylor," said the familiar voice, "Tell me you're back in the city."

"Yes, I just got back."

"I got your email this morning. Thanks for sending me the pictures of the party. My trucks were obviously the hit of the party. I loved what you did with them. As always you made my humble images look great...that's why we work so well together. I knew there was a reason I chose you as my partner."

"You're being nice to me for a reason. What do you want, Spyder?"

"Stop being so suspicious. Haven't I just shown an entirely new respect for your creativity? Haven't I just said nice things to you? After all, not everyone would think to create a truck piñata."

"Are you finished?"

"Yes, just had to get that out. I'm all better now! It was great by the way!"

"Spyder!"

"Sorry, we have a meeting at 9:30am. I was hoping that we could get together before hand and take a look at a few notes that I've made."

"No problem, I'll meet you for coffee in the morning at the usual place. If you change you attitude, I might buy your mocha latte for you, but I need to see some significant changes. You have a lot to atone for...I remember all those things you said to me while I was in Cincinnati."

"Now Taylor, can I help it if I didn't appreciate your genius until I got your email," Spyder continued, totaling enjoying himself.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning. That should give you enough time to reflect," Justin teased.

"Perfect. I'll work on that," Spyder teased. "I'll see you then."

"Bye."

When Justin closed his cell phone, Brian was smirking. "So you arranged a rendezvous right under my nose," he smirked.

"Oh yeah, with Spyder, I can see that you're trembling in your boots."

"Jason seemed to think that I had reason to be concerned. You realize that Jason thinks that Spyder seems to be some sort of competition for your affections. He really feels threatened."

"As I told Jason, he and Spyder are about equally annoying...as you could probably tell from our conversation, but he's meeting me for coffee in the morning, so you can see for yourself."

"You're inviting me to join you?"

"Absolutely."

Brian now had a reason to smile as Justin leaned up to gently kiss him.

"So I'll have coffee with you and meet the illusive Spyder. Then I'll finally have my meeting with Liberty Air and find out what the big secret is. I can't help wondering what's going on. Mark usually doesn't ask for a meeting without sending me some kind of agenda. Yet in this case, neither Cynthia nor Theodore could find out anything about the reason that he wanted to see me."

"That's odd don't you think?" Justin commented, "You've worked with him a long time."

"Yeah, but I guess I'll find out what's going on tomorrow," Brian confirmed.

"It must be something in the air," Justin hinted, "Didn't you also say that Eyeconics was being equally obscure about the reason for their meeting?"

"I did. Although ever since Eyeconics got involved with Rudolpho Silvestri, nothing that happens there would surprise me," Brian said with a slight laugh. "However, what's odd is that both Kellie and Susan asked for this meeting. I usually have to only deal with one or the other of them...unless there's some sort of problem."

"You've dealt with Eyeconics for years too. Why so suspicious?"

"Like I said," Brian reiterated, "Rudolpho Silvestri is involved in this somehow. I can just feel it!"

"Anything I can do to help."

"Maybe you had better stand by," Brian said with a sigh, "Unfortunately, you do handle him better than anyone when he decides to go over the top...although he did promise that he has changed."

"He said that?"

"He did," Brian now smiled, "And I have on good authority, change is possible," he said, finally leaning down to give Justin a gentle kiss, "Except with Rudolpho, I shudder to think of the possibilities."

They both burst out laughing.

Chapter 25 – Welcome To My Web

The Next Morning in NYC...(Day 43)

"Ouch!" Brian complained as he bumped into the wall of the shower again. "Tell me again, why we're here in this tiny shower instead of one of the roomy ones at any number of possible luxury hotels in this city?"

"Because..." Justin answered, allowing his wet ass to brush against Brian's cock.

"Then again..." Brian smiled, taking hold of Justin's waist.

After a few well-practiced maneuvers in tight spaces, Brian and Justin finally emerged from their morning shower thoroughly fucked and ready to face the day.

"Where's our meeting?" Brian asked, as he was getting dressed. "Surely you're not taking me into his lair."

"As it turns out, Spyder asked me to meet him at your favorite coffee shop a few blocks from here. That way you'll be happy too because your day will start with your morning latte. You and Spyder have a lot in common."

"How is that?"

"You were both geeks in high school, and neither of you can really start your day without a latte," Justin said with that certain laugh.

"Are you done, Sunshine?"

"With a name like Spyder, should I be prepared for studs...leather...with a hint of tattoos?"

Justin totally ignored the last question with a simple roll of his eyes.

"Aside from Spyder and your meeting with the client, what else is on your schedule for today?" Brian asked, expertly knowing when to change the subject.

"After Spyder and I finish, then I guess I'll head to my studio. I really want to get started on those paintings."

"So you'll be in your studio this afternoon?"

"Unless there's some unusual problem with this client."

"Why don't I call you later," Brian suggested, "Maybe I'll get a chance to feed you again before I leave," he teased.

"Ok. Sure."

When they were finally ready to leave the apartment, with Brian dressed impeccably in Armani and Justin in simple slacks and sweater, Justin casually asked, "Do you have your keys? You know you're going to need them to get back in here."

"Yes dear," Brian answered in a singsong fashion, "Do you have your cell phone?" he asked in reply and waited for Justin to answer with a nod. "Good! Now, are you going to leave it on for a change?" he persisted with his gentle nagging.

"Brian!"

"Just checking..."

They left Justin's loft and got into the waiting limo for the short ride to the coffee shop.

"I don't know why we just didn't walk," Justin mumbled.

"Because I had already prescheduled the limo so I could move about all day today. However, I'm willing to have the nice driver take me to the coffee shop, and we'll patiently wait for you to walk there and join us," Brian offered, "How does that sound?"

"Never mind," Justin finally said with a sigh as he settled back comfortably into his seat.

Brian smiled victoriously.

Justin was right. It was only a few blocks. So before they knew it, they had arrived at their destination.

As expected, a few heads turned when the limo parked at the curb; Brian and Justin exited the car and entered the coffee shop nonchalantly. They both moved with the accustomed ease of persons very used to the convenience of limos.

"I see that you reserved our usual table," Justin said as he approached a certain table with Brian in tow. He stood there and waited to be acknowledged by the person, who was pretending to be deeply engrossed in his morning paper.

"You know how I love this particular corner...you can see everything, but no one can touch you," Spyder said, without looking up. "But I noticed that, as always, you still love to make an entrance. A limo...really Taylor?"

"Don't blame me. I tried to get Brian to simply walk here. It's only a few blocks, but obviously, I lost..."

"Obviously..." Spyder commented with a smile.

"I see the moniker Spyder is well deserved," Brian commented with a smile, daring to move closer to the table. "May I?" he asked before daring to take a seat.

Feeling that his space had been invaded, Spyder lowered his paper to face the intruder.

Brian came face to face with a 32 year old, raven-haired stranger with smoldering good looks and piercing dark eyes. Spyder sat there with the calm assurance of someone who knew exactly who he was and was very sure of his place in the world.

"Welcome to my web said the spider to the fly," Spyder smirked, motioning to a seat for Brian and leaving Justin to fend for himself.

Brian took the offered seat with ease. Justin let out a quiet sigh and shook his head, while Spyder took a moment to size up Brian. Then Spyder continued, "Taylor, I see that you brought me a tender morsel. My gratitude to you will know no bounds."

"You obviously have no idea who you're dealing with," Brian commented in that certain tone with one raised eyebrow for emphasis.

"Oh I've heard the myth. It's so good to finally meet the legend. Especially since I've had occasion to meet a few of the walking wounded," Spyder persisted with a laugh. "Seriously Brian, your reputation precedes you," he said quickly extending his hand, "I've been so looking forward to meeting you. Evidently, I've been out of town whenever you've been visiting the city before. I'm glad that wasn't the case this time."

"Dr. Spencer Michael Warrington...I've heard a lot about you too. They say that you're a silver-tongued devil...accomplished in your own right. Legend has it that you simply vanished. I have admired your work. I'm sure there's a novel in the offing as to why you're designing websites with Justin."

"I see someone has been doing their research as well...I'm flattered."

"Ok, now that you two have met, I want both of you to behave yourselves," Justin ordered.

Brian and Spyder simply smiled knowingly at each other. Obviously both had heard this tone before.

"In answer to that question you're dying to ask," Brian said with a laugh, "All the time!"

"How do you put up with it?"

"He's so worth it."

Spyder merely nodded. "Then I guess, I should simply thank you for getting my business partner back to civilization." Then he looked directly at Justin and asked, "And have we gotten the back woods out of our system yet?"

"I'm going back to West Virginia to paint over the weekend. So whatever you need from me has to be done by then, or it will have to wait until next week."

"All the time," Brian commented again with a smile.

"So since I've been on my best behavior, how about that mocha latte that you promised me? And have I atoned enough for you to spring for a muffin too?"

"Possibly."

"Here, look at these while Brian and I talk," Spyder continued.

"This is our potential client?" Justin asked, hiding the company stuff from Brian.

"Just keep thinking pretty pictures...leave the technical stuff to me."

"As always."

The waitress came and took their order while they continued to talk easily.

"What I don't understand is why they would need us. We both know for a fact that they have a full staff to handle this sort of thing."

"From what I can tell, they think they need something special that their existing staff can't handle. They need an upgrade to our original designs. That's why we're meeting with them."

"What's going on?" Brian asked.

"This is the first client that Spyder and I worked on together." Justin pointed out. "They decided that they needed a full time staff to keep things going after we did the initial designs. So why do they need us now?"

"They think they need a new segment to the site."

"But you made the original site upgradeable. I don't see what they could possibly need."

"I only said that we would be willing to talk to them," Spyder quickly pointed out, "I haven't agreed to handle this project. I'm fully aware of your upcoming shows, but if this is something that we can do quickly, then why not?"

"Well, whatever it is that they think they need would probably take us less time than it would take their in house staff, or they wouldn't have called you in the first place," Justin suggested.

"That was my thinking too," Spyder agreed.

"I gather you two are planning to negotiate for a premium for your usual hefty fees, after all the client must be desperate to be bringing you back," Brian suggested with a smile.

"Oh yes, there is that too," Spyder smirked, appearing to be calculating.

"Before you two spend our fee, maybe we should investigate what the job really is first," Justin said, shaking his head and wondering why he ever agreed to have coffee with both Brian and Spyder.

Brian continued to watch Spyder and Justin as they continued to chat. In the back of his mind, Brian began to wonder how Spyder was going to take the news that this would probably be his last project with Justin. Spyder and Justin had worked together for several months now, and in spite of his bravado, Brian sensed that Spyder was extremely fond of Justin and would definitely miss working with him. No, Spyder was not going to take that news well when it was delivered, but that was an issue for another time.

When they were all finally ready to leave the coffee shop, Brian insisted that they join him in the limo so he could drop Justin and Spyder at their meeting. They tried to protest, but once again Brian won the argument.

Justin and Spyder casually talked over the notes one more time in the limo, while Brian watched the two at work. It was interesting to see the working dynamic between the two business partners, who definitely played well off of each other's skills.

Eventually, the limo finally stopped, and the driver got out to open the door at the stated address that Spyder had given him.

"Brian, thanks for the lift, I could easily get used to traveling like this again," Spyder said with a smile, "It's going to be hard to go back to riding the subway after this."

"Please, pay no attention to him," Justin smirked.

"Brian, I'm looking forward to seeing you again," Spyder said, leaning back in the limo.

"Anything is possible, I suppose. But you know...my reputation and all..." Brian tried to remind him.

"Keep working on it, Brian," Spyder retorted, still leaning into the car.

"Be sure your phone is turned on," Brian reminded Justin, as he was about to leave the car.

Justin simply smiled at the comment, fully understanding the implied Kinney-speak in that statement that Brian was going to miss him during the day.

"Later," Justin said, turning back to give Brian a gentle kiss of goodbye.

Spyder and Justin watched Brian's limo pull off into the midtown traffic.

"I like him. You two are good together. And both of you are going to be a force to be reckoned with," Spyder said with a laugh, as they were entering the building. "I'm so glad that I'll have a front row seat."

"Are you done?" Justin asked with mock exasperation.

"I've only just begun," Spyder retorted, "But I'm willing to take a break while we meet with our client. As usual, after that, all bets are probably off."

Chapter 26 – What Were They Thinking?

Moments Later, Liberty Air Office...(Day 43)

Brian accepted the offered cup of coffee and settled into one of comfortable chairs.

"You know I'm always fond of meeting with you Mark, but why so hush, hush about this meeting?" Brian casually asked, once he and the president of Liberty Air were alone again in the office. "And why are we meeting here in New York?"

"This meeting isn't hush, hush, Brian...I just didn't send you an agenda," Mark explained in all innocence.

"I see. There's a difference?" Brian commented with a sigh, beginning to feel a bit like he was having a conversation with Justin. "I know this may come as a strange question...but do you even have an agenda?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Of course, I have an agenda," Mark responded.

"Well that's at least good to know," Brian said with a smile.

"It's just that some members of the board and I have been talking..."

"Anything specific?" Brian asked, already not liking the sounds of things.

"Maybe you should just come with me!" Mark suggested.

Mark led Brian to the company conference room where a few people seemed to be gathering for a meeting. Brian greeted everyone by name and then settled down and joined them at the conference table.

Liberty Air had been Brian's account since his early days at Ryder. The Airline had once had the reputation for being a stodgy, conservative company. However, the relationship between account exec and client had mellowed over the years. So at this point there was a relaxed easiness even between the various board members and Brian. Of course, the fact that the company owed a lot of its success to Brian's ad campaigns over the years didn't hurt either.

"Don't let the fact that we're meeting here in New York intimidate you," Mark said immediately, knowing full well to whom he was talking and also knowing that there wasn't a chance in hell that Brian would be intimidated. Still Mark felt the need to be reassuring for the benefit of the others in the room. "This is just an informal meeting."

"Ok. Tell me again...why am I here?" Brian repeated once all the niceties were observed and everyone had been greeted.

Adam, one of the board members, immediately began to speak, "Brian, of course you've been following all the news lately on the recent plane crashes. I don't want to call attention to fact that the crashes are happening at all the other airlines..."

"That's good, Adam, because if you were to do that the public might get the impression that you're a heartless bastard with no concern for the families of the victims," Brian said harshly. "But I know you better than that, so would you like to try to make your point again?" he said pointedly.

Adam sighed in frustration. "What I was trying to say is that Liberty Air has spent several million dollars on safety features that the other airlines have chosen to ignore. I want Liberty Air to shout about these features in their commercials and ads. So we need a new ad campaign."

"Is that why you had me fly here under the cover of darkness?" Brian asked.

"You do see that this isn't the sort of thing that we could call you about?" Sylvia, the lone female board member present, wanted to mention.

"We have assembled a packet of information that you're going to need," Mark said, reaching for a large packet. "We didn't want there to be any leaks. So we thought if you made this personal trip, we could contain the gossip."

Brian had to suppress the urge to burst out laughing, for he couldn't believe his ears. Then he looked at the faces in the room and realized that everyone was deadly serious in their intent. So Brian thought for a moment and managed to gather himself together enough to address the group. "Mark, do you remember that very expensive legal staff that you employ?"

"Yeah, but what do they have to do with this?" Mark asked, completely thrown by the question.

"Did you, by any chance, run this idea for your new ad campaign past them?"

"No. Why would I?" Mark asked incredulously.

"Because if you had, they would have mentioned that there was an FCC regulation that prohibited you from terrorizing the flying public...and blackmailing them into flying Liberty Air," Brian said calmly.

"How can you even suggest such a thing? We just want them to know about the new safety features that we have put in place. What's wrong with that?" Adam had to ask.

"By stressing the safety features that the other airlines don't have?" Brian retorted patiently.

"We care about the safety of the flying public..." Mark pointed out.

"By implying that the other airlines don't?" Brian asked.

"We went ahead and implemented the FAA and TSA recommendations two years ahead of schedule. We should get kudos for that."

"Maybe...but not by suggesting that the FAA and TSA is lagging and slow to implement its own suggestions. What you're suggesting is that the government agencies issued regulations that really didn't matter. You're suggesting that the government agencies issued recommendation and then did nothing to push for their implementation. You just made the FAA and TSA look ineffectual. Is that what you're really trying to do here?"

"We told you, we just want the credit that we deserve," Sylvia insisted.

"We spent all this money on these safety features and no one seems to know about them," Adam repeated again.

"We did a good thing here. We just want to make the flying public aware of what we've done," Mark added.

"Can we dispense with the smoke and mirrors? What are we trying to do here?"

Adam, Sylvia, and Mark all looked at each other for answers. There was a deafening silence in the room while Brian patiently waited for answers.

"Ok. Ok. We want to increase our market share," Mark sheepishly admitted.

"Now we're getting somewhere. Why didn't you just say so?" Brian commented with a sigh. "Look, I saw your numbers, ridership is up 15% on Liberty Air, even though the ridership for the industry as a whole have been essentially flat for the last five years."

"Ridership is only up because of the campaigns you created."

"Of course...so what's the problem?" Brian acknowledged without a trace of humility.

"With increased fuel costs, our profits are being squeezed. So we're still looking for ways to improve the corporate bottom line," Adam explained.

"Please tell me that I don't have to conduct a basic finance course at this level of your corporation?" Brian teased.

"What do you mean?" Adam asked.

"If ridership is increasing, then so should be your revenues. I believe that I've done my part," Brian reminded them. "The remainder seems to be a management control issue to improve your bottom line," Brian pointed out.

"We have maximized the ticket pricing algorithm to maximize our revenues. We have negotiated for the best direct routes, and we are essentially serving the flying public," Mark assured him.

"Then what is the problem?" Brian asked.

"Fuel costs have skyrocketed. We have multiple teams working within the airline, each looking for ways for save fuel. We have made some strides in this area, but not enough. We have even joined with the other major airlines on research studies in this area. We're just looking for answers," Mark reassured him.

"So what have they come up with so far?" Brian candidly asked.

"Nothing concrete yet...it's too soon to tell. The possibility does exist that we may have to get use to living with lower profit margins. It may become the new reality of this industry under the current administration in Washington. Another option might be to diversify our holdings. This option has pros and cons, but we are looking into it. We owe looking at all the options and making a careful decision to our shareholders," Mark said with a sigh.

"If you know all this, then I don't understand the problem," Brian said, leaning forward in his seat to hear the anticipated reply.

"Now that you have reminded us of the facts...maybe we were just clutching at straws," Sylvia reluctantly acknowledged.

"Even, I can accept that possibility now," Adam agreed.

"Ok. So now that that's settled, let me try to do something useful since you dragged me all the way here," Brian began, "So just out of curiosity which is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you want the public to know about all the safety features that Liberty Air has included in its planes, or do you want to increase ridership, which is it?"

"You mean we have to choose?" Sylvia asked in total disbelief, "That doesn't seem right."

"Which is precisely why Kinnetik rather that this board handles your ad campaigns. Yes! You have to choose!" Brian insisted. "Which is it?"

The Liberty Air board members mumbled among themselves for a while obviously wrestling with this complex decision. Brian watched them as they tried to decide, and he couldn't help thinking about Gus and Nicky a few days ago at the fire station, as they tried to figure out which puppies to play with first...the decisions...the decisions.

Brian smiled to himself and so wished that Justin were here to share this moment with him.

"Let's see if I can help you," Brian finally suggested, after watching them struggle for several minutes, "Your present ad campaign is targeting the demographics that you're primarily interested in. The flying public, in surveys and in focus groups, still thinks of Liberty Air, as its primary carrier of choice. Your customers are not your problem," Brian reassured them.

"Well that's good to know," Adam commented.

"So I suggest that now is not the time to change your ads...especially with the existing campaign being so new and performing so well," Brian continued.

"So what do you suggest?" Sylvia asked.

"One of the TV news magazine shows might be interested in doing a feature on Liberty Airlines, which might serve to give you some additional exposure without opening you up to being sued by your competitors and the FCC," Brian said with sigh. "We might be able to casually touch upon the newly implemented safety features...but only in passing."

"But this isn't your primary suggestion to gain more public attention for us, is it?" Mark asked pointedly, knowing from Brian's tone that he had something else in mind.

"Not really. Liberty Air needs to get involved in a major charity event. Give something back to the communities you serve. Think about it!" Brian suggested.

"I guess that's a better solution than this cloak and dagger stuff we've been trying lately?" Adam suggested with a laugh.

"I guess we should leave our campaign strategy to you, Brian. We're definitely out of our element whenever we try," Mark added with a sigh.

"Agreed," Sylvia concurred.

Brian just shook his head in disbelief at the workings of the corporate America.

"Are we done here?" Brian finally asked.

Everyone nodded their agreement.

"Thanks for coming, Brian," Adam added. "You know it's always good to see you."

"It's always good to see you too Adam. You too Sylvia."

"Well now that I seemed to have averted a major crisis here at Liberty Air, let's see if can locate some more attractive lunch companionship," Brian teased.

"How is Justin?" Mark asked, with a knowing smile, "I've been reading quite a bit about him lately. He's still the darling of the art world."

"And very busy getting ready for several gallery shows...one of which is here in New York," Brian said with an easy measure of pride.

"Ah, at the Thornton Gallery, so I heard," Sylvia confirmed. "The buzz has started already."

"But the show isn't for months," Brian reminded her.

"But the publicity mill here in New York begins months in advance for a gallery the size of The Thornton, you know that. We can't wait to see his new pieces," she continued, "He's always trying something new."

"Brian thanks for your help. We'll think things over. We'll be in touch." Adam said, as he was leaving. "What you said makes a lot of sense."

"I always make sense, Adam," Brian reminded him.

"We're glad you made the trip...we don't get to see you very often. You know how we still like that personal touch you used to give us when we were just a fledgling airline," Mark teased, shaking Brian's hand.

"You aren't a fledgling anymore," Brian reassured him, "Liberty Airlines now ranks with the major airlines."

"Thanks to your campaigns," Mark reminded him quietly.

Brian just smiled.

When the meeting finally ended, Brian made his way back to his limo. He was so looking forward to the opening of the New York office of Kinnetik. But at the moment he had more pressing problems like trying to arrange a date with a certain blond.

Chapter 27 - Touching Base

Moments Later...(Day 43)

Brian settled once again into the limo. He was hoping that Justin was finished with his meeting and maybe would be able to join him for lunch. Unfortunately, the calls to Justin's cell phone each rolled over into voice mail.

"What's the use of having a cell phone, if you don't leave it on?" Brian complained into the open space of the limo.

Brian looked at the time. "Well, I guess your meeting with the client could be running longer than you expected. I knew I should have insisted that you call me when your meeting was over," he mumbled again.

He leaned back in the limo in frustration. Brian hoped that whatever was happening in that meeting wouldn't interfere with their weekend plans.

Suddenly images of hot tubs and Justin quickly expelled all doubts.

Brian smiled to himself as he reached for his phone again to place the next call.

"Theodore, what have done to my company?" Brian bellowed for good measure.

"Company still standing, Bri," Ted responded, "How was Cincinnati?"

"Let just say that Nicky managed to successfully turn four years old," Brian said with a laugh.

"That much we know," Ted sigh, "Justin emailed pictures to Em yesterday. Em showed them to us during dinner. Gus and Nicky seemed to be having a good time together."

"You have no idea," Brian added with a laugh.

"How are things going in New York?" Ted asked.

"Nothing I can't handle. Now fill me in on what's been happening at the office."

"Brian, we need to hire more people. Collezione Fiero and its accelerated deadlines are stretching everyone to the limit. Almost everyone was working all weekend. Then when you add The Pentland Group plus our existing clients...the staff is going to be overwhelmed in a few weeks unless we do something now."

"Hire what we need, but be sure that any new hires are willing to relocate to the New York office."

"Can you hold down the office there alone? I need to work from here for a few days. You can reach me on my cell phone. You can email and fax me stuff, of course. The working conditions are miserable, but I really need to do this."

"What's going on?"

"Justin needs to be here for a few days. He really needs to paint. He's dropped everything for Kinnetik for the last month; the least I can do is give him a few days here so he can get some painting done. I can work from here."

"That's a good idea. We can reach you if we need to," Ted assured him.

"And Theodore, if you breathe a word of what I just told you..."

"I know I'm fired. Bri, my lips are sealed."

"Good," Brian said, "As long as we understand each other."

Ted just smiled as he thought about Brian's tough guy image. "Is there anything else?"

"I need to talk to you about something."

"Sure Bri, go ahead."

"I originally told you that I wanted the New York Office of Kinnetik opened in three months, do you remember?"

"How could I forget that little bombshell?"

"Well, I need to change the dates a bit."

"That's good because three months was going to be really hard to execute. It's good to know that I'll have a longer timeline to work with...especially with everything else going on."

"Theodore, you don't understand."

"What do you mean?"

"I was planning on talking to you about this face to face. But I don't want to waste any time on this. I'm not extending the timeline. I need at least temporary offices here in New York almost immediately, so that means that I need a staff and living quarters. Run the numbers and make it happen."

"Bri, are you sure about this?"

"No," Brian said with a laugh, "But I don't see that I have any other choice. I'm going to need a lot of office support. By the way, talk to Murph and be sure that the software I'm not supposed to know about is installed everywhere. I want to make sure Justin's computer can talk to the office. Figure out what staff we are going to need. Hop to it."

Ted just sighed. "Is there anything else?"

"Yeah, now give me a status report on Collezione Fiero."

Ted updated Brian on everything that had happened in the last few days on the campaign. Everything was still on track, even in his absence. Ted reminded Brian that as he had requested, Valerie had reworked the script for the commercial. The revised script had already been emailed to Brian this morning.

Brian was pleased with what he was hearing by the time he said goodbye to Ted.

Brian paused for a moment. He needed to call Cynthia. There were things he needed to discuss with his assistant. Things he would have preferred to discuss face to face, but time and circumstances were not making that possible.

Cynthia had been Brian's assistant since his days with the Ryder Agency. She had survived the transition to Vanguard and had believed in him enough to take a chance with him at Kinnetik.

His relationship with Cynthia had always been more than account exec and executive assistance...it was a true working partnership. The combination of Brian, Ted, and Cynthia had made the Pittsburgh office of Kinnetik hum like a well-oiled machine. Now the New York Office was about to become a reality, and Brian needed to talk to Cynthia.

"Cynthia," Brian quietly said into the phone.

"Hi Boss," Cynthia answered cheerfully.

"How are things? Anything that I need to know about?"

"I guess you've talked to Ted, and he told you about emailing you the revised script for the Collezione Fiero commercial. Otherwise, just the normal stuff. We're holding down the fort."

"That's good. Listen, I know I was planning to be back in the office tomorrow, but I think I'm going to be working from here for a few days. Call me on my cell phone if you need me."

"No problem. How's Justin?"

"He's fine. He's meeting with a client as we speak."

"He's really busy isn't he? We were lucky that he made time to work with us on the campaign."

"Let's not tell him that," Brian teased, "He'll be unbearable to live with."

"Ok," Cynthia said with a laugh. "But I think he already knows."

"You're probably right," Brian said, nodding to himself. Look Cynthia, I need to talk to you about a few things. The phone isn't the best way, but with the timelines and everything I don't see that I have much choice. There are some things that you need to think about, and I want you to have the time to carefully consider you decision."

"Brian, you're scaring me."

"I don't mean to. I need you to listen. Are you listening?"

"I'm listening."

"I need to open an office here in New York as soon as possible. I need at least a skeleton staff and temporary office space. I need permanent space ready within 90 days. Jennifer did such a good job with our offices in Pittsburgh, I want her to do the same here in New York, but Justin and I need to talk to her first."

"You're right. She'll be upset if she hears about this from anyone else."

"Since the move is going to happen sooner than I originally expected, I need to know what you want to do. Do you want to make the move with me or do you want to stay in Pittsburgh and run the office? Think it over and let me know."

"I don't have to think it over. I'm going to make the move to New York with you."

"Cynthia, you realize that you have the education and surely the experience to run the Pittsburgh Office. You've worked with me long enough to..."

"This isn't about my capabilities. I know I can do the job. I know that I could have moved up years ago. But I also know that I don't want to miss my front row seat of seeing the action in New York. Besides you'll need me there more than here, trust me."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. It's going to cost you?"

"Cost me? I knew that. How much?"

"I want to run the New York Office when Kinnetik goes international."

Brian burst out laughing. "And what makes you think that Kinnetik is going to go international."

"Justin," she said confidently, as if the mention of the name should explain everything.

"Justin?" At the sound of the name, Brian immediately stopped laughing. "What does Justin have to do with this?" he simply asked, not knowing if he wanted to hear the answer to this.

"Justin predicted that you were going to need international offices eventually. Don't you remember? Plus after his show in Milan, he's going to be internationally famous. So, I'm holding out for the New York Office. You always said, 'Dream big or don't dream at all'..."

"I never said that. I've thought it...but I've never said it," Brian teased.

"I guess I must have read your mind...scary huh?" Cynthia said with a laugh.

"Get back to work or you're fired," Brian teased, "I'll talk to you later."

"I love my job!" Cynthia incanted, "So I guess I need to start to train several new assistants. I'll get busy on that."

"Just be sure they're willing to travel...willing to relocate."

"Got it. Now is there anything else?"

"Check with Lindsay to be sure everything is in place for her arrival on Friday. Confirm the same with Paul and Jason. They're going to need a limo. They're arriving on Friday too."

"They are?"

"Is Nicky coming too?"

"Yeah. This is suppose to be a play date for Gus and Nicky."

"Brian, does anyone else know that Paul and Jason are coming?"

"No. They'll find out in due time," Brian said nonchalantly.

Cynthia smiled and shook her head as she pictured the impending weekend and the ensuing chaos. Michael especially was not going to like outsiders being here taking up Brian's time, especially when Brian had already been gone for so long. She also couldn't help wondering how Brian and Justin were going to deal with all of these people at once.

"Michael has been trying to reach you," Cynthia said, fully realizing that this message was unnecessary. "He's left several messages."

"I'll take care of it."

"By the way, how was your meeting with Liberty Air?" Cynthia finally asked as an afterthought. She was curious why Brian hadn't mentioned the meeting at the beginning of the call.

"Let's just say the meeting made the client happy...and leave it at that."

"Oh, that good, huh?" Cynthia said with a laugh. "Well at least there's no crisis. With everything else going on, no client crisis is a really good thing."

"Good point."

"Well, it's almost time for my meeting with Eyeconics so I better get going. I'll call you later," Brian said, ending the call.

"Bye," she responded. Cynthia hung up the phone and smiled to herself. "I love my job!" she said aloud to no one in particular.

Chapter 28 – What Now?

Later that Afternoon...(Day 43)

Brian walked into the Belluss Occhiali Offices in New York and was greeted by the receptionist.

Before he could receive further directions, Brian heard his name being quietly called.

"Brian," the familiar voice repeated, "It's so good to see you."

Brian immediately felt the little hairs on the back of his neck react. He knew this could only mean trouble.

"You don't mean that," Brian responded with a smile, "And why aren't you in Milan?"

"I have work to do here," Cristina Silvestri said and returned his smile, "Where's Justin?"

"In his studio, as far away from you as possible..."

"Now Brian, I've been hearing rumors. I just thought I would check them out for myself. That's why I'm here."

"What rumors?"

"I heard that Justin was in New York."

"You must have spies everywhere. That rumor is true, but I want you to stay away from him, he trying to get ready for several shows, and Collezione Fiero has already pushed him far enough behind schedule."

"Don't get so defensive...I only asked if he was here."

"I also heard that Kinnetik is opening an office here in the city. Congratulations!"

"So when there are no rumors on the horizons, you're content to start them yourself. You definitely are your father's daughter."

"And so much more," Cristina confirmed gleefully.

"Now what is that supposed to mean?"

"You'll see. C'mon Brian, can't we be friends," Cristina teased, "Maria and I have gotten over the fact that Justin chose you instead of one of us...and we're trying to heal our broken hearts. Anyway, we're like family now...we all have to work together."

"You're supposed to be in Milan!" Brian took pleasure in reminding her again, "By the way, what have you done with Kellie and Susan? Don't tell me you're here doing a take-over?"

"Don't tempt me," Cristina said with a laugh, "No, everyone is waiting for me to escort you to our offices. I personally asked for this honor. I wanted us to have this moment to try the bury the stiletto between us."

"Just out of curiosity, where were you planning on burying that stiletto? And just so you know, in English that's a hatchet that we should be burying. Of course, now that I think about it, you and I should probably stick to stilettos," Brian teased.

Cristina couldn't resist laughing at his imagery.

"Brian, will you at least try to smile, the others will wonder what I tried to do you. Your attitude isn't helping things."

As they were walking, a second familiar figure approached.

"Well there you two are. You were taking so long, I thought I was going to have to follow a trail of blood," Maria Silvestri commented with a laugh. "How are you Brian? We've missed you. And how's Justin?"

"Justin is fine. Both of you are here?" Brian mumbled, trying to process the turn of events. "So, who's minding things in Milan?" he finally asked.

"Brian!" Maria remarked with a smile. "Stop worrying. Things with the collection are fine...better than fine actually."

"But I thought you talked to father. Didn't he tell you?" Cristina asked.

"Rudolpho was as obscure as always. He simply said it was a surprise. Kellie and Susan asked for this meeting. That's why I'm here. No one said anything about you two being here to torment me."

"Probably because everyone knew that you would react like this," Cristina smirked.

"Well everything will make sense soon enough," Maria said, linking one on her arms with Brian's and gently nudging him along. "Come with me. Kellie and Susan are waiting for us."

"I was planning to take the other arm, but I think I'll keep a safe distance," Cristina suggested with a laugh.

"Good idea," Brian confirmed, "If you touch me it would probably fall in the realm of harassment. But Maria...now that's another story," he teased.

"Thank you, Brian," Maria teased.

Cristina couldn't resist playfully hitting him gently on the arm. "I do so wish that Justin were here," she said, unable to resist getting in one more taunt. "He is sooooooo much easier to deal with."

"You know, I've heard that before," Brian quipped.

They finally arrived at a spacious office, where Kellie and Susan were patiently waiting.

"Brian, it's really good to see you," Kellie began, "Thanks for making a trip to New York to see us. How's Justin? There're rumors that he's painting in his studio here in the city."

"I must admit that I'm fascinated by your keen interest in my partner's whereabouts. I'm still waiting for someone to tell me why I was summoned here to this all female board of inquiry," Brian teased, looking around at the occupants in the room.

"Now Brian!" Susan protested.

"First, of all we wanted to let you know that the first ads targeted to our distributors for Collezione Fiero are doing quite well. The pre-announcement orders and the initial buzz may exceed our projections, even at this early stage of the campaign. We just thought that you would like to know. I flew here to share the news with you personally," Maria began. "Aren't you pleased?" she asked finally releasing his arm.

"Thrilled," Brian retorted sarcastically, "But a simple email would have given me that news. So what else is up your collective couture sleeves?"

"Stop being so suspicious! And your sarcasm isn't necessary either," Susan remarked. "Now can I get you anything...water, coffee, tea?"

"Brian, please have a seat. You know that we did have a reason for bringing you all the way to New York," Kellie added, "Otherwise we could have met in Pittsburgh."

Brian motioned for a bottle of water. "This better be good," Brian grumbled, as he began to make himself comfortable in the offered chair and accepting the offered bottle of water.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Kinney, I am that reason," a female voice laced with faint hints of French and Italian accents said from the open doorway to the office.

Brian turned to come face to face with a stunning woman, immaculately dressed and standing by the partly opened door. The rest of the room fell silent.

Brian immediately stood up.

She walked toward Brian with her hand extended, "Mr. Kinney, I am Perin Silvestri," she said, "And I've wanted to meet you for some time. I apologize for all the intrigue."

Brian was speechless, but he did manage to shake the offered hand.

"I've heard a lot about you," Perin continued with a genuine smile, "I see that all the rumors are true. They say that you're also the best at what you do. Based on the preliminary figures for Collezione Fiero, I can see that everyone was right about you. By the way, I love the name Collezione Fiero. The choice of a name is brilliant and works so well internationally."

"Why thank you," Brian said confidently. "We thought so too."

"Brian," Maria said softly, "I'd like you to meet my mother."

"You see Brian," Cristina began, "My mother started Belluss Occhiali, and she watches over it like it was a third child. And in spite of appearances, it was my mother, who worked out our joint venture with Eyeconics."

"Your mother?" Brian whispered.

"My husband is especially fond of you and Justin," Perin continued. "He's changed since his encounter with the two of you. I wanted to see why," she said with a laugh, "That's why I'm here."

"I'm happy to meet you Signora Silvestri," Brian could finally say.

"When you were at Vanguard, Darcy...the then Mrs. Vance...said you were a feast for the eyes. She was right. She also said that you were the bane of Gardner's existence until he found a way to force you out of the company. I never understood what she saw in Gardner to begin with. Impossible man! Anyway, it was said even back then that you were the best at what you did. Then I heard that you started your own firm. That's very impressive for one so young, and you've been very successful. Based on all that I've heard, we were very lucky that you agreed to create the campaign for our joint collection. I just wanted to say how very glad I am about that too," Signora Silvestri added with a knowing smile.

"I'm flattered," Brian said with a smile.

"Well, now that the introductions are all out of the way, let's get down to the other reason that we asked Brian to come here," Kellie began, "Although meeting Perin would have been reason enough."

"Brian, you know what difficulty we had finding the right ad agency to handle the new collection, so we passed on several international showcases that we would have ordinarily participated in, deciding instead to use your strong ad campaign for our collection."

"That would make sense."

"Through an unusual set of circumstances, we have been asked to participate in one of those previously passed on showcases on very short notice. So we need to your help."

"Why do you need my help? Belluss Occhiali has a reputation for making an outstanding blitz at these showcases, so you obviously have significant in house expertise in this kind of thing. So what exactly do you want me to do?"

"We know that Belluss Occhiali could effectively showcase the collections, but Eyeconics wants to have an impact too. Since this is a joint venture between our two companies, we just need you to oversee the preparations. We want things to have a different look than Belluss Occhiali would normally produce alone. You and Justin understand our companies so well...both individually and together. So we just need your help to make a spectacular showing at the showcase. This is very important to all of us."

"Schedules are already a really tight these days with the Collezione Fiero rollout. Have you forgotten? Due to all the delays, you asked for an accelerated roll out of everything. I can't believe that you want to add something else to the mix," Brian said shaking his head incredulously. "Just out of curiosity, when were you planning on all this happening?"

"We were hoping that you and your team would leave for Milan immediately. It's only for a few days. We really wouldn't ask if it wasn't necessary. We have less than two weeks to get everything ready," Kellie pointed out.

"You know that I would do anything within reason the make the Collection a success. But what you're asking is out of the question," Brian patiently insisted.

"Brian you can't turn us down on this," Susan protested strongly. "We can't get this done without your help."

"The creative team of Belluss Occhiali will be at your disposal," Cristina insisted.

"As well the creative team of Eyeconics," Kellie added, "We just need a little guidance and direction to pull things off. You can't say no to us."

"Sure I can," Brian said easily.

"This showcase is really important to us," Maria added. "Even Father understands that. He's willing to spare no expense to makes sure everything is perfect. But we really need your help to pull this off on such short notice. We don't have any time to lose."

"So all of you have ganged up on Rudolpho. No wonder he escaped to Switzerland," Brian teased.

"No, Rudolpho is here is New York. I suggested that he remain at the hotel. But if his presence is necessary so that you would help us, then I'm sure we could get him here quickly," Perin insisted.

Before Brian could answer, Susan chimed in with a question.

"Where is Justin?" Susan asked, " I see that Rudolpho was right. He said that we should have approached Justin first with our problem. Justin being the artist would be more sensitive to our needs. He warned us that Justin would be more understanding of our plight," Susan added said with some frustration. "But I felt that you could be reasonable about this, Brian."

"I assure you, suggesting that Justin would be more reasonable about this is definitely not the way to garner my cooperation," Brian suggested sternly. "Besides, you've obviously forgotten how much trouble Justin can be. So I wouldn't take his cooperation for granted on this if I were you," he added with a smile.

"I know that you'll eventually be reasonable about this. Once Justin understands things, he'll have a chance to make you see our predicament," Perin added, "My husband indicated that he was very involved in our campaign, so it would probably be helpful if he were on our side. It may help to convince you to find a solution to our problem."

"And you did say that he was in his studio here in New York..." Cristina added.

"So he could easily meet with us," Maria added.

"And I would so love to meet Justin," Perin added, gently touching Brian's shoulder. "And if we meet tomorrow, Rudolpho can join us for our meeting too."

"Then we would all be together to plot out our strategy for the showcase," Kellie added.

Brian listened to the plotting among the five women in the room with him. He now understood why Rudolpho Silvestri was the way that he was. To spend almost a lifetime trying to win arguments Perin and Cristina and Maria on anything must have been daunting...especially when they joined forces. Brian was sure that taking over international companies and starting new companies both must have been far easier endeavors for Rudolpho to pursue than trying to rule his own household. No wonder he built such an expansive empire. And now the Silvestri women were pulling Kellie and Susan into their schemes.

Brian continued to listen to them making their case that they needed Justin to intercede for them. As he listened, Brian became amused by three turns of events: First, evidently since Rudolpho was out of intermediaries...Justin was now being pressed into service in that role. Second, it was clear that the Silvestri family had missed Justin, and each of them was trying to invent a reason to see him. Third, in spite of their problems in the past with the Silvestris, Kellie and Susan had somehow joined them now in whatever they were up to.

Brian shook his head and tried to figure out whether to simply remind this group that he, not Justin, was in control at Kinnetik, and that sooner or later, everyone in this room would have to learn to live with his decisions. Or, he could let everyone think that they'd won and simply ask Justin to get involved one more time.

Finally the talking among the women stopped.

"Brian, you're awfully quiet. Say something." Susan insisted. "Are you going to let us talk to Justin?"

"All right. You realize that Justin has a meeting schedule of his own so I can't promise that he'll be able to meet with you ..." Brian said, and everyone in the room began complaining at once. Brian held up his hands to silence them all. "But...but I will talk to him to see if he's available and willing to meet with you. That's the best that I can offer."

Once again, the women in the room started talking among themselves. Finally they stopped talking and agreed that Brian's offer was fair. They agreed to meet tomorrow morning at the same time...and hopefully Justin would be there and able to help them.

Brian just shook his head.

"I wanted to come along on this trip so that I could finally meet you, Mr. Kinney," Perin reminded him again.

"Please make that Brian...."

"Brian. I like that. And I'm Perin. Rudolpho and I are planning to have dinner with Darcy tonight. I'll have so much to tell her. Especially when I tell her that I finally met you. She will be so jealous. You made quite an impression on her when you were working at Vanguard."

"Please give her my regards," Brian said sweetly.

"Of course, maybe if I had insisted that my husband bring me with him on his trips to the States years ago, I could have succeeded in securing Justin as a son in law," Perin now teased. "Instead, I've had to nurse my daughters through their broken hearts in this matter."

"I know that your daughters are fond of Justin, but I doubt that either Cristina or Maria are too broken hearted...in spite of what they may tell you. And I'm sure that by now everyone has filled you in on the fact that Justin and I are partners."

"I was aware of that," Perin confirmed with a smile. "Things do seem to have worked out I guess. I like you Brian. I feel that both Belluss Occhiali and Collezione Fiero are in good hands. We're just a small family run company so it's important that everyone work well together. And just between you and me, both my partners and my daughters adore you. What more could I ask for?"

"Indeed."

"I feel better knowing that we're all meeting tomorrow," Perin said confidently. "I guess I can now release Rudolpho from the hotel. I'm sure he'll be glad about that."

"Knowing Rudolpho, he's probably taken over another company during his confinement," Brian said with a laugh.

"He did mention something about making a few phone calls this morning," Cristina said slyly.

"It has been said that the mind of Rudolpho Silvestri never sleeps," Brian quipped.

"Never," Perin added, "I can attest to that."

Everybody laughed. "I guess I'll see you all tomorrow," Brian said, as he was gathering his things to leave.

"And we can hardly wait to see Justin..." Cristina added with a smirk.

Chapter 29 – Did I Not Mention

Earlier that morning... (Day 43)

"Oh my goodness," said the receptionist at Barrister, Wilkins & Evans, one of the premier architectural firms in New York.

"Adrienne," Spyder said with a smile, "Still guarding the fort I see. And you remember Justin Taylor, don't you?"

"Of course. Hi Justin," she said in reply. She returned her attention quickly back to Spyder. "It's good you two are back. Things haven't been the same without you."

"We planned it that way," Spyder teased, "It's good to know that we haven't lost our touch."

"You kidder," she responded with traces of her British accent showing through her practiced American tones, "You're scheduled to meet with Mr. Evans, I see. Someone will be right out to get you. Would either of you like coffee or something?"

"No, we're fine," Spyder said, looking over at Justin to confirm.

"No thanks," Justin said, as he was making his way to a comfortable seat.

Spyder and Justin made themselves comfortable.

"I can't believe that the modification of the company website warrants senior partner involvement to meet with us," Justin suggested, "What do you think is going on here?"

"They told me this was a simple modification. I'm taking a wait and see attitude. Like I told Brian, I'm only willing to do this project if it's not too much trouble. You have shows coming up, and I have to go back on the coast. Although you and I can work together from anywhere, I'm not sure either of us is really inclined to do that at the moment. So we'll just see."

"What do you mean, you're going to the coast?"

"Do I detect a hint that I'll be missed? Be still my little heart!"

"Will you stop being a drama queen? You know how I feel about you."

"Yeah, I do. Same here."

"Then what going on?"

"We'll talk about it later."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

At that moment, they noticed someone approaching. The person stopped momentarily to speak to Adrienne, and then immediately came over to them.

"I'm Toni Andrews. I'm Mr. Evans' assistant. The two of you are legendary around here. Mr. Evans has been looking forward to this meeting."

"It's a simple website," Spyder reminded her.

"Yes, but we live in the technological age. That makes the website critical. We couldn't function without it. Not now...not ever." Toni said, emphasizing the last part.

Justin and Spyder were about to inquire further, but before they could speak, Toni continued, "Here we are," she said, showing them into a conference room. "He'll be right with you."

Justin and Spyder set about making themselves comfortable in the room to wait.

"So you two are back where you belong," a voice said from behind them. "I tried to tell the others that we couldn't afford to let you go. They had limited vision and wouldn't listen to me. So we know it's going to cost us a fortune to get you two back. Ok...name your price," he insisted.

"Mitchell, there must be some mistake. We understood that you needed a simple modification to the website that we designed. So we're prepared to consider that. Coming back to work for the firm wasn't even on the table," Spyder quickly pointed out. "Besides, wouldn't you like to say hello first," he teased.

"Of course, how are you Justin? Hello Spyder. How's that?"

"Much better."

"By the way congratulations to both of you on your nomination for the Bronze Quill. I know that the price tag to get you both back here went up with the nomination. I'm trying to close our deal to get you back before you actually win the award. See I do know about these things," Mitchell said with a smile. "Now back to my original question, what is it going to take for the two of you to come back here?"

"So just as Taylor suspected, the website was just a ruse?"

"Now Spyder stop being so suspicious. No. No. The website needs a new segment to be added. The idiots on our staff can't figure out your code...what a surprise there...so you and Justin have to write that segment. That part is a genuine contract. Having you come back to the firm was just frosting to make an old man happy," Mitchell finally admitted sheepishly.

"Mitchell, please not the 'old man' routine. You're what, 45...have you no shame?"

"Even immune to the sympathy routine, Justin how do you deal with him?"

"I'm still learning."

"Ok Mitchell, let's talk about what you need."

"You and Justin added a proprietary segment to our website that allows several architects to work on our location-site designs simultaneously...without regard for location."

"Yes, I remember."

"We're about to acquire three international firms. We need to bring them on line as part of our proprietary network, and they need to be able to work with us as seamlessly as our existing in house staff. That's essentially it."

"And when do you want it?"

"I wanted it yesterday. I would be happy with tomorrow. But I'm trying to learn patience in my old age. So the question is, when can I have it? I'm at your mercy."

"I do so love to hear you beg," Spyder teased. "It sounds like a simple problem. Our replacements should have been able to handle this. My code is really not that complex."

"The three acquisitions all have their own proprietary websites. Some of them have features we would like to incorporate within our system. Then we want all four systems to work as one coordinated unit. We want an architect in New York and one in Paris to work on a project in Hong Kong." Mitchell explained.

"This is more work than either Taylor or I bargained for," Spyder started to protest. "We both have commitments...I just don't know...we really have to think about this," Spyder said haltingly. He immediately knew that Justin was going to kill him for getting him involved in this mess.

"Promise me that you'll think about this. I've prepared a packet of information to help you with your decision. Stay in touch with Toni or myself on this. Of course, I need your answer as soon as possible."

"Ok," Spyder said with a sigh. "Taylor and I will review this and talk about things, and we'll be in touch. But Mitchell, you've got to realize that this is a surprise. I'm not really sure how I feel about this."

"Understood. That's good enough for now," Mitchell said, "I'd offer to bribe you with lunch, but I have another meeting. I'll save it for a celebration lunch or dinner when you two hopefully tell me yes."

"We'll see," Spyder said cautiously, "I wouldn't break out the champagne just yet though."

They continued walking towards the reception area exit. "Spyder...Justin, I'm going to continue to hope...at least until I hear a definite no from you."

"Like I said, Mitchell, we'll think about it," Spyder reinterated.

"Fair enough," Mitchell said hopefully with a sigh.

"Good seeing you again, Mr. Evans," Justin added.

"You too, Justin. I have a feeling we'll be working together so you better make that Mitchell."

"I'd like that," Justin said with a smile as they finally reached the reception area.

"Excuse me, Mr. Evans, " Adrienne interrupted quietly.

"Yes, Adrienne," Mitchell answered, turning to see to what Adrienne wanted, as Justin and Spyder motioned their final goodbyes.

They were about to leave when Spyder heard his name. "Spyder, you do manage to get around, don't you?" the voice said quietly.

Spyder recognized the voice and turned, "This city is really just a small town, and I do like to be where the action is, you know that Adam. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here for a meeting. We should get together for drinks so we can catch up. I'll call you," Adam said. "Oh, where are my manners. This is one of my associates at the firm, Kip Thomas. Kip meet Spyder Smith."

"Spyder...unusual name. Hello, I'm pleased to meet you," Kip said, shaking hands with Spyder, but Kip's eyes were fixed upon Justin.

Spyder noticed. "You too," Spyder said returning the handshake. "And this is my PARTNER, Justin Taylor. Taylor this is Adam Lyons and Kip Thomas. Adam is a partner in Kennedy and Collins, one of the major ad agencies here in New York."

"THE major ad agency here in the city," Adam corrected him.

"Did I fail to mention his modesty?" Spyder added.

"Please to meet you both," Justin said, relying on his country club manners because he had just come face to face with a ghost from his past.

"I don't mean to stare," Kip quietly said, appearing to search his memory bank to connect the face and name, "But you look familiar, have we met before?"

Before, Justin could answer, Spyder interrupted, "For some reason that seems to be the universal reaction to my partner. It happens so often that a smile seems to be the only proper response. So please, Taylor, a simple smile...so we can be on our way."

"I can understand why you would feel that way," Adam said, with a sigh of understanding, as he too began to fix his eyes on Justin.

Justin and Adam simply smiled at each other, while Kip still seemed to be trying to make the pieces fit. Meanwhile Spyder continued, "Well, we need to be going. Adam, give me a call. You have the number. We seem to have some catching up to do."

"Obviously," Adam said, nodding toward Justin.

And with that Spyder and Justin proceeded to quickly leave the area.

Once they were outside, Spyder turned to Justin, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"You know I'm not going to let this drop?"

"I know," Justin said with a sigh. "I think I'll head to my studio. We'll talk later."

"Promise? I think we have a lot to talk about," Spyder said calmly.

"Promise," Justin confirmed.

"So you'll call me later?" Spyder asked trying to hide his concern. Justin nodded his agreement. "Let's share a cab. After this morning's mode of transportation, I'm not ready to face the subway just yet."

That last statement caused Justin to laugh. "That's better," Spyder said, letting all his unasked questions drop for the moment.

Chapter 30 – The Painting

Later that Afternoon...(Day 43)

Justin stopped by his loft and quickly changed into comfortable cargo pants and a tee shirt. It was definitely time to go to his studio and paint.

Lost in the realm of unsorted thoughts, Justin quickly arrived at his studio. Once he was locked securely inside, he immediately wrapped himself in Brian's Armani shirt. Justin took a moment to savor the feeling of Brian's essence was still trapped within the fibers of the shirt. For Justin, painting in one of Brian's shirt, meant that Brian wasn't far away. And right now, Justin needed to feel that Brian was close.

Justin's unsorted thoughts intruded. So he placed a new canvas on the easel and began to mix the paints so reflexive of those thoughts...for Justin knew, whatever he was thinking could best be sorted out in paint.

As he dipped his brush in white paint that would form the base coat for the canvas, Justin's thoughts continued to race.

Justin then began to make broad stokes of yellow paint on the canvas.

So Kip Thomas had landed on his feet and was working for a major firm in New York. The world truly was smaller than Justin had realized, and Spyder was right when he said that New York City was just a small town.

As Justin thought about Spyder and that New York would soon be his home with Brian, his brush stokes became softer as he changed to shades of blues and green. With his gentler stokes there was a momentary quietness to his painting.

Who would have guessed that a ghost from the past would resurface after six years in New York City of all places? Kip Thomas, who made the first move to get Brian to fuck him; then when it happened, Kip used the fact that they were both gay and had fucked to ask for a promotion. When Brian refused, Kip filed a lawsuit against Brian and the Ryder agency for sexual harassment. Kip was out to totally destroy Brian for the supposed betrayal. Back then, Brian would have been ruined and would have lost everything.

The broad strokes resumed again as he remembered what Kip had tried to do to Brian. And Justin once again picked up the broad brush and dipped it in the red paint and crisscrossed the canvas again. The brush strokes like Justin's thoughts moved on.

Justin found a way to fight back. Without ever saying a word to anyone, Justin had recognized Kip and seduced him. Then Justin made Kip believe that he was under age and that his father had imprisoned for ten years the last person with whom he had been involved. Justin promised to never tell his father about he and Kip being together if Kip would agree to drop the lawsuit against Brian in exchange. The next day to everyone's surprise, Kip simply dropped the lawsuit. No one ever knew why...no one seemed to care why.

Justin shifted his colors once again, to the reddish gold colors as a small shape started to appear in the corner of the canvas. The image, like its painter, was trapped in the web of circumstance. And finally the shape came to a focal point...a moment of truth.

While Justin continued to paint with the colors of victory, the yellows and golden colors were cast in fine strokes upon the canvas.

And for six years, Justin never mentioned his part in getting Kip to drop the lawsuit. For six years, Justin hadn't given his actions another thought. Until now, when he had come face to face with Kip Thomas again and been forced to remember.

Now it looked as if Kip had once again aligned himself with someone powerful. Justin wondered if Kip still believed that he could still fuck his way to the top or if he had changed his ways.

Justin realized that he and Kip were bound to cross paths again for the city was like a small town. Justin had to prepare himself for anything. Even worst, Kennedy & Collins was a major agency, and Kinnetik would be too, so Brian and Kip were bound to cross paths at some point. He had to figure out how to warn Brian. Finally, he had to wrestle with whether or not to tell Brian what had happened so long ago. For Justin had to wonder if Kip even remembered what happened...and if he did, would he mention it to Brian?

And in the end the brush stokes gave way to the random paint scatter of uncertainty as the purplish droplets splattered over the golden tones.

Finally it was done. The painting was complete. Justin had worked in all out in his mind.

For the first time the painter took a step back to examine his masterpiece. One look at the raw emotion, emanating from the finished painting forced Justin to sit on the futon to take it all in.

Justin once again approached his painting.

He reached for one of the smaller brushes. As he signed and dated the painting, he knew at once what its title would be...The Secret.

Justin had been painting for hours.

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Meanwhile that Evening back at Justin's loft...(Day 43)

Brian had tried to distract himself with work and with Beam. But nothing could make him forget that he was in New York and that Justin still wasn't home.

Even worse, Brian had been unable to reach Justin all day. In typical Justin fashion, Justin had probably forgotten to turn on his cell phone, so at this point Justin could either be working with Spyder somewhere or even in his studio. Either way Brian didn't want to disturb him, but did wish that Justin would simply call him.

A knock at the door pulled Brian away from his thoughts. Brian hoped that Justin had simply forgotten his keys. He knew it was a false hope, but it didn't change the momentary thought anyway.

Brian checked the peephole and slowly opened the door. "Spyder, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing, Brian," Spyder responded. "I thought you would be back in Pittsburgh by now."

"Hoping to get rid of me, were you? Come on in." Brian said with a smile, motioning into the apartment.

Spyder made himself comfortable, and Brian resumed his position in the chair with his bare feet elevated on the coffee table.

"Is Justin here?" Spyder finally asked.

"No, I hoped he might be working with you," Brian responded.

"Afraid not. I haven't seen him since early this afternoon. He said something about being eager to get to his studio to paint, but I thought he might be home by now since I saw the lights on here. Of course, if I had known that you were still here, I wouldn't have stopped."

"You know how he is once he gets into his studio. Time has no meaning. He must really be in the midst of something if he has his phone turned off. And unless he's checking his messages, he doesn't know that I'm still in town. He thinks I left for Pittsburgh this afternoon."

"Do you think he's sleeping there? You know he did order that new futon for the studio the last time he was here."

"You know about that?" Brian asked with some surprise.

"Yeah. He complained for months about how uncomfortable sleeping on the floor had been," Spyder said with a smile.

"That doesn't surprise me," Brian said with a sigh, "Are you sure I can't get you anything? I was hoping that you and I could talk while we wait for Justin."

"Well, in that case, do you have a beer? I guess I can stay for a bit and talk."

Brian went to refrigerator and returned with a bottle of beer and handed it to Spyder. Brian poured himself another glass of Beam.

"So how was your meeting this morning?" Brian asked, while making himself comfortable again in the chair.

"You mean our meeting with Barrister, Wilkins & Evans?" Spyder asked.

"You have to admit they're one of the premier architectural firms in New York," Brian reminded him.

"That's true," Spyder acknowledged, taking a sip of his beer.

"So did they really need a simple website?"

Spyder immediately shook his head before he answered. "No, Taylor was right. It was a ruse. They wanted so much more, but I'll let him tell you all the gory details," Spyder said with a laugh.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"Don't worry. It's nothing we can't handle," Spyder assured him.

"That's a relief."

"So Taylor doesn't know that you're still here. Why the mystery?"

"No mystery. I needed to stay to deal with a few client issues here. It looks like I'll probably be here most of the week. I have to leave by the end of the week though. Is that soon enough for you?" Brian couldn't resist teasing.

"Not really, but I've learned to work under adverse conditions," Spyder teased back in response.

"Liked having him all to yourself, did you?"

"Who wouldn't? He's easy to work with and fun to have around. I'm sure you know that we hang out together. We watch out for each other. But anything more...would be a heartache waiting to happen. So you can relax. You have nothing to worry about."

"I wasn't worried," Brian assured him confidently.

"Besides I watched you two this morning..."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It's all there whenever you two look at each other," Spyder pointed out. "Don't act surprised. I'm sure you know that. You've been together what...six years. That's a long time for a legend like you, Brian."

"Justin is nothing if not tenacious," Brian said with a laugh.

"I have noticed that. Lucky you," Spyder added softly.

They toasted each other by clinking their drinks and smiling again.

"Brian, answer something for me?" Spyder continued.

"Sure if I can."

"Why does an architectural firm need an ad agency? After all it's not soap, toothpaste or cereal. You're not trying to convince the buying public to buy something it doesn't need. No one spends millions of dollars and several years on a project on a whim."

"No, the objectives of the ads are different. You talk about what they've done. The ads constantly showcase the projects they've done all over the world. And you let the readers indulge in the vision for themselves. You also show drawings that reflect their design philosophy. Then one day someone wants a building and their name is the only one that people can think of...their buildings become the only ones anyone can remember. Eventually they become the standard by which all others are judged."

"And advertising can do all that."

"Of course not. Ads can only do so much. The talent of the architects has to be there to begin with. They're like artists. First they have to have the talent; then advertising in the right media can let people know all about them."

"I think I see. So are you going to handle the ad campaigns for Taylor's career?"

"He won't let me," Brian pouted, "Something about making his own way in the world."

"Oh that."

"Why did you ask?"

"When Taylor and I were leaving our meeting with Barrister, Wilkins & Evans, we ran into two representatives from Kennedy & Collins. They were there for a meeting. It just seemed odd to me, that's all."

"Kennedy & Collins is a major firm. I once wanted to work for them myself. They're a really smart firm, but this isn't the type of thing that they usually handle though. They must be expanding into new areas," Brian said thoughtfully, "Very interesting."

"There are rumors swirling around that you're opening a New York office. Is it true?"

"Events do seem to be moving in that direction, although I'm not ready to make a public announcement yet."

"Understood...my lips are sealed."

"How did you find out?"

"Remember I said this city was a small town. It lives on gossip. Let's just say I'm well connected, and you've been spotted around town."

"Why should that be unusual? I have clients with offices here. Justin sort of resides here. I'm in and out of the city all the time. What's so different about now?"

"Now there's a buzz about you," Spyder pointed out.

"I see," Brian said pensively, "Do you know why?"

"Look at you Brian. You're gorgeous. Anywhere you move in the city you're going to be noticed. You have the aura of success about you. And people already know who you are from the awards and everything. Let's face it you've gotten quite a bit of press. And I'm sure that the deal with Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali didn't hurt your reputation."

"How did you hear about that?" Brian asked with some surprise.

"You got the account that every ad agency in the world was after. You succeeded where every other agency had failed. You're now on everyone's radar screen...whether you're in Pittsburgh or here in New York. That's why there's a buzz about you now. That's why it's now being noticed that you're in town. Surely you see the difference?"

"I guess I hadn't thought about it that way," Brian said reflectively, "Interesting."

Spyder gave Brian a moment for everything to register. Then he said, "Brian, I need you to do me favor."

"No, Spyder, I'm not going back to Pittsburgh so you have Justin all to yourself," Brian teased. "Get over it!"

"Will you give it a rest? This is important. I need you to make a courtesy call on Barrister, Wilkins & Evans. I need you to talk to Mitchell Evans. He's one of the senior partners."

"I know who he is. Of course, I'd be glad to talk to him, but why?"

"I suspect that the firm is in the market for a new ad agency. I believe that they're just starting to meet with Kennedy & Collins. I want them to have a real choice. Does the name Adam Lyons ring a bell?"

"I know him. He's good. He's one of the partners at Kennedy & Collins. He's been there for a long time."

"Is he as good as you are?" Spyder asked pointedly.

"Few are."

"That's my point. I want Barrister, Wilkins & Evans to have the best and not to just get lost in a big firm. I suspect with Kinnetik that's not going to happen...no matter how big you get. Besides, even if you don't take him on as an account, you're going need an architect when you relocate here. So you have nothing to lose by simply talking with him. After all, it's just a courtesy call."

"Kinnetik is just a little firm. I think Barrister, Wilkins & Evans is a little out of my league for an architect...don't you agree?"

Spyder just sighed in exasperation. "Brian, in Pittsburgh, you turned a bathhouse into your corporate headquarters. I would say you were a person of vision. You're just the type of client the firm likes to work with."

"How did you know what my corporate offices used to be? Did Justin tell you?"

"You think that you're the only one capable of hiring investigators?" Spyder teased, taking another sip of his beer.

"So how much do you know about me?" Brian asked.

"About as much as you know about me," Spyder said with a sly smile.

"Now what?" Brian asked.

"Now nothing. Taylor expects us to get along. I'm not in the habit of disappointing Taylor...are you?"

"I see you've had occasion to tangle with Justin," Brian said with a laugh

"The blond hair and innocent blue eyes are so deceptive." Spyder said, and then he paused, "Now back to the topic at hand...will you make that courtesy call on Mitchell Evans?"

"I'll make the call. After all, one call can't hurt. Just don't expect too much. Without an office and staff here, it's going to be hard to garner trust and compete with a firm the size of Kennedy & Collins."

"Oh I don't know. They may surprise you. Especially since you know the right people," Spyder said with a smile.

"And that would be?"

"Me..." Spyder said confidently.

"Careful Spyder, your modesty is showing," Brian teased. "I said this morning your nickname probably fit you. I see that I was correct. Is there anything you're not into?"

"Probably not. But let's keep that our little secret." Spyder said, searching in his pockets for something. "Here's Mitchell's card. I'll call him and tell him to expect your call."

"Well, I guess I should be getting home. Can you have Taylor call me when he finally resurfaces?"

"Sure. And Spyder, thanks."

"No problem."

"Ah Spyder, one more thing."

"Huh?"

"How would you like a little distraction from website designs for a bit?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"How would you like to dust off the skills that earned you that PhD in the first place?

The timelines are ridiculous. The client is impossible. But now that I think about it, you're just what I need to pull this off. Perfect actually!"

"Sure Brian...now I'm intrigued. And you think I can do this?"

"Let me buy your latte tomorrow morning..."

"So you know my weakness..."

"And there's a ride in the limo in it for you too..." Brian added in a tone usually reserved for bribing Gus.

"Damn Brian...you are really good."

"Oh, did I neglect to mention that?"

"Ok...ok," Spyder said with a sigh, throwing up his hands in defeat, "I'll do it...whatever it is."

"Good! Justin and I will see you in the morning," Brian said, showing a smile of victory. "I trust you'll reserve our usual table?"

"See you tomorrow...but don't forget to have Taylor call me," Spyder said as he once again headed in the direction of the door.

"Yeah, I'll do that," Brian agreed.

Chapter 31 – An Unexpected Visitor

A Little While Later That Evening...(Day 43)

Justin had just finished signing his painting when there was a knock at his studio door. This was odd since it was rare for anyone to disturb him at his studio without calling first. So he carefully checked the peephole, and immediately opened the door.

"Spyder, what are you doing here?" Justin asked.

"I've been tying to reach you," Spyder said, as he appeared to be gasping for breath.

"Here sit down," Justin said, motioning for the futon, "You're out of breath. What did you do, run here? Why didn't you just call?"

"Well for starters, I've been calling you since early this afternoon. All my calls go into voicemail. You and I need to talk, and we may have to talk fast. I wouldn't be surprised if Brian showed up here any minute."

"Brian? He's back in Pittsburgh."

"Have you talked to him recently?" Spyder asked, leaning forward still trying to catch his breath.

"Not since he dropped us off this morning," Justin answered, "Here, let me get you some water."

Justin retrieved the bottle of water and handed it to Spyder, who took a few sips.

Now that he had calmed down, Spyder continued, "Well, I just left someone, who bears a remarkable resemblance to Brian, sitting barefoot in your loft. So if Brian's in Pittsburgh, you have a doppelganger, now in residence in your loft, who told me he's going to be here all week so do you think I should place a call to Ghostbusters. This gorgeous creature even gave me a beer while I were waiting for you, and the two of us had a long talk."

"You did? What did you talk about?"

"Things..."

"Spyder, I hate it when you're obscure. What kind of things?"

"That's not important. I only stopped by to be sure that you were ok. I have to get home. You need to call Brian. I can still recognize a caged tiger when I see one."

"Ok. I'll call him."

"Good." Spyder thought for a moment and then changed his mind. " Ordinarily I would wait until tomorrow for you and I to talk, but some things have been put in motion. I need to know what's going on, and I need to know now. So I'm going to ask you questions, and you're going to give me answers. No bullshit! Are we clear?" Spyder said sternly in a tone that he seldom used with Justin.

Justin immediately nodded yes. "Ok...if this is going to be the grand inquisition, do you want more water or maybe a soda or something before you stretch me on the rack?"

"No. I'm good. And I serious here, Taylor, so don't fuck with me," Spyder said harshly.

"I know that you are. Go on..."

"Ok. Today as we were leaving Barrister, Wilkins & Evans we met two ad execs from Kennedy & Collins. Do you remember?"

Justin swallowed hard, before nodding yes.

"I felt you tense up. I'm sure they didn't notice, but I know you really well. Have you seen Adam Lyons before?"

"No."

"Are you sure you haven't encountered him around the city? Maybe fucked him on one of your backroom ventures when you first got here? Something?"

"Contrary to popular opinion, my fucks are neither nameless or faceless. No. I've never seen him before. Or, if I have...I never noticed him."

"What about the other guy? What was his name...Kip Thomas?" Spyder pointedly asked.

"What about him?" Justin asked in response.

Spyder immediately recognized the avoidance tactic. "Taylor don't play coy with me. I'm not in the mood for this," Spyder bellowed.

"I sort of knew him in Pittsburgh. He worked for Brian."

"Wait a minute. Kip Thomas...that's the guy who filed the lawsuit against Brian for sexual harassment."

"Yes, but how did you know about that? That was years ago."

"Brian isn't the only one who knows how to use investigators."

"You had Brian investigated? Why?"

"Why do you think?"

"Oh." Justin said softly.

"There's so much stuff in Brian's dossier...Brian has been a very busy man...let me see...Kip Thomas...Kip Thomas...the lawsuit."

"Yes."

"He charged Brian with...what was it...sexual harassment. Now, I remember."

"How can you remember that?" Justin pointedly asked.

"I have a photographic memory...sort of. What happened?"

"Kip decided to drop the lawsuit at the last minute," Justin admitted. "It was a mystery. No one knew why."

"I see. Then I guess Kip left town, and you haven't seen him for all these years."

"Right."

"So it was a shock seeing him today. The question is what is the relationship between Adam and Kip? Is it purely professional or is there a personal element?" Spyder began to speculate aloud.

"Why do you care?"

"I just asked Brian to make a courtesy call on Mitchell Evans. If that goes the way I think it will, Brian and Adam Lyons will compete head to head for the firm's account. I don't want Adam to be able play the 'you and Kip' card to force Brian to walk away from the account. And we both know that Brian will do anything to protect you."

"Fuck!"

"Right now both Adam and Kip think that you're my partner. I deliberately laid the false trail because I wasn't sure what was going on, and I didn't like the way either of them was leering at you. But there's too much buzz surrounding both you and Brian these days so the truth will eventually come out soon enough. I want Brian prepared to deal with anything. Do I make myself clear."

"Why do you care?"

"Since I can't make him disappear. I've decided to like him," Spyder said with smile. "And I'm fiercely protective of those I like...you know that."

Justin leaned up and gently kissed Spyder on the cheek, "Yes, I do know that."

"Look, I've got to get going. Call Brian! And think about what I just said."

"I will."

Spyder stood up to leave, but he stopped and turned. His eyes fell upon the painting. He walked over to take a closer look. He looked at the painting without saying anything, and then he leaned against the wall for support as the impact of the painting sank in. "You did this today didn't you?"

"Ah yeah...do you like it?"

"It's a beautiful painting...very powerful."

"Thanks."

"The Secret," Spyder said, reading the title of the painting. "Taylor, whatever secret you're hiding. Tell Brian...and tell him now. You can't keep this one any longer."

"Maybe...I don't know..."

"What do you mean you don't know? You just painted an exquisite masterpiece about this secret. I'm sure if I understood enough about your painting I could figure it out. If I understood your paintings, you wouldn't have to tell me. But I don't. You've got to deal with this," Spyder insisted. "You've got to tell Brian whatever you're hiding."

"I just don't know...I'm not sure I can...It's just..."

"What is it? Tell me!" Spyder demanded, wrapping his arms around Justin as a sign on support. "It's going to be ok. We can all deal with this, but we have to know what it is."

Justin pulled back and changed the subject, "What's this about you going to the coast?"

"So you want to change the subject, huh? Ok...I'll let it go for the moment. I need to go and meet with my attorneys. It seem that someone wants to option one of the novels I wrote a lifetime ago."

"That's great! Congratulations!"

"Don't pour the champagne yet. I'm still not sure how I feel about this. I really like my anonymity. I guess you're not the only one with secrets," Spyder said with a smile. "Look, I'll see you tomorrow...Brian offered to buy me my morning latte."

"He likes you."

"He just wants to keep an eye on me...not that I blame him," Spyder said with a smile as he headed for the door. "See you tomorrow. Now, don't forget to call him."

"I won't," Justin said as he closed and locked the door.

Justin made himself comfortable on the futon to think about what Spyder had said. Justin had never meant to keep his involvement with Kip a secret. It's just that there has never been a good way to tell Brian about what happened. There still isn't. Then with time, it didn't seem to matter anymore, and Justin just forgot the whole thing.

Justin was sort of reminded of the Kip Thomas incident several years ago when Brian's nephew had claimed that Brian molested him. But once again, Justin simply did what he felt he had to do to save Brian then too. He got found out the truth and got Brian's nephew to confess that he as lying. But now...here in New York...all these years later...things were different.

Justin took a moment to erase these thoughts before he reached for his cell phone to call Brian.

"Hey..." Justin said when Brian answered his phone on the first ring.

"What was the last thing I said as you were leaving the limo this morning? And what was the last thing that you agreed to do?" Brian asked harshly...but before Justin could answer, Brian's tone softened, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I didn't know you were still here. I figured you had those meetings and then caught a flight. So I had planned to call you later tonight for several rounds of phone sex."

"No. Sunshine. I'm sitting here in your terrible loft, waiting to hear from you. I started to come down to the studio, but I figured that you were on a roll, and I didn't want to distract you. Then too, I wasn't sure that you and Spyder weren't working somewhere on that project...that is, until he dropped by looking for you. That's when I realized that you were probably in your studio and didn't even know that I was still in town."

"I know I just talked to him. Spyder stopped by the studio on his way home to make sure that I called you. That's how I found out you were still here. Spyder mentioned that you were probably going to be here all week."

"I've got work to do. So do you. I figured we could probably fly back together. Spyder said that you had been in your studio most of the day. How's the painting going?"

"I finished a painting. So, let me clean up here, and then I'll come back to the loft. I'd much rather have the real thing than phone sex any day," Justin teased.

"No. Why don't I come there? I need to get out of this loft for a while. Why don't I pick you up? I know you're covered with paint so I'll bring you a change of clothes. We can grab a bite to eat before we come back here. I know you must be hungry."

"I guess I am kind of hungry, now that you mention it, I did forget to eat lunch. Ok. Let me clean up this mess, and I'll wait for you. Do you remember where my studio is?"

"Yeah. I have the address," Brian reminded him. "Later."

"Later."

Chapter 32– The Night Continues

A Little While Later...(Day 43)

Some time later, Brian knocked on the door of the studio. Justin once again checked the peephole and admitted his visitor.

Brian reached out and pulled Justin into a passionate kiss. Justin yielded to the kiss and allowed it to deepen.

"I've missed you," Brian finally said when they finally had to break for air.

"Me too," Justin softly agreed.

"Are you ready to get out of here?" Brian asked.

"I think so. Just let me change," Justin said, taking the change of clothes from Brian and disappearing into the bathroom.

Brian casually looked around the studio while he was waiting for Justin. It had been a while since he had been in this studio, and things hadn't changed much.

Brian made careful note of the new futon. He bounced on it a few time to try it out.

"I like your new futon. I think this will do very nicely," Brian teased.

"Brian!" Justin called out with a laugh, as he was changing.

"Just giving an honest opinion, Sunshine."

Brian's eyes happened next to fall on the painting on the easel, but he didn't say anything. The painting was a beautiful abstract, and as he approached it, Brian realized from the smell that the paint was still drying.

'So this is what you painted today,' he thought to himself. Then Brian noticed the title of the painting...The Secret. 'So what are you not telling me now, Sunshine?' Brian silently asked.

Hearing Justin approach, Brian returned to sit on the futon.

"Let's go," Justin said, gathering up his things.

"I'm ready. Any place in particular you'd like to eat?" Brian asked.

Brian and Justin walked out of the studio and the building to the waiting limo.

"What's this?" Justin asked with some surprise.

"Just get in," Brian said, gently nudging Justin in the direction of the limo.

"This isn't really necessary, you know?" Justin commented, "We could have walked wherever we're going or taken a cab."

"This was easier to arrange than a cab on short notice. So get in Sunshine, you're wasting time."

Brian turned to give directions to the driver.

Justin finally got in the limo followed by Brian, and the driver closed the door.

"Where are we going?" Justin asked.

"You'll see," Brian smirked.

A few minutes later, the limo parked in front of the restaurant.

"Brian?"

"Not now. Later," Brian said, gently kissing Justin before they exited.

Brian ordered a large gourmet salad while Justin decided to order a steak since he was really hungry. They settled on a Merlot to go with dinner.

"I've been waiting all day to have a meal with you," Brian said, once they had been served, "I was hoping that we could have lunch, but I guess your meeting with the client must have run longer than you expected. How did it go?"

"You have no idea," Justin said, shaking his head.

"That good, huh?" Brian quipped. "That sounds like my meetings too. Several times today, I wished that you were there with me. I don't know. Now that you and I have decided to be together, it's getting harder to get through my day without you," Brian quietly admitted.

"Really?" Justin asked, beaming from across the table. Then Justin flashed Brian a full wattage Sunshine smile.

Brian looked at Justin and felt his heart melt. "I've turned into a lesbian," Brian complained quietly.

Justin couldn't resist another smile. Then he quickly changed the subject. "So how was you day dear?" he asked in the classic singsong fashion.

Brian told Justin about the meeting with Liberty Airlines and their conflict about wanting to shout to the world about all the money they had spent on safety features versus their simple desire to increase ridership.

Brian and Justin talked about the political climate that was making it difficult for airlines to continue to survive. It was more than just simply living with reduced profit margins. So many carriers had gone out of business. Fortunately, Liberty Airlines ridership had remained strong and viable. Liberty Air through good management had been an exception to the rule.

"How was your meeting with Eyeconics?" Justin had to ask.

"You mean the all female court of inquiry," Brian said with sigh.

"I will admit that Kellie and Susan are two women, but I have never quite heard you refer to them that way before. You've always seen them as capable joint CEOs of their company, who are challenging and seem to know what they want. I know we're queer, but I've never known you to be so prejudiced against women."

"I'm sorry. This isn't about prejudice," Brian protested, "This is about reality. You have no idea the afternoon I had with those women."

"What happened? You've been working with Susan and Kellie for years. What changed?"

"Now they're entangled with your friends the Silvestris."

"Ah oh...what do the Silvestris have to do with this?"

"I should have known that something was up when the meeting was held at the Belluss Occhiali offices here in New York," Brian complained.

"What's so unusual about that? Because of the joint venture for Collezione Fiero, why would the location be suspicious? I'm sure Eyeconics is within their building for joint venture stuff all the time," Justin offered as a rational explanation.

Brian paused for a minute before he could get the words out. "Cristina Silvestri is here. So is Maria. And... are you ready for this...I've met the reclusive Perin Silvestri."

"Wow! You met Signora Silvestri...the woman behind Rudolpho and his empire. What's she like?"

"Beautiful, seductive, intelligent. She looks harmless, but she's clearly a tiger shark."

"Brian!" Justin said laughing.

"The five of them ganged up on me," Brian professed, looking for sympathy and understanding.

"On you?" Justin asked in disbelief. "No, they didn't? Why?"

"They're going to participate in an international showcase in a few weeks. These five women thought that I should just drop everything and fly immediately with them today to Milan to help them prepare for the showcase. When I resisted, they all decided that I didn't have the proper artistic sensibilities about things, and so they wanted a chance to make their case to you. Now do you understand why I'm upset?"

"I'm not sure that I see the problem," Justin said with a laugh.

"It's not a good precedence to set, if every time they have a conflict with me, they think they can run to you. They know that you'll coddle them. And then they think that you'll convince me to do something I would otherwise refuse to do," Brian explained.

"I don't know how they could think such a thing," Justin said with an underlying teasing tone to his voice. He then leaned back to look at Brian before he continued, "After all, everybody knows that you don't do anything that you don't want to do."

"That's right," Brian agreed, very glad that someone understood how the world worked.

"And I have absolutely no influence over you what so ever," Justin continued with a smile, "Everybody knows that." Justin paused to let his words sink in.

Brian liked the sounds of what he was hearing even if he questioned the tone of delivery. "Go on...I'm listening," he said.

Brian waited for a moment, hoping that Justin would say more. When Justin didn't say anything else he added, "We have a problem here, Sunshine."

"Why?"

"First of all, not only are the Silvestri women in town, but Rudolpho is here too. We're all supposed to meet tomorrow morning. Everyone believes that you're the key to getting everything they need for the showcase. I wasn't even sure that you would have time to deal with them...so I simply said that I would ask you. So do you have time to meet with them in the morning?" Brian asked.

"I guess I can make the time," Justin agreed.

"Then I need to talk to you and Spyder before the meeting," Brian continued, "So I promised Spyder a latte tomorrow morning. He agreed to join us. I may need to hire you and Spyder to help so that Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali and Kinnetik can work on this stuff together. And you or I can oversee this from either here or Pittsburgh to be sure that it reflects Collezione Fiero...meaning the combined identity of both companies. And did I fail to mention this is last minute? All this against the backdrop that you need to be somewhere in your studio painting."

"I've been there most of the afternoon," Justin admitted, "So I'm making progress. I'm just not sure that I'm happy with my results."

Brian wanted to make a comment about how beautiful the painting was, but he changed his mind. Now was not the time to get into a discussion with Justin about his most recent work of art.

"What happened at Barrister, Wilkins & Evans?" Brian asked instead.

"Didn't you ask Spyder when you saw him at the loft?"

"I'm asking you," Brian whispered, getting a sense that Justin was trying to hide something...Brian's antennae was immediately up.

"They want Spyder and me to come to back and work for the firm. Really, they want Spyder...but they figure at this point that we're a packaged deal, so the offer included me too...but Spyder is the key. It seems that the in house staff can't figure out how to modify his code for the existing website. The network and the website have become so integral to the operation of the firm so that Spyder has now become very important. The firm is acquiring three new international firms. Those firms and the New York office need to be able to co-design projects together."

"How did you and Spyder leave things with the firm?"

"We're going to create the little segment they originally asked for. Then we're going to take some time to think things over about the job offer. I don't really see how I could do the job assignment. And I would be surprised if Spyder would go back under their thumb as an employee either. I'm sure he already has other commitments on the west coast. He'll probably work out some compromise in the end."

"Probably."

"Although he and Mitchell Evans seemed awfully close. They were on a first name basis, which is highly unusual for senior partner and programmer in a firm that size. I was going to ask Spyder about it as we were leaving but that's when we ran into these two guys from Kennedy & Collins."

"Spyder mentioned that too when we talked, " Brian added

"I understand that Spyder wants you to call Mitchell Evans. According to Spyder you could be about to go head to head with Kennedy & Collins. That's really huge...and you haven't even opened the New York Office yet."

"I admit I like the idea of having enough accounts in place before I open the office, but like I told Spyder, don't expect too much. I've tangled with Adam Lyons before. He's really good at what he does. He's also a fierce competitor."

"I met him today...Adam Lyons. He was waiting at Barrister, Wilkins & Evans for a meeting, as Spyder and I were leaving. He started cruising me. Spyder put a stop to that by making him think that he and I were a couple."

"I think that was simply wishful thinking on Spyder's part?" Brian said with a quiet laugh.

"No, it had more to do with whom Adam Lyons was with."

"Who was that?" Brian asked with renewed interest.

"Kip Thomas," Justin said and waited for a reaction.

Brian was silent for a moment; then Justin could see the momentary anger flare; then Brian was quiet again.

"Brian? Did you hear what I said?" Justin asked again.

"I heard you," Brian said quietly. "What do you know about Kip Thomas? You weren't even around when all of that stuff happened," Brian insisted trying to remember.

"Yes I was. Remember I was living at Debbie's. I heard things," Justin reminded him.

"I'll bet you did. Everyone kept telling me that I was getting what I deserved. Back then I will admit I would fuck anything that moved."

"And everyone wanted you to fuck them."

"But Kip Thomas said that I promised him things for fucking me. I would never do that. Then he wanted me to put him up for a promotion that I didn't think that he was ready for just because we were both gay and we had fucked. I don't believe in that either. When I refused, he charged me with sexual harassment. But he made the first move, and I only gave him what he wanted...I fucked him."

"Are you all right about this?" Justin asked.

"You know I took a lot of shit back then from Debbie, Vic, Theodore, Emmett, Lindsay... all felt that I got what I deserved. Michael was seeing Dr. Dave, who had a field day enjoying my suffering. Melanie agreed to represent me. I remember we were sitting in the room waiting for the hearing to begin when Marty Ryder came in and told Melanie and me that the lawsuit had been dropped. No explanation. Life went on. I had to leave town right away to handle a meeting about the Liberty Air expansion...I remember that."

"Do you remember why the lawsuit was dropped?" Justin hesitantly asked.

"No. I heard rumors at the club, but nothing too concrete. So it just remained an unsolved mystery."

"Haven't you ever wondered what happened?" Justin cautiously asked.

"At the time I was just so glad to get my life back I didn't really care. Kip quit the firm and left town. This is the first I've heard of him since the lawsuit was dropped."

"Do you think that he and Adam are fucking?"

"That's a good question. I know Adam, and he would definitely like the ego stroking, and Kip would be good at that as I remember. Kip had the potential to be a good ad exec, but his horizons will always be limited with the tactics he used to get ahead. As long as you think that you can get to the top based on anything besides your own merit...you're already starting down a slippery slope."

"Still he's now at Kennedy & Collins. Maybe he has seen the error or his ways," Justin suggested.

"Maybe, but I think he's still trouble. Anyway, he's not my problem anymore."

"But he's here in New York. Your path is bound to cross with his."

"He's an asshole. I guess I'll have to deal with that when it happens," Brian said confidently.

"So I take it you've had dealing with Adam Lyons before. Did you fuck him?"

"It was a long time ago when I was considering that move to New York, but we both know that I didn't take the job because I just couldn't possibly go and leave you behind," Brian teased.

"That's not the way I remember it. I think I heard that the job offer fell through," Justin corrected him.

"That too," Brian said with a smile. Justin smiled too.

"So... I think I'll order dessert," Justin added

"Look at the time... not me...I couldn't possibly...."

Of course, when Justin's chocolate death dessert arrived, Brian couldn't resist tasting a few spoonfuls just for good measure. Some things never change.

"We'll now that you've been fed, there shouldn't be any interruptions as I'm having my way with you," Brian said, as they were leaving the restaurant.

"I'm looking forward to it," Justin answered once they were back in the limo.

It was just a short ride back to the loft. Justin just rested his head against Brian's shoulder and casually slid his small hand inside Brian's shirt. It was a simple gesture. But Brian could feel the heat everywhere that Justin touched his skin, and Brian could feel his cock responded simply to tenderness of Justin's touch.

And even though they enjoyed the moment, they both could hardly wait to get back to the Justin's loft.

Chapter 33 – Here We Are Again

The Next Morning...(Day 44)

As Brian and Justin entered the coffee shop the next day, Spyder was once again sequestered at his favorite table, pretending the read the morning paper.

"I see Brian obviously won again about the limo?" Spyder teased, without looking up. "Well, don't just stand there, take a seat."

Brian and Justin seated themselves and began to review their menus.

"Well Brian, you've had all night to plot your strategy. What do you have in mind for me to do today?" Spyder finally asked.

"Can you and Justin pull something together that will allow my client here and my client in Milan to work with each other...maybe across the web if necessary. And then have those two clients work with Kinnetik in Pittsburgh, with Justin and I having access to whatever they're all doing from where ever we happen to be? The good news is Justin's computer already has the ability to talk to Kinnetik," Brian described.

"I'll probably have it working by the end of the day, barring any problems with your two clients," Spyder suggested.

"Good. And, I also need you to be Justin's assistant on this project," Brian added nonchalantly.

"What?" Spyder objected. "Do I look like an artist to you?"

"Spyder, these clients won't need you do anything artistic. What they're going to need is a referee. They need someone to keep them on track, and they need someone to keep them out of Justin's hair unless it's absolutely necessary. That way he'll be able to get some painting done. He still has that submission for the Milan gallery, and the deadline is coming up. I won't take any more chances with his art," Brian explained.

"Brian..." Justin raised his voice to complain.

The waitress appeared, delivering mocha lattes for everyone. Brian and Justin looked surprised.

Spyder just smiled. "I took the liberty of ordering before them before you got here," he confessed.

Everyone took a sip of their latte and then paused a moment to give the waitress their breakfast orders, with Brian and Spyder waiting patiently while Justin appeared to be ordering the entire menu.

"You wouldn't think someone as slim as he is would eat so much, would you?" Spyder commented with a laugh. "Where does he put it all? Where does he get that metabolism?"

Even the waitress had to smile at these comment, before she left with their orders.

"I wish I knew," Brian said with a touch of longing. Then he remembered that he was in the process of making a point so he resumed his original train of thought. "Now where was I? Oh yes...this isn't open for discussion, Sunshine."

"Sunshine...isn't that sweet," Spyder couldn't resist commenting on the nickname he had never heard used before.

"Don't you start," Justin warned him no uncertain terms.

Spyder decided to heed the warning, and quickly changed the subject.

"So you just want me to coordinate things. I guess I can probably do that. I'm sure I can work around any problems. However, I do have to make a trip to the west coast at some point to see my attorneys," Spyder continued, "It seems that someone wants to option one of my novels, but we live in the technology age, so I'll make it work."

"Option one of your novels? That should end your reign of obscurity," Brian quipped.

"I know. That's why I'm hesitating. I like my anonymity," Spyder acknowledged.

"I remember what happened when Hollywood came calling because they wanted to turn the comic book that Michael and I created into a movie," Justin said, shaking his head, "What a disaster that was. They pulled the plug on production in the middle of things. I'm not sure I would rush to deal with the movies again. When did you write your novel?"

"I wrote this novel a long time ago. It sold quite well in Europe. I can't believe that someone has found it after all this time," Spyder said with a shrug, "And now someone wants to option it. I'm only going out to talk with my attorneys...nothing more."

"Ok I assure you that this project will be far more interesting than any deal you're about to transact about your novel," Brian assured him with a laugh.

"So go on tell me about it," Spyder insisted, "I'll admit you have me intrigued."

"Justin, you and I have to create a showcase for Collezione Fiero...from scratch... during this meeting. Are you up for it?" Brian hesitantly asked.

"Really?" Justin asked with a smile. "We had originally planned to do that for the campaign itself, but in the end that wasn't necessary," he said with a slight laugh.

"Thanks to you. You know I really hate to suggest this because I know that it'll require a lot of effort on your part. But, you know I couldn't do this on the spot with anyone else. At least this time, we have the added advantage that we know what their ad campaign looks like, so we're really ahead of the game. We just have to select the right elements from the campaign to make them shine at the showcase."

"And what do you want me do while all this creativity is in progress?" Spyder asked, using his hands for added emphasis.

"Like I said, Spyder, you're going to be Justin's assistant. You're fluent in both French and Italian. I was planning on you eventually putting together the commercial to run on the video screens during the showcase. We have artwork and copy to help you. I know that this will be just another day at the office for you," Brian smirked.

"I can probably do that. It's the 'be Taylor's assistant' part that I don't understand," Spyder stated, still showing his confusion.

"Anything that Justin and I don't finish by the time we leave today...anything that either Belluss Occhiali or Eyeconics needs to finish, I want them to route their stuff through you. You can decide when Justin or I need to get involved. That way Justin can get some painting done, and yet still work on this project. You and Justin can also use the resources of Kinnetik...if that becomes necessary. I guess I'm just concerned because I know that Justin has an application to submit to Pinacoteca Ambrosiana before the end of the month. It has a deadline that Justin really can't afford miss." Brian revealed

"So Taylor is going to be my boss? Brian, you don't know what torture that's going to be?" Spyder was already complaining.

"I think I have some idea, but you're strong, Spyder, I'm sure you're up to the challenge," Brian said with a smirk.

"This is just your way of getting back at me because I thought that you should have left for Pittsburgh already," Spyder quipped.

"I hadn't thought about that. But now that you mention it, you HAVE been trying to get rid of me," Brian reminded him.

"Unsuccessfully, I might add... And what is this about a submission the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana? You mean the art gallery in Milan where Leonardo's painting of the Last Supper is housed," Spyder asked with renewed curiosity.

"That's the one...Justin has been asked to apply for this summer's emerging artist exhibit at the gallery. He only has a few weeks to create his submission for the application process," Brian explained with some pride.

"Why Taylor, I had no idea," Spyder remarked. "I knew about your show here in New York at the Thornton Gallery, and I knew about the show in Cincinnati, but this... You have to tell me these things so I can be suitably impressed. You've been holding out on me."

"I have not been holding out on you. You've been working out of town, and I guess I've been rather busy too. Now will you two stop talking about me like I'm not here," Justin protested.

Brian continued to speak with Spyder as if Justin had not interrupted. "Now you see why I'm trying to protect his studio time? And I know if we let them, the Silvestri women will try to think of some excuse to take him back to Milan. I think Signora Silvestri is still trying to figure out some way to get him for a son in law," Brian grumbled.

"Brian, surely these women know that Taylor is gay and that you two are together?"

"You know Spyder, those two facts only seem to be slowing down their plans. It's as if they think that these are two minor glitches that they can work around with the proper planning and enough time," Brian quipped.

Spyder burst out laughing. "You have to be kidding?"

"I only wish I were. Just you wait. I'm sure you'll see for yourself. But most of all, I just want Justin to be able to spend some time in his studio and maybe get some painting done."

"Ok Brian, I'm in with you on this," Spyder announced. "We'll work on this together."

"You know, I'm not a child," Justin reminded them. "If I was desperate to paint, I would just leave both of you and go to my studio and paint like I did yesterday."

"But you won't do that because every time I get in a bind at the office you bail me out. You don't stop and think about the cost to you. So for the moment, Spyder and I are in overprotective mode. You're just going to have to get used to it," Brian insisted.

"Did you hear that Taylor? Overprotective Mode...my most personal favorite way to operate!" Spyder declared.

"But what about all the work that YOU have to do, and the modification to the website for Barrister, Wilkins & Evans? They really want that quickly. You don't have time to keep an eye on me," Justin tried to reminded Spyder.

"It's a minor change. I don't have that much work to do, and I only need a limited set of graphics from you. Don't worry, we can work remotely. I can give Mitchell half of what he wants...he'll be happy to wait for the last piece. So you need to focus on being in your studio. You're running out of excuses," Spyder demanded.

"Are you seriously thinking of going back to work at the firm?" Justin asked, still trying to stall for time.

"Not with a novel about to be optioned. I'm going to be rich. I'll never have to work again."

"Spyder, didn't you just hear me tell you what happened to Rage, the movie?" Justin asked with a laugh.

"Seriously, I believe we can provide the technical stuff that the firm needs without either of us going back to work for them. They just have to put me on retainer."

"Mitchell isn't going to be happy about that," Justin warned.

"Yes he will. I'll make him an offer he can't refuse."

"Speaking of Mitchell, you two seemed awfully close. You were on a first name basis with the senior partner of a major firm. You've got to admit that unusual for a lowly programmer."

"Mitchell and I go way back. He's like family."

"I see."

"So Brian, are you only buying me a latte or will you spring for my Danish too."

"Now since you're Justin's assistant, I think Kinnetik can spring for your entire breakfast. That way I won't have to feel guilty about how hard you're going to work today. And I'll still give you that limo ride I promised you," Brian added with twinkle in his eye.

"Oh Brian, you didn't bribe him with a limo ride too?" Justin protested with a laugh. "He already doesn't want to ride the subway. He even made us take a cab yesterday."

"Give me a break, Taylor, there are some things about my old life that I do miss."

"You know that you could have it all back if you would just visit your family while you're on the west coast," Justin suggested.

"I've been thinking about it. As soon as I finish being in overprotective mode with you, maybe I'll give it some serious thought," Spyder said, still thinking over the prospect and desperately wanting to change the subject.

"This really isn't necessary...I'm not a child...I've really been able to manage my own life for some time now," Justin complained aloud, "I think you two should just leave me alone..."

Neither Brian nor Spyder said anything; they just smiled at Justin's ramblings. They both knew that there wasn't a chance that either of them was going to miss the chance to be overprotective where Justin was concerned. They both had plans to savor the moment. However, neither of them said anything. They both secretly decided to just let Justin have his drama queen moment...uninterrupted.

Chapter 34 – The Return Event

A Little Later ...(Day 44)

Brian was talking to the receptionist, once again waiting for further instructions. Spyder and Justin were patiently standing nearby.

"Justin," Maria said quietly as she quickly approached, "It's so good to see you."

"Maria, I heard you were in town," Justin said easily.

Maria wrapped her arm around one of Justin's arms, "Now don't pay any attention to any thing that Brian told you. We've all just been waiting for you."

Brian watched as another figure approached.

"Justin," Cristina said, approaching and taking the other arm. "I'm so glad to see you. Brian wouldn't let me take his arm yesterday. It's so much better with you being here," she professed.

Brian whispered to Spyder, since they were being totally ignored, "I forgot to mention that these two women are in love with Justin. Both of them had plans to marry him years ago. So right now they're nursing a broken heart, can't you tell?" Brian quipped. "But they're slowly trying to mend."

"They found out you and Justin are partners, did they? I can see that they're taking it well," Spyder teased. "They haven't acknowledged the fact yet that you're even here. Does this happen often?"

"All the time. I hope that once the meeting gets started, someone will notice us, but for right now Justin is the only person in the world for these two."

Spyder and Brian smiled and continued to follow the trio.

"You did say they were YOUR client, right?" Spyder asked in a whisper, "And you are the CEO of Kinnetik, right?"

"Facts that they readily overlook whenever Justin is around. I may need you to use your knowledge of Italian to help me out here. Right now things are ok...everyone is dealing in English. When things drop into Italian, watch out." Brian whispered.

They finally approached the conference room. Maria and Cristina made sure that Justin was escorted in. They both totally ignored Brian, leaving him and Spyder to fend for themselves.

Brian just sighed at the predictable turn of events.

"Brian, it's good to see you," Rudolpho said, pulling Brian into a hug.

"Rudolpho, I think that I'm glad you're here. Maybe you'll be on my side. I felt so out numbered yesterday," Brian teased.

"Welcome to my world," Rudolpho teased. "And who is this?" he asked looking at Spyder.

"This is Spyder Smith, he's Justin's new assistant. Justin would have made the introduction himself, if he weren't being trapped by your daughters. Spyder, this is Signor Rudolpho Silvestri"

"It's a pleasure to meet you Signor Silvestri," Spyder said, "I've heard a great deal about you."

Rudolpho smiled as he shook Spyder's hand.

Kellie and Susan entered the room and greeted Brian. He immediately introduced them to Spyder. Kellie and Susan were intrigued for both of them mentioned that they thought that they had met Spyder before.

"I live here in New York, so it's always possible that we've crossed paths. This is really a small town when you really think about it," Spyder said, giving them one of his trademark smiles.

Maria and Cristina still had Justin tied up, and now Brian could see that they were introducing him to Perin, who had already reserved a seat for him near her at the table. Brian just sighed. "This is going to be a really long meeting," Brian whispered to Spyder. Spyder just smiled.

Once everyone was finally settled in the room and had been offered the usual water, coffee or tea, Brian decided it was time to start this meeting.

"Shall we get started?" Brian began.

As Brian started to speak, everyone got quiet.

"Yesterday, you all wanted a chance to talk to Justin about your forthcoming participation in the showcase. I thought I would save us all some time so Justin and I talked last night about your showcase. Justin and Spyder have agreed to lend a hand so we can figure out what you need. So now is the time for us to get work on whatever you need. After all, Justin does have to get back to his studio," Brian stated firmly. "So let's get started."

"I knew that if you talked to Justin, you would see our side of this problem. Thank you Brian, for changing your mind," Perin commented.

"Don't thank me yet, you're all going to have to do a lot of work," Brian emphasized, "First of all you need to ultimately work here in New York...not Milan."

"Our team is here," Maria pointed out. "So just tell us what you need."

"Our team is here too," Susan added. "So we're ready."

Brian smiled. This was good news. "I want us to spend some time this morning brainstorming about the showcase. Then hopefully, Justin and I can take your ideas and create the theme for the showcase. Once we have the theme, then we can develop the list of action items that need to be addressed. How does that sound?" Brian asked everyone.

"This is exactly what we had hoped for," Kellie said with a sigh. "We know now that both Belluss Occhiali and Eyeconics will be reflected in everything. So now we can relax. You and Justin understand both companies so well. We know we're going to love whatever you create."

"I have to agree. We'll get our teams leaders here in the conference room so that they're readily available," Cristina agreed.

Maria Silvestri and Susan Weaver each called in their respective team leaders, and within a few minutes they entered the conference room and took their seats.

"So we can get to work now?" Brian asked.

Everyone nodded their agreement.

"Justin and I have agreed to allocate the majority of today to work on this. Any follow up on anything that needs to happen, I need everyone to coordinate with Spyder. He will make sure that Justin and I are kept abreast of how everything is going. You'll find that he will be a big help toward getting things done."

"If Justin thinks he's ok to be his assistant then we know we're in good hands," Maria agreed.

"You'll be very happy to know that Spyder has a varied background. He and Justin are both nominated for a Bronze Quill award for their unique website designs, and they have been creating commercials together. Also, Spyder has a PhD in linguistics, and he has spent several years living, working, and traveling abroad. I wanted you to know that Justin and I wouldn't have you work with just anyone," Brian continued with a smile.

"We know that Brian," Susan said confidently, "You do always manage to get us that specialized help that we need...whether we want to accept it or not," she said with a laugh.

"Ok, so let's get started. Tell me all about your showcase?" Brian asked, and then he settled in to listen to what everyone had to say.

Spyder set up his computer to essentially record the meeting. Brian pulled out his notepad to jot down specific notes while Justin pulled out his sketchpad to sketch while everyone talked. Everyone was now ready.

Each person in the room actually participated in the process of filling Brian, Justin, and Spyder in on the showcase. Belluss Occhiali, being very experienced in this sort of international event, had already outlined some ideas and suggestions for their contribution. Eyeconics, being newer in the international arena, had fewer ideas to offer. Brian made a few comments. Justin continued to quietly sketch. Spyder asked a few questions. There was great communication between everyone in the room.

When they finally took a break, Rudolpho approached Brian and embraced him.

"What is that for?" Brian asked with a smile.

"I just love the way you get everyone working together. I knew that once you got involved, everything would come together. I'm not really needed here. I could probably go back to the hotel."

"Don't tell me that you have another company to take over?" Brian teased.

"No, I did that yesterday," Rudolpho teased back, "When Perin had me locked away." Then he laughed. "So if you want me to stay here, it's not a problem."

"Ok everyone, I see that we're approaching lunch time. Why don't we break for lunch? That will give Justin and me a chance to go over our notes and see what we can come up with. How does that sound?"

"We'll all leave you alone," Susan agreed, "But..."

"We hoped that you might be here for lunch so we already planned to have lunch brought down here for you. We don't want to take a chance of you getting lost in the big city at lunchtime," Cristina teased. "We need you, and I would miss you terribly," she added with a smile.

Brian rolled his eyes and then smiled, "You know you don't mean that you'll miss me. You're just afraid that Justin would be lost with me," he teased.

Cristina smiled and bantered back, "That too."

Just then, there was a knock on the door. And lunch was delivered by waiters in uniforms and spread out before Brian, Justin, and Spyder, while everyone else said their goodbyes for the moment and left the room.

Maria showed Brian how to use the phone system to get everyone back when he was ready for the meeting to resume.

Over lunch, Brian and Justin went over their respective notes. Brian crystallized ideas, and Justin created images to make the ideas reality. Spyder watched in awe at the way the two partners worked together. They bantered ideas back and forth to each other as if this was a well-practiced dance.

Spyder knew what it was like to work with Justin for they had worked together for months. But when Spyder and Justin worked together, Spyder usually had the concepts and Justin added the visuals. What he was seeing was something different.

Watching Brian and Justin work together, Spyder saw that it was a true partnership. Justin created images that spurred Brian on to create new ideas, and Brian created themes, which Justin executed quickly on paper.

After Brian and Justin had worked out the showcase themes in fine detail, Brian discussed the specific needs with Spyder. Spyder nodded an easy acceptance of the things that Brian was asking. As Spyder ran the required timeline through his mind, he realized that the size of this task could require months to execute. But with all the work that Brian and Justin had just done previously, the various elements could be executed in a matter of days if everyone cooperated.

Spyder was already envisioning Justin undisturbed in his studio painting.

Spyder was touched that Brian had asked him to assist on this obviously very important project, and he was determined to show Brian that his trust had not been misplaced.

After a few hours, Brian called everyone back together to share with them the results of the showcase that he and Justin had worked out.

Everyone reassembled and hung on every word that Brian had to share.

There was already excitement from Rudolpho, who knew instinctively that whatever Brian and Justin came up with would be amazing. Perin had never seen first hand the duo work their magic, so she was totally enthralled and ready to listen. Kelly and Susan had an air of relaxed confidence about what they were about to hear, and Maria and Cristina shared their father's confidence that whatever Brian and Justin came up with would be wonderful.

"You need the music and graphic and some voice over to run on various monitors. We have your images, which Justin and I worked up for your campaigns. Both companies liked the images, because you felt, during our previous meeting, that they reflected both companies. Ordinarily we could use images from the commercial...but we are saving the commercial for maximum impact when it runs in TV spots later. But we have available all the copy and the images from the ads that we can definitely use. I'm sure that Spyder will help us to integrate everything," Brian began, looking over at Spyder for confirmation. Spyder smiled and nodded his cooperation.

This seemed to be a doable element and heads were bobbing in agreement immediately.

Brian continued, "We have a selection of images that are essentially drawings. It may be possible to turn those drawn images into photographs for display in your space. I'm sure we can arrange a photo shoot on short notice if we need to, but I think you have shots with models already in your company archives. So your choices are to use the sketches or use your archival photos or schedule a photo shoot to acquire new images. I'll give you time to check on everything and compare notes, and I'll have Spyder check with you in a day or so to see what you ultimately decided."

Once again everyone nodded in agreement.

Brian continued one more time. "That should leave us with the images for the fliers and brochures you have in your space. And both companies should spend some time making first pass at the copy, if you like. Just in case there is something new that you want to say about the products that Kinnetik hasn't addressed in the ad campaign. I believe we have sufficient images of the product available for this."

The team leaders from Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali looked at each other and then nodded their agreement. Then they both looked at Spyder and both nodded again.

"So what do you think?" Brian asked and then waited for their response.

Everyone was so excited that they all tried to talk at once. Brian had exceeded their expectations. Even Belluss Occhiali realized that this showcase would put all their previous appearances to shame.

The assignments were divided between Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali. There were a few tasks that Brian realized Kinnetik was going to need to get involved in. But with Spyder driving the process, Brian felt that the Kinnetik parts could easily be done without overwhelming his Pittsburgh staff.

Rudolpho and Perin couldn't stop smiling at each other. For they both knew that they had made the right decision adding Brian and Justin to their little family. They also were beginning to like Spyder as well.

Spyder agreed to come back in the morning and load the software that would allow everyone to work together by computer.

Finally at the end of the day, Brian and Justin and Spyder got in the limo and headed back toward Justin's loft.

"I think that went well," Brian commented, while they were riding.

"You were brilliant as always," Justin added, leaning in to give Brian a gentle kiss.

"Watching you two in action was pretty amazing. It was like you two just made intellectual love to each other during your creative process. I can't believe how well matched you two are."

Brian and Justin just looked at each other and smiled.

The limo dropped Spyder at his apartment. As Spyder was exiting the limo, Brian said to him, "I guess Kinnetik has to spring for breakfast one more morning, so the limo can take you over the Belluss Occhiali office for your meeting."

"Really?" Spyder asked with surprise.

"You're so easy...a mocha latte...a limo ride...I think we can manage that. Considering the big favor you're doing for us," Brian teased, "Especially since you have to deal with the Silvestris."

"They're still getting use to me. I think they're pretending that I'm Taylor whenever they talk to me. Did you notice they did finally pay attention to you though?" Spyder couldn't resist adding

"Out of desperation," Brian quipped. "But it helped having you there. Thanks for doing this."

"You're welcome. I'll see you for breakfast tomorrow, Brian. And Taylor...to your studio!" Spyder said with a smile as he finally moved away from the limo and allowed the door to be closed.

Justin settled into Brian's arms, as the limo continued on to Justin's the loft.

Once they reached the loft, Brian changed into his jeans and tank top and quickly settled into his usual chair to relax from his grueling day.

Brian watched and waited to see what Justin's next move would be.

Brian hoped that Justin would quickly change his clothes and be out the door, announcing that he was going to his studio.

Justin, on the other hand, had other definite plans of his own.

He returned to the living room and immediately straddled Brian's lap.

"What are you doing?" Brian quietly asked.

"I'm relaxing," Justin announced, lowering himself onto Brian's lap. Justin leaned in to kiss Brian gently.

"You don't have time to relax, you're supposed to be in your studio, or have you forgotten," Brian tried to ask, in between the kisses he was receiving from Justin. Brian was having some difficulty getting his point across.

Brian reached for Justin and the kiss immediately turned passionate.

They both surrendered to the kiss, allowing it to deepen. When they finally broke apart for air, they both realized that they were desperate for each other, and once again surrendered to the kiss.

Justin slid his hands beneath Brian's top and the contact of skin-to-skin only served to ignite sparks between them.

Brian lowered his legs and gently nudged Justin off his lap. "We're moving this to the bedroom," Brian announced.

Justin smiled and quickly got to his feet. "That was my plan."

After several hours of lovemaking and a round of fucking in the shower, Brian and Justin managed to get dressed. This time Justin was dressed in paint spattered tee shirt and cargo paints.

Brian was once again seated his chair with his bare feet elevated on the coffee table, when Justin leaned in to kiss him.

"I take it you're kissing me goodbye," Brian teased, "Because you're on your way to your studio and I won't see you for hours?" he asked, trying to make a point.

"Brian!"

"I guess if you're still reluctant, I could always call Spyder and..."

"No...no...I'm going..." Justin finally said, giving Brian one last kiss.

"Be sure your phone is turned on," Brian insisted.

Justin pulled out his cell phone and made sure it was turned on. He grabbed his messenger bag and headed for the door. "Later," he said, as he was leaving.

"Later," Brian whispered as he simply allowed himself to smile a victorious smile.

Chapter 35 – The Plot Thickens

A Few Moments Later That Same Day...(Day 44)

"Theodore," Brian bellowed into the phone for good measure. "You don't have time to relax, I have a new list of things for you to do."

"Bri, no one has time to relax around here. You have created impossible deadlines. Everyone is trying to find time to just breathe. How are things in New York?"

"Justin is painting, which is all I care about," Brian said almost in a whisper.

"Well not quite all," Ted answered with a laugh, "But I'm sure it ranks up there." Then he laughed. "How did the meeting go with Eyeconics?"

"The entire Silvestri family is here. Justin and I just created a showcase on the spot. So, they're quite happy. Of course, they got to see Justin, which I believe is all they secretly really cared about."

"Maria and Cristina are still hanging all over him, huh?" Ted asked with a laugh.

"You have no idea. Once they saw him, they totally ignored me. I'll tell you all about it when I get back. Look Theodore, I need you to pull together some information for me really fast."

"Sure. Don't tell me you're changing your moving plans again?"

"Probably not. What do you know about Barrister, Wilkins & Evans? They're an architectural firm in New York."

"I've seen pictures of some of their projects. They're quite well known. They're a bit big for any architectural work we may need when we move to the city. Why do you ask?"

"I've been asked to make a courtesy call on one of the partners. If I'm going to call on them, I want to be prepared. Not that I expect too much from a simple visit, but it never hurts to be prepared. It seems that they may be looking for a new ad agency."

"If we could land that account that would truly make everyone in New York take notice of us," Ted commented with a laugh. "I'll get right on it. I'll email you what I find out."

"What about the projections for temporary space and for staffing while I'm here?"

"Not a problem. I made the numbers work. But you need to talk to Justin about when his lease is up on this loft and on his studio, so we can time things just right, unless he's planning on doing a sublet."

"I'll talk to him. Well let me go. You'll get that information to me right away, won't you?"

"Absolutely. Bye, Bri."

Brian immediately dialed Cynthia. He relayed to her an overview of his two days of dealing with the Silvestri family and Eyeconics. Cynthia listened intensely and tried her best not to burst out laughing as Brian relayed the events.

Cynthia remembered all of Justin's warnings to them when they were pursuing the Eyeconics/Belluss Occhiali account about how troublesome the Silvestris could be to deal with. But somehow Brian and Justin always seemed to handle them just right.

"I'm glad you and Justin were able to solve their problems," Cynthia finally said, trying to suppress her smile.

"By the way, Kinnetik may have its first New York employee. It appears that Justin has a new assistant," Brian said and waited for her reaction.

"What? When did that happen?" Cynthia just had to ask, and she couldn't wait to hear the details.

"It's a long story. I'll email you all his information. His name is Spyder Smith. And you need to alert Murph and Valerie to expect a call from him at any time. Let them know to treat whatever he needs as a priority," Brian relayed, "We'll deal with the paperwork regarding him later."

"I'll take care of it. Of course, it does seem odd that Justin would have an assistant, who will probably be on Kinnetik's payroll, when Justin doesn't work for the company," Cynthia just happened to mention in passing and laughing once again.

"I know, it's complicated...like everything else whenever Justin is involved. But things have a way of straightening themselves out eventually," Brian reminded her.

"So this is Justin's doing, is it?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"Well not exactly. Look, we'll talk about it when I get back. I just wanted to warn you,"

Brian said, brushing off all additional questions.

"No problem, Boss," she said with a smile, "I was just asking."

Brian was now most eager to change the subject. "I've been asked to make a courtesy call on Barrister, Wilkins & Evans. Theodore is doing some research. Would you give him a hand on that project? You know the kind of information I need, and I need it fast."

"That would be a great client! I was looking at some of their projects in a recent magazine article. They're really quite important in New York circles. The article showcased some of their projects worldwide. I'm really excited."

"Don't get excited yet. If they're remotely interested in us, we'd probably end up competing against Kennedy & Collins, and God knows who else," Brian added with a laugh. "Anyway, we're going to give it our best shot, and we'll just have to see what happens."

"So when do you think that you'll be back here?" Cynthia asked more of out of curiosity than anything else, for things were really under control at the office.

"I know that I'll be in the office on Friday morning. Anything before that would probably be a pipe dream. There are a few companies that I might want to call on while I'm here. I want to use my time wisely while Justin is locked away in his studio painting."

"Somehow I knew that you would," she said with a smile.

"I'll call you later. Be sure that Theodore sends that material as soon as you have a chance to look at it," Brian reminded her.

"Don't worry. We'll take care of it. Bye, Brian."

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Meanwhile That Afternoon in Justin's Studio...(Day 44)

Both Brian and Spyder were insisting that Justin spend time in his studio. Justin had escaped to the quiet of his studio just to get away from their constant nagging. He smiled as he accepted the fact that they were both just looking out for him, and he really did need to paint.

Justin sat in his studio flipping through his sketchpad, trying to think about the next painting that he wanted to start. He mindlessly flipped through the sketches in reverse order.

There were the sketches from his meeting with Belluss Occhiali and Eyeconics.

Justin really enjoyed seeing the Silvestris again. Maria and Cristina were also fun to be with, and they were both looking forward to showing Milan to him and Brian this summer. Cristina was still talking about the art scene in Milan and the friends she wanted to introduce Justin to. Of course, they still teased him about hopes that he would marry one of them eventually. But he knew by now that they just loved to flirt with him. Justin knew that all the Silvestris really liked Brian and were really glad that he and Brian were together.

Justin also enjoyed meeting Perin Silvestri. As he talked with Perin, she reminded him so much of Jennifer. They were both strong women who dearly loved and protected their families.

Justin also remembered watching Perin and Rudolpho during the meetings. They had been together for over 25 years, yet whenever one of them glanced in the direction of the other, you could still see how much in love they still were. Justin hoped that after 25 years together with Brian that they would still look at each other in that special way.

Flipping back through the pages of the sketchpad, Justin's eyes fell on the images of Gus and Brian on the plane. Justin had even made a quick sketch of Brian and Gus playing UNO together on the plane.

There were also the sketches of Nicky and Gus in Cincinnati along with Paul and Jason. Justin thought about how happy Nicky and Gus seemed to be playing with each other. Justin realized how much he was looking forward to the coming weekend when everyone would be together again. Justin also realized that in spite of Brian's plans...inviting everyone for the weekend to allow him time to paint...Justin knew this coming weekend was going to be full of chaos.

Justin smiled to himself as he thought that Brian still believed that things could be otherwise.

As Justin was flipping through the sketches, he smiled at the drawings of Brian...always Brian. Justin now felt inspired. Justin was ready to paint.

He placed a new canvas on his easel. He lightly sketched a new image on the canvas, and he began to blend a new batch of paints. Justin Taylor Artist was now back at work.

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At The Same Time in Spyder's Apartment (Day 44)

Spyder had enjoyed his limousine rides today. It reminded him of another time...another life.

Now Spyder reclined in his favorite chair and asked himself if maybe Taylor was right. Maybe it was time to come out of his self-imposed exile and call his family.

These were thoughts that he hadn't allowed himself to think about for some time. Somehow getting mixed up with Justin Taylor had starting him thinking along these lines.

Maybe that birthday party in Cincinnati with pictures of Brian and Taylor together had reminded him that there was clearly more to life than work. Or maybe it was the joyous faces of a four year-old and his best friend that reminded Spyder of another time and other pleasures of life. He wasn't quite sure. But he did know he was starting to think about his family.

Spyder's thoughts were interrupted by a ringing phone.

The phone rang several times as Spyder tried to understand why his landline rather than his cell phone was ringing.

"Hello," Spyder said, wondering who could be calling.

"Spyder, it's Adam...Adam Lyons," the voice on the other end of the phone began.

"Well. Adam. I wonder who would be calling me on this line. It's good to hear from you."

"Yes, it was lucky that we ran into each other yesterday. I haven't seen you around town lately. I thought you might have moved away."

"No, I'm still here. Remember coming up with creative websites keeps me really busy. Lately, I really seem to be in unusually high demand."

"I'm sure the nomination for the Bronze Quill may have something to do with that," Adam pointed out with a quiet laugh.

"Oh, so you know about that?" Spyder asked with some surprise.

"How could I not know? I read the trades. I noticed that you and your partner are both nominated."

"We're a great team. What can I say?" Spyder said with a smile.

"Well, I was hoping that we could get together for that drink we discussed. We have a lot of catching up to do. I was hoping that you would be free tonight or maybe tomorrow. And maybe rather than just drinks you would be up for a bite to eat?"

"I'm in the midst of a project at the moment, but we could get together after work tomorrow. I have to do an installation in midtown, so I'm going to be close to your office. If you can be a little flexible on the time, I could call you as I'm finishing up."

"Hang on a second, let me be sure my calendar is clear." There was momentary silence. Spyder could hear the clicks as Adam checked his electronic calendar. Then Adam came back on the line. "Yes, I'll be working in the office. So we can go whenever you're free. I'm really looking forward to seeing you."

"Me too."

"Will your partner be joining us?" Adam slyly asked. "I'd really like a chance to get to know him better," he continued.

"I bet you would. But no...he's tied up on another project, so it will be just you and me. Is that a problem?" Spyder asked, taking note of Adam's continued interest in Taylor.

Spyder felt bad about letting the misunderstanding persist, but he wanted to investigate further before he corrected Adam's beliefs about his relationship with Justin Taylor.

"No. No." Adam immediately clarified. He really was looking forward to getting together with Spyder with or without the newly identified partner. "We'll be alone so we can really talk. I'm so looking forward to this," he repeated, and he actually meant this.

"Me too. I'll see you tomorrow. I'll call you as I'm finishing up with my client," Spyder repeated.

"Perfect," Adam whispered.

Spyder hung up his phone. He leaned back in his chair and started talking to himself, "So Adam, you just couldn't wait...could you?" he said aloud to himself with a smile. "Welcome to my web said the spider to the fly."

Spyder eagerly went to this desk to work on his projects, knowing that tomorrow was going to be an interesting day.

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A Few Moments Later in Adam's Office in Midtown (Day 44)

Adam was smiling too as he closed his cell phone. He was really looking forward to seeing Spyder tomorrow.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on his office door.

Adam wondered who would arrive at his door unannounced? Then Adam checked his watch and realized that his assistant must have already left for the day. Adam waited to see who would enter.

"Adam," Kip said, "I was just checking to see if you had plans for dinner."

"Oh, hi Kip, I thought you had left already. I wasn't expecting you. Dinner, huh? I hadn't really thought about it. I was planning on working on a few things."

"Is there something I can help you with? Would you like me to stay and help?" Kip volunteered.

"Thanks anyway. This is something I need to work on alone. But we'll have plenty of opportunities to work together. Just be patient!" Adam suggested.

"It's just that we haven't spent much time together lately. I've missed you," Kip tried to say subtly. "I learn so much from working with you."

"This week is going to be a killer. I hope that by the weekend I get a chance to breathe," Adam tried to brush off his clinging assistant.

"Does that mean you'll be going to the club then?" Kip eagerly asked.

"Too soon to tell," Adam pointed out, "We'll just have to see how this week plays out."

"I'll check back with you later. Well, I'm going to go now and leave you to your work. I'll see you tomorrow," Kip finally said, seeing that he had no choice but to accept things the way they were for the moment.

"Tomorrow, then," Adam said quietly, and returned to working with the papers on his desk.

Kip headed for the door to exit the office. He took one last look over his shoulder at Adam. Then he quietly left and returned to his own office several floors below. Kip thought to himself, that he had been wise to make this move to New York."

Chapter 36 – Friendships Renewed

Late Afternoon on Wednesday (Day 45)

"Hello," Adam said, answering his phone.

"Adam, it's Spyder. I'm just finishing up with my client. I just wanted to see if we were still on for drinks. After the day I've had, I could sure use one."

"How about if I meet you at Sullivan's? That way if we get hungry while we're talking we can grab a quick bite to eat. How does that sound?" Adam suggested.

"That sounds like a winner. I'll meet you there," Spyder quickly agreed.

"Bye Spyder...see you soon."

Spyder had spent the day with the Belluss Occhiali and Eyeconics teams. Work was proceeding nicely. Spyder knew that Brian would be pleased.

As a concession to Spyder, Brian had let him have the limo today. Needless to say he was thrilled. The knowledge that the limo was waiting for him had spurred Spyder to work all day with the Collezione Fiero team...instead of just the morning as he had originally planned.

Now Spyder was preparing to meet with Adam Lyons. He was looking forward to this meeting, but before he left, he decided to make one more call.

"Brian, it's Spyder," he began, "I'm leaving Belluss Occhiali now. We made great progress today. I was wondering if I could stop by later tonight and show you what we've done."

"Sure, when did you have in mind?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"Is Justin locked away in his studio?" Spyder immediately asked with a laugh.

"I think he went there to get away from both you and me. I'm going to drop by the studio later and make sure he eats. Otherwise, I think it's good news that neither of us has heard from him," Brian said with a laugh.

"I have to agree. Look I'm meeting a friend for drinks. Why don't I call you later?"

"I'll be here. I'm doing my homework on Barrister, Wilkins & Evans."

"I heard that you have a meeting scheduled for tomorrow morning. You work fast."

"I didn't expect Mitchell Evans to fit me into his calendar until next week, but he asked to see me tomorrow. What on earth did you tell him?"

"Only the truth, Brian. It's all up to you from here on. Good luck."

"Thanks. I'll wait to hear from you. Are you enjoying the limo?" Brian had to ask.

"It's been wonderful. How can I ever thank you?"

"Just by doing a good job. I'll talk to you later."

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Spyder walked into Sullivan's and found Adam already waiting in a quiet area in the lounge.

"Spyder," Adam said softly in greeting as he watched his friend approach.

"Adam," Spyder said, quickly extending his hand. The two friends shared a momentary hug.

"What are you drinking?"

"How about a Beam? What are you having?"

"I think I'll join you."

When the drinks arrived, Adam decided it was time for a toast. "To friendship renewed," Adam said.

"I'll drink to that," Spyder agreed.

They clinked glasses.

"So what's been going on with you since we last saw each other?" Spyder asked, being the first to break the ice.

"Well I'm still at Kennedy & Collins, but I'm sure you figured that out."

"I did."

"I'm still living in Soho. Things are going well."

"Are you seeing anyone?"

"Not seriously. I guess you know that Lars accepted that position with the European office so I'm just trying to get used to being solo again. I miss him. Since he left, I've just been hanging out. Unfortunately people have been slow to put me back on their guest lists so I'm doing a little of the party scene and occasionally visiting the clubs. You know the same old, same old."

"What about you?"

"Like I said, I'm still in demand for websites. You met my partner. What more is there to tell."

"Yes, I met your partner. He's really something special."

"That he is."

"When I first met him I thought that he was a kid. But the name was very familiar so I Googled him. Please pray tell, how did you hook up with him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you know that your partner is the darling of the art critics. The entire city is buzzing about his participation in the upcoming show at the Thornton. How on earth did you meet him?"

"I was working on an assignment, and I needed an artist. Trying to avoid being a starving artist, he applied for the job. When Taylor walked in he was easy to work with. When the assignment ended, we decided to continue working together."

"Well it must be working for you. You've never looked happier. You two are nominated for a Bronze Quill. That's no easy feat in this town. The competition is fierce."

"We haven't won the Bronze Quill yet, but it is an honor to be nominated. I will admit that I have designed websites in this town for years. It wasn't until I was paired with him that the nomination happened. We work well together. He's really smart."

"So you're telling me he's more than just a pretty face."

"That's what I'm telling you. So much more."

"So are you ready to rejoin civilization? You've been avoiding the social scene for long enough. I think it's time for you to rejoin us."

"I don't know. Maybe I've outgrown all that."

"Spyder, you're always on the list for the best parties. I would hang out with you just to be able to tag along. But for some reason, you prefer to hide in the shadows. Why is that?"

"I'm not hiding," Spyder protested.

"I never see you out or at the clubs anymore. You're still a legend in this town. Your kingdom is calling. Your subjects await," Adam said, sounding very much like his own ad copy.

"Like I said...I've really been busy. But now that you've told me I've been missed, maybe I should think about rejoining the world," Spyder said with a laugh. "So what's the deal with you and Kip."

"Kip Thomas recently joined the firm. For some reason the senior partners thought that he should sit in on my meetings. So I'm sort of taking him under my wing."

"He's quite a looker. I don't blame you," Spyder commented.

"Kip is very creative. He's always coming up with really good ideas. I think that he has a good future in advertising. But he seems to be in some sort of hurry to get to the top," Adam said with some reservations.

"Aren't we all? Haven't we all been there?"

"Yes, we all try that route until we learn the importance of a balanced life."

"That's a really hard lesson to learn."

"So you think he's cute? Do I detect some interest? After all he is gay," Adam suggested with a sly smile.

"Not in the least," Spyder said quickly, wanting to set the record straight.

Adam looked around the room. "You know this place isn't too crowded tonight," Adam observed, "Why don't we grab a bite to eat? My treat..."

"I guess we could do that...I do have another meeting later, but I think we have time."

During dinner they chatted easily for a while and caught up on people that they knew in common. Then Adam once again steered the topic of conversation back to Justin Taylor.

"Spyder, while I Googled Justin Taylor, I also had a chance to go to his website. He has quite a body of work for one so young, and he is constantly experimenting with new techniques."

"I know...he's an amazing artist."

"According to the catalogue on his website, I see that Brian Kinney is a major collector of his work."

"That is also true."

"I also see that Brian Kinney is one of his favorite subjects too."

"Yes he is."

"Spyder you can cut the charade. I know. Justin Taylor was Brian Kinney's partner. Why did you lead me to believe that you and Justin Taylor were a couple?"

"Taylor is my business partner. And, I'm very protective where he's concerned. Taylor is here. Brian is still in Pittsburgh. What did you expect?"

"I guess that makes sense. Are they still together? Brian Kinney and Justin Taylor?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Brian Kinney is legendary, and he's a first class fuck. The only problem is that he would fuck anything that moved. I heard that he supposedly had this stupid one fuck rule...so I was just wondering."

"Are we speaking from experience?" Spyder had to ask with a laugh.

"I heard rumors that he's been seen around town. I kept waiting for a phone call. I was hoping that he and I could hook up again. After all, it's been a long time. But I guess with Justin Taylor as a partner...that's a thing of the past. Still I sort of expected a courtesy call if he was in town."

"With Taylor living here, Brian is in and out of the city all the time. Why is your interest piqued about him now?"

"Now he's landed the Belluss Occhiali and Eyeconics joint venture account. I also heard rumors that he landed The Pentland Group. He's tops in his field, and he's been winning awards for years. I guess I just wanted to touch base."

"I'll be sure to tell him that you think so highly of him," Spyder said with a laugh.

"Your business partner was able to tame the legend. You're right...Justin Taylor's not just a pretty face."

"I think I said that."

"And if Justin Taylor is here, then Brian Kinney will probably be around too," Adam mindlessly repeated to himself.

"I would say that's a good assumption. You know now that you mention it, I think that I might be ready to resume my visibility on the party scene. I should probably make sure that Brian and Taylor meet all the right people, shouldn't I? After all, Taylor is my business partner. So Adam, does this mean that you and I should start hanging out together again?"

"Like I said, hanging with you gets one invited to the best parties. I will admit without you, I seemed to have dropped off the A list."

"Well, I guess we'll have to see what I can do about that when I get back."

"Are you going somewhere?"

"I have business on the west coast, but I'll only be gone a couple of days."

"I'll be here waiting when you get back," Adam promised. "You'll be sure to call me won't you?" he almost pleaded.

"I think that can be arranged," Spyder said with a smile.

For some reason, Adam Lyons seemed relieved. Spyder made careful note of events.

"Adam, answer something for me?" Spyder started to ask.

"Sure, what's on your mind?"

"You've been working at Kennedy & Collins almost from the beginning of your career, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have."

"How come you never went out on your own? Why not start your own agency?"

"I like the idea of being part of big organization. I have a lot of support behind me. It's hard when everything rests on you and what you're able to do. I like the big bonuses for a job well done. I'm able to make the right investments. I have no complaints about my life."

"Do you think that you'll ever want your own agency someday?" Spyder wondered.

"No, I think I'll stay at Kennedy & Collins. I'm perfectly content to rise through the ranks. Why do you ask?"

"I noticed that Brian Kinney went out on his own, and he seems to have done it when he was so young. I was just curious, why you didn't?"

"Brian was in Pittsburgh. I'm here in New York. Those two things are really not comparable."

"Oh, I see," Spyder whispered although he didn't really get the point. What he gathered from that exchange was that Brian Kinney was a risk taker...while Adam Lyons liked to play it safe. He filed this information away.

After they had finished dinner, Adam and Spyder exited Sullivan's. Spyder headed for his waiting limo. The driver opened the door for him.

"Spyder, I see that we're moving up in the world," Adam commented with a degree of envy.

"Can I drop you somewhere?" Spyder offered. "Like I said, I'm on my way to another meeting. The client just wanted to be sure that I arrived...hence the limo. I assure by tomorrow I'll be back on the subway."

Spyder and Adam shared a laugh.

"No, I think I'm going back to the office and work a bit before I finally head home. You'll be sure to call me when you get back?"

"I will call you," Spyder said, as he finally entered the limo, and the driver closed the door behind him. Adam gave one more wave goodbye.

As the limo pulled off, Spyder reached for his cell phone to call Brian.

Adam, on the other hand, replayed his reunion with Spyder over again in his mind.

Chapter 37 – Just Checking In

A Little While Later...(Day 45)

Brian got up to answer the knock on the door. He was not surprised to find Spyder standing there.

"Please tell me, you haven't heard from a certain artist that we're both overprotecting?" Brian asked teasingly.

"No, not a word. How about you?" Spyder asked with a smile in return.

"He's been silent. I know that his phone is on. I made sure that he turned it on before he left the loft this morning."

"So we terrorized him into hiding out in his studio," Spyder teased, "I guess both of us in overprotective mode was too much for his little blond psyche, huh?"

"We make a formidable pair," Brian said with a laugh, as he and Spyder shook hands. "So what are you doing roaming the streets at this hour?"

"Well I wanted to return your limo, and say thanks."

"You're welcome."

"I had drinks and dinner with Adam Lyons. I must say he was suitably impressed."

"You saw Adam? That must have been interesting."

"He asked about you. He'd heard the rumors that you were in town."

"And..."

"He was looking forward to hooking up with you again...until he Googled Taylor. He knows that you and Taylor are a couple. He also knows that you're in town."

"What did you tell him?"

"I simply told him that with Taylor here, you were in town all the time. He bought it for the moment, but Brian there's too much buzz about you. That line isn't going to work much longer."

"I know."

"Adam thinks I should return to the social scene here in town. Maybe it's not a bad idea since I do want to be sure that you and Taylor travel in the right circles," Spyder said with a laugh, making himself comfortable in the nearest chair.

"I'm surprised that with you and Adam being friends that you're still so willing to be actively involved with Justin and me," Brian said, resuming his relaxed position. "Can I offer you anything to drink?"

"No thanks, I'm fine. You know Brian, I don't let anyone dictate to me who I can and cannot see. I like you and I like Taylor. Adam is merely an old friend. I'm very trustworthy because I keep confidences. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Not at all. I'm just surprised that you would have me call on Barrister, Wilkins & Evans, when you knew that Adam was probably going after the account."

"Your calling on the firm is purely business. I admit I have a warm spot in my heart for the firm. I wanted them to have the best ad agency. That wasn't going to happen unless the firm had a choice. Mitchell is smart enough to know what he wants. I simply made an introduction."

"That's fair, and I'm pleased that you had enough confidence in me for that introduction." Brian said, "Now tell me how things went today with Belluss Occhiali and Eyeconics."

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot," Spyder said with a laugh. "After I loaded the software on their computers, we worked a bit together. Here's the first draft of text for the brochure," Spyder said, handing over a few printed pages. "I've already emailed you the file."

"Well..." Brian was pleasantly surprised.

"We also wrote the script to run on the monitors. We tried to make a selection of the images to go with the script. You'll have to take a look at what we selected. We couldn't settle on the music though...so I thought you and Taylor would settle on that. They also found enough archival images so that a photo shoot is unnecessary for this showcase."

"I can't believe you got all that done."

"I think they like me, so they wanted to work together. I couldn't argue with that. Since we got so much accomplished, I thought I would make that trip I need to make out to the coast. That way I should get back here on Monday. If you need to send me stuff before then, just email it to me. I can't work on my tan the whole time I'm gone. Of course, from what Taylor has told me about the weekend that you guys have planned, not too much will be happening here anyway."

"So he told you about the gathering did he? I only set it up so that my son would have a play date when he was visiting me, and hopefully Justin could get some painting done. Otherwise, Gus would never give Justin a moment's rest. For some reason my son is crazy about Justin, and every now and then I have to remind him to whom Justin belongs."

Spyder burst out laughing as he tried to picture that discussion between father and son.

"I don't know what you think is so funny," Brian commented in all seriousness.

"Nothing, Brian. I'm sure you wouldn't understand," Spyder said with a smile, "I would just love to hear that conversation between you and your son."

"You're right, it pretty funny...and it never seems to do any good," Brian added with a laugh. "Anyway...I guess I'll pick up dinner and stop by the studio. I don't want Justin to become a starving artist."

"You do that. I may stop by the studio on my way home. I want to be sure that I touch base and let him know that I'm leaving." Spyder gathered up his things to leave. He and Brian said their goodbyes. "I'll call you," he added. "And have a good meeting with Mitchell."

"I'll do my best," Brian whispered.

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Spyder left Brian and headed right to Justin's studio on his way home.

Justin was painting away, but he didn't mind the interruption. He opened the door and smiled at Spyder.

"If you're checking to see if I'm painting...you can see for yourself that I am," Justin say right away, still holding the paintbrush in his hand.

"I just stopped by to let you know that I'm leaving for the coast. I'll email if I need you anything I need you to work on for Barrister, Wilkins & Evans while I'm gone. I'll be back here no later than Monday."

"I'll miss you," Justin admitted.

"That alone makes the trip worthwhile," Spyder said with a smile.

"I just left Brian. He said something about bringing dinner to you here in the studio. So he should be here any minute."

"That's good. I was so busy painting that I forgot about lunch."

"You've been doing that a lot lately," Spyder reminded him.

"I know. Once I get back to my studio at the house, Teres will make sure that I eat...not to worry."

Spyder got serious for a moment. "Taylor, did you talk to Brian about Kip?"

"I told him that I saw Kip with Adam Lyons. That means that he's been warned that Kip is in town so he won't be caught off guard if their paths cross," Justin explained.

"I just had drinks with Adam Lyons...so he and I have reconnected. He knows that you and Brian are a couple. He figured it out when he Googled you. I merely confirmed it for him. He hasn't figured out about the Kinnetik's New York office yet. But it's only a matter of time. So Adam and Brian will probably be traveling in the same circles soon. I'm glad you finally told Brian whatever secret you were keeping."

"I didn't say that I did that," Justin cautioned him. "I simply told him that Kip Thomas was in town. That's all that Brian really needs to know at the moment."

"Are you sure?" Spyder challenged as gently as he could.

"Yes. I'm sure," Justin stated. "You have to let me handle this. I know what I'm doing."

"Ok. I'll let it go for now. I'll email you, while I'm gone. I'll talk to you when I get back."

"Are you going to contact your family?" Justin asked, being eager to change the subject.

"I still don't know. We'll have to see. I'm at least thinking about it."

"Have good trip," Justin said as he hugged Spyder goodbye.

Justin closed the door to the studio and returned to his painting.

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An hour later, Brian knocked on his studio door. Once again, Justin was ready for the interruption, and he quickly opened the door.

"Teres isn't here to feed you, so I thought I would bring you dinner," Brian said, "I hope you're hungry. I picked up Chinese."

Justin leaned into give him a kiss before removing the bags from his arms. "Spyder was here...not too long ago. He just stopped by to tell me he was leaving."

"Yeah. He said as much to me," Brian said, making himself comfortable on the futon, and placing the food on the nearby table.

Justin cleaned up a bit and made himself comfortable beside Brian.

"How's the painting going?" Brian finally asked, seeing that there were no paintings visible.

"Pretty well. I think I'll fly back here on Monday and finish my painting. I want to get the submission off to Milan by the end next week. Then I can start on the paintings for the other exhibits."

"I have my meeting with Barrister, Wilkins & Evans tomorrow morning. So I was thinking that we could fly back home tomorrow afternoon. How does that work with your schedule?"

"I should be at a good stopping point by tonight. I have a couple of paintings to ship back to the house in the morning. That way they will arrive at the house of Friday without us having to take them on the plane. But I should be ready to leave with you in the afternoon."

"We should probably call Jennifer and see if she and Molly can come out to the house for dinner tomorrow? I'll call Teres to see if she can whip up something. Otherwise, I'll have dinner delivered. Either way, you and I need to talk to Jennifer. I don't think we can put it off much longer," Brian pointed out.

Justin leaned over to rest against him. "I know...I can't believe how fast things are moving."

"I'm glad that we're doing this together. You know, I couldn't do this without you," Brian admitted.

"Sure you could. You're the best at what you do. I'm just here and madly in love with you," Justin said, leaning in closer to give Brian a kiss.

"I'm glad about that," Brian whispered, as he wrapped his arm around Justin.

"Oh, I need to call Gregory too," Justin said as an afterthought.

"Gregory, why? Why are you calling our decorator?"

"Well with Nicky coming, I want to be sure that we have a room set up for him and Gus. I want them to be comfortable. So I'll call Gregory and have him deliver the additional stuff we need. In fact, I think I'll send him an email tonight. He'll probably have everything set up by the time we get home tomorrow."

"I guess at some point, you and I will have to spend some time actually furnishing the house," Brian suggested. "That's going to be a real project!" he added with a laugh.

"I still want us to be able to take our time when we do it," Justin argued, "So I know that it won't happen any time soon. In the meantime, the rented furniture keeps the house from feeling so empty."

"I agree."

Justin leaned over and wrapped his arms around Brian. "I want you to know, I really appreciate the fact that you haven't complained about the rented furniture."

"You know, you chose comfortable stuff. We have everything that we need. You added the touches so everything feels like home. After we furnish our place here in the city, we'll work on furnishing Bri-tin. We'll do it together. Somehow, we'll make the time. Ok?"

"Ok," Justin whispered in agreement. "Have you decided what we're going to do about telling the family about the move?"

"I've decided that I'm not telling anyone until the move is complete. Theodore, of course knows. Jennifer will need to know. If you need Emmett's help, then he'll have to know. If you swear him to secrecy he won't gossip. If we leave him to figure things out, he'll think out loud and be the gossip queen we both know he can be," Brian said with a laugh.

Justin burst out laughing for he knew what Brian just said about Emmett was so true. Then Justin got quiet for a moment.

"What happened? Where did you go?" Brian asked.

"I was just thinking how much I've missed everyone. It's been weeks since we were really home for any length of time."

"I know. So much has been happening. You and I have been really busy, haven't we?"

"It's been less than two weeks since you finally came to your senses and agreed that we were going to be together."

"I'm probably as happy about that decision as you are. I like waking up with you in bed beside me. But Theodore and I have a lot to do to pull everything off. In the meantime, I really want you to focus on your shows."

"I will. There shouldn't be anymore distractions."

"Spyder got a lot done for the Collezione Fiero showcase. So that should come off on schedule. I'm glad that he was willing to help. He makes a great assistant...I wonder how long I can bribe him with breakfast and limo rides to keep him helping us here?"

"Spyder is so unpredictable. I'm sure a lot will depend on what happens while he is on the west coast. We'll have to see when he gets back."

"So are you going to show me what you've been working on?"

"Not really. You know how I hate to show you unfinished art. You'll see it when it's all done."

"I guess I can live with that," Brian said, touching his forehead to Justin's.

"I'm going back to the loft. I want to review my notes before my meeting in the morning."

"I should be home before too long. I just want to finish up a few things here," Justin said, beginning to stand up.

"Promise me you'll take a cab back to the loft?" Brian demanded.

"I'm perfectly capable of walking. I do it all the time. But, if it will make you happy I'll take the cab," Justin agreed. He figured it was easier to give in to Brian when he was like this.

"Thank you," Brian said with a sigh. "Eventually, you'll have the studio where ever we live, and this won't be an issue."

"I know," Justin readily agreed.

After they had finished eating, Brian helped Justin clean up and discard the take out cartons. Once the studio was once again returned to a professional state, Brian wrapped Justin in his arms. "I'm going back to the loft. I'll see you when you get home."

Justin kissed Brian passionately. "Are you sure that you wouldn't like one of my world-class blowjobs before you go?" Justin asked with a devilish smile, "You know it will be awhile before I get back at the loft?"

Justin already knew the answer to that question.

"Ordinarily, I don't want to keep you from your work, but now that you've offered, how can I refuse?" Brian said with smile, pulling Justin on top of him as he collapsed on the futon.

Chapter 38 – A Few Random Talks, Part 1

A Little While Later, Wednesday Night...(Day 45)

In their bedroom in Cincinnati, Paul and Jason were talking. "Did you finally get Nicky back to bed?" Jason asked with a laugh.

"Yeah. Remind me to kill Brian the first chance I get," Paul muttered with a laugh.

"Brian? What does Brian have to do with this?" Jason innocently asked.

"Ever since Brian cradled Nicky in his arms and asked our son if he would feel better if he was coming for a visit...Nicky has thought of nothing else. This is all Brian's fault."

"Don't you think that's just a bit harsh? Nicky's been excited for weeks now...first about turning four...then about his party...and Gus' visit...and Brian and Justin being here. The fact that we're going to Pittsburgh is just one more thing for him to be excited about. We only have a few more days, and then we'll be on a plane. Everything will eventually take care of itself. I think the prospect of murder might be a bit extreme," Jason said, leaning in to give Paul a gentle kiss.

"When you put it that way...you're probably right," Paul groveled. "Have you talked to Justin?"

"He must still be in New York meeting with Spyder. I hope that Brian is keeping an eye on this Spyder-character," Jason continued.

"You went to great lengths to tell him about your suspicions. I'm sure he heard you," Paul added with a laugh.

"If he heard me, Brian will take care of things from there," Jason insisted with a determined laugh.

Jason got up to be sure their bedroom door was locked. He walked back to the bed, gently pushed Paul into a reclining position, and casually lay down beside him.

"I understand why Nicky is all excited. I'm excited about visiting Brian and Justin myself," Jason added, as he propped himself up on one arm and looked at his partner.

"I'm really excited about the trip too...that's why I'm going to kill Brian. He has all of us living with this anticipation all week," Paul said, trying to sound serious.

Jason couldn't resist. He just burst out laughing. Paul thought about what he just said, and then he burst out laughing too.

"Let's get ready for bed while I'll see if I can temporarily erase these murderous thoughts from your mind," Jason suggested with a smile.

"That's a very good idea," Paul said, pulling Jason into a passionate kiss.

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Melanie and Lindsay were relaxing in Toronto, and Lindsay was going through the mail. She kept stopping at one particular piece of mail. Melanie noticed.

"What do you have there?" Melanie asked Lindsay.

"It's a description about an artist in residence program in Paris," Lindsay explained.

"You seem awfully interested," Melanie noted.

"I received it in the mail, and I'm just looking at it. The program looks interesting. I was just thinking..."

"We're barely making ends meet now. We have two kids to take care of; I hope you're not seriously thinking about pursuing this," Melanie warned.

"It would only be for the summer. There are fellowships available. I don't see why I couldn't look into this. Look at all that Justin has been able to accomplish."

"Sweetie, you're not Justin. And once again let me remind you that we made a decision to have two kids. They need our attention. They have to come first."

"I'm sure Brian would help out. He's always willing to help. I'm sure that he would pay for someone to look after Gus while I was in class," Lindsay asserted.

"What does that mean?" Melanie asked, not liking one bit the turn this conversation was taking.

"Gus is older now. I could probably take him with me. Paris would be a wonderful experience for him. I'm sure that Brian would pay for whatever help I needed," Lindsay couldn't resist pointing out.

"I can't believe that you would ask him," Melanie challenged.

"Gus is his kid too. He can't continue only to do everything for Justin? He has a son. Who else should he spend his money on but his son?" Lindsay professed.

"Where did that come from?" Melanie asked again.

"I don't know. It's just what I've been feeling lately," Lindsay acknowledged.

"Is it because we're going back to Pittsburgh?"

"Every time we go back, I have to deal with the fact that Brian bought that house for Justin. A house we haven't even been allowed to see, I might add...while we live here in this tiny place," Lindsay repeated with her anger rising.

"Things will get better for us. You know that. We've talked about this. We've talked about why we're not moving back to Pittsburgh. I thought that you agreed with me. Or, are you now ready to have Michael and Debbie deeply involved in how we raise Jenny Rebecca?"

"No, I know that you're right. Here's where we need to be to have any chance to really parent our kids. I understand that. I was just daydreaming," Lindsay said with a sigh.

Melanie decided to explore Lindsay's thinking. "So, in your daydreams, if you were to do the summer program...you would take Gus with you. How did you figure that I would take care of Jenny? You know that I do have to work."

"Your cousin is here. She would help you with Jenny. Or I'm sure Ben and Michael would help out too if you asked them. Ben could take a sabbatical and be here for the summer. Then Michael and Ben would be here to help you with Jenny. This might work out well for everyone. It would give Michael some time with Jenny. Then after the summer, he would go back to Pittsburgh, and we could go back to raising our kids." Lindsay explained.

"You can't be serious," Melanie suggested. "I'm not sure that after spending the summer here, that we would ever get Michael and Ben to go back to Pittsburgh. It's clear that you're daydreaming. So I guess that's ok?"

"Why should we continue to struggle while everyone else has so much?"

"Lindsay, what is wrong? You sound like you want Brian to pay for the fact that he isn't with you. I thought that we were past this point."

"It's just that Justin seems to have everything. He has Brian. He has the house. He has the career. And Gus won't stop talking about him."

Melanie couldn't resist laughing. "Lindsay, Gus has been crazy about Justin since he was a tiny baby. That is never going to change. You 're going to have to do better than that."

"Did you notice that when Brian and Justin dropped off Gus, he was ready to leave with them again? After Gus came here and spent a few minutes with you and me, he was ready to grab his little suitcase and go home with Brian and Justin. It was only Justin, convincing him that he had to go to school that made him agree to stay with us. Otherwise he would be with them now...wherever they are."

"That and Justin reminding Gus that he and Brian would see him this weekend," Melanie reminded Lindsay of the rest of Justin's conversation.

"Just before he went to bed, Gus was upstairs counting the days until the weekend."

"Gus is six years old. Time is a tricky concept for him at this age. But I guess I was right," Melanie acknowledged, "Gus clearly loves us, but he needs more than just you and me to complete his world if he is to grow into a happy well adjusted person," Melanie reminded her.

"I know that you're right. Brian is a good father."

"Yes he is. But no matter how good a father he is to Gus, Brian is never going to be that fantasy husband you've always wanted. Brian is always going to be with Justin. And even if you have all of Brian's money, you are never going to have Brian."

"I know that," Lindsay admitted.

"That's good to know because, I will not allow you to use Gus to manipulate Brian. He doesn't deserve that."

"When did you become Brian's advocate?" Lindsay protested.

"When I watched the way he loves and takes care of Gus," Melanie said with a sigh.

"I'm sorry," Lindsay finally said. "I know you're right. I know I'm being unreasonable. But, still if we could find a way for me to take that art course in Paris," she said gently kissing Melanie.

"What about you job at the gallery?"

"I'd have to see about that."

"Maybe the gallery might be willing to send you. Then you could consider the course without relying on help from Brian. At some point you have to stop looking to Brian as your personal piggy bank. Sometimes you have to consider the alternatives," Melanie suggested.

"Maybe?"

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Meanwhile back in New York City, Justin sent an email to Gregory.

Justin talked about setting up another room for Nicky and Gus so that they would have more space. Justin explained in the email that he didn't want Nicky to have to sleep on the futon that was in Gus' room. Justin also suggested that the need had finally presented itself for that dining room table that they had avoided dealing with.

Gregory just happened to be on his computer at the time, and he was able to email an immediate response.

Gregory suggested that they set up one of the empty guest rooms with twin beds and accessories so that Nicky and Gus would be comfortable. He also would take care of the dining table issue, using Justin's original sketches as a guide. Gregory told Justin not to worry about anything that he and his team would take care of everything in the morning.

Justin could now breathe a sigh of relief...for he felt that things were now under control.

Justin replaced his painting back on the easel. He had moved the painting earlier so that Brian wouldn't see his unfinished work. Now that Brian was safely tucked away at the loft, and Spyder had already said his goodbyes, Justin felt that he could now resume painting undisturbed.

As Justin painted, his mind would occasionally drift. He was really looking forward to the weekend and the visit from Paul and Jason and Nicky. He was also looking forward to seeing Lindsay and Melanie and Gus...as well as seeing all of the Liberty Avenue gang. But most of all, he was looking forward to being back at Bri-tin with Brian.

Justin was trying to remember how things had gotten so out of kilter.

A month ago...was it only a month...Justin had convinced Brian that they should move into Bri-tin for a three-month temporary stay while Justin created the paintings for his upcoming shows in Cincinnati and New York.

The temporary move had become a permanent one...for now both he and Brian thought of Bri-tin as home. Justin couldn't help smiling at how well things worked out.

Events had taken over. Brian had signed the Belluss Occhiali and Eyeconics joint venture account creating Collezione Fiero. Justin had met Pietro Marani of Pinacoteca Ambrosiana and been asked to apply for this summer's emerging artist exhibit in Milan.

Brian had finally understood the message of his painting, Talisman Of Time, and now they were making plans to finally live together. Opportunities were already opening up for Brian, and it looked like he was going to be spending more time in New York even before their planned move-in-together-date in three months. And if Brian was going to be spending more time in New York, then so was Justin.

Justin paused a moment to smile and let all these thoughts pass by.

He took a moment and refocused his attention back on his painting. Justin Taylor Artist happily went back to work.

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At about the same time Brian got back to the loft and realized that he needed to make a few phone calls. He looked at the time and figured that Jennifer should still be up, so he called her at home instead of on her cell phone.

The phone at home was answered with a quick "Hello..." by a voice that didn't belong to Jennifer.

"Molly..." Brian said hesitantly, recognizing the voice.

"Who wants to know?" she asked coldly. Molly wasn't going to be warm and friendly until she knew exactly who was calling at this hour of the night.

"Molly, it's Brian. What are you doing up so late?"

"How else do you expect me to find out things?" Her voice immediately softened, as soon as she identified the caller, and the easy banter started between them. "Nothing ever happens early...you know that."

Brian laughed at her remarks. Then he quietly asked, "Can I speak to Mother Taylor?"

"Not yet," Molly said with certain determination, "I think we need to talk first."

When Brian heard the 'I think we need to talk first' images of Justin flashed through his mind. Brian suddenly wished he had simply sent an email and avoided this conversation. Instead, he simply sighed and asked, "What do we need to talk about?"

Molly began her questions, "First of all, where are you?"

"I'm in New York," Brian volunteered, "And before you ask, I'll be home tomorrow."

Molly simply continued her questions. "That's good. Is Justin with you?"

"He's in his studio, but yes he is here in New York with me. He'll also be home tomorrow. Is there anything else?"

"No, that should cover the basics," Molly said obviously satisfied with his responses. Brian could finally smile, thinking the inquisition was over. He was mistaken. "So why do you want to talk to Mom?" Molly then asked.

"If you must know, I called to see if you and Mother Taylor are busy tomorrow evening?" he said and then waited for her reaction.

"I'm available, what did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking that you and Mother Taylor might come out to the house for dinner."

"You're inviting me to the mansion? Is this like a date?" Molly asked.

"You and Mother Taylor...its kind of a package deal," Brian tried his best to explain this key point.

"And, I'm invited too?" Molly had to double check. Of course, she got invited to dinner at Debbie's all the time, but dinner with Brian was something special, and she knew it.

"Isn't that what I just said?" Brian said with sigh.

Their conversation was momentarily interrupted. "Molly, who are you talking to at this hour?" Brian could hear Jennifer ask in the background.

"Hold on..." Molly said.

Brian could hear Molly explaining things to Jennifer. He simply waited patiently for whoever was going to come back on the line.

"Brian?" Jennifer said, obviously deciding that this call was intended for her.

"Yes, hello Mother Taylor," Brian said warmly.

"Did I just hear Molly correctly?" Jennifer asked, "Did you just make a date with my daughter?" she couldn't resist teasing, "Isn't she a little young for you, dear?" she continued.

"I invited her to dinner not to Babylon," Brian teased back with a laugh, "I was sort of hoping that you would be there too, at least as a chaperone?"

"As it turns out, I think I have a free evening," Jennifer continued to banter, "I understand that you set up this date for tomorrow?"

"Justin and I were hoping that you would come out to the house for dinner," Brian finally confessed.

"Out to the house? The house? You mean the mansion? You're inviting us out to the mansion?" Jennifer rambled in total surprise.

"I think that's what I just said. Don't act so surprised...you've been to our house before. Do you still remember how to get there?"

"Of course, I remember how to get there. What time?" Jennifer asked, now most eager.

"I was thinking about 7:30...how does that sound?" Brian asked.

"That should work. We'll see you then, Brian."

"Wonderful," Brian said and was about to say goodbye when Jennifer came back on the line.

"Oh, wait a minute, Brian...Molly wants to talk to you again."

Brian just sighed, wondering when does it ever end.

"Brian?" Molly said

"Yes, Molly?" Brian said patiently.

"So do we have a date?" she asked.

"Well, I was going to ask you the same question? Mother Taylor thinks she can make it, but I'm still waiting on an answer from you?"

"I wouldn't miss it. Is Justin going to be there too?"

"Yes. I hope you weren't suggesting that I leave him here in New York?" Brian teased.

"As long as you explain to him that WE have a date, I think everything should be ok," Molly insisted.

"This may take some doing, but I think that can be arranged," Brian agreed. "So are we on then?"

"I'll be there," Molly finally agreed.

"Thank you. I'm looking forward to it," Brian said with a smile. "Goodnight."

Brian closed his cell phone and wondered how a simple dinner invitation turned into a date with Molly, and Brian wondered how he was going to explain this particular date to Justin.

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Brian picked up his phone again. He decided he had better make a few more calls.

"Emmett? It's Brian," he said on the next call.

"Brian? Why are you calling? Is Justin ok? Where are you?"

"Justin is fine. I'm talking to you, isn't that enough?" Brian quipped.

"It isn't necessary for you to get an attitude. What do you want at this hour?" Emmett asked sternly.

"I wanted to call you before you went to Babylon. I need a favor."

"Anything within reason. You know that."

"Jennifer and Molly are coming out to the house for dinner tomorrow night. Justin and I are stuck in New York. I was hoping that you could whip up something special to serve for dinner. I know it's short notice and all..."

"Are they dining alone or are you and Justin planning on joining them?"

"Don't be an asshole! Justin and I are flying back tomorrow afternoon, so we'll be there too. We just won't have time to prepare dinner. I hate the idea of serving take out pizza to Jennifer for dinner."

"Good point. No problem, Brian. I'll take care of it. What time is dinner?"

"7:30"

"You're going to owe me big time for this," Emmett reminded him.

"That goes without saying. Thanks, Em. I'll let Thomas and Teres know that you'll be out the house."

"That does make things easier. Don't worry, I'll take care of everything."

"Thanks, Em."

"You're welcome.

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Brian was pretty pleased with himself. Things were going pretty well so far. He was now ready to make that final call.

"Hello," Thomas answered with a cherry voice.

When Thomas answered the phone, Brian smiled to himself because he was once again convinced that Thomas never sleeps.

"Thomas, it's Brian Kinney."

"Yes, Brian."

"I just wanted to let you know that Justin and I will be home tomorrow."

"That's good. The house has been rather quiet without you."

"I just wanted to warn you that all sorts of people would probably be dropping by tomorrow before we get there. There will probably be additional furniture delivered too."

"Not a problem, Brian, where do you want me to put it?"

"The furniture is for the upstairs bedroom. I wouldn't worry about where everything goes. I'm sure Gregory...you remember my decorator...and his team will probably show up to arrange everything. He and Justin will work out the details."

"Ok, Brian. If the furniture arrives but Gregory doesn't, then we'll just put everything in one of the empty bedrooms."

"That will be good, and then Justin and Gregory can sort things out later if necessary."

"Is there anything else?"

"Emmett...you remember Emmett?" Brian asked hesitantly, trying to figure out if anyone could ever not remember Emmett.

"Yes...Teres and I both remember Emmett," Thomas said with a laugh.

"Emmett may come out to the house and take over the kitchen. We're having guests for dinner tomorrow night."

"Not a problem. Teres will give him a hand if he needs any help."

"Thanks Thomas. And we have friends flying in from Cincinnati on Friday, so there will be extra houseguests over the weekend. This will be a play date for Gus."

"Teres and I will make sure that everything is ready. It'll be good the have you back."

"It'll be good to be home. We'll see you then."

Brian closed his phone again and placed it on the table. He settled into his chair again and elevated his bare feet again on the coffee table. As he reached for his file of notes on Barrister, Wilkins & Evans, he couldn't help smiling. Life was good.

And later, when he heard Justin's key turning in the loft door, Brian knew his world was about to be perfect.

Chapter 39 – A Few Random Talks, Part 2

Thursday Morning...(Day 46)

Michael, Emmett and Ted were having breakfast at the Diner.

"Has anyone heard from Brian and Justin?" Michael asked.

"I talked to Brian yesterday. He's been really busy," Ted suggested.

"He's been gone for over a week. I don't understand how he can be so busy that he doesn't have time to call me. After all, I'm his best friend," Michael complained.

Emmett decided immediately that the best course of action, as this point, would be to change the subject. "Are you all ready for Mel and Linds and Jenny Rebecca to visit?"

"I am," Michael replied gleefully, "It will be good to have my little honey bunch around."

"What do you have planned for her visit?" Emmett asked.

"Planned?. JR is just a baby. You don't plan things. You just spend time with a baby. I'm sure that she misses me. After all, I'm her father, and she's crazy about Ben."

"I heard you talking on Sunday about possibly moving to Canada. Have you given it any more thought?" Emmett asked, always wanting to keep abreast of the latest information.

"Ben and I are just starting to talk about it. It would be a big step. Ben would have to make arrangements with the university and get a job there. It's just something I'm thinking about so I can spend more time with my daughter."

"That would be a big step for Ben. After all, he has tenure and everything here. He would have to give up a lot to make that kind of a move," Ted added as a word of caution.

"Remember Lindsay and Melanie made their move and things didn't turn out quite the way they expected. We don't want the same thing to happen to you and Ben. Besides you can't move there, how would you manage with out US?" Emmett teased.

"I wish that Mel and Linds would come to their senses and move back here. Then everything could be the way it was," Michael added.

"Things can never be the way they were. That's why it's important that you talk to Mel and Linds and tell them what you're thinking. Things may be really hard for them in Toronto. You don't want to make plans to move to Toronto only to find out they are planning on moving back here or thinking of moving somewhere else," Emmett added.

"Why can't we all have it easy like Justin, having Brian take care of everything in his life?" Michael continued to complain.

"Where did you get an idea like that?" Ted finally knew that he had to join the conversation. "Justin has been working and paying his own way for a long time now, especially since he moved to New York. Hello? Do you remember the painting of Superheroes...did you remember how much that painting hanging in your shop is worth?"

"I know. I know..." Michael finally acknowledged.

"It's not like you to rant like this. What's the matter, is Justin making it impossible to get out the next issue of Rage?" Ted asked.

"No, it's just that Brian has been gone so long."

"Well, you know that he went to Cincinnati for Nicky's birthday. You saw the pictures that Em had on Sunday."

"Yeah."

"And then he had business in New York. So he and Justin flew there directly from Cincinnati."

"But he's been gone so long." Michael complained. "How can his business here run without him being here? After all, the Justice League doesn't work without Superman at the helm?"

Ted and Emmett both rolled their eyes at the comic book reference.

"Fortunately Kinnetik isn't a comic. It's a real business, and that's what he has Cynthia and me and full staff of people for." Ted patiently explained. "We make sure that Kinnetik still runs, whether Brian is here or not. And right now he has us all working overtime. So don't be surprised when he gets back here if he still doesn't have any time to spend with you. There's a lot going on with the company right now."

"But I bet he has time for Justin," Michael whined.

"I wouldn't bet on it. Justin is probably in his studio painting. You know he has all those shows to get ready for. So I suspect that both Brian and Justin are working their little asses off while they're in New York," Ted persisted to try to make his point.

"Maybe..." Michael finally acknowledged.

"But the weekend is coming up. I'm sure Brian and Justin will be back for the weekend. And if they're back, you know they'll come to dinner on Sunday. Give him a break, Michael."

"Give who a break?" Debbie asked, as she passed their booth and couldn't resist eavesdropping on their conversation.

"Michael is missing Brian. It seems he's been gone for over a week," Emmett explained to Debbie, "Michael thinks it's the end of the world."

"When are you going to stop clinging to Brian?" Debbie finally asked, placing her hands on her hips for emphasis.

"I'm not clinging to Brian. He's my best friend."

"I know all about how he's your best friend. You still want to cling to Brian like you did when you were kids. You went on with your life...but you still won't let Brian have his," Debbie persisted.

"What your mother is suggesting is that you might want to shift more of your attention in Ben's direction," Emmett gently warned. "And remember to keep your priorities straight."

"My priorities are straight. I just wish that Brian would hurry back," Michael quietly said.

Debbie realized that this discussion was getting her nowhere, so she decided to change the subject.

"Em honey, you're up and out pretty early," Debbie said, turning her attention away from Michael for a moment.

"I have a busy day. I need to prepare dinner party for a client. It was a last minute thing. It's one of my special clients so I don't really mind. The day is going to be busy...busy...busy," Emmett said with a laugh. "In fact, I should probably get going," he added, scooting out of the booth to leave. "I'll see everyone later."

"Michael," Ted said quietly once Emmett had left, "What's with you? It's been a long time since you've complained about Justin and Brian being together."

"Brian has been living in that house for almost a month. I'm his best friend, you would have thought that he would have invited me out to the house by now," Michael complained.

"Brian bought the house for Justin. So technically, you may have to wait for an invitation from Justin...not from Brian. They're only staying there temporarily for a few months. You know that Justin is getting ready for his shows. I'm sure he's not thinking about socializing yet. They haven't even bought furniture yet. They still have that rented stuff. Give them some time, Michael."

"I know that you're right. I'll be okay by the weekend when JR is here."

"Sure," Ted said, not believing it for a second

"Let me go and open the store," Michael said, scooting out of the booth.

"I should get to the office too," Ted announced, also standing up to leave.

Michael and Ted said their goodbyes.

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Back in New York, Brian and Justin had just finished breakfast at the coffee shop. They had managed to get their usual table, even though the illusive Spyder wasn't there.

"Are you looking forward to your meeting with Mitchell Evans?" Justin casually asked.

"I've done my homework, but technically this is supposed to be a courtesy call," Brian explained, "So I'm just playing this meeting by ear."

"You'll be magnificent as always," Justin reminded him.

"You realize that no matter what happens with Barrister, Wilkins & Evans, I really need to come back here to New York next week."

"Me too. I really have to finish my submission for Milan by the end of the week. I have to allow time for shipping it there. I just hope that my application is accepted."

"Just do your best, and everything will be fine. But, whatever happens, we're going to Milan this summer," Brian reminded him.

"I'm so looking forward to our trip."

"Me too."

They both shared a momentary daydream about their forthcoming trip to Milan. Then just as quickly, they both returned more or less to the present.

"It's hard to believe that we'll be back at Bri-tin in a few hours," Brian said with a smile. "We're probably going to be as busy there as we have been here. Are you ready?"

"Gregory emailed me last night. He's going to take care of everything at the house for us," Justin relayed with a smile.

"That's good. We're having dinner with Jennifer and Molly tonight. Unfortunately, Molly thinks that she and I are having some sort of date," Brian sheepishly explained.

Justin couldn't resist a laugh, "So you have a date with my sister? Mom must have loved hearing that," he teased.

"Please, I've already taken shit from your mother about this," Brian recounted, "Hopefully Emmett will fix a feast that will get me off the hook with Jennifer," he continued with a laugh.

"Not having take out pizza will go a long way with my mother," Justin reassured him.

"Somehow I knew that. Look, I had better get going to my meeting. Let me drop you at your studio," Brian said, standing up to leave. Justin followed him.

When the limo arrived at the studio, Brian made sure that Justin's cell phone was turned on before he was allowed to go inside. Just before he finally left, Justin gently kissed Brian and flashed him a full-wattage Sunshine smile for luck.

And Brian knew in that instant that there was nothing he couldn't accomplish.

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A few minutes later, Brian entered Barrister, Wilkins & Evans and talked with the receptionist.

"Mr. Kinney, someone will be right with you. Can I get you anything?" Adrienne asked.

"No thanks, I'm fine," Brian said, taking a seat and making himself comfortable.

A few moments later, Toni Andrews came out and introduced herself to Brian. She then led him to Mitchell Evans' office. As Brian was following her, his thoughts momentarily turned to Cynthia. Brian wondered if Toni was as good at her job as Cynthia was.

Beginning of Flashback.

"Since the move is going to happen sooner than I originally expected, I need to know what you want to do. Do you want to make the move with me or do you want to stay in Pittsburgh and run the office? Think it over and let me know," Brian asked.

"I don't have to think it over. I'm going to make the move to New York with you."

"Cynthia, you realize that you have the education and surely the experience to run the Pittsburgh Office. You've worked with me long enough to..."

"This isn't about my capabilities. I know I can do the job. I know that I could have moved up years ago. But I also know that I don't want to miss my front row seat of seeing the action in New York. Besides you'll need me there more than here, trust me."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. It's going to cost you?"

"Cost me? I knew that. How much?"

"I want to run the New York Office when Kinnetik goes international."

Brian burst out laughing. "And what makes you think that Kinnetik is going to go international."

"Justin," she said confidently, as if the mention of the name should explain everything.

"Justin?" At the sound of the name, Brian immediately stopped laughing. "What does Justin have to do with this?" he simply asked, not knowing if he wanted to hear the answer to this.

"Justin predicted that you were going to need international offices eventually. Don't you remember? Plus after his show in Milan, he's going to be internationally famous. So, I'm holding out for the New York Office. You always said, 'Dream big or don't dream at all'..."

"I never said that. I've thought it...but I've never said it," Brian teased.

"I guess I must have read your mind...scary huh?" Cynthia said with a laugh.

End of Flashback.

Brian couldn't help smiling to himself at the memory.

He was brought back to the present as Toni Andrews finally led him into Mitchell's office, and then, she quietly slipped away, leaving the two men to talk.

"Mr. Kinney, it's good to finally meet you. Of course, you know that you're the talk of the town?"

"I hadn't heard that, but it's always good to know. Mr. Evans, it was good of you to fit me in on such short notice. I'm pleased to finally meet you."

The two men shook hands.

"I understand this is a courtesy call," Mitchell began.

"Yes, I wasn't sure whether you had heard that Kinnetik is in the process of opening a New York office to better serve our clients."

"I imagine that having to deal with Belluss Occhiali, The Pentland Group, and Liberty Air might warrant a New York presence."

"I must say that you are particularly well-versed with my client-list."

"Did you think that just because you're in Pittsburgh that I don't know who you were? You're a National Award Winner. And when I hear your praises from Rudolpho Silvestri, I have to take notice...we both know that Rudolpho is a hard man to please," Mitchell said with a smile. "The worldwide landscape is littered with the remains of ad agencies that have tried and failed."

Even Brian had to smile at that remark. For once again he was unexpectedly the beneficiary of his unusual relationship with Rudolpho Silvestri. "I'm truly flattered that you and Signor Silvestri found time to discuss me."

"Don't be flattered, your praise seems well-deserved. Now, you asked to see me, what can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to stop in to meet with you. I know that BBD is your ad agency. I have seen some of the ads that they've created, they seem to have served you well over the years."

"That's true. But in view of the fact that we're acquiring three international agencies, we wanted to change our image. Spyder said that you gave him a lesson in what an ad campaign should do. He was very impressed. After talking with you, Spyder came to talk to me with a new understanding of things. I figured if you could crystallize things so well for Spyder, then I can imagine what you could do with our target audience. I was impressed that you understood that we're not soap or toothpaste or cereal...I like that," Mitchell said with a slight laugh.

"Handling the ads for a company such as yours the objective is to keep your name before your buying public...so that your company becomes the industry standard...and then you become the only name someone thinks about when your type of project needs to be undertaken. This is done through slow and methodical advertising."

"I like what I'm hearing. May I call you Brian? Everyone else that I've talked to simply wants to continually showcase our projects. You're the first agency I've talked with that understands that we have longer-range vision and a broader perspective. We're architects...that by it's very nature means that this company still has dreams."

"Of course, Mr. Evans... "

"Please call me, Mitchell."

"Of course, Mitchell, just because you're an established company and tops in your field, doesn't mean that you'll be content to simply rest on your laurels in the future. Without dreams, your firm would be left in the dust by your competitors. The pursuit of those dreams are what has kept this firm on the cutting edge of its industry."

"You do understand us, Brian. That's wonderful...because I would like Kinnetik to make a presentation to us to become our new ad agency. I will be honest -- you will be competing against some of the top ad agencies, both here and abroad. But somehow, I doubt that this is the least bit intimidating to you," Mitchell said with a laugh.

"This would be most interesting, how could I possibly refuse?" Brian said with a smile.

"Perfect. Toni has a preliminary packet of information for you. We will have additional information as we actually figure out how we're merging with the new firms. Once that is settled, we would like you to make a comprehensive proposal to us covering the new firm, as it then exists. We have some time remaining on our BBD contract, and BBD will also be given a chance to present for the new entity too. But we're open to new ideas. You understand that the board will make the final decision. I'm merely just the point of contact."

"I understand fully."

"It has been good to meet with you Brian. And we'll definitely stay in touch. Please keep me posted on your move to the city. I'm most interested. I know we don't have any bath houses for you to turn into your local offices, but I'm sure you'll be equally as inventive with your offices here as you were with the one in Pittsburgh."

"I'm somewhat surprised that you know about my Pittsburgh office."

"I know a lot about you, Brian. You're a man of vision. You're fascinating. Your thinking is definitely out of the box. I've wanted to meet you for some time. And whether you handle our ad campaigns or not, I'm always going to keep my eye on whatever you're involved with. I have a feeling you will always be fascinating to watch," Mitchell added with a laugh. "Something tells me you're about to give your competition in this town a run for its money. I wouldn't want to miss that. Not at all."

"Well, I've taken up enough of your time. I want to thank you for seeing me on such short notice. I will stay in touch with you, and I'll see that my assistant Cynthia Sykes stays in touch with Ms. Andrews."

"This has been a good meeting; let me walk you out," Mitchell said, standing up and shaking Brian's hand.

They were met enroute to the reception area, by Toni Andrews, who handed Brian a packet of materials.

Mitchell and Brian proceeded to the reception area where they said they're goodbyes.

Brian left Barrister, Wilkins & Evans and entered his waiting limo.

He leaned back in the limo for the ride to the loft. Brian was pleased with the meeting and looking forward to eventually making a presentation to the firm.

Brian replayed the meeting with Mitchell over in his mind. Brian couldn't believe that once again he had Rudolpho to thank for another introduction. Brian smiled as he thought about his random discussion with Spyder about what an ad agency could do for an architectural firm. Little did he know that those random comments would have such a powerful impact.

Brian began to feel that all the forces of the universe were working in his favor. And as he once again leaned back in his seat, Brian thought of Justin and he remembered the letter.

Beginning of flashback.

Brian,

Legends have told us that the Ancients would craft a Talisman, a sacred object forged at the astrologically auspicious time when all the forces of the universe converged, to consecrate the energy of the spirit within the object. For the Talisman could only be created at this one moment in time and space.

It was said that with the proper Talisman, time could be eluded.

Some have said that with the proper talisman, time would have no meaning...one could travel at will...back in time to the past... or forward in time into the future.

Still others have said that the talisman can be used only once...one time to change a moment of the past or one time to change an instant of future.

How often have we wished to go back in time to change the outcome of a moment? How often have we asked "what if"? And how often have we desperately clung to some single moment hoping it would never end?

We have had our moments, you and I...moments when all the forces of the universe converge. We have known both moments of extreme joy and moments of utter despair. And through it all...through all the ups and downs...we come here to this moment in time...here in the present...when We are still US...when we are still together.

The shadow of the lovers' embrace is the ultimate Talisman of Time, for the love that is shared is transcendent.

We choose what we'll do with the time that has been given to us.

Can't we simply choose to find some way to share a love without sacrificing a life? Can't we find some compromise? Can't we find some way to be together?

'It's only time' isn't good enough, Brian.

This is the moment for which our Talisman of Time was forged. Now is the time!

Justin

End of Flashback.

There it all was again...Talisman Of Time...the painting...the letter.

Everything came back to Justin. Everything always came back to Justin. Justin changed everything. Not just six years ago when they first met outside of Babylon...Justin changed everything...everyday.

And with absolute clarity of mind, with no hesitation or reservations, Brian made a decision. He then reached for his cell phone and made a most important call.

Chapter 40 – Meeting Of The Minds

Late Morning on Thursday...(Day 46)

Brian entered the loft, and Justin was waiting for him.

"So how did it go?" Justin eagerly asked.

Brian never answered his question. Instead, he dropped everything as he entered the room and immediately reached for Justin. Brian first swept Justin into his arms, and then he leaned down and pulled Justin into a passionate kiss.

Justin immediately responded to it all. When the need for air forced them apart, Brian started walking Justin backwards in the direction of the bedroom.

"We don't have time...a plane to catch," Justin attempted to mutter in between breaths.

"Fuck the plane!" Brian said, continuing his forward motion. "Later..." he uttered as a shortened explanation.

Justin smiled and leaned again into the kiss. Brian continued to steer him towards the bedroom. Once they reached the bedroom, their clothes were quickly scattered about.

Justin fell on the bed bringing Brian down with him. Brian easily slid on top of Justin allowing their bodies to grind together. And Brian knew at that moment, there was only one place he wanted to be.

With practiced precision they brought each other to new heightened states of ecstasy.

In the midst of the kissing, nipping, and touching each other, Brian reached for the lube. After warming the lube slightly, Brian covered his fingers and began to administer to Justin's hole while Justin responded by continuing to writhe beneath him.

Once Justin was prepared, Brian sheathed his cock in a condom. Today Brian wanted this more than usual and he always wanted Justin. Brian placed Justin's legs on his shoulder, and he began to long slow thrusts into that tight space, where he so wanted to be.

As Justin began to thrust up to meet him, Brian sank in deeper and deeper. Brian felt Justin's passion pull him toward the outer reaches of his own, as everything started to happen all at once.

Brian reached that spot that sent Justin over the edge. Brian felt himself being pulled along. Then Brian felt Justin reach his climax, and at the same time that Brian reached his own.

Brian knew that even though they had done this by now, thousands of time before...this time was different, and Brian didn't want this time to end. He didn't want to pull out. As much as he wanted to stay buried deep within Justin, he knew that he had to move.

So reluctantly, Brian pulled out of Justin, with a painful groan at the lost of closeness.

Brian removed and disposed of the condom and returned with a cloth to allow Justin to clean up a bit before they spooned together.

As Brian lay there spooned together with Justin, he could once again relish the closeness.

In a universe of time and space, cosmic forces had converged to bring this man into his life...this man, who changed everything.

And Brian understood that the lovers' embrace was truly the ultimate Talisman of Time, and he held on to savor it for one more moment.

"I guess we have to get up, huh?" Brian finally whispered to Justin.

"It would probably be nice to arrive home before our guests," Justin teased.

"Meaning?"

"It's time for us to go home."

"Home..."

They reluctantly got up, quickly showered, packed the last few items, and got dressed. One more quick visual sweep of the loft, and they were out the door and into their waiting limo.

Brian used his cell phone to reschedule their flight and to send a text message to Cynthia.

They arrived at their gate just as their flight was boarding.

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"So once again, we're flying together. I think I like having you as my in-flight partner," Brian teased once the plane had taken off.

"It's only because you know that I won't challenge you to play UNO," Justin quipped.

"I still have the cards in my briefcase. Are you sure you don't want to try?"

"I'm sure. Are you going to tell me how your meeting went with Mitchell Evans?"

"I found him interesting. At least now, the courtesy call is out of the way. We really need to get offices set up here. We have a lot of work to do. He asked us to compete with the other agencies to become his ad agency."

"That's great. I always knew you were the best at what you do. Mitchell would be foolish not to be impressed."

"You know how I love hearing your accolades, and of course I deserve them," Brian said with a determined smile.

"Always."

"Did you get everything from your studio packed and shipped?"

"Yeah, my stuff should arrive at the house sometime tomorrow."

"What made you ship them?"

"I had a few paintings in New York that I wanted to move back to Bri-tin."

"Just out of curiosity, are any of them for me?" Brian asked, reaching out and letting his fingers entwine with Justin's. "What are you trying to persuade me to do this time?" he whispered.

"Brian..."

"I just wanted you to know that you don't have to send me paintings and a letters to make your point. I've learned my lesson. I promise that I'm much more receptive now to the things that you say," Brian confessed sarcastically.

"Brian, will you stop it?"

"I was just letting you know. I'm much more cooperative now. Just tell me what you want, and I'll agree to it. It saves so much time it if I just do it right from the beginning."

"I'm glad you finally realize this," Justin smirked with some satisfaction.

Brian smiled, and just for a moment leaned his forehead over to touch Justin's.

They then continued talking easily together.

"Do we need to have someone meet us at the airport?" Justin asked.

"No, I emailed Cynthia earlier so there should be a limo waiting for us. We do have one stop to make before we go out to the house. Then you should have enough time to have your way with me before Jennifer and Molly arrive for dinner."

"I really like the sound of that."

"Somehow I thought that would appeal to you."

The flight between New York and Pittsburgh was really less than an hour. So before they knew it, the plane had landed. And as expected, when they exited the terminal in Pittsburgh, the limo was waiting.

"So where are we going?" Justin asked once they were settled in the limo.

"Does it matter?" Brian teased, "I was hoping that you would blindly follow me anywhere."

"In your dreams, Kinney. You obviously have me confused with Michael."

"I knew that someone would blindly follow me anywhere. Deep down I should have known that it wasn't you. How could I forget, how much trouble you really are?"

"Are you done?"

"For the moment."

"Now where are we going?"

"If you must know, we're going to my attorney's office. There are some papers that need to be signed."

"What papers?"

"You ask too many question."

"You know I have been told that before."

Within a short time they arrived at the Pittsburgh offices of Caulfield & Caulfield.

"Mr. Kinney," the receptionist said, "Mr. Caulfield has been expecting you."

"Pam, it's good to see you. I don't know if you've met my partner. Pam this is Justin Taylor. Justin, this is Pam Mathers."

"Pleased to meet you," Pam said with a knowing smile.

Before Brian could make himself comfortable, a male figure approached. "Brian," he whispered.

"Max, sorry I'm late. Did I give you enough time? I know I gave you just a few hours notice."

"Of course not, but like your alter ego, Rage. I can do the impossible too." Max teased, "That's why I charge you those exorbitant fees."

"Are you done? Max, this is Justin Taylor, my partner. Justin, this is my attorney Max Caulfield. Actually, his father is my attorney, but Max keep butting in and taking over things."

"Lucky for you," Max quipped. "Hi, Justin. Why don't you two follow me?"

"Max, you have to be careful what you say about Rage, Justin and Michael created the character. Justin is the artist that brings Rage to life," Brian added, as they were walking.

"I know, I shouldn't admit it," Max explained, "But I've been a fan since the first issue. It's really an honor to meet you."

"Thanks," Justin said with a smile.

They entered the conference room, where a very tall stack of papers was waiting. Max took a seat nearest the stack.

Brian made himself comfortable on the other side of the table. Brian nudged Justin into a seat beside him and casually wrapped his arm around him. Finally Brian leaned over and gently kissed Justin on the cheek.

"So are we ready to begin?" Max casually asked, trying to hide the developing smile for. Max had never seen this side of Brian, but he knew that now was not the time to acknowledge what he just saw.

"I think so," Brian said, looking straight at Max. Then he turned slightly toward Justin and gestured with his hand. "Justin, I need you to sign these," Brian said matter-of-factly.

"What do you want me to sign?" Justin innocently asked, trying to read Brian's eyes.

Max slid the entire stack of papers over toward of Justin.

Justin started to read the papers, "Agreement to Legalize Domestic Partnership," he said aloud. "Brian, what is this?" he asked, turning once again to face his partner.

"I don't suppose that I could get you to just sign the papers now, and then maybe argue with me later...could I?"

"Not a chance."

"I was afraid of that," Brian said with a sigh. "Why do you have to be so much trouble?"

"What's going on, Brian?"

"I want to legalize our relationship," Brian finally admitted.

"What does that mean?" Justin asked.

"Talisman of Time said that you wanted us to be together NOW."

"That was the message," Justin said. "I'm glad you were paying attention," he added with a smile.

"I've decided that simply agreeing to BE together isn't enough for me. I want more. I've thought it over. This is what I want. I want to legalize our relationship."

"What do you mean you want to legalize our relationship? You obviously don't want to get married?"

"What makes you think that?" Brian asked with surprised, "I really hadn't given that option much thought."

"Don't you think it's obvious, since we're sitting in a lawyer's office not a church, and these papers do not appear to be any sort of prenups?"

"When you sent me the painting, we agreed to live together in three months. That would mean I would have been able to handle all this legal stuff in little bits over the next few months when the task wouldn't be so daunting. But thanks to you, events are taking over, and we need to move sooner than I thought. So I need to have all this paperwork out of the way before we move. So I need to you to sign all this now so everything can be filed both in Pittsburgh and New York, and we can be perfectly legal."

"Brian?"

"Justin..."

"Why don't I give you two a few minutes alone," Max said with a smile. "You can push the buzzer over there when you're ready for me to come back."

"Sure, thanks Max," Brian said, trying to figure out how he lost control of things, and then remembered that he was dealing with Justin.

When Max was out of the room, Brian wrapped his arms tightly around Justin and ever so gently kissed the top of Justin's head.

Without moving, Justin gently asked, "What's going on? Tell me."

"I've decided that I want to legalize our relationship. Why is that causing you such a problem?"

"I don't know. You're just acting strange."

"What's so strange? I did ask you to marry me, if you will remember?"

"Of course, I remember. Is that what you're asking me now?"

"Are you saying that me we have to be like Melanie and Lindsay and have a ceremony in order for you to sign the stack of papers on the table?"

"No. I told you before I left for New York that we didn't need rings or vows to prove we loved each other. I thought you agreed with me."

"I do."

"Then why are we here?"

"We're here for the simple reason that I want to legalize our relationship. And thanks to the current political climate, at the moment that seems to be a job for attorneys...not for priests. I want to give you legal rights to everything I have now and will have in the future."

"It's a wonderful gesture."

"Thank you...I'd hope you would approve," Brian smirked. "Now will you sign the papers?"

"Brian, why are you doing this?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Brian quietly asked as he once again settled in his seat. He looked up lovingly at Justin and smiled.

"What?"

"You're going to make me say it?"

Justin thought for a minute and returned the smile. "Yeah," he finally said.

Brian let out another deep sigh, "Because I still don't understand how to do the romantic gestures of buying you flowers and saying the words you want to hear. This feels right somehow. I know, I don't tell you often enough, but never doubt for a minute how much I love you."

"I love you too. Now, we don't have to do this. You show me every day how much you love me. We're fine, Brian. I don't need this...this really isn't necessary," Justin protested.

"I know that. I need to do this. I also know, that we can walk of here without signing any papers, and you and I will be fine. That isn't what this is about. But I also know that not signing the papers also isn't what I want. I want you to do this. So will you sign the papers?" Brian pleaded.

Justin allowed himself to be pulled into Brian's arms.

"Let's get Max back in here," Justin said softly when he was released.

They pushed the button, and Max re-entered. Brian still had his arms wrapped around Justin.

He didn't move when Max entered, smiled at the couple, and sat down.

"Well, are we ready?" Max casually asked.

"Max, please explain to me again what Brian wants me to sign?" Justin patiently asked.

"In a nutshell, Brian wants you to agree to share the rights to anything he owns at this moment and anything he will have in the future. Unfortunately it only takes a breath to say it, but 14 inches of documents to make it a reality," Max explained.

"In this stack of documents, are their papers giving Brian the rights to everything I own at the moment and will own in the future too?"

"Not in this stack. Do we need them?" Max innocently asked.

"Well I'm not signing these, unless Brian signs a comparable stack."

"Justin, what are you doing?" Brian immediately started to protest.

"Making sure that we remain equal partners," Justin said, giving Brian a gently kiss. "I admit, at this moment, I don't have much. I'm still a starving artist. But I do have my interest in Rage...I have my paintings..."

"That could be pretty substantial, Justin, Rage is very popular. I know, remember I'm a big fan. Besides, you're on your way to becoming a famous artist," Max pointed out, " I just wanted you to know that I do read the Arts and Entertainment section. You're the darling of the critics," he added with a knowing smile.

"And, I also have Taylor Graphics and Design..."

"Justin was nominated for a Bronze Quill Award for innovative website design," Brian added with a certain measure of pride.

"Congratulations," Max added, "You are indeed very talented, Justin."

"Thanks. So Max, if you will prepare a second set of papers, and Brian agrees to sign them. Then he and I can come back and sign both sets at the same time," Justin said, casually leaning up to give Brian a gentle kiss.

Max just smiled as he observed the shocked expression on Brian's face.

Max now knew to just lean back and watch to see what was about to unfold.

"I can't let you do this," Brian protested, "I don't want your money."

"I thought we were partners."

"We are."

"I thought you wanted to legalize our partnership."

"I do."

"Well, that's going to require both of us to participate to make it legal. Max is sitting right here. I'm sure he'll be glad to explain the concept to you," Justin added with a smirk.

"Justin..." Brian tried to say in protest, but Justin cut off his protests with a kiss, which Brian completely yielded to.

When they finally broke apart for air, Justin simply asked, "What's it going to be, Brian?"

Brian tried to regain is breath while he looked over at Max for help. "You're my attorney, can't you help me out here?" he asked.

Max simply shrugged in reply.

Brian finally admitted defeat. "Are you sure, Justin?"

"I'm as sure as you are, Brian," Justin said softly.

"All right," Brian finally agreed. "Max will you prepare the second set of papers? Justin and I will come back in the morning and sign everything. Does that give you enough time?"

"That will be fine," Max agreed.

"Well, this meeting hasn't gone quite the way I planned," Brian said with a laugh.

"Brian, I never thought I would see it, but I think that you've finally met your match. I'm going to so love watching you two."

Brian wrapped his arms around Justin and looked at his watch. "We had better get out to the house, we're having guests for dinner."

"And I still have to have my way with you?" Justin teased.

"Haven't you done that enough?" Brian asked.

"Never enough..."

Chapter 41- Dinner at Bri-tin

Late Thursday Afternoon – (Day 46)

"Look at the traffic," Justin commented as they were riding in the limo towards Bri-tin.

"It seems to always be like this during this time of day," Brian added, "That's why I like to stay at the office until at least 7pm. So I can avoid this."

"Mom and Mollusk won't be at the house until 7:30 so they'll miss this, won't they?"

"They should, that was the reason for setting the time when we did."

"We've both been so busy all day today, I didn't get a chance to check with Gregory or Em."

"We're so close to home, it doesn't make sense to call them now. They either took care of things or they didn't. Either way, I sure we'll manage," Brian said with a laugh. "I guess you're right, this has been a rather busy day...made longer become someone wouldn't just simply sign a stack of papers," he said, giving Justin a gentle kiss.

"After dinner we'll get in the hot tub, we have things to discuss," Justin said with a note of seriousness to his voice.

"Which hot tub were you thinking?" Brian asked, trying to gauge how much trouble he was in.

"The one down stairs. You still have some serious explaining to do. It seems that I'm not the only one capable of getting into trouble."

"Me, why?"

"We'll talk about it later," Justin insisted. Then he changed the subject. "I wonder what Emmett is creating for dinner?"

"Thomas said that Teres would probably help Em. So don't be surprised to find both of them our kitchen when we arrive home."

"I've missed everyone, but most of all it'll just be good to sleep in our own bed here. It feels like forever since we were there."

"Has it only been 10 days since you left for Cincinnati and I left for New York?"

"And tomorrow, everyone will be in town...Paul, Jason, Nicky, Mel, Linds, Gus, and Jenny. This should be a fun weekend," Justin remarked with eager anticipation.

"I'm going to have to TELL you ALL about it, because you're supposed to be locked away in your studio. I had a plan, remember? Everyone was supposed to leave you alone so that you could paint."

Justin leaned over and rested his head on Brian's shoulder. "Don't worry if things don't work out quite the way that you planned," Justin quietly suggested.

"What's that supposed do you mean?" Brian started to challenge, "Except when you're involved, my plans always work perfectly."

"Brian, that's not funny."

"It wasn't meant to be. I'm merely stating facts, Sunshine," Brian confirmed, leaning over to kiss the top of Justin's head.

At that point the limo turned into the driveway at Bri-tin, and both Brian and Justin got very quiet.

They noticed the extra vehicles still in the driveway as the rode up to the front door, where the ever-present Thomas was waiting.

"Brian...Justin, it's good to have you home," Thomas said in greeting.

"Thanks Thomas, and I knew somehow that you would be here to greet us," Brian teased.

Thomas smiled. "I'm just keeping an eye on things as usual."

"I see we have guests?"

"Your decorator has been here most of the day working upstairs. Emmett and Teres went shopping together earlier today. Now they're busy in the kitchen together. They seem to be having a great time together, but they have barred me from that part of the house. All in all, things seem to be going rather well, I'd say," Thomas added with a laugh.

"I gather that both the furniture AND Gregory arrived," Brian continued to speculate, "So I guess we don't have to creatively store things like we feared."

"No, everything seems to be taken care of," Thomas responded, "So there don't seem to be any problems here.

The driver finally removed the luggage from the back of the car. Thomas retrieved the luggage and said, "I'll put these upstairs in your room."

Brian grabbed his briefcase and Justin grabbed his messenger bag; then, the two of them headed inside to see how the interiors of Bri-tin had changed.

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Brian and Justin dropped their things in the foyer.

"Something smells good. Em, are you here?" Brian asked in the hallway.

Brian and Justin continued down the short hallway toward the kitchen.

"Did I hear you call me?" Emmett asked as he came over and wrapped his arms around Justin. "Welcome back, Sweetie."

"Emmett," Brian said as a solitary way of greeting. Then he proceeded to unwrap Justin from Emmett's embrace.

Teres couldn't help smiling as she greeted Brian and Justin and watched them interact with Emmett. She could immediately see that they were good friends.

Emmett and Teres filled Brian and Justin in on their day. Teres pointed out that she picked up enough food for the weekend, especially the double-stuffed Oreos that Gus was so fond of. She also reassured Brian that he now had a fresh supply of guava juice in the refrigerator. Brian automatically smiled at this news.

"It's good that something can improve your disposition," Emmett said sarcastically.

Emmett then wrapped his arms around Justin and guided him in the direction of the dining room. He wanted to be sure that Justin approved of the way things were set up for dinner. Emmett deliberately left Brian to follow along on his own.

The table was set up in a semi-formal style. "Because it was Jennifer, I wanted to keep things a little bit formal. But nothing is fussy, so Molly should be ok with things too," Em explained.

Brian was pleased with the way the room was set up, and he especially liked the furniture and touches that had been added to the room.

"Gee Em, everything looks great. Thanks, now what smells so good?" Justin asked, "I'm starved."

"What else is new?" Brian commented.

"That's because you never feed me," Justin reminded him.

Brian thought about it and realized that neither of them had really eaten since breakfast. So he turned to Emmett with that look of pleading in his eyes "Em..." he began.

"Don't say another word. Why don't you two go say hello to Gregory? Then when you come back I'll have a snack all prepared for you. Just a little something to tide you over."

"Great idea, Em. Thanks," Justin remarked, gently nudging Brian out the room and towards the stairs.

When they arrived on the upper level, they encountered Gregory. They exchanged greetings, and Gregory showed them to the guest bedroom that had been set up with two oversized twin beds. The room was just perfect for two little boys. Curtains had been added for privacy. A few toys and books were added to give the room a homey feel.

"Since I had to come out to the house, we also furnished a feminine version of this guest bedroom too. Come and see. Now that you're starting to have sleepovers, I wanted everything to be prepared. So now, six of the seven bedrooms are furnished. Emmett picked up extra linens and stuff for you. The bathrooms are all stocked."

"Gregory, I can't believe that you got this all done so fast," Justin said with some excitement.

"It was only because you had given me the sketches. I kept in touch with the rental company looking for just the right pieces from time to time. I knew exactly where to find them. Based on how quickly we had do things when you moved in here a month ago...I had a feeling these last rooms would happen at the last minute too."

"Gregory, you've outdone yourself," Brian smirked.

"Justin, my team has done all we can do today. I think I'll come back in the morning and finish any little details that we may have overlooked. If you think of anything else you need, just send me an email."

"No problem."

"I'll see tomorrow then," Gregory said as he was leaving.

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Brian and Justin returned to the kitchen for the snack that Emmett had prepared.

They chatted easily together while Brian and Justin enjoyed the finger sandwiches that Em had prepared.

"Why don't you two lie down? I'm sure you've had a really long day. I'll call you in about an hour. That should give you plenty of time to dress for dinner," Em suggested.

"Thanks Em, you're the best," Justin said, leaning up to give Emmett a kiss on the cheek.

"Justin..." Brian tried to grumble, but failed miserably.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Em, he's just teasing you," Justin said with a smile.

Emmett nodded his full understanding while Brian tried to scowl.

Brian and Justin followed Emmett's suggestion and headed to their bedroom.

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About an hour later, Brian and Justin both arrived downstairs. Brian decided that guests for dinner required more than his usual sweatpants and tank top. So he opted instead for simple slacks and a soft sweater. At Brian's insistence, Justin decided to forgo his usual cargo pants and tee shirt so he dressed in slacks and soft sweater also. Brian made one more concession to fact that guest were arriving, Brian decided to wear shoes.

Emmett gave both of them his nod of approval.

"Em," Justin began, "I was wondering what you were doing for lunch tomorrow?"

"I'm probably free. What's up, Sweetie?"

"I just need to talk to you about something, but I don't want you say anything to anybody about our meeting or what we talk about. Can you keep a secret?" Justin asked.

"I know that I'm the queen of gossip, and your secrets are always so delicious, but sure Sweetie, for you I won't say anything to anyone if you don't want me to," Em said, "Scout's honor."

"You were never a boy scout," Brian added as a challenge.

"I would have been if they would have let me. So the pledge works either way," Em insisted. Brian simply rolled his eyes at this latest revelation. "Do you want to meet at the Diner?" Em finally asked.

"No, why don't I pick you up, and we'll find somewhere other than the Diner to go?"

"Sure."

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. Brian eagerly answered the door, figuring he could escape from the fantasy world of Justin and Emmett.

"Mother Taylor," he said in greeting at the door. Then he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek.

"Brian," she responded giving him a hug.

"And don't forget me, your date for the evening," Molly said on entering, turning her cheek up to Brian for her obligatory kiss.

"I was getting to you, Miss Taylor," Brian teased, "I'm so glad that you were able to have dinner with me."

"That's better," Molly said with a smile, "Now, what did you do with Justin? You did tell him about our date?"

"Of course, he knew we were going to need this moment alone," Brian continued. "So Justin's in the kitchen with Emmett."

Molly gave Brian a smile that almost rivaled Justin's while Jennifer just shook her head at the antics of the two of them.

"I didn't bring my map with me, Brian, so why don't you point me in the direction of the kitchen. I think I may have to call out to Justin. After all, it's been so long since I've seen him, I'm not sure I'll be able to recognize him," Jennifer teased.

"You do that, Mother Taylor," Brian said with a laugh, knowing there was no way possible that mother and son would have any identity problems, but he was willing to play along so he said, "But I will give you a little hint. When you finally reach the kitchen, Justin's the little short blond guy in there."

"Thank you, Brian. You're so helpful. Now, if you two will excuse me," Jennifer teased. Then she called out for Justin.

"Mom," Justin said, wrapping her in his arms. He met her half way to the kitchen.

"Let me look at you," she said. Justin endured her mother's scrutiny, and after a thorough inspection, Jennifer had to admit that her son looked happy to her eyes.

"I've missed you, Mom."

"I've missed you too. I can tell it's been a long time since I've seen you; I think you're wearing your hair much longer now."

"Mom..."

"It's okay, after all you're an artist. I guess you have to have a certain almost rock star image."

"Mom..."

"Before we do anything, I want you to give me a personal tour of the mansion. The last time I was here, all the rooms were empty. Molly has Brian tied up somewhere alone, now that she's reminded him they have a date. So I guess we'll be lucky if we see them at dinner, huh?"

"Molly is pretty formidable, but I'm sure Brian can take care of himself. I would love to give you personal tour of the house. Since we're headed in that direction, why don't you come in and say hello to Emmett?"

"Emmett is here?" Jennifer said with some surprise.

"Well, Brian and I weren't sure we'd get back in time. And we both knew that take out pizza was not one of your favorites. So we asked Em to give us a hand and prepare something special for you. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind? Of course not, I'm just so glad you invited me out here."

They finally reached the kitchen where Emmett was putting the finishing touches on things. He looked up when heard footsteps approaching.

"Jennifer..." Emmett said with a sigh.

"Hi, Emmett. I see that they put you to work." Jennifer said as she and Emmett hugged each other.

"Yeah. I just whipped up a few things...nothing too fancy."

"Perfect. Everything smells wonderful. I'm so looking forward to this, honey," she said, giving Justin a kiss on the cheek.

Justin continued to give Jennifer a tour of the lower level, showing her his studio and Brian's study.

"Everything looks so different now that its furnished, and I like what you were able to do this place." Jennifer immediately noticed the painting hanging in the study. "Is that the painting that you gave to Brian, when you were moving in here?" she asked.

"Yes, that's it."

"So he finally got to see it. Obviously he liked it, since he hung it in his office," she pointed out.

"He said that he liked it."

"I've never seen you paint anything quite like this before. The style is a little different, and I notice it's one of your few paintings with no people in it."

"When I did the show in Santa Barbara, I had a chance to experiment with a few new techniques. This was one of those experiments. Do you like it?"

"Even without people, it's still a beautiful painting. How are your paintings coming for your upcoming shows?"

"I have one painting that I have to have finished by the end of the week. So I'm going to fly back to New York on Monday. That one is the most pressing. I have just about two months to get the other paintings done for the shows in Cincinnati and New York," Justin explained.

"So you're going to be busy," Jennifer acknowledged.

When they got to the media room, Jennifer stopped and tested out the comfortable chairs.

"Somehow, I think room is so you. You did a great job with furnishing everything. You added so many little touches to everything," Jennifer added.

"We couldn't have done it without you. If you hadn't come up with that solution for temporary furniture, I don't know what we would have done. We probably wouldn't have had chance to move in here. I'm not sure that I ever properly thanked you?" Justin admitted.

"You're welcome, dear. But that's what a mother is for," she said with a certain measure of pride. Jennifer started to move around the room again. "I see that we have Brian's classic movie collection and even a copy of The Yellow Submarine. Is it still your favorite?"

"Yeah. Fortunately, Gus got hooked on it when he was a baby. So between the two of us, Brian doesn't stand a chance. Now, he no longer bothers to complain since he has to watch it so often."

"I remember meeting Brian for the first time. I remember it was in his office at work. I had stopped by to drop off your clothes and stuff and your copy of the tape of The Yellow Submarine. I wanted to throttle him back then, but now he's family. And except for this date with my daughter thing, I'm very fond of him."

"Me too. And Mom, I wouldn't worry about this Molly and Brian thing. Let's face it, she's really not his type," Justin pointed out.

They both laughed out loud.

"You're probably right," she agreed with another laugh.

"C'mon, let me show you the upstairs. Believe it or not upstairs has furniture too," Justin teased.

Jennifer allowed Justin to pull her to stand, and she followed behind him.

As they were walking upstairs, Jennifer paused to ask, "How do you and Brian keep track of each other when you're in this house? I always knew it was big. I just didn't realize how large."

"Brian makes me carry a cell phone when I'm in the house. I was supposed to contact Gregory about having an intercom system installed, but like everything else here, we just haven't gotten around to it."

"No, I guess the two of you would have to stay in town for longer than a minute...."

"Mom..."

They stopped at the master suite. Jennifer only took a quick peek, then they moved to Gus' room. Jennifer was really proud of the little touches that Justin had added to make Gus feel at home...especially the oversized Teddy Bear. Jennifer wanted to go "awww", but something told her that probably wasn't a good idea.

"Honey, I see that you furnished most of the bedrooms. What made you change your mind? When we talked about this you were only doing a few rooms."

"Paul and Jason are flying in tomorrow, and they're bringing Nicky for a play date with Gus. I didn't want to redo Gus' room to move an extra bed in there, and I didn't really want Nicky stuck with sleeping on the futon. So I had Gregory set up this a new room for them. Gregory's been working all day today on this."

Jennifer was amazed at the thoughtfulness of her son, and she was very proud of the way his mind worked.

"So what about his one," Jennifer asked as they paused at the next room. "Did you set this one up in case Molly and I stayed too?"

Justin couldn't contain a laugh. "Mom, if you and Molly stay over, I think you could each have your own room. Let's face it, we have seven bedrooms in this house."

"Good point, but you never know when you'll have a full house, and Molly and I have to bunk in together."

"I suppose we can't see into the future. But in that unlikely event, yes you and Molly could bunk in together here," Justin agreed.

"Thank you, dear."

Justin just shook his head at the antics of his mother.

They quickly peeked in on the other bedrooms and made their way back downstairs, to find Brian and Molly in the living room enjoying the fireplace.

"So how is the date going?" Jennifer asked as she joined them by the fire.

Molly turned at the question and gave her mother a big smile. Jennifer immediately knew that things were going well.

Molly finally saw Justin standing there and thought she had better at least acknowledge him. "Hi Jus," she finally said, "I really like the house. Brian took me on a tour."

"He did, did he? I just gave Mom the tour, how come we didn't run into you guys?" Justin asked.

"We carefully avoided you so that Molly and I could be alone," Brian pointed out. Molly once again just beamed. "We even used the back staircase," he continued. "Just to be sure."

"I see," Justin said with a sigh.

Jennifer couldn't hide her smile as she watched the antics between the three of them.

"If you'll excuse me, I should check with Emmett about dinner," Justin continued, leaving Molly and Jennifer alone with Brian.

"Molly, I almost forgot to tell you. You know that this is Gus' weekend to visit me?" Brian pointed out and waited for her reaction.

The thought of Gus immediately made Molly smile. "Yeah. I guess that means that his mommies will be here too, huh?"

"That's right. And so will Nicky," Brian casually slipped in this new information and waited again for Molly's reaction.

Molly's interest was immediately piqued. "Justin emailed us pictures of Nicky's birthday party."

"He did?" Brian reacted with some surprise to this new information. "Well, what did you think?"

"I thought that if I was ever little again, that would be a great birthday party to have," Molly explained.

"I'll tell Justin that you thought so," Brian teased. "He helped with a lot of the party stuff."

"Did Justin send you pictures of the piñata that he made in the shape of a truck?" Brian asked.

"I saw that. That must have been really neat. When I as little, Justin would do craft projects with me all the time," Molly added.

"Yes, I thought my kitchen would never recover from their projects. Justin was messy even when he was a kid," Jennifer added with a laugh.

"He still is," Brian added, thinking about his paint-splattered Armani shirts that Justin insisted on wearing. "Justin claims that you can't be both neat and creative."

"I think he might be right about that. After all he is a great artist, in spite of the mess he makes," Jennifer reminded him. Brian had to agree.

"You know, Molly, Nicky will be here this weekend because he has a play date scheduled with Gus," Brian mentioned nonchalantly.

"He does?" Molly responded with obvious enthusiasm.

"And I know how fond you are of Gus. So I just wanted you to know that there will probably be two little ones around this weekend...both probably in need of your guidance."

"You really think so Brian?" Molly asked now with a serious tone. She obviously took this guidance thing as a serious responsibility.

"So I just wanted you to be prepared, in case they both descend upon you at once," Brian said in such a way as to let the prospect hang in the air.

Jennifer had to turn away to keep from laughing as she could tell from Molly's facial expressions that she was already calculating the possibilities. Jennifer now knew, without a doubt, that Brian had a wicked streak.

At that moment, Justin returned to announce that dinner was served.

Everyone moved to the dining room to eat.

Emmett had truly prepared a simple feast, starting with Caesar salad. The main course was Cornish Hens stuffed with wild rice with the vegetable side dish of asparagus. Emmett had chosen Sauvignon Blanc to go with dinner...with sparkling cider for Molly. Of course, Molly's cider was served in a regular wine glass, so she was completely thrilled.

During dinner everyone chatted easily, remembering to include Molly in the conversation. Justin filled Molly and Jennifer in on some of the things that happened in Cincinnati, which had everyone laughing. Brian talked a little bit about New York.

Finally over dessert of Crème Brule, Brian began to broach the topic of New York. "Mother Taylor, I guess you've notice that Justin and I have been spending a lot of time in New York City."

"Is that where you've been? With the two of you it's rather hard to keep up."

"I'll have to agree with you on that. But what I'm trying say is that events have been happening at such a frantic rate, that the time has come for me to open the New York of Kinnetik."

"Oh Brian, that's wonderful. Does that means that you and Justin will be together? I know that this separation has been hard on both of you."

"Yes, that does seem to be unavoidable," Brian said with a sigh.

"Brian!" Justin protested. Brian just smiled.

"I'm going to need to locate office space in New York City. You did just such an excellent job, finding just the right building here in Pittsburgh, I was hoping that you would do the same for my New York location."

"Oh, I would love to help," Jennifer gushed, "Working on your projects are always so challenging, how can I resist? Fortunately my company has offices in New York, so this I can easily get any assistance we may need."

"Perfect. I also need your help to find some sort of temporary housing and office space. Although it will be months before Kinnetik is ready to move into its official offices, Justin and I need to be in New York now. And, as much as I love his tiny loft there, I think ..."

"Say no more. How do you want to work this?" Jennifer interrupted.

"I'll have Ted or Cynthia give you a call to work out the details, but Justin and I felt that this was something that we should tell you and Molly in person."

"I'm glad you did," Jennifer said, showing her obvious happiness for the two of them, "Oh honey ..." she added.

"There's one more thing. I need you and Molly to keep the fact of our moving to New York under your hat for a while."

"I can surely understand why you may not be ready to tell everyone just yet," Jennifer had to agree, "I won't say anything."

"What about you Molly? Can I trust you not to tell anyone? As a favor to me," Brian really stressed the last part.

"Sure, just for you, Brian," Molly said, sending him an air kiss.

"Thank you," Brian whispered with a smile.

After dinner and dessert, they all returned to relax for a few moments in front of the fire.

Eventually, Jennifer looked at her watch. "This has been a wonderful evening, but I think it's time for us to go. I have to get Molly home... after all this is a school night."

Brian and Justin walked Molly and Jennifer to the door.

Molly surprised Brian by reaching up and putting her arms around him. "I had a great time on our date," she said, giving him a hug.

"Me too," he said, wrapping his arms around her.

Jennifer smiled. She hugged Justin and said, "It's good to see you honey, and I'm very happy for you and Brian," she said hugging Brian as well.

"Thanks Mom."

Finally everyone said their goodbyes.

Brian walked into the kitchen, and Justin wrapped his arms around Emmett from behind. He was just finishing packing everything up. "Thanks Em. Everything was wonderful."

"Glad to do it for you, Sweetie. You know that. I'm really looking forward to lunch tomorrow."

"Me too."

Once Emmett had left, and Brian and Justin were alone, they wrapped their arms around each other.

"We have a date with a hot tub," Justin reminded him.

"You know we could easily put off the hot tub thing until tomorrow night. We could go right to bed, you know?"

"Not a chance, Brian."

"I didn't really think you would put it off, " Brian said with a smile, "But it never hurts to check."

Brian was now ready to face the inevitable, as he and Justin headed for the downstairs hot tub.

Chapter 42 – Talk To Me

Late Thursday Night...(Day 46)

Brian and Justin quickly undressed. Brian stepped into the swirling waters of the hot tub and extended his hand to help Justin join him there. Justin lowered himself to enjoy the warm waters, and then positioned himself in his favorite position, spooned against Brian's chest. Brian enjoyed the contact of skin to skin, and Justin had really missed this special closeness too.

"We can't stay here very long, you and I have important things to do in the morning. Tomorrow is going to be a really long day, and we need to get a good night's sleep," Brian said, trying to make a point.

It obviously didn't work, for Justin replied with, "You're not going to get out of this, Brian, so start talking." Brian just sighed.

"What would you like me to talk about, Sunshine?" Brian tried to feign innocence.

"Why did you make the decision to legalize our relationship? That's a pretty big decision; in fact, I would go so far as to say huge, monstrous..." Justin was prepared to go on, but Brian chose to interrupt.

"Ok, ok, I get the picture!" Brian said sternly. Then he softened his tone to ask, "Now what's your point?"

"With the way you feel about these things, this is a pretty big decision, don't you think? So are you going to tell me what's really going on?" Justin patiently asked again.

"There is no impending disaster. My health is good. I didn't almost lose you in an explosion. I promise you, I'm not reacting to anything. Things in New York really look promising. I just want us to do this together. I want to share a life with you. I've been thinking about this for some time. Max and I had talked about it. I called him from New York and asked him to prepare the paperwork. This just feels right, Justin. End of story."

"And you're sure that this is what you want to do?" Justin had to ask one last time.

"I've never been more sure of anything," Brian said, wrapping his arms more tightly around Justin.

"What made you think of this instead of getting married?" Justin casually asked.

"Last time we were going to get married, you thought I might turn into a Stepford fag or something. This feels right. I think it accomplishes everything we've talked about. This is a joint decision. It acknowledges our relationship, and it's perfectly legal, which is more than I can say about most of those marriages. I don't want to pretend that we're legally bound. I want it to be real," Brian quietly explained.

"I can't argue with that."

"And anything not covered by the agreements are matters between you and me. I guess I just thought that we would work things out like we always do. You'll tell me what's acceptable, and I'll just agree," Brian said, leaning down to kiss Justin's cheek.

"Brian, that's not true. We always set the rules together," Justin reminded him.

"And that's how things will continue to be," Brian said as a promise. "So do we need to make any new rules?" he asked and waited for Justin's response.

"The ones we have at the moment seem to be working quite well," Justin answered.

"I agree."

"So our legalized relationship will be registered in Pennsylvania and in New York?"

"That's right."

"I'm just surprised that you're ready to announce to the world that we're a couple...that we're together."

Brian started to laugh. "Oh yeah, like this was a big secret. Sunshine, everyone has known that we were a couple for a very long time. I guess at the prom when I kissed you as we were dancing, I was claiming you as mine, for all the world to see. Then you were hurt, and I almost lost you. Then I almost lost you to the fiddler because I was afraid to admit the truth. Both of us are openly gay and honest with the world about who we are. The fact that I asked you to marry me sort of said it all. But taking the extra step and making our relationship legal, to the fullest extent of the law, demonstrates for all to see how committed we are. I have no problem acknowledging that to the world. Now is the time."

Justin leaned back to give Brian a kiss. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"So how do we tell everyone?" Justin asked with a smile.

"I haven't worked that part out yet. We'll see everyone in small groups this weekend...because Paul, Jason, and Nicky are visiting. I will tell Cynthia and Ted tomorrow at the office after all the papers are signed. You might want to drop in and tell Jennifer before you and Emmett go to lunch tomorrow. We have to tell Debbie together. I'm sure by the end of the weekend everyone will know," Brian said with a laugh.

"Brian, you need to tell Michael and Lindsay. It would be awful if they heard it from someone other than you."

"And you should send Daphne an email," Brian insisted.

"Are you still afraid of her?" Justin asked with a laugh.

"She's vicious, Sunshine, I told you that," Brian smirked.

Justin couldn't resist laughing. This earned him a gentle nudge from Brian.

"What are you going to say to Gus?" Justin finally asked.

"I'm going to tell my son that now you officially belong to ME forever and ever. Of course with Gus, his little six-year-old mind will translate that to mean, you belong to HIM forever and ever too. So I suspect that he'll be pretty happy. My son is crazy about you, you know?"

"And, you know how much I love Gus," Justin whispered.

"Yeah, I do. Well, if there's nothing else that we need to discuss, I guess we should get out of the tub before you start to wrinkle. Especially when the idea of fucking you into the mattress is such an appealing thought."

"Think again! You said that I could have my way with you. Did you forget?"

"That offer was for before dinner, but we were so tired that we opted to sleep instead. That obviously means that you lost your chance to have your way with me. Sorry Sunshine."

"Think again, Brian."

"Well I suppose that we could move upstairs to the bedroom and sort of just see what happens," Brian suggested with a smile and a wiggle of this eyebrows.

"That's a start. I guess we'll just have to see how persuasive I can be, won't we?" Justin said with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

"Justin..."

"Besides after tomorrow we'll be legally equal partners. Equal Brian...just wanted to remind you?" Justin said with a smirk.

Brian groaned at the prospect.

"You said something about getting out of the hot tub. I do think that it's time we start moving because my skin IS definitely starting to wrinkle," Justin complained.

As they helped each other out of the hot tub and wrapped themselves in comfortable robes, Brian wrapped his arms around Justin and asked, "Just out of curiosity how long are you planning to be this much trouble?"

"Forever and ever," Justin echoed.

Brian smiled at that thought. "I can probably live with that."

Each slid an arm around the other's waist, as they slowly made their way upstairs to their bedroom.

Brian reached the bed and gently pushed Justin down on top of it. Then he just stood at the foot of the bed, looking at Justin and smiling.

"What are you doing?" Justin had to ask.

"I'm having my momentary fantasy about how cooperative you would be tied to the bedpost. You have to let me have this one moment of fantasy before reality sets in."

"Are you back to the 'tied to the bedpost' fantasy again?" Justin said with a smile, reaching up and grabbing Brian by the belt of his robe and pulling him down on the bed.

Justin immediately started nipping and licking Brian on that certain spot on his neck, just behind his ear.

Then Justin kissed Brian gently at first, and allowed the kiss to turn passionate. Brian completely surrendered to the kiss.

When they finally separated, Brian breathlessly conceded, "But then again...maybe I can't complain too much...if you occasionally... have your way with me."

Justin just smiled, as he started to kiss a path down Brian's chest, and Brian completely surrendered to his touch.

Chapter 43 – Legal Partners

Friday Morning – (Day 47)

Brian was awakened by the tickle of soft blond hairs against his cheek and the feeling of Justin against him. And for Brian this was exactly the way he wanted to wake up every morning.

Justin finally stirred and opened his eyes to look at Brian.

"Good Morning, Sunshine," Brian whispered.

"Hmmmmmm," Justin said, snuggling in closer.

"No, no...none of that. We have to get up. We have to see Max, so I can make an honest, legal partner out of you."

"And, I out of you."

"I'm starting to like the idea of being tied to you," Brian said with a smile.

"Enough to give up the fantasy of me being tied in various positions to the bedpost?"

"Now that's a lot to ask," Brian teased.

"Maybe you're right," Justin said with a yawn and a stretch.

"About my fantasies?" Brian asked hopefully.

"No, when you said that we should probably get this day started," Justin stretched again. "Although I would much rather spend all day in bed with you," he added, snuggling close again.

"I guess we could shower together, that would give us more time...not to mention save water."

"Fortunately the house has a much bigger water heater than the loft. And, we tend to save neither time nor water. But I'm sure that after putting up with that tiny shower in my loft, it will feel good to be back in a shower where we can maneuver."

"Absolutely. And if you roll off of me, I might even treat you to breakfast before we meet with Max. That way I don't have to worry about your stomach rumbling while we're signing all those papers."

"Why Brian, you say the sweetest things," Justin said, reaching up to give Brian a gentle kiss.

Brian and Justin finally made it into the shower. They were both eager to sign the papers in Max's office. Even during the shower both of them couldn't help thinking about what this was going to mean.

They enjoyed the touch of each other during the shower, but then they always did. Even the simple task of applying shampoo to the other was a sensual experience.

A round of fucking in the shower brought this point home as they each remembered that they would have a lifetime of this. Justin also sank to his knees under the shower spray to give Brian a blowjob. And afterwards, when Brian pulled Justin up for another kiss, the final round in the shower could only be described as lovemaking.

They did manage to eventually leave the shower to get dressed to start the day. They were both looking forward to the day ahead although neither of them would really mention anything directly about it.

They had breakfast at the Wagon Wheel Diner near the house, where Justin had blueberry pancakes with bacon and sausage, while Brian tried to content himself with one egg and dried whole grain toast. Of course, Brian found his breakfast more palatable because he continued to swipe morsels of pancakes and bacon from Justin's plate.

"I miss our morning lattes," Brian remarked wistfully.

"Just as soon as we get back to New York, we'll solve that problem," Justin teased.

"I don't think I can wait that long," Brian mumbled in protest.

"So, we'll stop at Starbucks on the way to Max's office," Justin easily suggested.

"You're more than just a pretty face, aren't you?" Brian said, gently touching Justin's arm. He wanted to do more, but he remembered he was in West Virginia not New York City.

After breakfast, they stopped at Starbucks and picked up Mocha Lattes to go, not just for themselves, but Justin thought they should take lattes for Max and Pam too.

Brian chuckled to himself as he thought that most people would celebrate an official union with something like champagne. But true to form, he and Justin were definitely nontraditional, and lattes were the perfect proof of what he already knew.

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Once again, as Brian and Justin arrived at the offices of Caulfield & Caulfield, Pam immediately greeted them, "Mr. Kinney, I see that you and Mr. Taylor are back."

"Yes, we're back again. Here Pam," Brian said, "In view of what Justin and I are about to do, we wanted you to have this," he said, handing her a latte.

"That was very thoughtful of you. Thanks. I rushed in this morning without my usual coffee. You don't realize it, but you just saved me," Pam said with a smile, taking a sip of her latte. "Mr. Caulfield will be right with you."

Brian and Justin made themselves comfortable, but for some reason couldn't resist finding reasons to touch each other. Pam watched the two of them from her position behind the desk, and she couldn't resist smiling to herself as she savored her morning surprise.

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"Good Morning. You two must be eager. That's what I like to see. Why don't you follow me?" Max rambled on as he approached Brian and Justin in the waiting area.

Once they reached the conference room, there were now two stacks of papers waiting for signatures. Justin immediately smiled a victorious smile.

"Max, we brought you a latte in honor of what we're about to do," Brian said triumphantly.

"I'll definitely agree that it's probably a little early for champagne. This is definitely better." Max said with smile. He had his first sip and took a moment to savor the taste. "Thanks." Then he finally said, "Okay, so are we ready?"

"Definitely, let's get this done. Then I'm off to the office," Brian said.

"Ever the romantic," Justin remarked, "I'm definitely ready now, too."

Max smiled as he watched the two men. For the entire few minutes that they had been in the conference room, they had found excuses to continually touch each other. Nothing too overt but to Max's eagle eyes, everything was so apparent. These were two people, who loved each other.

"So are we ready?" Max asked once more.

Both Brian and Justin nodded yes.

"Let me get Robert in here so he can notarize certain documents as we proceed." Max went over and pushed the buzzer.

Robert entered and made himself comfortable, taking out his seal and other implements.

"I guess the best way to do this is to handle it one document at a time. I will describe each document and go over its provisions. I'll then give you time to read the document for yourself. Then you can sign it as required. To make things easier I used different colored flags so you would each know where to sign. The blue flags are for you, Justin...the yellow ones for you, Brian. Once everything has been settled about the first document, we'll move on to the next one. We'll do this until both stacks are complete. How does that sound?"

Again, Brian and Justin nodded their agreement.

"Before we begin, let me give you the legislative history of Legalized Domestic Partnerships. The congress was very conservative when the Legalized Domestic Partnership was created. They really didn't want to pass the legislation, but since it looked liked the measure had the necessary votes anyway, a few of the more conservative legislators added several restrictive clauses. One of those clauses provided that once granted, the parties had to go to court to dissolve the partnership...no simple dissolution would be allowed by mutual consent like a divorce or regular partnership. That's part of the reason that most gay couples continue to take the simple commitment ceremony route. Some took the marriage route in places like Massachusetts or Canada, but the unions are not universally recognized in this country. Most filed simple statements of domestic partnerships after the ceremonies for limited things like insurance coverage, mortgages, etc. But none of these actions had the true force of law or the legal ramifications of the Legalized Domestic Partnerships. The requirement to go to court to dissolve the agreement was the legislature's way of striking back at being forced to legalize something that many members were dead set against. The other provision they required had to do with registration. Although the legalized domestic partnership is nationally recognized, the couple has to register their partnership in each state of residence."

"Thank you Max, for the political science lesson, but now can we get on with this," Brian said impatiently.

"Eager are we Brian?" Max said with laugh. "Although, I can't say that I blame you." Max added looking over at Justin. "Ok, let's get to it."

Max started with the first paper in the stack and proceeded as he described. Brian and Justin signed where needed. They continued through the stacks signing various types of documents including wills, powers of attorney, insurance documents, etc.

As they continued to go through the stack, Brian became concerned about the toll this might be taking on Justin's hand, so Brian began to massage Justin's right hand between signing each document.

Max couldn't help smiling as he watched the gesture. Max had seen Brian be a tough negotiator during many business deals. He continued to be surprised by the tenderness that Brian showed in dealing with Justin. Max, once again, took it all in but made no comment.

Several hours later, Max finally said, "Okay, here is the final document, the Agreement to Legalize Domestic Partnership." Max went on to explain the provisions of the agreement. He reminded Brian and Justin that everything was legally binding. Once again, he reminded them to revoke this agreement would require corresponding legal action on everyone's part. "A marriage would only require a mutual agreement and a simple divorce on the grounds of irreconcilable differences. To break this agreement will require a day in court. I just want to be sure that you understand that. This final document is an ironclad contract. Few couples are willing to commit to this extent."

"We heard you the first time, Max," Brian complained.

"We've talked about this Max. We really do know what we're doing," Justin said in response.

"Max, we've already made the commitment. These papers just legalize a decision we both already made," Brian concurred. "A commitment that already exists."

Max nodded his acceptance, as he watched them sign the final document.

Robert notarized the document, and both Brian and Justin were each given a copy.

"You realize that this will be recorded, and a public announcement will appear in the papers here and in New York. It usually takes about a week for it to be published. Usually very few people actually read these notices in the paper. But then again, you two are so high profile that I expect the media to be all over this fairly quickly. I just want to be sure that you are prepared," Max cautioned again.

Brian and Justin indicated that they understood.

Finally, everything was concluded. Robert had completed his work, so he quietly left the room.

Brian swept Justin into his arms and said, "You're now stuck with me forever and ever because I'm never going to let you go."

Justin smiled a full wattage Sunshine smile, "You'll never be able to escape me either. We're going to be together forever and ever."

Brian and Justin slid their arms around each other's waist. They said goodbye to Max. They even said goodbye to Pam as they were leaving.

They got in the car and both of them finally remembered to breathe.

Brian reached across the seat and pulled Justin into a passionate kiss. They ever so slowly broke apart and once again reached over to kiss each other again.

When Justin finally settled back his seat, Brian reach across and touched Justin's hand. He intertwined his fingers with Justin's. Brian slowly lifted and kissed Justin's wrist ever so gently.

"I know that I have to get to the office, but I think we need to stop at the loft first," Brian said quietly.

Justin just smiled because he had the exact same thought. "I want you inside me," Justin responded softly.

"There is nowhere else that I would rather be," Brian added. And with that, Brian pulled the car out of the parking space.

Chapter 44 – We Have News, Part 1

Late Friday Morning...(Day 47)

Brian walked into his office at Kinnetik. Cynthia was at her desk and was surprised to see him walk by. Cynthia immediately noticed something was different.

"Morning Cynthia," Brian casually said as he strolled past her desk.

"Hi Boss," Cynthia responded. She waited to see what would happen next. She didn't have long to wait.

"I need you to give me five minutes, and then I want to see you and Theodore in my office. Be sure that you re-route the phones. Except for Justin, I don't want us to be disturbed," Brian said precisely.

Cynthia did as she was instructed, regarding the phones. She immediately called Ted and brought him up to date, first on Brian's unusual mood and secondly to tell him that both of them were due for a meeting in Brian's office.

Ted hurriedly arrived at Cynthia's desk. "What going on?" he asked nervously.

"I'm not sure. I thought he was in a good mood, but then he ordered us to come in for the meeting."

"Well the good mood is understandable, Brian spent the last week or so with Justin. They must have just gotten back into town. I have no idea what he wants to have a meeting about unless he wants our status reports. After all, he has been gone for over a week. Anyway, we'd better get in there and find out what's on his mind," Ted suggested.

Cynthia and Ted steeled themselves and thought they should knock on Brian's door rather than just barging in as they usually do.

Brian had his mask now firmly in place.

"Theodore, nice of you to join us. Cynthia, please make yourself comfortable," Brian suggested.

"Bri, how was New York?" Ted immediately asked. "How did things go with Barrister, Wilkins & Evans?"

"I had my meeting with Mitchell Evans, and you remember that it was only supposed to be a courtesy call. However, as it turns out, he wants us to participate in the competition with the other companies to potentially become their new ad agency. It's going to be a lot of work. They're in the middle of an expansion, which involves acquiring several international firms. To get this account, we're going to have to compete, not only with their present agency BBD, but also against Kennedy & Collins and probably every other international firm in existence. I really want us to land this account, do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," Cynthia answered. "But that's wonderful," she gushed.

"We're going to need staff," Ted added with smile.

"Make it happen. I don't want to over-hire...but I need a minimal staff in place in the city immediately," Brian stated firmly.

"And just where are you planning on putting these people that we hire, pray tell?" Ted asked.

"Good question. I need both of you to work with Jennifer to find temporary office space and probably temporary living space. Justin and I had dinner with her last night, so she now knows that Justin and I are relocating. She has also been sworn to secrecy. Since this is business, there won't be a problem. Call her and let's get the ball rolling," Brian insisted.

Ted and Cynthia nodded their understanding.

"I have a file on my computer which is essentially the commercial that Collezione Fiero will need to run on the monitors during their upcoming showcase. We have copy and images. Spyder made a mock up for you. We need music and final mixing by end of day on Monday. Eyeconics and The Silvestris are on a tight schedule," Brian stated clearly.

"I'll take care of it," Cynthia said, making a note to herself.

"Here's the file name; I'll upload the files to the server as soon as we're done with our meeting.

"I also need a brochure laid out. Justin's new assistant worked with Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali to work out the copy. I need Valerie to finalize that copy and Murph to finish the layout. I need Justin to take a look the final copy, which is going to be difficult, because he's going back to New York on Monday. So let Valerie and Murph know they will have to use Spyder's new network to get things to Justin," Brian elaborated.

"Consider it done," Cynthia said.

"How are we coming with OUR commercial for Collezione Fiero?" Brian asked sternly.

"We have the script that you approved. We have a film crew set to shoot on Monday. Models and actors have been hired. Everything is ready," Cynthia confirmed.

"Site location set too?" Brian asked. Cynthia and Ted both nodded yes. "Wonderful. Good job, you two."

Cynthia and Ted breathed a sigh of relief.

Then Brian relaxed in his chair. "You know I was at my attorney's office this morning," Brian began nonchalantly, "And what I am about to tell you does not leave this office. Everyone will find out about things sooner or later. But for the moment, it's important not to discuss this with anyone else," he cautioned.

Cynthia and Ted agreed. They heard the word 'attorney' and knew that whatever Brian was about to say had to be big.

"Justin and I legalized our domestic partnership this morning," Brian said calmly.

"You married Justin," Cynthia said beginning to gush, "That's wonderful. I'm so happy for both of you."

"Cynthia, that's not what he said. He didn't say that he married Justin," Ted solemnly corrected her.

"Thank you, Theodore, I'm glad that someone pays attention when I speak," Brian said with a smile. "What I said was, Justin and I legalized our partnership. We filed papers to legalize and register the fact of our domestic partnership. As of this morning, Justin and I now have rights to everything each other owns at this moment and everything that either of us will own in the future, including Kinnetik. Here is the certified paperwork, please have HR do what's necessary. Likewise Theodore, I guess you have things to do too."

"You legalized your domestic partnership? That's really legally binding," Ted mindlessly commented.

"I'm glad you realize that," Brian said with a smile, "Justin and I are quite pleased. For all practical purposes I don't expect any changes...except that maybe Justin will continue to work with the art department a little more often as his time permits. Murph will continue to manage the art department. It just means that Justin and I can work on campaigns without a lot of hassles. I really need him in New York. But I fully understand that he still has to paint, so his time will still be limited."

"This is great news. I've been trying to figure out how we could get Justin to work here. It does look like you solved the problem," Cynthia said enthusiastically.

"I'm so glad that I made you happy," Brian quipped sarcastically.

"You know what I mean?" Cynthia responded defensively.

"Yes, I do," Brian practically whispered.

"Well, let me get back to my desk," Cynthia said with a smile. "Congratulations, Brian. My lips are sealed."

When Cynthia left, Ted hung around for a few minutes to talk to Brian.

"Bri, congratulations. When you guys didn't get married last year..."

"I know, Theodore, now we're legally bound. This is so much better. I'll be honest with you; I have never been happier. Once everything is filed and recorded, my attorney will probably send you some paperwork so you can change anything that we missed."

"How are you going to tell everyone?" Ted had to ask.

"I'm not sure that I will," Brian said, raising one eyebrow for emphasis. "Nothing's really changed. Justin and I were committed partners before we spent all morning in my lawyer's office signing papers. And we still are."

"Bri, legalized domestic partnerships get listed in the paper. Everyone will know sooner or later."

"Like they read the published legalized domestic partnership listings. C'mon Theodore, you have to do better than that," Brian said with a laugh. "Actually this is a business matter and really is no one's business but Justin's and mine. The reason I told you and Cynthia first was for just that reason...it's just business as usual."

"Bri, I don't know how to tell you this, but anything involving you and Justin is never just business as usual. It becomes a newsworthy event. And the move you just made is truly legally binding. I don't know if I should mention it, but at this moment, you and Justin are more bound together than any couple we know," Ted couldn't resist emphasizing the last part.

"You don't have to tell me that. Justin and I already figured that out," Brian smirked.

"Well, I'm happy for you," Ted reiterated. "This is going to be so exciting to watch."

"All I want to do is get Justin back to New York. He has that painting for his application for Milan to complete by the end of the week. I need to tie up a few loose ends here. Then I'm on my way back there to New York, too. I'll only be there for a few days. Then I guess I can hold down the fort here, and you and Cynthia can do what's necessary to get us staffed in New York City. We can't wait on this any longer."

"I'll get on the phone to Jennifer to see what we can work out. And Bri, once again congratulations," Ted said again.

"Thanks, Theodore."

Ted left Brian's office, and stopped to talk to Cynthia.

"Ted, what do you think of that? Did you know this was coming?" Cynthia asked.

Ted revealed what little he knew. "Brian asked Justin to marry him last year. When that didn't happen, no one knew what to expect. You've got to admit he does seem happy about it."

"I wonder what made him do it?" Cynthia asked.

"Who can figure out why Brian does anything? And when Justin is involved, all the rules go out the window. No, I suspect that Brian made the decision and never looked back. He is as sure about this as I've ever seen him about anything," Ted admitted with a smile.

"Can you imagine the bonuses we're going to get now that Justin is around? Brian is always at his creative best when he works with Justin. Just look at the campaign for Collezione Fiero. This is just good news all around," Cynthia added with big smile.

"I have to agree," Ted said. "Now let me get to my desk and call Jennifer. We both have a ton of additional work to do."

Cynthia smiled in agreement. "I love my job," she said as she turned around to once again resume working.

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Meanwhile Across Town...(Day 47)

Justin stopped in to see Jennifer at her office. Needless to say she was surprised, but pleased, to see him.

"Hi, dear," Jennifer began, giving him a motherly hug. "I'm surprised to see you. I just wanted you to know that Molly and I really enjoyed dinner last night. Everything was wonderful. Molly was still talking about her date at breakfast this morning," she added with a laugh.

Justin had to chuckle at the last part himself.

"It was fun, wasn't it," Justin said wistfully.

"I'm surprised to see you out and about. I expected you to be locked away in your studio by now," she teased. "So what brings you into town?"

"Brian and I had to meet with his attorney," Justin said easily.

"That's good. Did you two get everything taken care of?" Jennifer asked nonchalantly.

"I guess you could say that," Justin added with a laugh.

"Now what is that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"Mom, I need you to sit down and take a deep breath," he insisted.

"I'm already sitting, honey. Ok, what's going on? Is everything all right?"

"It's better than all right, Mom. Brian and I just legalized our domestic partnership this morning."

"What does that mean? I know you didn't get married or have a commitment ceremony, because surely I would have been invited," Jennifer felt the need to make this point.

"We didn't get married, Mom. Brian and I don't need rings or vows to prove we love each other. Brian and I legally have rights to everything the other owns now and everything that each of us will own in the future. This isn't a simple romantic gesture like a wedding; this is a legally binding partnership. This feels right for us...no fuss...no fanfare."

"Oh, honey," Jennifer began to gush, giving Justin a big hug. Then she caught herself and finally released him. "If this was what you and Brian want, then I'm happy for you. You know that all I've ever wanted was for you to be happy. You have made it clear that your happiness is with Brian. You two have fought hard to get here. I'm really happy for you," she said, hugging him just one more time.

"Thanks, Mom."

Jennifer pulled herself together and sat back down in her chair. She adopted a somewhat serious tone when she said, "I take it that this is something else that you want me to add to my ever-growing list of things that I won't mention to anyone?" she asked with a touch of humor in her voice.

"Brian and I just wanted you to know. He's probably at the office talking to Cynthia and Ted. In a few days everyone will know because our legalized domestic partnership will be published here and in New York. Brian and I will probably break the news to the gang this weekend."

"That's good. Because right now the list of people I can talk to is really very short." Jennifer teased. "Especially since you know that I don't lie very well."

"I know, Mom. But I'm sure, somehow, you'll manage," Justin teased in return. "Well, I'd better get going. I have a lot to do before everyone arrives in town this afternoon." Justin finally said, as he was about to leave. "I'll call you later."

"Sure, honey," she said with a smile.

Once Justin had finally left, Jennifer sat at her desk to process it all.

Brian had taken the steps to legalize his partnership with Justin. She really didn't care what it was called, Jennifer felt very proud to have Brian as her son-in-law. But, how was she ever going to keep all these secrets?

Chapter 45 - We Have News, Part 2

Lunchtime On Friday...(Day 47)

Justin had promised to have lunch with Emmett, and they decided to eat at a café near PIFA.

"Em, I want to thank you for all you did for Brian and me yesterday. Mom and Molly loved dinner. You even managed to fix something that Brian couldn't complain about eating. I don't know how to thank you."

"Anytime, Sweetie, you know that. I loved working with Teres. She was a big help with the shopping and everything. I noticed that Gregory set up two more guest rooms; you must be planning on having a lot of guests."

"No...no, Paul, Jason, and Nicky are coming in from Cincinnati for the weekend. You know that this is Gus' weekend to visit too. Brian thought if Gus and Nicky had a play date, I might actually get some painting done this weekend."

"I see the master planner is working overtime again," Emmett teased. "Of course, there is no way that Gus is going to let you out of his sight. I hope you've taken that into account."

"Don't worry, I did, but now Brian is another matter. You know how he has a slightly different view of the world?" Justin said with a laugh. "Anyway, I didn't want to redo Gus' room by moving another bed in there. So I asked Gregory to set up one of the other bedrooms with twin beds. That way Gus and Nicky can have room to play. Since Gregory set up a little boy's room, he set up a feminine version, too, while he was at it. Thus two more bedrooms are now full of furniture."

"Well I must say that you and Brian have certainly settled in."

"We really do think of Bri-tin as home now. Brian can actually relax there. Of course, we love having Thomas and Teres there too. They really make life so much easier for us, especially with our travel schedules."

"Are you actually getting any painting done? I can't believe how busy you've been since you've been back. Usually, we see you at Sunday dinners, but these last few weeks you've even missed those."

"We went to Toronto to see Gus...then Cincinnati with Nicky...then off to New York...finally we're home," Justin recounted, "You know, now that you mentioned it, Brian and I HAVE really been moving around quite a bit." Justin said with a laugh.

"Is everything ok with you and Brian?" Em cautiously asked.

"It's better than ok, Em. We're really together. There's no need for you to worry."

"I noticed that something had changed when I saw you two the last time at Babylon. I saw the same thing yesterday. You guys just seemed so in love."

"Em, don't let Brian hear you say that. He'll retreat back into his shell. After all, he has a reputation to consider," Justin teased.

"Ancient history," Em quipped.

Their salads arrived, and they began to eat.

"I don't know why I'm so hungry," Justin admitted, "Especially since Brian and I had a big breakfast this morning."

"I guess when you stay busy, you tend to burn off the calories. That's how we stay so slim."

Justin and Emmett both had to laugh at the last remark.

"Now that you're plying me with food, are you going to tell me what's on your mind?" Emmett finally decided to pointedly ask.

"I have something to tell you, but you can't say anything about it to anyone."

"Ok, I can do that," Em immediately agreed without a moment's hesitation.

"Something is coming up, and I'm going to really need your help."

"Sure, I'm listening."

"I have to find a new place to live in New York. Then I have to move in and get settled. All this happening against the fact that I have several shows coming up," Justin tried to explain.

"Is it moving time again?" Emmett patiently asked, as he appeared to be mentally counting the months. "It seems like you just moved into your loft. It feels like we just got you away from those strange roommates that you were with before."

"Well, it looks like I'm going to be sharing living space again. You know how it goes?"

"But I thought your paintings were selling really well. Do you need a loan, Sweetie?"

"No...No. I'm fine. My loft is just too small for more than one person. So I'm going to have to move into another place."

"You've had some unusual roommates since you moved to the city. So let's see if I have this straight, you're getting a new roommate, and the two of you will be moving to a new apartment?"

"That's right."

"I don't understand."

"I'm going to be moving to a better neighborhood with more living space. Of course, we haven't found the place yet, but once we do, we'll need you to help us move in. Everything is complicated by the fact that all this has to be done while I'm preparing for two maybe three exhibits. Everything seems to be happening all at once."

"Sure honey," Emmett said, still a bit confused, but always willing to help his favorite blond whenever he's needed. "Nothing I like better than having a reason to be to New York," he admitted with a smile.

"Thanks Em."

"So why don't you want anyone to know that you're moving?" Emmett asked, his confusion continuing.

"Because I just told everyone that I planned to stay at the here at the mansion for the next three months to paint. But, events are making it such that I have to return to New York sooner that I expected. I don't want to send up a lot of red flags to everyone and have them asking me a lot of questions. I'm on a really tight painting schedule at this point. I really can't deal with the distraction. You know what I mean?"

"Of course I do," Emmett said sympathetically. "Just let me know when you're ready to move, and I'll help you and your new roommate get all settled in."

"Thanks Em.

The waitress cleared away the dishes from their salads and brought them their cheeseburger, fries, and shakes.

"Has Brian met you new roommate?" Emmett casually asked, always in the constant search for more information.

"Yeah, Brian met him sometime ago. He's ok with him and everything."

"Ok, well that's good. Brian is so possessive of you. I'm sort of surprised that he doesn't have a problem with this forthcoming arrangement."

Justin smiled, "You know how Brian is. And Brian knows how I feel about him. Believe me, Em, my new roommate is no threat to Brian, I promise you."

"Well ok, if you're sure."

"Absolutely."

"So Paul and Jason are coming for a visit. We haven't seen them since before Nicky was born. I loved the pictures of Nicky with all those red curls and those freckles. He's such a little cutie."

"Yes he is. It's a good weekend for them to visit because Paul hasn't seen Lindsay in a long time either. You remember that they went to school together? So everybody will see everyone at the same time. It should be fun."

"You're supposed to be in your studio painting, so I guess, Gus and Nicky are going to have tell you all about it." Emmett said teasingly and enjoying every minute of it.

"Now you sound like Brian."

"Oh no...never that."

They continued eating their lunch and chatting easily.

After lunch, Justin dropped off Emmett and then decided to stop off at Kinnetik before going out to Bri-tin.

"Hi, Cynthia. I know I should have called first, but is Brian available?"

"Justin," Cynthia said, coming around the desk to give him a hug. "I understand congratulations are in order. Do I have to call you Boss now?"

"Not if you want to keep your job?" Justin teased, "I see Brian told you."

"Yes, it's great news."

"Thanks. I guess he told Ted too, huh?"

"Yes, he told both of us together during our meeting this morning. We both couldn't be happier."

"Is Brian in a meeting now?"

"Yeah, he should be just finishing up though. Do you want to wait?"

"Is Ted in that meeting too?"

"No, Ted's probably down in his office."

"Why don't I go check with Ted? Will you call me there when Brian is free?"

"Sure. And congratulations again, Justin."

"Thanks."

Justin tried to stop smiling as he walked the short distance down to Ted's office.

"Hi Ted," Justin said as he entered Ted's office.

"Well if it isn't my new boss?" Ted began teasing.

"You'd better not let Brian hear you say that," Justin reminded him.

"You're probably right. He keeps looking for an excuse to fire me. I sure don't want to give him any extra grounds. How are you doing? Congratulations, by the way, Brian gave us the news this morning."

"I'm still trying to let it all sink in."

"I understand that you have a painting to finish for Milan this week? So why aren't you in your studio? Too excited are we?"

"No. I just had lunch with Em. Mom and Molly came out to the house for dinner last night. Em was kind enough to take care of everything because Brian and I got back so late yesterday. I just wanted to say thanks to him."

"I'm sure Emmett liked that. Did you happen to tell Em the news?"

"You know I just couldn't work it into the conversation," Justin admitted with a laugh.

"I can understand that. But you know he's going to find out, and then you're going to have hell to pay," Ted couldn't resist creating the dire scenario, even though he knew that Emmett would forgive Justin anything. "So what brings you down to my office?"

"I just wanted to see if all the payments had come in yet from Santa Barbara? I sent off the last few paintings a few weeks ago. I'm just checking on the status of things."

"Mr. Taylor, I'm happy to report that your bank account is bulging...based on the estimate of what you expected to receive for the commissioned artwork and especially the two paintings of Superheroes. The gallery must have paid you a premium because if I remember correctly, the amount you received exceeded the forecast you gave me. Don't worry, I'll email you the complete statement this afternoon so you can take a look and see for yourself."

"That will be great."

"By the way, Brian told us about your nomination for the Bronze Quill. Congratulations. You know that he's really proud of you and your accomplishments."

"Don't get too excited yet, the competition is still really stiff, but at least I can say I was nominated," Justin explained. "And it is New York, so I guess that makes it a big deal."

"Of course it does. This has really been a busy month for you, hasn't it? So much has been happening."

"Overwhelming to say the least. But, I guess Brian has thrown YOU a couple of curves too, hasn't he? Sorry about that..."

"Oh I don't know. A week ago he told me I had three months to prepare for your move to New York. This morning he moved the date up to next week. So I don't know, you might say he's had me in a bit of a tailspin. Especially since you know how I like things well ordered. But then, I work for Brian Kinney so I'm kind of getting used to his impossible deadlines," Ted said with a laugh.

"But you handle things so well," Justin said with a tone of honesty to his voice.

Ted had to blush a bit at the obvious compliment.

"So Justin, are you and Brian planning on telling the rest of the family?"

"I know what you're thinking," Justin teased. "You'll be glad to know that we've at least talked about it. I want him to talk to Michael and Lindsay first, and then we'll deal with the rest of the family. There's so much going on this weekend, with Paul and Jason coming in to town, Nicky and Gus' play date, and Mel and Linds visiting too. So even without our news, this is going to be a crazy weekend."

"I did hear Cynthia mention that Paul and Jason were coming into town. We all loved the pictures that you emailed to Em. He shared them with us during dinner."

"Yes, the party was something else. I think we can safely say that Nicky turned four years old with a bang."

"By the way, have you talked to Michael?" Ted cautiously asked.

"Not for weeks, why?"

"And, Brian hasn't said anything to you?"

"I don't think Brian has talked to him since we left, but I'm not sure. What's going on?"

"Just between you and me?" Ted had to ask.

"Just between you and me and Brian," Justin quickly corrected him. "You know Brian and I don't keep secrets from each other...the punishments are usually quite severe."

"I have heard that," Ted couldn't resist teasing.

"So what's going on with Michael?"

"Michael wants Ben to think about moving to Toronto so that he can spend more time with JR. He's talking about opening a second store up there and all."

"Has he said anything to Melanie and Lindsay about what he's thinking?"

"I don't think so. He might mention something this weekend since they'll be in town with the kids. Michael thinks Mel and Linds should move back to Pittsburgh."

"Ted, the whole family probably thinks they should move back to Pittsburgh, but it doesn't matter what we think. Mel and Linds have to arrive at their decision on their own terms. And if Michael leaves them alone, Mel and Linds will probably get there eventually. But if he pushes, Melanie, especially, will only become more entrenched. You remember the custody battle over Jenny? Can't you talk to Michael?"

"Me? I've already tried to reason with him. It doesn't seem to do any good. Hopefully Ben will help him change his thinking. Ben has a lot to lose with tenure and everything if he makes that kind of a move...especially when you factor in his health issues and all. From a financial perspective Ben and Michael's move to Toronto isn't a good idea. I just see real thunderstorms developing on the horizon over this, especially this weekend."

"I see why you're concerned. How's Debbie dealing with the talk of Michael's possible move?"

"Debbie thinks that Michael should just leave it alone. After all, Jenny is still quite young, and Michael and Ben get to see her every month. They used to go to Toronto for the visit, but now Mel and Linds seem to be coming back here. Now just doesn't seem to be the right time to upset things, but you know Michael."

"Yes, I do," Justin said with a slight laugh. "Hopefully Ben will be able to reason with him. You know that Ben has a calming effect on Michael."

"I hope so too, or else there is going to be a lot of turbulence this weekend."

"Like I said, there's going to be a lot going on this weekend. With any luck, the issue of Brian and me may not even have a chance to surface until things are published some time next week. Of course, we'll be back in New York by then."

Their conversation was interrupted as Ted's phone rang. He answered it and relayed to Justin that Brian was finished with his meeting.

Justin said goodbye to Ted, telling him that he would see him later, as he made his way back to Brian's office.

When Justin got back to the area of Brian's office, he found Brian standing at Cynthia's desk and waiting for him. Brian made of show of looking at his watch. Justin knew what was coming.

"Justin, if it's almost 2 pm and you're still here in town, this obviously means that you're not getting any painting done in your studio," Brian began sternly.

"I was just on my way home, and I thought that I would check in with you before I headed back," Justin explained.

Brian gave Justin a skeptical look. Then he decided to change the subject. "Did you see Jennifer?"

"Yes, and she's very happy for us."

"Did you have lunch with Emmett?"

"Yes, he's agreed to help me and my 'new roommate' move into the new apartment once we've located it. So at least that's settled." Justin explained.

"Did you happen to mention to Emmett just who your 'new roommate' was going to be?" Brian cautiously asked. He was just dying to hear this explanation.

"I really couldn't work that clarification into our conversation. Although he did ask if you had met this new roommate and what you thought of him?" Justin explained with a smile.

"You're going to be in so much trouble when everything comes out," Brian said with a laugh. "Don't worry, we're in this together now. I'll see what I can do to help you out of this mess you've gotten yourself into," he continued to tease.

"Leave it alone," Justin insisted. "I'll work it out with Emmett later. If you get involved, you'll just make things worse."

"Justin, you wound me..." Brian responded, clutching his chest, but he knew deep down that Emmett would forgive Justin anything. Finally he simply acknowledged, "Maybe you're right."

Brian casually slid his arm around Justin's waist. "Why don't you come in the office, and you can tell me about the juicy tidbits of information that the gossip queen shared with you during lunch?"

Justin allowed himself to be gently nudged along.

"Don't forget to lock the door during this discussion," Cynthia reminded them with a laugh.

"Have I not given you enough to do?" Brian called back.

"No, I'm good," she replied with a laugh. "I still love my job."

Chapter 46 – We Have News, Part 3

Later Friday Afternoon...(Day 47)

Brian nudged Justin into his office, and wrapped his arms around him. "I'm really beginning to enjoy this being legally bound to you thing," he said, giving Justin a kiss.

"It does have its advantages, I suppose," Justin agreed. "I especially like the 'equal partners' part."

"Justin, out of all those papers we signed this morning, with all those various clauses, the 'equal partners' part is all you can remember?"

"No...no, that's not true, I remember the 'forever and ever' part too. Funny how when you string it all together...equal partners forever and ever...it has such a nice ring to it," Justin insisted, reaching up to kiss Brian again. "Don't you think?"

"My day has been too busy, I hadn't had a chance to think about it," Brian teased. "Now explain to me again, why you're in my office instead of in your studio?"

"I need to check on when everyone is arriving? So that we can make sure that we have a plan for getting everyone out to the house."

"Cynthia mentioned that Paul and Jason should get in around 6 o'clock. Mel, Linds, and Gus should be here at about the same time. This will give you several hours to paint if you go home now," Brian pointed out. "Sunshine, you realize that you're clearly tampering with my plans. You know how I feel about that?"

Justin couldn't resist laughing. "I have a better idea."

"What do you mean, you have a better idea? You aren't part of the planning committee. The lack of time you've spent in your studio is testament to the fact that your skills are lacking in this regard. But just for the fun of it, let me hear your idea?"

"If you have an hour free, I think we should walk over to the diner and see Deb. I think we have something to tell her, and the sooner we do it the better it will be. What do you think?"

"That's not a bad idea, we might as well do something constructive since you aren't painting," Brian remarked sarcastically.

"And after we talk to Deb, you can go see Michael since the comic book store would be so close by. What do you think?"

"You're sending me to see Michael? You want to tell me what's going on?"

"You've been gone for several weeks. Michael may have something that he needs to discuss with his best friend."

"So that I don't walk into any maelstroms, you want to give me just a hint as to what the something might be?"

"I'm not sure there's a problem yet, but Ted swore me to secrecy about something."

"So of course you made a beeline for my office as a result. That's not like you."

"We don't keep secrets from each other, remember? It was part of our new rules, don't you remember?"

"Of course, I remember. I'm just impressed to see that you remembered too. Ok, so what does Ted know?"

"Michael wants Ben to move to Toronto, so he can be closer to Jenny. He's thinking of opening a second comic book store there, so he can have a reason to travel back and forth between Toronto and Pittsburgh more often."

"So what's the problem? It's really none of our business."

"We know better that anyone else how hard things have been for Mel and Linds in Toronto. Mel and Linds are trying to work through some issues. Mel doesn't take well to interference...you know that. Remember the custody battle when Jenny was born? This weekend could turn into a powder keg if Michael brings this up to Mel right now. Mel and Linds are going to be in town for counseling. No one else knows about that but you and me. Mel and Linds can't work on their issues if they have to start dealing with Michael right now too."

"Exactly what is it you want me to do, Sunshine?"

"Nothing. With the exception of the potential impact that this new crisis could possibly have on Gus, you're right it's none of our business. Except when this all goes down, Lindsay will come crying on your shoulder, and I want you prepared to deal with this. It's my job as your new legal domestic partner to protect you," Justin reiterated, leaning up again to kiss Brian.

"You're going to protect me? Why do I find that a scary proposition?" Brian teased.

"Brian!" Justin protested his remark.

"Sorry," Brian said with a laugh. "I have to admit when it comes to the Munchers, you've been most helpful," he had to finally say.

"I just wanted you to be prepared for anything," Justin added.

"I know you do."

"So are you ready to go see Debbie? I think we have something important to tell her."

"No. I wasn't planning on seeing Debbie."

"But we agreed."

"I know we did, but that doesn't mean we have to rush into things."

"I know that we don't have enough time to fuck, but how about I give you a quick blowjob for courage, and then we go deal with Debbie. What do you say?" Justin asked, leaning up to nibble on Brian's ear lobe.

"You know you do have a way about you. I must say that I like the way you negotiate. How can I refuse such an offer?"

Justin locked the door, while Brian made himself comfortable on the couch in his office.

Brian knew the moment that Justin's lips touched his cock that this was going to be hard and fast, and he was right. And Brian knew, as he quickly came down the back of Justin's throat that although he wanted more, this would have to do for right now. But Brian did clearly think about a lifetime of this with Justin. And he thought to himself, 'never enough,' as he pulled Justin into a kiss once again.

Brian and Justin restored the office and themselves back to their original state. Brian grabbed his jacket, unlocked the door, and told Cynthia that he would be back in about an hour.

Brian made sure that he had his cell phone. And then, they were on their way to the Diner.

It was a short walk between Kinnetik and the Diner, and Brian thought to himself that today the walk seemed even shorter than he remembered.

They reached the Diner, and as expected, Debbie was working.

"You know I could go for a lemon square and a glass of milk," Justin suggested.

"I can't believe you. We have important work to do here, and all you're thinking about is your stomach," Brian said in total disbelief. Then he remembered that he was dealing with Justin, and he just smiled. "Why am I not surprised?"

There weren't many people in the Diner, so Justin thought that the timing was perfect to talk to Debbie. Brian decided he would follow Justin's lead.

"Debbie," Justin said quietly.

Debbie immediately turned. "I recognize that voice," she said, "Sunshine!" she almost screamed, before wrapping Justin in one of her death holds.

"Debbie, you have to release him," Brian demanded, "He can't breathe."

"Sorry Sunshine," she said, partially releasing Justin, but reaching out to hug Brian with the other arm. Brian held up his hands to stop her, and Debbie backed away from him, but she never really released Justin.

"Sunshine! What are you doing here? When did you get back? How did you escape from your prison?" she asked a series of questions with no time for individual answers.

Finally Brian extricated Justin from her grasp, and the two of them hurried to the safety of being seated in one of the booths for protection.

Debbie followed them to the booth. She stood there waiting for answers to her series of questions. Since neither Brian nor Justin was answering fast enough, she turned up the volume on her nonverbal communication. She placed her hands on her hips and allowed one foot to begin tapping, demonstrating her impatience.

"Brian and I just got back last night from New York," Justin began. "We're going to be at the house for the weekend because this is Gus' weekend to visit. Paul and Jason are also coming in this weekend, so that Gus and Nicky can have a play date. So everyone should be arriving shortly. I had a craving for a lemon square and a glass of milk, so we decided to walk down here from Brian's office."

Brian decided that it was time to give Justin a hand. "Debbie, will you get Justin his lemon square and milk before he keels over from hunger? You know how he is? I'll have a cup of black coffee." Brian paused for just a second, and then he added, "And why don't you grab yourself a cup of coffee and come sit with us," he suggested easily.

Debbie's interest was immediately piqued. She knew something must be up, for Brian to voluntarily suggest that she join him for coffee. She also knew that until she complied, she was not going to get any information. Debbie had been dealing with Brian Kinney for a long time, and she knew how these things worked.

Debbie got the lemon square and milk for Justin and two cups of coffee. She made sure that someone would cover the tables while she took her break. Debbie then made herself comfortable in the booth across from Brian and Justin. She patiently waited for events to unfold.

Brian was seated next to Justin with one arm leisurely wrapped around Justin's shoulders.

Debbie looked at them, and she just had to smile. She couldn't remember when she had seen them so relaxed and casual with each other. Debbie also looked into their faces, and she knew that Brian and Justin were happy together. Having figured out that much, she knew she was prepared for anything that they had to tell her. Somehow Debbie knew whatever they had to say was going to be a really big.

"You know Debbie," Justin began softly. "We came into town this morning because we had to meet with Brian's attorney." Justin held his breath a bit and waited to see what she would say.

"You did?" Debbie commented, and waited to hear the rest of the story.

"Yes," Justin said hesitantly. He then took a deep breath before he continued. "And the reason we had to meet with Brian's attorney was because we took the necessary steps to legalize our domestic partnership," Justin finally revealed.

There...it had all been said.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Debbie questioned.

"It means, Debbie, that we signed papers today to give each other the rights to everything, we own at this moment and to everything we will own in the future. We are legally bound together as partners forever and ever," Justin explained.

"You two can't do anything simple can you?" Debbie said, shaking her head. "You two couldn't have a simple commitment ceremony where everyone could attend like Melanie and Lindsay had. You couldn't even run away to Canada like Michael and Ben. You two just have to be totally unconventional don't you?" she challenged.

Brian decided, that was his cue to speak again. Justin had done the hard part. It was now time for him to step in and help. "Of course," Brian said sternly. "We didn't want a meaningless ritual without force of law. I wanted us to be legally bound together. We accomplished that this morning. As of this moment, we're more than married. We are legal domestic partners, and our union is sanctioned by law. We aren't asking your approval, Deb, we simply came to tell you what is fact, so that you would know," Brian said patiently.

Debbie looked over at the Brian, and she couldn't believe what she was hearing. She had known Brian since he was 14, but this was a different Brian sitting across the table from her now. Oh, he may have looked the same, but this was a totally different man. She knew it at this moment as she had never known it before. In her mind, Brian knew what he wanted, and he went after it with everything that he had. And Brian wanted Justin.

"Legal partners, huh?" was all that Debbie could say with a smile.

"I think that's what I just said," Brian reiterated calmly, finally taking this moment to load his coffee with his usual ration of sugar.

"Sanctioned by law, huh? she added hesitantly.

Justin smiled at her.

"Come here you two. I'm so fucking happy for you!" she finally said, pulling both of them out of the booth. She kissed Brian and said. "You did good, you little asshole. I'm really proud of you. You take good care of Sunshine."

She finally released them once again, "I just can't believe this. We were all shocked last year when you were going to get married. We didn't know what to think once Sunshine went off to New York. But you two really held it together, and I'm proud of the way you both stuck together. And now you're legally hooked to each other. I don't know what to say."

Brian wrapped his arm more tightly around Justin, and leaned over and gave him a gentle kiss. Debbie just smiled at the tender interchange between these two men.

"This is what I've wanted for you Brian, ever since you were a kid. And now you have it. I can't tell you how happy I am for you two. You two are really together," she kept gushing, "You have to give me a minute for all this to sink in," she continued.

"Thanks Deb, I think," Brian said with a laugh. "I really am quite happy about things."

"I can see that. Wait until I tell everyone. Let me shout it now, for all who are here!" she said as she started to try to slide out of the booth.

Brian immediately grabbed her wrist, forcing her to sit still.

"We just wanted you to know. We don't want you to say anything to anyone. Can you do that?" Justin asked, making her silence seem like the most important thing in the world.

Debbie recognized the tone. "Sure Sunshine, but why?"

"We wanted you to be one of the first to know. Melanie and Lindsay will be here this weekend with Gus and Jenny. Paul and Jason are also coming this weekend with Nicky. There's going to be a lot going on here, even without our news. So we want to be able to tell everyone in our own way over the next week or so. So we're asking you not to say anything to anyone." Justin continued with a serious tone.

Debbie thought about it for a moment. Then finally she said, "All right, Sunshine. But you've got to admit this is big news."

"Not really," Brian said, finally entering the conversation once again. "Everyone has known that Justin and I have been a couple for a long time now. We've been partners for quite a while. All we did was legalize what everyone already knew," he added calmly.

Debbie laughed, "I see your point...as fucked up as it may be. Ok, I won't tell anyone. But, it's going to be hard to keep a secret like this."

"If you have to talk about it with someone, you can call Jennifer and gush with her about this," Brian added with a laugh. "She too, would probably enjoy having someone to commiserate with over this."

"So you told Jennifer," Debbie said with a smile. "You know Brian, she's thought of you as a son-in-law for some time now. She must be thrilled to have that thought made fact."

"She did seem pleased when I told her," Justin remarked.

"So now you two mothers can talk about this with each other until your heart's content," Brian said with a laugh, as he imagined the phone call that was going to occur as soon as he and Justin left the diner.

"If we're done here, that is JUST what I'm going to do," Debbie teased. "Well, I guess I should get back to work. I'm very happy for you two. Now you take care of each other," she added as she kissed first Brian and then Justin on the cheek.

Debbie took a few steps to walk away, then hesitated. She turned back to Brian and Justin and said one more thing, "Vic would be so pleased for you both."

Brian and Justin couldn't help smiling at her last statement. She returned the smile as she walked away with a certain bounce in her step.

For Brian and Justin, the task of telling Debbie was now done, so they finally left the Diner together.

Once they were gone, Debbie was standing by the register, and she remembered.

Beginning of Flashback.

"You think you got everybody fooled, don't you. Well not me, honey, I've known you too long...and regrettably too well. And no matter how hard you try to deny it, I can tell, you care about him as much as he cares about you. Only you haven't got the big hairy cajones to say it," Debbie said to Brian while they were sharing a beer at Woody's.

"Oh well, maybe I could borrow yours," Brian quipped.

"Well hey, what ever it takes...to admit that you love him...and I know that you do. Despite all of your efforts to never let another heart touch yours...that's assuming of course that you have one...that little persistent kid has somehow gotten in under the wire. And that's what's happened, huh? Admit the truth...you love him don't you?" she demanded to know.

Debbie's question was met with a silent stare from Brian. He never said a word.

"I thought so...then tell him...tell him what you could never say to Michael."

End of Flashback.

And Debbie thought to herself as she reflected on that moment so many years ago, 'You finally found the way to tell him, didn't you Brian...' and then she just smiled as she reached for the phone.

Chapter 47 – We Have News, Part 4 (Sidebar)

Late Afternoon...(Day 47)

Jennifer's day was winding down, because she was about to leave to pick up Molly. She was supposed to be finishing up some last minute paperwork, but instead Jennifer was sitting in her office daydreaming about the recent changes in her family.

Brian and Justin had found a way to bind themselves together. They had legalized what everyone already knew...that they were a couple. Justin was happy, and that was really all that mattered to her...well that and Brian was now legally her son-in-law.

Jennifer's thoughts were interrupted as her cell phone rang. She noticed the caller ID, so she cheerfully answered, "Hi Debbie."

"Jennifer, can you believe it?" Debbie asked breathlessly without explanation.

"What do you mean?" Jennifer hesitantly asked, wanting to be absolutely sure what Debbie was talking about and not being willing to give away any unnecessary information.

"You can cut the bullshit. I know! Brian and Justin were just here at the Diner, and they told me what they did. The little shits made it legal."

"Then you know?"

"Yes, they told me and then fucking told me not to tell anyone."

"Are you going to be able to do that, Debbie?" Jennifer asked the question and tried to make it sound credible.

"Only because Brian told me I could call you. He said that we could talk to our hearts' content. I think those were the exact words he used. So I'm calling."

"Debbie, why are you so surprised? You know that they wanted to get married last year. Brian was ready. Justin said yes. They just couldn't make it happen then...events seemed to intervene."

"Leave it to Brian and Justin. You know they could have had a ceremony so you and I could have been there. In fact, I wouldn't put it past those two to go through all this legal mumbo jumbo just so I couldn't watch them tie the knot," Debbie insisted.

"Now Debbie, how could you think that they would do such a thing? You know how they feel about you? Brian and Justin wanted to make sure that it was done and legal. You can understand that. I think you can finally stop worrying about them now. They will truly take care of each other. I must admit, I'm really very happy."

"Of course I'm happy. But how the fuck am I going to keep this secret?" Debbie admitted. "This is really big news!"

"I know, I feel the same way," Jennifer confirmed. "But it's important to them, so I think we're just going to have to honor their wishes. I'm sure they'll find a way to tell everyone over the next week if we just give them this time."

"I know, but at least I can talk to you," Debbie said.

Jennifer just smiled. When she thought about it, she and Debbie had been through a lot together over the last six years. "Of course you can. We've been sharing Justin for a long time now, you and I. Now we get to share Brian too."

"Sharing Justin has been easy. Brian now is another story. But the two of them together will make for a roller coaster ride. I can see it already."

"C'mon Debbie, they're good together," Jennifer said with a laugh. "You have to at least admit that."

"But Jennifer you should have seen them. They're so cute together. They act like fucking newlyweds, in spite of the fact that they aren't calling it a marriage. They never do what you expect them to. I have to wonder what the fuck they're up to next."

Jennifer had to laugh because Debbie knew them so well, but Jennifer wasn't about to let that perception go unchallenged.

"Whatever they're up to, they'll eventually tell us. Haven't they shown us that?"

"Maybe. But I'm never going to be able to rest, waiting for whatever crazy thing that they're gonna think up next."

"Debbie, you're going to have to relax. Everything will be all right. Somehow we'll all manage to get through this."

"I'll be ok as long as I have you to talk to," Debbie quietly admitted.

"I'll be right here," Jennifer whispered, "Debbie, I have to go. I have to pick up Molly. We'll talk later."

"Ok, Jennifer, bye" Debbie said just before she hung up the phone.

Jennifer hung up the phone and thought to herself, 'Oh Debbie, you have no idea how right you are. Hang on, dear friend, we're about to go on one very wild ride!'

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Kiki arrived at the Diner and greeted Debbie.

"Thanks for coming in early to relieve me," Debbie said to Kiki. "We're having house guests, and I still have a few things left to do."

"So who's coming?" Kiki asked, not wanting to miss out on any juicy gossip.

"My granddaughter is coming to visit, along with Melanie and Lindsay. You remember them don't you?"

"Who could forget them, and your adorable granddaughter? Michael must be thrilled."

"Of course, he always looks forward to seeing his daughter. I've missed her too. It's been a month since she was last here. I bet she's really grown since I last saw her. You know how kids are at that age, they grow so like weeds."

"I'll have to take your word for that," Kiki remarked with a smile.

Debbie returned her smile. "I guess I better get going. I have so much to do."

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Debbie walked into her living room and sat down on the sofa for just a minute.

She wanted to take just a moment to let the events of the day settle in. Talking to Jennifer had definitely helped, she didn't feel so alone with her awesome burden...Brian and Justin had legalized their domestic partnership.

Carl came home and was surprised to see his better-half sitting down. In the time that he'd known Debbie, she could, at best, be described as in perpetual motion. He immediately knew, something was up.

"So is everything ready for the girls' visit?" Carl cautiously asked.

"Yeah, sure," Debbie responded with some distraction.

"I would think that a little more enthusiasm would be in order. After all, your entire little family will be back together," Carl commented.

"My little family, as you call it, will never be the same again," Debbie revealed.

"Why what happened?" Carl asked with some concern.

"You will never believe what's happened, so don't even ask."

"Debbie honey, I'm still a good detective, but you wouldn't by any chance want to give me just a few clues," Carl teased. "I'm so much better when you give me leads."

"I can't tell you, I've been sworn to secrecy. I promised Sunshine."

"Sunshine...what would Justin swear you to secrecy about? I didn't even know that he was back in town."

"Sunshine and Brian flew back yesterday from New York. They stopped by this afternoon to see me at the Diner."

"So they're back, huh? Has Brian talked to Michael?" Carl asked. "I know that Michael has been trying to reach him."

"Michael? I don't know," she said mindlessly. Then she remembered that she knew something that Michael probably didn't know. " Oh my god, Michael! How is he going to deal with this?" she said with alarm.

"How is he going to deal with what? Sweetheart, you're not making any sense," Carl cautiously mentioned.

"I can't tell you. This is all fucked up. Sunshine swore me to secrecy."

Carl made himself comfortable beside Debbie and wrapped his arms around her. "Well I wouldn't want you to betray any promises you made to Justin, but I am your loving partner and fiancé. When Justin swore you to secrecy, I don't think he meant to include me. I just want to help, Sweetheart, and I can't do that if I don't know what's going on," he tried to reason.

For just a moment, Debbie surrendered to the comfort of Carl's arms.

"Ok," Carl said, trying to figure out his next move. He decided to begin by changing the subject.

Carl released Debbie and started moving about the room.

"Do you know what time Melanie and Lindsay will arrive?"

"Somewhere around six, I would say. Brian got a limo so they could easily get here from the airport," Debbie pointed out. Then her voice softened as she said, "Brian really does do nice things, doesn't he?"

Carl walked over and placed his hand on Debbie's forehead. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"Sure, why do you ask?"

"Because ever since I've known you, you have personally blamed Brian for every moment of unhappiness that Michael has ever experienced since the age of 14. In your eyes, I thought that he was the devil incarnate. What brought about this sudden change?"

"I never said he was the devil incarnate. He's always looked out for Michael. I think that Brian is part of the reason that Michael never grew up. Brian was always there to look out for him. Michael could simply hide in Brian's shadow."

"But that's all changed. Michael moved on and married Ben. So taking care of Michael is Ben's job now...not Brian's?"

"You don't understand. Michael may be with Ben but he figured that he would grow old with Brian. How often have you heard Brian say that 'they would be two old queens growing old in Palm Springs'? Michael still has hope."

"Hope? Hope for what? You say a lot of things when you're kids...but then you grow up, things change. Everybody knows that." Carl carefully pointed out, hoping this explanation would register with Debbie.

"Carl, do you remember last year when Brian and Justin were supposed to get married?"

"Sure, I remember. Everyone was in a state of disbelief when they first heard the news. No one could believe that Brian was ready to settle down. Michael seemed ok with things. He and Brian even made up after their long-standing disagreement. Michael was even going to be Brian's best man. I remember that Gus was going to be ring bearer," Carl added with a laugh. "Once everyone got over the initial shock, everyone was looking forward to their roles in the wedding. Then Brian and Justin called off the wedding, and Justin went to New York instead. But why are you bringing this up now?"

"I was just thinking that Brian has been gone for almost two weeks. Michael always gets so lost when Brian is out of touch too long."

"After twenty years, you get used to someone being around all the time. You just miss them when they're not around. Add to that, the fact that Brian and Justin have been living out at the house for the last month. I guess Brian hasn't been around too much. I'm sure it's hard on Michael."

"I know. But I bet Brian could talk some sense into Michael. Make him forget about his crazy idea of moving to Toronto," Debbie said emphatically.

Carl breathed a sigh of relief. So Debbie was simply concerned that Michael and Ben might move to Toronto, and that was the reason for Debbie's peculiar behavior. Okay, he could deal with this. He would have to do a little more work to figure out how Justin fit into all of this. He would just have to be patient while he figured out how to get the remaining details. This was going to take all his skills as an interrogator.

"Michael was just spouting off," Carl proposed as a way of explanation. "He just misses JR. I'm sure that once she visits this weekend, he'll regain his perspective. You've got to admit, Melanie and Lindsay have been really good about making sure that he gets to see his daughter at least once a month, even when they really didn't have to."

"I know. I would hate to see a replay of their original custody battle start up again."

"And you think that might happen?"

"Yes, I do. Melanie is very protective where JR is concerned. Michael is always pushing for more; he never appreciates what he has. He's a greedy little bastard in that regard. He always tries to push for more until things blow up in his face. Then he's always so hurt when he feels left behind."

"I think you worry too much. I know you wish the girls would simply move back here. Michael thinks that things could be the way they once were. But when you think about it, what do they have to come back to? Melanie and Lindsay have said that their relationship is recognized in Toronto. They have a chance for a different life...a chance to raise their kids in safety, or at least that was the premise for the move."

"Well, let me finish fixing dinner. I know everyone will be hungry when they finally get here."

"I'll be your assistant since Em seems to be out," Carl volunteered.

"Yeah, he's been really busy with his clients. He had a last minute dinner party yesterday, and he's been busy most of today too. Ok, Carl, you're hired."

"Oh thank you, great one," Carl teased, "Now what would you like me to do first?"

Carl gently pulled Debbie into the kitchen with a kiss. Together they began working on dinner preparations.

Carl was cutting up veggies after detailed instructions from Debbie. Carl suddenly had a new respect for the patience of Emmett, but he said nothing and simply did as he was told.

"You know, Debbie," Carl cautiously began, "I've found it's sometime easier to keep a secret if you share the burden with someone."

"I know and talking to Jennifer has definitely helped. Otherwise, I'm sure I would have blurted everything out by now," she responded.

"I see," Carl said, admitting defeat. "It's because we aren't married yet that you don't want to share family secrets with me. I do know how to maintain confidentiality you know. It's part of my training to be on the force," he knew he was laying it on a bit thick, but he didn't like to see Debbie in this much distress, and he really did want to help share the load of Justin's secret...whatever it was.

"Ok Carl, I'm going to tell you, but you've got to promise not to tell a living soul. I really do need to tell you because I need you to be there for me, so I can be there for Michael. Michael isn't going to take this well."

"What on earth could Justin do that would effect Michael?" Carl asked, now stopping his vegetable cutting to give Debbie his undivided attention.

"This morning Brian and Justin legalized their domestic partnership. They are legally a couple."

"A lot of couples are doing that these days," Carl said nonchalantly.

"Carl you don't understand, Brian and Justin didn't just mindlessly sign a few papers. Let me see, how did Sunshine put it...He and Brian gave each other every thing that they have at this moment...and everything that they will have in the future. They are equal partners forever and ever. Their union is recognized as completely legal."

"That's pretty significant...but, why the secrecy? Brian and Justin have been a couple every since I can remember. They have declared themselves to be partners for ages. They were going to get married. Why should anybody even raise an eyebrow at their new status?"

"Michael's not going to take this well. It will truly mean an end of an era for him. This has been Michael's biggest fear since the day Brian first fucked Justin. He's always been afraid that they would totally commit to each other. And somehow Brian would change. And if Brian changed...than Michael's relationship with Brian would change. And on and on."

"But Michael went on to build a life with Ben," Carl rationally pointed out.

"But Michael always knew that Brian was out there waiting for him...always available to him. But somehow, Brian changed in the process of making this decision about Justin. I sat across the table from a different Brian Kinney. This new and improved Brian knew exactly what he was doing and didn't give a shit about what anyone else thought, except for Sunshine. I've never seen Brian like that before. And you should see the way Brian and Sunshine look at each other. Brian's not hiding his feelings anymore."

"And Brian hasn't told Michael?"

"Not yet. Brian and Justin want to tell everyone themselves. So that's the reason for the secrecy."

"Well I promise you that I won't tell anyone. But I want you to know, I'm here for you and Michael if you need me," Carl said, moving over to gently kiss Debbie. Then Carl smiled, "So Brian and Justin are legal partners now. They must have really reached a new understanding. But you know, I couldn't be happier for them."

Emmett entered unnoticed while they were talking, "What do you mean that Brian and Justin are legal partners?"

"Oh Hi, Em," Carl said, "We didn't hear you come in."

"Obviously," Em said sarcastically. "But now that I am in, are you going to tell me what's going on with Brian and Justin?"

"It's supposed to be a secret," Debbie admitted.

"Need I remind you that there are no secrets here? So dish!"

"Em, I can't. Brian and Justin swore me to secrecy," Debbie tried to protest.

"Well I guess I'll just go and call Justin directly and ask him what's going on. If you'll excuse me?" Em said, making a move to go upstairs. "I'm sure he'll be interested in the conversation here that triggered my call to him."

"No, Em..." Debbie called out, "You can't!"

"Emmett, wait a minute," Carl insisted, casting a pleading look at Debbie.

Debbie took a deep breath. "All right, I'll tell you, but you can't say anything to anyone."

"Ok, Brian and Justin are a fucking couple," Debbie said simply.

"Of course they're a couple," Emmett said with a laugh. "Have you not been paying attention? They've been a couple almost since they met," he pointed out. "So you're going to have to do better than that."

"Promise me you won't tell anyone?" Debbie insisted. "Because if you do, I swear to god I'll tie your balls in a knot. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sure Debbie, calm down. There's no reason to get hostile," Emmett tried to say.

"Brian and Justin went to their lawyer this morning and signed the necessary papers to formally legalize their domestic partnership. To quote Sunshine, they are equal partners forever and ever. They went the whole way and legalized their union."

"So Brian finally got Justin to take that final step," Emmett said. "I think it's wonderful, but why the secrecy?"

"Brian wanted to have chance to tell everyone over the next few days. When they finally tell you, you're going to have to act surprised. Can you do that?" Debbie asked.

"Oh please, after all the movies I've seen. Of course, I can act surprised. I promise that I won't say a thing. Does Michael know?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Debbie professed. "That's what Carl and I were talking about when you came in."

"Oh my god, he's not going to take this well. He never figured that Brian would go through with this."

"Oh come on, Emmett, he has to know how Brian and Justin feel about each other. They were going to get married a year ago, we all know that." Carl interjected.

"Michael always said that Brian would never go through with the marriage. So when it was cancelled last year, Michael felt vindicated and could say, 'I told you so'. No one really knew that Brian and Justin were still a couple. Michael thought the relationship was over. You remember how he was when he received his painting from Justin. So I'm sure he was surprised a month ago when Justin came back into town, and then Brian and Justin moved into the mansion together. Now this...I don't know," Emmett revealed. "I wouldn't want to be the one to tell him this news."

"And you won't be. I have your promise, Em. You let Brian handle this with Michael. The two of them will have to work it out together."

"My lips are sealed. Although you have to admit, this is the news of the century. This won't stay buried for long."

"Melanie and Lindsay are coming here in a few hours. I also don't want you to say anything to them either. You let Brian handle this in his own way. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," Emmett said, "I won't say a word. You have my promise."

Emmett went into his room and closed the door. He couldn't help wondering why Justin didn't mention this when they had lunch this afternoon. He played back in his mind the entire lunchtime conversation. 'New roommate'...'need a bigger living space'...'moving to a better neighborhood'...

"Of course, Justin needs a new place to live because he and Brian are moving in together. Not only are they moving in together, they're moving to New York. Wait until I get my hands on that little blond. He knows better than to deliberately mislead me. Ok, Justin, I'll give you a few days to come clean. But you have a lot of explaining to do!" Emmett said aloud to himself. Then he couldn't resist a laugh.

Emmett sat down and began to plot the punishment for Justin...just in case a certain blond neglected to come clean in the allotted time

Chapter 48 – Arrivals

A Little Later Friday Afternoon...(Day 47)

Brian and Justin were standing outside of the Diner.

"Ok, so now that we've told Debbie, why don't you let me get back to the office," Brian suggested, "I have a few things that I would like to finish up before the day is over."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Justin patiently asked.

"Like what?"

"Michael."

"Michael?"

"Remember, he may need his best friend after your long absence?" Justin tried to refresh Brian's memory.

"To be honest with you, Sunshine, I'm just not up to dealing with Michael right now. If the truth were told, all I want to do is take you to Bri-tin and be alone with you until our guests descend upon us."

"Unfortunately, we don't have enough time. But since you're not going to talk to Michael, we could plan on leaving soon. We would get to the airport early and maybe avoid most of the traffic. It shouldn't be too long before Paul and Jason arrive, right?"

"Not too long. When Paul and Jason get here, why don't you ride back to the house in the limo with them? That way you can spend some time with Paul and Jason and help get everyone settled. I'll keep the car and wait for the Munchers. Then I'll grab Gus and bring him home with me. How does that sound?"

"That sounds like a plan," Justin commented.

"See how nicely things work out when you leave the planning to me?" Brian quipped.

Justin just shook his head and laughed. He and Brian linked arms and started walking back to Kinnetik.

"Can we stop by the loft for just a moment before we go to the airport?" Justin asked, while they were walking.

"Are you planning to blow me again?" Brian asked with suggestive eyebrow movements.

"Brian!"

"Just asking, Sunshine. I'm trying to follow the workings of your mind."

"No, I'm not going to blow you. I just want to be sure everything is ok there. Just in case things get intense for Melanie and Lindsay on this trip, and you offer them the loft as a safe haven while they're here. I know there's no food there, but I want everything else to be ok."

"What makes you think that I'm going to offer them the loft?" Brian challenged, wondering what on earth Justin was thinking. Gus would be safely out at Bri-tin, away from whatever chaos might be happening in town. So as far as Brian was concerned, whatever chaos might be happening in town was going to be none of their business. Brian tried to figure out why Justin thought he would even be involved. He didn't have to wait very long for an answer.

"Because I'm on to you, and I told you, now that we're legally bound, it's my job to protect you. And part of that job is to anticipate problems for you before they arise. I promise, it will only take a few minutes," Justin patiently explained.

As they were walking to the loft, Brian couldn't help but be amazed at the workings of Justin's mind. Now Brian understood why Justin was such a successful stalker in the early days of their relationship. Justin was always three moves ahead of him. Brian realized, for the first time that maybe all that time when he thought that he was in control of things, he was delusional...that Justin was really the one that had every thing under control. Brian realized that it was no wonder that he never really stood a chance in getting rid of the teenage Justin, and he was so really glad about that.

Brian simply smiled to himself as he leaned down to give Justin a gentle kiss.

"What was that for?" Justin asked, somewhat puzzled by Brian's action.

"It's very nice having you to look out for me," Brian said with a smile.

Justin beamed back a full-wattage Sunshine smile in return, and Brian felt his heart melt in response.

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They arrived at the loft, and Justin quickly made his visual sweep while Brian went to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water.

After a few sips, Brian simply said, "Fuck it!" He carefully hung his jacket on the back of one of the stools and started walking towards the bedroom to locate Justin.

Brian caught Justin in his arms, just as he was about to descend the steps leading from the bedroom. Justin never made it any further.

Brian leaned down and passionately kissed him, as he began removing Justin's clothes. Justin joined in the ceremonial undressing, and they both ended up sprawled on the bed with their clothes scattered everywhere.

"Well, that was unexpected," Justin whispered.

Brian smiled a victorious smile. "I'm glad that I can still surprise you," he quipped, "You had me worried there for a second."

Justin just smiled. Brian leaned down to give Justin another passionate kiss as he slid his body over on top of Justin's.

Justin completely surrendered to the kiss, and Brian knew exactly where he wanted to be.

Brian reached for the lube and quickly began to prepare Justin for entry. He finally sheathed his cock with a condom and gently placed Justin's legs onto his shoulders. Brian tenderly kissed each leg before he slowly pushed his way into Justin.

And as Brian sank deeper and deeper into Justin, Brian couldn't help the groans of pleasure that escaped from his own lips or the groans and sighs that he heard from Justin in reply.

When Justin began to thrust up to meet him, Brian felt himself being pushed to the edge of ecstasy by the passion that existed between them. He knew that they were both so close. And when he felt Justin clamp down on him and release into the space between them, Brian could finally allow himself to release into the condom, as well.

With that release, Brian collapsed on Justin, which finally allowed Justin's legs to lower.

Brian felt Justin lock his legs behind his back to hold him into place. And Brian knew not only was he where he wanted to be...he also knew that this was the place he didn't want to leave. And he lay there for as long as possible with his body bonded with Justin's.

When Brian had to pull out to remove the condom, both he and Justin groaned in complaint at the loss of contact.

Brian quickly tied off and disposed of the condom and brought back a damp cloth for Justin. Then they spooned together wrapped in each other's arms. Once again, Brian just surrendered to the feeling of the closeness of Justin. And the words 'forever and ever' echoed in his heart.

Finally, Brian said, "As much as I hate to admit this, we have to get up. We don't want to leave Paul and Jason stranded at the airport."

"No, that probably wouldn't be a good idea," Justin said as he turned over to snuggle into Brian's chest.

"Oh, no you don't!" Brian said with a laugh, "If you start that, we'll never get out of this bed."

Justin leaned up to kiss him, and Brian felt his cock twitch.

"Justin..." was all that Brian could say before he found himself once again surrendering to the kiss. When Brian finally found the strength to break the kiss, he said, "I am going to get up and take a quick shower. We really do have to get out of here."

"Okay," Justin agreed, reaching up to kiss Brian once more.

"Justin, that means you can't keep doing that, or we'll never get out of this bed. I can't believe that I let you lure me to the loft for fucking in the afternoon," Brian protested, clearly deciding that their present predicament was all Justin's fault.

"Brian!" Justin complained.

Brian felt himself being gently punched for that last statement, and on reflection, he realized that he probably deserved it.

They both finally managed to roll out of bed and quickly showered together...this time it really was to save time...probably a first for these two.

They quickly got dressed, and together they once again restored the loft to a presentable state.

They quickly made their way back to the office to pick up the car, and they were now off to the airport to meet Paul, Jason and Nicky.

On the way to the airport, Brian checked the status of Paul and Jason's flight. The flight would be arriving on time. Brian expertly weaved through traffic and finally parked the car in valet parking at the airport to save time.

Brian and Justin arrived at the gate with time to spare. They made themselves comfortable to wait for their friends to arrive.

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When their plane landed, Paul and Jason each tried to reach down to hold one of Nicky's hands as they were exiting the gate. Brian and Justin were waiting there for them.

Before either Paul or Jason could adequately restrain him, Nicky caught a glimpse of Justin.

Strains of JUSTIN could be heard throughout the area.

Nicky took off and ran to Justin, hurling himself into Justin's arms. Justin leaned down to capture the little projectile and lifted him into a hug. Nicky clung to Justin, wrapping his little arms about Justin's neck. Paul and Jason couldn't help laughing.

"I'm sorry, Jus, he's just getting faster than he used to be. Once he saw you, nothing was going to stop him," Jason said, struggling to catch up with his son.

Paul eventually caught up with them. "Brian, how are you? I assume that Justin's ok, but now is not the time to interrupt this love fest to find out."

Brian took a moment to greet Paul and Jason.

"Very funny," Brian said with a laugh. "I'm glad you guys made it."

Then Brian looked over at Justin and Nicky and realized that it was time for him to intervene.

"Nicky, you're going to have to loosen your death grip on Justin," Brian said, reaching over to gently tug at the youngster.

"Oh...hi Uncle Brian," Nicky finally said, finally letting go of Justin and reaching out for Brian.

Brian wrapped Nicky in his arms. "Well, hello to you too, Nicky," Brian teased, before lowering Nicky to the floor, but continuing to hold his hand.

At that point Paul and Jason finally had a chance to exchange hugs with Justin.

"I know it's been only a week," Paul said, "But we've missed you guys."

"We've been looking forward to your visit too," Brian said. "Shall we go grab your luggage?"

Brian hoisted Nicky onto his shoulders to the squeals of joy from Nicky. Brian continued to hold Nicky's hands while he was securely perched on his shoulders. Nicky pretended that he was an airplane. There is nothing that Nicky liked better than being perched on top of Brian. Nicky really enjoyed being at this new height.

When they reached the baggage claim area, Nicky was finally willing to be lowered to ground level again.

"Where's Gus?" Nicky finally asked.

"Gus is flying in a little later with his mommies," Justin explained. "Brian's going to wait for them and bring Gus home with him later."

"Oh," Nicky said, sounding a little disappointed.

"Unless of course," Brian began hesitantly, "You would like to wait with me. It will be a short while, but then we can meet Gus and his mommies together?"

Nicky beamed at that suggestion. Paul and Jason just laughed.

Justin just shook his head. "I guess I don't have to worry about you being all alone here at the airport, while you're waiting for everyone to arrive," Justin teased.

"No, I think I'll have plenty of company. Nicky and I will have a chance to watch the service trucks while we're waiting. How does that sound, Nicky?" Brian asked.

There was no verbal answer, but Nicky was now beaming.

They retrieved the luggage, and everyone walked to the waiting limo where the luggage was quickly loaded while Paul, Jason, and Justin made themselves comfortable inside.

Brian gave the driver the routing to Bri-tin. Brian also made sure that Justin had his cell phone turned on. At the last moment, Brian leaned in to give Justin a gentle kiss goodbye, and the limo was finally on its way.

Once the limo was out of sight, Brian turned his attention back to Nicky.

They made a quick bathroom run, and then they stopped to pick up some water. Brian also picked up a few snacks for Nicky, and using his VIP access pass, Brian found just the right spot for Nicky to view the various service trucks servicing the Liberty Airline planes.

As the time got nearer for the flight from Toronto to arrive, Nicky and Brian made their way over towards the gate to watch the service trucks from an entirely new vantage point. Nicky also liked watching the planes take off and land.

"Gus and his mommies are on the plane that is landing now," Brian carefully told Nicky, as they finally watched the flight from Toronto slowly taxi over to its berth.

This was news enough to distract Nicky from his perpetual viewing of the service trucks. Now Nicky was clearly focused on the airplane and the gate and waiting for Gus.

"Do you see him Uncle Brian?" Nicky began to ask every few minutes.

"Not yet Nicky, but soon," Brian answered continuously. Brian couldn't help smiling, for Nicky's enthusiasm definitely matched his own.

Finally, Brian saw Lindsay come through the gate with Jenny in her arms. Brian and Lindsay nodded to each other at a distance. Next Gus came through the gate with Melanie behind him. Brian bent down to whisper an update in Nicky's ear.

Gus saw Nicky about the same time that Nicky saw Gus, and two little pairs of legs were pumping the short distance toward each other.

"NICKY!"

"GUS!"

could be easily heard in the area, as the two little people ran to meet each other under the watchful eyes of the three adults. Nicky and Gus hugged each other. Meanwhile, Brian hugged and kissed Lindsay, and said hello to Melanie in greeting.

"Welcome to Pittsburgh," Brian said with a laugh, "We seem to be your welcoming committee," he continued to tease.

Gus and Nicky finally released each other, and Gus ran over to lunge himself towards Brian. "DAD!"

"I thought that you forgot all about me. So how are you doing Sonny Boy?" Brian asked as he picked up his son.

"What on earth is Nicky doing here?" Lindsay asked with some surprise. She looked around and was surprised when she didn't see Paul or Jason. "Where are Paul and Jason?"

It would take a while for Lindsay's question to be answered, for there were now more pressing problems at hand.

Lindsay lowered Jenny down to the floor, and Jenny immediately headed in the direction of Nicky. Jenny wrapped her little arms around Nicky just as she had seen Gus do minutes earlier. Nicky was totally surprised.

Everyone else thought the gesture was cute.

"Jenny is usually so standoffish around strangers. But here we obviously have love at first sight," Melanie mumbled with a laugh.

"Another lesbian victory," Lindsay teased as she and Melanie high-fived each other.

Brian rolled his eyes. "Let me go rescue Nicky," he said with a sigh. "Now...now, that's enough of that." Brian picked up Jenny as she squealed in pleasure.

Jenny was finally content to wrap her arms around Brian neck. She was happy to see a familiar face. Then Brian carried Jenny over to properly introduce her to Nicky.

Jenny was completely fascinated by the mop of red curls and the face full of freckles. She could hardly take her eyes off this new little person before her.

Since Jenny was still in the Brian's arms, she tried to reach out to grab a handful of Nicky's hair. Fortunately, Gus recognized the hand movement and ran over to grab Jenny's hand before she made contact, thus saving his friend from Jenny's grasp.

Lindsay and Melanie couldn't help laughing as they watched the entire interplay between the kids.

"Lindsay, Melanie...in case you haven't guessed, this is Nicky. Nicky, come meet your Aunt Lindsay and your Aunt Melanie," Brian said with a laugh.

"Brian, he's so adorable," Lindsay gushed.

Nicky was thinking that he didn't have many aunts, so he was thrilled to have two more. He was willing to accept hugs from Lindsay and Melanie, once they had both lowered themselves down to his level.

"Let's go get your luggage," Brian said, "And get you to your limo. I'm sure Debbie and Michael are waiting for you."

"I guess I had better call them, and let them know that we've landed." Melanie suggested. She pulled out her cell phone and called Michael, who said he would meet them later at Debbie's.

Everyone checked to make sure that everyone had hold of all the little ones, and they started in the direction of baggage claim. The group had turned and had only taken two steps, when Gus asked the inevitable question. "Dad, where's Justin?"

Brian couldn't help smiling at the familiarity of it all. "Justin just left about an hour ago with Uncle Paul and Uncle Jason. They've already gone out to the house. Nicky decided to wait with me, so that we could greet you properly. You'll see Justin as soon as we get home," Brian reassured Gus. "Is that ok?" he asked.

"Sure Dad," Gus said, temporarily satisfied with Brian's response.

Brian shook his head, while Mel and Linds couldn't resist smiling. They had wondered how long it would take, once the plane had landed, for Gus to ask this inevitable question.

Once they reached the baggage claim area, the limo driver was waiting, as agreed, to help get all their stuff to the waiting limo. Mel and Linds were really grateful that Brian had taken care of everything.

"Thanks for all this, Brian," Melanie said once they'd reached the car. "The flight and the limo have made things so much easier for us."

"I'm glad I could help," Brian replied simply.

Brian made sure that everything was loaded in the limo, and then he retrieved Gus' suitcase.

Once again, Brian confirmed with the driver the routing...this time to Debbie's.

Lindsay, Melanie, and Jenny settled into the limo and eventually said their goodbyes.

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Brian, Gus and Nicky waved goodbye to the limo until it was out of sight. Then Brian and the kids headed for the valet parking area to get the SUV.

Brian managed to strap Nicky in the car seat that was still in the car, and Gus was strapped in with the seat belts.

"Well Gus, let me stop at the rental desk and get another car seat," Brian suggested.

"I've grown, Dad, I don't have to ride in the little kid seat anymore," Gus explained, "I'm big now."

"I thought you had grown since the last time I saw you, but I wasn't sure," Brian said, realizing that he had only seen Gus a week ago. Brian smiled.

He stopped at the rental car counter at the airport, just to be on the safe side, and in fact, Gus met the requirements to no longer need to be strapped into the car seat. "My Gus, you really have grown," Brian acknowledged.

Gus just beamed with pride.

"Well now, that's all settled," Brian said, "I guess we should get going."

Nicky and Gus were definitely ready to get out of the airport.

As they were driving away from the airport, Nicky and Gus were sitting in the back already talking to each other. Brian had no idea what they were talking about. It didn't matter to him, for both Nicky and Gus just seemed really happy to see each other.

As Brian pulled into traffic, he groaned as he realized how long it was going to take to get home. Brian decided that before he spent all that time in traffic that Gus and Nicky were probably starving, so he decided that they needed something to eat before they started the long drive out to the house.

Brian reached for his cell phone and called Justin to let him know that he was going to stop so the kids could share a burger. There were cheers from two little people in the back seat. Brian couldn't help smiling. Brian agreed to call again when they were on the way home.

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Brian stopped at the Diner, and he helped Nicky and Gus divide a hamburger. Nicky and Gus managed to talk while Brian continued to steal their French fries. Gus told Brian all about his week at school, and Nicky listened intently. Nicky rambled on about his friends at day care.

There was quite a bit of chatter in the Diner, for the vision of Brian Kinney deeply engrossed in conversation with two little kids did not go unnoticed. The fact that he also appeared to be enjoying himself was bound to cause quite a buzz.

While Gus and Nicky were eating, Brian had just a moment to reflect on this day. This morning he had signed papers to legalize his relationship with Justin, and now he sat in a Diner with a four year old and a six year old as his dinner companions. Even Brian had to smile at the irony of the way the day had turned out.

Brian couldn't help wishing that Justin were there with him.

Once Gus and Nicky had dined sufficiently, they were both now ready to go.

"Dad, can we go see Justin now?" Gus asked pointedly, just so that his Dad didn't lose sight of where they were going.

"Ok, Gus, we'll go see Justin. Let me call him and tell him we're on our way," Brian said. Once he punched the number, he handed the cell phone to Gus.

"Hey," Justin said on answering the phone.

"Jus," Gus said into the phone, totally happy to be talking to HIS Justin.

There was a pause.

"I miss you, Jus," Gus continued.

There was another pause.

Brian couldn't help shaking his head at the conversation. Whatever Justin was now saying was causing Gus to beam...as always.

"Tell Justin that we're on our way home," Brian whispered his instructions to Gus.

"Dad said we're on our way," Gus relayed, following Brian's instructions. Gus was still smiling.

There was another pause.

"Bye Justin," Gus finally said.

Brian took the phone away and simply said, "Later."

Brian closed his cell phone and asked, "Are we ready to go see Justin?"

Two little people looked at him with hopeful eyes and big smiles, as they simply nodded yes. Brian helped Gus and Nicky out of the booth and then stopped at the counter to pay for the check.

"Dad, we have to get lemon squares for Justin," Gus insisted.

"What makes you think that Justin would like to have lemon squares?" Brian teased.

"We always get lemon squares when we come here without Justin," Gus reminded him, not understanding why his Dad wouldn't remember.

Brian was shocked at Gus' suggestion. He couldn't believe that Gus would remember that a month ago he and Gus had come to the Diner on their way back to Bri-tin. They had purchased lemon squares as a surprise for Justin then too. Of course, when they got to the house Justin surprised them both with a camping adventure in the living room. Brian knew that Gus remembered the camping adventure because he had relayed it in detail to everyone in Cincinnati, but Brian never expected Gus to remember something so simple as the lemon bars they purchased on the way home...but Gus had remembered.

Brian smiled and did as he was told and purchased a half-dozen lemon squares to go.

Gus merely smiled a satisfied smile. "Thanks, Dad."

Now Brian...with Gus, Nicky, and the lemon bars in tow...were now on their way to Bri-tin.

Chapter 49 – We Have News, Part 5

Meanwhile...(Day 47)

Meanwhile in the limo heading toward Bri-tin...Justin, Paul, and Jason were chatting easily.

"Things may still be a bit of a mess at the house," Justin began to explain, "Brian and I just got back from New York yesterday afternoon.

"You were in New York all this time?" Jason asked with some surprise, "I thought you were only supposed to be there for a day or so."

"That was the original plan, but Brian had some meetings, so we just stayed over. We're probably going back again next week."

"Did Brian meet Spyder?" Jason had to ask, showing that his concerns were still ever-present.

"Yes, and they got along great," Justin pointed out with a laugh.

"I tried to tell Jason that there was no need to worry, but you know how he is," Paul teased.

"Believe it or not, Spyder and Brian actually liked each other," Justin revealed. "They spent a good deal of time together while we were in New York."

"No!" Jason said in complete amazement.

"So you can stop fretting now and relax. Spyder isn't a threat to anyone." Justin finally set the record straight.

"Ok, I can do that. I can't believe that we're here. And we're going to see the mansion," Jason said all excited.

"Mom and Katie made us promise to take lots of pictures. They're desperate for details. You know they wanted to come along on this trip, just so that they could see the house," Paul teased.

"I almost expected them to get off the plane with you," Justin teased.

"They really wanted to come. They tried to use the excuse that you were going to need them to watch Gus and Nicky, so we could all go to Babylon. It took some doing to get them to stay in Cincinnati. They made us promise to bring them the next time we came to visit," Jason relayed with a laugh.

"I'm going to look forward to their visit. You know how we feel about Fran and Katie. We have plenty of room, so they can stay with us," Justin said with a laugh.

"I'll be sure to tell them," Paul said with a laugh.

"Okay look, just don't expect too much when you see the house. Things are furnished, but we're still living with rented furniture. And the way things are going, it will be quite some time before Brian and I have time to actually purchase furniture for the house," Justin revealed.

"Is that because of all your shows coming up?" Jason asked.

"Partly, but mainly because Brian and I may be moving to New York, and all our energies are going to be focused on setting up a new place to live there, not to mention a new office for Kinnetik," Justin answered.

"I know that you've been living in New York for the last year, but I'm surprised that Brian was willing to finally take the plunge and move too," Jason commented.

"Brian has always wanted to be in New York," Paul reminded them. "Even when we were in college, that was all he talked about. But he got the internship with Ryder and the rest is history. But I thought he was happy in Pittsburgh?"

"I told you that we've decided to live together. I was ready to move back to Pittsburgh. Let's face it... I can pretty much paint anywhere. But Brian thought that it was better to move to New York. He has a few clients with offices there, and then he landed a few new accounts, so he's decided to open a New York office," Justin explained.

"Things must be happening pretty quickly, you guys didn't mention anything about your New York plans when we talked last week," Jason commented.

"You're right, things are happening really fast. This move to the city is happening sooner than we expected. Brian did well not to complain too much this week when he stayed at my loft, but I know we really can't live there," Justin said with a sigh. "So we have to find a new place to live."

"That's wonderful. That means that you can still pursue your career in New York, doesn't it?" Jason added.

"I think that the fact that I could still benefit from being in New York, might be part of reason that Brian started thinking seriously about New York again. Anyway, the decision has been made. Now we just have to make it work," Justin said joyfully.

"How is the family dealing with the news about your move?" Paul cautiously asked.

"No one knows about it yet, and I'm going to ask you not to mention it to anyone while you're here. My mother knows because she's a realtor, and we're going to need her help to pull this off. But we haven't said anything to the rest of the family. We want to get set up before we tell them. So please, don't say anything to anyone while you're here," Justin pleaded.

"My lips are sealed," Jason promised.

"Mine too," Paul agreed.

"There's something else that I have to tell you," Justin said and then paused.

"More, I love it," Jason cooed.

"Jason..." Paul protested.

"This morning, Brian and I signed papers to legalize our domestic partnership," Justin revealed nonchalantly.

"What?" Jason responded with some excitement.

"No! I can't believe it," Paul said. "How on earth did you get Brian to take that step? He's always been so against this sort of thing."

"I didn't do anything. This was Brian's idea. I just made sure that we stayed equal partners," Justin explained.

"You guys just can't do anything simple. You can't simply get married. You and Brian have to go all the way and bind yourselves together legally forever," Jason teased.

"We don't need vows or rings to prove that we love each other. Brian wanted to be sure that we're legally bound, and that our union had the force of law. This way everything is all legal. We signed papers to register our legalized domestic partnership here and in New York. This all happened this morning, and it should be about a week before it's published in the papers," Justin continued to explain.

"How is the Liberty Avenue family taking THIS news, or is this something else that you and Brian haven't bothered to tell them?" Paul asked, already figuring out that possibility.

"So much going on today, that we only had time to tell my mother and Debbie. Oh yes...and Brian told Ted and Cynthia, at the office during their morning meeting," Justin revealed.

"Well congratulations," Paul said, reaching over to hug Justin. "I'm really happy for you and Brian. You guys have been in love with each other for so long. I'm just glad that you finally sealed the deal."

"Me too," Justin whispered.

"Congratulations Jus," Jason said, also hugging his friend.

"Don't worry, we'll your secret while we're here, but as soon as we get back to Cincinnati we have to tell Mom, Katie, Lee, Gabrielle, and let's not forget Glenn. I'm sure Glenn will be the happiest of all. For some reason he hasn't stopped talking about you and Brian all week," Paul said with a laugh.

"I thought that your office would simply return to normal after we left," Justin suggested. "Although you have to admit, everybody really pitched in to make the party a success."

"They never had so much fun," Jason admitted with a laugh, "Are you kidding? All week long, everyone was still passing around the pictures from the party every chance they got."

"Before we left Cincinnati, I sent a few emails back to everyone here, and I included a few of the digital images that we had. Everybody seemed to really love seeing the pictures of Nicky's party as he turned four," Justin explained.

"Wait until you see the professional shots...especially the ones of you and the kids. They are great. You probably don't remember, but they captured shots of you drawing with the kids during the party. They are wonderful," Jason added joyfully.

"I love the ones where Gus and Nicky climbed on your laps to rest from all the excitement," Paul added with a laugh. "Those are precious. Nicky is so crazy about you and Brian, you can just see it in the pictures."

"By the way, did you figure out the Mickey Mouse Pancakes thing?" Justin asked hesitantly.

"I was going to work on that after you left, but Nicky informed me that it wasn't necessary. He said that we were coming to see you this weekend, and he knew that Gus would make sure that you made Mickey Mouse Pancakes. So I guess I should warn you about your godson's expectations," Jason said cautiously.

"You realize, of course, that we have no idea what Gus and Nicky talk about when we're not around?" Justin pointed out, "This just proves my point," he added with a laugh. "By the way, Paul, did you, by any chance, remember to pack one of your designer shirts for Nicky to wear when he paints?"

Paul immediately started to complain. "Jason made sure, that was the first thing in the suitcase. Although for the life of me, I don't understand why it's necessary. Just because Brian is willing to sacrifice his designer shirts for Gus' creativity is no reason the rest of us have to follow suit," he said in mock protest.

Justin and Jason couldn't help laughing at Paul's mock outrage.

"This is great. Nicky will have a chance to be messy. His creativity will have a chance to be released. I think his creativity has been stifled long enough. I've been really worried about him. You two are so compulsively neat...it's not good for a little kid," Justin reminded them. "You two should talk to my mother while you're here. You'll see that she agrees with me."

Paul and Jason just shook their heads.

At that moment, the car approached the driveway at Bri-tin, and Paul and Jason got really quiet as they got their first glimpse of the house. Justin couldn't help smiling at their reaction.

"Well, here we are," Justin said as the car pulled into the driveway.

When the limo came to a complete stop, the ever-present Thomas came out to meet them, this time followed by Teres.

"Well, there you are, Justin. Teres and I have been waiting for you." Thomas said in greeting. "Now where's Gus?"

"Gus's plane should be arriving soon. He'll be coming a little later with Brian," Justin explained.

"Oh..." Thomas said.

"Thomas, these are our friends; this is Paul and Jason. They will be staying with us all weekend. Paul...Jason, this is Thomas and Teres. They take really good care of us and the house," Justin revealed.

There were greetings and handshakes all around.

"Teres, I've heard a lot about you," Jason added, "You and Justin are always plotting in the kitchen. I'm sure preparing meals for Brian is a real challenge."

Teres couldn't help from smiling about the fact that Justin actually talked about her with his friends.

"I fixed some snacks for you to munch on while you're waiting. I thought you might be hungry," Teres suggested, "But I'll let you get settled first, then you can join me in the kitchen."

"That sounds great, I think we'll take a moment to relax, and then we'll be right there, Teres," Justin said thoughtfully.

"Why don't you all go inside? I'll retrieve your luggage, and put everything in your rooms," Thomas insisted.

"Perfect, thanks," Justin said with smile.

Justin, Paul and Jason left Thomas to deal with the luggage.

At that moment the exterior lights came on, and Paul and Jason were able to get their first breathtaking view of the magnificence of Bri-tin.

"Oh my god" and "Wow" was all that Paul and Jason could utter. They were definitely overwhelmed.

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So much had happened so quickly, that now Paul and Jason needed a moment to catch their breath, so they all stopped in the living room, and Justin flipped on the fireplace. Everyone made themselves comfortable, and the three friends started to relax.

"I love the house," Paul said, finally finding his voice. "At least what I've seen of it so far, " he teased.

"I can sure see why you and Brian can relax here," Jason added.

"Well, I'm going to go and see if I can rustle up those snacks from Teres," Justin began, "The way you two are behaving, I know that you'll need food before you'll be ready to take a tour of the house," he teased.

"How did you know that?" Paul teased.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Jus, he's just teasing you," Jason replied. "We love your house. Now, I'm going to follow you to the kitchen. Hopefully, you'll show me your studio on the way?"

"I'm going to just sit here and enjoy the fireplace. I'll just wait for you two to return. I know how you two are whenever art is involved, " Paul mumbled, making himself more comfortable in one of the over sized chairs.

Justin followed by Jason, headed toward Justin's studio.

On the way to the studio, they passed by Brian's study, and Jason took a quick peek. His eyes immediately fell on the painting hanging on the wall.

"I saw that painting on your website, and I loved it. The website said that Brian owned it. I must say that it's more beautiful when you see the real thing. What's it called?" Jason asked.

"Talisman Of Time," Justin said simply.

"It's different than your usual stuff, but I like it," Jason mumbled.

Thomas stopped them in the hallway as he passed by, "Justin, some packages arrived for you this morning. I noticed, you sent them to yourself, so I put them in your studio."

"Thanks, Thomas," Justin said. Then he turned to Jason and said, " I had a few paintings in my studio in New York that I wanted to move here. By the way, Thomas, do you have a set of tools handy? They actually crated the paintings before they were shipped. I can't remember what we did with my tool-set. They're probably still under the seat of the SUV riding around Pittsburgh with Brian."

"No problem, I'll bring you some tools. I'll even come back later and help you open those crates if you want. Just let me know."

"That would be great, thanks, I really hated to ask," Justin stated.

"I know you do," Thomas teased with a smile. "I'll be right back."

Justin and Jason continued the rest of the way to the studio. Jason looked at the way the studio was equipped, and he couldn't help teasing Justin, "Is there anything you don't have in here?"

Justin couldn't help laughing, "Not really. Brian furnished and equipped my studio as a surprise for me while I was still in New York. All those things that I used to dream about, he got them for me. That's why this room is so special."

"And you allow Gus in here while you're painting?" Jason asked incredulously.

"Yes, Gus dresses in one of Brian's shirts, and he likes to finger paint and draw over in the corner there. Sometimes he just curls up on the floor to read one of his books. Gus doesn't think I should be alone when I paint," Justin said with a laugh.

"Most artists can't work with anyone around. How do you do it?"

"I guess it's a carryover from my time at PIFA. I usually like to have my workspace to myself, but I'm so used to painting while I was babysitting Gus that I just got used to it. Lindsay doesn't understand it either," Justin laughed.

"You know, Brian had this idea that if Paul and I brought Nicky for a visit that Gus would leave you alone so you could get some painting done," Jason recounted Brian's grand plan. "Did he tell you?"

"Yes, he told me," Justin said with a laugh. "It was really thoughtful of him. He was trying to be a good partner."

"But Jus, neither Nicky nor Gus are usually willing to let you out of their sight. What are you going to do?" Jason had to ask with some concern.

"I'd rather have Gus and Nicky covered with paint in my studio than see them restrained because I needed to be sequestered to paint. I'm going back to New York on Monday, so I can finish the painting to submit to Milan. I'll get some painting done then. So you really shouldn't worry about it too much," Justin said, gently touching Jason's arm. "And I'm sure that Nicky and Gus will get in plenty of playtime this weekend."

At that moment, Justin's cell phone rang.

Justin answered and found out that Brian was taking the kids to get a snack before they came home.

Justin relayed the information to Jason. Then he said, "Let's go see Teres and get those snacks that Teres made for us, so we can enjoy them in front of the fire. It will be awhile before Brian gets here. I'll finish dealing with all this stuff later."

Justin closed the door to his studio, and he and Jason headed toward the kitchen to retrieve the snacks and drinks that Teres had prepared.

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"Jus, we're really glad to be here. Nicky has talked about nothing else all week. Between the party and this trip, he's going to remember turning four years old for a very long time," Jason teased.

"Jason and I don't know how to thank you for coming early and for all the planning and the decorations and everything that you created for the party. You saved Nicky from just a quiet family celebration for his fourth birthday," Paul said quietly.

"Look, you have to know that Brian and I are crazy about Nicky. So we were glad to be a part of helping you plan his party," Justin reminded them.

"But Jus, Paul and I took advantage of you, and we're so sorry," Jason explained. "We knew that you had an impossible painting schedule leading up to the exhibits. You told us that over an over, but we imposed upon our friendship and begged you to come early anyway because we really needed you. We just couldn't do anything about the party until you got here."

"I knew something was going on, but you never said anything. I didn't want to bring it up while I was there last week, but what was going on with you two? You guys run an ad agency. Surely you could have put a simple birthday party together for a four-year-old. What happened?" Justin demanded to know.

"Brian asked us the same questions last week. In fact he read us the riot act about our behavior. He really made us see what assholes we were being. He knew something was off kilter because Jason was more annoying in his pleading to you. My calls to him were more frequent, making sure you were actually coming. Once he saw the way things were going, he made us face some hard truths about ourselves," Paul admitted sadly. "He even threatened to take Nicky back home with him if we didn't get ourselves together."

"Brian did that?" Justin asked with some surprise.

"Look Justin, you know this time is always a little difficult for Paul and me. But we were getting to be ok about Alex," Jason tried to explain.

"I know that things get a little weird for you around the time of Nicky's birthday? I understand about that, I even factored that in, but that doesn't explain the way things were. So what happened?" Justin continued to question.

"This year on top of everything else, Nicky started with the mantra that he wanted a little brother or sister. And he wanted this sibling delivered by his birthday," Jason explained.

Justin burst out laughing.

"I don't know why you think that's funny," Jason began to protest.

"Jason, every little kid says that at some point, especially when he's an only child. Then when they get the requested brother or sister, they began the childhood quest of how to send said brother or sister back where they came from. Nicky just needs to talk to Gus."

"Gus wanted to send Jenny back?" Jason asked in horror, being an only child he was finding this was a totally new perspective.

"Yes he did. I did too. Look, I'm the oldest. I love my sister. But a younger brother or sister is a constant source of aggravation. Isn't that right, Paul? I'm sure that Gus will fill Nicky in on these facts of life. As much as Gus loves Jenny, I'm sure she drives him crazy too."

"Poor Gus, no wonder he likes to hang out here with you and Brian," Jason teased.

"Yeah, here he gets some peace and quiet," Justin teased.

"Not to mention that here he's probably the center of attention," Jason added.

"I'm not sure about that. When Gus is here, we just go about our normal routine, but we just include him in everything that's going on," Justin pointed out. "We don't really do that much special for him."

"Anyway, when Nicky wanted a sibling it brought the whole Alex thing up again."

"I can understand that," Justin said.

"Then Paul and I were at odds over the issue of another kid, and we couldn't really discuss it. We couldn't talk about it with the family."

"Nicky wanted the sibling to be delivered for his birthday, so Paul and I had to try to explain to a three year old where babies come from. Believe me, that's not an easy conversation at any age. It's even harder when you're a gay couple. And when you're a gay couple, your parents can't really help with this."

Once again, Justin burst out laughing.

"Justin, I'm glad that you find our struggles so amusing," Paul said.

"It's not that. If you had said something to us on the phone, Brian and I could have probably helped. You didn't have to go through this alone...that's what friends are for."

"We didn't think about that," Paul said.

"So you explained where babies come from to Nicky. Is everything ok now?" Justin asked.

"Yeah, except. We're still trying to discuss the issue of another child," Jason said.

"And..." Justin asked.

"We're still at an impasse," Jason pointed out.

"Wow. That's a lot to deal with," Justin admitted, with a touch of understanding.

"It's just been a difficult time. Jason is an only child, but I grew up in a large family. We each had different growing up experiences. You remember it took us a long time to decide to have kids in the first place. We're also not sure if Gabrielle is up to going through another pregnancy, especially since she had such a difficult time before. We can't talk about this with the family until we reach some kind of decision between ourselves, because you know they will be all over us about this," Paul explained. "Mom and Katie would love to have another grandchild to spoil."

"You know that you could get another surrogate," Justin suggested.

"We have talked about it," Paul answered.

"Or you could even adopt. Ohio has some of the most liberal adoption laws with respect to gays in the country...or at least that is what I read," Justin added.

"Compared to some places in the country that's true," Jason pointed out. "And with the last election the voters also passed legislation to ban discrimination of gays, too. So I will admit that Cincinnati is becoming a nicer place to live."

"But the issue isn't whether Nicky wants a sibling...the question is whether you two want another child. And that's a question only you two can answer," Justin reminded them.

"We're working on it. But whatever we decide about that, we want you to know how much we appreciated the way you stepped in and took over everything. You did all the things we should have done, and we just want you to know how much we appreciate you," Jason said.

"I'm glad I was able to help. And now that you're here, you can talk to Lindsay and Melanie this weekend, it may help you with your decision," Justin suggested.

"That's a good idea," Jason said pensively.

The three friends continued to chat easily while they munched on their snacks.

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"So now that we've had our sustenance, why don't you take us on a tour of the house? We'll probably need the remainder of the night to see everything," Paul teased.

"Yes, do you think that Brian will be able to find us when he brings Gus and Nicky back here?" Jason joined Paul in his teasing.

"Are you two finished? Just so you know when we're in the house, Brian makes me carry my cell phone so we can talk to each other..." Justin explained.

"Not to mention probably locate each other, too. They haven't perfected GPS technology to work in houses just yet," Paul added.

"So now that you've finished your comedy routine, let me show you the house," Justin said, finally standing up. Paul and Jason also stood up and began to follow Justin.

Justin showed Jason and Paul the lower level of the house. He pointed out the media room, his studio, and Brian's study. Justin also directed Jason and Paul to the hot tub and showed them the pool. Needless to say, they were suitably impressed.

Paul and Jason teased Justin that they were definitely considering a trip to the hot tub before their visit was over. Justin took care to show them the special features of the hot tub area and the location of towels and robes as well as condoms and lube.

As they were proceeding upstairs, Justin's cell phone rang again. This time it was Brian again...or rather Gus, letting him know that they were on their way home.

Justin continued to show his guests the upstairs as he updated them on Brian and the kids.

Justin quickly passed Gus' room, suggesting that Paul and Jason should ask Gus to give them a personal tour of his bedroom. Paul and Jason smiled.

Paul and Jason did get to see the second bedroom that Justin had set up for Gus and Nicky for this weekend. They couldn't get over how special they thought it was that Justin had gone to so much trouble for them.

Justin directed Paul and Jason to the guest room he had selected for them. Paul couldn't resist testing out the bed. "Justin this is so comfortable."

"My pleasure," Justin said.

"Well Paul, since you're so comfortable, why don't you two relax a bit until Brian gets here with the kids? If you need me, call me on my cell phone; I'll be down in my studio. I have a few paintings I need to unpack," Justin suggested, as he turned to leave.

Paul took one look at Jason and smiled. "Why don't you go ahead down to the studio with Justin? I can tell by the look on your face that's where you want to be. I'll unpack our things, and then I'll stretch out for a few minutes and relax until Brian gets here."

"He'll probably be here in about a half-hour," Justin indicated.

"No problem," Paul said, making himself more comfortable on the bed.

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A few moments later, Thomas joined Justin and Jason in the studio. "Here we go Justin," Thomas said. "I think I have the tools we need...now how do we open these monstrosities?"

Justin couldn't help but laugh at Thomas' comment. He had been packing and unpacking paintings for so long that he had forgotten how strange it might be for someone else when it was their first time.

Jason moved over to the futon so that he was out of the way, while Justin and Thomas opened the crates. Justin carefully removed the paintings and leaned some of them against the studio wall. Jason became silently entranced, as the paintings were unpacked.

Once all the crates were unpacked, Thomas removed the packaging materials from the studio. "I'll store the packing material in the barn, in case you need it, Justin," he remarked, as he was leaving.

"Thanks Thomas," Justin called out, before returning his attention back to the paintings.

"Oh Justin, these are wonderful. Are these for your show?" Jason asked.

"No...no, these were just random paintings. Sometimes I just get in the mood to paint. Usually when I exhibit, I like the paintings connected by some theme. I'm still a fairly new artist, so I don't have a lot of paintings lying around. And I have been fortunate that usually when I exhibit, usually my paintings tend to sell out. But sometimes I do show paintings are just too personal to sell, and after the Santa Barbara show, I now have this reputation for showing artwork, and then deciding not to sell it. That very bad habit has gotten me a significant amount of media attention," Justin said with a smile.

"That and the fact that you're a wonderful artist," Jason added.

"Maybe...that too," Justin agreed with a smile.

Jason's eyes fell on the painting of Brian among the rumpled sheets. He simply clutched his chest and simply said with a sigh, "Magnificent..."

"I sketched it one morning when Brian was sleeping. Brian seemed to like the drawing when he saw it. You know when had I my first show at the GLC...I think I was 17...I did a similar sketch of Brian. Someone paid $100 for that sketch; of course, the money went to charity. But I remember what it felt like that someone liked my work enough to buy it. It was my first real sale. My skills were so limited then. I'm a much better artist now...I don't know who bought the original sketch, but I wanted Brian to have this one," Justin revealed.

"He's going to love it. The painting is going to be like a wedding present," Jason said, always thinking romantically.

"Oh please, don't use the word wedding when you're around Brian," Justin practically pleaded. "He still sees weddings as a meaningless ritual. Legalizing our domestic partnership was so much better. Now we're legally bound to each other as equal partners forever. As for the wedding thing...we were committed to each other before we signed those papers, and we're still committed to each other...rings and ceremonies are unnecessary."

"He's still going to love it." Jason argued.

"I hope so," Justin added.

Jason finally pushed himself off of his comfortable spot on the futon. "Thanks for letting me take a peek at some of the paintings. I'll leave you to your work. I'm going upstairs and see if Paul needs any help with the unpacking," Jason finally said as he turned to leave.

"Sure and I'll call you when Brian gets here," Justin agreed.

Justin decided that he should also go and let Teres know that Brian and the kids were on their way home, so that she could handle dinner. Justin had to admit to himself that it was going to be nice to have another home cooked meal after all the days of take out. Teres would also prepare something that Brian would probably eat without too much complaining.

Chapter 50 – Storm Clouds (Sidebar)

Early Evening...(Day 47)

Ben walked his bike into Red Cape Comics. "Michael," Ben called out as he entered the comic book store.

"Ben, I'm surprised to see you," Michael said, looking up to greet his partner.

"I was on my way home, but I wanted to drop by to see if you'd heard anything from Mel and Linds?"

"Melanie called not too long ago. Everyone was at the airport," Michael said joyously. "With the traffic, they should be at Mom's in about an hour."

"I know they're flying this time, but how are they getting to Debbie's from the airport," Ben asked as he put his bike in the office.

"Brian arranged for a limo for them," Michael explained.

"Well that was nice of him. I'm sure it makes things easier, especially since Melanie and Lindsay are traveling with two small kids and all their luggage," Ben acknowledged.

"Maybe..." Michael said, with a complaining undertone to his voice.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ben asked.

"I just think that Brian should have picked them up personally from the airport. Especially since one of the two kids they're traveling with happens to be his. Brian has to realize that he has responsibilities. He can't just focus all his energies on his business," Michael complained. "Anyway, where the hell is Brian?"

"Don't you think that's a bit harsh? Brian appears to have managed to juggle his business and still see Gus. After all, he took Gus to Cincinnati with him. C'mon Michael, cut Brian some slack here. Brian works really hard. He made arrangements to make things easy for Melanie and Lindsay, what more do you expect of him?"

"I expect him to remember that he has responsibilities. He can't just do what he wants to do. I'm his best friend, and he neglects me the same way that he neglects Gus. I want things to be the way they used to be when Lindsay and Melanie still lived here, and me and Brian and the guys used to occasionally hang out together. Now everyone is so busy we hardly even see each other. I miss things being the way they used to be," Michael explained.

"Once upon a time, your whole world consisted of Brian, Ted, Emmett, and Babylon. You would work during the day and hang out during the nights at Babylon. But you grew up, and so did your friends. Now they each have lives of their own with new priorities...and so do you," Ben said calmly. "I thought you had moved beyond all this a long time ago," he added quietly.

"I have. I have you and Hunter and JR now. I really do like the life we have," Michael conceded.

"Then, what's this rant all about? Besides, you see Ted, Emmett, and even Brian at Sunday dinners. I don't see the problem," Ben quietly pointed out, now making himself comfortable on one of the stools next to Michael.

"My daughter lives in Toronto, and I live in Pittsburgh. That's the problem."

"Michael, when you agreed to be JR's father, you knew that Melanie and Lindsay were going to be the parents. You knew that JR wasn't going to live with you. We have seen JR every month for the last year since she moved away. Mel and Linds have made sure that you stayed involved in JR's life. From what I can tell JR is growing up healthy and happy. What more do you want?"

"I want to be more involved in my daughter's life. I grew up without a father, I don't want that fate to befall my daughter."

"How can you think that she's growing up without a father? You see her constantly."

"I'm not Brian. I'm not content to be a drop-in dad. I want to be more. I want to interact with my daughter on a daily basis. I can't do that with the present arrangement."

"If you felt that way, why did you so readily give your blessing to Mel and Linds to move to Toronto?"

"I wanted my daughter to be safe. Mel and Linds convinced me a year ago that things weren't safe here in Pittsburgh. I couldn't argue with them, considering the fact that I was almost killed here. Brian tried to tell all of us that we were overreacting, but we wouldn't listen. Carl said the same thing, and we all told him that he didn't understand. But now I'm not so sure that I didn't make a mistake, giving them my blessing to take JR away."

"Michael, surely you see that this isn't a decision that can be easily reversed?"

"Why not?"

"For starters, it's been a year. Melanie and Lindsay pretty much cut their ties with Pittsburgh...except for the family. They quit their jobs, sold their house, and started to build a new life in a new place. You can't ask them to give up everything that they've spent this year building...no matter how much we might miss them."

"Melanie and Lindsay could move back here and start over. They could find new jobs again HERE. Then life could be like it once was. "

"And what are Melanie and Lindsay supposed to do in the meantime? How will they live? Where will they live? They have two small children to support and raise, how will they do that if they disrupt their lives again?"

"You know that Mel and Linds could stay with us or with Mom until they found jobs and were back on their feet. And as I said, one of those small children that Mel and Linds have to support is Gus. So Brian would help out. We could even help out too."

"Michael we're just getting by on my salary at the moment. Sure we can cover the added monthly costs to visit JR, but there isn't much extra in our budget. Also, Hunter is getting ready to go to college. We have to think about that too. We're doing all we can. I can't support two households. The money just isn't there."

"If we move to Toronto, we would only have one household to support, and then I could be a part of JR's day to day life," Michael challenged.

"How would we live, Michael?"

"What about teaching in Toronto? You could switch universities."

"Michael, I've explained all this before. I have tenure at Carnegie Mellon. That's job security that I need especially because of my HIV status. To move to a new university would mean a cut in pay for me. You and I ran the numbers, I just don't see how we can do it right now?"

"I could open another comic book store. I'm sure I can help out."

"Remember, you and I went over the numbers with Ted about a second comic book store. In the best of circumstances, it would be years before the second store would pay off. We would also have some other issues being Americans running a Canadian business. It's a nice idea, but the numbers don't work...at least not at this point."

"If only Rage, the movie had been a success. Justin should have handled things better when he was in LA. He may not have needed the money, but we could sure use it. If the movie had been made, we would have enough money for everything we ever dreamed of."

"We're not doing so badly. We have the house. We have Hunter. We see JR every month. My counts are good. I've been able to stay off the cocktail. You're making a success of this store. I would say we're doing okay. "

"We are doing okay," Michael finally confirmed. "But I think while Mel and Linds are here, I'll at least mention to them the possibility moving back to Pittsburgh."

"Michael, if you bring this up to Mel and Linds, they're going to see this as your attempt to interfere with their lives. You remember the custody fight. I think we should keep things on good terms with Mel and Linds."

"If Brian had bought a house in town instead of a mansion so far away, Melanie and Lindsay could stay with him while they find new jobs and everything. But Brian is so far away that even I haven't seen his house. But I'm sure that Brian would help them buy a new house. All Lindsay has to do is ask; after all, Gus is Brian's kid too."

"Brian pays child support for Gus, Michael. Which is more than we do, I might add?"

"Like you said, Brian can afford it, and we can't. I'm sure Brian could be persuaded to pay more. I'm sure if I asked him he would, and then Mel and Linds could bring the kids back here."

"Michael, I'm warning you. Let Melanie and Lindsay have a nice visit with us this weekend, so they will be willing to come back next month. I'll admit that seeing JR once a month isn't perfect, but by complaining you could mess everything up. Take a moment and look at all that you have."

"But..."

"You know Michael, once before I told you not to get involved in something. You didn't listen to me then either."

"When was that?"

"Back when Justin was becoming involved with Ethan."

"I did listen to you, but Brian was my best friend. I didn't want to see him hurt. It was my job to make sure that he always knows the truth."

"Did you also tell him the truth about how unhappy Justin was before that all happened. You and I talked about how sad Justin seemed. Did you mention that to Brian too?"

"No, why would I?"

"Because you were Brian's best friend, and you might have seen something that he was unaware of. You were aware of truths that Brian couldn't grasp. You might have helped both your best friend and your business partner at the same time."

"Justin was an ungrateful little prick. Why should I have helped him? He had Brian doing everything for him, but still he wasn't satisfied."

"Why didn't you just stay out of it?"

"Because I didn't want Brian to get hurt?"

"But don't you see, your interference hurt Brian more than anything Justin could have done. You pushed Brian so hard, that you ended up being punched because of it. Sometimes you just go too far."

Michael stopped for a moment and remembered the one time that Brian actually hit him.

Beginning of flashback.

"Do you believe the nerve of that little twat?" Michael immediately started to gripe. "Showing up here with his new boyfriend. I told him to stay the fuck out of our lives."

"Why did you do that?" Brian innocently asked.

"After what he did?" Michael started to raise his voice.

"He didn't do anything. We were never happily married. He was always free to go...so was I," Brian said calmly with a shrug.

"You're just saying that. He's a selfish little shit," Michael started to rant.

"Be quiet, Michael," Brian tried to interrupt.

"He used you, and he took from you, and he never gave back a thing!" Michael continued to rant, with his voice getting louder.

"I said, be quiet!" Brian insisted more strongly.

"And this is the thanks you get for saving his life! If you ask me it wasn't worth it! You might as well have left him lying there..."

And with those words, Brian had heard enough. He turned slightly and immediately swung his fist and punched out Michael.

End of flashback.

"That was different," Michael finally said softly.

"How is that different, Michael? You wanted things to be different. You thought you had the power to change things. You wouldn't let events take their own course, in their own time. In the end, you created a lot of unnecessary problems and unwanted heartaches. And in the end, a lot of people ended up being hurt...including Brian. You created a lot of upset, and after everything was said and done, Brian and Justin still ended up together."

"Maybe."

"I don't want to see you make the same mistake with Melanie and Lindsay that you made with Brian. Michael, you need to come to terms with how things are and make the best of a really good situation," Ben suggested patiently.

"Look, I know that you don't feel the way I do about this. After all, JR isn't your daughter."

"That's unfair, Michael, you know how much I love JR."

"It's just not the same!" Michael said, grumbling his displeasure.

There was a pause in the conversation, so Michael took his opportunity to change the subject. "We should get ready to go over to Mom's. Everyone should be arriving soon."

"Sure," Ben finally said, realizing that nothing had been resolved. He continued to hope that Michael would think about things, but somehow Ben was beginning to doubt that would happen.

Ben let out a deep sigh, for he knew that storm clouds were now forming on the horizon.

Ben walked into Michael's office to pick up his bike. While he was there, he spent a moment looking at the painting that Justin had sent to Michael a little over a month ago. "Superheroes," Ben said softly to himself, "Sometimes they never learn."

Ben took one more moment to take in the painting, and then he quietly turned and walked his bike back into the store where Michael was waiting. "I think it's time for us to go," Ben finally said.

Michael turned out the lights and locked the door.

Chapter 51 – Dinnertime at Debbie's (Sidebar)

Early Friday Evening...(Day 47)

After the limo arrived at Debbie's, Carl and Em helped bring in the luggage from the limo while Lindsay and Melanie immediately greeted Debbie with hugs and kisses.

Jenny wasn't too sure she was interested in a hug at this point, so she immediately hid behind Melanie for protection.

"She's just tired, Deb, you have to give her a few minutes," Lindsay explained.

"Sure," Debbie agreed sadly.

Melanie and Lindsay made themselves comfortable in the living room to relax.

"So how was your flight?" Debbie casually asked.

"It was a lot easier than driving," Melanie quickly admitted. "The limo Brian arranged helped too. Although I must admit that even with the limo, it felt good to find Brian waiting for us at the airport when we landed."

"Oh, you saw Brian?" Debbie asked. "Was Justin with him?"

"No, Justin had already left earlier to take Paul and Jason back to their house. Brian met us alone...or rather he met us with Nicky."

Emmett and Carl came back in the room and joined everyone.

"You should have seen Gus and Nicky when they first saw each other. They were so cute. And I think Jenny has a new love interest," Lindsay recounted with her usual romantic enthusiasm, "In fact, she seems to be quite taken with Nicky."

Emmett picked up Jenny, who broke into a smile at seeing Em. "Well Miss Jenny, I see that you have excellent taste at such a young age. Was it the curls or the freckles that attracted you?"

Jenny didn't answer, but she laughed and buried her head into Emmett's shoulder.

"I have to admit, Nicky is a cutie. He's going to grow up and break a lot of hearts," Lindsay admitted.

"So Brian was there. How did he seem to you?" Debbie innocently asked, still hoping to find out what Lindsay and Melanie knew.

"We didn't spend a lot of time with him. He and Gus were glad to see each other, of course. And then Gus asked the inevitable question about where's Justin, so they were off," Melanie explained.

"So Brian left the airport alone with both Nicky and Gus?" Debbie asked, trying to form a mental image of this unlikely group. "Do you think the kids will be ok?"

"Brian is pretty used to handling Gus. He's spent lots of time with him lately. And evidently he's spent lots of time with Nicky too. Both kids seemed to adore being with him," Melanie added.

"I guess he's now on his way out to the house," Lindsay said, "Do you think that with Paul and Jason being in town, we might actually get invited out to the house for a visit?" Lindsay asked aloud, as she was really hoping for this invitation.

Emmett could see the way this conversation was going and he wanted to do his part to help his friends. "I don't know...Brian and Justin have been really busy. They've been out of town all week. They just got back from New York themselves," Emmett patiently explained.

"It's wonderful that Justin's career is doing so well. I knew it was a good idea for him to take his art to the next level in New York," Lindsay commented, being extremely proud of herself, "He's going to be really successful if he doesn't lose focus."

Emmett picked up on this new piece of information. So Lindsay was responsible for Justin going off to New York. He should have known that this wasn't a decision that Brian and Justin would arrive at without undue outside pressure. Emmett started to worry that Lindsay was about to stir up more trouble. "What do you mean by lose focus?" he asked hesitantly.

"You know, he shouldn't let Brian or anything else distract him from his art," Lindsay confidently explained.

Emmett, Carl, and Debbie just looked at each other, exchanging silent messages.

Emmett wasn't ready to let things drop. "Since when has Brian been a distraction? He's always been most supportive of Justin's art," he reminded her.

"I mean that Brian keeps luring Justin out to the mansion, when he should be locked away in his New York studio painting. Or at least in New York making those all-important contacts that will further his career," Lindsay explained.

"Gee Lindsay, how on earth has Justin managed this last year without your guidance and protection?" Emmett said sarcastically. "From where I sit, Justin seems to be doing just fine with his career."

Lindsay heard the subtle reprimand imbedded in what Emmett had said. She looked over at Melanie and read the nonverbal warning in her expression too, so Lindsay immediately let the subject drop.

Debbie thought that since some time had passed, it was now time to make another try to get Jenny to come to her. So Debbie simply smiled and held her arms opened. Emmett lowered Jenny back down to the floor. This time Jenny was willing to run into Debbie's waiting arms.

"That's better," Debbie said with a laugh as she hugged and tickled her granddaughter, before placing her on her lap. "Why don't you girls go freshen up and get settled? Dinner is almost ready. I'm sure you must be starved after your long flight," Debbie said cheerfully.

"Thanks Deb," Melanie said, picking up Jenny. Then Jenny, Melanie, and Lindsay headed upstairs.

When they were gone, Debbie grabbed both Carl and Emmett by the fronts of their shirts and pulled them close to her, "I expect you both to remember to keep your fucking mouths shut about what we know, do I make myself clear?"

In fear for their lives at that moment, Emmett and Carl quickly agreed by nodding yes.

"Good," Debbie said with a smile as she finally released them.

Ben and Michael arrived at Debbie's, just as she was releasing Carl and Emmett.

"What's going on?" Michael asked, making his way over to kiss his mother.

"Nothing you little shit, why would you think something's going on?" Debbie asked with a hint of guilt in her voice.

"Judging by the strange things in the living room, it looks like Melanie and Lindsay are already here," Ben commented with a laugh. He leaned down and kissed Debbie too, "How are you?" he asked.

"Just fine, Ben. Yes, they just arrived a few minutes ago. They're upstairs freshening up. You two are just in time, are you staying for dinner?" Debbie asked.

"Sure," Michael quickly agreed. "Hunter is tied up studying...or so he says...so it looks like it's just me and Ben, and you know how we love your cooking."

"Why don't you and Ben wash your hands, then you can help me set the table," Debbie instructed.

"Sure Mom, no problem," Michael willingly agreed, as he and Ben approached the sink.

"I heard that Paul and Jason are in town too. I guess that means we should have a rather large crowd here for Sunday dinner," Debbie said joyfully. "That reminds me, I need to call Brian and Justin and remind them to bring Paul, Jason, and Nicky to Sunday dinner. It's been ages since we've seen them. I've always liked Paul, even back when he and Brian were in school together. Now he and Jason seem like a really nice couple. And of course, I'm just dying to see Nicky. "

"You need to do that, Honey," Carl agreed. "You should probably give them a call after dinner."

"Has anyone talked to Brian?" Michael asked. "I haven't been able to reach him."

"He and Sunshine were at the Diner earlier this afternoon. It seems Sunshine had a craving for one of my lemon squares, so they walked down from Brian's office. They looked really happy," Debbie relayed with a smile.

"I just wonder why Brian hasn't returned any of my calls," Michael started to complain.

"You know how Brian is, he probably figured he'd see you over the weekend. He and Justin just got back into town, and with houseguests and all...he's probably kind of busy," Emmett pointed out. "But I'm sure you'll see him soon."

"Yes, Paul and Jason and Nicky are all visiting this weekend in addition to Gus," Debbie added, "Brian and Justin probably have their hands full."

"They were all just together in Cincinnati last weekend," Michael said thoughtfully, "Why on earth are they visiting so soon. You would think they would get tired of each other," he continued to consider aloud.

"I think Paul and Jason are here so that Nicky can have a play date with Gus," Emmett added, thinking he should try to clear things up before Michael had a drama queen moment. "Although there are rumors afloat that Miss Jenny might already have a new love interest," Emmett teased, "So I wouldn't be surprised if they were around a lot more from now on."

"What are you talking about?" Michael asked, not liking the sound of Brian having more frequent houseguests. After all, Brian was his best friend and Michael was not sure he wanted to share Brian's time any more than he already had to.

"I heard that once Miss Jenny took one look at Nicky...it was like in the movies," Em continued.

"I think she's a little young for Michael to be worried," Ben teased. "Don't you?"

"I don't know," Lindsay said re-entering the room with Jenny in her arms. "Nicky is quite a cutie. How are you Michael...Ben?" Lindsay said, giving them each a kiss.

"First crush already?" Michael said, "How are you my little Honeybunch?" he asked, taking a smiling Jenny from Lindsay's arms.

At this point, Debbie called everyone into dinner, and they settled in at the table, with Michael placing Jenny's high chair between himself and Melanie...and with Ben sitting on the other side of him.

"Where's Gus?" Michael finally asked, once they were all settled.

"He's with Brian of course?" Lindsay quipped.

"I know that Linds! What I'm asking, is how did Gus get to Brian? Since Brian works all the time, did you drop Gus off at Brian's office on your way here?" Michael asked sarcastically.

"No, Brian and Nicky were waiting for us at the airport. That's how Jenny had her love-at-first-sight moment with Nicky," Lindsay said wistfully, reflecting again on the romantic moment.

"Lindsay, please!" Melanie interrupted. "Lindsay is such a romantic! I think that Jenny just watched Gus hug Nicky...so she just copied him. Don't worry Michael, Emmett doesn't have to start planning our daughter's wedding yet," she said with a laugh.

"Brian was at the airport?" Michael asked with complete surprise, "But I thought Brian made arrangements for a limo for you guys."

"He did, and the limo and driver sure made things easier for us, but Brian was there too," Melanie added as a way explanation. "I must admit seeing him there to meet us was a welcome sight."

"See, you were worried that Brian was shirking his responsibilities," Ben said, leaning over to kiss Michael gently on the cheek. "As usual, you had no reason for concern."

"I'm surprised that he can find the time," Michael began to complain, "After all, he seems to be too busy to call me, his best friend." Everyone at the table rolled their eyes at this point, for they had all heard this tirade many times. "Looks like both Gus and I are both being neglected," he added with a pout.

"Gus isn't being neglected," Melanie said nonchalantly between bites of food.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Michael asked incredulously. "Brian is only a drop-in dad. Of course, Gus is being neglected. Not like my little Honeybunch," he emphasized with an air of superiority, while tickling Jenny under her chin.

"Actually Gus has spent a lot of time with Brian and Justin lately," Melanie confirmed.

"How is that possible?" Michael challenged.

"Let's see," Lindsay began to ponder aloud. "He came to Toronto a couple of times and played with Gus and Jenny...Gus went to Cincinnati with him and Justin...now he's here with them at the house.

"Brian also talks to Gus weekly. So I wouldn't say that Gus is neglected at all," Melanie added with a laugh. "Not to mention that Gus has two full time mommies."

"Good for Brian!" Debbie interrupted, wanting to bring this line of conversation to an end.

Michael still wasn't content, but Jenny demanded his help with a spoonful of food. So he paid attention to his daughter and quickly forgot about everything else.

"Last time you were here, you had business to take care of...do you have any special plans for this trip?" Debbie asked.

"Just a few things that we wanted to do tomorrow morning," Melanie said, "If I can convince Michael to pick up Jenny after breakfast tomorrow?"

"I'd love to spend time with my Honeybunch," Michael said, again tickling his nearby daughter under her chin.

Ben allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief. "Well tomorrow is Saturday and Justin's in town. I guess I should whip up a batch of special muffins..."

"Oh no! With Justin and Brian having house guests, you don't really expect them to show up for brunch," Michael protested. "Even if Justin is addicted to your muffins...an addiction, I don't understand, by the way."

"I don't know. Justin and I still have complex marketing strategies to discuss," Ben mentioned with a serious tone to his voice.

Everyone looked over at him when he made that remark. But only Melanie could find her voice.

"Don't you mean you have to talk with Brian about these things?" Melanie asked, sort of bewildered by Ben's comment. "Isn't he the resident expert on these things?"

"Not really. Brian seems to have some reservations about our marketing idea. But Justin and I aren't deterred. Brian isn't sure about sales since Justin drowns my innocent muffins in butter. Now, Brian may have problems with the idea...but I did notice how many morsels of buttered-muffins he removed from Justin's plate," Ben added with a laugh.

"Are we talking about the same muffins you gave us to sample the last time we were here?" Lindsay asked with a smile.

Everyone started to shake their heads.

"Don't say it, Linds, it'll hurt Ben's feelings," Michael said quickly. "Justin and Hunter seem to be the only ones who like the muffins. Go figure!"

"And let's not forget Brian." Ben added with a laugh. "We all know how picky Brian is...let's remember that he ate my muffins too."

"Brian probably ate your muffins because they were on Justin's plate," Lindsay teased. "Gus is the that way too. Both of them have the same bad habit. They'll refuse to eat something...but if that item happens to be on Justin's plate...they just keep stealing morsels."

Everyone suddenly had the image of Brian, devouring these very fattening muffins drowned in butter, and they couldn't resist laughing.

"So I see that this is a habit that father and son share alike," Carl said with a laugh. "Who would have ever thought that bad habits like this would be genetic?"

"I guess it goes to show, the effect of parental influence," Ben suggested with a laugh.

"No, it can't be that," Melanie added with a laugh. "Gus spends most of his time with Lindsay and me, and we both have perfect table manners. Gus doesn't really spend THAT much time with Brian and Justin. You know I think you're right...I think this habit must be genetic," Melanie added with an amount of certainty in her voice. "Just like their strong attraction to Justin. You have to admit, both Brian and Gus are really crazy about Justin."

"That's for sure," Emmett agreed. "For both of them...it was love at first sight."

"So you've been watching those Lana Turner movies again, huh Em?" Melanie teased. No one could resist a gentle laugh.

"I wouldn't say love at first sight exactly," Lindsay added, remembering the past.

"Certainly not!" Michael corrected. "Justin was just a persistent stalker that eventually just wore Brian down. Justin was the perfect example of the Twink that wouldn't leave. Brian hasn't been able to get rid of him in all this time. But Justin still lives in New York, and Brian still lives in Pittsburgh," he added thoughtfully. "So now I don't know."

"Can't you see how much in love they are now?" Emmett said wistfully.

Debbie cleared her throat, and then she said, "Earth to Emmett!"

Emmett realized what he was thinking and simply said, "Sorry..."

Everyone else couldn't help but smile at Emmett's antics.

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Melanie and Lindsay gave Jenny her bath and helped her settle down for the night.

Ben and Michael tucked Jenny in, and Ben read her a bedtime story, and they both kissed her goodnight.

"She's really grown in the month since we've seen her," Michael said sadly. "At this rate she'll be grown up before we know it."

"I wouldn't go jumping to conclusions, Michael," Ben pointed out.

"I guess I'm overdoing it, huh?" Michael seemed to realize what he was doing.

"Maybe just a bit," Ben suggested, "But I do understand. You have a beautiful daughter, Michael. I guess we really do need to work a little harder to contribute to her college fund and to see what we can do to help Lindsay and Melanie to raise her. After all, Jenny is your daughter too."

"But I thought that you said, you couldn't support two households?" Michael said with some irritation.

"I can't support two households, but helping out Melanie and Lindsay support your daughter is what you do when it's your kid." Ben explained, "Just like Brian contributes to help support Gus, we should see what we can contribute too," Ben continued.

"What's the problem? Brian can afford it. Like you said, we can't." Michael pouted.

"She's your daughter, Michael. We have to do more than buy her every toy that you can think of," Ben pointed out. "It's no longer a question of what you're required to do by law. It's a matter of doing what is right. We just have to figure out someway to help."

"I just want my daughter to be happy," Michael challenged.

"She is happy."

"What are you to whispering about?" Debbie asked as she passed by the door.

"Just admiring my beautiful daughter," Michael said.

"She is beautiful, isn't she?" Debbie cooed, "She looks so much like you, especially when she's sleeping."

"Yeah, you're so right," Ben agreed.

"I just wish that she lived closer by," Michael pointed out. "Then I could see her everyday. I wish Mel and Linds would move back to Pittsburgh."

"We all wish that Honey, but we don't get to decide where those close to us live. We have to be a supportive family and support the girls in their decision about Canada. But you have to admit, they have been really good about making sure that we remain a part of Jenny's life," she admitted.

"Still, I want to suggest to them while they're here, that they consider moving back to Pittsburgh. Maybe it's something that they haven't thought about," Michael tried to persuade.

"I'm sure they've thought about it. I'm sure they miss us as much as we miss them. But, for right now, Toronto is the right place for them. You have to accept that," Debbie pointed out.

Michael continued to grumble as they all went back downstairs to the living room.

Debbie reached for the phone and called Brian's cell phone. Her call rolled over into voice mail, so she left a message about everyone being invited to Sunday dinner.

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Later that night after everyone had settled down for the night, Carl and Debbie were curled up in bed watching late night television.

"So do you want to tell me what's bothering you, or are you going to simply fidget all night?" Carl patiently asked.

"I'm not fidgeting. I'm thinking." Debbie said in response.

"What about?" Carl asked even though he already knew the answer.

"I'm really worried about how Michael is going to take the news about Brian and Justin," she began. "You have to admit, legalizing their domestic partnership was a really big step. It's so final. Brian and Justin are REALLY a couple now. I so wish that Vic were here to see this. He would also know just how to handle this with Michael."

"Vic was also so fond of both Brian and Justin," Carl added. "I'm sure he's really happy for them wherever he is. Now why don't you try to get some sleep? I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be quite a day. "Whatever happens, we'll all be here for Michael."

"As if Brian and Justin's legalized domestic partnership weren't enough," Debbie continued, "Michael is going to try to get Lindsay and Melanie to move back here to Pittsburgh. He wants to see his daughter more often. If he brings this up to the girls they are bound to become upset. This is going to cause trouble, I can feel it."

"Like I said, we will be here for Michael and help him deal with whatever happens," Carl assured her again.

"Maybe, you're right," Debbie finally agreed, switching off the television.

They said their goodnights and snuggled together.

Now the house was finally quiet, as Melanie once again tried to fall asleep. She thought to herself, 'Oh Debbie, you forgot this house has paper thin walls. So Michael wants us to move back here. Not in this lifetime...I want more for my daughter than this. And Brian and Justin legalized their domestic partnership. Oh God, this is Lindsay's worst nightmare. Brian literally just gave everything irrevocably to Justin. All hell is going to break out this weekend. I definitely need to get some sleep.'

Melanie finally settled down and snuggled in closer to her soundly sleeping partner.

Chapter 52 – Reunion at Bri-tin

Meanwhile at Bri-tin...(Day 47)

Brian drove into the driveway at Bri-tin.

Brian turned toward the back seat, and much to his surprise, both Gus and Nicky were still awake. Brian helped them both out of the car. Within minutes, Thomas came out of the house to meet him. "Hi Thomas," Brian said

Further greetings were exchanged as Thomas received a hug from Gus and then Nicky.

"Thomas, I see that you've already met Nicky," Brian said with a laugh. "Nicky, say hello to Thomas."

"Hello," Nicky finally said, as he took a step back.

"Hello Nicky," Thomas said, shaking Nicky's hand. Then Thomas turned his attention to Brian. "Teres has prepared dinner for you. I think your guests are in their room upstairs. And I think that Justin's in his studio. Everyone has been relaxing and waiting for you and the little ones to get here."

"Thanks," Brian said, as he reached out to hold Gus and Nicky's hands as they entered the house.

"Your house is really big, Uncle Brian," Nicky casually mention, causing Brian to smile. Nicky couldn't resist constantly looking up.

They headed to the foyer, where Gus and Nicky immediately started calling for Justin.

In fact, Gus and Nicky made enough noise that it echoed off the walls. It became a clarion call, so Paul and Jason instantly knew that Brian had finally arrived. They smiled at each other and started to get ready to leave their room.

Gus and Nicky decided that following Brian was the best strategy to find Justin, so they tagged along as Brian headed for Justin's studio.

Gus and Nicky waited patiently while Brian gently knocked on the door. Justin opened the door and quickly stepped into the hallway, Gus and Nicky made a beeline for Justin. "Jus" "Jus" two little voices said in unison.

"Take it easy you two," Brian cautioned...a caution that fell on deaf ears...as Nicky and Gus wrapped themselves around Justin. Justin greeted both Gus and Nicky, kissing them gently on their foreheads.

"Hey," Brian said quietly, leaning down to give Justin a kiss. "Don't tell me you found time to paint already. I'm so glad that you're cooperating with my plan," he teased.

"I hate to disappoint you, but my shipment of paintings arrived today. Thomas helped me to get everything unpacked. I was just putting things away," Justin explained, shaking his head. "Paul and Jason are upstairs."

"So I heard. I'm going to go upstairs and change," Brian said.

"I'll come with you," Justin added. "I have to show Nicky and Gus to their new room for the weekend."

"What happened to my room?" Gus asked with some concern.

"It's still there," Justin teased. "Come with me...you'll see."

Brian picked up Gus and Justin picked up Nicky in attempt to save time while taking the stairs. Paul and Jason greeted the foursome as they arrive in the upstairs' hallway.

"Hi Brian," Paul began, "It's a good thing that you're here now. I've needed you."

"What happened?" Brian asked.

"Justin and Jason have been talking art. Please don't leave me, I need real conversation." Paul mockingly complained.

"I'm sure you'll be ok now that I'm here," Brian teased. Brian lowered Gus to the floor. "Ok Gus, go check your room and be sure it's still there,"

Gus immediately made a beeline to his room, and turned on the lights. "Still there, Dad," he said with a smile.

"Imagine that?" Brian quipped.

"Would you like to give Nicky and his dads a tour of your room?" Justin suggested.

Gus beamed with pride as he nodded yes. Paul and Jason loved the room. Nicky wasn't that interested in the room; however, his eyes fell immediately on the oversized Teddy Bear on the futon.

Brian watched Nicky and smiled. "The bear was gift from Justin," Brian explained.

Paul and Jason complimented Gus on his bedroom.

"Gus, I didn't want to rearrange your bedroom, but I knew that you and Nicky wanted to be together, so I set up a room for the two of you over here," Justin said as he started to walk toward a lit room across the hall. "What do you think?" he asked hesitantly.

Gus and Nicky ran into the room. Each chose a different bed and then pounced on their bed to test it out.

"Gus, you and Nicky can use both of these two rooms. I wanted to be sure that you had enough room to play," Justin added. "I'm sure the steps are going to be a bit tricky for Nicky, but this way you two can still have room to play up here, if you want."

Gus walked over and wrapped his arms around Justin. "Thanks Jus," he said, giving Justin a big hug.

"Well, why don't you two get washed up for dinner? I'm going to go change," Brian announced as he headed toward the master bedroom.

"Gus you already had sweatpants and sweatshirt here, so I laid out a set for you to change into," Justin suggested. "Maybe Jason can find a similar outfit of clothes for Nicky. If not, we have an extra set of Gus' that he can borrow, right Gus?"

Gus quickly nodded yes.

"No, I have them right here," Jason said, reaching in the drawer for the necessary outfit and placing it on the foot of Nicky's bed. "Paul and I unpacked Nicky's things while we were waiting."

Justin and Paul moved out to the hallway. "Why don't we meet you down in the living room?" Paul suggested as he now joined him.

Paul peeped back into the room to ask, "Nicky, do you need any help?"

"No," Nicky answered, "Gus is helping me."

Paul and Jason looked at each other and shook their heads, trying to dispel the forming images of Nicky and Gus together in an elaborate room, helping each other get dressed.

"It'll be fine," Justin said with a laugh. "Brian and I will check on them as soon as we get changed."

Justin quickly moved to the master bedroom, and once he entered, Brian pulled Justin down on the bed with him. "This feels good," he said, reaching over to pull Justin even closer.

"Now...now. We don't have time for that," Justin teased. "We have guests, and I'm sure dinner must be ready. Teres has been working so hard, it wouldn't be fair."

Brian groaned, but knew Justin was right. He slowly got up and finished changing into his own sweatpants and sweatshirt with his usual bare feet. "That's better," he said, as he looked over and noticed that Justin had now changed into similar outfit. "Let's go check on the kids."

Brian and Justin went to the guest room and helped Nicky and Gus finish dressing. Gus insisted that he and Nicky remove their shoes, so that they could have bare feet too...like Brian's. Justin just shook his head.

They all headed back downstairs.

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"At last," Teres said with a smile. "Dinner is ready. Do you want me to stay?" she asked.

"No Teres, I think we can handle it from here. But don't be surprised if you find a mess when you come back," Justin teased.

"I'm not worried," she said with a laugh. "Somehow I think I'll manage."

"Did you make enough for you and Thomas?" Justin asked. "After all this hard work, I hate to think that you have to go home and cook."

Brian suddenly appeared behind Justin and wrapped his arms around his partner.

"Our dinner is upstairs, Justin. Not to worry. Oh Brian, I made a little dish for you...no carbs," Teres said with a smile. "And a special dish for the kids. I don't think you'll have any trouble telling which is which," she said with a smile.

"Thanks, Teres," Brian said with a grin.

Everyone settled down to enjoy dinner. Brian found his dish of turkey and veggies, while Gus and Nicky had a special macaroni and cheese surprise with veggies and hamburger. Paul, Jason, and Justin had a turkey, rice, and veggies dish. Everyone shared the green salad.

"I must remember to thank Teres for all her hard work," Brian commented, completely thrilled with his dinner, especially since with the all the excitement of the day's events, he found that he was now hungry.

"She did remember to fix something perfect for each of us," Justin added. "It is good to have another home cooked meal. We have been eating a lot of take out lately...especially while we were in New York."

"Dinner is delicious!" Jason added, "Maybe I can take Teres back to Cincinnati with us. She must need a change of scenery, after all this time," he teased.

"Will you leave Teres alone?" Justin insisted with a laugh. "I don't know what we would do without her."

The group chatted easily during dinner.

"There's champagne in the refrigerator and sparkling cider for Gus and Nicky for later," Justin added. "I think I would like to celebrate...just a little with good friends."

"I'm sure that Justin told you our news," Brian said with a big smile.

"And it's the best news!" Paul added.

"We couldn't be happier," Jason agreed.

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After dinner, everyone returned to the living room to relax by the fireplace.

Paul and Jason retrieved the professional photos of Nicky's party, and they all gathered around to look at the pictures. Nicky and Gus reminded everyone of everything that had happened that entire day. Brian and Justin loved the pictures.

A little while later, as everyone was relaxing, Justin announced, "Gus, I have a surprise for you. Wait here."

Gus waited patiently in the living room, while Justin went to his studio and returned carrying a painting. "Gus, I thought you might like to have this for your room," Justin said, standing the painting up against a chair.

Gus jumped and down with excitement.

There was a picture of Brian sitting on a Palomino horse with Gus riding a spotted pony. In the picture they were riding toward each other.

Brian picked up Gus and moved closer, so that father and son could look at their images together.

Looking at the painting, Brian felt as if he could see the muscles of the horses ripple, as they were captured on canvas mid-stride. He then moved his attention to the riders. Both riders held a tight rein on their horses, as if guiding the horses to a stop. And the riders each had smiles on their faces as they greeted each other.

Gus moved now to simply stand by his dad to get an even closer look at his painting. Except for a big smile, Gus didn't say a word. Father and son couldn't resist gently touching the painting. Both Brian and Gus were now smiling. But no one said anything.

"Will someone say something?" Justin demanded.

Now that Brian and Gus had their closer look at the painting, Paul and Jason brought Nicky over for a closer look, too.

"Jus, it's beautiful," Jason said.

"Well Brian, with this picture, you'll be able to silence all those nay sayers, who doubt that you can ride," Paul teased. "Justin, I love the way you captured Gus and Brian. It's a beautiful painting."

Then Brian lifted the painting and placed it on the mantel over the fireplace.

Brian took one more look at the painting, and then he reached out and pulled Justin into a hug. "It's exquisite, Sunshine," Brian remarked. "I think it's some of your best work."

"I love it," Gus finally said, as he ran to Justin and hugged him. "For me!"

"I don't know Gus, I know Justin did the painting for your room, but I think it looks really good over the fireplace," Brian began. "What do you think? Maybe we should leave it here for a while?"

Gus looked at the painting, but didn't say anything for a while. Then he broke out into his big smile and simply climbed into Brian's arms. Gus beamed and nodded yes.

"But you understand, Gus, the painting belongs to you," Justin pointed out with a laugh. "You get to decide where it's to be hung in the house. Ok?"

Gus just continued to smile. "Sure Jus, but I like it here."

Brian lifted Nicky up so that he could get a better look at the painting from this view.

Nicky's eyes were still wide with amazement. This was the first time Nicky had seen one of Justin's paintings, so this was a totally new and wonderful experience for him.

Once everyone had admired the painting and settled back into comfortable chatter, Paul suggested, "I guess we should do our toast, before the little ones get too sleepy to join us."

"What's a toast?" Gus asked.

"We want to celebrate," Brian said with a laugh. "We have something special to celebrate."

"We do?" Gus asked. "What?"

Brian picked up Gus and carried him over to one of the oversized chairs.

"Justin and I have something to tell you," Brian began.

Justin moved over to the oversized ottoman to join them, while Paul and Jason nestled Nicky in their arms to listen from the other chair.

"You do?" Gus asked.

"Yes," Brian said, then pausing to try to find just the right words.

"What is it?" Gus asked with impatience, trying to figure out why his father was stalling. Gus thought about it for a minute. Then he remembered the last time that Brian acted like this. Gus immediately felt better, for the last time Brian had told him the secret of how much he loved Justin. Brian had also said that Gus didn't have to worry because he would also take care of Justin.

"Dad?" Gus said, gently reaching up to stroke Brian's cheek.

Brian wrapped one arm around Gus and reached out to Justin with the other.

"Gus, this morning Justin and I signed papers, so that now we legally belong to each other. And we'll belong to each other forever and ever," Brian said, and then he held his breath waiting for Gus' reaction.

"But Justin has always belonged to US," Gus explained, trying to figure out why his dad was so confused about the basic facts.

Brian made note of the use of the "us" and smiled. "Of course, he's always belonged to us, but now it's all legal."

Gus moved from Brian's lap to Justin's lap and wrapped his arms around Justin's neck. "I love you Jus," Gus quietly said.

"I love you too." Justin responded quietly, kissing Gus.

"Now you'll always be mine," Gus said.

Justin smiled a knowing smile, and Brian tried to contain his laughter. Paul and Jason couldn't help laughing.

"You know Gus, you and I must have a long talk someday about to whom Justin belongs. Now is not the time because obviously you don't plan to understand things. But when you're older, we must talk about this," Brian rattled on, with no one paying any attention to him.

Brian opened the champagne and poured the glasses for everyone, while Justin poured glasses of sparkling cider for Gus and Nicky.

Paul made a toast to Brian and Justin, wishing them much happiness, and everyone clinked glasses and sipped their drink.

Afterwards, Brian made a toast to Paul and Jason and good friends.

"I like toasts," Gus said with a smile, and Nicky heartily agreed by nodding yes.

When the toasts were over, they all had ice cream for dessert by the fire.

Brian and Justin continued talking easily for a short while with Paul and Jason. Brian and Justin talked about their week in New York, while Paul and Jason brought them up-to-date on everything that happened in Cincinnati during the week. Nicky and Gus made themselves comfortable on Paul and Jason's lap, for they didn't want to miss any thing. From time-to-time, the adults made sure to include the kids in their conversation.

Eventually, Nicky and Gus started to get really quiet, and everyone realized that it was definitely their bedtime. So Paul and Jason volunteered to get them ready for bed, giving Brian and Justin a few moments alone.

Brian and Justin promised they would come in shortly to tuck in Gus and Nicky and to kiss them goodnight. Gus and Nicky happily went with Paul and Jason.

Justin gently slid his arm around Brian's waist. "Come with me," he said softly.

"Where are we going?" Brian asked, allowing himself to follow Justin's lead. "What are we doing here?" he asked with some confusion when they came to a stop.

"I have a present for you, but it's in here," Justin said, with a smile as they reached his studio door.

"Oh no...no Sunshine, not a painting. You promised. I thought we agreed that if you had something you wanted me to do, that you would just tell me. You promised...no more messages contained in paintings and letters," Brian teased in mock protest...for he really didn't mean this.

"It's not that kind of painting. Will you stop being a drama queen? There is no message here. This is simply a gift," Justin explained, shaking his head at his partner's antics.

"Oh well, that's different," Brian remarked with a smile and an immediate change in attitude, "You know how much I love presents...especially since you're the only one who gives them to me," he quipped.

Justin opened the door to his studio, and there on the easel was the painting of Brian sleeping among the rumpled sheets. The painting was done in varying shades of blue. This was the painting of the recent drawing that Justin had made for him several weeks ago here at Bri-tin. In fact, Brian had found this drawing of himself, resting beside him in bed when he woke up one morning.

As much as Brian had loved that drawing, he loved his painting even more. Brian looked at the painting, and it took his breath away.

"Magnificent!" was all he could say, as he clutched his hands to his chest. "You know how much I loved the sketch. But, this painting is so much more beautiful even than your sketch," Brian pointed out, wrapping his arms around Justin. "When exactly did you find time to paint this?"

"You know a little time here...a little time there. Do you like it?" Justin asked.

"I love it. You know there's nothing I like better than images of me painted by you," Brian teased.

"I don't know if you remember, I guess it was back when you and I first met each other," Justin began to explain.

"You mean back during your stalker phase," Brian interrupted him with a laugh.

"Yes, way back then," Justin said with a laugh. "I did another sketch of you while you were sleeping. I remember that I tried to talk Lindsay out of showing it to you, and you couldn't figure out when I had done the particular drawing either. Anyway, Lindsay exhibited my sketch in the charity art exhibit for the GLC art show."

"I remember, Mikey thought that you had taken certain liberties in your drawing of me, but I tried to reassure him that you were an artist, and as such, you would only capture accurately what you saw," Brian teased.

"I'm a much better artist now..." Justin admitted.

"You weren't a bad artist then, Sunshine. After all, you managed to get accepted at PIFA," Brian reminded him.

"But then I got bashed, and my art has never been quite the same after that."

"Sunshine, make no mistake. You're a wonderful artist," Brian insisted.

Justin continued, "I don't know who bought the original drawing that I did way back then, but I wanted you to have this painting," Justin explained with a smile. "Now all you have to do is figure out where you want to put it."

"I have to take some time to think about where to hang it," Brian said, wrapping his arms gently around Justin from behind. "So many places, so little time."

"Take your time," Justin said with a smile.

"So that's how you see me, is it?" Brian asked, tightening his arms around Justin.

"That's how I see you." Justin said with a smile.

"God I'm beautiful. As long as you see me this way," Brian said, "That's all that really matters."

"Well, that's not all that matters, but I appreciate the sentiment," Justin said with a smile.

"What else could there be?" Brian asked, wrapping Justin in his arms again. "Except maybe the fact that I love you."

"I love you too." Justin whispered.

"You know I was thinking..." Brian began and then paused. Justin patiently waited to hear what was next. "In view of our new status, I think tonight would be the perfect time to fuck you into the mattress. We do need to consummate our legal arrangement."

"What?"

"Of course, I think we should start with a turn in the hot tub first."

"I haven't done anything to warrant a trip to the hot tub," Justin said in his own defense.

"So we'll use the hot tub upstairs," Brian suggested. "Just because..."

"I like the way you think," Justin teased. "But Paul and Jason have probably gotten the kids ready for bed. We should probably go and tuck them in first."

"And Paul and Jason probably want to talk for a bit more...so there's no rush," Brian pointed out. "I just don't want you to lose sight of our plans for the night," he said, leaning down and kissing Justin again.

"I think I can remember..." Justin suggested.

"Sunshine, thank you for my painting. It's perfect!" Brian admitted.

Brian and Justin wrapped their arms around each other's waist, as Justin turned out the lights in his studio, and he and Brian headed upstairs to tuck in Gus and Nicky.

Chapter 53 – Secrets Revealed

Late Friday Night...(Day 47)

Brian, Justin, Paul and Jason all spent time tucking in Gus and Nicky for the night. Gus and Nicky kept pleading for another story or a drink of water or anything to keep from going to sleep. But as Justin climbed on the bed with Gus and Brian climbed on the bed with Nicky, the kids finally gave up resisting and fell asleep.

Justin made sure that the monitor, installed in the kids' guest room, and its receiving unit, in the master bedroom, was turned on. Then the adults left the sleeping beauties, quietly tiptoeing of out of the room.

Paul decided that they'd had a very long day, so in the hallway, he announced that he and Jason were going to turn in for the night. They said their goodnights to Brian and Justin.

Brian and Justin checked downstairs to make sure that everything was locked up, and all the lights were off, before they headed for their bedroom.

"We're so going to have to get those intercoms installed," Brian teased once they reached their bedroom, "Otherwise our bedroom is going to look like command central." He pointed to the two monitor receivers already on the nightstand.

"I'll email Gregory in the morning to look into it," Justin finally agreed.

"I think I'd also like to have a security fence put around the perimeter the property, with gated access," Brian added.

"I know we talked about it as part the original renovations before, but now with the move to New York, do you still want to do it?" Justin asked in reply.

"I think we need it now more that ever. I know Thomas and Teres are here. But still I would feel better if more security were installed," Brian pointed out. "I want you and Gus to be safe when you're here," Brian added, wrapping his arms around Justin from behind.

Justin turned around and kissed Brian passionately. Brian felt his whole body yield to the kiss. "Justin, stop that...we're getting in the hot tub!" he quipped.

"Oh," Justin said innocently with a smirk.

They quickly undressed and made their way to their hot tub. Brian quickly lit the candles around the tub. He pulled out a bottle of Beam and two glasses and placed them on the side of the hot tub as well.

"Well, now where did that come from?" Justin asked with a smile, carefully making note of all Brian's romantic gestures. Justin thought back and realized that he and Brian had come a long way.

"This has been quite a day, and I thought we might need a night cap," Brian suggested. "Besides we can never celebrate enough the fact that we're going to be equal legal partners forever and ever."

"I do like the way you think," Justin agreed with a smile, leaning up to give Brian a gentle kiss.

Once they were undressed, Brian stepped into the swirling waters and extended this hand to help Justin join him. They both submerged themselves under the water. The warmth of water made them start to relax. They immediately spooned together with Justin's back resting against Brian's chest. Brian willingly wrapped his arms around Justin.

Eventually, they toasted themselves, and each of them took a sip of their Beam.

"Ok, now that we're here in the hot tub, what did you want to talk about?" Justin asked.

"Now why do you think I have anything to talk about? We were here only yesterday. I think we covered everything before we signed the papers," Brian said with a slight laugh. "And you haven't had enough time to get into trouble, because I've kept my eyes on you most of the day."

"Well, that's true enough, you only left me alone to talk to my mother, Emmett, and Ted," Justin responded with a laugh. "Hardly time to get into trouble."

"I don't know, with you I'm never really sure, Sunshine."

That remark resulted in Brian receiving a gentle swipe from Justin.

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While they were relaxing in the hot tub, Brian finally said, "Ok, I need to talk to you about something."

"Sure," Justin replied, and held his breath.

"I love the new painting that you did of me, but I have a confession to make," Brian began and held his breath.

"You, a confession?" Justin responded with surprise.

"You said earlier tonight, that you wondered who bought your original sketch of me from the GLC charity art show. It was a long time ago. I never knew that you still speculated about it. I want to put your mind to rest. I know who bought that original sketch," Brian said haltingly.

"You do?" Justin asked.

"Yes," Brian said softly.

"How did you find out?" Justin asked.

Brian laughed, "Sunshine, I was the King of Liberty Avenue. There wasn't much that happened on Liberty Avenue that I didn't know about," Brian pointed out.

"Well that's true," Justin agreed. "Daph always thought it was someone, who was obsessed with you and just couldn't resist buying an image of you."

"Daphne is very perceptive," Brian said with a smile.

"I always worried that some pervert or former trick had the drawing," Justin admitted.

"You were right to worry," Brian said softly.

"Was it Ted as you originally suspected?" Justin asked.

"No, it wasn't Theodore," Brian said with a smile, remembering his accusation. "Isn't it enough that now you can stop fretting about it."

"How is that?" Justin asked.

"You can stop fretting, because I bought the drawing," Brian easily admitted.

"Why would you buy it?"

"It was a beautiful drawing, Justin. I'd never seen myself that way. You saw something in me that no one else had ever seen. Of course, I wouldn't admit it, but I liked seeing myself the way you captured me," Brian started to explain.

"You did?" Justin asked with some surprise.

"Yes, so I bought the sketch," Brian said matter of factly.

"It was the first time any of my art sold ever sold. I was so excited. I never knew that you bought it. Did you buy it because you liked it or just because I drew it?" Justin had to ask.

Brian let out a sigh, not believing where this conversation was going. "Sunshine, I liked it well enough to buy it. Doesn't that say it all?" he finally asked.

"I guess. What did you do with the picture?" Justin asked.

"I have it at the loft," Brian revealed.

"How come I've never seen it?" Justin persisted in his questioning.

"Because basically you were a stalker not a snoop. That and I have the picture well hidden," Brian explained with a laugh.

"Where?" Justin asked.

"Does it matter? Isn't it enough to know I have the drawing?" Brian said, hoping to close the matter...then he remembered he was dealing with Justin, so he just smiled and braced himself for the next question.

"I suppose so," Justin admitted reluctantly. "So does that mean you don't want the new painting?" he asked.

"Let me clear this up for you, Sunshine...you cannot have my painting back!" Brian insisted, making things very clear.

"Oh," Justin said, leaning back and kissing Brian.

Brian just shook his head at Justin's antics.

"You know Gus is really thrilled about his painting too. I can't believe that you also painted me on horseback in his painting," Brian said on reflection.

"I wanted you to see how stately you looked, and I wanted Gus to have a painting of the two of you riding together," Justin explained.

"Thank you."

"So are you ready for your riding lesson tomorrow?" Justin innocently asked.

"Justin, you never said anything about a riding lesson tomorrow. That wasn't part of my plan. How are we going to do that? We have guests," Brian protested, feeling again that Justin was tampering with his grand design for things.

"Well you and Gus are scheduled for a lesson at 3 o'clock tomorrow. Chuck is expecting you. Gus made me promise that he could go riding. So..." Justin insisted.

"Okay, is there anything else that you scheduled that I need to know about?" Brian thought he'd better ask. If he was going to have to draft a new plan, he needed to know all the elements.

"Not really. But..." Justin replied.

"But?" Brian answered with concern.

"I was thinking that we should invite Mel and Linds to come out to watch Gus have his riding lesson. Last time they were in town, they had plans. I thought we might invite them to lunch. That way they can spend some time visiting with Paul and Jason before you and Gus have your lesson," Justin suggested.

"I thought we'd agreed that you wouldn't do planning. I thought we'd agreed that you would leave the planning to me. Didn't we agree that this weekend, the only thing that you were to do, was lock yourself in the studio and paint, don't you remember?"

"I remember..." Justin said. "It was just a suggestion."

"Ok, I'll think about it," Brian finally agreed.

"Thanks," Justin said, leaning up to give Brian a kiss.

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They continued to relax in the hot tub. After a while, Brian casually said, "There is something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Sure," Justin agreed, snuggling closer to Brian's chest.

"Tell me the story behind your new painting entitled, "The Secret". I saw the painting in your studio when we were in New York."

"You did?"

"And I'm most interested to hear the story behind the painting," Brian continued. "I wanted to ask you about it while we were in New York, but there was so much going on the time was never right."

"And you think that now the time is right?"

"I was hoping you would tell me, since we don't have any secrets."

"I was upset after Spyder and I ran into Kip Thomas. I went back to my studio to think things through. I think better in paint...you know that."

"What was there to think about regarding Kip Thomas?"

"Before I start, I need you to remember that this happened a long time ago," Justin cautioned.

"Ok. I understand that." Brian said, holding his breath. "Tell me what the painting is about?"

"Kip Thomas." Justin felt Brian's body tense under the water. "Brian? Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard you." Brian said quietly. "We've already talked about Kip Thomas when we were in New York. What more is there to say? Kip Thomas said that I promised him things for fucking me. I would never do that. Then he wanted me to put him up for a promotion that I didn't think that he was ready for just because we were both gay and had fucked. I don't believe in that either. When I refused, he charged me with sexual harassment. But he made the first move, and I only gave him what he wanted. I fucked him. End of story! Melanie represented me. Marty came in and told Melanie and me that the lawsuit had been dropped. No explanation. Life went on."

"Do you know why the lawsuit was dropped?" Justin asked.

"No. You asked me that before. I had heard rumors at the club, but nothing too concrete. So it just remained an unsolved mystery," Brian explained. "We talked about this, Sunshine, why are you bringing this up now?"

There was a moment of silence between them. The only sound was the swirling and swishing of water. Justin was the first to break the silence.

"Because I have to tell you something."

"What is it, Sunshine?" Brian tried to ask nonchalantly, but failed miserably.

"I know why Kip Thomas dropped his lawsuit," Justin said quietly.

"You do? So you heard the rumors at Babylon too? There's no need to repeat them," Brian remarked.

"No, I know the truth. Not the rumors," Justin asserted firmly.

"And how could you possibly know that?" Brian asked in a tone designed to simply humor Justin.

"I saw him at Woody's," Justin began. "I recognized him from that time he visited you at the loft."

"How could you recognize him? You were never at the loft when he was there. I made sure of that, as I remember," Brian said, searching his memory to be sure that what he said was the truth.

"I hid on the stairs that day he came to the loft. I wanted to take a look at whom you were doing business with. You said it was business...I wasn't sure," Justin recanted.

"I can't believe that you remember back then...that was during your stalker phase. You were everywhere. I couldn't get rid of you. You were a persistent little fucker," Brian teased.

"Yes, I was. You were so stubborn that I had to be," Justin teased back.

"Anyway, after he filed the lawsuit, I saw Kip later at Woody's. I approached him. We started talking. He'd been drinking. He was so turned on. He wanted me," Justin explained calmly.

"Nothing new there," Brian said, trying not to show his rising concern.

"So I went home with him," Justin admitted quietly.

"You did what!" Brian said, trying to contain his feelings.

"I went home with him," Justin repeated nonchalantly.

"Did you fuck him?" Brian had to ask.

"No!" Justin responded firmly.

"Did you let him fuck you?" Brian had to continue to probe, trying to hide any jealousy he was feeling in light of his own uncertainty.

"No...never, but I did let him blow me," Justin quietly admitted.

"Justin, you were always free to fuck who you wanted BACK THEN. There were never locks on our doors you know that. So why are you telling me this now?" Brian asked, ready to end what he now considered a meaningless discussion.

"I have a reason. I need you to listen. Are you listening?" Justin demanded.

"I'm listening," Brian acknowledged. And he was listening, for now Justin had his undivided attention.

"I let him blow me, and he was in the middle of a blowjob, and I told him that he had to hurry because I had to go home because I had a curfew," Justin began to explain.

"And he believed you? He believed that line?" Brian asked incredulously.

"I told him I was only 17. I told him I was underage. I told him my father had beat up the last man I'd been with," Justin continued to recount the events.

"Well, that part was true. Your father nearly broke my ribs. He nearly killed me," Brian confirmed, while still trying to listen to what else Justin had to say.

"Then I told him that my father had the last man arrested...that he wouldn't be out of jail for ten years because I was underage," Justin went on to explain.

"And he believed you?" Brian asked in disbelief, knowing full well that 17 was the age of consent.

"I looked young...I could be very convincing...I learned from the best," Justin quipped.

"Then what happened?" Brian asked. He was now fully engaged in what he was hearing.

"Then Kip panicked. He got scared that he would be arrested. He begged me not to tell my father about us being together. So, I promised not to tell my father about him if he would do me one little favor," Justin further elaborated.

"And that was?" Brian asked just to humor Justin.

"I promised not to tell my father...if he would drop the lawsuit against you," Justin finally said, and then he held his breath for Brian's reaction. He didn't have long to wait.

"You did what?" Brian queried in his most serious tone, while trying to control his anger.

Justin added quickly in his own defense, "He was afraid of being arrested...so he dropped the lawsuit," he tried to explain confidently, but he was already concerned about Brian's reaction, since he could feel Brian's anger every place their bodies touched in the water.

"Justin, what are you telling me? Are you saying that you blackmailed him into dropping the lawsuit?" Brian demanded to know.

"That's one way of looking at it," Justin tried to say innocently.

"How do you look at it?" Brian was thinking to himself that this explanation had better be good. His only hope was that he could contain his anger long enough to hear the answer.

"I looked at it that he lied...I merely used his own lying tactics against him. I was merely better at it," Justin said calmly without remorse.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" Brian now had to ask.

"I didn't see any reason to tell you. The lawsuit was dropped. You were okay, that was all I cared about. I didn't do it to score points with you. I just wanted to help. I never wanted you to know. That wasn't why I did it," Justin tried to calmly explain the unexplainable.

"Fuck Justin, it's the thing with my nephew all over again!" Brian said, with anger flaring. "You had to get the evidence to get me out of that one too. Yes I know all about that. Carl and Debbie told me the whole story and your part in it," he said, trying to get his temper under control. "I've got to be more careful about the things that I do. You can't always be rushing in to rescue to me. It's too dangerous, and you're too fearless. That's a dangerous combination! I want you promise that you won't ever do anything like that again," Brian demanded, holding onto Justin tightly

"Brian!" Justin said in protest.

"This isn't a negotiation, Justin! I want your promise. I'm serious about this. You have to let me handle the stuff that I get myself into from now on," Brian continued to demand.

"That's just it," Justin went on. "There are some things that you are powerless to handle. When that happens, I have to step in and help. I love you, and I'm not going to let anyone destroy you. I'm not going to let anyone take advantage of you either."

"You can't continue to do this, Justin!" Brian insisted.

"You should talk," Justin said, elevating his voice just enough for emphasis. "I wasn't the one who hired private investigators to check on Spyder...so you might want to re-examine your own actions before you go any further," he said firmly, before leaning back to give Brian a kiss that Justin was well aware Brian didn't want at that moment.

Justin felt he had made his point.

He was now ready to change the subject. "Well it looks like I'm starting to wrinkle," he said calmly, "So I guess our hot tub chat is over for the evening. You wouldn't want me to get all wrinkled at my tender young age," Justin quipped.

"Age a little, and tell me why you decided to tell me this now?" Brian demanded to know. After all, these events happened five or six years ago. Brian had to wonder why Justin would suddenly tell him about this now.

"You and Adam Lyons were going to go head to head over the account for Barrister, Wilkins & Evans. Spyder didn't want there to be any skeletons that Adam could pull out of the closet to make you walk away," Justin confessed calmly.

"And if that had not been the case, you would have taken this story to your grave without ever telling me? You would have kept this secret?" Brian pushed for answers.

"Probably...there never seemed to be a reason to tell you." Justin admitted calmly. "Brian, it just didn't seem worth discussing. It didn't seem important," he admitted, as a way of explanation.

"Justin, I'm still waiting for you to promise me that you won't do anything like that again. Promise me!" Brian demanded.

"Brian." Justin protested.

"I'm serious Justin. I want you safe. I want you around for a long time. I don't want anything to happen to you. So promise me that you won't do anything like that again. Justin, I can't go back to the long vigils at your bedside. I just can't!" Brian persisted, explaining the reasons behind his demands.

"What are you talking about?" Justin said with a laugh. "You've never done long vigils by my bedside. That's not your style. So what are you talking about?" he patiently asked.

"Never mind, it's not important," Brian said, realizing he may have said too much.

"You let me be the judge of that," Justin said sternly. "Now, what are you talking about? Tell me. Tell me!" he insisted, leaving Brian little wiggle room.

"When you were in the hospital I kept a vigil...." Brian began but was immediately interrupted by Justin.

"But the only time I've been in the hospital was after the bashing. Back then I dreamed that you came to visit me at night. But I would wake up, and it would be only a dream. You never came," Justin admitted sadly.

"I was there...every night. You weren't dreaming. You would toss and turn all night. They couldn't give you anything for the pain. I don't want to watch you go through that kind of anguish again, Justin. So you have to be careful. You have to be safe," Brian said with a certain quietness in his voice that seemed to be covering so much more. "Justin, you can't keep doing this."

"Brian, I'm your partner. I'll do what needs to be done to keep you safe. I'll not sit idly by and let someone destroy you. I'm sorry, I can't do that." Justin said firmly. "You would have lost everything."

"I know that. I don't know what I would have done both times if you hadn't stepped in and saved me. But Justin, something terrible could have happened to you...both times. Things could have turned out differently...surely you see that," Brian said, the concern evident in his voice.

Justin turned around and lightly kissed Brian. "Nothing is going to happen to me. I'm always careful," Justin proclaimed. "And I have you to protect me."

Brian couldn't say anymore. He just wrapped his arms around Justin and pulled him tightly to his chest. Brian tried to find that words that would explain to his partner that it didn't matter if he lost everything...as long as Justin was ok. Brian couldn't find the words to tell Justin how much he needed him. He couldn't say any of that.

What he said, instead, while holding Justin tightly was, "And Justin, we have to end this thing of secrets between you and me."

Justin didn't answer; he just wrapped his arms tightly around Brian, for Justin understood all that Brian was unable to say. And Justin quietly said, "I promise."

With that promise, Brian was now ready to help a very wrinkled Justin out of the hot tub. They extinguished the candles and wrapped themselves in heated towels.

Brian and Justin made their way back to the bedroom. There Brian and Justin's lovemaking was intense, as Brian tried to deal with all his feelings for Justin that were now right on the surface, and Justin tried to process how much Brian loved him for so long. They both learned a little more about the partner that they each had legally committed themselves to forever. And they both realized how much they really loved each other.

And as they lay spooned together afterwards, Brian could still hear Ben's words, echoing in his heart. "You are always strongest with Justin by your side." And Brian knew, now more than ever, those words were so true.

Chapter 54 – The Morning After

Early The Next Morning...(Day 48)

Gus and Nicky

"Wake up Gus, it's morning," Nicky pointed out, shaking his roommate awake.

"Are you sure?" Gus asked, trying to slide down under the covers. Gus was beginning to wonder if his roommate-of-the-moment ever sleeps.

"Gus wake up. Now!"

"Why?" Gus asked, thinking this had better be good. "What's wrong?"

"Jus has to make us Mickey Mouse Pancakes," Nicky explained.

Gus groaned as he wondered if his torture at the hands of Nicky would ever end.

"He will," Gus assured him.

"When?" Nicky needed to know, not wanting to leave anything to chance. He stood there with his hands on his hips glaring, at Gus and waiting for answers.

"As soon as he gets up to fix breakfast," Gus explained, being well aware of the routine of the house.

"Can we go and wake him?" Nicky asked, realizing this was something that he was particular good at.

"No!" Gus said, envisioning the consequences. "Dad will open his door once they're up, or they'll come and get us. Go back to sleep Nicky. Jus, will wake us for breakfast...I promise," Gus had to say for emphasis.

"Ok," Nicky finally agreed, and settled back into his bed.

A few minutes later, Gus once again found his rest disturbed by Nicky. Gus opened his eyes once again to find Nicky standing by his bed again.

"Now what?" Gus innocently asked.

"I can't go back to sleep," Nicky said sadly.

Gus took pity on his friend, "Here, climb into bed with me," he said, pulling back his covers. Nicky immediately climbed into bed with Gus. He made himself comfortable and within minutes, they both fell back to sleep.

Brian lay there listening to the voices through the monitor and smiled. He gently leaned down and kissed the top of Justin's head. 'You were so right,' Brian thought to himself, 'We have absolutely no idea what Nicky and Gus talk about when we're not around."

Brian made himself comfortable and snuggled in closer to his partner. Brian waited for Justin to wake up.

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Ben and Michael

"Good morning," Michael said to Ben, as he arrived downstairs into the kitchen. "You're up early."

"I have to get started on my muffins," Ben teased. "You never know what may happen. If I bake a batch of perfect muffins, Justin may want to paint their picture for the packaging," Ben mockingly teased.

"You can't be serious?" Michael had to ask, shaking his head. He reached for the Captain Crunch cereal and poured it into a bowl.

"No, I'm not serious," Ben said with a laugh. "But I do want to bake extra muffins for Justin. I can give them to him tomorrow."

"That's better," Michael said with a smile. "I notice that you got up extra early this morning." He reached in the refrigerator for the milk.

"I wanted to look at our budget and our finances. I'm trying to see what we might be able to do to help Melanie and Lindsay with JR. I considered what we spend monthly for our visits to Toronto or for them to fly here. I also considered what Hunter is going to need. But I think with just a little belt tightening, we can at least contribute to her college fund. That's what you do when it's your daughter," Ben patiently explained.

"I never thought about it. Mel and Linds were so clear that I wouldn't have any financial responsibilities for my daughter, that I never gave it a second thought. But now that you've pointed this out, I see that it's the right thing to do," Michael revealed.

"I'm glad to hear that," Ben said with a measure of satisfaction that Michael was beginning to understand about responsibility.

"But it doesn't change the fact that I think they should move back here to live," Michael continued to state, lest Ben misunderstand his intention.

"I know that. I understand how you feel. You just shouldn't say anything about your feelings to Melanie and Lindsay," Ben reminded him one more time.

"I know you're right," Michael said with a sigh.

Ben was still hopeful that Michael wouldn't disturb the delicate balance that existed between the family and Lindsay and Melanie.

"Just think, you're going to spend the day with your daughter," Ben reminded him. "That's what's important."

"You're right." Michael said with a big grin.

"I guess we should get ready to go to Debbie's to pick up JR." Ben finally said.

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Carl and Debbie

"The coffee smells good," Carl said, as he made his way to pour a cup. "Good morning, Honey. Good morning, Jenny."

"Hi Carl. Now what would you like for breakfast?" Debbie asked.

"I think I'll just have toast and coffee this morning. That way I'll have room to have lunch with you. What's the pink plate special today?"

"It's Saturday, probably the Dick of Death," Debbie said with a laugh. "Although I'm thinking maybe I should hang around here today...just in case someone needs me."

"Debbie, if someone needs you, believe me Honey, they definitely always know where to find you," Carl suggested.

Debbie handed Carl his cup of coffee and placed a handful of Cheerios in front of Jenny. Jenny immediately began the laborious task of eating the cereal one morsel at a time.

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Jennifer and Molly

"You made me blueberry pancakes for breakfast," Jennifer said with surprise, as she came into the kitchen at the condo. "Thank you, dear."

Jennifer knew that occasionally Molly would try her hand at breakfast. But Jennifer couldn't help wondering what her teenage daughter was up to.

"You're welcome, Mom," Molly quietly responded.

"So, what are your plans for today?" Jennifer cautiously asked.

"I thought I would call Brian," Molly said nonchalantly, making it sound as if calling Brian was the most normal thing in the world. "Of course, I need to borrow your cell phone to do that."

"I see," Jennifer said, wondering if she was about to lose another child to the charms of one Brian Kinney. After all, Molly hadn't stopped talking about the house and Brian since "their date" a few days ago. Of course, Brian and Justin had legalized their union, so she knew she had nothing to fear, but still Jennifer had to wonder about Molly's new interest in Brian. "Sure honey, you can call him, but let's wait until after breakfast, just in case Brian and Justin are sleeping late."

"Sure," Molly said with no resistance. "Gus should probably be there by now, don't you think?" she asked, seemingly out of the blue.

"I think Debbie said that Lindsay and Melanie were arriving last night. Why?" Jennifer wondered.

"Do you think Nicky is here yet?" Molly persisted with her questions.

"He probably came in with his dads last night as well. Why do you ask?" Jennifer continued to be perplexed.

"I was going to see if Brian would let me visit with Gus and Nicky. After all, he did suggest it at dinner the other night. Maybe he'll even let me stay over in the new guest room," Molly continued.

Jennifer couldn't suppress a smile.

So Molly was planning on charming Brian into letting her come out to the mansion for a visit, so she could see Gus and Nicky. Molly may have a crush on Brian, but she clearly had other priorities today. 'Teenagers,' Jennifer thought to herself.

"Why don't you call Justin instead of Brian?" Jennifer casually inquired, just dying to hear this answer.

"Brian's just easier to deal with," Molly said emphatically. "Justin is such a pain!"

Jennifer couldn't help laughing at the difference in the characterizations.

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Melanie and Lindsay

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Melanie said to Lindsay.

"I'm surprised that you're awake," Lindsay said, rolling over to give her partner a kiss. "Did you get Jenny up and dressed?"

"Are you kidding? Debbie was in there with our daughter as soon as she was awake. I wouldn't be surprised if we found her downstairs having coffee with everyone. I heard Debbie and Carl go downstairs earlier," Melanie recounted.

"We need to call Gus this morning to find out about his evening. We were both so tired after our flight and dinner that we just fell into bed," Lindsay tried to remember.

"I'm sure that Gus is having the time of his life. He's with Brian and Justin not to mention Nicky and Paul and Jason. I'm sure he had a very busy evening himself. I think we should leave Gus alone, and wait until he calls us. You know that he will. He loves to call us and tell us all about his day," Melanie reminded her.

"I must admit that I really love to hear his nightly status reports. A lot must have happened at the mansion, for Gus not to call last night. But he was probably as tired as we were. Maybe he'll call us this morning," Lindsay said hopefully.

"If Gus doesn't call us tonight, then we'll call him. How does that sound?" Melanie agreed.

"I wanted to call Justin this morning and drop a subtle hint. I really want an invite out to see the mansion," Lindsay said longingly.

"Are you sure that you're ready for that?" Melanie asked cautiously.

"What do you mean?" Lindsay challenged.

"Are you sure that you want to see the house that, in your fantasy, should have been yours?" Melanie challenged.

"Who knows, if we move back here, maybe Brian would let us stay with him until we get back on our feet. Then I would get a taste of living at the mansion. I could hold on to the fantasy a little longer, and I know that Brian would agree since he would get to spend all that additional time with Gus. You know how he loves to spend the time with Gus," Lindsay continued to explain.

"The mansion is a long way away from everything and everyone. If we were to move back we would need to be here. No, if we were to move back the most likely scenario would be that we would end up staying with either Debbie and Carl or Michael and Ben until we were on our feet again. Neither of those are particularly enticing options," Melanie pointed out.

"Or maybe, Brian would let us live at the loft?" Lindsay continued to fantasize.

"And where would Brian take his tricks? Besides, there are no walls at the loft. That would be a problem with two kids," Melanie continued to explain as the voice of reason.

"I know that you're right," Lindsay said with resignation in her voice.

"I know that you're unhappy with the way things are in Toronto. I'm sure that's part of the reason that you want to run away to Paris for the summer. I really do understand, Lindsay," Melanie said, showing her understanding. "I'll just have to see what we can work out."

"But I also understand why you don't want to move back to Pittsburgh. I want more for Jenny than to be smothered by Debbie and Michael. That isn't why we had her, and we owe her more of a life than that," Lindsay said, with her reasoning ability returning.

"Thank you for seeing that. But I think she loves the attention she gets when she visits here or when Debbie or Michael visit us, and I like the idea of us staying close to the family. As long as we aren't too close," Melanie added quietly.

"They are almost the only family we really have," Lindsay added, "I like the idea of being close to them too."

"But you know, Gus is thriving from all the contact with Brian and Justin. These last few weeks he's been a lot happier. He's doing well in school," Melanie began to reveal her observations, "So my hypothesis seemed to have been correct. Gus is going to need more than just us if he is to grow up and be well adjusted, and Brian is making such an effort with Gus."

"I just wonder if Justin is getting any painting done. How can he with a house full of guests and two rambunctious kids running around?" Lindsay asked.

"Look, you know how protective Brian is where Justin is concerned. I'm sure he figured out how to handle things for this weekend. Otherwise Justin would be in New York instead of at the house, and Paul and Jason wouldn't be visiting with Nicky," Melanie responded, almost thinking aloud.

"Justin belongs...locked away in his studio...in New York. I don't care how carefully Brian has planned things," Lindsay stated emphatically.

"So you could have Brian all to yourself this weekend? I know it's been awhile," Melanie asked with a laugh.

"I miss Brian coming to me with all his troubles and sharing everything with we me. We've been very close for a very long time. I thought you understood about that?" Lindsay revealed.

"I do understand. I'm just cautioning you not to get too attached to Brian. He has his own life. He's been doing a really good job of managing his life without consulting with you at every turn. You saw him at the airport. He's never looked happier," Melanie said as a way to caution Lindsay. Melanie was thinking about what she overheard last night.

"I just want to have some time to catch up on things with Brian. That's all," Lindsay finally admitted with a smile.

"You can have Brian," Melanie finally teased, "I'd much rather catch up with Justin."

"You've always liked Justin better...even when he was a little kid." Lindsay reminisced.

"Justin was never a little kid," Melanie said with a laugh, "If you will remember he was always more mature than Brian. It just took Brian a long time to figure things out. It will probably take him a lifetime to figure out how to deal with Justin."

"Maybe," Lindsay said, but deep down she was wondering if Brian would waste a lifetime on such a daunting task.

"Well, I guess we should get dressed and go down for breakfast before our appointment with Elizabeth," Melanie suggested.

"And maybe we can call Gus and Justin after breakfast," Lindsay reminded her.

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Paul and Jason

"So you decided to finally wake up," Jason teased his partner.

"Of course, I've been awake. This house is so quiet. I miss our monitor," Paul explained with a laugh. "Brian and Justin put the receiver in their room. I wonder what Nicky and Gus are up to?"

"So that's the reason you miss the monitor," Jason teased, "You miss spying on Gus and Nicky," he said with a laugh.

"Gus and Nicky seem to be so happy together. I'm really glad Brian made us come," Paul commented.

"Do you really think that Justin will get any painting done with all of us here?" Jason hesitantly asked.

"Not if Gus and Nicky are going into his studio to paint with him," Paul said with a laugh.

"I don't know. You saw the painting that Justin did for Gus. Wasn't it wonderful? Did you see Nicky's eyes light up when he looked at the painting? You're probably right, if only Gus was in the studio, maybe. But Gus and Nicky together, Justin will get no painting done at all," Jason said, unable to contain his laughter. "And of course, if Justin gets no painting done, Brian is going to kill us. Did you think about that?"

"I prefer to think about the painting. Brian and Gus captured on horseback. We have got to send a picture of the painting back to the moms," Paul said trying to change the subject. "Dealing with Brian if his plans go astray is not going to be pleasant. You know what a control freak he is?"

"I'm betting that Jus will know how to handle Brian," Jason said with a laugh, "And that he will protect us. Otherwise you and I are toast."

"Tell me about it," Paul said with some concern. "Well there is nothing that we can do about this now. We'll just have to play it by ear."

"I wonder if Justin has entered the new painting on his website yet? I wonder if he shows Gus as the official owner?" Jason continued to ponder, thinking about more pleasant thoughts than Brian's wrath.

"We'll have to check," Paul suggested.

"When we first arrived, while you were resting, Justin let me watch while he unpacked all these paintings from New York. There was one painting in that group of Brian in bed among rumpled sheets. It was totally awesome!" Jason recounted, "Even more magnificent than the one he did for Gus. You should see it. I think Justin painted it as a present for Brian."

"Brian didn't say anything about receiving a painting last night when we were together," Paul reminded him.

"Justin probably hadn't given it to him yet," Jason pointed out.

"You know that I've known Brian since college, and we've know Justin for years. Because Justin is our friend, sometimes you just forget he is this famous artist, especially when you see him with the kids," Paul said wistfully.

" I know. I'm so looking forward to vacationing with them," Jason said eagerly.

"Me too," Paul agreed.

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Brian and Justin

"Good Morning, Sunshine," Brian said with a smile, as two very blue eyes looked up at him.

Justin leaned up to give him a kiss, before snuggling again into Brian's chest. "What are you doing awake?" he asked.

"Well, I was listening in on the morning conversation between Gus and Nicky," Brian said with a smirk.

"You were. What did you hear?" Justin asked with renewed interest.

"I was thinking of taking you and everyone out for breakfast this morning, but Gus and Nicky are conspiring to get you to make Mickey Mouse Pancakes," Brian nonchalantly revealed.

"Noooooooooo," Justin tried to say in protest.

"Yeeeeeeessssss," Brian said in reply.

Justin couldn't suppress a laugh.

"Now I would spend the morning fucking you into the mattress again, but I know that Gus and Nicky would just interrupt us. So I think we're going to have to table that until tonight," Brian suggested.

"But, you fucked me into the mattress last night," Justin casually reminded Brian. "I think under the terms of our equal partnership agreement, I think it's my turn to do the fucking. Don't you remember? It must have been on one of those papers we signed?" Justin teased.

"I listened very carefully to everything that Max said," Brian quipped, "There was nothing in those documents that specified that you were doing any fucking. But I can see how your devious little mind is working. I'm going to have to be more careful, now that we're legally bound and all," Brian said, with a mocking tone to his voice.

Brian received a gentle slap on the arm for that statement.

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Brian, Justin, Nicky, and Gus

"Oh oh, I hear little people stirring," Brian commented as he looked over at the monitor. "And here they come."

"You're kidding," Justin asked with a laugh.

Brian got up and opened their bedroom door.

Justin received his answer with the sound of approaching little footsteps, and two little heads appearing at the foot of their bed.

Brian and Justin couldn't resist a smile. Justin propped himself up in bed, as Brian rejoined him. Brian patted the bed and Nicky and Gus curled up between them, completely smothering Justin.

Brian pulled them over to his side. "What are you two doing up so early?" he innocently asked, already knowing the answer.

"Nicky's hungry, Dad," Gus explained.

"Well, that's good," Brian explained with a smirk, "I was planning to take everyone out to breakfast, how does that sound?"

"That's a wonderful idea, Brian," Justin answered, and then he watched the faces of Nicky and Gus turn to sadness.

"Jus, can't we stay here. Can't we have Mickey Mouse pancakes?" Gus suggested.

"But Gus, you love going out to breakfast," Brian quipped.

"But Nicky has been waiting a whole week for Mickey Mouse pancakes," Gus suggested as he looked over at the pitiful expression on Nicky's face.

"A week, huh?" Brian teased. "That's not very long," he said with a laugh.

Gus and Nicky decided that Brian was useless in their negotiation, so both of them moved over to snuggle into Justin's arms.

Justin found himself looking into two pairs of sad eyes. "What's wrong?" he innocently asked.

"Jus, will you fix Nicky Mickey Mouse pancakes?" Gus asked, as he put his arms around Justin's neck. Nicky copied the move. Brian simply watched the complex negotiations and tried not to laugh.

"Sure," Justin finally said. "Give Brian and me time to get dressed first, ok?"

Nicky and Gus broke into big smiles. Brian couldn't conceal his own smile, as Gus and Nicky gave Justin wet kisses. Then the kids disappeared, leaving Brian and Justin alone.

"You're so easy!" Brian quipped, wrapping Justin in his arms.

Justin just smiled.

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Paul, Jason, Nicky and Gus

A few minutes later, Paul and Jason heard a knock on their door. The knob easily turned. Two pairs of little feet scampered across the floor, and two little heads appeared at the foot of their bed.

Paul and Jason looked at each other and smiled.

"What are you two doing up?" Paul innocently asked, opening his arms to his son.

Jason patted the bed beside him for Gus to join them, and he willingly curled up in Jason's arms.

"Are Brian and Justin awake?" Jason innocently asked.

Gus quickly nodded yes.

"We're having Mickey Mouse Pancakes," Nicky informed them.

"What a surprise!" Jason said with a laugh. "So the two of you wore Jus down first thing this morning, huh?"

"Dad and Jus are getting dressed," Gus informed them.

"Then I guess, we'd better get dressed too," Paul said.

"Ok you two, why don't you go to your room and figure out what you want to wear today. Paul and I will get dressed, and then we'll come in and help you get dressed. How does that sound?" Jason suggested.

Gus and Nicky, with visions of Mickey Mouse Pancakes in their heads, scampered back to their room.

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Gus and Nicky

"We get to paint after breakfast," Gus explained to Nicky.

"How do you know?" Nicky asked.

"Jus likes to paint in the morning light. He'll let us paint in this studio with him," Gus explained.

"He will?" Nicky asked with excitement and total amazement.

Nicky was already excited about his day...Mickey Mouse Pancakes and painting with Justin. He thought things just didn't get any better than this.

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Debbie, Emmett, Melanie, and Lindsay

"Good Morning, Debbie," Melanie said, as she arrived at the table.

Jenny was already at the table playing with her cereal.

"Where's Lindsay?" Debbie asked.

"She's hasn't quite finished getting dressed," Melanie explained. "For some reason it always takes her a lot longer to get dress than it takes me."

"I can understand that," Debbie said with a laugh. "How would you like your eggs?"

"Scrambled, please," Melanie said.

Debbie was in the process of fixing the eggs, when Melanie asked her, "So tell me about Brian and Justin?"

"What do you mean? They're very happy," Debbie replied. "You saw them last night."

"Debbie, I heard you and Carl talking last night. So I know," Melanie said quietly.

"Don't tell me that you fucking eavesdropped on our personal conversation," Debbie protested harshly.

"Will you calm down?" Melanie responded. "I couldn't sleep. It was while I was tossing and turning that I heard you and Carl talking. I know that Brian and Justin have legalized their relationship."

"Oh Melanie, you can't say anything to anyone about it," Debbie begged.

"Why not? The news is going to eventually be published in the papers. Then the whole world will know. What's the secrecy?" Melanie asked, obviously perplexed by the secrecy issue.

"Brian and Justin swore me to secrecy. They'll kill me if they find out that you know," Debbie explained, as she loaded the eggs and bacon and toast on a plate and handed it to Melanie.

"So who else knows?" Melanie asked with a smile, thinking to herself that Brian and Justin must know that Debbie can't keep a secret.

"Carl, of course, and Emmett. Justin told Jennifer. I don't think anyone else knows," Debbie practically whispered.

"Emmett?" Melanie questioned, realizing if the gossip queen knew then all of Pittsburgh must also know by now.

"He overheard me talking to Carl yesterday. So you see you can't say anything," Debbie pleaded. "Emmett blackmailed me into telling him the details."

Melanie thought to herself she would have loved to be a fly on the wall for the discussion between Emmett and Debbie that resulted in Debbie revealing everything to Emmett. She couldn't help the smile that crossed her face. Then she thought about the seriousness of the situation, and she composed herself.

"Lindsay and Michael are probably the only ones who don't know. You have to give Brian time to tell them himself," Debbie demanded. "He told me that's what he planned to do."

"I can't believe that Brian did this. If I heard you correctly Brian legalized his partnership with Justin. They did the new legalized domestic partnership thing. That means that Brian essentially gave Justin rights to everything he owns. The Law now sanctions their relationship. They are stuck with each other for life. I never thought Brian would do that after they didn't get married last year. I wonder how Justin pulled this off," Melanie said in disbelief, almost just thinking aloud to herself.

"From what I understand, this was Brian's idea. You know he really loves Sunshine. He's just not hiding his feelings anymore," Debbie professed.

"Who's not hiding his feelings anymore?" Lindsay asked, as she finally joined them for breakfast.

"Brian," Melanie answered nonchalantly.

"Brian is really crazy about Gus, isn't he? The two of them have spent a lot of time together. They are so cute to watch," Lindsay revealed.

Debbie and Melanie just looked at each other.

"I was just telling Debbie, about how Gus and Brian are when their together," Melanie lied.

"I'm just so glad to hear it," Debbie agreed, hoping this line of discussion would end soon. "How would you like your eggs?" she finally asked Lindsay.

"Scrambled," Lindsay said, as she sat down to help Jenny with her cereal.

"Coming right up," Debbie announced.

A few minutes later, Emmett came down to join them. He noticed the strange looks passing between Debbie and Melanie, but he didn't say anything.

"What will you have, Em?" Debbie asked pointedly.

"Good morning. Just coffee," Em said, "I'm not awake enough to process breakfast yet."

"Do you have a client this morning?" Debbie asked.

"No, but I have some shopping I need to get done, so I want to get an early start," Emmett explained.

"Good for you," Debbie added.

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Brian, Justin, Gus, Nicky, Paul, and Jason

Paul headed downstairs, and found Brian in his study. "What on earth are you doing?" he asked.

"Trying to find just the right spot for my new painting," Brian explained. "Justin gave it to me as a present last night."

"May I?" Paul said, as he approached the painting. He took one look and found the painting to be all the Jason had said, and so much more. "Brian it's beautiful. I don't know how Justin can take something so simple and turn it into something so beautiful."

"You know it's always a surprise to see myself in his eyes. He always surprises me," Brian said quietly.

"Well you ARE his favorite subject. You're so lucky," Paul reminded him.

"Yes the world is becoming quite familiar with all aspects of my form," Brian teased. "I wonder what he plans to paint for Milan?"

"He hasn't said anything?" Paul asked with a laugh.

Brian just shook his head. "Not a word."

"We'll all find out when we're in Milan this summer and see the exhibit. I can hardly wait. Do you think you'll get a preview of his painting?" Paul asked with excitement.

"Justin doesn't like anyone to see his work before it's finished. But hopefully, he'll show it to me before he ships it off to the gallery in Milan," Brian said hopefully.

"Where is Justin?" Paul asked.

"In the kitchen. I just came out to move my painting. It was sitting on his easel in his studio, and according to my plan, I know that studio should be where he's headed right after breakfast," Brian said confidently. "I didn't want there to be anything in his way."

"You know that Gus and Nicky aren't going to let Justin out of their sight?" Paul reminded him.

"Don't worry, I planned for that. I actually did figure that into my plans. I know that we won't see Justin, Gus or Nicky for a while," Brian explained.

Jason, Gus and Nicky suddenly appeared at the doorway to Brian's study. Brian couldn't conceal a smile at seeing them all together.

"What's that?" Gus asked.

"It's a painting," Brian explained easily.

Gus and Nicky scampered over for a closer look.

"Did Jus do that one too, Dad?" Gus immediately asked. "It's a painting of you, isn't it?"

"You recognized me, huh?" Brian teased. "What do you think?" he asked and then waited to hear his son's reply.

"Jus made you look pretty," Gus said with a sigh.

"I couldn't agree with you more," Brian said with a smile, taking another look at the painting.

Once again, Paul lifted Nicky up for a closer look at the painting. Nicky just smiled and then hid his face in Paul's shoulder. Jason picked up his son from Paul and cradled him in his arms.

"It's a beautiful painting, Brian. Jus showed it to me last night when he was unpacking his paintings. You're so lucky," Jason reminded him.

"I know," Brian said with a smile. He then placed the painting against one of the walls in his office. "I'll get Thomas to help me hang it after breakfast. In the meantime, we should go in and see if Justin needs any help."

They all made their way to kitchen. Justin had already cooked the bacon and sausage. He was mixing up several batches of batter.

Gus and Nicky placed themselves on nearby stools, so they could see the stove. They were most keen to watch their pancakes develop.

"Hi, I know Gus and Nicky want Mickey Mouse Pancakes, but I thought you might like some regular blueberry pancakes. Teres got fresh blueberries. Would anyone like any eggs or anything with their pancakes?" Justin asked.

Brian and Paul set the table, while Jason tried to watch Justin as he made the pancakes. Jason was enthralled as Justin poured the batter, and he watched the Mickey Mouse Pancakes take shape. Jason felt it was due to Justin's artistic talents that the batter was perfectly shaped for the design. Jason thought about what unusual shapes appeared for pancakes he often tried to make at home. Jason realized that he just didn't have Justin's talent.

As the Mickey Mouse pancakes were served to two wide-eyed kids, Justin began making the regular blueberry pancakes for everyone else. Once again Jason couldn't believe the ease with which Justin seemed to attain the perfectly shaped stacks. He felt a twinge of jealousy.

"It's ok," Paul said, wrapping his arms around his partner. "You have other talents. You make great waffles."

"Oh sure, with the help of a waffle iron, all things are possible," Jason quipped, eliciting a laugh from everyone. "Jus is just a true artist," he finally said with a sigh.

"So did you find a place for your painting?" Justin asked Brian.

"I'll get Thomas to help me hang it after breakfast. While you and two little some ones are sequestered in your studio," Brian mentioned so that Justin could hear his determination.

"I guess this means my designer shirt is going to be pressed into service," Paul teased.

"Did you have any doubt?" Justin quipped.

"Of course Gus, you have to call your mom first. We forgot to call them last night before you went to bed," Brian reminded Gus. "I'm sure that she wants to hear from you."

"Sure, Dad," Gus mumbled, as he took another forkful of his pancake.

During breakfast, Brian looked at his dry whole grain toast with egg, and looked at the stacks of stacks of pancakes on everyone else's plate. Gus made sure to shield his plate so that Brian couldn't have any. This left Brian to look at Justin with very pitiful eyes.

"Oh for Christ sake, Brian, here," Justin said, as he gave Brian a plain blueberry pancake.

Brian smiled as he accepted the pancake, and then he proceeded to steal bacon and sausage off of Justin's plate. Gus and Nicky couldn't stop laughing into their hand. Paul and Jason just shook their heads.

After breakfast, it was time for Gus' phone call to Lindsay.

Gus told Lindsay all about his new painting. He did his best to describe that he and Brian were on horseback. Gus was sure to mention how he decided that it should be placed over the fireplace. Lindsay was thrilled to hear the description, but it only made her more anxious to get that invitation to come out to the house.

Finally, Lindsay couldn't stand it any longer, and she asked to speak to Justin.

When she did get Justin on the phone, she practically begged to be invited out to the house...finally asking what she had to do to get said invite. At this point Lindsay was not above bribery.

Justin laughed and asked if she would like to come out to the house for a late lunch and to visit with Paul and Jason after her appointment. Justin also asked if she and Melanie would like to go watch Gus have his riding lesson later this afternoon.

Finally, Lindsay was thrilled to get both offers and she eagerly accepted for both her and Melanie.

Brian rolled his eyes during the last part of the conversation.

Paul and Jason were definitely anxious to see Lindsay and Melanie. Paul was very surprised that Gus had a riding lesson today; he couldn't help wondering how Brian was going to fit that in to an already packed schedule.

Gus talked to Melanie, as did Paul and Jason. Then Paul and Jason said a quick hello to Lindsay and told her they were looking forward to seeing her.

Finally the phone was handed back to Gus, so he could say goodbye to Lindsay.

"Mommy, I had toast last night," Gus tried to explain before he finally said goodbye.

Lindsay tried to figure out why the fact that Gus had toast last night was newsworthy, but evidently it was important to him so she played along. "Did you enjoy the toast?"

"Yes, it had bubbles and tickled my nose," Gus explained.

Suddenly Lindsay got a totally different picture. "You were celebrating," she said.

"Yes," Gus agreed.

"What were you celebrating?" she asked.

"Jus will belong to us forever," Gus explained.

"That's nice, dear. I know how fond you are of Justin," Lindsay said, already quite aware of how Gus felt about Justin. She couldn't help laughing at how possessive Gus was where Justin was concerned. Lindsay didn't' fully understand what was going on, but Gus was happy about it, and that was all that she cared about.

"Well I just wanted to say goodbye," Lindsay added, "I'll see you later for lunch. Justin just invited us."

"Ok, bye Mommy." Gus hung up with a smile.

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A few minutes later, Brian's phone rang. "Hello Jennifer," Brian said, after noticing the caller ID.

"No, Brian, it's me," Molly said quietly into the phone.

"Molly?"

"Yes."

Justin couldn't resist laughing when he found out who the caller was. Paul and Jason looked confused. Justin whispered to them about Molly and Brian's date a few days ago.

"Someone else caught in Brian's charms?" Paul teased.

"Will you shut the fuck up?" Brian said to silence the chatter at the kitchen table.

"Bad word, Dad," Gus commented. Brian just rolled his eyes in response.

"What were you saying, Molly?" he asked into the phone.

"Are Gus and Nicky there?" she asked.

"Yeah, they arrived last night. Why do you ask?" Brian wanted to know now that his curiosity was peaked.

"You said I should spend some time with Gus and Nicky. I was wondering if I could come out to the mansion today?" Molly asked point blank.

Brian couldn't suppress a smile. "Sure, would you like to come out for lunch?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"Really?" Molly gushed.

"You have to check and be sure it's ok with Jennifer," Brian insisted.

"She doesn't care," Molly quipped.

"I guess I need to pick you up, huh?" Brian cautiously asked.

There was silence on the line. Then Molly came back. "No, Mom said she would drop me off. Thanks Brian."

"No problem," Brian said as he hung up the phone. Once Brian had hung up, he once again talked to the crowd at his kitchen table. "Well it looks like we'll have lots of guests for lunch. Since I know there isn't time to press Em into service, I guess I probably need to make a trip to the deli."

"Sure, I'll go with you," Justin quickly suggested.

"Think again, Sunshine! My plan calls for you to migrate to your studio. You have a date with some paint. I understand that you probably have two little assistants at your beck and call. So unfortunately, you will be unable to accompany me," Brian pointed out with a sinister smile.

"Don't worry Jus, Paul and I will go with him and see what we can do to help, while you and the kids are in your studio. Don't worry...we'll take care of everything. It'll be fun. You know how we love to hang out with Brian?" Jason said.

"See Sunshine?" Brian said, "Problem solved."

"I see that," Justin admitted. "Well, I guess the guys and I should move into my studio. But I guess we should go upstairs and make sure that we have something for you guys to wear while you paint."

"I heard that Justin. I'm counting my shirts when I come up there," Brian said in protest.

Justin couldn't refrain from laughing out loud as he led Gus and Nicky upstairs.

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Melanie, Lindsay, Debbie, and Emmett

Lindsay hung up the phone. She turned to Melanie and Debbie to relay the conversation.

"They must have been celebrating out at the house last night," Lindsay said. "Gus tried to tell me about the toasts."

"Did he say what they were toasting?" Melanie asked cautiously.

"Gus is excited because Justin is going to belong to him forever," Lindsay said with a laugh. "Brian must have created a mock celebration for them. Of course, it's nothing new...Gus has always believed that Justin would belong to him forever. He's always said that ever since he could talk." Lindsay rambled on, and once again, she couldn't help laughing.

The room had gotten particularly quiet. Lindsay could only hear the sound of her own voice. She looked over at the expression on the faces of Debbie, Emmett, and Melanie, and the color had drained from all their faces. They all looked as if they had all just seen a ghost. "What's wrong," Lindsay asked in a panic. "How come you're all not laughing?"

Everyone tried to convince Lindsay that they were all just surprised by Gus' remark. Lindsay wasn't buying this explanation. She demanded to know what was going on.

Melanie reached over to take one of Lindsay's hands in hers. "Honey, I have something to tell you," Melanie began. "And I need you to really listen to me."

"Melanie you're scaring me," Lindsay said, already becoming quite nervous by the turn of events.

"Do you remember what the Legalized Domestic Partnership is?" Melanie asked.

"Is that so that someone can be covered by the insurance of their partner?" Lindsay asked.

"No, No, that's just the regular domestic partnership. Do you remember about the Legalized version?" Melanie began to clarify.

"I know it's sanctioned by law, it's like a marriage only for life," Lindsay answered mindlessly.

"You remember, we read about it? Two people agree to legalize their union until death do them part. They agree to give each other the rights to each other's assets. If they want to break their legalized status, they have to go to court to try to abolish the union," Melanie slowly recanted.

"I remember that we talked about it. Why?" Lindsay answered.

"Because...Brian and Justin legalized their domestic partnership," Melanie said definitively.

"No! That's not possible," Lindsay protested. "Brian would have discussed it with me before he made a step like that. How on earth did Justin force him into something like this? This has to be a mistake. If it's a mistake, Brian can get out of it, can't he?" Lindsay rambled on.

"Sunshine didn't force Brian into this. Brian convinced Justin to make this step. He confessed that to me yesterday. Brian wanted this, and Justin agreed. They gave each other the rights to everything they own now...and will own in the future. But most of all they are legally a couple," Debbie explained. "And I've never seen either of them happier."

"That's not possible. Justin has a career in New York. Brian is still here. I knew that Justin convinced Brian to open the house, but what you're talking about is something that Brian would never do. He's made his feelings about this sort of thing well known ever since I've known him," Lindsay continued to protest.

"I don't know why you're so surprised," Emmett joined the conversation. "Brian asked Justin to marry him last year."

"But they didn't get married. Justin went off to pursue his career. I really thought that they had given up on the marriage thing," Lindsay pointed out.

"Hoping were you, Lindsay?" Emmett asked sarcastically.

"What do you mean by that?" Lindsay challenged.

"Well, one minute Brian and Justin were about to get married. You evidently convinced them otherwise, so the next thing we knew, Justin was off to New York. Now why do you think that was?" Emmett continued to press for answers.

"Emmett!" Debbie cautioned him.

"Never mind, I think we all know the answer to that, now don't we?" Emmett quipped. "Look, I hate to leave this little tea party, but I really have things to do. I'll see you all later," he said, as he left to finish getting ready to leave.

Lindsay sat there looking stunned. In fact, she looked as if she had been slapped.

"Lindsay, are you all right?" Melanie asked with some concern.

"I'm fine. There must be some mistake. When we see Brian, he'll straighten this all out. He just created the mock celebration for Gus' benefit, that's all," Lindsay rattled on.

"But..." Debbie started to say, but was interrupted by a look from Melanie.

"Well, I guess we should get ready to go too," Melanie suggested. "We have some things to take care of before we have lunch at the mansion. So we should get started."

"Sure," Lindsay said, still in some kind of fog. "Debbie, you'll be here so Michael can pick up Jenny?" Lindsay asked as she reached over to hug her daughter.

"No problem. I'll be here," Debbie agreed, hugging Lindsay goodbye. Melanie reached over to hug Jenny goodbye.

Lindsay and Melanie gathered their things together, leaving Debbie and Jenny alone together in the kitchen.

Chapter 55 – The Day Continues

Late Saturday Morning...(Day 48)

Emmett and Ted

Emmett was on his way to Torso when he passed by Red Cape Comics. Michael was in the store, and Hunter was standing behind the counter. Emmett couldn't help thinking about the discussion at the breakfast table with Lindsay.

Lindsay had interfered more than anyone realized in the relationship with Brian and Justin. As Emmett reflected on everything, he better understood why Brian took the action he did. He made sure they legalized their relationship first, and then told everyone about it later.

Emmett understood all that, but still he couldn't suppress his overriding concern that someone needed to warn Michael. Of course, Emmett knew that he was the gossip queen, but when he assessed the current situation, he realized that too many people already knew about Brian and Justin...none of whom were evidently capable of keeping a simple secret. It had only been 24 hours and look at the number of people who already knew.

He wasn't sure what to do, but Emmett knew that he needed the voice of calm reason, so he walked up Liberty Avenue toward Kinnetik. Emmett realized that Brian must have told Ted the news, because after all, Ted managed the financial affairs for both Brian and Justin, so he figured that Ted was a safe person for him to talk to.

After confirming that Ted was, in fact, at the office, Emmett casually asked if he could drop by. Ted, being the ever-faithful friend, agreed to an interruption to his already jam-packed, thanks-to-Brian, Saturday.

Ted escorted Emmett to his office. There was a moment of silence between the two friends, each waiting for the other to begin. Then finally Emmett spoke up.

"Teddy, you know don't you?" Emmett began.

"I know a lot of things Em, most of which I'm not at liberty to divulge. Would you like to be a tad more specific?" Ted said, believing that thus far he had dodged the first volley.

"You know that Brian and Justin legalized their relationship don't you?" Emmett said, now standing with hands on his hips.

"How do you know that?" Ted innocently asked, guessing that living in the house with Debbie and thin walls, might have something to do with it.

"Brian and Justin told Debbie. Debbie told Carl. I overheard them. So Debbie confirmed it for me," Emmett explained matter-of-factly.

"I see the gay grapevine is working overtime, as usual," Ted said with a laugh. "Pray tell, who else knows?"

"Let's see, Debbie told Melanie. Gus talked about toasts last night at Bri-tin. So Melanie told Lindsay. And I think Justin must have told Jennifer," Emmett relayed. "Since it's obvious that you already knew. I would guess that Ben and Michael are probably the only ones who don't know."

"I see that news still has a way of traveling fast around here," Ted said with a laugh.

"This isn't funny, Teddy. Michael is going to have a fit. You know how possessive he is of Brian. Brian and Justin being legally bound together forever, is Michael's worst nightmare. Someone has got to tell him," Emmett demanded.

"And who, pray tell, are you planning to assign that unpleasant task," Ted asked.

" I was hoping...." Em began but couldn't get any further.

"Forget it Em, as fond as I am of Michael, I definitely love my job more. I'm going to stay out of the line of fire on this one. I recommend that you do the same. Michael is a big boy. He accepted their forthcoming marriage easily last year. He'll do the same thing with this news. After all, nothing has really changed. Brian and Justin have been a couple for a long time now. I just don't see what difference this legal status change really makes," Ted reminded him casually.

"It shouldn't make a difference...but trust me...it does," Emmett acknowledged quietly.

"So what are you going to do?" Ted asked cautiously, hoping against hope that the answer was 'nothing'.

"Well, I'm going to take your advice. I'm going to go shopping. That always makes me feel better."

"Excellent idea, Em," Ted reassured him with a sigh of relief.

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Brian, Justin, Paul, Jason, Nicky, and Gus

Justin carried Nicky downstairs dressed in Paul's designer shirt. The fit of an adult's designer shirt on a four-year-old left much to be desired. The shirt reached all the way down to Nicky's ankles, and Justin had rolled up the sleeves so that Nicky actually had hands available to use. He was really a sight for all to behold.

As Justin and Nicky approached Paul, he thought to himself that it was good thing that Justin was carrying Nicky, because Nicky would surely trip on the shirttail. Paul couldn't resist smiling at the sight of his young son, no matter how improperly dressed he looked. Finally Justin simply held Nicky's hand allowing him to learn to walk in his new outfit.

Nicky struggled to run into Paul's arms. "Daddy, I'm going to go paint," Nicky proclaimed, completely unfazed by his unique appearance.

"And of course you're letting me have one final look my designer shirt," Paul teased with mock sadness, "You're such a good son."

Paul and Jason each gave Nicky a hug, and he happily disappeared with Gus and Justin into the studio.

Justin had already set up the corner of the studio with paints and paper and all sorts of craft toys for Gus and Nicky to work with. Justin dressed Gus in one of Brian's shirts, and he set the kids free to experiment with everything.

Every time that Gus was working on something...Nicky would at first try to copy him. Eventually Nicky got the hang of things, and he was off and running with his own creative ideas.

The time passed quickly.

Periodically, Justin would look over at the two kids, wondering how he was going to get the spattered paint out of Nicky's hair.

Meanwhile, Justin flipped through his sketchpad and found a drawing of Gus and Nicky. He finally decided to capture this image onto canvas.

As Gus and Nicky worked contentedly in their corner, they finished several pictures. As each one was completed, Justin stopped and made sure that they signed and dated their respective works of art.

Justin carefully placed each picture on the wall of the studio, so it could be admired. Gus and Nicky were beaming with pride.

After an hour, Brian decided that Gus and Nicky had probably had enough time in the studio so he gently knocked on the door. "Gus, would you and Nicky like to go shopping with us?" Brian innocently asked.

Two paint covered kids looked at him incredulously. "No Dad, we're busy. We're painting with Jus, see?" Gus said, pointing to all their artwork covering to the walls.

"I see," Brian said as he leaned in and kissed Justin gently, before he left the three of them to continue their artistic endeavors in the studio.

Once safely in the hallway, Brian couldn't help laughing all the way back to the kitchen to relate to Paul and Jason, what he had just seen.

"I'm afraid, we've lost our kids," Brian tried to relate. "Justin is putting their art work all over the walls. The good news is Justin is at least standing by his easel. Gus and Nicky are working in the corner. It's only been an hour or so, and they've already got paint all over them. I have never seen them happier," he relayed with a laugh.

"At least now Justin will stop giving us the lecture about us limiting Nicky's creativity. He's been really concerned about this," Paul reminded them.

"Do you think they're going to come out and join us for lunch?" Jason asked.

"Molly will be here for lunch. Maybe she'll be able to coax them away from Justin and the paints. But she grew up with Justin and his art, so I wouldn't be surprised if she joined them in the studio," Brian added with another laugh. Then his mood suddenly changed.

"What's the matter?" Paul asked, noting the change in demeanor.

"Oh no. If Molly joins them in the studio, that means that I'll probably have to sacrifice another shirt to the cause," Brian said in horror.

"But such a worthy cause," Jason teased.

"The jury's still out on that one," Brian replied, "Wait until you two try to finally de-paint Nicky," he continued to tease. "Then see how worthy the cause is."

"You know Brian, you could have chosen a partner, who was simply a great artist, like I did. Then you could have easily put him to work in the firm," Paul teased, "But oh no, you had to go for a great artist, who works in all mediums. Things were bound to get messy."

"I do get your point," Brian teased back, "And it's really wonderful when Justin has time to work with me at Kinnetik. He's really easy to work with."

"Except for the international incident..." Jason gently reminded him.

"Yeah well, every campaign needs an occasional international intermediary thrown into the mix," Brian quipped. "It does keep things interesting. In fact, while Justin and I were in New York, I had to unexpectedly deal with the our Italian client again."

"Oh no!" Paul said with a laugh. "How did it go?"

"Let me see," Brian tried to figure out exactly how to word this, "They felt I was uncooperative and lacked the proper sensibilities to deal with their problem, so they demanded the opportunity to make their case to Justin...because with his artistic sensibilities...they thought that he would be more attuned to their dilemma."

Paul and Jason couldn't stop laughing. "How do you put up with them?" Paul asked.

"For all their trouble, they are genuinely fond of Justin. It took me a while to figure out that they just missed him, because once he showed up, they wouldn't stop fawning all over him. The daughters are almost as bad as Gus. It's still really embarrassing," Brian said mockingly.

Paul and Jason once again laughed, "How do you think they're going to take the news of your legal partnership? It will probably be published in the New York papers, won't it?" Jason curiously asked.

"Nothing's really changed. They've known we were a couple for quite some time," Brian said casually. "Of course, the daughters will be drama princesses about it, I'm sure. Every time we have a meeting, I now have to hear about their slowly mending broken hearts because Justin chose me instead of one of them. It's just never ending."

"Yes, but now when they have disputes with you they can legally appeal to Justin because now, he really is your equal partner in Kinnetik," Paul reminded him.

"They'll probably try it a few more times. Then Justin will remind them how much trouble he can actually be. I'm not really worried. Things will sort themselves out," Brian said with a knowing smile.

Paul decided to change the subject. "So you think that Molly will join them in the studio?"

"Yeah, but fortunately, Melanie and Lindsay will be here, so at least we'll have someone to talk to," Brian confessed.

"That's good. It's been a long time since we've all been together," Paul said wistfully.

Moments later, Brian, Paul, and Jason were sitting in the kitchen crafting their menu and grocery list for lunch today when Teres quietly entered.

"Brian, what are you doing in the kitchen?" she teased, as if this was the beginning of the apocalypse.

"Contrary to popular opinion, Teres, I do know my way around a kitchen. Maybe not this kitchen yet, but I'm working on it," he teased. "We're having a few friends over for an impromptu lunch, so the three of us were trying to plan things," Brian tried to explain.

Teres tried to use all of the restraint at her disposal to contain the laughter that was about to erupt. "Please, may I join you," she calmly asked, taking a seat. "You know Brian, I thought we'd agreed that you and Justin would leave complex meals to me from now on," she gently reminded him.

"But this was so last minute..." Brian began as a way of explanation. "I couldn't ask you..."

"I'll take care of it. Just tell me how many people?" Teres said, shaking her head.

"Plan on seven adults and two kids," Brian said with a sigh. "Plus you never know who else will suddenly drop by."

"No problem," Teres said with a laugh. "But just for laughs, why don't you three show me what you were planning?"

Brian, Paul, and Jason filled Teres in on their plans so far. Paul and Brian were quick to remind her that they did this for a living, so she was supposed to be suitably impressed.

Teres reminded them that they did complex events. She was thinking more about a simple lunch...buffet-style...assorted selections.

"Teres, just so you know, Paul and I are taking you back to Cincinnati with us," Jason said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. "You're a genius."

"Ok, so we went a bit overboard," Brian finally acknowledged, "It probably comes from hanging around with Justin."

"That may be true. I've heard bits and pieces about Nicky's birthday party," Teres admitted.

"Well, I'll fill you in on all the gory details when we're alone," Jason teased.

"I'd like that," Teres said with a smile. "Now, why don't you just continue to visit? I have everything covered. I'll be back shortly."

Teres walked a few steps towards the door then she stopped, "I take it that Justin and the little ones are busy in his studio?" she asked with a smile.

Brian nodded yes with a laugh, "We may never see them again," he teased.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure that they eat too," she calmly assured them.

"Thanks," Brian said with a laugh.

A few minutes later, Thomas appeared in the kitchen. Brian asked his help in hanging the painting in his study.

Thomas followed his lead. As they passed through the living room, Thomas immediately noticed the painting over the mantel. "I see your last horseback riding adventure has been captured on canvas," he said with a smile. "Justin is a wonderful artist."

They finally reached the study, and Thomas saw the new painting. He couldn't resist teasing Brian just a little more. "I see that you're often a model for Justin's painting. I don't know a lot about art, but I see that Justin has done an excellent job capturing your likeness."

"I'll be sure to tell him," Brian said with a slight laugh. "Ok so, I'm going to hang this one here for a while until I think of a better place to put it."

"Let me go get some tools and hardware. I'll be right back," Thomas said, as he was leaving.

"I like Thomas and Teres," Jason said. "They manage to tease the great Brian Kinney and live to tell about it."

"They know they have me over a barrel. I couldn't possibly run this house without them. They are crazy about Justin, and a bit overprotective too as he gets ready for his shows. So at the moment I seem to be their foible," Brian said with a shrug.

A few minutes later, the painting of 'Brian among the rumpled sheets' was added to a wall of his study. Brian looked around and thought to himself, 'he was going to really enjoy working from home'.

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Jennifer, Molly, and Brian

Brian's musings were interrupted when the doorbell rang. "It's started already."

"Hi Brian, I know that we're a little early," Jennifer said when he opened the door, "But I have to present an offer to a client nearby. You know how it goes," she added with a laugh.

"Unfortunately, yes I do," Brian responded.

"I have some listings in New York to show you, when you have some time," Jennifer said with a laugh, thinking 'when would that ever be'.

Brian brushed aside her obvious dig and changed the subject. "Mother Taylor, this may be a trivial thing, but I have to ask, where's Molly?" Brian gently asked.

"Oh, she's getting her suitcase out of the car, she'll be right in," Jennifer relayed.

"Suitcase?" Brian asked incredulously.

"She said it was ok with you if she stayed overnight," Jennifer said, "Oh Brian, I'm so sorry!" she said in horror, once she figured out that she had been manipulated by Molly.

"It's fine, Mother Taylor. It's not as if Justin and I were here alone," Brian teased. "Besides Nicky and Gus will love it."

"Are you sure?" Jennifer questioned.

"Absolutely. So you may as well tell her it's safe to come in now," Brian said with a laugh.

Jennifer reached back to open the door, and Molly sheepishly entered the foyer.

"Molly, just so you know, you're in a lot a trouble!" Jennifer teased.

"Brian, help me," Molly said, leaning into him for protection, a move so similar to her brother that Brian had to smile.

Brian wrapped his arms around her waist. "I understand you invited yourself to stay overnight?" he teased.

"How else can I play with Nicky and Gus?" Molly asked resolutely, like the reasoning should have been obvious to everyone.

"Well put your suitcase upstairs in YOUR room. I'm sure you already know where it is? Then come back down, and you can say hello to everyone," Brian suggested. "Mother Taylor, I would introduce you to Nicky, but at the moment he's been painting with Justin for several hours now, need I say more?"

"I get the picture," Jennifer said with a smile.

"Why don't you come back and visit with us after you finish with your client. I'll hide a sandwich from Justin for you. We're only going to be hanging out. Come back and spend some time with Paul and Jason. We'll probably even have Nicky cleaned up by then," Brian teased.

"I may just do that," Jennifer said with a laugh, completely surprised by the invitation.

"Bye, Mother Taylor, we're family now," Brian said, leaning down to give Jennifer a kiss goodbye on the cheek.

Jennifer couldn't resist returning a smile, "I'll call you later, Brian."

As Jennifer was leaving, Brian's cell phone started ringing. He quickly answered it.

"Brian, it's Melanie. Lindsay and I just finished our appointment." Melanie continued talking to give him some idea of their location.

"Why don't you two grab a cup a coffee and relax, I'm on my way to pick you up," Brian said. "Do you have Jenny with you?"

"No, she's spending the day with Michael and Debbie. She'll be fine," Melanie assured him.

"I'll see you in about 30 minutes," Brian finally said as he ended the call.

Jason decided he would stay behind and get to know Molly. Plus he and Molly would be available if Teres happened to need any help.

Paul decided to ride with Brian to pick up Lindsay and Melanie.

Before he left, Brian gently knocked on the studio door. As Justin opened the door with paintbrush in his hand, Brian reached out and pulled him into an embrace. "Alone at last," he said, as he reached down and kissed Justin.

"Brian, you're going to get paint all over you," Justin protested, wriggling free to put the brush back in his studio and covering his work on his easel, before rejoining Brian in the hallway. "Now where were we," Justin asked, snuggling into Brian arms again, then leaning up to give Brian a kiss. "Much better," he quipped.

"How's the painting going?" Brian asked.

"Well, Gus and Nicky have been painting for hours. The wall of my studio is covered with their work. I can't believe they were content to stay so long with me in the studio. I thought they would have left ages ago."

"You and paint are a pretty hard combination to beat, especially when they can get paint everywhere. That's really a treat when you're a little kid," Brian said with a laugh.

"Did you get any painting done?" Brian hesitantly asked.

"A little," Justin answered, wrinkling up his nose. "But don't worry about it. I think I'm going to finish up this part I was working on, and then I think I'll take a break."

"Sounds like a plan. Melanie called. Paul and I are going to pick up them up. Jason is going to stay here, in case he's needed. Teres insisted on handling lunch. Mother Taylor may be back. It's just a lazy afternoon at the Taylor-Kinney's," Brian said, leaning down to gently kiss his partner again.

"So it seems."

Brian was about to leave, when Justin said quietly, "Be sure to stop by and see Michael," he said sternly.

"Sunshine..." Brian protested.

"Brian, it's time," Justin said quietly.

Brian simply closed the studio door without saying a word, but this was a task he was not looking forward to.

When he returned to the kitchen, he found Jason and Molly deep in conversation with a sketchpad between them.

Brian just shook his head and retrieved Paul to leave for the trip into town.

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Emmett and Ben

Meanwhile, Emmett was having trouble shopping. He was really concerned about Michael. His loyalty to Brian and Justin precluded him from personally calling or visiting Michael. Emmett was clearly afraid that he couldn't restrain himself from blurting out the truth.

Ted had been of no significant help...a fact that Emmett found disturbing, for he had always relied on Ted in a crisis.

Finally finding no peace and yet desperately needing to shop, Emmett reached for his cell phone. Emmett knew it was time to place a critical call.

"Ben, it's Emmett," he began once the phone had been answered.

"Emmett, are you looking for Michael? He's not here."

"I sort of know he's not there, Ben. I need to talk to you about something," Emmett stated firmly.

"Sure, what's on your mind?" Ben innocently asked.

"Ben do you know what a legalized domestic partnership is?"

Ben immediately rattled off the entire legislative history of the legalized domestic partnership...including the fact that it was the most the most binding commitment two people could make. After Ben finished his summary, which sounded more like one of his classroom lectures, he waited to see what Emmett would say next.

"Wow, Ben, it's easy to see that you're up on your law," Emmett commented.

"Was this simply a test of my legal knowledge, or did you have some specific reason for bringing up the legalized domestic partnership?" Ben innocently asked.

"Oh, I had a specific reason for bringing it up," Emmett said, fanning away the vapors, even though no one could see through the phone.

"And that would be?" Ben asked haltingly.

"Ok Ben, before I tell you, I need you to promise me that you won't tell another living soul?" Emmett declared.

"Sure Emmett, you know I can be trusted to keep your confidence," Ben reminded him.

Emmett took a deep breath. "Brian and Justin signed papers yesterday to legalize their domestic partnership. Their relationship is now sanctioned by law. They are now eternally legally-bound partners," Emmett managed to say in one breath.

"Are you sure?" Ben asked.

"Why do you ask me if I'm sure?" Emmett asked in return.

"Because I can't believe that Brian would make a move like that without telling Michael. And if Michael knew, I'm sure he would have said something to me about it," Ben answered with a laugh. "Now I realize that you're plugged into the gay grapevine and all, so of course, you hear everything WAY before the rest of us, but on this one, I just think your information may be a little off," Ben teased.

"I thought you might think that, so that's why I'm calling. I'm not sure if Michael has heard yet. When he does, he going to need you more than ever." Emmett explained calmly.

"But Em, if it's true, why hasn't Brian told Michael?" Ben asked with some concern.

"From what I understand Brian plans to tell Michael. But, Ben this all only happened yesterday morning. Brian and Justin have been swamped with out of town guests plus Gus since last night. I'm sure he hasn't had a chance to get away to see Michael. And you've got to admit, this isn't the kind of news that Brian can deliver to Michael by text message, email or phone," Emmett pointed out.

"No, you've got a point there," Ben had to agree. Then he thought for a moment. "You know, Emmett, if it's true, you have to admit, it's really great news. Brian finally settling down with Justin has to really be the best news."

"I have to agree with you. We were all hoping for this last year. But things didn't work out then. Now that makes it all the 'more sweeter' that it happened now, don't you think? Isn't it romantic?" Emmett began to gush.

"Easy, Em," Ben began to caution. "Even if it's true...this is still Brian we're talking about. Romantic may still be a bit strong, but I understand your sentiment," he added with a laugh. "If it's true, it's really big news. Wow! Now, tell me again why you chose to share this juicy bit of gossip with me?"

"Ben, how can you ask...we're family!" Emmett continued to gush.

"I will admit, I love gossip as much as the next person, but let's keep that our little secret. Okay?" Ben quipped.

"I can do that, provided you'll keep mine," Emmett cooed.

"Which is?" Ben had to ask.

"You can't let on to anyone that you know...you promised," Emmett reminded him sternly.

"Emmett, answer something for me. If I have to keep it a secret, why on earth did you tell me?" Ben asked on reconsideration.

"I just wanted to be sure that you were prepared," Emmett suggested strongly.

"Prepared for what?" Ben innocently asked.

"You know if Michael hears the news from the gay grapevine before Brian gets a chance to tell him directly, he's going to have a true drama queen moment," Emmett suggested. "I just wanted to be sure that you were armed with the facts to cope with it."

"Thank you. I appreciate that. Now all we have to do is keep Michael away from the Diner until Brian has a chance to talk with him," Ben teased. "Let's face it, the comic book store's clientele are unlikely to relay gossip...but the Diner is definitely another story."

"Good point, I hadn't considered that," Emmett said wistfully.

"Well, let me get back to my muffins. I'll talk to you later," Ben said, as he was about to hang up.

"Muffins? Ben, are you planning on giving us samples again?" Emmett cautiously asked.

"No, No. These are a surprise for Justin, someone who actually appreciates a good muffin," Ben quipped.

"Sure, Ben, whatever you say. I'll talk to you later." Emmett said signing off.

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Molly, Justin, Gus, Nicky, and Jason

There was a gentle knock on Justin's studio door. Justin opened the door to find Molly standing there.

"Justin, can I come in?" Molly quietly asked, knowing full well that her brother's studio was hallowed ground.

"Mollusk, when did you get here?" Justin asked trying not to allow room for his sister to enter, but that didn't work.

"Molly!" Gus said, when he saw who was standing at the door. Gus immediately scrambled to his feet and started to run in the direction of the new object of his attention. Nicky immediately followed suit. Gus felt himself halted mid-stride, which also caused Nicky to stop. Both of them looked up at Justin with this pained expression on their faces.

"Whoa there, you two," Justin said with a laugh. "You have paint everywhere. Wait a minute."

Justin removed the shirts from Gus and Nicky and wiped the excess paint from accessible areas. Then he released the two little dynamos so that they could greet Molly.

Molly found herself hugged first by Gus. Then she was introduced to and hugged by Nicky.

"Now tell me why you're here again, Mollusk?" Justin teased.

"I'm here to rescue Gus and Nicky from the your studio. I thought they might like to spend some time outside with me," Molly suggested. "We can hike without going off the property. What do you think guys?"

Gus and Nicky looked at Justin, and then at Molly. "Will you be ok if we leave you alone?" Gus asked, wrapping his arms now around Justin.

"I think I'll be fine. You two go ahead and have fun. But let's see if we can get you de-painted before you go," Justin teased.

So Molly and Justin removed as much paint as possible from the faces, hands, arms, and hair of Gus and Nicky. They helped Justin clean up the corner, and re-hung the kids' shirts on hooks in the studio.

"Those are cool smocks," Molly teased, "You just don't see smocks like those everyday."

"Are you done?" Justin asked with mock exasperation.

Gus and Nicky kissed Justin goodbye and left with Molly.

Molly led Gus and Nicky into the living room where Jason was sitting.

"So Molly, you were able to pry the little ones away from Justin," Jason said with a laugh, "Not an easy feat. Brian and Paul have already left to pick up Melanie and Lindsay. They'll be back shortly. I thought you and I would stick around in case Teres needs some help."

"We're going outside for a while," Molly announced. "Don't worry, we'll just be out back."

"If you're interested, I think there's a soccer ball near the door," Jason mentioned. "I also think Thomas is back there too. I'll give you guys plenty of warning, so you can get cleaned up before lunch or if we need you."

"Great," Molly said with a big smile.

Jason went with Gus and Nicky to help them find warm clothes. Then Molly, Gus and Nicky disappeared out the back door.

"I'm going to go check on Justin," Jason said softly.

Jason gently knocked on the door to the studio. "I just came to make sure you're ok," Jason teased, "Did you get any painting done?"

"I started a new canvas, and things seem to be going ok," Justin admitted.

"Well Molly and the kids are outside. Don't worry. Thomas is back there too. I'm sticking around to keep Teres company," Jason admitted with a smile.

"That's good, Teres likes company in the kitchen when she's working," Justin pointed out. "I'm only going to do a little bit more on the painting, and then I think I'll join you. It's probably time that I took a break. I haven't been a very good host."

"Are you kidding? There hasn't been a dull moment since we arrived here. Paul and I are having a ball. This has been a relaxing weekend. And if you get any painting done at all, then Brian's plan will have worked. So go ahead and paint. I'll be in the kitchen with Teres," Jason said. "I'll also keep an eye on Molly and the kids."

"Thanks," Justin said, turning back into his studio.

Chapter 56 – We Have News, Part 6

Saturday Late Morning...(Day 48)

Brian and Paul were on their way from Bri-tin into Pittsburgh to pick up Melanie and Lindsay.

"Ok Brian," Paul began once they were on the highway, "I know it's a long ride into town, and it's just you and me. Jason knows the whole story because he talked to Justin, but I only have bits and pieces. So will you please tell me about the Milan account?"

"Ok, I'll make this quick. One of my US accounts formed a joint venture with an Italian company. Because we were the ad agency for the US company, we were asked to make a presentation. I was already driving my staff crazy with Justin in New York, so Cynthia said I couldn't use any staff for the presentation. She then suggested I ask Justin to come back here and help with the presentation. Then it turned out that Justin had worked on an earlier campaign for the same Italian company when he was an intern at Vanguard."

"That was a stroke of luck."

"It turns out that the owner of the Italian firm was crazy about Justin. Even wanted Justin to marry one of his two daughters...both of whom are now officers of the firm. When they showed up, the women were hanging all over Justin. It was embarrassing."

"I'll bet. Didn't they know that he's gay?" Paul asked with a laugh.

"They knew. They didn't care...that's what makes it worse. Anyway, we made two presentations. Everybody loved them. But then they wanted us to create another campaign on the spot. Justin and the owner had this argument in Italian. I have no idea what they said. Justin suddenly withdrew all the campaigns from consideration and walked out of the room."

"He can't do that. You didn't let Justin get away with it did you, Brian?" Paul questioned. "I know you love him, but this is business."

"He was right, Paul. It would have been a waste of time to create another campaign, when they had already said they loved the two we had already shown them. So I did nothing."

"So then what happened?"

"The client, being Italian, had to figure out a way to apologize to Justin, since he believed Justin was the key to getting either of the campaigns, he now wanted, released. So he called his childhood friend who happened to be the director of a gallery in Milan.

"What!"

"He had his friend hop a flight...fly from Milan to the US ... act as an intermediary and give his apology to Justin...and return to Milan. Justin accepted the apology and released the campaigns and we got the signed contract."

"You're kidding?"

"The Director of the gallery saw Justin's work in the lobby of Kinnetik and invited him to apply for the exhibit. You know the rest."

"Oh my god. That's an amazing story."

"It gets worse."

"The client is so crazy about Justin...they wanted to make him the ad exec instead of me, believing that he would be easier to work with. His partner talked them out of the idea. Anyway the client seems to be recommending Kinnetik to other international firms. When we open the New York office, we will actually have clients already based there. I'm really excited about things. It's going to mean a lot of work setting up an office and a residence in New York."

"But fortunately you have Justin to help, even if Gus and Nicky act likes he's another little kid," Paul said with laugh.

"You mean even if Gus and Nicky think that he exists only for them," Brian corrected him.

"I have noticed that," Paul remarked with a smile. Then he sought to change the topic, "So we're picking up Melanie and Lindsay. I'm looking forward to this. Although how are you going to tell Lindsay about you and Justin?"

"I think she probably already knows. Gus dropped enough hints about toasts this morning. I'm sure she knows something is up even if she can't yet connect all the dots."

"Well, don't worry, I'll follow your lead once we pick them up. I'll only talk about what you want me to," Paul reassured him.

"I have to make one stop before I pick them up though," Brian casually announced.

"Oh?"

"Justin is insisting that I tell Michael in person about us while I'm in town."

"I remember Michael. Over the years, he has always thought that you were his personal possession. Even back when you were in college, he felt that way."

"We've been close since we were 14. That's a long time! He and Justin are business partners on Rage. In the end, he'll be happy for Justin and me, but he'll be pissed in the beginning because he didn't get a chance to be my best man." Brian said with a laugh.

"While you're talking to Michael, I better call home and update the moms. I have so much to tell them already." Paul said with a laugh. "But Brian, I just want you to know I'm here for you if you need me."

"I really did know that," Brian said with a smile, "Although, I'm learning it doesn't hurt to hear the words."

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"Yo, shopkeep!" Brian called out as he breezed into Red Cape Comics.

"Brian!" Michael said, in greeting and then scurried around from behind the counter to wrap his arms around his friend.

"Yeah...yeah," Brian grumbled, trying to extricate himself from Michael's grasp.

"Where have you been?" Michael had to ask.

"Cincinnati, New York, West Virginia. Justin kicked me out of the mansion, so I thought I would come and visit you."

"What do you mean Justin kicked you out of the mansion?" Michael asked with some concern.

Whatever Brian was about to say was interrupted as Brian noticed little footsteps heading in his direction.

"Jenny!" he said, and he watched the toddler's unsteadily run towards him. Brian quickly picked her up. Jenny immediately squealed her pleasure and wrapped her arms around Brian's neck. "How's my girl?" he continued to talk to her.

"She's usually so standoffish, but you two seem like old friends," Michael complained.

"Jenny and I have seen quite a bit of each other lately, whenever I've visited Gus...isn't that right Jenny." Once again, Jenny squealed, and then buried her face into Brian's shoulder.

"So you've finally come to your senses," Hunter voluntarily added as he entered the room, "At last you're getting rid of the bleached blond because you know that I'm right here waiting for you," he continued to flirt. "What took you so long?"

"Sorry kid, you can keep trying," Brian quipped. "No actually, I just came in to see you, Mikey. I feel like I've been neglecting you."

Hunter took this opportunity to decide that the friends would probably like some privacy, so he reached out to Jenny, who willing came into his arms. "Well, JR and I are going to the Diner for a snack," Hunter said with a smile, "We'll be back shortly. Can I bring you anything, Brian?"

"Thanks anyway. No." Brian responded. Then he turned his attention back to Michael. "It must be nice having Jenny visit you this weekend," he continued.

"It is. I just wish that she were here all the time. In fact, I wish that Mel and Linds would move back to Pittsburgh," Michael immediately explained.

"We all miss them. But I guess you know that there's not much chance of them moving back here?" Brian went on to explain.

"You were right last year. I shouldn't have given my blessing for their move to Toronto," Michael whispered remorsefully.

"Don't be so hard on yourself Mikey. Last year you were almost killed. So your judgment was a little off. But what's done is done. Now we just have to make the best of the periodic visits with our kids," Brian suggested.

"Easy for you to say. You've probably spent almost every weekend lately with Gus," Michael grumbled.

"That's true. But that's because my kid adores Justin. It doesn't matter what I say, in Gus' mind, Justin belongs to him."

"But you know Gus is crazy about you too?"

"Yeah, I do know that." Brian said with a smile.

"I want Mel and Linds to move back here!" Michael insisted with a pout.

"Unfortunately, it doesn't matter what YOU want. Mel and Linds have chosen to live in Toronto. As long as they allow us to see our kids, I don't see what the problem is."

" I want to spend time with my daughter every day."

"Then Michael, you and Ben need to adopt another child...this time a little girl. That wasn't the agreement when you agreed to father Jenny. If you want to be a full-time parent, you need to have your own children...not interfere with the raising of this daughter. I don't see what the problem is, you can go visit anytime you want."

"Me and Ben can't keep making trips to Toronto. After all, I have the store to run and Ben has classes and stuff."

"So what's the problem?"

"Things just haven't turned out the way I wanted them to. I tried to talk Ben into teaching in Toronto, but he doesn't want to leave Carnegie Mellon," Michael complained.

"With his HIV status and all, I can't say that I blame him," Brian acknowledged. "He has tenure and all. He's worked very hard for all that, so he has a lot to lose."

"But I want to spend more time with my daughter!" Michael complained, paying no attention to what Brian just said. "That should be all that's important."

"Get a grip, Mikey. Ben is a patient man, but you can push him too far. Why can't you be content and appreciate what you have? And Mikey, you have a lot! But no matter what, you never seem satisfied. You always seem to want more. If you keep this up, you could lose everything," Brian cautioned him.

Seeing that Brian was not going to agree with him, Michael wanted to quickly change the subject. "I guess you're right," he said to placate Brian.

"Look, Mikey. I came into to see you because I have news," Brian said with some enthusiasm in his voice.

"Oh?" Michael was not curious.

"Yesterday, Justin and I signed a shit load of papers at my attorney's office. We're now officially legalized domestic partners," Brian said joyously, as he waited for Michael's reaction.

"That's nice," Michael said, without too much enthusiasm. "Exactly what does that mean? Is that like me and Ben so I could be covered on his health insurance?" he finally asked in hope of dispelling his own confusion.

Brian smiled. "Not quite. I did more than sign up for Justin and I to be domestic partners. And he's been covered by my insurance since he was 17. No, Justin and I signed legal documents to give to each other everything that we own at this moment...and rights to everything that we will own in the future...forever and ever. As of yesterday, Justin and I are legally bound together forever," he finally explained. Then Brian just stood there smiling.

"I can't believe that you and Justin got married. You swore that you would never do anything like that. Isn't that why you didn't get married last year? Of course, I knew that you would never go through with the marriage then. That's not who you are. That would mean giving up tricking and all. And I know that you would never do that," Michael responded confidently because, of course, he knew Brian so well.

"Mikey, I asked Justin to marry me a year ago. I meant that proposal as I've never meant anything else. We would have gotten married then, except we became convinced that Justin needed to go to New York to begin his career," Brian explained.

"But I thought when Justin went off to New York...I thought the little prick was out of our lives. Doesn't it matter that you keep offering him everything, and he keeps leaving you all alone? I don't understand why you would take him back after the way he keeps humiliating you," Michael tried to refresh Brian's memory.

"Excuse me? Justin was never out of our lives when he went to New York. He and I were still in a relationship...we were still partners...we just lived in two different cities. We never really broke up. What made you think that we had?" Brian asked. "Surely you've seen us together for the last month or so. What did you think was going on?"

"You and I used to talk about everything. After all, I am your best friend. Why didn't you ever tell me what was going on with you and Justin? Why didn't you tell me that you and Justin were back to being more than a couple?" Michael demanded to know.

"I can't understand why you would think that Justin and I broke up. Didn't you notice that I was traveling to New York? Although I will admit, you've been really busy with your own life over the last year, so I guess you and I haven't really spent that much time together lately," Brian said on reflection.

"And whose fault is that? I thought that with Justin in New York and Gus in Toronto, you and I would spend more time together. But over the last year you were always traveling...I thought you were doing all this traveling on business," Michael replied with some hostility. "Since I knew that for a long time you weren't allowed to visit Gus. But you never returned my phone calls, so how was I to know where you were. It's a good thing that I didn't have to reach you because of an emergency or anything."

"If there had been an emergency, you would have contacted Cynthia, like always, and she would have known how to get in touch with me," Brian reminded him. "So it really didn't matter where I was. Now did it?"

"So did you and Justin get married? Is that what you're trying to tell me?" Michael patiently asked again.

"No, Justin and I didn't get married. Justin and I don't need rings or vows to prove we love each other. We're legal domestic partners," Brian calmly explained again.

"Well at least you weren't stupid enough to marry him," Michael mumbled. "At least you knew that would be a disaster."

"Mikey, Justin and I didn't get married because marriages aren't legal. We're legal domestic partners because this way, the law sanctions our union," Brian calmly explained.

"I know you only did this because Justin pressured you into it. That's good that you didn't get married, so when the twink runs off again, you can easily dissolve this thing that Justin forced you into and move on with your life," Michael revealed.

"Mikey, first of all Justin didn't force me into this. I wanted this more than he did. He just made sure that we stayed equal partners. He gave me the rights to everything he owns now and in the future too," Brian said with a smile, remembering Justin's surprise gesture in his attorney's office.

"Well that's not very much," Michael said with a dismissive laugh.

"It includes Rage! It includes all his art! And judging by the value of the painting that you have hanging in your office," Brian said, pointing in that direction for emphasis, "I would say that's pretty substantial. And as for dissolving this, we would have to go to court to dissolve this. No simple little mutual agreement or divorce will end this. So for all practical purposes we are legally bound together forever. So I would say, we're definitely more than married," Brian said with a slight laugh.

"How could you agree to something like this?" Michael asked in total disbelief.

"Because I wanted our union to be legal. Justin and I will be together forever. That's the way I want it...that's the way Justin wanted it too. We're both very happy. I'm looking forward to growing old with Justin by my side. I love him, Michael. Surely you know that...surely you've known that for a long time now. I just came here so you could wish us well," Brian proclaimed.

Michael's anger finally raged. "That's bullshit! Growing old! You never wanted to grow old! You have always wanted to die young ever since we were 14. And now what you've done has let some little blond twink get his clutches into everything that you've worked a lifetime to build. I can't believe that you did that," Michael loudly protested.

"You know that Justin could care less about my money. He stood proudly by me when I lost everything. Besides, Justin is going to be a success in his own right. He's a wonderful artist. Surely you know that," Brian reminded him.

"And what about us?" Michael demanded to know.

"What do you mean, what about us? I'll always love you Michael, you know that. You and I are still best friends. Nothing has changed."

"But you promised me more that just being your best friend. You promised that we would settle down together when we were 'two old queens in Palm Springs'. I had planned to grow old with you," Michael reminded him.

"We'll always be friends, Michael. We'll always be there for each other."

"Friends! That's not enough!" Michael screeched.

"Michael, I thought we settled all this a very long time ago. You and I were never going to be a couple," Brian reminded him quietly.

"But you always told me that you loved me and always would. I thought that it meant that after your tricking days were over, that we would be together. I've been waiting for you all this time. And now you do this!" Michael protested.

"Need I remind you that you're married? You have a husband and a family. You went on and built a life for yourself. I thought that you were happy. I thought that you loved Ben. Why would you still be holding on to this fantasy?" Brian inquired, completely confused by the turn of events.

"I do love Ben, and Ben and I will be always be together as long as he lives. But you and I both know that Ben isn't going to live forever because of his HIV status. I figured by the time Ben died, you would be ready to stop tricking and settle down with me. Then you and I would spend the rest of our lives together in Palm Springs. You promised we would always be there for each other. Now what am I supposed to do, when Ben is gone? Now I'm going to be all alone. How could you do this to me?" Michael recounted so Brian would understand.

"I have loved you since I was 14. If it hadn't been for you and Debbie, I wouldn't have made it through my childhood to have a chance to grow up. But I have always loved you like a brother. You're my oldest and dearest friend. But Michael, I'm IN LOVE with Justin. I admit, I never thought it would happen to me. I don't even know when it happened. I just know that he's the one I want to spend the rest of my life with," Brian said in his own defense.

"You and Justin don't see eye-to-eye on anything. Why would you risk everything you've worked for on a little blond bubble butt? You could have had anyone you wanted," Michael reminded him.

"I know that. And the one I wanted was Justin. And I finally got him. He belongs to me...and I belong to him. I may be having some trouble getting my son to understand things...he seems to think I did all this, so he and I could share Justin." Brian explained with a gentle laugh.

"So what happened to the no bars on the window or no locks on the doors? What about being free to leave?" Michael challenged.

"That's over! I may have been stupid enough to let him walk away from me before. But I promise you that I will fight with everything I've got to never let that happen again. I know he drives me crazy. But he understands me; he's done things for me that you'll never know about. And I'm just beginning to understand how much he really does love me. He IS the person I want to build a life with," Brian said emphatically.

Michael finally started to calm down and see the big picture. "Why him? Why him and not me? I've been waiting for you for a lifetime...ever since we were 14?" Michael had to ask the eternal question, one more time.

"I can't answer that. What I can tell you is that it simply IS him. It's ALWAYS going to be him. And I'm willing to gamble everything I have now or will have in the future on that one simple fact. He's it for me, Michael. I know as surely as I'm standing here, I'll never again feel this way about anyone. He changed everything. And I'm sure when you have time to think about it, you'll realize that I'm right."

"I can't believe that you let him work some magic spell over you," Michael declared softly, "JT has no superpowers, if you will remember?"

"I remember," Brian added with a smile, realizing that Michael's mind had to convert everything to a comic book reference to try to understand the incomprehensible.

"Look, I came here hoping that my best friend would wish me and my new legal partner well. I had no idea that you still harbored these feelings. I thought we were done with this discussion a long time ago. I'm disappointed that you still feel this way. I would have thought that you wanted me to be happy. I see that I was wrong," Brian whispered sadly.

"I do want you to be happy. But Justin isn't going to make that happen. Can't you see that? No matter what you think, Justin doesn't understand you...not the way that I do. Justin will cause you nothing but grief. Haven't these years taught you anything? You won't be happy until later when you and I are together in Palm Springs," Michael reminded him one more time.

"But if you can't be happy for me that's ok. You go on with your life, and I'll move on with mine. I always thought we would be there for each other. I always thought we would take care of each other...like best friends do. That's what we always promised each other. But if that's not possible, I can understand. Either way, I have a life to live with Justin, and I intend to live it. And you have your own life to live too. So you take care now. Goodbye Michael," Brian calmly said, and he turned to walk out of the store.

Hunter returned to the comic book store at that moment, carrying Jenny Rebecca in his arms.

"Goodbye Hunter, I'll see you around." Brian said, as he was leaving. He stopped for a moment to rustled Jenny's hair. And then Brian was gone.

"What was that all about?" Hunter asked, taking in the tortured look on Michael's face.

"Nothing," Michael said sadly. "Look, can you watch JR and the store for me for a bit. I'm going to the Diner."

"Sure," Hunter responded easily.

When Michael had left the store, Hunter reached for his cell phone to call Ben.

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Brian returned back to the car after meeting with Michael. Paul could see that Brian was upset.

"I don't have to ask how things went," Paul quietly stated. "Just give him some time. You have to admit your news can be a bit of a shock, especially when you take into account the bullshit you've spouted over the years," he added with a laugh.

"Maybe, I guess you're right. I was really convincing, wasn't I?" Brian managed to say with a slight laugh. "Everybody bought the bullshit except Gus and Justin, but that's not what this is about. This is about people moving on with their lives, but not wanting me to have the same chance for happiness in mine...I'm supposed to remain the same. That's bullshit!"

"Are you going to be all right?" Paul quietly asked.

Brian thought for a minute and then smiled and said, "Yeah. I'm going to be fine. Fuck 'em all!"

"Let's go get Lindsay and Melanie," Paul suggested, "So we can party at the mansion."

"Party at the mansion, huh? Let's!" Brian agreed, allowing a smile to break through.

Chapter 57 - Afterwards

Late Saturday Morning...(Day 48)

Michael, Debbie, Emmett, and Ben

When Michael entered the Diner, it was quiet. Debbie was not out front, so Michael quickly moved to an out of the way booth towards the back. He just sat there, staring off into space...remembering another time.

Beginning of flashback.

Brian and Michael are smoking a joint at the loft, shortly after Vic's funeral.

"You look like you could use a blowjob," Brian said to Michael.

"I'll settle for a joint. I suddenly feel a preponderance of death," Michael replied, taking the joint that Brian offered.

"Wasn't that a play by Arthur Miller?"

"It's an unsettling observation by Michael Novotny...everywhere I turn, I'm confronted with the inevitable fact of one's mortality."

"Death can really hang you up the most," Brian said quietly.

"I don't mean just Vic, but Ben and Hunter. It's a horrible thing to say. I don't even like to think it, but they could die just like him, and I'd be the one left to pack up their stuff and turn out the lights."

"Just because they're positive, doesn't mean they're going to be the first to go. Hell...it could be you. You could step out in the street, and you could be hit by a Mercedes Compressor. It's so much classier than a bus."

"Thanks."

"You could go down to the post office to buy a stamp, and pop, get be blown away by a disgruntled employee. In case you haven't noticed, these days, they're all disgruntled."

Michael wrapped his arms around Brian for just a moment, before releasing him.

"I just...I just get scared of the thought of being alone," Michael stated almost in tears.

"That's how we all came in...that's how we're all going out," Brian quipped back in response.

"Yeah, but until then I...I prefer at least the illusion that someone else will be there... even only temporarily."

"Think what you want. The less you have to hold on to...the easier it is to let go," Brian said, removing and opening two bottles of beer from the refrigerator.

"Maybe so. Still, I'm glad I have you." Michael said, clinking his bottle of beer with Brian's.

"Who said anything about me?" Brian tried to laugh.

"At least I know that no matter what happens, we'll always have each other. We always have. Right?" Michael said in reply, wrapping his arms around Brian again.

End of flashback.

Debbie came back into the Diner, carrying an order for one of the tables; she saw Michael sitting there alone in the booth. She quickly delivered the order to the customer, and then went to join her son. "I'm surprised to see you. Where's JR?" she asked with some concern, sliding into the both beside him.

"Hunter is watching her. She'll be fine. I just needed a few minutes to myself," Michael said sadly.

Debbie immediately started feeling Michael's forehead and the side of his neck with her hand. "You don't look too good. Are you all right?" she asked.

Michael allowed himself to be medically tested, without any protest. The hands were probably more accurate than any thermometer. In Debbie's eyes, he was once again her little baby boy, who just found out that there was no Santa Claus or Tooth Fairy or Easter Bunny. Debbie wanted to wrap him in her arms and rock him and tell him everything was going to be ok. But he wasn't her little baby boy anymore; he was a 35-year-old man.

So instead, she simply said, "Can I get you anything... maybe tea, coffee, or Diet Pepsi?"

"A Diet Pepsi would be good," he finally agreed.

Debbie was about to get up to get the soda, when Michael extended his hand and placed it gently on her arm. It was enough to cause Debbie to stop. Michael raised his head and looked at his mother, with drooping puppy-dog eyes that were starting to fill with tears. Finally, he said, "You know don't you? You know about Brian and Justin?"

"Yes," Debbie said softly, placing one of her hands on top of his.

Michael allowed the tears that he'd been holding back to finally stream down his cheeks.

"Let me go get your soda, and I'll be right back," she said, placing a stack of napkins in front of her son before she left.

Debbie returned a few moments later with a soda for Michael and one for herself. She made herself comfortable in the booth again, this time opposite Michael.

"What am I going to do, Ma?" he asked. "How could Brian do this to me? I'm his best friend."

"Honey, what exactly is it that you think that Brian did to you this time?" Debbie had to ask, already having difficulty following her son's logic.

"We were supposed to be 'two old queens in Palm Springs'. We've planned it since we were 14. That's not going to happen now. I don't even recognize Brian anymore. Brian is talking about growing old! He's actually looking forward to growing old now...growing old together with Justin," he started to explain...each statement dripping with his personal pain.

"And that's going to be fucking difficult because Sunshine is never going to age," she said with a laugh.

"Mother, will you pay attention," he retorted with anger that his mother could find some measure of humor in his present moment of pain, "I'm suffering here! Look what Brian did to me!"

Debbie had heard enough. "Look you little shit! Get your head out of your ass and listen to me!" she said sternly, now starting to wave one pointed finger in the air. The movements of said finger were more pronounced by the color polish she had chosen for the nail.

Michael immediately sat up straight. He knew this mother-tone very well.

She continued, "I know that I'm usually the first one to blame Brian...but not this time! Brian has told you in every way possible over the years how he feels about you...and how he feels about Justin! Brian and Justin love each other. You...know...that! I think it's wonderful that they finally made it legal."

"How long have you known?" Michael finally asked.

"Brian and Justin told me together yesterday afternoon. They swore me to secrecy so that Brian could tell you himself. Please tell me that when he told you...you had the fucking balls to at least wish your best friend well?" Debbie demanded to know.

"Wish him well? I told him that Justin didn't understand him and would never be able to make him happy. I told him that he wouldn't be happy until he and I were 'two queens together in Palm Springs'..." Michael was quite wound up and was just about to recite a further litany, when he was stopped.

Feeling the point of Debbie's finger under his chin, he lifted his face as he was forced to look her in the eye.

"Oh no you didn't!" she said in disbelief. And Debbie remembered the Brian Kinney that sat across from her with Justin by his side. A man, who no longer cared what anyone else thought about the decisions he made and would no longer put up with the bullshit of the past. She knew at this moment that Michael had sealed his own fate.

Debbie knew it. The question was could she find the words to explain the new reality to her son. Being a bit uncertain, she simply asked, "What did he say?"

"He told me to have a good life, and then he said goodbye," Michael recounted. "But I'm not worried. He didn't mean it. I'll give him a few days to come to his senses, and then he'll be looking for me like always. Brian will never change. This is just some momentary spell that he is under. After all, he's Brian fucking Kinney."

"Honey, I talked to Brian after he and Sunshine made things legal. Brian has changed. He's a different person. He's confident about his decision regarding Justin. Brian really doesn't give a rat's ass what you or anyone else thinks about his fucking decision. It's done! You have to accept that! It's time for you to move on. It's time for you to wish him well!" she insisted strongly.

"How can I wish him well when he's made a big mistake?" Michael continued. "He has to fix this. I just have to hope he comes to his senses before it's too late. I..." Michael continued until his speech of superiority was suddenly interrupted by another voice.

"What did you think, Michael, that you could be with Ben? That you could have your life with Ben and Hunter and JR, and what...Brian was just going to be all alone until the end of time? Don't you think he deserves to be happy too?" Emmett asked pointedly, while standing by the booth.

"Brian was happy. He's been happy all these years. Tricking is who Brian Kinney is! He's never going to change! I have been explaining that simple fact to Justin since the first night that he and Brian met. Justin has always wanted something different. Brian can never be what Justin wants. Justin is just going to leave like he always does. I'll be left to pick up the pieces like always. Only this time Justin will walk away with all that Brian's worked for," Michael said, his anger rising with each statement.

"Michael," Emmett said quietly, not willing to participate in the tirade he'd just heard. "Brian has changed. His relationship with Justin over the years has changed him, can't you see that?"

"So you know too?" Michael asked in anger, clearly not liking the way events were preceding. Michael firmly believed he was the righteous victim here, and he just couldn't understand why no one else could see it.

"I found out by accident," Emmett gently explained. "But I think it's wonderful!" he gushed.

Michael looked at Emmett in total disbelief at what he was hearing.

But before Michael could say anything, Emmett took the initiative again. "And I know that all your dreams of growing old with Brian are now gone, but Brian still loves you. You two can still be friends...best friends...as soon as you find a way to apologize to him," Emmett explained.

"Apologize to him?" Michael protested. "Brian will eventually come to his senses, and then he will apologize to me!" he reiterated. "It won't take long. I can wait."

With that comment, Emmett knew he was fighting a losing battle, so he just sighed deeply, and then he reached for one of the menus, appearing to contemplate his lunch selections.

"Emmett, honey, why do you have a menu? Surely by now, you know the whole menu by heart?" Debbie questioned with a laugh.

"I wonder," Emmett began nonchalantly, " I wonder, what Melanie and Lindsay are having for lunch? Of course you know, they were invited to lunch at the mansion," he gushed with a smile.

"Mel and Linds are at the mansion? How did that happen?" Michael asked with complete disbelief, becoming further upset by the turn of events.

"Lindsay begged Justin for an invite. He finally agreed. Paul and Jason are there too. Remember Lindsay went to school with Paul and Brian, so this is a reunion of sorts. Gus and Nicky are having a weekend play date. I bet there's a big celebration happening out there right now!" Emmett enjoyed relaying, adding his own embellishments as he went along.

"Well, why wasn't I invited? After all, Brian is my best friend," Michael professed again.

"Like I told you before, the house belongs to Justin. Justin needs to extend the invitation. But I can tell you right now that Justin is in overprotective mode where Brian is concerned. So unless you and Brian patch things up, I wouldn't expect an invitation to the mansion anytime soon," Emmett continued with extreme pleasure. "Just take my word for it, the house is simply a-ma-zing!"

Emmett gave Debbie his to go order, and she quickly scooted out of the booth to put in the order. She also had to try to conceal her own smile at Emmett's antics.

Emmett decided now was a good time to move to the counter to wait for this order. On his way there, he bumped into a very concerned Ben.

"Hello Em, what are you doing here?" Ben asked with some surprise.

"I might ask you the same question," Emmett replied. "I'm ordering lunch."

"Hunter called and said that Michael was upset after talking to Brian. Based on our conversation earlier, I can just guess what Brian must have said. Is Michael ok?" Ben asked with concern.

"See for yourself," Emmett said, motioning in the direction of the booth where a fuming Michael was still sitting.

Ben took a seat opposite Michael in the booth. Ben waited for a few minutes to be acknowledged. When that didn't happen, he simply said, "Hi."

Michael finally noticed who sat opposite him, "Hi Ben, what are you doing here?"

"Hunter called me. He told me you were upset. Are you ok? You don't look so good," Ben remarked quietly.

"I'm fine," Michael assured him.

"I understand that you saw Brian. What did he say?" Ben asked calmly.

"He came to tell me that he and Justin are now legally a couple," Michael relayed sadly.

Ben paid no attention to his partner's tone, "That's wonderful!" he remarked with excessive exuberance, "Good for them. It's been a long time coming," he added wistfully. Then Ben looked over at Michael and noted his expression. "Why the long face?" he had to ask.

"This is the biggest mistake that Brian has ever made. You know that he and Justin can't agree on anything for very long. Brian is never going to change. Justin is just going to leave like he always does. They should have just done a simple commitment ceremony like Melanie and Lindsay or gotten married like you and me. Then when things didn't work out, they could easily go their separate ways or get a divorce. This is so final. Now when Justin leaves, he's going to take all Brian's money with him when he goes," Michael related to Ben.

"Brian is willing to gamble that Justin isn't going to leave. Justin must be willing to gamble the same thing," Ben pointed out. "Surely you know how much they love each other."

"That's not what this is about. Justin found some way to get to Brian. I have to find some way to save him. That's what Zephyr is supposed to do for Rage," Michael explained.

Ben could only roll his eyes at the comment.

"Michael, please tell me that you didn't say any of this to Brian? Please tell me that these are your personal thoughts that you're sharing only with me, your partner? Please tell me that what you said to Brian was a simple 'Congratulations' and 'Best Wishes'?" Ben demanded to know, and then he patiently looked at Michael, waiting for an answer.

"I told Brian that he made a mistake. I told him that Justin would never make him happy. I told him ..." Michael continued to ramble self-righteously.

Ben cut off Michael mid-sentence. "Michael," Ben began calmly with his softest voice.

Michael immediately recognized the tone and immediately stopped speaking.

Ben continued calmly, "I'm going to pick up JR and take her home. I'm sure she's tired and ready for her nap."

"Oh yeah...that's a good idea," Michael said mindlessly. "I forgot about that. Thanks, Ben."

Ben stood up and simply said, "JR and I will see you when you get home."

"Ok," Michael agreed hesitantly. "Sure."

And with no further words, Ben simply left the Diner.

Chapter 58 – The Remix, Part 1

Late Saturday Morning...(Day 48)

Melanie, Lindsay, Paul, and Brian

When Brian and Paul arrived at Starbucks they were surprised to find Melanie and Lindsay standing outside the coffee shop.

"So you missed me?" Brian began teasingly as soon as they got into the car, "You couldn't wait to see me, huh? Melanie, you have no idea how touched I am," he quipped, clutching his right hand to his chest.

"Will you shut up and drive, asshole," Melanie fired back, "We were coming outside to call you again. We thought you had forgotten all about us."

"I was trying my best, but Lindsay was with you," Brian fired back, "You see, I was really looking forward to seeing her."

Paul couldn't contain his smile. "I see that things haven't changed between you two. How are you Melanie? Lindsay?" he said, leaning over to give Lindsay a kiss on the cheek.

"Don't pay any attention to them, Paul, how are you?" Lindsay asked with a warm smile.

"I'm sorry, Paul, it's good to see you," Melanie added cheerfully, "Even if you're in the company of ...".

Brian felt he had endured enough, so he cut of Melanie's impending tirade, mid-sentence.

"Sorry, I was late." Brian related with a bit of genuine remorse. "I had to stop by to see Michael. Obviously, it took a lot longer than I expected," he calmly relayed.

First Melanie and Lindsay took note of the apology. This was a major surprise for both of them, so they both made a mental note, but neither of them dared to say anything.

Then they next looked knowingly at one other, as each formed a vision in her mind of what must of happened between Brian and Michael.

"How is Michael?" Lindsay eventually had the courage to ask.

"He's not particular pleased with me at the moment. It seems that he has a problem with the fact that I formed a legalized domestic partnership with Justin," Brian relayed nonchalantly.

Paul had to look over at Brian, trying to hide his surprise at how easily Brian just relayed the facts. Brian and Paul looked at each other and simply smiled. Lindsay and Melanie looked at each other again. Now they were completely shocked that Brian had relayed this most significant information so casually.

Without exchanging a word, both Melanie and Lindsay knew intuitively to tread carefully...this was a different Brian than the one that they were used to dealing with.

"So the rumors that I've heard are true," Melanie quickly responded, "And you went all the way for the legalized domestic partnership. That takes a lot of balls for someone like you. But I couldn't be happier for you and Justin. Congratulations for finally coming to your senses," she said with a laugh. "When did this all happen?"

"Yesterday," Brian related joyfully. "It just felt right."

"Congratulations, Brian," Lindsay managed to say.

"Thank you," Brian said, happily accepting congratulations. "I know that you had some idea. I heard Gus telling you on the phone this morning, about the toasts we did last night."

Lindsay laughed, "It took me a while to figure out what he was talking about. He talked about the bubbles tickling his nose; that's when I knew, you were celebrating something."

"It was after dinner," Paul quickly said, "Jason and I convinced Brian and Justin to let us raise at least one glass of champagne to celebrate their new status. Nicky and Gus wanted to join in too, so they had sparkling cider. They had a ball."

"I'm glad to hear it. You should have called us," Lindsay commented with some hurt in her voice, "We would have loved to celebrate with you too."

"Oh Lindsay, this wasn't something we planned. It was just a spur of the moment thing after dinner," Paul said to clarify things. "Now that you're coming out for lunch, we can toast Brian and Justin all over again. Believe me, Gus and Nicky won't mind in the least," Paul said quickly with a laugh.

Lindsay began to feel better. Now she knew that she was not deliberately excluded from some aspect of Brian and Justin's life. This was truly an impromptu event.

"You know how I feel about celebrations," Brian said seriously. "I only celebrate achievements," he said, and then he laughed. "But I guess the fact that I managed to get the blond to go through with this...is reason enough to continue celebrating."

"Why wouldn't he?" Lindsay asked. "What does he have to lose?"

Melanie reached over and gently touched he partner to caution her, for Lindsay was about to head into dangerous waters.

"Sure I gave him the rights to everything that I own now or will own in the future, but he gave me the rights to everything he owns at the moment and everything he will own in the future too. That's quite a lot when you think about it. I'm going to have a really lavish old age," Brian added with a laugh. "Just wait until my partner becomes an internationally renowned artist. He's going to be even more famous than he is now...not to mention that he's going to be very rich. I'm going to be so pampered in a few years."

"I see that you've planned this well," Paul quipped. "Your future is secure. Of course, you still have to share Justin with Gus."

"Yes, that's true..." Brian quietly acknowledged.

"What is that?" Lindsay asked. "What is that about sharing Justin with Gus?"

"You know how Gus feels about Justin," Brian proceeded to relate. "Gus thinks that I did all of this, so that Justin would belong to both Gus and me forever. I tried to correct his perception, but his little six-year-old mind doesn't seem to get it," he continued with a laugh.

"Nothing unusual there, Lindsay! Nicky feels the same way," Paul added. "Nicky and Gus even insisted that they keep Justin company in his studio this morning. They both managed to get paint everywhere; they've never been happier," he added with a laugh.

"I see Justin's technique hasn't changed. I don't know how he manages to get any paint on the canvas," Lindsay teased with a laugh. "Gus used to be so neat with his art. Now he's copying Justin's messiness too. I don't know what to do about it," she relayed with mock exasperation.

"Not to mention he now has to wear Brian's shirt whenever he does anything artistic," Melanie added with a laugh.

"Don't mention the shirt," Paul interrupted, "That's still a sore subject with both us."

Lindsay couldn't resist laughing as she saw the pained expressions on the faces of both men. "Don't worry... you two will get over it."

"I'm so glad that Justin finally agreed to invite us out to the house. You know that Lindsay and I have been dying to see it," Melanie said gleefully.

"Wait until you see it," Paul said with a laugh, "It really is a mansion, but once you get inside, it has a cozy feel. It's really very different than the loft."

"Yes, in the house, Justin and I have to carry cell phones so we can find each other," Brian teased.

"Knowing you and Justin," Paul teased, "I find it hard to believe that you two are ever far enough apart to need them."

"Are you done?" Brian asked, trying to fake a glare.

"Not quite," Paul continued, "And wait until you meet Thomas and Teres."

"Paul!" Brian said.

"Sorry," Paul remarked, trying to sound apologetic, but failing miserably.

"Thomas and Teres?" Lindsay asked with renewed interest.

"They were supposed to be the caretakers. But with Justin getting ready for shows and my travel schedule, they've somehow managed to take over our lives," Brian said with a sigh, "You'll see what I mean when you meet them. I'm convinced that Thomas never sleeps, and Teres just told Paul, Jason, and me that our planning skills left much to be desired. We tried to explain to her that we do this for a living, but for some reason Teres didn't seem to be at all impressed. Now you see what I have to put up with," he continued to complain.

Once again, Lindsay and Melanie couldn't contain their laughter.

At that point, Brian started to slow down to turn into the driveway at Bri-tin.

"We're here," Paul said joyfully, "Now as Brian drives into the driveway, take a minute and take it all in," he quietly suggested, clearly acting as an experienced guide.

"Paul, aren't you done yet?" Brian turned to him and asked with mocked annoyance.

"Not quite," Paul replied with a smirk.

Lindsay and Melanie couldn't help smiling at the banter between the two old friends. However, they both immediately followed Paul's suggestion and took in their first view of the house. They were absolutely stunned into silence by what they were seeing. Melanie was not surprised by the grandeur, but she was impressed none-the-less. Lindsay, on the other hand, was simply overwhelmed by the house.

At first, Lindsay found it difficult to breathe when she remembered that this was the house that Brian bought as an engagement present for Justin. And if the rumors were true, this was the house where Brian asked Justin to marry him a year ago. For Lindsay, in a lot of ways, this house was symbolic of their union.

Then Lindsay began to remember things she had tried to ignore in the past, and she felt like she was beginning to understand, just how much Brian loved Justin. And the artistic spirit within Lindsay went completely romantic, as she sought to understand the symbolism...and the size and scope of the house made sense...when you realize that the house had to try to contain all the love that Brian felt for Justin.

In that instant, Lindsay finally got it all. And seemingly without her knowledge, a solitary tear made its way down her cheek.

Chapter 59 – Afternoon's Delight

Saturday about Noon...(Day 48)

Brian, Justin, Paul, Jason, Gus, Nicky, Lindsay, Melanie, and Molly

By the time that Brian had finally parked the car in front of the house, the ever-present Thomas was there to greet them as they exited. Brian couldn't help smiling as he greeted Thomas and introduced him to Gus' mothers, Melanie and Lindsay. Once all the introductions were out of the way, they headed inside.

Paul, once again, resumed his role as official tour guide.

"Now as you enter the foyer, take another moment to pause before you actually enter the hallway," Paul suggested with a smile.

"Paul, I thought you were done," Brian quipped.

"I was done with the exterior...but I'm just getting started inside," Paul answered innocently, smiling at Brian for good measure.

Melanie and Lindsay burst out laughing.

"You have to allow me to be the tour guide...you and Justin take the house for granted. I'm here so Melanie and Lindsay can properly experience the mansion and have their chance to gush at everything. Now will you leave me to my work?" he insisted with a smirk.

Brian walked ahead of the group, just shaking his head. He did, however, have to smile as he heard the oohs and aahs from Lindsay and Melanie as they moved from the foyer to the hallway.

While hanging their coats on the nearby rack in the hall, Brian heard approaching footsteps.

Nicky and Gus ran ahead of Justin. Gus quickly greeted both his mommies with hugs and kisses. Nicky accepted hugs from his new 'aunts', but he was really glad to be picked up by Paul.

Brian immediately, leaned down to give Justin a gentle kiss. "What are you doing out of your studio?" Brian quietly asked.

"I got hungry," Justin admitted, "Especially when the aroma of whatever Teres was preparing for lunch filtered under my studio door. I couldn't work any longer."

Then Justin greeted Mel and Lindsay with hugs and kisses. " I'm glad you're finally here. Welcome to Bri-tin," he added.

"Bri-tin," Melanie repeated the name and laughed.

"Yes, well every good estate must have a name. Everybody knows that!" Lindsay teased with a smile. "Surely you remember Wuthering Heights."

"Gheez Lindsay, you could have picked a more cheerful example like Longbourne or Pemberley...did you not read Jane Austin along with your Emily Bronte?" Paul teased back.

"When I read Pride and Prejudice, I guess I wasn't into mansions," Lindsay remarked.

"No, but I'm sure you remember Mr. Darcy," Melanie teased.

"Who could forget Mr. Darcy," Lindsay affirmed wistfully.

"I'm sure in Wuthering Heights, you were probably enraptured by the brooding Heathcliff," Melanie added with a laugh, "The perfect archetype for Brian. No surprise there," she quipped.

"I heard that!" Brian scowled.

Lindsay turned to Justin to make apologies for her partner.

"I'm sorry, Justin. You know how Melanie is whenever she and Brian are in the same room. She really doesn't mean it. Now, I think it's just force of habit," she added with a deep sigh.

"Sparring Partners?" Justin said with a laugh to Melanie.

"Just like my painting," Melanie agreed with a corresponding laugh.

Then she took a step towards Brian and smiled at him strangely. "I've missed you, Brian," she said, trying to slide an arm around his shoulders.

"Oh, that's just great!" Brian responded, moving far away from Melanie and hiding behind Justin for protection.

Paul decided the moment had come for him to take charge again.

"Now I recommend that we have lunch before we start to explore the mansion," Paul suggested, once again returning to his role as tour-guide. "Because the mansion is so immense, you'll definitely require sustenance before the long sojourn," he continued, "I don't want you dying of starvation in the middle of my tour," he continued to tease. "So if you will follow me, I'll show you where you can freshen up," Paul finally said, leading Melanie and Lindsay away.

"Paul?" Brian called after him to no avail.

"What was that all about?" Justin pointedly asked Brian.

"Paul has decided that he wants Melanie and Lindsay to have a chance to 'gush' over the house...so he's appointed himself as official tour guide. I think he's lost it. He's over the top. In fact, he's as over the top about this as you were about Nicky's party," Brian said with a laugh.

"Brian!" Justin said, in protest, hitting Brian in the chest for that remark. Brian realized that he probably deserved the hit...even if what he said was true.

Brian and Justin started to move in the direction of the dining room.

"How did things go with Michael?" Justin quietly asked, now that he and Brian were alone.

"Let's just say, at the moment, he's not too happy with me," Brian pointed out.

"I'm sorry. You just have to give him some time. You know how he is." Justin said reassuringly. "Sometimes Michael doesn't take change very well, but I'm sure he'll come around in time. Are you going to be ok?" he finally asked gently.

"I'm going to be fine," Brian responded confidently. "I really don't care what any of them think," he added.

Justin heard what Brian just said, but secretly he hoped that Michael would come around soon. For he knew that best friends are hard to come by, and Justin couldn't help thinking of Daphne, and how much he missed her.

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When everyone arrived in the dining room, Jason and Molly greeted them.

"Wait until you see what Teres has prepared for lunch," Jason teased everyone. "Of course, Molly and I helped, didn't we Molly?" he continued. Molly just smiled.

"Well, I must admit, I'm impressed." Brian teased. "Ok Teres, what smells so good?"

"I made soup to go with the sandwiches. Gus and Nicky taste-tested the potato leek soup, and they said it was ok. But I also made a simple vegetable soup, just in case," Teres explained with a smile.

Everyone began to prepare their bowls and plates and seated themselves at the dining room table.

By the time that Lindsay was about to prepare a plate for Gus, she found that Gus and Nicky had already settled down on either side of Justin. Although Gus and Nicky had their own personal bowls of soup, both of them were already eyeing whatever Justin had planned on his plate. Without even thinking, Justin allowed Gus and Nicky to enjoy morsels from his sandwich.

This was a rather contented threesome, and Lindsay took notice with a smile.

Brian looked at Justin with Gus and Nicky and thought to himself, 'Gus and Nicky really don't have a clue to whom Justin belongs,' and then he just laughed to himself.

Paul looked at the contented trio of Gus and Nicky and Justin, and he couldn't help wondering how long it would be before Brian and Justin were full-time parents to children of their own...in spite of Brian's professed position on the matter. Paul could see that Justin was a natural with kids.

Molly easily claimed a seat next to Brian at the table, and she smiled at him. Brian had seen Justin smile a similar smile before, so he couldn't help wondering what this Taylor sibling was up to.

"Thanks for saving me with Mom earlier," Molly said quietly.

"No problem," Brian said with a smile. "Did you and Gus and Nicky have fun while I was gone?"

"We spent some time outside. We saw the stables, and then went to the pool house. I didn't see those places when Mom and I came for dinner...I guess because it was so dark. What else do you have hidden away here on the estate?" Molly asked, before casually taking a bite of her sandwich.

"Believe it or not I really have no idea what's on the property," Brian had to admit with a smile, "Justin is the only one who knows all that," he added, looking over at his partner with the kids. "He's looked at all the plans to the estate."

"But you bought it," Molly reminded him, trying to understand why Brian was so uninformed. "How come you don't know?"

"I bought it as a present for Justin, but that was a year ago," Brian said with a smile, thinking back to why he'd bought the mansion in the first place and all that had happened here since.

Molly got a little quieter than usual. "Mom told me about you and Justin," she added quietly.

"She did? How do you feel about that?" Brian quietly asked.

"I think it's great that you and Justin are together. You seem happy," Molly said nonchalantly.

"We are!" Brian responded with a grin.

"That's good. I like having you around. You're a lot less trouble than Justin," Molly said with a smile, leaning over to touch shoulders with Brian.

"Why thank you, Molly," Brian said with a smile, totally agreeing with her last remark.

Everyone casually enjoyed lunch.

At the end, Paul located the bottles of champagne and sparkling cider in the refrigerator, so that once again everyone could toast to Brian and Justin's happiness. And this time, Melanie and Lindsay got a chance to participate in the toasts and the celebration.

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The group eventually moved to the living room.

Brian and Justin settled in one of the oversized chairs and Nicky joined them. Paul and Jason settled into the other one with Gus. Mel and Linds made themselves comfortable on the couch, and Molly made herself comfortable on a cushion on the floor between the two oversized chairs. Both Gus and Nicky reached their hands out to play with Molly from their secure perches.

Conversation flowed easily among the friends as they tried to catch up with each other's lives. Everyone made an effort to include Molly in the conversation. Gus and Nicky periodically made their presence known.

As they chatted, Melanie and Lindsay's eyes kept drifting to the painting over the fireplace.

"That's a wonderful painting," Melanie finally said, being unable to contain her curiosity any longer.

"That's MY painting," Gus said, beaming with pride. He wanted to make sure this fact was known to everyone present.

"Is that your new painting?" Lindsay innocently asked, already knowing the answer.

Lindsay and Melanie moved to stand closer to the painting.

"Yes," Gus answered, with excitement evident in his voice. "Jus gave it to me."

"He did?" Lindsay teased. "Is this the painting you were trying to tell me about on the phone, this morning?"

Gus proceeded to recap in detail all the important elements of his painting. He wanted to make sure that his mommies didn't miss any details.

Everyone in the room tried to hide their smiles as they listened to Gus.

Finally, he was finished with all descriptions of the painting. "And Dad and Jus said I could put it wherever I wanted, but I like it here," he added for good measure.

"Justin, it's just beautiful," Melanie said over her shoulder to Justin, "It's an especially good likeness of Gus, of course I don't know why you want to spoil the painting by adding that other person on horseback."

"Actually, I wanted Gus to have a picture of him and Brian on horseback," Justin explained with a slight laugh.

"And the camera didn't work?" Lindsay teased.

"This was too important an event to simply capture on film," Justin said seriously.

"Now, you will stop acting like it's out of the question that I would be on horseback?" Brian tried to protest.

"I know Justin has a vivid imagination." Melanie continued with a laugh. "I'm sure that as an artist, he took certain liberties."

"He did not!" Brian immediately challenged, causing everyone to laugh.

Brian figured he had suffered enough abuse at the hands of his sparring partner; it was now time for him to strike back.

"I don't know, Melanie, with your present attitude, I'm not sure if I'll even let you see my most recent present from Justin," Brian couldn't resist saying in a halting manner.

He immediately knew that Melanie's curiosity would be piqued.

As Brian watched Melanie's expression changed, he began to savor the moment.

"Be nicer to him, Mel, it's worth it just to see it," Paul strongly suggested, "Trust me on this one."

"You think so, Paul?" Melanie asked, to confirm what she'd heard.

"Oh yeah!" Jason had to also agree.

"Ok, Brian, I'm sorry for all the mean things I've just said to you about your riding," Melanie said apologetically. She was definitely trying to be sincere, but she was having a hard time.

"That's a start," Brian said, while still pondering the situation.

"You know she's sincere," Justin added, giving Brian a gentle kiss.

"Thank you, Justin," Melanie added, glad that at least Justin was still on her side.

"Okay, come with me," Brian reluctantly agreed. He sighed to let Melanie know this was a chore for him.

Brian walked Melanie in the direction of his study...just the two of them...with Brian gently nudging Melanie ahead of him for good measure.

Lindsay couldn't resist shaking her head at the antics of the two of them.

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Brian and Melanie

Once they reached the study, Melanie looked at the two paintings, and then looked over at Brian beaming back with pride.

Melanie first looked more closely at the painting, 'Talisman of Time'.

"You know I've seen pictures of this painting in Lindsay's clippings from the exhibit. But those pictures didn't really do justice to the beauty of seeing the actual painting. Even without people in it, Justin's painting is so emotional," she said softly.

Brian thought back to his initial reactions. "I know exactly what you mean...I had the same reaction when I first saw the painting," he said thoughtfully.

Melanie then took a closer look at the second painting, 'Brian Among the Rumpled Sheets'.

Melanie began feeling like a voyeur, for in addition to the simple beauty of the painting, she could feel the love that Justin had for Brian was laid bare on the canvas for all to see. And she knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Melanie also wondered if she and Lindsay had ever loved each other like that.

Before she had a chance to ponder more deeply her own question, Melanie's thoughts were interrupted by a serious tone from Brian.

"Look, since we're alone I need to talk to you about something," Brian began. "I need to claim attorney-client privilege, and I don't want you mention this to Lindsay either," he insisted. Melanie knew this must be serious.

"Sure, what's on your mind?" Melanie asked, settling onto the comfortable couch and shifting into professional mode.

"Do you remember when Kip Thomas filed a sexual harassment suit against me years ago?" Brian began, making himself comfortable in one of the other chairs.

"Of course, how could I forget?" Melanie began to gloat. "It's the thing that will keep you eternally indebted to me for the rest of your natural life in gratitude...a girl doesn't forget leverage like that," she teased with smug satisfaction.

"You DO remember that the suit was dropped?" Brian went on to remind her, as a way of countering her mock smugness.

"Yeah, I remember," Melanie softened her tone. "We were sitting in the room waiting for the hearing, when your boss came in and told us the suit had been dropped. There was no explanation. That was it," Melanie recalled. "What's your point?"

"We never knew why Kip dropped his suit, did we?" Brian solemnly pointed out.

"No, we didn't. But why are you bringing this up now?" Melanie had to ask. "After all, the case happened years ago."

"Because now I know why the suit was dropped," Brian said calmly. "I just found out."

"How?" Melanie asked with renewed curiosity.

"Justin told me."

"Justin was just a kid at the time. How would he know? How would he have even known Kip Thomas? What could he possibly tell you?"

"Melanie, let's face it, Justin is a genius...a ruthless genius when he gets into his overprotective mode. I can't tell you how many times he's saved me. He's so clever because he does it quietly, without fanfare, and he never says a word. It almost makes him deadly."

"What are you saying?"

"Now I want you to understand that Justin only told me about this yesterday," Brian said softly.

"What did he tell you?" Melanie asked, her curiosity reaching its peak.

"He told me why Kip Thomas dropped the suit."

"Why would he tell you this now...after all this time?"

"Because Justin happened to run into Kip Thomas in New York City while we were there. Kip just so happens to live and work in the city. I guess our paths were bound to cross his eventually."

"What are you going to do?"

"I think between Spyder and me, we can manage to keep Justin safe. Keeping him contained is another matter entirely...Justin is so fearless...it scares me sometimes," Brian confessed. Then he took another deep breath and continued, "I just want you to tell me if Kip has any LEGAL recourse, after all this time, against me...or against Justin."

"No. We made sure he signed a release after the suit was cancelled that precluded him from changing his mind and re-filing the suit. That's standard procedure."

"That's all I needed to know. Thank you."

"Ok asshole, are you going to tell me what Justin told you?"

"I hadn't planned to."

"I'm your attorney, I need to know these things."

"Ok, Justin was responsible for the Kip Thomas lawsuit being dismissed. Just like he was responsible for getting the charges against me by my nephew dropped."

"Carl and Debbie told me how Justin handled your nephew, but how did he get the Kip Thomas suit dropped."

"Ok...here it goes...Justin seduced Kip Thomas. Then in the middle of a blowjob, Justin told Kip that he had to be home soon because of a curfew...because he was under aged and living with his parents. Justin went on to tell Kip about the last man that his father had caught him with...that his dad had beaten up that man...and that man would be in jail for the next ten years. Kip, being in a heightened state of arousal, wasn't thinking very clearly. He couldn't remember that 17 was the age of consent. Instead, he begged Justin not to tell his father about them being together. Justin agreed that he wouldn't tell anyone...if Kip would drop the suit against me. And the rest is history."

"Holy shit, and you didn't know?"

"I heard a whole bunch of rumors. I'm the Stud of Liberty Avenue, after all. No one could put it all together. And then Kip simply issued a formal apology and left town. But now he's in New York."

"How did he manage that?"

"I don't know. He works for Kennedy & Collins, a major New York ad agency and a competitor, especially now that Kinnetik is opening a New York office."

"Justin's something else, isn't he?" Melanie couldn't resist saying with a sigh and renewed respect for one of her favorite people.

"So it seems," Brian said, shaking his head.

"So you're finally going to open the New York office," Melanie asked with a smile. "Did you think I wasn't paying attention?"

Brian ignored her last comment.

"Yes, I already have a few clients lined up," Brian confirmed. "I guess I can tell you that much, since our attorney-client privilege is still in effect," he added with a laugh.

Brian knew that the last tidbit of knowledge about opening the New York office was going to annoy her no end. After all, she couldn't share that information with anyone.

Melanie realized what Brian had done to her, and that he was enjoying every minute of her turmoil.

"You asshole," she said. Then she started to laugh. "You know that you're very lucky to have Justin."

"I do know that."

"You also have your hands full," Melanie added with a knowing laugh. "You just signed up for lifetime of Justin's antics."

"Don't remind me! Of course, my current problem is to pry our son away from him."

"Not much chance of that happening. Get over it, Brian!"

"One more thing, Brian, all kidding aside," she added with her tone becoming more serious, "Gus is thriving from spending time with you and Justin."

"I'm glad to hear that. You know how I feel about Gus."

"You've been traveling a lot, so I know things for you are about to get crazy...especially as you prepare for the New York office. Just don't forget about Gus in the chaos."

"I have no intention of doing anything like that. In fact, I was going to ask you and Lindsay if maybe Gus could go on vacation with Justin and me this summer."

"You're going to take a vacation. That's a first."

Brian scowled at her. She paid no attention to him.

"Justin is applying for an exhibit. We're not sure whether he'll be accepted or not. If he's accepted...we want to be there for the opening; if he's not accepted...we want to see the exhibit anyway."

"I'm sure we can arrange that. I'll talk to Lindsay."

"Thanks. I guess we should go back and find everyone before they start looking for a trail of YOUR blood to follow," Brian said with a smirk.

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Justin and Lindsay

Meanwhile back in the living room...

"I know it's pretty personal space, but can I get you to show me your studio?" Lindsay sheepishly asked shortly after Brian and Melanie had left.

"Sure. My studio is a bit of a mess. Gus and Nicky were in there with me all morning," Justin quickly replied.

"I heard that they were painting with you. Did YOU get any painting done?"

"A little. I never intended to get too much done. Gus and I paint together all the time. Or rather I paint, and he curls up in his corner and reads or plays. He likes to talk to me while I paint. For some reason, Gus doesn't think I should paint alone. It must be a carryover from when he was a baby, and I was still at PIFA. Remember, I used work on projects while I watched him. Nicky is a little rambunctious...this is all so new to him. But they both hung out with me all morning, and they only left when Molly came to coax them outside to play."

Lindsay couldn't stop laughing as she thought about the image of Justin trying to paint with Nicky and Gus close-at-hand. She knew that she couldn't do it. Part of the reason that she hadn't painted in years was that she couldn't paint at the same time that she watched the kids. Justin obviously didn't have this problem.

Justin slowly opened the door to his studio.

Lindsay looked at the artwork all over the studio wall. She noticed that the artist had signed each work of art. She could just image the extreme delight Gus and Nicky must have experienced as they placed each piece of finished artwork on the wall of Justin's studio.

Lindsay sat down on the futon and took it all in.

She tried to imagine herself working in such a space. She quickly shook away that thought. For though she could imagine herself in the space...she was well aware that she could never produce the caliber of art that Justin had created in the simple painting over the fireplace.

"Have you done any other paintings lately?" Lindsay asked.

"If you'll follow me, and I'll show you my latest pieces," Justin responded with a smile, as he led Lindsay down to Brian's study.

Brian and Melanie were leaving as they entered.

"You're going to see something special," Melanie whispered with a smile as she passed by Lindsay.

"Really?" she said with renewed anticipation.

Justin showed her the painting of 'Brian Among the Rumpled Sheets'.

The painting took Lindsay's breath away. But even more, Lindsay was overwhelmed by the beauty and simplicity of the painting before her that was still so powerful.

"Beautiful," was all she could say, as the manifestation on canvas of how much Justin loved Brian was arrayed before her.

And she knew that no matter how hard she tried, she could never produce a masterpiece like this one. She sat down and remembered that Justin was just at the beginning of his career as an artist. It was all very humbling for her.

And once again the tears begin to unknowingly flow down her cheeks.

After a few minutes, Justin said quietly, "I guess we should go back and join the others."

Chapter 60 – The Remix, Part 2

Saturday Afternoon...(Day 48)

Brian, Justin, Paul, Jason, Jennifer, Lindsay, Melanie, and Molly

When Lindsay and Justin returned to the living room, only Brian and Melanie were there.

"Where's everyone?" Justin quietly asked.

Brian reached up and pulled Justin into his lap, "Missing your own personal entourage, are you?" Brian teased. "Paul and Molly convinced the kids to take a short nap. Jason is in the kitchen annoying Teres."

Melanie and Lindsay started thanking Justin for inviting them to lunch and for allowing them to see the house. They were in the process of teasing Brian about the great gossip about the house that they would be able to share with everyone during Sunday dinner tomorrow.

Before Brian had a chance to make his well-chosen objection, the doorbell rang.

"Now who could that be?" Justin asked as Brian got up to answer the door.

Brian found an apologetic Jennifer waiting for him. "Mother Taylor," Brian said, giving Jennifer a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"Hi Brian...I decided to take you up on your invitation. I just finished with my client. It took a lot longer than I expected, but everyone signed off on the deal so here I am. Am I too late? Did I miss everything?" Jennifer asked.

"Everyone's still here. C'mon in. I know you must be hungry," Brian said in response, gently steering her down the hallway. "Don't worry, we did manage to hide a few morsels from Justin," he added with a laugh.

"Mom hi," Justin said, giving his mother a hug. He was truly surprised, but pleased, to see her. Melanie and Lindsay greeted her as well.

"Why don't we move this to the dining room table so Mother Taylor doesn't have to eat alone?" Brian suggested. Everyone reassembled first in the kitchen.

"It's good to see you again, Jason," Jennifer said with a smile. Then she called out, "Hi Teres. I see that they're keeping you busy as always."

"Not too busy," Teres responded with a smile, "And they even provided me with a great assistant. I really can't complain," she added with a laugh as she looked at Jason.

Teres and Jason showed Jennifer the food selections and helped her fix her plate and select her bowl of soup.

Then everyone congregated back at the dining room table where Jennifer noticed that evidently a few of the others must have been hungry, too, because they managed to fix themselves a few morsels for their own plates...obviously so that Jennifer wouldn't have to be eating alone.

"Where's Molly?" Jennifer asked, making herself comfortable at the table.

"She and Paul are settling Gus and Nicky down for a nap. Gus has a riding lesson in a few hours. They didn't want him to fall while he's riding," Brian quipped.

"Good idea," Jennifer said with a laugh.

Everyone was chatting easily when Paul and Molly came back to join them, grabbing snacks of their own.

"Gus and Nicky were so afraid that they'd miss something that they didn't want to take a nap," Paul teased, "But they've had such a busy day that they finally had to give in to sleep."

"Mom, what are you doing here?" Molly said with surprise, slowly starting to move in the direction of Brian for safety...just in case.

Jennifer laughed. "You thought you could escape me, did you?" she teased. Everyone laughed at Molly's surprise at finding her mother there. "There's no need to hide behind Brian," she continuing teasing.

"Mom!" Molly protested with a laugh.

As easy conversation returned among everyone, Paul reached for the pictures of Nicky's party to show them to Molly and Jennifer. Melanie and Lindsay were particularly interested too. Jason took pleasure in recounting the entire day of festivities in great detail.

"Of course, you realize that you're missing the running commentary courtesy of Nicky and Gus, so I'm sure this picture show leaves much to be desired," Paul added with a laugh.

A little later in the conversation, Melanie said something that caught everyone by surprise.

"You know Jennifer...Lindsay and I are beginning to think about moving...maybe even back to the States," Melanie said cautiously.

"Are you thinking of moving back to Pittsburgh?" Jennifer asked with renewed interest. "I'm sure Debbie and Michael would love it if you moved back."

"We're honestly just starting to think about it so of course, we're going to ask you all not to say anything to the rest of the family," Melanie cautiously said in response. "We really haven't decided anything yet," she said quietly.

Everyone, including Molly, made the 'zipping of the lips' motion with their hands, and Melanie and Lindsay couldn't resist laughing. Having received everyone's vow of silence, Melanie continued. "But, to be completely honest, we'd really like a city with more to offer than Pittsburgh...some place with more opportunities."

"Like New York?" Brian asked curiously, momentarily thinking about his own upcoming plans with Justin. Melanie and Brian exchanged knowing smiles.

"Not quite that many opportunities," Lindsay said with a laugh. "Maybe something in between."

"You mean like Cincinnati?" Jason mindlessly volunteered.

"Cincinnati?" Melanie said with surprise.

"It's sure worked for me," Paul joyfully replied. "After grad school, I gave New York a try, but it was too much for me. I didn't like it so I took what I'd learned there and moved back to Cincinnati. I have never regretted that decision. Of course, opening the agency and having Jason come on board made things perfect. Well, you know the rest... and now we have Nicky. Cincinnati is a great place to raise a family," Paul reiterated.

"And based on the results of the last election, it's a gay friendly city. They did pass sweeping anti-discrimination legislation," Jason reminded everyone. "It's not San Francisco, I know, and they don't recognize gay marriage yet, but I can tell you it's a great place to live," he added for good measure.

"I did hear about the election," Lindsay remarked. "And judging by the pictures of Nicky's party, there obviously seems to be a large gay community. I can see why you love it," she said with a smile.

"Oh, all of our friends aren't gay," Jason quickly clarified. "But our gay and straight friends have spent so much time mixed together, that they found that they genuinely liked each other. That's why everybody showed up for Nicky's birthday. They all knew it was going to be a chance to all get together and have an all day party. And thanks to Justin that is exactly what is was."

"Exactly! They'll be talking about that particular party for some time to come," Paul added with a laugh.

Paul received a glare from Justin, and he quickly decided to change the subject.

"You're coming back for the gallery opening, aren't you?" Paul asked, with his mind already filling with suggestions. "You can't miss Justin's big show," he added for emphasis.

"We haven't really talked about it," Lindsay said hesitantly, ashamed that she'd been so consumed with her own dramas that she hadn't focused on Justin's achievements.

"But, it goes without saying that when our favorite artist has a show..." Melanie added with a smile.

"That's great! Why don't you plan on staying a few extra days and let us show you around?" Paul suggested.

"That's an interesting idea," Lindsay said thoughtfully.

"Actually Linds, I was going to ask for a favor," Justin meekly began. "I don't know if you'll have the time, but I could use some help with my show. It would mean a lot to me if you could be there to help me set up. You know so much more about shows and stuff than I do," Justin continued.

"Do you mean that, Justin?" Lindsay gushed, "I mean...I thought after...what I did...I just thought...I'm sorry. I would love to help you set up."

"Wow!" Melanie remarked, "That's quite an honor to be asked by the darling of the art world to help him set up for his major show," she couldn't resist and opportunity to fondly tease both her partner and Justin.

"Yes, it is," Lindsay whispered, still thinking about her actions a year ago. She realized how lucky she was that Brian and Justin still counted her among their friends.

Lindsay managed to find a smile for Justin although she felt very ashamed of herself for some of the things that she had done and the feelings that she once had.

"Wait until you meet 'the moms' and my dad," Jason said eagerly. "They adopted Brian and Justin ages ago. They're already in love with Gus. For some reason my mom and Paul's mom hang out together all the time. The family wonders what mischief 'the moms' get into when we're not around."

"Oh yes...speaking of 'the moms'...Brian, you and Justin are in deep trouble," Paul warned. "Mom and Katie were threatening to fly here to see you. I tried to calm them down, but you know how they are. They sent their congratulations, but they can't believe that you would take this major step without inviting them to attend," Paul added. He knew that he was going to enjoy watching Brian and Justin appear to squirm just a little.

"My sentiments exactly," Jennifer mumbled without looking up.

"Mom!" Justin protested.

"Let me get this straight," Brian began to question, "So you all wanted to sit in my attorney's office for hours while Justin and I signed papers to legally bind ourselves together...is that what you're telling me?" Brian asked, attempting to fight back.

"I think that's what mom's trying to gently tell you, Brian," Molly added, trying to be helpful.

"Ok, the next time Justin and I become legally bound forever, we'll be sure to send out invitations," Brian said with a smirk.

"You do that, Brian," Jennifer teased. "And we expect invites to any other life-altering event that you and Justin plan," she insisted.

"Here...here!" everyone else echoed in agreement.

"And what, pray tell, would that be?" Brian asked innocently.

"It doesn't matter," Jennifer explained. "My edict is all encompassing...just to be on the safe side."

Everyone else, once again, nodded to echo their agreement.

"Yes, Mother Taylor," Brian finally said with a sigh, as leaned over and kissed Jennifer on her cheek.

With that now settled and out of the way, the conversation once again returned to the issue of Cincinnati.

"You know Cincinnati is a pretty good city," Jennifer continued. "It might be what you're looking for. I'll email you some information. In fact, if you tell me a few other cities that you're thinking about, I'll be sure to send you information about them too. Then when you're ultimately ready to make a decision, I can help you with things," Jennifer added.

"You would do that for us, without saying anything to the rest of the family?" Lindsay asked with surprise, "I know how close you are to Debbie?"

"Why wouldn't I help, we're all family now," Jennifer said with a smile, looking over at Brian.

"Thanks, Jennifer," Melanie added, letting out a sigh of relief that someone would help them without undue pressure, and Melanie knew that Jennifer would do just that. Lindsay, too, was pleased with the turn of events.

"Oh, don't let me forget," Justin said.

"Forget what, Sunshine," Brian asked.

"I made some interesting sketches of Gus and Nicky when I was in Cincinnati. They were so willing to sit for me...that is...until they fell asleep," Justin added with a laugh. "Anyway, I might want to turn a few of my sketches into paintings, so I was wondering if you would sign releases."

"To have our kid featured in a Justin Taylor painting, where do we sign?" Paul teased.

"Of course, you know we're going to sign too," Lindsay added.

"Only because if we refused, and Gus found out, he would stage another hunger strike in protest," Melanie remarked with a laugh.

"Hunger strike," Jason teased. "Melanie, if he's doing hunger strikes at 6, what's he going to do at 18?"

"I don't want to think about it. This is obviously something he picked up genetically from Brian. Lindsay and I would never do anything like that," Melanie teased.

"I don't know, Lindsay was very politically active when we were in college," Brian pointed out. "And why am I always blamed for everything that Gus does wrong?" Brian asked with a smirk. "Do you give me credit for Gus' good qualities too?"

"No, those obviously came from Lindsay alone," Melanie teased in response.

"That's enough, you two!" Justin said sternly.

Melanie and Brian just smiled at each other. They were obviously getting ready for the next round of sparring when the opportunity presented itself.

"Melanie, Paul and I have been meaning to ask you and Lindsay, how do you manage with two kids day-to-day? Right now, Nicky, alone, is quite a handful," Jason asked.

"You know we always wanted a houseful of kids. I don't think we had any idea how much work it was going to be." Melanie remarked. "In our case childcare seems to fall mostly to Lindsay. She's much better at handling two kids than I am."

"So what you're saying is that with two kids, in order for things to work well, one partner needs to be a stay at home parent?" Paul asked.

"Or have a large extended family available for babysitting. I will admit things were easier when we lived in Pittsburgh," Lindsay added. "We had lots of babysitters available, especially Justin. Both Gus and Jenny loved it when he would baby sit for them. For some reason they just responded to him better than anyone else in the family."

"So you are saying that you think that Gus and Jenny 'imprinted' on Justin," Molly asked with an inquiring expression on her face.

Everyone looked at Molly with complete surprise on their faces.

"Molly?" Jennifer could finally say, "Where did that come from?"

"What?" Molly asked. "Oh please, I watch the Discovery Channel!" she said nonchalantly, causing everyone to burst out laughing.

"Maybe I need to rethink those parental controls," Jennifer teased.

"Mom!" Molly said in protest.

"Well I'm sure Nicky must have imprinted on Justin and Brian when he was a baby. They stayed with us when Nicky was born. I don't know what we would have done without them. It would explain why Nicky is so crazy about them even now," Jason explained. "Besides you saw the pictures at the party...did you how notice how many pictures there are of Nicky snuggling close to Brian and Justin? Did you notice how few pictures there are of Nicky with us?" he made sure to point out.

"I guess that would explain about Gus too," Lindsay teased, "After all, Justin did rescue Gus from being named Abraham," she reminded everyone.

"You're just never going to forget about that, are you?" Melanie protested with a laugh, "As Gus has gotten older and heard the story, I'm not sure that he'll ever forgive me either."

"It's a good thing that Justin saved our kid," Brian added with a smirk, "Otherwise, he could have been scarred for life. His little life would have been irrevocably ruined," he continued on mournfully. "Being stuck with a moniker like Abraham."

"Would you give it a rest, Brian?" Melanie complained, "You were just looking for an opportunity to make things worse."

Brian clutched his chest in mock horror.

"There are times I worry about Nicky being an only child," Paul added. "I grew up in a large family," he added. "My sister is Nicky's mother, and Gabrielle has two kids, but that's different...I think," he added.

"Plus, you've got to remember how much both your families are completely devoted to Nicky," Brian added.

"And I know 'the moms' would love another grandchild, but I still don't know..." Jason added.

"I know what you mean. Gus has suggested on numerous occasions that we send Jenny back to where ever she came from," Lindsay explained. "This usually happens about the time that Jenny has just knocked down the perfect fort or tower that Gus just built," Lindsay added with a laugh. "But I think deep down, Gus loves his sister."

"So Jenny knocks down forts," Brian quietly mused, "What are you teaching your daughter Melanie? Isn't she a little young to be so butch?" he quipped.

Melanie was about to fire off her comeback response when Jennifer easily said, "Molly was like that too."

This new revelation was obviously adding to the total embarrassment of Molly.

"Mom!" Molly protested.

Jennifer paid no attention to her daughter's complaints. "She wanted to tear down everything that Justin created. But now she's crazy about her brother," she continued to tease.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," Molly protested, "Justin is tolerable," she added. "But Brian is soooooo much easier to deal with," she added with a laugh.

"Why thank you, Molly!" Brian smirked, sticking his tongue out at Melanie.

"I just think that it must be difficult being an only child," Paul added.

"I don't know," Jason reminded him, "I survived pretty well, but I'll admit I love that your family is around all the time," he said smiling over at his partner.

"I don't know why you're concerned, you both seem to manage to handle both Gus and Nicky without any problems," Brian added.

"But that's because they're so close in age. There would be a four or five year gap between Nicky and his possible sibling. That would be totally different," Jason said with a laugh.

"I don't know," Jennifer added, "Justin and Molly are eight years apart. And you see how that turned out," she added with a laugh, looking over at both her children, who were now both scowling at her now.

Brian was definitely amused by the turn of events, and Melanie noticed.

"Ok, Paul, you promised me a tour of the mansion. Why don't you and I leave them, and you can give me one of your personally guided tours? Melanie suggested.

"I'm being pressed into service," Paul quipped with pride. "Why don't we start with the upstairs first?" Paul was very glad to return to his duties as a tour guide.

"Come on Molly, let's see if we can get Teres to create a bowl of fruit for us to sketch. At least if we ask her, she'll know that she'll get her fruit back. I sure one of her biggest fears is that if Justin asks her for these things, the food will be gone forever," Jason teased. "Only the empty bowl would be returned to her."

"Are you done now?" Justin asked with a sigh.

Jason just smiled, being very pleased with himself.

"Sounds like a plan," Molly said, "I could use some help with my drawing technique."

"Well, you know you could have asked me...I would have helped," Justin said sadly.

"You're a painter," Molly reminded him. "Jason's a real artist. Even I know the difference," Molly explained.

"Remind me to keep her away from the critics," Justin said with a laugh. "An artist is never appreciated in his own home."

"Yes, you are. Don't ever doubt it," Brian said, wrapping his arms around Justin from behind.

"Come on Lindsay, I know you've seen my study and Justin's studio, but let me show you the rest of the lower level." Brian suggested. "I figure that should get us upstairs just in time to get Gus and Nicky up from their nap."

Justin and Jennifer moved into the living room, where she saw the new painting of Gus and Brian on horseback over the mantel.

"Oh Honey," she gushed, "It's a beautiful painting."

"I did this one for Gus. I thought he would put it in his room, but he's decided he likes it being here...so here it stays," Justin added with a laugh.

"You know it's good to see you and Brian so happy," Jennifer added. "And Molly seems to be having a good time. I wasn't sure."

"She and Jason have been bent over a sketch pad every chance they get. I think you may have another artist in the family," Justin teased.

"Oh no! One of you is quite enough. She doesn't draw that much at home. I think she just likes Jason," Jennifer clarified.

"That's good, she can be his little sister for a while," Justin teased, "That should put an end to his consideration for another child."

"I don't know," Jennifer countered with a laugh. "I'm glad that I have both you and Molly," she reassured him.

"That's because you got to be a stay at home Mom with us. Think about running a business with the two of us around," Justin suggested.

"Good point," Jennifer said, laughing at the momentary images of Justin and Molly as little kids, "But I must admit, I did enjoy both of you."

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Brian and Lindsay

"I love the media room," Lindsay gushed, as she was touring the lower level with Brian. "I see that it's stocked with your classic film collection and, of course, The Yellow Submarine. But I also see Spongebob Squarepants and a collection of kid friendly videos, which obviously are there for Gus," she teased. "I'm sure he loves that."

"Don't be too sure," Brian remarked, "Justin seems a little too willing to watch those with Gus," he added with a laugh, "I'm not sure who watches those videos with whom."

Lindsay smiled at the image of Gus and Justin torturing Brian with these special videos.

"I loved the paintings," Lindsay had to finally say, "Justin keeps getting better and better. The critics have to notice. At this rate, he'll have that solo exhibit before he knows it. I heard he's part of the joint exhibit coming up at the Thornton Gallery in New York."

"Yes, he has the Thornton Gallery and the Cincinnati Gallery happening back to back. Then I think I'm going to try to steal him away for a vacation. Justin and I were hoping that you would let Gus go with us."

"I don't see why not. He loves to travel with you and Justin. Of course, I'll have to talk to Melanie."

"Yes, I know." Brian said with a sigh. Then he quickly changed the subject, "Are you really thinking about relocating?"

"We're just starting to talk about it. The idea came up during our counseling session. It would be a lot of work, first to find just the right city, and then to actually move there. But I'm sure we could manage...especially with Jennifer's help."

Lindsay's mood suddenly changed.

"Look Brian, about last year. I'm really sorry that I intervened and..." Lindsay said before Brian interrupted her.

"I know that you thought you were doing what was best for Justin. And I'm willing to overlook some of your possible ulterior motives...because it just doesn't matter anymore. But I will tell you this, Lindsay, I won't tolerate another round of your 'good intentions', do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly. I'm really sorry, Brian. It won't happen again."

"How are things with you and Melanie? How are the counseling sessions going?"

"Melanie and I are trying really hard. Things are getting better. It's just a slow process. I promise you though, the house isn't a war zone or anything like that," Lindsay sought to reassure him.

"That's good to hear. After all, Gus is getting older, he understands a lot more now than he did when he was just a baby."

"Gus isn't focused on Melanie and me, he's just focused on how to make the days pass more quickly so he can hurry to get back here to be with you and Justin."

"That's reasonable don't you think. Gus likes it when just we guys hang out together," Brian quipped.

"You have to admit, this mansion is a great place to hang out," Lindsay said with a laugh.

"Gus doesn't really care where we are, pretty much, as long as Justin is there. Of course, now he and Nicky are inseparable too."

"Gus and Nicky do seem to have fun together," Lindsay added with a laugh, "I saw their artwork on the wall of Justin's studio."

"You should have seen them together when we were in Cincinnati. Gus let Nicky boss him around...it's was so cute. But they must have talked when we weren't around...because Nicky is suddenly scheming to get Justin to make him Mickey Mouse pancakes."

Lindsay burst out laughing at the mention of the Mickey Mouse Pancakes.

"Oh no! Justin started that when Gus was just a baby. I offered to make them, but he seems indifferent until Justin comes around to make them for him. He says Justin's pancakes taste better."

"Jason experienced the same thing with Nicky. I think Jason said he has problems getting the shape of the pancakes just right."

"I know Jason and I are both competent artists, but it must take a painter's hand to get things just right," Lindsay had to admit. Then she turned to face Brian. "It's good to see you so relaxed. You look happy Brian...it's what I've always wanted for you."

Both Brian and Lindsay were quiet for a moment.

"You know I'll always love you, Linds," Brian said quietly.

"I know. But you're so in love with that blond kid in there, it hardly matters," Lindsay said with a laugh.

"You're probably right," Brian confirmed with a smile. Lindsay smiled in return. "Well, we'd better go and tour upstairs. Hopefully we'll bump into Paul somewhere along the way. There's not much to see upstairs...just something like seven or eight bedrooms," Brian added. "Paul could probably make those intriguing."

"What are you going to do with all those bedrooms?" Lindsay had to ask.

"Somehow, Justin has managed to put most of them to use this weekend. I feel like we had just enough rooms for our guests...planned and unexpected," Brian teased.

Lindsay couldn't help laughing as she and Brian headed upstairs.

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"When Gus is awake you'll have to ask him to show you his bedroom," Brian suggested. It's his private space, and I don't want to intrude without his permission," he explained.

Brian quickly showed Lindsay the remaining bedrooms.

"You have plenty of rooms," Lindsay commented, "You could have the whole family here for a sleep-over," she teased.

"Now why would I want to do that?" Brian asked incredulously. "One of the nice things about living here...it's just far enough away so that I don't have family members dropping in unexpectedly," he added honestly.

"Not like the loft, is it?" Lindsay thought aloud, "When you were there, Michael and I could pretty much just walk in all the time."

"No, it's definitely not like the loft," Brian assured her. "This feels like home. I don't know what the loft was. Even when Justin is in New York for a few days at a time, I like to be here. I can actually relax here. It's so different from the loft," he admitted.

"I've never heard you talk like this before," Lindsay commented, showing her surprise at what she was hearing. She immediately noticed that Brian was so open and honest. This was a new experience of Brian for her.

"Me either," Brian smirked and then quickly changed the subject, "I think it's time to get Gus and Nicky up from their nap. Gus and I have our riding lesson coming up," he added enthusiastically.

Chapter 61 – A Few Unexpected Events

Later Saturday Afternoon...(Day 48)

A cluster of people descended on the riding stables. Justin went ahead of the entourage to prepare Chuck for the oncoming crowd.

"Is everyone riding?" Chuck teased as he noticed the approaching crowd. "I'm sure we can round up a few morel horses," he said with a laugh. "You should have warned me, Justin," Chuck continued to tease.

"No, just Brian and Gus are having their usual lesson," Justin explained. Then he started thinking, "Although, you know, Nicky is so small that I guess he could ride with me."

"We might have an extra pony, with a toddler saddle so the little one can see how he feels about riding," Chuck suggested. "Or, we can put him on a horse with you if he's ok about it."

"That sounds like a good idea," Justin agreed.

Brian caught up to Justin as this point.

"What did you agree to?" Brian demanded to know, remembering the surprises Justin had in store for him the last time.

"Don't worry," Justin suggested with a smile, leaving Brian to really wonder.

The scene was the same as last time. Chuck brought out two ponies. Justin and Gus went over and became reacquainted with the ponies. Gus was fine, as long as he could reach out and touch Justin from time to time. Gus finally mounted his horse to the delight of Nicky, who was watching a few paces back.

When Gus rode off with one of the instructors, Chuck returned with another pony for Nicky to pet. As long as Nicky could hold on to Justin, he was ok, and once Justin picked Nicky up his arms, he was totally brave when he petted the horse.

Then it was time for Brian to get on his horse. Justin casually slid his hand under the back of Brian's shirt. The skin-to-skin contact, gave Brian just the courage he needed to confidently mount his favorite Palomino. With this many watchful eyes, he realized now was not a good time to panic. Brian managed to slowly ride his horse to the inside ring to join Gus.

Chuck brought Justin's Chestnut horse out to him. Jason came up to pry Nicky out of Justin's arms, and Justin easily mounted his horse with the skill of someone, who had been riding most of his life.

Tears immediately started streaming down Nicky's face. Paul, Lindsay and Melanie tried unsuccessfully to console him. Jason knew immediately what the problem was, and he simply walked over and handed the tearful Nicky to Justin. Jason walked away shaking his head. Some things never change.

Nicky wrapped his arms around Justin as if his little life depended on it. Justin gently soothed Nicky. "Do you want to ride with me?" Justin quietly asked.

Nicky immediately nodded yes in between sniffles.

Brian couldn't help but smile, but he knew that Paul and Jason were going to kill Justin when they got back to the mansion.

Brian began to wonder if the imprinting thing that Molly was talking about earlier was real, for even when Jason and Paul were standing right there, Nicky's source of comfort was always Justin.

Brian was starting to worry, but then he remembered that Gus had been the same way when he was younger. Now, Brian could look at his son confidently riding his pony, and he knew that Nicky would be ok too...in time. But for right now, one little four year old simply needed Justin.

As Nicky and Justin were riding together, Nicky's confidence grew. He waved to Gus and to Brian. Nicky was totally brave from his safe perch, nestled in Justin's arms.

When the lesson was over, Nicky and Gus confidently went with Chuck to feed carrots to the ponies.

Brian and Justin finally dismounted, and Justin wrapped Brian in his arms. "I'm very proud of you," Justin whispered, "Your riding is getting better and better."

And Brian just beamed.

Afterwards, Justin went to settle the bill with Chuck and to reserve the lessons for next month, while everyone else headed for the cars.

"You can bring all your friends back next time, Justin, I promise to have all my horses available," Chuck couldn't resist teasing.

"I don't think that will be necessary," Justin added with a laugh. "But thanks anyway." Justin couldn't help smiling to himself as he made his way to the car.

In the car, Gus and Nicky tried to wrap their arms around Justin's neck at the same time to thank him for the letting them ride the horses.

Jason and Paul couldn't contain their laughter. Finally they decided to help dislodge Gus and Nicky from Justin so that he could breathe.

Melanie and Lindsay couldn't believe what they had seen...Gus and Brian both horseback riding together. They had to finally admit that the painting over the fireplace really showed the truth.

Lindsay had noticed something else...both Brian and Gus needed to know that Justin was there to offer support to both of them as they ventured into the new realm of horseback riding. Both Brian and Gus rode with confidence after being coaxed by Justin. The scene of Nicky in tears was heartbreaking, but he too needed Justin. So many people bonded so tightly and so in love with one little blond twink.

For Melanie the events that played out surrounding the horseback riding reminded her that everyone's life was changed when Justin made himself a part of their little group. Watching Nicky with Justin, reminded her the way that Gus and Justin are together. But even more, having Justin in their little family all these years had shown them all...Brian, Michael, Ted, Emmett, Lindsay, Debbie, and even herself...what it meant to be brave enough to love.

Melanie looked over at Lindsay and tried to imagine what her partner must be thinking.

And once again, Lindsay wiped away tears that were about to fall.

"What's wrong?" Melanie asked, wrapping her arm lovingly around her partner.

"I understand so much," Lindsay said.

"I thought so," Melanie added softly, tightening her arm around her partner.

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When they got back to the mansion, Teres and Thomas were there to greet Gus and Nicky. Gus immediately started filling them in on his riding lesson. Gus even took the time to explain that Nicky was riding too--on a horse with Justin. Nicky beamed that he was being talked about.

Once inside the mansion everybody scattered in different directions. Gus and Nicky were so happy from their riding adventure that they were content to have Paul and Jason supervise their showers while Brian and Justin went to their room to spend a few moments alone together.

"This has been a fun day," Justin quietly said, snuggling into Brian's arms once they were alone.

"You realized that you've managed to deviate from my plan, Sunshine," Brian tried to scowl, leaning down and gently kissing the top of Justin's head. "You're not getting any painting done."

"I got a little done his morning," Justin reminded him.

"You have, however, managed to make this day special for everyone," Brian said seriously. Then he finally allowed himself to smile as he simply said, "Thank you."

"For what? I couldn't have done it without you," Justin reminded him quietly, leaning up to kiss Brian passionately.

Brian eventually broke the kiss, "Why do you always do that when you know we don't have time?" he teased.

"We have to take a shower," Justin said in his own defense, mimicking Brian's eyebrow movement for emphasis. Brian couldn't resist a smile at his partner's antics. Justin had made his point.

They quickly undressed and made their way into the shower.

As Brian was applying the gel to Justin's wet skin when he said, "You realize that you're going to be severely punished for tampering with my plans today?" he said seductively.

"I was afraid of that," Justin added with a willing smile as he handed Brian the packets of condom and lube.

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Meanwhile, everyone else had reassembled in the living room. Lindsay and Melanie were already filling Molly and Jennifer on what had happened at the riding lesson. Gus and Nicky came running into the room to add additional commentary.

But for some strange reason, it seems that Gus and Nicky had an entirely different version of horseback riding then what Melanie and Lindsay had just relayed.

Jennifer decided that obviously Gus and Nicky's version of things was the most accurate...thus winning her additional hugs and kisses from the storytellers.

Melanie and Lindsay just shook their head in defeat, while trying to hide their smiles.

Everyone was making their way to the dining room to sit down to the special dinner that Teres had prepared in honor of Gus' riding lesson, when the doorbell rang.

Brian and Justin looked at each other...trying to figure out who this could possibly be.

They walked to the door together to find out who the uninvited guest might be. Brian opened the door and was completely surprised by who was facing him.

"Where is he?" Emmett began. "Where is that little twat?" he said as he pushed past Brian to come face to face with Justin.

Brian couldn't help smiling, for he knew what was coming; he could already see that Emmett was pretty wound up.

"Hi Em," Justin said nonchalantly.

"Don't 'Hi Em' me!" Emmett complained, striking a pose of impatience. "You have a lot of explaining to do. So start talking!"

"What in particular would you like me to talk about?" Justin innocently asked.

"Oh...no...you...don't!" Emmett protested.

Brian decided it was time for him to step in. "Emmett, come on in. Whatever it is, we'll sort it out someplace besides here in the hallway." Emmett made his way inside. "We were getting ready to sit down for dinner," Brian continued with a smirk, "Would you like to join us?"

"Dinner isn't going to get the little blond troublemaker off the hook, Brian," Emmett professed strongly. But a whiff of dinner did persuade Emmett to calm down a bit. "I hope you realize that!" he said unconvincingly.

"I'm going in to join the other," Brian said with a smile. "But I'll have Teres set another place. I take it that you two can solve this quickly because everyone is waiting to eat. " Brian really couldn't resist reminding them that everyone was waiting; he really wanted to hurry this along.

Reluctantly, Brian left Emmett and Justin alone as he walked away, shaking his head and trying to conceal his smile.

"Why didn't you tell me what you and Brian had legalized your relationship?" Emmett demanded to know, standing there with folded arms. "You and I discussed a whole lot of other things during lunch. Why didn't you tell me about THIS?"

Justin just signed. "I was going to tell you. I just couldn't figure out how to work it into our conversation. I just didn't know what to say," Justin admitted quietly. "When I saw you at lunch, Brian and I had just signed the papers. It was still so new. I guess I was still having some trouble talking about it. I'm sorry, Em. I would have told you tomorrow," he reassured Emmett. "How did you find out?" he finally asked.

"Honey, I'm the queen of gossip, you know that I have ways of finding out these things," Emmett reminded him. "The next time, you be sure to tell me first, you hear?"

"I'm sorry, Em," Justin said, wrapping his arms around Emmett.

As expected, Emmett quickly caved and immediately forgave Justin. The two smiling friends joined everyone else at dinner.

As Emmett entered the dining room, Gus got up from his seat and ran over to Emmett.

"Auntie Em!" Gus called out. Hugs and kisses were exchanged all around.

Then Gus pulled Emmett over to meet Nicky.

Now we clearly have love at first sight. Emmett took one look at the head full of curls and the freckles, and he was in love. Nicky had never seen anyone quite like Emmett, so he was fascinated too. The twosome had a hard time taking their eyes off of one another.

Brian simply cleared his throat, and Emmett finally took his seat at the table. Everyone just smiled at the mutual admiration developing between Em and Nicky.

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After dinner, everyone moved to the living room to relax and have dessert. Justin flipped on the fireplace...to the oohs and aahs of everyone.

Following dessert, Gus and Nicky settled down in the media room with Molly to watch a movie.

Emmett blended right in with Paul and Jason. Somehow during the discussion, Emmett suggested that Brian and Justin needed to take Paul and Jason to Babylon so they could all just hang out together.

"It would be the perfect way to cap off the evening," Emmett gushed...ever the romantic.

Justin immediately liked the idea, and started to persuade Brian.

Brian wasn't so sure, but he eventually agreed. After all, he was still focused on his plan...and he knew that if Justin spent some time at Babylon, he was sure that Justin would go directly into his studio first thing in the morning. Since his plans for today hadn't gone quite the way he'd hoped, Brian was most eager to get things back on track for tomorrow.

While Brian was still considering Babylon, Jennifer volunteered to stay overnight at the mansion. She agreed with Emmett that it would be great if Brian and Justin could have a night out, and Jennifer was really looking forward to the chance to hang out with Gus, Nicky, and Molly.

Of course, having the perfect excuse to test out the new guest room that Brian and Justin had set up for her and Molly...didn't hurt either.

Justin extended an invitation to Melanie and Lindsay to stay over too, but they knew that they had the counseling session with Elizabeth in the morning, so they opted to ride back to Pittsburgh with Emmett to make it an early evening.

Once Melanie and Lindsay and Emmett had said their goodbyes and left the mansion, Paul and Jason decided that they wanted to test out the downstairs hot tub before they went to Babylon.

Paul and Jason left Brian and Justin alone in the living room, relaxing in front of the fire.

Chapter 62 – A Moment In Time (Sidebar)

Early Saturday Evening...(Day 48)

Ben and Michael

Ben had spent a great deal of time in meditation today, trying to understand his partner.

Brian had told Michael that he and Justin had legalized their relationship. It was legal, it was binding, and as far as Brian and Justin were concerned, it was forever. They had risked everything on that premise.

Ben was thrilled about the news, for he had watched Brian and Justin struggle over the last five years to make their relationship work.

Ben smiled to himself as he remembered the special moment...Brian standing in his living room sometime during the Stockwell campaign. At the time, Ben and Michael were so caught up in the fact that Hunter had fucked a murderer to get evidence that key elements of the conversation were overlooked until much later. Then, in a quiet moment of meditation, Ben heard the words replayed oh so clearly.

Beginning of Flashback.

"I was trying to help," Hunter protested.

"You were trying to impress Brian," Michael argued in response to Hunter's behavior.

"Yeah, well, he wouldn't be the first one," Brian quipped.

"Well, he already has a boyfriend," Michael said hoping to discourage Hunter in his pursuit of Brian. Admittedly, Hunter was surprised by this turn of events.

"You do?" Hunter asked for confirmation directly from Brian.

"In a non-defined, non-conventional way," Brian admitted casually, "Yeah."

End of Flashback.

'Yes, Brian Kinney was in a relationship with Justin Taylor. Of course, Brian seemed to be the last to know.' Ben couldn't help smiling, as he remembered that long-ago moment.

'Now Brian has gone further than any of them to bind himself to Justin,' Ben thought as he replayed the legislative history of the legalized domestic partnership in his mind. 'This was irrevocable...this was done.'

Now Ben needed to understand why this particular change in Brian's status would upset Michael so much. After all, this was something that everyone had been expecting for a long time.

What was it that prevented Michael from simply saying 'Congratulations and Best Wishes' to his best friend? Why couldn't Michael have kept his beliefs and opinions to himself? Why couldn't Michael see that what's done, is done?

Whenever Ben searched for answers, he kept coming up empty. Nothing made any sense. Ben knew he'd have to wait until Michael came home to discuss this with him.

Ben didn't have long to wait.

A few minutes later, Michael walked into the house, after closing the comic book store. "Hi, Ben," Michael said quietly.

"Hello, Michael," Ben responded with a flat tone to his voice.

"Where's JR?" Michael asked, looking around for his daughter.

"I dropped her back at Debbie's," Ben explained.

"Oh, why did you do that? I was looking forward to spending time with my little Honeybunch," Michael proclaimed, apparently oblivious to everything going on around him.

"You can spend time with her later," Ben strongly suggested. "I think we need to talk."

"What about?" Michael innocently asked.

"What's with you and Brian?" Ben pointedly asked. "Why aren't you happy for your best friend?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Michael tried to say.

"Oh, we're going to talk about it," Ben insisted sternly. "Because I need to understand what's going on with you!"

"Look, Justin is always hurting Brian," Michael reluctantly agreed to explain. "Every time you turn around Justin is always leaving. But I guess if Brian wants Justin for a 'fuck buddy', I don't have any problem with that. But to legalize the relationship is a mistake, and I told Brian that," he said proudly.

"Michael, Brian didn't come to you to ASK for your permission to legally commit to Justin forever. He came to you and TOLD you that he HAD already made the commitment," Ben explained.

"Brian made a mistake. Now he can unmake the commitment," Michael said point blank.

"Brian can't do that. Why would he? Brian is right where he wants to be. You know better than anyone...Brian Kinney doesn't do anything that he doesn't want to do. You have said that yourself for years. So why does this bother you so?" Ben continued to ask.

"Brian made a mistake. He didn't mean to do this to me," Michael responded.

"To you? What does this have to do with you?" Ben asked, becoming even more confused as the conversation progressed. "You've seen Brian and Justin as a couple for a long time now. So I ask you, what does this have to do with you?" he demanded to know.

"Brian's always told me that he has always loved me and that he always would," Michael began.

"And I know that you love him too. You two have been like brothers since you were 14. I know all about that," Ben pointed out.

"And Brian promised me that when his tricking days were over we would be two old queens living in Palm Springs," Michael continued.

"How old were you when Brian made this promise?" Ben calmly asked.

"Fourteen or fifteen," Michael answered.

"Michael, surely you see that both your lives have changed in the 20 years that have passed since that childhood promise was made. You and Brian are still best friends. But Brian is IN LOVE with Justin, and I thought that you were IN LOVE with ME," Ben continued.

"Of course, I'm IN LOVE with you. This has nothing to do with you," Michael said emphatically. "You and I have a wonderful life together," he added.

"Then I don't understand," Ben said simply, "Have you finally reached a point that you want to be with Brian instead of me? Is that what this is all about?"

"No, why would you even think such a thing! I'm in love with you. We're married. My place is with you, and here is where I want to be."

"Then what?"

"You've always said that even though we loved other people, that didn't mean that we couldn't love each other," Michael pointed out.

"I did say that," Ben said with a nod, "But Michael even so, that doesn't mean that I'm going to sit around and play second fiddle to your feelings for Brian. I have too much respect for myself to let that happen. So if you want to be with Brian, I will step aside, and you and Brian can try to make things work," Ben said clearly.

"No! You don't understand!" Michael protested.

"What don't I understand, Michael?" Ben patiently asked.

"I need you to listen to me," Michael insisted.

"I'm listening, Michael."

"I know that even though you're positive, I know with all the advances in medicine and the way that you take care of yourself, you're going to be here for a long time," Michael said hopefully.

"That's what I was planning on," Ben reiterated firmly.

"But even with the best planning, the disease could progress, and you could die from this just like Vic did," Michael continued. "And when you do, then I'm going to be all alone," he added.

"Michael, you have Hunter and JR and family and friends, who love you and who will support you and be there for you...if anything should ever happen to me," Ben pointed out. "You and I wouldn't be together unless I was sure that was the case," he added.

"But I would be all alone. I don't want to be all alone. I thought that Brian and I would be together. He and I would have each other, so I wouldn't be alone," Michael explained tearfully.

Ben was speechless so Michael continued.

"But with Brian legally committing to Justin, they are going to be together. Brian won't be there for me if anything should happen to you," he added. "He'll be with Justin."

"Michael, you and Brian have been there for each other for over 20 years. I assure you that if anything were to happen to me, Brian would be right there by your side...giving you his love and support. And Justin would be there too," Ben insisted.

"That's my point. If something were to happen to you, Brian AND Justin would be there together for me. Brian and I wouldn't be together in any way that mattered. And I would still be all alone," Michael continued to mourn.

Ben was beginning to get the picture that Michael was using Brian as his contingency plan for the future.

"Michael, just so you know, I'm planning on being around for a very long time," Ben said with a smile.

"I know. It's really good to hear you say that," Michael confirmed.

"Michael, just out of curiosity, what did you expect Brian to be doing all this time while I'm still here...taking very good care of myself?" Ben had to ask.

"I figured that Brian would continue as he was...as he's always been...in the clubs...with the tricks. You know that Brian will never change," Michael pointed out.

"So you expected Brian to remain the same and continue in the clubs until he was ready for the two of you to be 'two old queens in Palm Springs'...sometime after I was gone," Ben said in disbelief.

Michael just shook his head yes.

"You weren't planning on Brian having much of a life, were you?" Ben suggested. "You would have years of happiness with me, and you expected Brian to continue as he was for all that time," Ben pointed out. "That wasn't very fair to him...did you consider that?"

"Brian was happy the way he was with tricking and everything. It's only as he tried to change to make Justin happy that Brian made himself miserable. Justin doesn't understand him. Justin is always trying to get him to change. Brian was always happy the way he IS," Michael reiterated.

"Michael, Brian might not have been as happy as you think he was with his life. He's been changing ever since he met Justin. If Brian hadn't changed, he would have never taken this step with Justin. Legalizing his relationship with Justin is the proof that Brian is a different person. Surely you see that?" Ben said calmly.

"I see no such thing. Justin must have manipulated him to this decision. I really need to rescue him," Michael started to mumble.

"You don't need to rescue Brian. Believe me, he is exactly where he wants to be...with Justin. And you have to accept that," Ben reminded him.

"I don't have to accept anything!" Michael protested.

"So where did you leave things with Brian?" Ben had to ask.

"Brian told me if I couldn't wish him well, then, he was going on and living his life. He wished me well in my life, and then he told me goodbye," Michael reported, after reflecting for a moment.

"Doesn't that tell you something?" Ben asked.

"He doesn't mean it, Ben. I'll just give it some time, and Brian will be looking for me in Babylon. Brian will apologize, and things will be as they always were," Michael protested. "He can't stay mad at me for very long...he never could."

"Things can never again be as they once were, Michael. Brian meant what he said. If you don't come to grip with things, you could lose him forever. Brian has chosen Justin as his life partner. He's not about to give that up...not for you...not for anyone. It's time for you to let go of the fantasy...even if it is for after I'm gone...and live to the fullest the time that you and I DO have left. You can't do that if you are clinging to the fantasy of Brian. It's time for you to let it all go. It's time for you to call your best friend and wish him well. It's time, Michael," Ben said seriously.

Michael looked at Ben trying to process what he had heard. He couldn't believe that Ben didn't understand the problem.

"I don't understand you, Ben," Michael continued. "You've always said you wanted me to be happy. Now you want me to make all these changes. I don't know what you want from me," he protested.

"I want my partner, my husband to remember that he's in a relationship with ME. I want my partner to remember that THIS relationship is important to him. Or at least I thought it was. And I want my partner to focus on our relationship and let his best friend focus on his. That's what I want, Michael," Ben professed. "What is it that you want?"

"I want a life with you...for as long as it lasts. Why can't you understand that?"

"I do understand it, Michael. Maybe for the first time!" Ben fired back. "And now I have to ask, do you want a life with me because you love me?"

"Of course I love you!" Michael was now shouting in hopes that Ben would finally hear him.

"Or, do you want a life with me...just so that you won't have to be alone?" Ben continued with his questioning.

"I don't know why you're getting upset. You and I have had many talks about what I was going to do after you were gone. You wanted me to go on and continue living when that time came. I promised you I would. Now you seem to be upset with the plans I have made to go on living after you're gone. I just don't understand it," Michael shouted back. "What's the problem?"

"The problem is, Michael, that I not going to die soon enough for you to have the life with Brian that you had planned. The problem is that I am very much alive. The problem is that I intend to continue to be so. The problem is you're in a relationship with me. The problem is that Brian didn't wait for you. The problem is...you can't have Brian!" Ben finally said.

"How can you say that? You know that Brian is my best friend," Michael replied.

"Michael, I suppose that once Brian fell in love with Justin, he was never going to go back to being 14 again. He grew up. Brian grew up and made a life-long commitment to Justin. And for once in his life, Brian didn't consult with anyone...because Justin was all that mattered," Ben said calmly.

Michael didn't say anything...he just sat there with tears streaming down his face.

"Look Michael, I guess being positive takes its toll on everyone. I have to remember to do all the right things to keep myself healthy...eat right, exercise, take herbs...all to keep myself out of the hospital. I know we have to be careful when me make love. I guess, as long as I wasn't in the hospital...I guess, I thought that we were ok."

"We are ok, Ben. I love you. Don't you know that?" Michael asked through tears.

"I guess...I forget sometimes how hard things must be for you. I guess...I forget that you're living with this disease too. It takes its toll on everyone. I guess...I forget sometimes how this disease crushed a lot of your dreams too," Ben said quietly. "But Michael..."

"Yeah?" Michael said, looking up at Ben.

"If you used the fantasy of a future with Brian as your way to cope day-to-day with living with me...what are you going to do now, Michael? What are we going to do now that you know the fantasy can never be real? Because like it or not, Michael, Brian and Justin are legally bound together forever," Ben continued calmly.

Michael didn't know what to say to Ben. He didn't know how to make Ben understand what he was feeling, and he knew that he needed some time to think.

So Michael simply said, "All I know is that I love you, Ben, and my life is with you. I don't know what else to say. Look, I haven't had a chance to spend much time today with my daughter, so I'm going to my mother's to play with JR before she goes to bed," Michael said sadly. "I shouldn't be gone too long," he added almost in a whisper.

And with that, Michael turned and left Ben alone. Ben knew he had to wait for those answers.

Chapter 63 – Locked In A Dream (Sidebar)

Saturday Evening...(Day 48)

Lindsay and Michael

Carl and Debbie and Emmett had gone out. Melanie had gone over to visit with Ted and Blake. Lindsay had elected to stay home and spend some time with Jenny while trying to make all the pieces of her life fit together after the afternoon she'd spent at the mansion.

She was still trying to sort out her own life, when a very troubled Michael descended on her doorstep, looking for a shoulder to cry on.

"Hi Michael. You look like you just lost your best friend. What's wrong?" Lindsay patiently asked.

"I'm sure by now that you've heard about Brian and Justin." Michael suggested.

"Yeah, I spent the afternoon with them," Lindsay said joyously. "I had lunch and dinner at the mansion. I even got to watch Gus and Brian during their horseback riding lesson."

"How did that go?"

"You should see Brian on horseback, and Gus had a ball," Lindsay couldn't wait to relay. "It's funny both Brian and Gus kept looking for Justin. Once they could each find him, they both seemed to be fine. I've never seen Brian that trusting...I've never seen Gus that independent. I think Justin is a good influence on both of them," she added with a laugh. "But I heard that you didn't take the news about Brian and Justin very well."

"I don't want to be alone, Linds," Michael said mournfully.

"What are you talking about? Why should you be alone? You have Ben and Hunter and Jenny and the family. How could you ever be alone?"

"Ben and Hunter are positive. I love them both very much, but I know neither of them will live forever," Michael explained. "I always thought that by the time Ben was gone that Brian would be ready to settle down with me...I always thought that he and I would grow old together."

Lindsay felt ashamed, for she realized that she and Michael had shared the same dream.

Knowing this, she felt that she was the one person that could make Michael understand. So she gave it her best shot.

"And you will. You and Brian are best friends. He still loves you, Michael. Nothing has changed. He's just never going to be in love with you...just as he is never going to be in love with me," Lindsay said with quiet acceptance.

Michael obviously wasn't listening to a word that she said, for he continued with his own personal train of thought.

"Brian even told me today that he was never going to love another person the way he loves Justin. That Justin is it for him. That's why Brian could take this step with Justin with no apologies and no regrets," Michael explained sadly.

"Don't feel bad, Michael, I lost him too," Lindsay admitted.

"How do you mean?" Michael asked, finally listening to what Lindsay was saying.

"I, too, thought that he wouldn't form any other serious relationships in his life. I thought that he would always be mine. I figured that because of Gus, we would always be bonded. Brian and Gus are bonded. Gus has even bonded with Justin. Brian is in Love with Justin. You and me...he still loves us for the history we all share. But he's truly in love with Justin, and that's totally different from what he feels for either you or me," Lindsay calmly explained.

"It is?"

"Yes. I spent the day with Brian today. I watched him as he dealt with his friends, with Gus, and with Justin. Trust me, Brian has changed. I guess that's what we have to understand. And we need to change how we deal with him, or he will truly leave us behind this time," Lindsay warned.

"I liked the old Brian...the one that has always been there for me ever since we were14. I want the Brian back that has always taken care of me."

"You can't expect him to do that anymore, Michael. He finally has a chance for a life of his own. He has a chance for real happiness with Justin. So I think that you can forget about him taking care of you. That's Ben's job now. Brian's not going to do that anymore...anymore than I can expect him to take care of me," Lindsay said quietly, for she too was still longing for a different time.

"Was that why you chose him to be Gus' father? Because you knew he would always take care of you?" Michael now started to inquire.

"I never thought what he had with Justin would last...that it was as real as it turned out to be. I thought that last year when Brian was going to get married that it was a reaction to your getting hurt and the bombing at Babylon. Then when they didn't get married, that just proved my point. It looked like Justin had placed his career ahead of the relationship. So it was good that Justin was on his way to New York, and Brian would be free," Lindsay admitted. "I never in a million years expected their relationship to survive the separation. As it turned out, we were all wrong."

"I knew that little blond twink was trouble from the moment that Brian laid eyes on him. He wasn't like the others," Michael said in protest.

"And yet, in spite of what we may feel about Brian and Justin being together...we both dearly love Justin...let's face it...you can go on and admit it," Lindsay said with a laugh.

Michael had nothing to say to this suggestion about their mutual fondness for Justin. He had too much else on his mind to ponder that particular question. Michael quickly brought the conversation back to the issue at hand.

"Ben and I just had a long talk," Michael revealed sadly. "I think Ben knows I love him, but no matter how hard I try, I can't make him understand about growing old with Brian. I've dreamed about this since I was 14."

"You'll still get to grow old with Brian and Justin. They're not going anywhere. Brian will still always be a part of both our lives."

"It's not the same."

"It's time to move on, Michael. Surely, you do know that." Lindsay persisted. "It was a childhood fantasy. But now you're a grown man with a family of your own. Don't you think it's time to let the fantasy go?"

"I know. For a while there, I was hoping that Ben and I would move to Toronto so I could spend more time with JR. But Ben has his reasons for wanting to stay here. Then I was hoping that you and Melanie would move back to Pittsburgh. Then things would be like they once were. You know the family would help you out until you were back on your feet. And I could spend lots of time with my daughter," Michael relayed with a sense of pleading in his voice.

Lindsay knew that she had to shut down this hope as quickly as possible.

"You know that Melanie and I aren't going to move back to Pittsburgh, don't you Michael?" Lindsay asked almost in a whisper. "But you can come and see Jenny Rebecca wherever we happen to be, but you know that we will probably never return back here to live anytime soon."

"I know," Michael said with a sigh. He was finally had to accept the loss of another dream.

"You know I think that you and I both latched onto Brian because he's so strong. You had a missing dad. I had parents who paid no attention to me because I'm gay. Brian took care of both of us. But now it's time for us to grow up and take care of ourselves. Brian says that Justin takes care of him, and that was all we needed to know," Lindsay relayed.

"That's because Justin is the only one who can figure out the ever-changing Kinney operating manual," Michael said with a laugh. "But, I'm still going to keep an eye on Justin just to make sure that he doesn't hurt Brian," he added stubbornly.

"Michael, sure you can keep an eye on him, but there's something that you need to know. It wouldn't matter if Justin hurts Brian...Brian's going to always forgive him. And it doesn't matter if Justin leaves...for Brian will always go after him. Justin has Brian's heart. It's as simple as that," Lindsay said with renewed awareness.

"And now Justin also has all his money too. Do you think Justin will really be a successful painter?" Michael had to wonder aloud.

"He already is," Lindsay had to admit. "You should see his most recent paintings. They are wonderful. He even gave one to Gus. Gus had it mounted over the fireplace at the mansion. It was of a painting of Gus and Brian riding horses together. Michael, it was a masterpiece!"

"You're kidding?" Michael said in complete disbelief.

"I've never been more serious. Justin's definitely going to be world famous, and he gets to do that with Brian by his side, just as he's always wanted," Lindsay finally whispered. "And Brian doesn't want to be anywhere else. He's happy, Michael."

"Wow!" was all that Michael could say. Michael flopped down in the nearest chair to ponder all that Lindsay had said.

"I'm going to go upstairs and get a shower. Then, I have so much to do to because I have to start mending my relationship with Melanie before it's too late," Lindsay admitted.

"I know, and I have to find a way to make things right with Ben."

"Michael, believe me, if you could have seen the house you would know what I'm saying is true. Once you see the house you will understand everything. The house is big and sprawling and magnificent on the outside, but once you get inside, it's warm and cozy. And I'm willing to bet that unless Justin is in his studio, or Brian is in his study, the two of them are rarely far enough apart to have to talk to each other on their cell phones. They really do love each other, Michael. You can really feel it when you're in their house. The house is so different from the loft. The mansion makes the loft seem almost cold and lonely by comparison," Lindsay continued to ramble wistfully, remembering all that she had experienced today.

"But we've always said that the loft was so Brian," Michael reminded her.

"I told you that Brian has changed," Lindsay reiterated. "Now you'll see what I mean."

"So the mansion is special, huh?" Michael had to ask, trying to contain his curiosity.

"Oh Yeah!" Lindsay said joyfully. She wanted to make sure that she made her point with Michael.

"How come I've never been invited there? After all, Brian and Justin have been living there for over a month."

"Brian and Justin have been really traveling a lot. There probably hasn't been time. Plus I'm sure that Brian would be perfectly content if he and Justin never had visitors at the mansion. Remember Justin is trying to get ready for several shows. You know how protective Brian is where Justin is concerned. And you have to remember that Brian bought the house as a gift for Justin. And Justin is the one that you have to get to invite you out to the mansion," Lindsay was quick to point out.

"How do I do that?" Michael asked, always needing to be led in the simplest of tasks.

"Justin is very protective where Brian is concerned. Maybe once you and Brian make up, Justin will extend the invitation. But until you and Brian settle things, I wouldn't expect too much from Justin," Lindsay warned him.

"How am I supposed to do make up with Brian?" Michael asked.

"You'll have to find a way," Lindsay suggested. "Once you finally accept that Brian has changed, it shouldn't be too hard for you. After all, you and Brian have been best friends for almost a lifetime. You always said you know him better than anyone," Lindsay reminded him of his own words.

"Maybe," Michael said. "I guess I'm just going to have to give it some time."

"I wouldn't wait too long if I were you," Lindsay cautioned him. "If you wait too long, Brian might move on with his life without you. You might want to consider that."

"I understand, but Brian will come around. He has always forgiven me...ever since were 14."

Lindsay, at that point threw up her hands in frustration. She knew at that moment that Michael just didn't understand what she was trying to say. She hoped that he would eventually come to term with things because Brian was clearly moving on...she could see it.

"The old Brian might have forgiven you, but remember that I told you that Brian has changed. So you can't simply sit back and rely on Brian's forgiveness this time. This time you're going to have to take action to fix this mess. If you don't you could lose everything including Ben...including Brian," Lindsay slowly cautioned. "If you don fix this mess...you could experience your worse fear...you could be all alone," she added for good measure.

Michael had finally heard enough. His mind couldn't handle anymore dire predictions. Michael tried to process all that Lindsay had said. Michael wanted more than anything, at this moment, to have happy thoughts. So he abruptly changed the subject.

"Where's my little Honeybunch?" he asked, obviously deciding that the discussion was over. He was now looking around for his daughter.

"I just put her down in her crib, but she isn't asleep," Lindsay said with a smile, "She is never ready to go to sleep. Why don't you go up and tuck her in?"

"I'm going to do that," Michael said with a smile, as his mind was trying to process so many things.

Michael went upstairs to spend a few minutes with Jenny Rebecca.

As he looked at his daughter, her realized that her life was so simple. Michael realized that his life was suddenly very complicated...all because Brian and Justin chose to legalize their relationship.

Michael played with his daughter and then tucked her safely into bed for the night. He gave JR a goodnight kiss.

Now Michael knew it as time to go home and find a way to straighten things out with Ben.

Chapter 64 – It All Plays Out (Sidebar)

A little later, Saturday evening...(Day 48)

Michael was about to leave when Debbie walked in.

"Michael!" she exclaimed, finding her son visiting. "What are you doing here? Where's Ben?" she asked.

"Ben's at home. I only came over to say goodnight to my little Honeybunch. Then I'm on my way home too."

"I expect to see you and Ben and Hunter here tomorrow for dinner!" Debbie reminded him. "There's going to be a real crowd here."

"I'll be there. I don't know about Ben. We have a lot of talking to do," Michael explained sadly.

"What the fuck could you and Ben have to talk about?" Debbie innocently demanded to know.

"We're still talking about Brian and me," Michael continued to say with sadness.

"Why are you and Ben still talking about Brian? Brian and Sunshine were happy the last time I saw them. They have waited a long time to be together. So what's the problem?" Debbie asked, almost without thinking.

"I'm still trying to get Ben to understand how I feel about what Brian did to me. Right now, he's pretty upset with me. I need to get home and try to fix things with him," Michael explained.

"What's there to fix?" Debbie squeaked with an elevated voice. "Brian and Sunshine made a decision that has nothing, what-so-ever, to do with you. You can't still be complaining about this? It's done. It's over. There's no turning back! You need to get over this," she demanded.

"I see that I can't talk to you about this," Michael protested.

"What's to talk about?" she asked incredulously.

"You don't know what it's like to have your dreams of a lifetime go up in smoke. I had hopes and dreams. I just don't know what to do now? I guess it's going to take me some time to adjust. I would think, as my mother, you would be on my side. This is all Brian's fault," Michael insisted.

"You listen to me, you little shit! Everyone has listened to you cry and complain all day. It's time to put an end to this. It's time for you pick your face up off the floor and deal with this. It's time for you to go home to your husband and get on with your life," Debbie instructed in that mother-tone, indicating this was more than a suggestion.

"I'm suffering here, Ma, and I would have expected a little more understanding from you," Michael said with disappointment.

"Well this time, you little shit, you can't have it! Enough of this! You go home and make things work with Ben, do you hear me?" Debbie instructed, shaking her finger at her son for added emphasis.

"That IS what I'm trying to do," Michael reassured her.

"Just remember what I said," Lindsay added as a reminder once she came into the room in her robe and slippers.

"I'll remember," Michael said quietly. "Look, I have to go; Ben is waiting for me." Michael leaned over to kiss Debbie goodbye. "I'll see you tomorrow, Ma," he finally said sadly, as he was leaving. "Lindsay, thanks for talking to me."

Michael walked away from Debbie's feeling almost as bad as when he had arrived. He couldn't understand why no one could see that Brian had killed his dreams of a lifetime, and no one seemed to understand how he was feeling. After all these years, Justin had gotten everything that Michael believed was his...by right for the time invested with Brian. Everything was over now. Brian truly belonged to Justin, and that knowledge, hurt like hell.

Michael thought about these things as he walked the short distance from Debbie's back to his house.

For Michael, the whole day played out in his mind. The day had started out so perfect...before Brian ruined everything by announcing that he and Justin had legalized their relationship. Michael shook his head as he walked, hoping to dispel the image of Brian's announcement earlier today.

'I can't think about that now...I have to go home and make things right with Ben,' Michael said to himself, with a new determination, as he hastened his steps toward home.

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A few moments later, Michael finally arrived home.

"Ben!" he called out as he entered his house.

"I'm right here, Michael," Ben responded quietly from the kitchen. "Did you tuck in J.R?"

"My little honeybunch is as cute as ever," Michael responded wistfully.

"Well, that's good," Ben added flatly, as he started to make his way out of the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Michael asked, starting to follow him.

"I thought I might work on some lecture notes."

"Could you postpone that? I was hoping that we could talk," Michael said hopefully. He waited patiently for Ben's answer.

"What do you want to talk about, Michael?" Ben innocently asked.

"I want to continue our talk from earlier. When I left to go see J. R, you said we could continue this talk later."

"I'm not sure, we have anything left to talk about, Michael," Ben answered resolutely.

"Of course we have things to talk about, we need to talk about Brian and me."

"Oh, I think that you have been abundantly clear on that subject. Brian was your contingency plan. You figured if anything happened to me, then you and Brian would ride off into the sunset of Palm Springs together. I get the picture. It's really crystal clear, now that I think about it," Ben said, with staccato pacing to his voice.

"It was just a fantasy, Ben, surely you know that? It was just something left over from our teenage years. My life is with you. I love you, Ben. You have to know that," Michael demanded.

"I do know that you love me, Michael. Since the beginning of our relationship, you have had to fight for us. And I know living with the me being positive is not an easy thing."

"No it's not, but I love you, and I want to be with you. Brian is just that--a fantasy."

"I used to believe that. It would even have been ok, if you had simply told me your fantasy about growing old with Brian. Like I said, we do what we have to do, to get through the day."

"I'm glad that you finally understand."

"But Michael, you didn't just tell me. You wanted Brian to leave Justin so that your fantasy could be fulfilled. You argued with Brian, just so that you could try to keep your fantasy intact. You couldn't even wish your best friend every happiness...from what I heard earlier...you still can't," Ben reminded him.

"I just need some time to adjust to the news. You have to admit it's a big shock. Brian did all those things that he swore he would never do. That's not Brian!" Michael affirmed, shaking his head.

"Michael, Brian has changed. The fact that he did all those things should confirm for you the existence of a very different Brian than the one you knew in your childhood."

"I just need some time," Michael said quietly.

"Michael, now that Brian has made this commitment to Justin, what are you going to use to get through each day with me? What's going to be your new contingency plan?" Ben patiently asked.

"I don't know."

"When you figure it out, you let me know," Ben said quietly.

"I will," Michael said confidently.

Michael walked over and wrapped his arms around Ben. He was confident that things were going to be ok. Michael snuggled into Ben's chest, but he didn't feel a pair of loving arms wrap around him.

"Ben, what's wrong?" Michael asked.

"I can't do this, Michael."

"What do you mean that you can't do this?" Michael demanded to know. Deep down he didn't really want to hear the answer.

"Like you said, this is going to take some time."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going to give you all the time you need to work through this," Ben said quietly.

"I know that...you want me to be happy," Michael said confidently.

"That's true, Michael," Ben said with a sad sigh.

"I know that," Michael reminded him softly.

"And I want to be happy too," Ben declared. "My life might be short; I may have to admit that. And this disease is hard on everyone. I have to remember that, but I want more in my life than someone, who is just waiting for me to die so he can live out a childhood fantasy. I want to be with someone who wants to spend his life with me...for however long that may be. And from what I have witnessed today, I realize for the first time in my life that you aren't that person. We want different things, and that's ok. We don't have to stay together," Ben said calmly.

"How can you say that, when you know how much I love you?" Michael began to protest.

"Yes, I do know that you love me. That's what makes this all so sad. But how are you going to love me, when my living is interfering with your life's fantasy? How are you going to go on with me...when this is all there is?" Ben says, spreading his arms apart for emphasis.

"I do love Brian, and I admit that I have since we were 14. But Ben, just like Brian wants a life with Justin, I know that I want a life with you. I know that it was stupid of me to hold on to the fantasy, but I promise you it was just that...a fantasy. I can live with the idea of losing Brian to Justin...but I can't live with the idea of losing you."

"Do you really mean that Michael?"

"Of course, I mean that! You and Hunter and JR are the most important people to me. I know that I've been stupid about things, but I don't want to lose you. I want a life with you...just like we've always talked about. You make me happy. You understand me. I'm just having a momentary reaction to my best friend, making a life decision that he said he would never make. That's all. It's going to take some time to get used to this. It's also going to take some time to get used to the new Brian."

"Well that's good to hear. So I take it, you will be congratulating Brian and Justin during dinner tomorrow at your mother's...is that correct?" Ben asked questioningly.

"I can't believe that you want me to congratulate Brian and Justin. Especially, when you know what I know," Michael reiterated.

"What is it that you know, Michael?" Ben demanded to know.

"I know that Justin is just going to leave Brian," Michael revealed.

"Michael, first of all, Justin is exactly where he wants to be. In fact, he is precisely where he has fought to be for all the years he's been with Brian. And Brian was stupid enough to let Justin walk away from him once...but I can tell you this legal action he took was probably to bind Justin to him so tightly that Justin would never be able to walk away from him again. And if I know Brian, he will always go after Justin...wherever he may be."

"You know, Lindsay said the same thing. When I told her that I was still going to keep an eye on Justin to make sure that he doesn't hurt Brian."

"What did she say?"

"She said that if Justin hurts Brian, Brian would always forgive him. And if Justin ever left, then Brian would bring him back. Lindsay said that all this is true because Justin owns Brian's heart. When she said it, I didn't understand. Now I understand why growing old no longer bothers Brian. In his mind, Brian now sees the prospect of growing old with Justin as something to look forward to."

"Now you're starting to get the picture," Ben said patiently.

"I want to grow old with you, Ben. I honestly do. But if that's not possible, I want to spend as much time with you as possible. That IS how you feel when you love someone. That IS what you said, when you asked me to marry you."

"But can you go on loving me, with no guarantees about how long? Can you go on loving me, without your future beyond me being assured?"

"It's like you said, I have family and friends who love me and will be there for me if anything should happen to you. Brian and Justin will always be there for me, after all Brian is still my best fiend."

"And he still loves you."

"I know that."

"But Michael, be very careful how you deal with Brian. Don't test Brian or put him in a position to have to choose between you and Justin. I would also caution you in your dealings with Brian to remember that no matter what you think of Justin...he is who Brian chose to be his life partner."

"I know...although, for the life of me, I can't figure out what he see in the blond twink."

"I realize that," Ben said with a laugh, "You and Hunter have a lot in common when it comes to that."

"Maybe, you're right," Michael said with a slight laugh, allowing himself to breathe for the first time.

"So are you planning to congratulate Brian and Justin tomorrow...and mean it? Are you ready to think about how happy your best friend and your business partner must be at this moment?"

Michael thought about it for a while. Somehow he managed to quiet the voices of opposition within himself to realize that Ben was considering giving him another chance, and he didn't want to blow this.

Michael somehow reached deep down inside himself and found enough strength to agree that maybe he'd had enough time to adjust to the reality of Brian and Justin as a legal couple. And then, Michael agreed to sincerely wish Brian and Justin well at dinner tomorrow.

And with that, Ben opened his arms to Michael.

Chapter 65 – A Hot Tub Adventure (Sidebar)

Later that Evening...(Day 48)

"We are definitely going to have to install one of these at the house," Paul said, sliding down in the water of the hot tub.

"Oh no!" Jason mumbled, settling in beside him. "Then we'll have to deal with Nicky and the trucks all over again. I suggest that we simply invite ourselves to visit Bri-tin. I think the periodic play dates for Gus and Nicky should allow us enough time to take advantage of the hot tub," Jason teased.

"Except that Brian and Justin are moving to New York..." Paul reminded him.

"Do you really think that they can stay away from this mansion for very long?" Jason asked, looking as his partner and waiting to see how he was going to respond to that particular question.

" I don't know. I'll admit that I've never seen Brian so relaxed...so open...as he is here," Paul commented. "Brian has always wanted to be in New York. Justin needs to be in the center of the art world. They both seem very excited about the prospect of New York...and being there together. So who can tell? All I know is that Brian is happy in spite of the fact that things probably haven't gone quite the way he planned," he added thoughtfully.

"I told you Justin wasn't going to get much painting done today. No one would listen when I said that Gus and Nicky weren't going to let Justin out of their sight," Jason confidently proclaimed his amazing foresight.

"You were absolutely right. Brian may try to manage things...but of course, Gus and Nicky always seem to have their own ideas..." Paul laughed.

"That's for sure," Jason added with a laugh. He let his mind reflect on the events of the day. He thought of Justin with his ever-present shadows of Gus and Nicky

"But that's not what I mean," Paul said, trying to correct the mistaken impression.

"Then what are you driving at?" Jason asked curiously, trying to follow his partner's line of logic.

"Brian had hoped that everyone would be happy for him and Justin. Now I understand why he made it legal first and then told everyone later."

"Paul, what are you talking about?" Jason asked with surprise. "As near as I can tell, everyone is thrilled with Brian and Justin's news. It's plain to see that Jennifer and Molly are crazy about Brian. Lindsay and Melanie even seemed happy about the idea. Of course, Gus thinks Brian did all of this just for him...so he could always have HIS Justin. Ah, the simplicity of youth! And Emmett..."

"Yes, they all seem pretty happy about things...but Michael isn't taking the news well," Paul revealed.

"Oh Michael...I forgot about him."

"Yes Michael...Brian's shadow."

"I noticed that we haven't seen him today."

"Brian told Michael the news this morning when we drove into town to pick up Lindsay and Melanie. From what I understand Michael didn't take it well. I'm not sure what happened, but Brian was upset when he came back to the car after talking to Michael."

"It's a good thing that you were there for Brian."

"You know how I feel about Brian, but I swear to you, I could strangle the little pip squeak Michael with my bare hands."

"Judging by how Michael feels about Brian, he has to come around eventually. I know that he has always been possessive of Brian over the years, but surely by now...now he can put all that aside. If nothing else, he must want his best friend to be happy," Jason suggested, leaning comfortably against his partner.

Paul simply wrapped his arms around Jason for good measure before he finally responded, "No, I think Michael simply wants his best friend."

"You're kidding?" Jason protested, leaning back to check his partner's expression. Seeing that Paul was totally serious about his last statement, Jason began to feel some sympathy for Michael. "You know I can almost feel sorry for him. All his hopes and dreams must have died, little by little, as he watched Brian and Justin grow together over the years. But Michael can't be blind; he had to know it would come to this!"

"Maybe he foolishly continued to hope things would turn out differently, but I suspect that once Brian saw Justin it was all over for him. Of course, Brian will never admit that it happened that way," Paul said with a gentle laugh. "It's like us. Once I saw you, there was no turning back for me either," Paul easily admitted.

"And when did you become the romantic?" Jason teased with a smile.

"I must admit, I'm starting to get ideas," Paul said emphatically.

"You are?"

"Oh yeah, as soon as I convince you that Teres just isn't right for you," Paul teased.

"But you already know that Teres isn't my type. She is a very sweet person, and I must admit that Molly and I enjoyed spending time in the kitchen with her today. Believe me, she is so in love with Thomas, I don't think that you have anything to worry about. Besides, everyone knows that I'm crazy about you," Jason reminded him.

"You have no idea how happy that makes me," Paul continued to tease. "You know, over the years I've gotten used to having you around. Somehow, it's comforting to know you still find me interesting."

"Not just interesting. I find you fascinating...exciting...sexy even. No, you have nothing to worry about. You're definitely the one that I want to be with. Did I neglect to mention how much I love you?" Jason asked in a serious tone, leaning up to give Paul a gentle kiss.

"I love you too, but I'll admit it's still reassuring to know that after all these years you still find me exciting."

"Most definitely," Jason reiterated. "And if we weren't both submerged up to our necks in this swirling water, I would show you how much. Just know that I'm very glad that we're together. "

"I really like living in Cincinnati with you, but have you ever thought about living in New York?" Paul sheepishly asked.

"Not really. I'll admit that I love doing art with Justin. It's really fascinating, watching him work, but I love running the agency with you. Can you imagine what's in store for Kinnetik when it opens its office in New York, especially with both Brian and Justin at the helm? Brian has said many times that he's so much more creative when he works with Justin. The two of them together will be a force to be reckoned with," Jason once again proclaimed prophetically.

"You heard Brian. He already has clients in New York. Justin needs to be in New York too. There is a whole new adventure waiting for the two of them there. But the most important part about their move is they are going to be together," Paul affirmed. "So Michael had better come to terms with things quickly, Brian is definitely not in the mood to continue to argue about a decision, this important, that makes him so happy."

"So that means during dinner tomorrow, we're going to have to be sure that Michael stays away from Brian," Jason pointed out.

"That should be easy to arrange. Nicky will keep Brian busy without any coaxing from either of us. You know how he feels about Brian."

"Speaking of Nicky, did you see Nicky's eyes light up when Gus introduced him to Emmett? It's a good thing that we're leaving tomorrow...I'm not sure that I like the way Nicky and Emmett were eyeing each other," Jason suggested with serious concern in his voice.

Paul couldn't resist a laugh at the idea. "Don't you think you're overreacting just a bit?" he asked. "After all, Nicky is only four."

"Now that you mention it...maybe just a bit," Jason added with a laugh of his own. "I do have to admit they are cute together, but I think we should still keep an eye on them tomorrow just to be on the safe side."

"Of course," Paul added, trying to stop another laugh.

Jason snuggled a little closer to Paul and lapsed once again into silence.

"Now, what are you thinking?" Paul asked hesitantly.

"Do you think that Melanie and Lindsay might actually move to Cincinnati?" Jason began to question.

"I don't know. It would be great for Gus and Nicky to live so close to each other. We could be a real support system for Melanie and Lindsay. They would be like family. Mom and Katie would love to have more people to spoil...they're already in love with Gus. I have to admit, it would be fun to have Lindsay close by. I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

"If they were to move to Cincinnati, they would be all settled when Brian and Justin move to Milan. Then they could move to Europe without worrying about everyone. I'm sure Brian is concerned about them being in Toronto, no matter what he might say."

"Where on earth did you get the idea that Brian and Justin are moving to Milan? I thought they were moving to New York. Did Justin say something to you while you two were talking alone?" Paul asked with renewed interest.

"No, he didn't say anything. It's just that he's been invited to exhibit in Milan. I don't know all the details, but they wouldn't have asked him to submit a painting if they weren't interested in his work. I can just see Europe calling...that's all...nothing would surprise me anymore."

"You know, I hadn't thought too much about the Justin's exhibit at the gallery. Brian told me the whole story about Justin and the Silvestris. If Brian's take on them is correct, and they are truly crazy about Justin...there's no telling what can happen."

"And just think, the announcement of Brian and Justin's legalized relationship will have to be published in the New York papers. The Silvestris will surely find out about their new status along with everyone else in New York."

"Maybe Brian thinks their news will be able to fly under the radar, but Justin is a rising star in the art world, and Brian has buzz all around him with his potential move to New York. Now he's going to be a major player on the New York scene. Oh yeah, everyone will know about this by the time they get back to the city. And just wait until Michael and the family find out about their plans to relocate to New York."

"Oh yeah, that's right. Brian hasn't told anyone except Jennifer about his possible relocation to New York. I don't know why Brian thinks he can keep this secret. Anyway, this is going to be interesting to watch the events unfold," Jason reiterated, already envisioning the intrigue to follow.

Paul couldn't resist laughing again. "You know I think Justin was right about you. You truly have a devious mind. I'm going to have to watch you more closely."

"That really isn't necessary!" Jason insisted. "But I can get used to being watched by the hottest guy I know."

"You're just saying that because you know we're on our way to Babylon," Paul suggested.

"Do you realize this is going to be our first visit to Babylon in a very long time? It's hard to believe that Brian owns it now. After all, it was once his private domain. He was talking about selling it before when he and Justin were going to get married. But instead he rebuilt the club. I'm dying to see what Brian did with it."

"I think Brian is done with his past as the Stud of Liberty Avenue. It may not be his playground anymore...but he and Justin still love to go there and dance. Justin seems really happy that Brian still owns it."

"I wonder what the renovations are like?"

"We'll soon find out...I have to admit that this has really been a fun weekend. I know we supposedly made the trip so Nicky could have a play date with Gus...but you have to admit, it's been great for us too."

"Does that mean we're going to take Mom's advice and visit with Brian and Justin more often? Nicky's older now and traveling is easier. Brian and Justin did most of the traveling to see us these last few years. Maybe they're right, now it's time for us to make things easier for Brian and Justin," Jason suggested. "After all, they are going to have a lot going on. I think they are really going to need us."

"And maybe it's time to get the trucks back to the house to add a hot tub for us and for the guest room too."

"Nicky will be thrilled. Of course, you know he'll start to talk about the delivery of his brother or sister...remember Nicky still believes trucks deliver babies," Jason added with a laugh.

"I wasn't trying to pressure you," Paul said softly.

"I know. I've just had a chance to do some thinking since we've been here. I'm not ready to commit to a decision yet, but I'm beginning to think that we should start to test the idea with Gabrielle to see what she thinks. I think we can trust her to keep things quiet for a while from the rest of the family."

"I do like the sound of that."

"Don't get too excited! I only said that I'm willing to talk to Gabrielle. Don't rush out and start buying a crib yet."

"I'll be patient and let you figure this out in your own time."

"Thanks. I bet Brian and Justin are having the same conversation," Jason added with glee.

"What on earth makes you think that? Brian has Gus, who is crazy about Justin. I think they both think that's enough for them. You know how Brian feels about kids, in general. How many times have we heard his thoughts on the matter?" Paul reminded him.

"Justin has changed Brian's thoughts about a lot of things. I suspect whenever Justin is ready, he'll change Brian's mind about kids too," Jason said definitively.

"As I said before, you really do have a wicked mind. You make it sound like Brian has no choice in his life."

"Brian has all the choices in the world...but he will do whatever he can to make Justin happy. You just watch and see. Just remember that you heard it here first!" Jason professed.

Paul shook his head at Jason's antics.

Paul thought about Brian, the man he'd now known for over 15 years. He then smiled as he realized how much both he and Brian had changed. But Paul wasn't about to give Jason the satisfaction of admitting that he could be right...for then, Jason would become truly unbearable to live with. Paul merely contented himself with a simple smile, as he once again hugged his partner. Paul knew that time would tell the truth about Jason's predictions.

"Ok, now we're going to have to get out of this hot tub. I think that you're starting to wrinkle," Paul commented, lifting Jason's arm to examine it closely.

"Wrinkle? Now we really can't have that, can we?"

"No, we can't. I really don't think I'm into wrinkles. If you will remember, it's not by accident that you're quite a bit younger than me," Paul continued to tease.

"Well if we must..." Jason said with a sigh.

Paul and Jason both shared a laugh as they slowly helped each other out of the swirling waters.

They reached for the robes and towels and noticed that everything was heated.

"Brian and Justin must spend a lot of time in here. The heated towel rack and robes are such a dead giveaway," Jason commented with a laugh.

"Knowing Brian, I'm sure that he and Justin have spent a lot of time in each room of this house. I'm also sure that they're probably never too far apart while they're here. They have probably christened every room in this mansion."

"I'm not so sure...I realize that Justin is very inventive...after all I'm sure we both still remember Atlanta. But let's face it, they have both been rather busy lately, when would they have found the time for the christening that you're suggesting?" Jason said with a laugh.

Paul laughed too as he nodded his agreement.

Although they had enjoyed their time alone in the hot tub, Paul and Jason were now totally relaxed and ready to rejoin everyone else in the mansion.

After all, Babylon awaits!

Chapter 66 - Babylon Awaits!

Late Saturday Evening...(Day 48)

Brian and Justin were still spooned together in front of the fire at the mansion. They were talking easily as they stretched across one of the oversized chairs and ottoman. Justin rested comfortably against Brian's chest while Brian had Justin wrapped within his arms.

Paul and Jason were clothed in heated robes after their turn in the downstairs hot tub. They were totally relaxed as they made their way into the living room to join Brian and Justin.

"Well there you are. Molly was beginning to wonder if we were going to have to rescue you two and would need to use her newly acquired life-saving skills," Justin teased.

"Jason and I were so relaxed that we got to talking, and I guess we just lost track of time," Paul explained, snuggling into the added comfort of his robe. He was truly enjoying his robe wrapped around his body after the relaxing time in the hot tub.

"Easy to do, I guess," Brian said with a smile, thinking of all the times he and Justin had talked in the hot tub. "Of course, the blond here has such sensitive skin that we don't get to stay in the hot tub very long," he added with a laugh. "But we do try to slip into the swirling waters more frequently to make up for it."

"I never realized how wonderful it could be," Paul remarked.

"So I guess it's time for us to get ready to go to Babylon, isn't it?" Jason commented sheepishly. "I'm with Emmett, I can hear that thumpa thumpa calling."

"You quoting Emmett? That's a first. A few minutes ago, you were worried that he and Nicky were going to run off together," Paul couldn't resist teasing.

"Paul!" Jason protested.

"Emmett is one of a kind...Gus is crazy about him too," Justin added with a smile. "Emmett is sooooo over the top, what kid wouldn't be captivated?"

"We have friends that are queens, but Emmett is truly in a class by himself. I really do like him," Jason had to admit.

"Speaking of Nicky and Gus, where is everyone?" Paul finally asked.

"They can't be too far away since they rarely let Jus out of their sight," Jason teased.

"Their affections were easily transferred. They are curled up in the media room with Mom and Molly. I'm not sure leaving them together while we go to Babylon is a good idea," Justin added.

"Needless to say, Jennifer has been telling Gus and Nicky about Justin when he was their age. Obviously, Sunshine isn't thrilled so he's been sulking," Brian revealed, wrapping his arms around Justin.

"I have not been sulking," Justin protested. "It's ok if Nicky and Gus hear this stuff...but Mollusk is in there too. She is never going to let me forget anything that she hears," Justin said woefully, snuggling closer to Brian for comfort as he contemplated his life going forward.

"I wouldn't worry about it," Brian reassured him, "Our being in New York, should give her time to forget whatever she's heard."

Paul couldn't resist a laugh at the last statement. He reflected for a moment growing up with Gabrielle. Paul could have told Brian that little sisters never forget. They simply file information away to be called forth when unsuspecting older brothers least expect it...waiting for that moment of greatest embarrassment. He understood that Justin had every reason to be concerned, but he also understood that neither Brian nor Jason would ever understand it. "Obviously spoken confidently by someone without a little sister," Paul finally had to say. "Have you forgotten Gabrielle?"

"Oh please, Gabrielle says that she has to constantly defend herself from you...using whatever tactics are at her disposal," Jason reminded him.

"See how sneaky they are?" Paul continued. "They even make your partner think that you're at fault. I just want you to know, Jus, I'm on your side. I fully understand," he added sympathetically.

"Thank you, Paul. It's good to know that someone understands," Justin said with vindication, hitting Brian for good measure. "You don't see it, because Mollusk is crazy about you," he finally pointed out to Brian.

"Can I help it if your sister has great taste?" Brian asked, beaming with pride.

Deciding this conversation was rapidly deteriorating, Justin just shook his head. "Babylon..." he simply said in reply.

"I've been so looking forward to this," Jason remarked.

"I must admit...me too," Paul added.

"Well I guess that's our cue to get ready," Brian commented.

"I guess we should tuck in the kids first," Paul suggested.

"Gus and Nicky announced that they are staying up late tonight. This obviously means that they are probably already asleep since it's way past their bedtime," Brian said with a laugh. "I guess you're right...we should carry them to their beds as we go upstairs."

"This weekend has been such an adventure for Nicky," Jason said with a smile, " I can't wait until we go on vacation together."

"Hopefully, Gus will get to go on vacation with us too," Jason added hesitantly.

"We'll have to wait and see. The Munchers did say they would think about it," Brian added hopefully.

"You know our trip isn't too far off," Jason reminded them. "It's just a few months. I can hardly wait."

"Which means that someone needs to be locked away his studio..." Brian began to make his point, jostling Justin a bit for good measure.

"Will you stop worrying? I'll have my application for the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana ready to be shipped this week." Justin reassured him.

"I wasn't worried," Brian professed, but unfortunately, no one believed him.

"Babylon!" Justin said, reminding everyone of the task at hand. He stood up and gently tugged at Jason to get him moving.

"Paul and I will grab the kids...then we'll be up to get ready," Brian added.

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Jennifer put her fingers to her lips as Brian and Paul entered the media room.

Molly couldn't resist a quiet laugh. "Sure, Gus and Nicky were going to stay up late. I knew they wouldn't last," she teased. "But they looked so comfortable, I didn't have the heart to wake them up."

"I know they do look like angels when they sleep," Paul commented, as he gently lifted Nicky, "But they both can be such devils when they're awake."

"What kind of a parent are you? That's a terrible thing to say about your kid," Molly said in mock horror.

"The kind with a clear perspective on his kid," Jennifer said quickly. "I have so often thought the same thing as I've watched Molly and Justin sleep."

"Mom, how can you say that?" Molly protested.

"Oh please, don't get me started. You're already in so much trouble, Dear," Jennifer reminded Molly. Jennifer smiled to herself as she watch the expression on concern float across her daughter's face. Being absolutely content, Jennifer turned to Paul to continue making her point. "If my kids are any indication, you have a lot to look forward to," she continued to tease.

"Brian, help me out here," Molly said pleadingly.

"I've done all I can do here, Molly. I'm simply going to retrieve Gus. You're going to have to get yourself out of this one," Brian said, giving her a gentle kiss on the cheek before picking up a sleeping Gus.

Jennifer couldn't contain the big smile on her face as she saw the worried look continue on Molly's face. Yes, she was enjoying this little moment of watching Molly squirm.

Gus and Nicky easily settled into their fathers' arms, snuggling in to make themselves more comfortable but not waking up completely as they were carried upstairs.

Paul and Brian carefully got the kids into their pajamas and gently tucked them into bed. Then the fathers simply smiled at each other as they were leaving the room.

Paul and Brian each headed for their respective bedrooms to change. As they were in the hallway, Paul quietly whispered to Brian, "Thumpa thumpa".

"Oh no, not you too," Brian rolled his eyes in mock protest.

"You have to admit the clarion call is very strong. I'm looking forward to seeing Babylon again," Paul revealed.

Brian just laughed as he entered his bedroom to get dressed for the Babylon.

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A little over an hour later, Brian parked the SUV at Babylon.

"I can't believe that you have your own parking space here at the club," Paul said, shaking his head.

"Ownership has its privileges," Brian teased.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Paul. He hardly ever uses his parking space at the club. We usually just park on the street and walk back to the club like everyone else. He's just parking here tonight to impress you," Justin revealed.

"Sunshine!" Brian protested.

"Oh, give it up Brian," Justin reminded him.

"Well now that you mention it...you never really know who will just happen to walk by that will change your life forever," Brian couldn't resist saying as he looked over at Justin. And in his mind, the night he first met Justin became the most vivid of images.

"I don't know," Justin answered, "You talk to a stranger, you never know where it can lead." Justin too was thinking about that night of first meeting Brian.

Brian smirked finally and said, "Since I seem to have lost my chance for anyone to come along...I thought I might as well use the convenience of my parking space at the club."

"Brian!" Justin protested as he gave Brian a well-deserved hit. Paul and Jason couldn't contain their laughter watching their friends.

Everyone piled out of the SUV and headed around to the front entrance of Babylon.

Brian looked at the long line of people waiting, as he slid his arm around Justin's waist. The group finally reached the entrance and security at the door simply smiled and greeted Brian and Justin as they let the foursome pass.

As they entered Babylon, Jason was already bouncing to the thumpa thumpa. He reached out and grabbed Justin by the hand, "Shall we show them how it's done?" he asked, leading a surprised Justin to the dance floor.

Paul and Brian looked at each other, shaking their heads.

"Let me buy you a drink," Brian said with a laugh, "Since we appear to have lost our partners."

The two of them proceeded to the bar. As they arrived, the bartender smiled and without asking, a glass of Beam suddenly appeared in front of Brian.

"Now where did that come from?" Brian teased. "I thought I could sneak into the club without anyone knowing I was here."

The bartender laughed. "Are you kidding? With the rumors that we've heard, I guess that should really be champagne. I must say that you and Justin really surprised us all."

"Oh?" Brian said nonchalantly.

"Good news travels fast," Paul said, carefully watching Brian to see his reaction to the comment. "I think I'll join you in one of those," he added, pointing to the glass of Beam.

The bartender quickly poured a second drink and passed it to Paul. Then he turned once again to Brian and said, "But don't worry. We won't create a scene. We all value our jobs too much to make a fuss, but that doesn't mean we aren't really happy for you and Justin. You're a very lucky man."

"I'd have to agree with that," Paul added, lifting his glass in a mock toast.

"What are we celebrating here?" Ted asked as he approached Paul and Brian at the bar. "Hello Paul, I heard you were in town."

"Hi Ted, it's been a long time, I'm glad to see you." Paul commented. " I was just noticing all the changes that have been made since the last time I was here."

"Why don't you let me give you the guided tour...so you can get a closer look before all the crowd in the line outside gets admitted," Ted suggested.

"See Brian, another tour guide. Now I get a chance to gush over things. Thank you, Ted," Paul couldn't resist commenting. Then he turned to Brian and said, "Are you going to be alright if I leave you alone?"

"Trust me, he'll be just fine," Ted said with a knowing smile.

"I'm sure I'll be able to find someone who'll want to dance with me," Brian smirked.

"Is that an offer, Sweetie?" Emmett asked as he swirled into the group ready to lead Brian to the dance floor.

"I think I've suddenly lost my urge to dance," Brian quipped back mournfully.

"I don't think I like your attitude," Emmett responded playfully.

Seeing that Brian was no longer left alone, Ted and Paul went on their tour of Babylon.

"Since I have to put up with you, should I order you the usual drink?" Brian asked.

"That would be a nice gesture. Thanks," Emmett said, accepting his usual Cosmopolitan. "I see that Jason and Justin are on the dance floor. They're dancing up a storm."

"Jason kidnapped Justin as soon as they were inside. I'm keeping an eye on them though." Brian said to reassure Emmett that he was ready to intervene at a moment's notice. "So did you find anyone interesting?"

"No, Drew won't be back until tomorrow," Emmett added. "So tonight I'm just here solo to hang out with Teddy. Did you notice that long line outside?"

"Who could miss it?" Brian responded.

"They must have all heard that you and Justin were here," Emmett teased.

"Of course they did. Why else would they be here?" Brian said with a laugh.

Brian and Emmett chatted easily, until a very winded Paul and Ted returned to join them.

"Thank you for the dance, Ted. It's been a long time. Jason and Justin don't seem to be slowing down any time soon," Paul added with a laugh. "Thanks for the tour too...it was good to gush with someone who understands."

Ted couldn't resist a laugh. "My pleasure."

"Well, Teddy, now that you've been properly warmed up. How about a dance?" Emmett asked.

"I think I can do it all again." Ted answered. "See ya later, Bri," he added as he was whisked away by Emmett.

"I love the changes you made to the place. Babylon is still so you. And with the changes, you really put your imprint on things. I see the Brian Kinney touch everywhere," Paul pointed out.

"I had to do it this way. After the bombing, I couldn't let the bastards win. I thought about selling this place. The renovations kept me busy when Justin first went away. Now, I'm glad that I still own it." Brian said quietly. "It's still fun to come here with Justin."

Paul simply smiled. "I think Jason and Jus have had enough time to dance with each other. Don't you agree? Shall we go and claim our partners?" Paul asked Brian and then waited for a response.

Brian couldn't resist a smile, for he was thinking the same thing...but he was trying to be polite. "That sounds like a good idea," he added sternly, as he and Paul headed for the dance floor.

Brian and Paul danced through the congestion on the main dance floor at the club until they reached Jason and Justin. Then they each slid in behind their respective partners, continuing to move to the beat of the music.

Justin and Jason each responded by leaning back and then turning into the arms of their partner...for each of them now had the dance partner that they really wanted.

To the casual observer no one would suspect that these were two couples...where the partners had been together for years...for it was obvious that the heat and passion still existed between them.

There was a whispered buzz on the dance floor as the other dancers noticed Brian and Justin dancing.

Brian simply smiled as he pulled Justin closer to him while they danced. As Justin snuggled in, even closer, Brian wrapped his arms tightly about his partner. The other dancers could definitely feel the heat that was Brian and Justin.

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Ted and Emmett sauntered off the dance floor to grab water from the bar. They were laughing and talking as they approached the bar so they didn't pay any attention to who was waiting for them.

"Someone seems to be having a good time," a cheerful voice said.

Ted turned to see who was speaking. "Ben...Michael, what are you doing here?"

Totally surprised, Ted and Emmett greeted their friends.

"You never said anything about coming to Babylon tonight," Emmett added.

"Ben said that primitive tribes believe in the curative powers of dance. I'm not so sure, but I'm here to give it a try," Michael said skeptically.

"These tribes have been adhering to that custom of the dance for centuries. So shall we give it whirl," Ben said, holding out his hand to Michael.

Michael and Ben headed for the dance floor, leaving Ted and Emmett alone to stare at each other.

"Well that was sure a surprise," Emmett commented. "I guess everything must be ok now between them if they're here at Babylon. Did you know that they were coming?" he asked.

"No, it's as much a surprise to me as it is to you, but what has you so concerned," Ted asked, but still so adept at reading his best friend after all these years.

"Brian told Michael the news about him and Justin. Michael has been upset all day. He hasn't been dealing well with the idea of a legally committed Brian and Justin. Debbie's really concerned too." Emmett remarked.

"Ben must have talked some sense into Michael. They seem to be ok...don't you think? I wouldn't worry about it," Ted responded, motioning to the bartender to give him two bottles of water.

"Yeah...but since Michael didn't tell us that he was coming...I bet he doesn't know that Brian and Justin are here. I'm not sure I like the feel of this," Emmett cautioned.

"Em, please. Can we save the drama queen moment? As big as Babylon is, Brian and Justin can easily move around here without running into Michael and Ben...especially when they aren't looking for each other." Ted pointed out.

Emmett took a sip of his water and tried to believe what Ted was saying. But the more he thought about it...the more Emmett had to wonder. For Emmett had seen Michael earlier today, and he wasn't sure that someone could do an about face so quickly...especially Michael.

Still Emmett tried to be optimistic. "Sure, Teddy. I guess you're right," Emmett finally said, always hoping for the best.

Their conversation was interrupted as Paul and Jason returned to the bar for their own bottles of water.

"Emmett, what's wrong?" Jason asked, "What happened to that bright eternal flame? Did Ted wear you out on the dance floor?" he teased.

"I thought I saw Michael," Paul added by way of a random comment.

"You must be mistaken," Jason added. "He couldn't possibly be here."

"I'm afraid he is. He and Ben were on their way to the dance floor. Where are Brian and Justin?" Emmett asked.

"They are headed for the bathroom; they should be here any minute," Jason revealed.

"Look, if Michael is here, we need to try to see that he doesn't get a chance to get to Brian. Brian talked to Michael earlier today and he was very upset afterwards. It's been an enjoyable day for Brian so far. I don't want Michael to upset him again," Paul insisted.

"Aren't you over-reacting just a tad? Michael and Brian have been dealing with each other for years. Believe me, Brian knows how to handle him," Ted reassured them.

"I don't know. Like I said earlier, Michael has had a difficult time all day dealing with Brian and Justin's news. So..." Emmett added.

"That's ok. I understand," Paul said quietly. "I was hoping that you two would help...but either way Jason and I will do our best to keep them a part. Like I said, I don't want Brian upset," he added firmly.

"You obviously feel pretty strongly about this," Emmett observed, clearly noting Paul's concerns. "Don't worry, we'll help in any way we can, won't we Teddy? But Paul, you have to realize that they will see each other tomorrow at dinner."

"I know. Then Brian will probably be prepared for that. I just don't want him to have to deal with Michael when he's simply out for a little fun with Justin," Paul insisted. "I know Brian can handle things. I just don't think that he should have to."

"Ok, Teddy and I will see what we can do to help. This is not going to be easy!" Emmett pointed out.

"I know. I guess it's ok if they see each other. I just don't want them talking to each other...not tonight." Paul further clarified.

"Alright Paul. We'll do our best. Surely, the four of us can handle this," Ted agreed.

"Let's hope so," Jason added, already starting to look around, trying to figure out where each of the characters were located at this precise moment.

Chapter 67 – Dancing at Babylon

A Little Later...(Day 48)

"So now that you've danced with me, and got me all hot and hard, you think it's time to dance with Jason again? Do you really think you can get away with that, Sunshine?" Brian teased Justin, as they were leaving the bathroom at Babylon.

"They're our guests, Brian," Justin pointed out, as if that should explain everything.

"And if I let you dance with Jason again, does this mean you'll get back on track with my plan and scurry into your studio to paint, first thing in the morning?" Brian had to ask, trying to use whatever leverage he could think of, to get Justin to cooperate with his well-laid plans for the weekend.

"Maybe not first thing in the morning..." Justin protested with a smile. "I may have other plans."

"Such as?" Brian demanded to know.

Justin leaned in to whisper something in Brian's ear.

Brian smiled, obviously liking what he was hearing, "Well, maybe first thing in the morning was a bit harsh," he finally said.

Justin couldn't resist a smile, as they started walking toward the bar.

Paul and Jason met them on the way, carrying several bottles of water.

"Here," Jason said, handing water to everyone.

"Thanks," Brian and Justin in unison, as they gratefully accepted their drinks.

After finishing their water, Justin and Jason said their goodbyes as they once again headed for the dance floor.

"Why don't you show me the new catwalk?" Paul suggested.

"Because you think we can keep an eye on our partners from up there?" Brian teased.

"Not to mention getting a birds-eye view of the dance floor," Paul added. "I can't believe how many people are here tonight."

"It's Saturday night in Pittsburgh, where else would they be?" Brian reminded him.

"You have to admit that this is still the hottest club in town," Paul reminded him. "Where else does a fag have a chance to maybe catch a glimpse of the great Brian Kinney? What will gay PA do when you move to New York?"

"I'm sure that some new guy will eventually take over as the new Stud of Liberty Avenue. I can happily retire...knowing that all of gay PA will be well taken care of," Brian confessed.

"That's not true...let's face it, there is only one legend...only one Brian Kinney," Paul proclaimed.

"That's true, a mighty legend brought low by a blond twink," Brian said with a sigh. "And I couldn't be happier," he added with a laugh.

"I know, but from up here you can still safely survey your realm," Paul reminded him with a smile.

"I must admit...It's a great view! Look at our partners," Brian said, nodding in their direction. "Where do they get the energy?"

"They have youth on their side," Paul said with a laugh, "But you have to agree...they really are quite a pair. We're so lucky, you and I."

Brian thought about all the years he'd spent thus far with Justin.

'Legal Partners...forever and ever has such a nice ring to it', he thought to himself, definitely looking forward to all the years to come.

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Meanwhile, Ted and Emmett were talking to Michael.

"Did you get a chance to spend a lot of time with JR?" Emmett asked.

"Not as much as I would have liked. I really miss her when she's not here, and thanks to Brian, my day has been rather upsetting."

"How is that?" Emmett had to ask, trying desperately to follow Michael's line of logic.

"I heard you when you said that Mel and Linds were invited to lunch out to the mansion. I saw Brian earlier today, and he didn't invite me too...his best friend. He never said a word about any thing special going on for him today. Linds was the one who told me about what had been going all day today at the mansion. I should have been invited too," Michael pointed out. "Brian has a lot to apologize for," he added.

"So have you finally worked through everything?" Emmett continued. "Are you finally ok with the news about Brian and Justin?"

Michael nodded yes. "Tomorrow, I'm going to wish Brian and Justin well," he revealed.

"That's wonderful, Michael," Ted exclaimed. "After all, Brian is your best friend. I know you want him to be happy, and even you have to admit that Justin makes Brian happy. This is good news."

"We both know that Justin will never make Brian truly happy. Everything will fall apart again...you'll see. I'm just going to be there, waiting to take care of Brian... like Zephyr takes care of Rage. Everything will eventually be ok. Everyone knows that Brian needs me," Michael pointed out with smugness and self-satisfaction. "Brian will never change...we all know that."

"So you're going to wish Brian and Justin well, even though you don't really mean it?" Ted asked, not believing his ears.

Michael simply nodded yes.

"Michael, sweetie, what makes you think you can pull this off?" Emmett had to ask.

"I have to. If I don't wish Brian well, I could lose Ben. So I know that I have to find a way to do this."

"Have to do what?" Ben asked as he rejoined them at the bar.

"I have to congratulate Brian and Justin first chance I get. It really is time," Michael said with a forced smile.

"I'm so glad to hear that," Ben said, leaning down to give Michael a kiss. "It's the right thing to do. You'll see that afterwards, things will be better between you and Brian."

"I know," Michael said, trying to sound reassuring.

Ted and Emmett couldn't help looking at each other with some concern. They both suddenly understood the overprotective stance that Paul and Jason were taking where Brian was concerned.

After a few moments, Michael excused himself to go the bathroom, leaving Ben to talk with Emmett and Ted.

"I'm sorry...I bet this has been a long day for you, hasn't it?" Emmett said to Ben. He wanted to be sure that Ben knew that he was being supportive.

Ben recognized the show of support. "Brian and Justin committing to each other has thrown Michael for a loop. I'm just glad that he is finally ready to wish his best friend well. He and Brian have been friends for so long that I hate to see a breach develop between them." Ben continued. "But you know how strong childhood fantasies can be?"

"My childhood fantasy was to get out of Hazlehurst," Emmett admitted. "Since I'm here in Pittsburgh, obviously I made that dream come true."

Ben and Ted couldn't help but smile at Emmett. Although they both had to wonder why Emmett had stopped in Pittsburgh, but they were both very glad that he did.

"It's good to have dreams," Ben reminded them. "Sometimes they're the only things that keep you going...believe me I know."

Everyone fell silent for a moment...simply nodding their agreement with Ben's statement.

Deep down, Emmett and Ted understood that eventually a person had to grow up and learn the difference between their dreams and real life. They both understood that Michael wasn't there yet.

Shaking away those thoughts, Emmett said, "Ok Ben, while Michael is away...how about a dance?"

"Why Emmett, you and I haven't been dance partners in quite some time. I think that's an excellent idea," Ben said joyfully, as he reached out to take Emmett's hand and led him to the dance floor.

A short time later, Michael returned to the bar, finding only Ted waiting for him. Michael took a moment to look around before he had to ask, "Where's Ben?"

"Oh, Ben and Emmett are reliving the past," Ted said casually. "They're dancing. They both decided it had been too long since they'd danced together."

"That's true. Me and Ben have been so busy with our lives that I guess we haven't spent much time here at Babylon," Michael said sadly. "Where does the time go?" he added.

"Once we were all so innocent until we found our way here to Babylon," Ted reminded him.

"Most of us were...except for Brian. I don't think Brian was ever innocent," Michael said, thinking back. "He seemed to always know exactly what he was doing...until now."

"Michael..." Ted said, trying to interrupt Michael's train of thought.

"I heard some guys talking, when I was in the bathroom," Michael continue oblivious to the attempted interruption. "They said that Brian was here tonight. I guess Ben and I should find him in case we have to drive him home," he continued.

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Ted pointed out. "If Brian is here, I'm sure he's not here alone."

"I suppose not," Michael said sadly, secretly hoping that Brian had left Justin at home.

"So tonight, he's not going to need that ride home," Ted gently reminded him.

"Was it business? Is he with clients?" Michael continued to question.

"No, Paul and Jason are here with him so you and Ben don't have to worry," Ted added for good measure. "I'm sure Brian has a safe way home."

"Still, I wonder where he is," Michael couldn't suppress the idea that if Brian was at Babylon, and they ran into each other, surely Brian would beg Michael's forgiveness for the harsh words between them. But even more, Michael was also hoping that Brian would admit that he made a mistake committing legally to Justin. Then things would return to normal.

"Babylon is still a pretty big place, remember?" Ted reminded him, breaking Michael's train of thought. "Brian could be anywhere."

Michael reluctantly accepted what Ted was saying.

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"Why thank you Mr. Ben for that dance," Emmett cooed.

"You're welcome, Em. It was my pleasure." Ben responded. "Michael, did you know that Brian's here?"

"I heard someone in the bathroom mention that he was here, but I haven't seen him yet. Do you think he's looking for me?" Michael eagerly asked.

"I don't think he knows that you're here. I thought I saw him talking to someone on the upper catwalk," Ben pointed out

"Did you see Justin there too?" Michael asked, hoping he could have a moment alone with Brian.

"No, Brian appeared to be talking to someone else. I couldn't see who it was. I also thought that I caught a glimpse of Justin dancing, but I was so far away I couldn't be sure. A lot of people are here tonight. I couldn't get close enough to Justin to even say hello," Ben recounted.

"I wouldn't worry," Emmett interrupted. "You'll see Brian and Justin at dinner tomorrow. So tonight...just enjoy the thumpa thumpa," he suggested.

"That sounds like a great idea," Ben agreed. "Let's just take advantage of the curative powers of the dance."

"So Em, now that you've had a chance to dance with Ben, how about you and I dancing together?" Michael insisted.

Emmett was a little surprised, but he managed to hide it. "Just give me a minute to catch my breath. Then, I think I'll be up to another dance," Emmett admitted, taking a moment to lean against the bar. "Its' been a while since you've asked me to dance."

"I know...." Michael confirmed with a smile.

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While Michael and Emmett were dancing, Michael couldn't resist constantly looking upwards, hoping to locate Brian. But with the crowd of people watching the dance floor from the catwalk railing, Michael never caught a glimpse of Brian.

Paul had seen Michael and Emmett approach the dance floor. He had also seen Michael constantly looking up in an attempt to locate Brian. So Paul had carefully maneuvered Brian out of the way so he couldn't be seen from the dance floor.

As Paul watched Michael leave the dance floor, he decided that the crowds offered just the right shield for them, so he guided Brian to just the right spot on the dance floor to once again surprise Jason and Justin.

"I'm going up on the catwalk," Michael announced, as he and Emmett were on their way back to the bar.

"No Michael, I really don't think that's a good idea," Emmett argued.

"If Brian's up there, I know he must be looking for me," Michael professed. "This is his chance to make things right between us."

"Michael, your plan was to see Brian tomorrow and congratulate HIM during dinner. Don't you think that's a better idea than talking to Brian here at Babylon," Emmett suggested, "Besides Ben is waiting for you. How do you think that Ben is going to take your searching for Brian tonight?"

"Ben?" Michael asked.

"Yes, you remember...your partner...tall guy...rather good looking...very well built like a superhero...surely you remember him?" Emmett said, trying to jostle Michael's memory.

Michael stopped to think for a moment. "Ben will understand," he answered. "I'll only be a minute." Michael took off in the direction of the upper catwalk.

Emmett decided to follow Michael at a distance, just in case he was needed.

Michael searched the upper level. In fact, he was so intent on his search on the upper level that he failed to notice Brian and Justin dancing together on the main dance floor.

Emmett however noticed the Brian and Justin on the dance floor...but said nothing to Michael.

After failing in his quest, a saddened Michael slowly returned to the bar to rejoin Ben...followed immediately by Emmett.

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Meanwhile, Brian and Justin were totally enjoying themselves on the dance floor.

Paul smiled to himself as he noticed Michael and Emmett on the upper catwalk, but he never said a word, as he and Jason continued to enjoy their dance.

Finally, the foursome decided they'd had a rather long, but totally enjoyable, day. They agreed to one more dance before heading back to the mansion.

After the final dance, Brian and Justin were on their way to the bar to say goodbye to Emmett and Ted before leaving; however, Paul and Jason tried to convince them that if they stopped at the bar...they might find it difficult to easily reach the exit.

That was it. Brian had finally had enough. "Alright Paul, are you going to tell me what's going on?" Brian demanded to know.

"Nothing," Paul insisted, keeping eye contact with Jason rather than looking up at Brian.

"Nothing, huh?" Brian grumbled. "You and Jason have managed to keep both Justin and me busy, the entire time that we've been here at the club. Jason's antics don't surprise me because he's always a little over the top when he and Justin get together," he added with a laugh. " But you...you've been handling me all night. Now I want to know what's going on...and I want to know it now!"

"Brian..." Justin tried to interrupt.

"Not now, Sunshine, Paul has some explaining to do, and I don't want to miss a single syllable," Brian said firmly. Brian didn't move a single step, but firmly planted himself in place, forcing the crowds to move around them. And to make sure that Paul didn't drift away in the passing crowd, Brian reached out and gently, but securely, held his shoulder as he said, "I'm waiting Paul."

Paul sighed deeply as he contemplated his position. Secretly, he hoped for some sort of divine intervention that would make it unnecessary for him to say anything more, for he was well aware that Brian hated to be handled.

"I'm waiting Paul," Brian repeated.

"All right Brian, you're right. Michael is here at Babylon tonight. I didn't want you two to run into each other," Paul finally admitted.

"I can't believe that you've done all this maneuvering, all night, just to keep me from seeing Michael? Why?" Brian asked, completely perplexed by the turn of events.

"He upset you earlier today, and I didn't want to give him the opportunity to upset you again." Paul revealed.

Brian laughed, as he released is friend.

"Ok, I'm sorry. I was just..." Paul started to say, looking for the right words not to make matters worse.

"Don't worry about it. There's nothing that I can do about how Michael feels about what Justin and I have done. I, also, have no intention of making it easier for Michael by avoiding him. This is Michael's problem, and he's going to have to deal with it," Brian pointed out.

Paul and Jason simply nodded, admiring the way that Brian had chosen to handle things.

Brian smiled, sliding his arm around Justin's waist. "Now we are going over to the bar to say goodbye to Emmett and Ted."

"Ok, " Paul said softly.

They had taken a few steps, when Jason suddenly interrupted things. "Wait a minute! What do you mean, Brian?"

"What?" Brian asked, trying to figure out was Jason was complaining about now.

"You didn't think I was listening, did you? What do you mean 'Jason's antics don't surprise me because he's always a little over the top when he and Justin get together?' Jason asked mockingly. "I'll have you know that I've been on my best behavior," he argued.

Brian couldn't resist laughing at the outraged Jason.

"Jason, I know you love to dance. But you have held my partner hostage on the dance floor almost since our arrival. Sunshine may not find that unusual, but I have to say it's quite suspect," Brian reminded him. "I suppose that you have another explanation?"

Jason was about to plead his case, and then he happened to look over at Paul. Paul's expression made it clear that Jason's best strategy, at this point, was to simply agree with Brian.

"All right, Brian," Jason finally said with a sigh. "When we first arrived, I really wanted to dance with Jus. But I'll admit, I have been focused on keeping Justin on the dance floor so that Paul could keep you distracted and away from Michael." Then Jason turned to Justin. "I'm sorry, Jus," he said sincerely.

"That's ok, Jason. At least now I understand, why I feel so tired," Justin teased.

"Jason, you and Paul, had better hope that Justin's energy returns quickly. Because I've made my usual promise to fuck him into the mattress tonight. And it's no fun, if Sunshine falls asleep in the middle of things. Do I make myself clear?" Brian pointed out

Paul and Jason suddenly felt a moment of panic. Brian smiled at Justin as he watched the expressions on Paul and Jason's face, but he said nothing, choosing instead, to let his friends squirm.

Brian continued to smile as he led the way to the bar.

Ted and Emmett saw Brian and Justin approaching with Paul and Jason. Casting a look at Paul and Jason, Ted and Emmett realized that they could not prevent the inevitable...Michael and Brian were about to come face-to-face with each other.

"Brian..." Emmett said, causing Michael to finally look up.

"Well Em, I think it's time that I take the blond home to bed," Brian said with a smile. "Hi Ben, it's good to see you."

"How's it going, Brian? Good to see you and Justin...and congratulations."

"Thank you," Brian said quietly.

Michael started to shuffle over toward Brian. "Briian," he whined. "I heard that you were here. Were you looking for me?"

"Not really," Brian said nonchalantly, giving Michael every indication to stay where he was.

Michael paid no attention and tried to reach out for Brian, who simply took a step backward, taking Justin with him.

"Michael, honey. Now is probably not a good time to hug Brian. After all, he's been dancing the night away," Emmett pointed out. "He's probably all hot and sweaty."

Michael stopped for a moment and noticed that Brian still stood with his arm around Justin. Michael couldn't understand why Brian hadn't released Justin and reached out for him.

"Brian?" Michael asked, hoping that Brian would say something to explain things.

Brian merely turned his attention back to Ted and Emmett. "And Ted, I'll see you later. I trust that you'll take of things here."

"Of course, Bri," Ted reassured him. "Paul...Jason...it's been good to see you too. We'll see each other at dinner tomorrow at Debbie's."

"I'm looking forward to it," Paul added, as he glanced at Michael and smiled.

"We're going to say goodnight...we'll see you tomorrow," Justin said, trying to suppress a yawn. And with that Brian, Justin, Paul, and Jason headed out of the club.

A very surprised Michael couldn't believe what just happened.

"He didn't say anything to me; Brian wouldn't even talk to me," Michael complained. "He's my best friend...how can he do this to me? I've got to go talk to him."

"No!" Ben insisted. "You just heard Brian say that everyone was tired. Just leave him alone. You can try to talk to him tomorrow."

"No, Brian needs me now," Michael protested, as he tried to follows his best friend. Unfortunately, Brian and group seemed to quickly disappear from sight.

Michael tried to follow the departing group onto Liberty Avenue.

"I'm sorry Ben, but you know how Michael is?" Ted remarked quietly, but his eyes never left Ben, who had a strange look of exasperation in his eyes.

"I guess I do," Ben said calmly, letting out a long sigh.

A few minutes later, Michael returned. "I don't understand, Brian had to hear me calling him, but he paid no attention to me. He just drove off."

"What did you expect, sweetie? Brian was tired and ready to simply go home. Ben was right; you're going to have to wait until tomorrow to talk to Brian," Emmett suggested.

"Maybe you're right," Michael quietly acknowledged. He waited a few moments to let the recent events settled in. "Ben, maybe it's time for us to go home too," Michael, then, suggested.

"You can go home if you like, Michael," Ben announced with a strange sound to his voice. "But I need another dance with Emmett before I go. Emmett are you up for it?"

Emmett smiled and followed Ben to the dance floor, leaving a very startled Michael behind with Ted.

"What was that all about?" Michael asked. "Ben is behaving so strangely."

"You may have pushed Ben too far this time," Ted quietly suggested, hoping Michael would start to think about what he was doing.

"What did I do?" Michael whined, apparently completely oblivious to what was happening.

Ted simply shook his head and wondered if Michael would ever get a clue.

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"In spite of everything, THIS was another great night at Babylon," Paul admitted, as he pulled Jason closer to him in the car on the ride back to Bri-tin.

"I couldn't agree with you more," Brian said, as he reached for Justin's hand, and gently kissed his wrist. "You'll forgive me if I hurry home," he added with a smile, "I still have a certain promise to keep before someone falls asleep."

Justin couldn't resist a smile.

Chapter 68 – The Next Day Begins

Sunday Morning...(Day 49)

Brian awoke to an arm full of Justin, and blond hairs gently tickling his nose. These were two of his favorite things to wake up to so Brian just lay there and enjoyed them.

He also started to let his mind drift back over the events of the last week, which culminated in a certain visit to his attorney's office.

Brian smiled as he thought about what he had managed to pull off. He and Justin were now legally bound...just the way that Brian wanted as he was about to begin the great adventure: Kinnetik-New York.

Brian felt Justin stir beside him and eventually roll onto his chest for good measure. "Are you just going to lay there?" Justin asked.

"I was thinking about it. Why? Did you have something else in mind?" Brian asked coyly.

"Since you're awake, I think that we should use this time wisely, don't you?" Justin teased, already starting to kiss a path down Brian's chest.

"But aren't you afraid we'll be interrupted by your little shadows. You know they can't possibly be asleep for very much longer," Brian teased.

"So you're telling me that I have to work fast?" Justin responded, momentarily pausing to check Brian's reaction.

"I'm not sure that I want you to rush, exactly," Brian added with a devious smile.

"Oh," Justin replied, once again resuming his attention to his partner's body.

Gracefully Justin made his way down below Brian's waist, and all thoughts of conversation seemed to disappear, being replaced by rising groans of pleasure.

Justin wrapped his mouth around Brian's cock while Brian surrendered to the sensations.

"Well, that was a bit of a surprise," Brian said as Justin reached up to give him a kiss.

Justin snuggled closer to Brian and smiled. "It's good to know that I can still surprise you. Now that we're legally bound, I'd hate to think that you'll get bored with me."

"Not a chance," Brian admitted with a smile, as he gently rolled Justin onto his back. "In fact, I think that I'll have to find someway to properly mark you now that you're mine," he added, as he started nibbling on that certain spot near Justin's ear.

"I've always been yours...since the very beginning," Justin reminded him.

Brian remembered his own carelessness over the years and quietly added, "Not always..."

"You just didn't know it," Justin added, "But now you do."

"Yes," Brian responded, looking down at Justin and realizing that he was totally lost to the man beneath him.

Brian leaned down to kiss Justin, and their passions erupted once again.

After several rounds of lovemaking, Brian and Justin slowly made their way towards the shower.

"I can't believe the kids are sleeping this late," Justin said as Brian started washing his back. "Have you heard anything?"

"No," Brian responded, "But I'm sure they'll be in any minute, especially Nicky."

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A bit later, as they were relaxing, once again, in bed...this time dressed in pajamas...there was a knock on their door and then patter of little feet approaching the bed.

Justin patted the space between him and Brian, and Nicky and Gus quickly scampered onto the bed.

"You're dressed!" Justin remarked as Nicky climbed into his arms and Gus nestled beside him. "Good morning, you two." He looked over at the opened door and saw his mother and sister standing there. "So what did you two do? Did you go wake up Mom and Molly?"

Gus and Nicky didn't say anything, but merely tried to hide their faces.

"Not quite," Jennifer said from the doorway, "Fortunately, we were already awake when these two came to visit. They did, however, manage to wake up Paul and Jason. And now, you're their final target," she admitted with a laugh.

"Yeah, Mom thought that she would let them say good morning to you before the three of them proceeded with their plans," Molly added with a grin.

"Plans?" Brian said, looking over at Justin. "They're too young for plans. I think you'd better tell me what you're up to," he continued sternly, trying to intimidate Gus into revealing all.

"Ok, Nicky, what's going on?" Justin quietly asked.

"It's a secret," Nicky said, reaching up to give Justin a kiss.

"It's a secret, Dad," was all that Gus would say too.

Gus and Nicky then kissed Brian and Justin goodbye and followed Jennifer and Molly out of the room. "Bye Dad," was all that Gus would say. "Bye Jus," was Nicky's contribution to the goodbyes.

When they were gone, Brian and Justin just looked at each other and laughed. "So what do you think that was all about?" Justin finally asked, snuggling again close to Brian.

"I'm sure I have no idea," Brian added, sliding back under the covers. "What's more," he said, rolling over to kiss Justin, "I have more important things to worry about," he added, leaning down to kiss him passionately.

A few moments later, a tender moment was interrupted as Brian's cell phone rang.

"Now who can that be?" Brian groaned as he rolled over to answer it. "Kinney."

"Brian, it's Jennifer."

"Jennifer, didn't you just leave my bedroom...so to speak," Brian laughed.

"Let's not go there, Brian," she responded, not amused by his previous comment. "I need you and Justin to get dressed and come downstairs...without dawdling."

"I think that could be arranged, what's going on?" Brian asked.

"You'll see when you get down here," Jennifer said without giving any further hints.

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"That's all I'm going to say. See you when you and Justin get down here," Jennifer added with a laugh.

"Ok. We'll get dressed and come on down. What about Paul and Jason?"

"Don't worry about them. They're already here. We're just waiting for you."

Brian and Justin dressed in sweat pants and sweatshirts and quickly made their way downstairs.

Reaching the lower level, Justin called out, wondering where everyone was.

Paul and Jason finally appeared to greet them.

"Ok, what's going on?" Brian demanded.

"You're not going to believe this," Paul revealed but said no more.

"Gus and Nicky fixed you breakfast," Jason added, deciding truth was the best course at this point.

"What?" Brian and Justin said in unison.

"Yes, it's supposed to be a surprise for you."

"Oh no!" Brian remarked.

"You can relax Brian, they got Jennifer and Molly to give them a hand. Gus and Nicky just wanted do something special for you."

"That's great," Justin said. "C'mon Brian, let's go check this out." Justin gently pulled a reluctant Brian along and into the kitchen.

"Surprise!" Gus and Nicky yelled in unison, aided by Jennifer and Molly.

"What's all this?" Brian asked with a smile that he now couldn't contain.

"It's breakfast," Gus explained. "It's a surprise, Dad."

"I can see that. I must say I'm definitely surprised. You did this for us? How did you manage this?" Brian asked the now beaming Gus and Nicky, who were standing on stools so they could reach the height of counter.

"Grandma Jen and Aunt Molly helped me and Nicky." Gus explained, dipping the last piece of bread into an unknown mixture and handing it to Jennifer to cook.

"This is wonderful! Thank you," Brian gushed with true emotion. He then looked over at Justin for support.

"This is wonderful. Thanks," Justin added with a big smile.

"Let's eat!" Jason quickly suggested. "I for one, plan to enjoy YOUR surprise breakfast."

"Me too," Paul added with a big smile.

Brian and Justin were treated to a meal of assorted fruit and whole grain French toast, juice and coffee...of course. Gus and Nicky had milk instead of coffee.

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"That was wonderful," Brian said, when they had finished eating, reaching over to hug Gus and Nicky, who were still totally beaming.

After breakfast, everyone gathered in the living room to read the Sunday papers together.

Brian grabbed the business section and made himself comfortable on the couch. Justin was sprawled on floor, reading the funnies to Gus and Nicky. Jason decided to occupy on of the overstuffed chairs while he took a look at the Art & Entertainment section, while Paul was reading the sports pages from the other chair. Jennifer and Molly were huddled over a small table, jointly working on the crossword puzzle. Brian had added gentle music and everyone was totally relaxed.

Then Jason said quietly. "Brian, I think that you should take a look at this."

"What?" Brian asked, reaching over to take the section of the paper from Jason. "What do I need to see?"

Jason didn't say a word, just allowed Brian time to look at the page. Then Jason smiled as he noticed Brian's reaction.

There on the page was a picture of Brian and Justin smiling at each other, as the article went on to talk about their new legal status. The news was now out there for all to see.

Paul got up to lean over Brian's shoulder to take a look for himself. "That's a really great picture of you and Justin," he murmured.

"What are you talking about?" Justin asked, leaving the funnies now to take a look at what Brian was holding. "I can't believe this. Max said that the news wouldn't be published for another week, and then we were expecting just a simple listing in the classified announcements."

"Obviously, the Pittsburgh Gay press had other ideas," Paul commented with a laugh. "Well there goes your anonymity," he added.

"And they didn't waste anytime publishing this news," Jason added. "Congratulations!"

Jennifer and Molly were now leaning over their shoulders too. "I love that picture," Jennifer added. "Where do you think they got it from?"

"I have no idea," Brian quipped.

"Look at the size of that picture. I don't get this much press when I have a show," Justin teased.

"Oh I don't know...I'll bet you will from now on. You and Brian won't be able to go anywhere in this town without being recognized. You're now going to be media darlings. I can see it all now," Paul continued wistfully.

"Will you save your imagination for your ad campaigns, Paul?" Brian quipped back. "Well Sunshine, I would say this makes us official, don't you think?" he added with a laugh.

"Yes, I would have to agree. You know everyone is going to see this and have their own comments when we get to dinner."

Brian simply sighed. "Yes, I do realize that." Then he smiled. "It really doesn't matter. This picture proves that I managed to snag the hottest guy around. Now everyone will know it," he added, pulling Justin down onto his lap.

"I did too...the hottest guy around," Justin added, leaning down to give Brian a gentle kiss.

Chapter 69 – The Gathering

Sunday Afternoon...(Day 49)

Debbie was moving quickly around the kitchen when Emmett breezed into the room.

"Where's everybody?" he asked casually.

"The girls left right after breakfast. JR and Carl seem to be having a love fest there in the living room. So that just leaves you and me," Deb responded with a laugh.

"I'll take that as hint that you might like some help...be still my little beating heart," Emmett teased, clutching his chest for dramatic effect.

"Don't be a little shit! Of course, everything is under control, but I wouldn't mind a little company while I work," she responded.

"Just teasing, Deb," Emmett reassured her with a laugh. "Just let me grab a cup of coffee, and I'm all yours."

Emmett reached for a cup from the cabinet shelf and poured a cup of coffee. "Can I pour one for you?" he asked.

Debbie shook her head no so Emmett settled down at the kitchen table to continue talking with Debbie.

While Emmett was sipping his coffee, a Danish appeared beside his cup. Emmett smiled and said "Thank you."

"Well, this has surely been a weekend to remember," Debbie began with a laugh.

"I know, just think that shortly there will be a house full people here for dinner. I'm so looking forward to it. You know how much I just love parties," Emmett gushed.

Debbie shook her head. "That's not what I mean. I'm talking about Brian and Sunshine."

"Oh yes, there is that too...Brian and Justin were even at Babylon last night along with Paul and Jason," Emmett informed her.

"They were?" Debbie reacted with some surprise. "If they were at Babylon, I wonder who was watching the kids," she muttered almost as if talking to herself.

"Jennifer and Molly stayed overnight at the mansion so that everyone could have a night out." Emmett relished telling this tidbit of information. "I heard something about how they were going to watch movies all night..."

"So Jennifer and Molly were out at the house too? Is there anyone who wasn't visiting Brian and Justin yesterday? Lindsay practically begged for an invitation until she wore down poor Sunshine into inviting her and Melanie out for lunch. I wonder how they managed to handle lunch with everything that Sunshine has going on at the moment?"

"I don't know about lunch, but Brian invited me to stay for dinner. From the looks of things, I would say that Teres must have had a very busy day," Emmett gushed.

"Teres?"

"Teres and Thomas take care of the house while Brian and Justin are traveling. Of course, from what I heard, Teres often likes to handle the meals for them too. Gus even pointed out that Teres always fixes a special meal whenever he and Brian go riding. All during dinner, Gus and Nicky couldn't stop talking about their riding adventure with Brian and Justin."

"You've got to be kidding?"

"No! And it appears that father and son ride together often. In fact," Emmett once again gushed, "Justin even captured their riding in a painting. Gus tried to describe it to Lindsay on the phone yesterday morning, but I saw the real thing for myself. There can no longer be any doubt about Brian and his riding...not with that painting over their mantel," he added with a laugh.

Debbie couldn't resist a laugh and a shake of her head as she contemplated the image of Brian Kinney on horseback. "Somehow I see Sunshine's hand in this adventure."

"And wait until you see Nicky," Emmett gushed. "He's such a little cutie! And he and Gus together are something to watch as they boss each other around."

"It sounds like you had a good time too. I wondered where you suddenly disappeared to yesterday."

"Yes, I drove out to the house to deal with Justin...." Emmett started to explain. "How dare he not tell me about him and Brian! What was I suppose to do, read it in the papers today like the rest of Pittsburgh...I don't think so. So I went out to confront the twink in-person." Emmett couldn't resist a smile. "But then everyone showed up at Babylon...Brian, Justin, Paul, Jason, Ben, and Michael, and the gay grapevine got wind of things. Now everybody knows the news."

"Ben and Michael were at Babylon?" Debbie asked with some surprise.

"Yep. Ben was spouting his usual wisdom about the natives using dance to relieve tension."

"Oh yes, we'll we've all heard that one before."

"Ben and I got a chance to dance together. We haven't done that in a long time."

"If Ben and Michael were at Babylon...then everything must be ok between them. I've been so worried." Debbie said, letting out a long sigh of relief. "Michael is really having trouble with Brian's decision regarding Sunshine. At least now, I guess I can stop worrying."

"Ben and Michael were there, but things are still a little tense between them. Things are also a little tense between Michael and Brian. Paul and Jason were spending most of the evening keeping Brian and Michael apart."

"That seems odd...why would they do that?"

"You know how upset Michael has been since Brian told him the news. It seems that Brian was upset by Michael's reaction yesterday morning too. Paul and Jason didn't want Brian upset again. They just wanted Brian and Justin to have a good time dancing. Their scheme worked for a while, but towards the end of the night, Michael and Brian eventually crossed paths at the bar."

"How did that go?" she asked with motherly concern.

"I'm afraid that Michael is still holding on to the hope that Brian will apologize to him and try to set things right between them."

Debbie couldn't help but groan. "I know that earlier in the evening Michael was talking to Lindsay. I hope that she got through to him. Michael has got to stop brooding and simply wish those two boys well. Brian is just not really in the mood for anything else."

"You know that Brian has always forgiven Michael anything. So I wouldn't worry too much about this...if I were you!"

"I have reason to worry. Brian has changed. Michael may have gone too far this time...whining about Sunshine...holding on to hopes of future with Brian. He doesn't see what he's doing." she added. "Ben is a patient man, but I'll bet that he's furious this time."

"Michael can't help it if he's still holding on to his childhood dreams ..." Emmett remarked. "Right now, Ben seems to be trying to understand. Thank goodness, Ben knows how Michael feels about him, and he's never really seen Brian as a threat so I wouldn't worry too much. Everything will be ok."

"I'm a mother. It's my job to worry." Debbie informed him.

Debbie and Emmett continued talking when the front door opened. Jenny Rebecca managed to break free of Carl and immediately projected herself into Hunter's arms.

Hunter laughed and picked her up and cuddled her in his arms. "Hi there, short-stuff," he teased. "At least someone here is glad to see me."

Jenny Rebecca giggled as she snuggled in closer to Hunter's chest; he carried her into the kitchen where he leaned down to kiss Debbie.

"Hunter, what are you doing here?" she asked mockingly.

"According to the grapevine, you're going to have a lot of people here for dinner. I just thought I'd show you what a good grandson I am and help you set up," Hunter said with a grin, wondering if anyone was going to buy this line of bullshit.

Hunter looked over at Emmett hoping to find support, but instead he just lowered his head and pretended to be very interested in his cup of coffee.

"Ah huh," Debbie said doubtingly, obviously not buying Hunter's bullshit either.

Hunter lowered Jenny Rebecca back down to the floor, and she scampered over to resume playing with Carl. "Even JR isn't buying that nonsense that you're spouting," she teased. "So why are you here?"

"Like I told you..." Hunter tried to continue, until he looked at the disbelieving expressions on Debbie and Emmett's faces and changed his mind.

Hunter simply let out a sigh. "I did come to help you set up for dinner," he re-emphasized, "And to make sure I get a good seat to watch all the action that I know is going to be happening here today. I can hardly wait for Molly to get here."

"I don't know. Molly and Jennifer were at Brian and Justin's yesterday. I'm sure they must be exhausted. So don't be surprised if Jennifer decides that she and Molly need to spend a quiet Sunday at home," Emmett suggested.

"What!" Hunter exclaimed. "Molly was out at the house with Brian? No way! How did that happen? I'm going to have to watch her more closely!" He paused for a moment to consider things then added, "At least now we can hear all about their house"

Emmett couldn't resist. "I don't know! She and Brian were pretty cozy yesterday. He probably swore her to secrecy. If you want to know about the house, you had better focus on Melanie and Lindsay."

"They were there too. Gheez! So that means that we're the only one's who haven't seen the mansion," Hunter pointed out, looking at everyone.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Emmett quipped. "I was out there for dinner last night too."

"How did that happen?" Hunter asked in protest.

"It's no big deal. You forget that I helped them get settled in. But of course, professional ethics means that I'm sworn to secrecy," Emmett couldn't resist pointing out.

"Did you know about this?" Hunter said, looking intensely at Debbie.

"Don't look at me. Lindsay pleaded with Justin until she wrangled and invitation. I'm not worried," Debbie said convincingly. "I'm sure that Sunshine will invite us out there in due time. But the little shit better not wait too fucking long or I'll have his balls!" she added as an afterthought.

"You know considering how we used to always just drop in on Brian at the loft. I guess he just wanted to spend some alone time with Justin. Although I've heard that he's been trying to lock Justin in his studio all weekend so that he could get some painting done. I also heard that Justin keeps finding reasons not to be there. So something tells me that Brian is not going to be in the best of moods when we see him later today," Emmett related. "You know how Brian hates to have his plans go awry."

"Don't worry about Brian...Sunshine has been handling him since he was seventeen," Debbie added with a laugh, "I'm sure that he'll be just fine."

"Enough about the blond," Hunter protested, "Now what do you need me to do to help?" he asked, always eager to change the subject.

Debbie and Emmett smiled knowingly at each other. Some thing never changed.

As Hunter and Emmett began rearranging the furniture, Debbie realized that Emmett was right. It was going to be a party.

Debbie was looking forward to seeing Brian and Justin. She was also looking forward to having everyone there...her whole little Liberty Avenue family and then some. She thought for a moment and realized that it had been quite a while since she had seen Paul and Jason...and after everything that she'd heard, Debbie was definitely looking forward to meeting Nicky too.

While all this activity was underway, another visitor walked through the door and was immediately greeted by Carl. "Drew, I didn't know that you were in town," he said, hugging Drew Boyd as he walked into the room.

"Drew? That can't be right." Emmett commented, standing up to check things out. "Drewsie's in Dallas...he isn't due back until midweek."

"I don't think so..." Debbie responded, accepting a hug from Drew. "How's my favorite stud-muffin?" she cooed.

"Great, now that I'm here. The grapevine has it that big things are happening here in Pittsburgh. You know how I like to be where the action is?" Drew teased, as he released Debbie. "So I decided to fly back early to investigate for myself. How's it going Hunter?"

"Great, Drew. I think it's awesome that you're back," Hunter said, greeting his idol.

"So Em, did you miss me?" he asked, wrapping his arms around Emmett, and throwing Emmett over his shoulder.

"Well, I guess I'll see everyone later," Emmett commented from his upside down position as Drew carried him upstairs, leaving Carl and Debbie and Hunter behind laughing.

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Jenny Rebecca had worn herself out so Carl had her nestled in his arms as he lounged in his favorite chair reading Jenny Rebecca a story. She was almost asleep when Lindsay and Melanie returned and took in the touching scene.

"It looks like someone is ready for a nap," Lindsay said, reaching for her daughter. Jenny protested snuggling closer to Carl.

"Leave her alone," Carl said gently. "She'll probably be asleep in a few minutes anyway."

"When did you become so smart," Melanie teased.

"I'll admit it's been a while, but I raised kids too, you know. I even have grandkids," he reminded them.

Melanie and Lindsay talked with Carl about his family. Carl mentioned that both his son and daughter had agreed to bring their families to Pittsburgh for the Christmas, and he was really looking forward to seeing them. He was also looking forward to his family getting to know everyone in this Pittsburgh family. Carl talked about how much his life had changed since a certain redhead came into his life.

"Oh yes, the guys at the precinct keep asking when they can have another rematch with the Liberty Balls. You know that first match that we had made a big difference in how they see gays. They're saying that they wanted to do it again."

"That first match was fun. I just wish that we'd won," Lindsay revealed with determination.

"I'm sure we will win the next time, but when did you get so competitive?" Melanie teased.

"I always like to win," Lindsay teased, "You know that."

"Maybe...."

At that point Drew and Emmett returned and greeted Lindsay and Melanie.

Melanie looked over at her sleeping daughter, and gently lifted her into to arms. "I'm going to take her upstairs so she can get a nap in before dinner."

"I'll come with you," Lindsay said, leaving Carl and Emmett and Drew in the living room together. "Maybe we can get a short nap too. I don't want to miss anything; from what I can tell there's going to be some gathering here later."

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Hunter finally finished arranging things as per Debbie's instructions, so he joined Carl in the living room to watch television.

"What are you watching?" Hunter asked.

"Another one of those crime shows, where the detective, who looks like a supermodel, manages to chase the suspect and solve the crime in less than a half hour...all without a single hair being out of place," Carl relayed.

Hunter couldn't' resist a laugh for he had heard this particular tirade of Carl's every time a police dramas was on the television. "So that means you're going to check out the game now that Drew is here?"

"Absolutely!" Carl added with a laugh. "I can't believe I was watching that other stuff in the first place. JR must have changed the channel earlier to watch her cartoon show."

Carl flipped the channel to the game and, as usual, Drew and Carl were soon arguing about the referee's decisions.

A few moments later, Ben arrived. He greeted Debbie and then quickly settled down to join everyone watching the game. "I came early to help rearrange things, but I see that that's already been done," Ben commented.

"I took care of it," Hunter announced proudly.

"You did?" Ben remarked with some surprise. "What brought his on?" Then he thought for a minute. "So you wanted to set up the best vantage point for watching things today. Just think about the cast of characters you and Molly get to watch this time," he teased.

"Did you see that play?" Drew interrupted. He and Carl immediately started to challenge the referee's call.

"I don't know why you two watch this stuff. All you do is argue," Hunter pointed out.

"Isn't it great?" Emmett cooed. "Big burley men focused on a ball. Who can resist?"

Everyone turned to look over at Emmett before breaking into laughter.

"Are Lindsay and Melanie here?" Ben asked as an afterthought.

"Yeah, they went upstairs to put JR down for a nap." Carl informed them. Then he asked, "Is Michael at the store?"

"He went in to check on things. He should be here shortly. Believe me, he doesn't want to miss any of what's going on here today," Ben added.

"You realize that this will be the first public appearance of Brian and the blond. I'm going to really need a ring-side seat for this!" Hunter suggested.

"I don't know how to tell you this, kiddo, but Brian and Justin were at Babylon last night with Paul and Jason. So I'm sure by now all of Liberty Avenue must know about them," Ben suggested.

"You went to Babylon?" Carl remarked with some surprise.

"It was good to forget about everything and to dance the night away," Ben responded. "And by the time Michael and I got home last night...we simply fell into bed."

"How were Brian and Justin?" Carl asked.

"They seemed the same. Brian kept his arms around Justin most of the night... except for when they were lured onto the dance floor by Jason and Paul. The four of them are funny to watch together," Ben added. "But they managed to keep the super-couple dancing all night."

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Ted and Blake were the next to arrive. They quickly went into the kitchen to greet Debbie, and then they settled down in the living room near Hunter.

"Did you see the papers?" Blake quietly asked.

"Blake," Ted said gently.

"What was that Blake?" Carl asked.

"There was an article in the Arts & Entertainment Section of the paper about Brian and Justin's legal union...complete with a picture and article about the two of them. If they intended to keep their union a secret, that obviously isn't going to happen now," Blake added with laugh.

"Knowing Brian, he probably planted the article himself," Carl teased. "Figuring that the publicity would be good for both their careers. After all, he is in advertising."

"No, I definitely know that Brian had nothing to do with this. He and Justin have been too buried to plant this story. I just think that some over zealous reporter picked up the news when their union was registered. Although he didn't plan the story, I'm sure he's going to bask in the limelight anyway," Ted said with a smirk.

"So were you out to their house yesterday too?" Hunter asked Ted once he had settled down next to Blake.

"Where? Oh you mean out to Brian and Justin's? Not hardly. Brian has everyone working overtime on projects at the office," Ted responded. "Why...what did you hear?"

"Not much. Emmett was there, but he won't talk!" Hunter added. "Maybe Mel and Linds can be persuaded to dish. The suspense is killing me."

"I know how you must feel kiddo," Ben added sympathetically. "But if we just practice patience, we'll have our chance to see everything for ourselves."

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Melanie and Lindsay came back down stairs and decided to join Debbie in the kitchen.

"Something smells wonderful," Lindsay said, as she poured herself a glass of juice.

"Your cooking is one of things we really miss about not living in Pittsburgh," Melanie added.

"You know you could move back here and have my cooking all the time," Debbie reminded them. "Not to mention, have the entire family available for babysitting duties."

"I know, Deb," Melanie said, leaning over to give her a kiss.

"I guess I understand why you felt the need to leave, but Pittsburgh has changed. Maybe it's time for you to reconsider things," Debbie suggested quietly. "You know how I feel about family." Lindsay and Melanie just looked at each other and smiled.

Debbie noticed the looks but decided not to press her point. "But I'm really glad that you two have decided to visit so often. It's the next best thing since you seem to like living in Toronto so much," Debbie continued. "I just want you two to know that if you ever decide to return...your family is still here...you'll always have a home here."

"Thanks Deb, we do know that," Melanie added.

"Lindsay, how are you holding up?" Debbie asked point blank.

"I'm ok," Lindsay honestly revealed. "Spending yesterday with everyone at the mansion gave me time to accept things. Brian and I have been so close over the years. But I can honestly say that I'm happy for them. They seem really happy."

"How is Gus dealing with the news?" Debbie decided to ask although she could already guess the answer.

"You mean aside from the fact that Gus thinks that Brian did all this so that he could have HIS Justin. Oh yeah! Gus is thrilled with the news," Melanie had to interject.

"How is Gus' play date going with Nicky?"

"You should see the two of them together. They are crazy about each other. It's good to see Gus interact with Nicky. Of course, judging by how they followed Justin around all day, I was beginning to think that Gus and Nicky thought that their play date was with Justin...not with each other," Lindsay relayed with a laugh.

Even Debbie had to laugh at the image of two little kids tagging along behind Justin wherever he went.

"You know, when Justin showed me his studio, I noticed that Gus and Nicky had their art work prominently displayed there on his studio walls. They were signed and dated and everything." Lindsay added.

Melanie couldn't resist. "I heard Paul complaining about having to sacrifice one of his shirts to Nicky's artistic endeavors. Gus too won't even finger paint unless he is wearing one of Brian's designer shirts? Of course, Gus is just copying Justin. Paul is still grumbling about Justin's bad influence."

"Wait until you see Nicky, Debbie. You're going to fall in love with him. He's going to be another little one for you to spoil," Lindsay added. "Of course, you're probably going to have to compete with Emmett for Nicky's attention. Ever since Nicky and Emmett laid eyes each other...it's been love at first sight."

"Yes, and you and Nicky share a lot in common," Lindsay added with a laugh.

"Starting with a head full of red curls," Melanie teased. "Of course, Debbie, you understand that Nicky's red curls are real?"

"Are you two done?" Debbie asked, stopping to put her hands on her hips.

"Yes," they both said in unison, trying not to laugh and failing miserably.

"What's so funny?" Emmett asked as he and Drew ventured into the kitchen during a break in the game.

"Oh we were just talking about Nicky," Melanie said with a laugh.

"He's a little cutie isn't he?" Emmett cooed, "And those red curls...."

"Yes, we were just telling Debbie about them," Melanie teased, starting to laugh again.

"That's enough out of you two," Debbie said mockingly. "Why don't you find something useful to do," she insisted. "Don't you have to pack or something?"

"Already done, Deb," Lindsay confirmed.

"So you can't get rid of us just yet," Melanie continued to laugh, "But just to show you that there are no hard feelings, I think we'll help you with dinner."

"So we're ready to lend a hand. What would you like us to do? Set the table...maybe?" Lindsay asked.

"I'm glad to see that you two are finally going to make yourselves useful," Debbie said mockingly. "Setting the table is a wonderful place to start."

"Well that's our cue to get back into the living room," Drew teased, as he started to move in that direction.

"Here take these with you," Debbie said, reaching in the cabinet and handing them several bag of munchies. "But, don't you dare spoil your appetites."

"Not a chance," Drew added, leaning down to give Debbie a kiss.

As Lindsay and Melanie were setting the table, they continued to chat easily with Debbie.

"I notice that this has been a really busy trip for you. It seems like you were gone more than you were here. We've hardly had a chance to just sit and chat this visit," Debbie pointed out cautiously.

"Now Debbie, Lindsay and I know that you enjoy having us around, and it's great for us to be here. But let's face it, you only tolerate us so that you and Carl can spoil your granddaughter," Melanie teased.

"I can't believe how much she has grown in just a month. I can't deny that I love these visits. So does Michael." Debbie reminded them. "This thing with Brian may have him a bit distracted for the moment, but never doubt how much he loves his daughter."

"I think in spite of all that's happening, Jenny Rebecca has been completely spoiled by everyone, Michael and Hunter especially...but also Ben too," Lindsay added. "We're so lucky to be part of this family."

"This is definitely a family, isn't it?" Debbie asked wistfully. "And I love you all to death."

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This tender moment was interrupted by the bustle of activity in the living room.

Carl opened the door as two little whirlwinds named Gus and Nicky projected themselves into the room. Both of them caught sight of Emmett, and they immediately squealed and ran over to greet him.

"Auntie Em," they both said, wrapping their arms around his legs.

"A queen could get the vapors from such attention as this," Emmett teased, while fanning himself.

"Hello there Gus," Carl said, opening his arms for a hug. Gus took a moment to run over and give Carl a big hug before returning back to Emmett's side. "Who's your little friend?"

At this point, Jennifer and Molly entered. Molly carefully introduced everyone to Nicky, using her best manners. Nicky was glad to meet everyone, but he was most reluctant to be pried away from Emmett's side.

"I see that you have a new love interest," Drew teased, "I go out of town for a few days...now this. When were you planning to tell me?"

Drew's reaction made everyone laugh.

"Ghee Drew, you have to admit that he's a little young," Ted countered with a laugh. "So I don't think that you have anything to worry about...at the moment."

"Jennifer, It's good to see you. But what on earth are you doing with Gus and Nicky? And where is everyone else?" Ted asked.

"Calm down...relax...don't worry, Brian, Justin, Paul, and Jason are just a few minutes behind me. Nicky and Gus decided to ride into town with Molly and me," Jennifer reassured them.

Jennifer moved into the kitchen to chat with Debbie, while Gus and Nicky made themselves comfortable with Emmett and the others.

Molly noticed that Hunter was now sitting apart from everyone else, so she went over to join him.

"I see that you got here early," Molly said quietly.

"Are you kidding? With everything going on this weekend, I wanted to be sure that I had a ringside seat to see all the happenings," Hunter relayed. "I saved you a seat, but of course, then I heard that you spent yesterday at the mansion," he added with a touch of disappointment in his voice.

"Paul and Jason were visiting with Nicky. So Brian wanted me to help so Justin could paint. We had a TV night...we popped popcorn and watched movies until Gus and Nicky fell asleep. I have to admit it was a fun day," Molly recounted.

"You know you could have called me. I would have willingly tagged along," Hunter said, hoping to instill the proper amount of guilt in his companion.

"Hunter, believe me. I was lucky to get invited myself," Molly reminded him, as she thought about what it took to wrangle that invitation to the mansion and, even more, to get to spend the entire night there. But she was not about to share that information with Hunter...some things were definitely better left unsaid.

"Yeah, I bet," he challenged in disbelief. "Of course, you have an in. After all, the blond..." Hunter began.

"Justin had nothing to do with this. Brian was the one," she said with a self-satisfied grin.

"What? Brian? That's not possible," he challenged.

Molly secretly knew, that little piece of information was going to bother Hunter all day, but she just couldn't resist. Then she just continued to innocently smile.

"Oh it's possible, all right," she responded definitively. "And now Brian is related to me too," she quickly added.

"So you seem pretty happy about that news?" he pointed out.

"Who wouldn't be? Now Brian will always be around all the time," she added.

"So I guess there isn't much chance that he'll ditch 'the blond', huh?" Hunter felt compelled to ask.

"I don't know how to tell you this...No!" she said with a laugh.

"I figured..." Hunter said with a deep sigh. He gave himself a moment, and then he immediately changed the subject. "So tell me about the house."

Before Molly could say anything the door opened once again. Michael had arrived.

Michael smiled as he noticed that Gus was already here; for he knew that this meant that Brian must have already arrived. He smiled at the prospect of seeing his best friend. But first Michael went into the kitchen to greet Debbie.

"I see that you finally got here, you little shit," she teased, wrapping him in one of her legendary hugs. This was one of those times that Michael really needed a hug, so he let his mother get away with smothering him.

"Hi ma," he said when she finally released him. "From the looks of all the food that you have here, I would say that you have been cooking all day. You must have enough food here to feed an army," he suggested.

Michael stopped to greet Jennifer, Lindsay and Melanie as well.

"I would say that's just about the right description for the number of people, who will be here for dinner...and I must say that I'm fucking looking forward to it," she added with a broad laugh. "How are you holding up, kiddo?" Debbie asked. "Emmett said that you and Ben were at Babylon last night."

"I'm doing ok," Michael said sadly. "Ben thought that a night at Babylon would do us both good. Brian was there too," he added.

"I did hear that Sunshine was there with Paul and Jason too," she added.

"Paul and Jason tried to keep Brian on the dance floor, but he managed to find the time to come over and talk to me...after all, I am his best friend," Michael reminded everyone.

Debbie couldn't help rolling her eyes at the last statement. Some things never change. "Yes, how well I know that," Debbie finally added, causing everyone else in the kitchen to smile.

"Ma, don't start! I've got enough to deal with right now," Michael professed.

"Baby, what's wrong?" she asked, now with some concern.

"I think we're going to go join the guys in the living room," Jennifer suggested. Lindsay and Melanie decided to follow her.

Debbie took a seat at the table and waited for Michael to join her.

Michael let out a sigh because he really didn't want to get into this with his mother now. What he really wanted to do was find Brian and talk to him. So Michael didn't take the offered seat, but he merely continued to stand.

Michael shook his head to clear his thoughts. "I don't want to talk about it now. You and I can talk later," he said emphatically, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

There was no stopping Michael as he immediately headed toward the back door. He stepped out on the back porch and looked around, but Brian obviously wasn't there.

When he stepped back inside, Debbie greeted him with a look of exasperation. "Are you looking for something?" she asked, stating the obvious.

"Brian..." Michael responded.

"He's not here yet. You know how he likes to make an entrance," she reminded him as she resumed the final touches on the salad.

Debbie looked at him and noticed that he wasn't taking this news very well. "You know, you could pick that long face up off the floor...."

"All right, Ma," Michael snapped. "Look I'm going back into the living room and hang out with everyone. You'll call me if you need me to do anything?"

"Sure. No problem," she uttered, still wondering when Michael's obsession with Brian would finally end.

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A few moments later, Brian and Justin made their entrance with Paul and Jason in tow. Everyone was really excited to see them all, and there were hugs all around.

"So Drew, I see that you made it back into town," Brian quipped.

"Brian, after the news that I heard on the road...I knew I had to come back here immediately to see if the rumors are true. You've got to admit...this news is too good to miss," Drew commented. "But I understand that congrats are in order."

Brian simply smiled and slid his arm around Justin's waist. "Thanks. We're both pretty happy about it."

"Drew, be sure that you talk to Jason while we're here. He's quite an artist in his own right. Maybe you can bribe him to make a drawing of you that is to your liking," Brian insisted, pulling Justin back into his arms.

Justin leaned into the embrace as he continued to watch Brian and Drew tease each other.

Paul and Jason managed to strike up a conversation with Drew, so Brian and Justin excused themselves to go see Debbie.

Michael wanted to get up and follow, but Ben gently held him in his seat.

When Justin returned, Gus and Nicky came over and forced Justin to sit down near Emmett. "Jus, you have to sit here," Nicky insisted. He then resumed his position on Emmett lap, while Gus climbed into Justin's.

Jason noticed the happy foursome and had to come over. His sights were definitely set on Emmett. "Emmett, you and my son have been spending an awful lot of time together lately," he teased, "I think Paul and I would like to know your intentions."

"Don't you think he's a little young?" Emmett replied, eyeing Jason with a smile.

"I, too, have noticed you huddled again with our son," Paul teased as he too walked over. "Is there something that you need to tell us?"

Drew overheard the conversation and came to Emmett's rescue. "I'm sorry little one, but your Auntie Em is taken," he added leaning in to give Emmett a gentle kiss. Gus and Nicky covered their eyes...to everyone's amusement.

Brian came over and to rescue the kids. "Why don't you two come with me?" he said lifting Gus and Nicky into the air...one kid under each arm."

"Aren't you going to say hello to me?" Michael asked, already feeling neglected. "We haven't had a chance to talk."

"Not now, Mikey," Brian said, heading into the kitchen with one kid under each arm. "My hands are a little full at the moment," he added over his shoulder.

Ben and Hunter immediately noticed the disappointment on Michael's face.

Ben once again wrapped his arms around him. "Is that better?" he asked.

Michael leaned into the embrace and simply said, "Lots!"

"You have to give him some time...they just arrived," Ben suggested.

"Well now that Brian and Justin are here, I guess we should go wake Jenny so she can join us," Melanie suggested.

"I'll get her," Lindsay suggested. "Michael, why don't you give me a hand?"

Michael's whole demeanor brightened as he followed Lindsay upstairs.

Chapter 70 – And It Continues

Sunday Afternoon...(Day 49)

Brian walks into Debbie's kitchen with a giggling Gus under one arm and a giggling Nicky under the other.

"Brian, what are you doing to my babies?" she said with mock protest, putting her hands on her hips for good measure. Debbie's reaction caused Gus and Nicky to giggle even more.

"Not a thing, Debbie," Brian said innocently. "Right, guys?" he asked, jostling them a bit for good measure.

"Right," they both said in between laughs and shrieks.

"Come here, my babies," Debbie said, releasing them from Brian's grip first Gus and then Nicky...both of whom went to her willingly. "That's better," she said, taking a quick look to be sure they were both ok. Debbie took a minute to try to smooth out Gus and Nicky's hair and kiss their cheeks. Brian just rolled his eyes in mock frustration.

Once Debbie was assured that Brian hadn't damaged anything, she could finally smile. "Now tell me, what you two have been up to," she finally said, wrapping one arm around each of the little ones.

"We made breakfast," Gus proclaimed with some pride.

"You did?" Debbie asked in amazement, then looking a Brian for confirmation.

Brian simply smiled and nodded yes.

"Me too," Nicky echoed. "I helped."

"And what did you make?" Debbie asked, never one to miss even the slightest detail. Then she volunteered, "Did you make cereal?"

Brian thought he'd better step in here. "No way. They made fruit and French toast," he explained. "Justin and I were totally surprised. It was delicious."

Gus and Nicky were simply beaming after Brian's words.

"And you did this all by yourselves?" she asked.

"Well...Grandma Jen and Aunt Molly helped a little," Gus sheepishly admitted.

"Yes, that may be true, but I watched Gus and Nicky making French toast with my own eyes," Brian boasted, much to the delight of the two little ones. "So I think we can safely agree that they definitely made breakfast," he added with a laugh.

Debbie nodded her agreement, as she continued to smile. "I'm really so proud of you two," she added, giving them each a hug. "Making breakfast is a big thing."

"I would have to agree," he added.

"Well Brian, can I borrow Gus and Nicky to help me announce that dinner is ready. I need two very strong helpers to get everyone to the table," she said gleefully.

Gus and Nicky agreed to help, so the trio of Debbie, Gus, and Nicky announced, "Dinner is served."

"You better come and get it!" Debbie added just for good measure.

Everyone in the room clapped at the announcement and quickly moved to find seats.

As they were taking their places at the table, Paul couldn't resist asking, "Nicky, wouldn't you like to come over and sit with us?"

Nicky quickly responded, "I'm going to sit with Jus," he said with some determination.

"Like that's a surprise," Jason said with a laugh.

"Me too," Gus answered, making himself comfortable between Justin and his dad at the table beside Nicky.

Jason turned to Melanie and Lindsay. "It's official, we've lost our kids."

Paul threw his arms in the air with mock exasperation. "First Emmett and now Justin...what are we going to do?" he sighed.

Nicky blew them both kisses.

"He still loves us, Paul," Jason teased, "Pheew, that's a relief,"

"I guess that means, he'll be going home with us, after all." Paul admitted.

"I think you can count on at least that," Brian remarked with his usual smirk.

Everyone else at the table just laughed.

Lindsay and Melanie were sitting close to Paul and Jason so they were able to keep each other company during dinner. Jenny Rebecca was trapped in her high chair between Michael and Melanie. Ben was seated on the other side of Michael.

"You know, Hunter," Ben began, "You and Molly could easily join us here at this table. You really don't have to sit over there alone."

"Were fine, Ben," Molly said with a smile, gently nudging Hunter to check on his agreement.

"We can keep a better eye on everyone from here," Hunter added, never one to be shy about his actions.

"Well, if that's the case, maybe I should join them," Emmett quipped, making moves to start to relocate to their small table.

"Stay where you are, Em," Ted insisted. Blake and I will join them over there. From an analytical perspective, I think that we need to check out this vantage point that they've set up for themselves. We'll fill you in on all the details later," Ted teased. "Won't we Blake?"

"Absolutely, someone needs to keep an eye on the trouble makers," Blake added.

"Mom?" Molly started to whine.

"Don't look to me, dear. I agree that you and Hunter need adult supervision," Jennifer added. "Thank you, Ted. You and Blake have taken a load off my mind," she teased.

"Mom!" Molly protested with a huff.

Jennifer and Debbie were able to sit together, and Carl went down to the other end of the table to join Ben.

Everyone managed to chat easily through most of dinner. No one would bring up the topic that was on everyone's mind...the pink elephant floating in the room...the legalized union of Brian and Justin.

All during dinner, discussions between Blake, Hunter, Ted and Molly flowed easily at their own little table, but all four of them definitely had their ears tuned to the happenings at the main table.

Finally, Blake leaned over to whisper, "So Hunter, did you get a chance to see today's paper?"

"No, I came over here to help set things up," Hunter casually responded. "What did I miss?"

"Well..." Blake started to gush.

"Ah, Blake..." Ted cautioned just above a whisper.

"Sorry...never mind," Blake said penitently, "I was just wondering," he mumbled quietly.

"Oh, you mean the picture of Brian and Justin in the paper," Molly added fearlessly. "Wasn't that a great picture? We're ALL still trying to figure out where the paper got that picture."

"You saw the picture?" Ted asked with some surprise. "But weren't you out at the mansion?" Ted was trying to gage if that ALL that Molly was referring to included Brian and Justin as well.

"Of course," Molly said nonchalantly, "Jason showed ALL of us the picture and the article this morning. Isn't it great?"

"Molly, what are you whispering about over there," Debbie asked. "You have to share with us. There are no secrets here," she added with a laugh.

"We weren't whispering, Debbie," Molly answered, "We were just talking about the picture in today's paper. Did you see it? It was with an article about Brian and Justin and everything that happened. It was great!" she continued. "It's like a wedding picture!"

A collective, audible gasp could be heard at the main table while Brian and Justin simply smiled knowingly at each other.

"How did you manage to do it, Jennifer?" Ben asked with a laugh.

"What?" Jennifer asked innocently, looking up from her dessert. "What do you mean?"

"How did you manage to raise two children, who are totally unafraid of Brian Kinney?" Ben responded with a laugh. "It must be a trait incorporated in the family's genes."

"Oh, I don't know," Brian interrupted, "I guess I can be very menacing, can't I, Sunshine?"

Before, Justin could respond, Debbie interrupted. "All right Ben, don't force the tiger out of his cage. Brian is behaving himself so far. Don't you dare start anything!" she teased.

"Thank you, Deb," Brian quipped.

"Although I do have to agree, it was a lovely picture of them. You have to admit that Brian and Justin make a lovely couple," Jennifer continued on with confidence and a smile.

"There is that too. But they also make one of the hottest couples around," Drew volunteered. "Em and I being one of the others, of course."

"Ok, all of you. Before you go too far down this road, there are little ones present," Carl reminded them with a word of warning.

"That was so thoughtful of you, Carl, but totally unnecessary," Jason interjected with a twinkle in his eye.

Justin looked over at Jason and knew that trouble was about to brew. "Jason," he tried to caution.

"Yes?" Jason asked with an innocent smile.

And in that moment, Justin braced himself for whatever was about to happen.

"Oh Gus," Jason said sweetly in a singsong fashion.

"Yes, Uncle Jason," Gus answered.

"Why don't you tell us about the new union between your dad and Jus?"

"It's so great. Jus now belongs to me and dad," Gus happily explained. "Dad explained it to me. Jus will be with dad and me forever," he added.

"Just like my dad and daddy," Nicky chimed in.

"And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen, out of the mouths of babe," Jason added.

"Was that really necessary?" Lindsay asked solemnly, attempting to chastise Jason.

Jason merely feigned total innocence and said, "It's public knowledge now. What's the problem?"

"Brian, this is big news. I know that you and Justin have been together for a long time," Drew began. "I heard about everything in Dallas, last night. I immediately booked a flight to come home and see for myself. Congratulations, you two. I guess that means that Justin won't be going back to New York."

"Of course, Justin's going back to New York," Lindsay interrupted. "He has a wonderful career as an artist ahead of him there. Brian's not going to let him throw his future away."

"If you'll excuse me," Justin said quietly, pushing his chair back to stand up. He smiled at Brian, before he pushed away from the table. "Let's see if I can get some of the stickiness off of Gus and Nicky."

"You do that," Brian said softly.

Once Justin had left with Gus and Nicky, conversation seemed to resume in the room.

"So, we're back here again are we, Lindsay?" Emmett continued in rising harshness.

"No, I think Lindsay just made an excellent point," Michael chimed in. "Just because Brian and Justin legalized things, doesn't mean that anything has to change."

Brian looked at the two of them incredulously. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Brian couldn't believe that his two best friends thought that he went to all this trouble to make things legal with Justin for them to continue to be apart, but he said nothing and continued to listen.

"Well they do have that house in West Virginia," Jennifer reminded them. "It's a wonderful place for Justin to paint," she added, showing her support for Brian and Justin, without divulging any of their future plans.

"Which will be great for when Sunshine comes to visit," Lindsay added.

"In the meantime, Brian will just continue to live at the loft when Justin returns to New York," Michael added confidently

"Ah...Michael," Ted tried in vane to stop him before things went too far. He had no intention of divulging what he knew, as his mind played over all the complex details he was trying to work through so that Brian and Justin could be together in New York. Still he wanted to stop this discussion, before things got out of hand.

Brian calmly listened to everything but said nothing.

"But you would think married people would want to be together," Melanie suggested, hoping to salvage things before they got completely out of hand.

"Brian and Justin aren't married," Michael was quick to point out with a shake of his head for emphasis.

Brian continued to sit in stunned silence.

Melanie continued again, trying the calm voice of reason. "No, you're right. They're more than married. As I was saying...you'd think that a couple would want to be together like Lindsay and me...we knew we wanted to be with each other, so we got back together, and then we both moved to Toronto."

"That's different. You moved there for the safety of the kids," Michael pointed out. "Things are different for Brian...Brian's different."

"What am I missing?" Paul asked, unable to keep quiet any longer. "Ben, you and Michael are together. Lindsay and Melanie are together. Carl and Debbie, Blake and Ted. Don't you all want the same happiness for Brian?"

"You don't understand," Michael added, "Brian isn't like the rest of us."

"How is he different?" Paul asked in protest. "I've known Brian since college, and he sure seems pretty normal to me."

"That's just because you and Brian are so much alike," Jason added with a laugh, trying to lighten the developing tension in the room.

Michael paid no attention to Jason's efforts. He already had his mind made up and nothing was going to deter him from his appointed speech. "Brian's my best friend, and I've known him since we were fourteen," Michael professed, stopping for a breath. "I've always been there for him, and I think, I'm the best one to know what he wants. And I'm sure..."

"Well, this has truly been enlightening," Brian said as he interrupted all discussion...and everyone froze at the sound of his voice.

Chapter 71 – A Storm Arises

Sunday afternoon...(Day 49)

"Let me see if I have this straight," Brian continued haltingly, his expression belaying nothing in particular. "Based on what I'm hearing, all of you get to enjoy your lives and the relationships with your respective partners, while I'm suppose to remain alone, living the life you've all planned out for me. Maybe I'm being a little ridiculous here...but does that seem a little odd to anyone?" he quietly asked.

"Brian, it's what you've always wanted," Michael responded quickly. "You've been content with the way your life was going until someone made you take this drastic step that goes against everything that you've ever believed in."

"What did you just say?" Brian asked, his ears unable to process what he just heard.

But Michael seemed to pay no attention to Brian's confusion; no, Michael clearly wasn't finished yet. "Okay, so you made a mistake and legalized things, but nothing really has to change."

At this point, even Ben couldn't believe what he just heard his partner say. Although he was still in a fog of disbelief, Ben did manage to raise his voice in warning. "Michael!" he said harshly.

Michael paid no attention and simply continued on. "I mean, I've known you since we were kids. You're my best friend, for fuck's sake. Why would you suddenly change everything that you believe in? That's not who you are."

"I see," Brian said quietly, "And please, pray tell me, who exactly am I?" he asked pointedly, a part of him dying to hear the answer from Michael.

"That's easy," Michael immediately responded, without taking a moment to consider. "You don't believe in love; you don't do relationships; you'll always be young; you'll always be beautiful; you're Brian Kinney for fuck's sake."

"I'm so glad that we've cleared that up," Brian said with a laugh. "That's ancient history Mikey! Where have you been the last six years? I'm beginning to wonder if you ever really knew me at all," he added softly.

"Of course, I know you. I'm the only one who does. I'm the only one who knows what you're really like. And, I want you to know that I'll always be here for you," Michael added quickly.

"Then you of all people know that I NEVER do anything that I don't want to do. I can see that my legally committing to Justin still seems to be bothering you...although for the life of me, I can't understand why. What on earth did you think was happening a year ago when I asked Justin to marry me?"

"Last year...that all happened because I got hurt. You were upset. I understood that drastic times called for drastic actions. Even Mel and Linds got back together then too, and then they moved to Toronto. Everyone was reacting to things, but now everything can get back to normal," Michael pointed out dismissively.

"Everything IS back to normal, Mickey, can't you see that. Justin's been an integral part of my life for years now. And we're together just like every other couple in this room. The only difference is we went all the way and made it legally binding," Brian said calmly.

"Don't remind me," Michael added.

"Don't remind you! It's a fact, Mikey! This is the real world, not one of your comic books. This is the way it is, and you're just going to have to accept it," Brian said emphatically.

"Accept it? Look, just because you made a mistake...nothing really has to change...things can just go on like they always have been," Michael insisted.

"Mikey, what makes you think that I want things to continue as they have been. We know how my life has been. I'm looking forward to my future...with Justin."

"Until he leaves again..."

"What's with you, Mikey? Justin and I have been together for six years. Time and time again, he's made it clear where he wants to be. I'm really getting tired of this. You know, I really don't give a fuck what you think...what any of you think! It's done...now accept it...because THIS discussion is over!"

"But Brian..." Michael said, starting to whine.

Brian simply held up his hand to silence him.

"It's done, Michael. Accept it or not...you know...I really don't care. But I'm done talking about this."

Brian turned to Paul and Jason. "I'm going to check on Justin and the kids. I'll say goodbye to Gus, and then we're leaving. I think I've had enough for one day."

Paul and Jason were beginning to stand up to get ready to follow Brian.

"Brian, please don't let Michael pull you away from the rest of us. We all love the two of you and are happy for you and Justin. We want you to stay," Carl added. Everyone else at the table echoed their agreement. "In fact, Debbie Honey, be sure that everyone's glass is filled. Brian, why don't you go and get Justin? I think I'd like to propose a toast."

"Thanks, Carl. Maybe another time," Brian said with a forced smile. "Paul, Jason, we should get ready to go. I think that Justin and I will take you to the airport and wait with you rather use the limo service."

"Sure Brian, no problem," Paul responded softly.

Lindsay sat on the sidelines, pondering something intensely. Finally she couldn't hold her tongue any longer. "But Brian," she began. "That may all be true, but it's really critical that Justin remain in New York. His career has so much promise that you can't take that away from him. That would just be too selfish," she added.

"Did you say selfish? Careful Lindsay, you talk to me about selfish. You and Melanie reconcile and move away to fucking Toronto, taking my son with you. You didn't stop to think about anyone but yourselves. And you talk to me about being selfish?"

"I just can't believe that you would make such a momentous decision without talking to me and the family first," Lindsay commented. "We've always been there for each other."

"Yes, but after listening to you and Mikey here today, I have to wonder if I've even mattered in anything over the years. From what I can tell, you and Michael have taken what ever you wanted from me and never really thought that much of me as a person."

"You're not like the rest of us, Brian, you know that," Michael insisted. "You need us to help you to do the right thing."

"After listening to you, it's hard to believe that I'm able to manage the day to day operations of one of the largest advertising agencies in Pittsburgh. I'm not a child, Mikey. I survived one miserable childhood where people taught me that my life didn't matter. I'll be damned if I live the rest of my life listening to all of you try to tell me the same thing. I want more from life than that, and I intend to have it. And Justin and I will somehow make decisions together about our future without you," Brian pointed out.

"You and Justin can't just think about yourselves. You have Gus to consider," Lindsay replied.

"Lindsay, what are you talking about?" Melanie asked.

"I was about to ask the same question because the last time I checked, Gus thinks that I did all this so that he could always have HIS Justin...as if someone could come between those two at this point," Brian added with a laugh. "And Lindsay, I expect my son to continue to spend time with my partner...so don't go getting any crazy ideas!" Brian insisted.

"Don't worry, Brian. You know how much we love Justin," Melanie insisted.

"Of course, we're crazy about Justin," Lindsay interrupted, "That's why I'm still concerned about his career."

"Don't be! I assure you that Justin's career is doing just fine. I think we can safely say that he will eventually be able to take care of me in the style to which I have become accustomed," Brian added with another laugh. Then he became serious and he said, "I would have hoped that you would have all been happy for Justin and me."

"We are, Brian," Drew asserted, reminding everyone that he was still in the room. "We really do wish you much happiness, right Em?"

"Absolutely, you know how we feel about you and Justin," Emmett proclaimed.

"Thanks," Brian said, finally breaking into a smile. "Now if you will excuse me, I'm going to go and see if I can help Justin with Gus and Nicky. And then I'm afraid, it'll be time for us to leave."

And with that, Brian turned to go upstairs. When he had finally disappeared from sight, the room once again erupted in conversation.

"Michael, what on earth were you thinking...talking to Brian like that?" Debbie asked, walking over and hitting Michael on the back of the head for good measure.

"I would think that you would be more concerned about what Brian said to me, after all he's my best friend," Michael proclaimed again.

"And he's Gus' father," Lindsay also proclaimed. "We have a right to challenge him on his decisions," she added righteously.

"And when exactly, does Brian's life get to belong to him. You all seem to act like his life belongs to you," Jason added.

"Maybe you don't know. Brian had a terrible life. We're all that he has," Michael volunteered.

"Until Justin came along," Jason added quietly with a smile. "Justin must have changed everything."

"I think you can safely say that Justin changed things for us all," Emmett added.

"You might want to think about that," Paul added quietly.

Then Paul and Jason went around the room, quickly saying goodbye to everyone. They both leaned down and kissed Debbie on the cheek and thanked her for the lovely dinner.

They also kissed Jennifer and said that they would see her soon. They waved goodbye to everyone else, as they announced that they were going up and help Brian with Nicky.

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A few moments later, Brian came down the steps with a smiling Gus in his arms. Paul followed with a smiling Nicky. Obviously some private moment was being shared on the stairs, as Jason and Justin brought up the rear.

"I'll call you in a few days," Brian said, as he finished his goodbyes to Gus.

"And, you know that we'll see you soon," Justin added.

"I know, because I have to go to school," Gus added, showing that he understood.

Gus hugged Paul and Jason and Nicky. Then he kissed his dad and Justin goodbye, and ran back into the room to join his mommies.

Justin stopped to say quickly a goodbye to everyone. And with that, Brian and Justin along with Paul, Jason, and Nicky were gone.

Chapter 72 – A Cold Wind Blowing

Later Sunday Afternoon... (Day 49)

Lindsay and Melanie helped Debbie to clear the table and put the food away before they made their way upstairs. When they reached the sanctity of the guest bedroom, Lindsay collapsed on the bed.

Melanie just stood at the foot of the bed looking at her partner.

"That was some dinner," Lindsay said innocently.

"Yes, I'd have to agree with you there," Melanie responded calmly, although calm was very far from what she was feeling at the moment.

"I wonder what on earth is going on with Brian. He just wasn't himself today," Lindsay pointed out.

"What do you mean?" Melanie felt compelled to ask. "What we saw today was classic Brian."

"How can you say that? He was disagreeable and argumentative...that's not Brian," Lindsay was quick to defend her position with a shake of her head.

Melanie felt the pressing need to interrupt this fantasy, "That is precisely the Brian that I know, and remember that I've been sparring with him for years," Melanie reminded her definitively. Then she softened her tone a bit before she continued. "Maybe to you, though, he seemed really changed," she added, trying her best to be supportive.

"Maybe..."

Melanie continued almost as if talking to herself, "Although he did make it clear that he wouldn't tolerate certain things anymore," she said as an afterthought.

"I know. I heard him."

"I thought that you understood what that meant...you said you understood...you tried to explain things to Michael...you even told Elizabeth that you understood Brian's decision," Melanie began to recount, using the fingers of her left hand to keep track. "What the fuck happened?"

"What's the problem, I accept the legal union between Brian and Justin. I really do think that it's wonderful," Lindsay gushed.

"You could have fooled me," Melanie retorted. "Then what on earth were you and Michael trying to accomplish here today?" she challenged.

"Things seemed different at the table today. And when the issue of Justin returning to New York came up, all I did was state my opinion..." Lindsay said emphatically.

"Your opinion...did anyone ask for your opinion?"

"No one had to ask. I've always told Brian what I thought," Lindsay said self-righteously.

"You know, I thought that we were making progress...you and me. We've spent all this time talking to each other...we've spent all this time seeing Elizabeth...you've told me about all these things that you understand now, which you didn't see before. Pray tell me, what the fuck have we been doing?" Melanie said, revealing her anger.

"What are you trying to say?"

"Ever since I've known you, Brian and I have been sparring with each other. Now, it's probably true that we both enjoy it more than either of us wants to admit, but I always thought that HE was the one holding on to the past. I always thought that he wouldn't let YOU go so that you could lead your own life apart from him. All these years, I've always thought that Brian WAS the problem."

"That's true. Brian relies on me to help him sort out his life. He always has, ever since we were in college. That's never going to change," Lindsay calmly explained.

"What I see is that you and Michael are the ones holding on. Brian probably always has been able to manage his life...but you and Michael over the years have created enough doubt that Brian second guesses everything he does on a personal level. He loves you both and respects your opinion, so what do you do? You make him think that he can't function without you...that he needs you...you and Michael have tried to make him into an emotional cripple."

"Brian IS an emotional cripple. If it hadn't been for Michael and me, Brian wouldn't have made it this far. You know what his childhood was like."

"Ancient history, Lindsay. What I see are two people trying to keep Brian tied to them. As long as he was the Stud of Liberty Avenue, your position in his life was secure. Let's face it, no trick could ever be a threat to you. Why don't you just admit that you don't want to share Brian... not with Gus...not with Justin? But you want to keep the childlike-Michael in his life because compared to Michael's whining, you look like a better friend. Now, isn't that really what's going on, Lindsay?"

"That's a terrible thing to think. How can you say such a thing?"

"Look at the evidence. I'm an attorney, Lindsay. I deal in facts. I don't know how to deal in that fantasy world where you choose to reside."

"I thought you were going to give me time to deal with things?" Lindsay fired back. "You must know how hard this weekend has been for me. I thought you understood my grief."

"Oh, I understand, Lindsay. I wish to God that I didn't. I'm thinking that Brian's new status might be a little difficult for you. I'm thinking that you're really trying to cope."

"I am!" Lindsay professed emphatically.

"No Lindsay, what happened is you saw Brian slipping away."

"No!"

"And you just couldn't stand it. Somehow you only seem happy when Brian and I are at odds with each other over you. Then you can step in and be the savior-queen and restore the peace. The fact that I'm in love with you and that Brian loves you too...somehow seems to make up for the love and caring you missed from your parents."

"When did you start to play amateur psychologist?"

"I don't have to be an amateur anything. It's all right there in front of my face. You can't stop loving Brian...not because he won't let you. You can't stop loving Brian because you don't want to. You cling to that love like it's a life raft. Well, Lindsay you're going to have to find another anchor for your life. You can't have Brian!"

"No!"

"I'm tired of sugar coating things for you. After the stunt that you and Michael pulled at dinner today...both of you may have lost Brian for good. He's made it clear that he wouldn't put up with any bullshit, but you and Michael just couldn't leave well enough alone. What is wrong with you?"

"I know he said it, but he didn't mean it," Lindsay said with a pout.

"Lindsay, think back to everything that you know about Brian Kinney...open that Brian Kinney Operating Manual that you and Michael are so fond of referring to. There is one thing that we all know about Brian. He says what he means, and he means what he says...except when talking to Justin because they've always talked in some kind of code that the rest of us can't begin to understand. But for the rest of us, Brian doesn't do bullshit. He talks straight. Fuck, even I know this."

"So what are you trying to say?" Lindsay asked, with tears now streaming down her cheeks.

"We've been together for almost 12 years...I thought that we loved each other...we built a life together... had a ceremony to symbolize our commitment...but what did that all mean? Why did we even bother?'

"How can you ask me that when you know that I love you?"

"Do you, Lindsay? Think about it. At this moment, we're falling apart, and all you can do is sit there and cry over Brian Kinney. What does that tell you?" Melanie said quietly.

Lindsay sat there in complete shock for a moment. Then she covered her eyes with both her hands, as she continued to cry.

Lindsay stayed like that, waiting to feel the supportive arms of her partner around her to try and comfort her.

But when that didn't happen, Lindsay had to look up again...she found that she was now in the room alone.

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Ben and Hunter helped Drew and Emmett return the living room/dining room to its usual arrangement. Everyone kept the conversation light, as they chatted easily with each other, but there was a certain underlying tension in the room.

Afterwards, Ben announced that he was going outside to get a breath of fresh air. He exited the back door and settled on the back steps, staring off into space.

Ben might have hoped that answers were carried on the wind, but as he waited and no answers came, he then struggled to find his sense of inner peace.

When Ben could find neither answers nor peace, he finally stood up to get ready to go back inside. As he turned, he came face to face with Hunter, who had just come outside to join him.

"What's up?" Hunter asked, trying to lighten the moment.

"What are you doing out here?" Ben asked with a smile.

"Oh I don't know..." Hunter responded with his usual attitude and a shrug.

Ben just shook his head and smiled.

Then Hunter walked over and wrapped his arms around Ben. Hunter didn't say anything; he just stood there holding Ben. Ben quickly returned the hug.

Finally Hunter whispered a simple, "I love you."

"I love you too, buddy."

When they finally broke apart, Hunter turned to go back inside. Just before he re-entered the house, he cast one more loving glance over his shoulder at Ben.

And then once again, Ben was alone with his thoughts.

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Jennifer hugged Debbie, and told her to call if she needed anything. Debbie was comforted by her offer of support.

Molly and Debbie hugged each other goodbye.

Then Jennifer and Molly left Debbie's a little earlier than usual so that they could get things ready for Molly's next day of school. Their unplanned, extended weekend stay at the mansion provided the perfect explanation for their departure.

Once in the car, Molly and Jennifer were initially quiet as they drove away from the house. But with a teenager in the car, the silence didn't last too long.

"Mom, what's going on with Michael and Lindsay?" Molly had to ask.

"What do you mean, dear?" Jennifer asked, without taking her eyes off the road. She had originally hoped that Molly wouldn't ask any questions about the discussion that happened at the dinner table, but based on her daughter's question, she now knew that particular hope was unrealistic.

"They were just upset, dear. They just..." Jennifer said, trying to find a way to explain things that she really didn't want to discuss with her teenage daughter.

"I don't get it," Molly interrupted. "Lindsay seemed so sweet yesterday, but today she seemed different. I wonder what happened to her. I thought that she was Brian's friend. Listening to her today, she didn't seem very much like a friend to me. Even I was ready to deck her."

Jennifer reacted with alarm, almost slamming on her brakes. "What?"

"Well, she was being mean to Brian," Molly pointed out, as if that should explain everything.

Jennifer couldn't resist looking over at here daughter. When she did, she noticed the intensity of her expression and the set of her jaw.

At that point, Jennifer couldn't help it. She had to smile. Then she had to ask, "And when did you, my darling daughter, become Brian's champion?"

"I like Brian, Mom. He's always been nice to me. And now we're family so I don't want anyone to hurt him," Molly professed with a determined tone.

"Molly, I promise you, that Brian can take care of himself. And I also promise you that Justin will take care of Brian."

"I know that, but now he has me too."

"Look, I understand how you feel about Brian, but I want you to stay out of what's going on in the family. Let Justin and Brian handle things. Do I make myself clear?"

"Don't worry. I won't DO anything. Thank goodness, Justin got Gus and Nicky out of the room so quickly. "

"So you noticed that too, did you?"

"Who could miss it?" Molly said, making it clear that she missed nothing.

"Yes," Jennifer said with a smile, "Who could miss that?"

"It's a good thing that Justin had to take care of Gus and Nicky, because I could see that he was furious. Everyone seems to forget how much trouble my brother can be...I think it's his boyish looks and the blond hair that's so deceptive. Of course, we know how much trouble he can be though, don't we, Mom?" Molly said with a laugh.

"Oh, yeah," Jennifer added with a laugh of her own, "Don't we know?"

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Emmett and Drew left immediately after helping to replace the furniture. They decided to spend some time together at Drew's house.

Ted and Blake decided to make it an early evening too. Ted knew that tomorrow was going to be a difficult day, so he was already thinking of things he needed to do at the office tomorrow to make things easier for Brian.

Carl settled once again in his favorite chair with Jenny Rebecca on his lap, and Gus nestled in beside him. Hunter was sitting on the arm of the chair, playing with both Jenny and Gus.

Michael and Debbie were alone in the kitchen.

Debbie was doing her best to keep herself totally busy so that she didn't have to talk to Michael. Unfortunately, her son had other plans.

"Ma, are you going to say anything?" Michael asked, using his little boy voice.

"I don't think there's anything left to say. I think that you managed to say everything earlier. Just so you know, Brian is really pissed at you right now, and this time, even I have to admit that he has a good reason."

"How can you say that? Look at what Brian did to me! I'm still waiting for his apology," Michael asserted righteously.

"His apology...for what? All Brian did was go after his own happiness...just like you did with Ben. What on earth does he need to apologize for?"

"Brian made promises to me...a long time ago. He can't just walk away from those promises like they never existed. He owes me for all the years I've been waiting."

"Michael, those childhood promises no longer matter. What's done is done. It's over. It's in the past. Your little fantasy is never going to happen."

"You don't know that," Michael challenged arrogantly.

"Will you get your head out of your ass? You have bigger problems to deal with...like, what you're going to do about Ben?" For even if the others had failed to notice, Debbie was acutely aware of Ben's growing frustration.

"I don't have to do anything about Ben. He understands all about Brian...he always has."

"That's because he never knew the WHOLE truth...did he, Michael? You may have managed to hide your true feelings about Brian until now, but I think Ben's got a new perspective on things after what he heard today." Debbie couldn't help shaking her own head, as if she were trying to dispel a distasteful image. Finally she whispered, "All you had to do was simply wish Brian and Justin well," she reminded him.

"Brian's my best friend..."

"But are you his?" Debbie asked pointedly, trying to get her son to think about things.

Without even a moment of hesitation, Michael fired back in anger, "How dare you take his side? You're my mother. How about thinking about me for a change?" He paused to allow time for Debbie's usual apology, which usually happened at about this time in situations like this. When none came, Michael continued his rant, "That's ok...Brian will eventually come around," he added confidently.

"Come around to what, Michael?" Both Michael and Debbie froze at the sound Ben's voice.

"Michael, I asked you a question," Ben continued to press. "What do you expect Brian to come around to? If you're waiting for him to end things with Justin," he said, and then some thing made him laugh. "Hell will probably freeze over before that happens. Brian loves Justin...he's showed that so clearly. In fact, he doesn't just love him...he's totally and completely IN LOVE with him and totally COMMITTED to him. I admit, it took Brian a long time to get here, but knowing Brian as well as you do, you must know that he would never take a legal step with Justin unless he was sure about what he was doing. So what is it...exactly... that you're waiting for Brian to come around to?" he asked, now leaning against the kitchen cabinet, patiently waiting for an answer from his partner.

Michael simply lowered his eyes. He had no real answer. Debbie, too, was silent. Ben continued looking at them both.

When no one said anything, Ben continued, "I'm waiting," he said patiently, reminding everyone that he expected an answer.

"I don't want to talk about it," Michael said. "I need some time."

"I see," Ben answered softly, finally moving towards the living room. When he stopped, he simply said, "Well...I think I'm going to take Hunter home. After all, tomorrow is a school day, and I'll bet he still has homework to finish."

Michael and Debbie still didn't say anything.

Ben started walking out of the kitchen. "I guess... I'll see you at home," he whispered.

Michael just nodded.

Ben nudged Hunter from his comfortable spot near Carl. Hunter had been tickling Jenny Rebecca, and the little girl and Gus were both laughing now.

Melanie came down stairs at just that moment. "That's what I like to see...both my kids totally happy," she added with a smile. This was a moment that Melanie wanted to remember.

Ben could see a sadness pass over her, as he and Melanie looked at each other and exchanged knowing glances...a moment of perfect understanding passed between them

"Melanie," Ben said, reaching over to hug her, "Hunter and I are getting ready to leave. You and Lindsay and the kids have a safe trip back to Toronto. And remember, we're only a phone call away."

"I'll remember that," Melanie whispered. "But I want you to remember the same thing," she added, giving Ben another hug. "And Hunter, try to stay out of trouble...at least until I can get back here," she teased.

"I'm innocent, Melanie...as my attorney, you should know that by now," he quipped back with a smile. "I'll see you next month," he added with a laugh.

Melanie simply nodded her head yes.

Ben said his goodbyes to Carl and Jenny and Gus. And then he and Hunter were gone.

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In the SUV heading towards the Pittsburgh Airport were Brian and Justin, along with Paul, Jason, and Nicky.

"Brian, it isn't necessary to drive to us to the airport," Jason insisted.

"Why, is there somewhere else you'd like to go?" Brian asked with a laugh.

"Back to the mansion...we're not leaving. We've decided to stay over. We'll leave in the morning. I'm sure we can arrange for a limo to the airport, " Jason suggested.

"Or, maybe we'll stay a few more days..." Paul added.

"I appreciate the gesture, but it really isn't necessary," Brian insisted, "I'm fine."

"Fine?" Jason challenged.

"Absolutely fabulous!" Brian added in his indomitable manner.

"It's really no trouble, you know," Paul added. "You know how much you and Justin mean to us. We just want to be here for you."

"Thanks," Brian said with a smile. "I really do know that."

Justin merely leaned forward and ran his fingers through Brian's hair. No words were exchanged between them, but Brian leaned into to his touch.

Justin gently let his hand slide down to Brian's neck, and Brian reached up and placed one of his hands over Justin's. They lingered like that for just a moment.

Then Brian smiled and said, "Let's get you to the airport. Then, how about we grab a beer before you have to leave? How does that sound?"

"I can go for that," Paul agreed.

"Me too?" Nicky chimed in, not wanting to be left out of anything.

"Nicky, I think, you and I should limit ourselves to Root Beer," Justin teased.

Nicky cheered and then started to giggle, and everyone else couldn't help laughing too.

Finally, the SUV took the approaching exit for the airport.

Chapter 73 – The Gathering Storm

Early Sunday Evening... (Day 49)

Ben and Hunter were leisurely walking away from Debbie's.

Hunter had originally hoped to linger at Debbie's long enough to gather more details about everything that was going on. But when Ben suggested that they needed to leave, Hunter didn't want to argue. But now that Ben and Hunter were alone, things were different.

"Ben, why did we leave so early," Hunter finally had to ask. "It can't be because of my homework...because, don't you remember, I'd already finished my assignments."

"Oh," Ben said quietly, trying to think of something else to say. "I guess I just needed some fresh air. So if you've finished all your homework, maybe we can just hang out for a little while."

"Sure," Hunter responded with a smile. "That works for me,"

They talked about nothing important on the short walk home, and once there, Ben settled into one of comfortable chairs, and Hunter sprawled on the sofa.

Hunter tried to challenge Ben to one of the video games; while Ben suggested something quieter like a board game. Instead, they settled on an easy discussion about the book that they were reading together.

They had both purchased the paperback version, and Hunter was sure that the book was going to be made into a movie...so he was trying to read slowly in hopes that the movie would appear in theatres before he had wasted too much time curled up reading it.

Ben countered with a simple reminder about the simple pleasures of turning pages and using your own imagination rather than relying on Hollywood's special effects. It was becoming a frequent point of good-natured arguments between them.

In spite of the easy banter between them, Hunter could see that Ben had a lot on his mind.

So from time to time, he would be content to simply let the silences linger between them.

Eventually Hunter felt that he needed to mention the unthinkable. "Are you going to leave Michael?" he quietly asked.

"What makes you think that?" Ben asked in return.

"Nothing new...maybe I'm just covering my bases...well, are you?"

"What?"

"Because if you're thinking about it, I want to go with you."

Ben shook his head. "What ever happens, I don't want you to worry about it," he tried to reassure him. "You know that both Michael and I love you. Whatever happens...it has nothing to do with you."

"Fuck it doesn't. I..." Hunter protested. "This is my life we're talking about."

"Trust me...this has nothing to do with you," Ben calmly repeated once again. Then he gently mussed Hunter's hair, as he slowly got up and walked into his bedroom.

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Melanie slowly made her way into the kitchen, where she walked in on a heated discussion between Debbie and Michael.

Her first reaction was to turn around and leave, so that mother and son could have some privacy, but before she could leave they stopped talking.

Michael realized that he now had the perfect excuse to escape from any further discussions with Debbie.

"Let me go and steal some time with my little honeybunch," he eagerly suggested, already starting to move in the direction of the living room.

Debbie, at first, tried to object, "Not so fast. We're not done, you little shit..."

But he was gone before Debbie could stop him. In frustration, all she could do was sigh.

Melanie looked at Debbie, and she could sympathize with what she must be going through. If Michael was in denial, as Melanie believed that he was, then he was handling things just like Lindsay. They both believed that they were right when it came to Brian. And because they both believed that they were right, neither of them would listen to reason from anyone.

Finally Melanie found her voice. She asked very softly, "How're you holding up, Debbie?"

Debbie tried to take a moment to straighten her clothes a bit and to smooth down her wig. "Everything is going to fine," she responded, somewhat amazed by her own words. Then she thought about things for a moment before she continued. "Maybe now that everyone has made their feelings known...things can get back to normal around here," she finally added, even though she knew it was wishful thinking.

"You don't really believe that," Melanie challenged. "There's a storm gathering. This is only the beginning. It may take a while to play out...but this is the rumble that will be heard around the world."

"What do you mean?" Debbie asked, feeling a sense of panic already starting to grow.

"I think that everyone is finally exhausted from dealing with this. One day you wake up and realize that we've all been dealing with this for years. I guess we all finally reached our limit. Ben and I have been dealing with this for such a long time...we must have been stronger, when we were younger...but now we're all just tired and worn out. We tried to believe that Michael and Lindsay would eventually get over Brian, but now we see that's never going to happen." Melanie said sadly. "The question is where do we go from here? We just found out our entire lives have been built on a lie."

"Brian just didn't think about what he was doing. Brian should..." Debbie started to say, almost as if she were on automatic pilot.

Melanie immediately cut her off. "Not this time, Debbie! You can't blame this on Brian. He didn't create this," Melanie protested.

"But all those years, that Brian let Michael follow him around like a little lost puppy dog. I know that Brian has always looked out for Michael. I really don't know how he would have survived if Brian hadn't protected him over the years. That's not the point. But with that all that caring, Michael always had hope," Debbie said.

"So did Lindsay. Because Brian was always there for both of them, they dared to cling to their dreams...in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. "

"And now he's gone...the asshole."

"He isn't gone! And that somehow makes it that much worse. Brian is still very much here. He still loves them...still cares about them, but he's in love with Justin. And try as they might, neither Michael nor Lindsay can change that simple fact...and it's killing them both. They don't see that all they have to do to live...is let go. Instead, they're both going to risk it all to try to find some way to hang on to their imaginary Brian."

Debbie looked at Melanie and noticed the calm way that she just explained everything. Something in her calmness added to Debbie's unease.

Debbie looked again at Melanie and suddenly alarms went off for her. She knew that this wasn't fatigue from a long weekend. Melanie was clearly in pain...in the same pain that Ben was in earlier. The calmness was just a mask for everything. And Debbie knew that somewhere deep down, both Melanie and Ben had reached a decision.

"Storm clouds are gathering, Debbie," Melanie repeated. The she leaned down and gently kissed Debbie on the cheek. "I guess we'll be leaving soon."

"I miss you and the kids already," Debbie said, "But you'll all hurry back here next month or sooner if you need to. Remember that we're all still family."

"I know that, Debbie. And we all know that you're the one that make us so."

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Lindsay walked downstairs into the living room; she was carrying a few things that had been left in the room. She sat on the sofa next to Michael and Jenny Rebecca.

"You're good with her," Lindsay said with a sad smile.

"She's such a cutie," Michael gushed.

Gus came over and gave her a hug. Lindsay smiled at him, and as she looked into the face that was so much like Brian's, she hugged him in return.

"Where's Melanie?" Lindsay asked, noting with concern that her partner wasn't in the living room.

She tried to quiet her sense of panic even though she knew that things were definitely not well between her and her partner. Yet Lindsay felt a new determination to fight for what was hers.

"She's in the kitchen with Debbie," Carl pointed out. "Girl talk...you know how that is?' he added with a laugh.

"Yes," Lindsay said quietly. "Girl talk..."

Lindsay couldn't help wondering what they were talking about. As she stood up to go find out, Michael nudged her gently in the direction of the front porch.

Lindsay didn't resist but allowed herself to be led outside. She was curious to hear what Michael had to say.

When they were both outside, sitting on the front steps, Lindsay found her voice.

"Michael?" Lindsay said, interrupting his silent thoughts. "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine, Linds."

"What happened? I thought that you were going to wish Brian and Justin well."

"I just couldn't. Something happened at the table. Brian was behaving so strangely. He just wasn't himself. The things that he was saying...that's not Brian," he said, shaking his head.

"Maybe he's changed."

"When did that happen? All I know is that I want things back the way they were...the way there're supposed to be."

"Well, Michael..."

"I know...I know...that's not going to happen," Michael seemed to accept. "But I never thought that Brian would change. He was supposed to care about what I thought. He should have talked to me before he took such a big step. I got the feeling, as I was talking to him earlier, that he didn't give a fuck how I felt about him and Justin."

Lindsay just smiled, for she didn't know what to say. There were clearly no arguments for Michael's observation.

Since Lindsay didn't say anything, Michael continued, "Brian just seemed so sure of himself. I've never seen him like this. This is more than...no apologies and no regrets...isn't it?"

"We're just going to have to face it...Brian may have changed," Lindsay confirmed, more for herself than for Michael.

"I've lost him!"

"You didn't lose him. Brian's always going to be there for both us. He still needs us. But I think he just made us responsible for our own happiness. He's not going to do that anymore. Now we have to focus on our own relationships...you with Ben...me with Melanie," she added sadly. "We have a lot to make up for there."

Michael made no response, and eventually Lindsay, too, fell silent. The pair was now deep in their own private thoughts.

"Ok, you two, don't you think it's time to come inside," Melanie said gently, talking to them through the screen door.

Lindsay and Michael looked up at the sound of her voice. Before they could say anything, they noticed that the limo was arriving.

It was now time for Melanie and Lindsay and the kids to leave for the airport.

There were the usual extended goodbyes between everyone.

Then Lindsay and Melanie and kids said their goodbyes and left, leaving Michael, Carl and Debbie alone.

Eventually, Michael looked at the clock on the wall and decided that he too should leave, citing the fact that he wanted to get home to Ben and Hunter.

In quiet resignation, Debbie simply hugged her son goodbye. And with that, Michael left.

The house was now extremely quiet as Debbie and Carl cuddled together on the sofa.

"Debbie Honey, you're going to have to stop worrying. Everything is going to be ok...you'll see," Carl reassured her, wrapping her more tightly in his arms.

She snuggled closer to Carl for support, enjoying the warmth of his arms. But Debbie knew that her significant other didn't have a fucking clue.

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Brian, Justin, Paul, Nicky, and Jason arrived at the airport. They lingered together on the concourse talking easily with each other. Eventually they settled at a table together since they had a lot of time before they needed to proceed to the gate.

"You know, Nicky, I'm not sure that these Root Beer Floats that you and Justin suggested were such a good idea," Jason teased, licking whipped cream from his straws.

"I expected complaints from Brian about the calories," Justin teased, "But what's your problem?"

"You mean aside from the fact that Nicky has whipped cream on his nose?" Jason said with a laugh.

"And that he's probably sticky all over," Paul complained, shuddering to think of a plane ride with a very sticky Nicky.

"Oh...for fuck's sake!" Brian said, sweeping the very sticky Nicky up into his arms. Of course, Nicky was thrilled and giggled with glee. "You two are unbelievable!" Brian continued, tossing the giggling Nicky. "Have we taught you nothing?" he asked with a smirk. "Obviously not..." he said, answering his own question. "Justin..." he finally said with a nod.

"Let me see if I can explain this to you," Justin teased, after thinking for a moment. "Nicky is only four years old. It's his job to be messy and sticky and such. Remember, your shirt, Paul?"

Paul immediately groaned at the memory of his Armani shirt on Nicky, and even worse, his shirt after Nicky had worn it while painting with Justin. "What's your point, Jus...because I'm assuming you have one?"

"Your compulsive neatness works well at the Offices of Dunbar and Smith. But Nicky needs to get messy if his creativity is to have a chance to develop...obviously spending the weekend with us didn't get that message across as clearly as I'd hoped," Justin relayed with some disappointment.

"So..." Brian interrupted, "No matter what's going on here...and no matter where we are...you're obviously going to have to visit us again for a repeat lesson..." Brian couldn't resist a laugh while he jostled Nicky. He looked at the shocked expressions on Paul and Jason's faces. Brian smiled as he added, "And can't you see how not getting this very important lesson is upsetting our resident artist?" he teased, gesturing toward Justin.

Paul and Jason looked over at a smiling, and very satisfied, Justin.

They didn't know what was coming, but Brian just was enjoying this too much. In fact, there was something eerily familiar about this whole scene, but Paul and Jason just couldn't put their fingers on it. Maybe, if Brian had given them time to think, they would have remembered the exact scene from Cincinnati and been better prepared.

"You know how many shows Justin has to get ready for. I can't have him upset," Brian said pointedly, "So Nicky...what do you think of visiting Justin and me again...let's say...in about a month...how does that sound?"

"A month?" Nicky asked, trying to remember how long that was.

"That's 30 days...what do you think?" Brian quickly explained so that a four year old would understand.

While Paul and Jason were rolling their eyes at the situation...their son was nodding yes.

"You know, Brian you have to stop doing this," Jason protested, suddenly remembering everything clearly now.

"You know you can't keep negotiating these arrangements with our son...you seem to keep forgetting who's in charge here," Paul said, completely failing to make his point.

Brian just smiled, paying no attention to their complaints. Then he returned his attention to someone more cooperative.

"Well, Nicky, why don't we leave Justin to explain the universe to your dads, while you and I take a little walk?" Brian easily suggested. A willing Nicky eagerly joined him. Brian and Nicky took off for the concourse, leaving Paul and Jason alone with Justin.

"So I guess, we'll all be together again in a few weeks, huh?" Justin said with a laugh.

"Probably..." Paul admitted, throwing up his hands as if in defeat. "How does he manage to keep doing that?" he asked with some annoyance.

"Surely you know by now that Brian likes to be in control?" Justin reminded them.

"What seems to be bothering you?" Jason asked with a laugh. "The fact that Brian maneuvered us to come back for a visit, or that fact that he suggested it first?".

Paul tried to appear outraged, but Jason and Justin continued to laugh at him. Then he secretly smiled as he realized how much alike he and Brian really were.

Then Paul's tone turned serious, "Jus, are you sure you don't need us to stay? You know, it's really no problem."

"Things may get a little tense here for a while, but I'm sure that Brian and I can handle it." Justin reassured them.

"Ok," Jason finally agreed. "Well, it looks like we'll be back in few weeks."

"That's if we ever leave," Paul teased, "Now where do you suppose that Brian and Nicky have disappeared to?" Paul asked, straining his neck to see if he could see them.

"Don't worry...we're at the airport...they couldn't have gone too far," Jason reassured him with a laugh.

The three friends continued talking with each other.

Eventually, Brian returned with a freshly cleaned and re-dressed Nicky on his shoulders. "We went shopping," Nicky announced as he was lowered to the floor and retrieved his bags from Brian.

"Of course, you did. You were with Brian. Everyone knows that Brian shops no matter where he goes. Why am I surprised?" Paul added with a laugh.

"Nicky, is that a new outfit," Jason asked cautiously, his artist's eye missing nothing.

"Yep, Uncle Brian bought it for me," Nicky confirmed, beaming with pride.

"It's amazing the shops that are here at the airport," Brian cooed. "Now my godson can travel, appropriately dressed."

"But Brian, he's dressed like you," Paul challenged.

"Precisely! Whereas before, he was dressed like Justin...is there a point that you're trying to make?" Brian asked with his eyebrow raised, cautioning Paul to answer carefully.

"No...no...just an observation," Paul responded, shaking his head. "You know you're unbelievable?"

"I know...I am" Brian said, agreeing totally with the perception. Everyone else just laughed.

A few moments later, they were all ready to leave the table. "Ok, let's see if we can find your gate. I don't want you to miss your flight," Brian suggested.

When they reached the gate, it was time to board so everyone began to say their goodbyes.

Of course, there was a prolonged love fest between Justin and Nicky, and a similar one between Brian and Nicky that caused Paul and Jason to wonder if they would ever get on the plane before it took off.

Finally there were hugs between Brian and Justin and Paul and Jason.

Then with one final wave to each other, Paul, Jason, and Nicky were gone.

Brian and Justin watched the plane take off, and then they started walking away from the gate in silence.

Eventually, Justin gently slid his arm around Brian's waist...Brian casually threw his arm around Justin's shoulders. Both of them enjoyed the simple moment of closeness.

When they reached the car, before opening the passenger door, Brian leaned Justin against the passenger side of the car, and he kissed him lovingly.

Justin immediately returned the kiss, wrapping Brian tightly in his arms as he surrendered to the kiss. The kiss deepened and was allowed to turn passionate. Finally Brian leaned back a little, giving them both a chance to breathe.

Once again Brian leaned forward, "Let's go home," he whispered breathlessly in to Justin's ear.

"Sounds like a plan," Justin agreed with a smile.

An hour later, they pulled into the driveway at Bri-tin.

Chapter 74 – The Quiet Storm

Sunday Evening ... (Day 49)

The house was dark and quiet when Michael finally arrived home. "Ben?" he called out as he entered and turned on the lights.

"I'm right here," Ben said quietly.

"Why were you sitting here in the dark?"

"I'm thinking...I'm meditating...I'm trying to make sense of my life...take your choice, Michael."

"Your life is fine," Michael quickly pointed out. "It's my life that's a mess. Brian just..."

"Not now, Michael," Ben cautioned him. "I've had all that I can take of your tantrums about Brian."

"What do you mean? Something is obviously wrong with him. He wasn't himself at dinner tonight. Did you see the way he treated me? I'm his best friend. Well, he can't treat me this way. I'm going..."

Ben interrupted, "So what are you going to do, Michael, huh?"

"Brian will come to his senses and realize that he needs me."

"And if he doesn't, will you just continue to wait? Are you just going to hang on until forever?"

"I can wait. Time is on my side. I know him better than anyone," Michael said emphatically.

"You may know him better than anyone...and you may be prepared to wait...and Time may be on your side...but none of that is true for me," Ben pointed out.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Time isn't on my side...and I have no intentions of remaining in a marriage where my life partner is simply waiting for me to die...so he can ride off into the sunset with someone else...real or imaginary."

"That's a terrible thing to say!"

"It's a horrible thing to feel! You should have told me the truth way back at the beginning. You should have told me that you had no plans to ever stop wanting Brian Kinney. You should have told me the truth...and I could have simply gone on with my life."

"Ben, I love you...you have to know that."

"That may be true, Michael...but sometimes loving someone is not enough. This just hurts too much. Sometimes the kindest thing you can do is move on."

"But you love me, Ben."

"Yes, I love you more than you'll ever know. But you and Lindsay were quite the dynamic duo today. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. You and Lindsay are supposed to be Brian's closest friends...yet the two of you would rather completely destroy Brian than see him happy with Justin. I never knew friends could do that to someone they love. That isn't love...it's selfish perversion...and I've decided to leave you alone to pursue it. I've decided that I've had enough."

"But Ben..." Michael started to whine.

Ben simply held up his hands to silence his partner.

Michael tried to be strong and pull himself together.

"What are you going to do?" Michael finally asked calmly.

"I'm going to find a hotel room for the night. Then tomorrow, I'm going to start looking for an apartment. Once I find a place, Hunter will probably be moving in with me. So you can do whatever you like," Ben finally told him.

"You can't do that!" Michael complained. Ben simply looked at him incredulously. The look didn't stop Michael. "You can't leave me. I want you here with me!"

"No," Ben said softly. "I no longer care what you want. You asked me to give you time to accept the changing status of Brian and Justin...and I tried. But I don't have an eternity to wait. And even if I did," he started to whisper, "Even if I did...I just can't do this any more."

"You can't walk out on me," Michael protested, "We're a couple. We got married. We bought this house. We adopted Hunter. We planned a life together. We belong together."

"I'm afraid not, Michael," Ben corrected him. "Hunter will always belong to both of us. Nothing is going to change that. The other things in our lives can be disposed of...including this house. We no longer belong to each other...because you believe that you belong to Brian."

"You can't leave me," Michael started to cry. "I'll be all alone."

"Michael, you don't understand. Maybe you're right that I can't leave you...I can't leave you because you were never here. But in a few minutes, I am going to walk out that door. I can no longer be a placeholder. You know that Melanie and I have a lot in common. But Lindsay and Melanie have little kids so I'm sure that they will try to make things work. But you and me...we're done."

"This is goodbye, Michael. I'll have my attorney get in touch with you."

"You have thought this all through so you're just going to walk away and leave me. But, what am I supposed to do? What's going to happen to ME?" Michael protested. "Who'll take care of ME?"

"Once everything is settled...you'll be able to move on with your life...and I'll be able to move on to mine."

Ben calmly walked over and picked up his suitcases.

"But Ben..." Michael tried to argue.

"Goodbye Michael," Ben said quietly, still holding his emotions in check. "I really did love you...but I guess it wasn't enough."

And with that Ben walked out the front door and was gone.

Michael couldn't believe what just happened so, out of habit, he picked up his cell phone.

His call rolled over into voice mail. "Brian will fix this," he said to himself.

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Meanwhile in Toronto, a Liberty Air flight was touching down at the airport. Melanie and Lindsay were aboard with the sleeping Gus and Jenny beside them.

Melanie and Lindsay had been relatively quiet during the flight, with each of them lost in their own thoughts.

Lindsay knew that Melanie was upset, but unlike her usual bouts of anger, this time Melanie was simply quiet.

No matter what happened, Lindsay didn't want her partner to give up on their relationship. They had both worked so hard to get back together...and to hold things together during this last year.

Jointly, Melanie and Lindsay got their kids into to bed. Once the kids were settled for the night, Melanie took a shower and easily settled into the peace and quiet of the guest room.

Lindsay spent some time alone with her thoughts in the living room.

No matter how things may have appeared at this moment, this was not a relationship that Lindsay wanted to lose.

She opened the nearby scrapbook with clippings from Justin's art shows. Lindsay still wanted this to be her life. She started to formulate a plan to still make her dreams come true.

Lindsay eventually went to take her own shower. Before settling down for the night, she knocked on the door to the guestroom. When there was no answer, she opened the door a bit. There was something that she needed to say.

"Melanie, I want us to go back and see Elizabeth," Lindsay said with determination in her voice. "I love you, and I want you to give us a chance."

"Goodnight Lindsay," was the only response that Melanie could offer, before she turned over to go to sleep.

Lindsay quietly closed the guestroom door and walked to her bedroom to sleep alone.

Chapter 75 – Swirling Waters

Later Sunday Evening...(Day 49)

The exterior lights were on so the house was illuminated as the SUV parked in its usual spot.

Brian and Justin waived to Thomas as they exited the car. With their arms around each other's waist, the couple quickly entered Bri-tin.

"May I suggest a dip in the hot tub?" Justin suggested with a knowing smile as they walked into the house.

"I must admit...I like the way you think," Brian quipped. "A most excellent suggestion," he added, gently nudging Justin along in the direction of the steps.

"You seem to be in a bit of hurry," Justin teased, sliding an arm around Brian's waist.

Brian simply wrinkled his eyebrows and said, "Let's just say that I have plans for you...afterwards."

"Let's move along..." Justin eagerly suggested, and Brian just smiled.

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Brian stepped into the swirling waters of the hot tub and began to savor the warmth for just a minute. "This feels really good," he whispered.

"Hey, wait for me," Justin protested.

Brian shook his head and sighed with mock exasperation. Then he smiled as he stood up again, and this time extended his hand to help Justin join him in the swirling waters.

"That's better," Justin reminded him.

"Such a bossy bottom," Brian teased, getting a swipe from his partner in the process.

Brian made himself comfortable once again, and Justin took his usual position, spooned against Brian's chest. The pair simply started to relax and enjoy themselves.

"This has to be one of your better ideas," Brian commented. "And to think we wasted all those years showering together when we could have been doing this."

"Showers maybe more efficient...for getting clean...for fucking..."

"But let's face it, the hot tub definitely has its place."

"Especially when we need to talk."

"So that's why you lured me here. You just wanted to lull me into a false sense of relaxation, so you could force me to talk. And here I thought you planned to have your way with me."

Justin leaned backward to give Brian and kiss. "Well, there is that too," he added with a smile.

Brian couldn't resist smiling too, as he laced his fingers with Justin's under the water.

They were both silent for a moment.

Then Justin quietly asked, "Are you ok?"

"As I told Paul and Jason, I'm fabulous. Didn't you hear me?"

"I heard you. I'm also on to you, so do you want to talk about it?" Justin patiently asked again.

"Not particularly."

"Ok," Justin said easily.

"And you're just going to let it drop?"

"Ah huh," Justin answered, snuggling closer to Brian's chest.

Brian wrapped his arms a little tighter around Justin.

"I mean, who would have thought that Michael still harbored all this shit," Brian began without further coaxing. "And Lindsay...who knew that she still had her own agenda. When did my life require all this handling by my friends?"

"Brian, you've always taken care of everyone. You've been doing it for so long that now everyone just expects it. And as for you and Michael...well."

"Michael...I thought that he had put all this nonsense behind him ages ago. I thought that he understood that he and I would never be a couple. How could he believe that we would grow old together...as a couple? What about the word NEVER doesn't he understand?"

"But this is Michael we're talking about...for him, never doesn't mean...not ever...it only means...not now."

"I can't believe that he was still holding to the dream that we would be 'two old queens in Palm Springs'..." Brian said, showing his frustration.

"Come on, Brian, you have to admit that growing old with Brian Kinney is a very tempting prospect...I know that I'm personally looking forward to it."

Brian smiled. "Especially since I'd always proclaimed that I never planned on growing old in the first place...although I have to admit, I rather like the idea of growing old with you too," he teased.

"Why thank you!" Justin responded with a grin, gently nudging his partner with his shoulder.

"Of course," Brian pondered for a moment, "You have to promise to at least age a little."

"Meaning...that I'm younger?"

"Precisely."

They both had to laugh at this point.

Then Justin started to think for a moment. Then he said, "But Brian...you do understand that this is about more than some promise that Michael believes has been broken...surely you see that?"

"Michael understands that Ben is going to die. I think the last time Ben was in the hospital brought it all home to him...that his time with Ben is limited," Brian agreed.

"But life is finite for everyone...no one knows how long anyone will live. That's why one has to live life to the fullest."

"If you're Michael and live in a world of comics, real life has got to be scary some times. And I'm sure that no matter how much he loves Ben, he's got to be scared shitless. I think that he built up some fantasy about me as a way to cope...to try to avoid dealing with his present reality. I don't think it's real."

"Yes, but if you tell yourself the lie often enough, you eventually start to accept the lie as the truth. They say that the mind can't distinguish between truth and a lie after a while."

"Maybe..." Brian said, pondering that thought for a while.

Then he quickly moved on. "The Munchers were the other surprise. I can't believe that Lindsay is back to the 'Justin needs to be in New York for his career' rhetoric again."

"Why didn't you just agree with her and tell everyone about...our move to New York?"

"I still don't want anyone to know about that just yet. I figure that we'll tell them when it's all done. That way I don't have to waste valuable time arguing with everyone."

"You know they're all going to be pissed when they find out?" Justin warned him.

"So we'll put off telling them as long as possible. That way, by the time they find out about it...it will be a done deal. But you know with Lindsay, this isn't just about your career."

"Oh?"

"Besides," Brian continued, "Michael and Lindsay seem to have the same problem."

"How so?"

"Neither one of them think that we should be together. I saw something today that I never understood before," Brian said pensively.

Justin paused and waited, giving Brian time to continue.

When Brian didn't say anything, Justin nudged him gently. "Tell me," he finally said gently.

Brian hesitated a moment. And in that moment, he wrapped his arm more tightly around Justin, snuggling in closer for comfort.

Justin leaned back and gently kissed Brian. After another moment, Brian began to speak softly.

"Neither Michael nor Lindsay can see me as a real person...a living, breathing person made of flesh and blood. All they see...all they both want to see... is some fantasy creature," he finally admitted.

"Oh, I don't know about that..."

"It's true, Sunshine. They each want something from me. I seem to provide something that they think they're missing. But, I'm not real to either of them. They don't want me to have a life. I'm simply the Stud of Liberty Avenue."

"But you haven't been that for quite some time."

"I know that," Brian confirmed, "But they want me to go back to that. That image of me is so comfortable for them...because they sure the fuck have no clue how to deal with person that I am today. Neither of them can afford to admit to themselves that I've changed...because if I've changed...what does that mean for them. As long as I stayed the same, they had this reference point in their lives. And as they went ahead and made lives for themselves, they could look back at me with smugness and feel superior. But if I've changed...who will they feel superior to...and who will they blame for the things that go wrong in their lives."

"Are you sure?"

"Think about it. I bet they look at their imitation hetero lives and compare it to ours and wonder...they start to question...they start to ask...what if."

"Oh...."

"I knew that legalizing things with you was going to cause a little rumble..."

"But not like this?"

"No, not like this. I never once suspected that my two best friends NEVER wanted me to be happy. I never knew that their friendship was conditional," Brian said with a touch of sadness. He paused for a moment and then he continued, "Do you remember back when you first came to live with me? You were staying at the loft, and I tried to take you back home to your parents. Do you remember?"

Beginning of flashback.

"Justin, do you have anything that you'd like to say?" Jennifer asked with Craig sitting beside her.

She paused to allow time for Justin to answer. When he didn't respond but merely sat there with his head lowered, she continued.

"Well, I'll speak for your father and me. We want you to come home. It's where you belong. And I think that Brian would agree," she added.

Craig interrupted her, "What difference does it make what Brian...."

Jennifer fired back at her husband, "Excuse me, I'm speaking...kindly let me finish."

Then she returned her attention to her son, "Justin..."

When Justin didn't respond, Brian stepped in. "Look at your Mom, Justin," he insisted

Justin turned to face his mother.

"You're staying here," she insisted softly.

"Only if dad says he's sorry to Brian," Justin demanded.

"Justin he's the one, who should be apologizing to you...making you think that he loved you," Craig responded.

"He never said that he loved me," Justin challenged. "He said it was just a fuck...that's all it should be. I'm all right with that."

"Justin, I think you should go to you room," Jennifer quietly suggested.

Justin started to move as if leaving the room.

But Craig wasn't finished. "Justin..."

"Craig..." Jennifer said, trying to stop Craig from continuing.

"No, I'm going to say this. Justin, If you're going to live in this house, you're not to go to gay bars...or talk about your disgusting life style...and you are never ever to see him again," he added, pointing to Brian.

"So what you've saying is that in order for Justin to live here, he has to deny who he is...what he thinks...and what he feels," Brian said calmly. Then he continued, "That's not love...that's hate."

"Get out of my house," Craig ordered.

Brian stood up to walk out, as he was leaving he said, "Justin...you coming?"

Justin said nothing, but immediately followed Brian out of his parent's home.

End of flashback.

"Yes, I remember..." Justin said quietly.

"I wouldn't let them do it you...and I can't let anyone do it to me either."

"But Brian, give Michael and Lindsay some time. They will eventually come around...you know that."

"It doesn't matter, Sunshine," Brian almost whispered as he leaned forward to give Justin a gentle kiss. "This is who I am..."

After a moment, Brian continued again. "Listen, I want you to go back to New York. I want you as far away as possible from the stuff going on here."

"But..."

"No buts...for once, don't argue with me, Justin!"

"Brian..."

"You have a very important painting to finish. I won't have people upsetting your plans. I want you in New York."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have a few things to finish up here at the office. Then I'll meet you in New York on Tuesday."

"But I don't want to be there without you..."

"I don't want to be here without you either...but I have to give you a chance to paint in peace. This submission to Milan is too important for you to miss the deadline. At least if you're in New York, there can't be any distractions."

"But..."

"Justin..."

"Brian, I'll leave when you leave. I can paint here at the house. You know that Thomas will make sure that I'm not disturbed. It's better if I just stay here."

"Are you sure?"

Justin simply nodded yes.

"Okay, I know that I'm going to have to work late at the office to get everything finished for the campaign. I guess we could both probably leave together late tomorrow night...since it's obvious that you're not going to give in on this."

"I'm glad you see that..." Justin said with a smile, gently nudging Brian for emphasis.

"I don't know why I thought you would be cooperative...just his once," Brian smirked.

"I don't know either..."

"I take it that you're probably going to always be this much trouble, aren't you?"

"Probably...I see no reason to change..."

Brian let out a deep sigh. Then he paused. "Me neither," he said with a smile.

"I love you," Justin whispered, as he leaned back to give Brian a gentle kiss.

"Me too," Brian responded softly.

"Well, I guess our time in the hot tub has ended," Justin finally announced.

"Don't tell me you're starting to wrinkle?"

"Afraid so..."

Brian and Justin helped each other out of the hot tub and reached for the warm towels to remove the excess water from one another. Then they wrapped themselves in heated robes and flopped down on their bed together.

"I guess it's good that we're out of there," Brian finally said as he pulled Justin into his arms.

"Oh?"

"Yes, I still have plans..."

"You do?" Justin asked eagerly.

"Absolutely," Brian said, as he rolled over on top of Justin and kissed him.

And in that kiss, they passionately surrendered to each other.

Chapter 76 – A Change Of Pace

Sunday Evening...(Day 50)

"I was beginning to think that you weren't coming back," Adam Lyons said into his cell phone.

"Does this mean that you missed me?" Spyder teased. "I just got in. My plane landed a few hours ago, but you know what a nightmare getting back into town from the airport can be. What's up?"

"What are you doing right now?"

" I was just about to wade through the messages on my cell phone. I did notice that you'd called."

"You know you couldn't have picked a worse weekend to disappear from New York. We're definitely going to have to work on your timing. You missed all the excitement."

"Adam, what are you babbling about? What excitement?"

Adam let out a sigh of exasperation. "Look, Spyder, can we get together for a nightcap? I'll even spring for one of those disgusting sandwiches that you like."

"The nightcap sounds like a good idea. But this must be really big if you are willing to feed me too. Gee, I'm definitely going to have take more trips out of town."

"Don't start being difficult, or I'll rescind all my offers!"

"So the fact that I might be exhausted from my trip probably won't deter you from your appointed rounds, will it?"

"What makes you think that I'm on a mission?"

"Well, aren't you?"

"Okay, maybe... Now can we get together?"

"All right. Where would you suggest? Where are you calling from?"

"I'm at the Brass Monkey. Why..."

"Adam, you're just around the corner. Why don't you just come here? You can keep me company while I unpack. And we can order something in later. How does that sound?"

"I'm on my way."

"Good. I'll see you shortly."

Spyder hung up the phone and shook his head. He couldn't figure out what on earth could be so important as to produce the strange behavior in his friend.

Adam had never been known to be a high strung individual...but during this conversation, Spyder got the clear impression that Adam was bubbling.

Spyder couldn't resist laughing at the image.

While he was waiting for Adam to arrive, Spyder once again scrolled through is voicemail log. He noticed that there were no messages from Justin or Brian. He didn't think there would be since he knew they had houseguests for the weekend.

He then dialed Justin's cell phone, and his call rolled over into voice mail so he simply left the message that he was back in town.

Spyder was curious about how Brian and Justin's weekend in Pittsburgh had gone with all those out of town guests. He couldn't help wondering about the pair's planning ability. His musings were interrupted by a knock on the door.

He opened the door for Adam, who stood there smiling, carrying bags of take out.

"You know, we could have ordered all this for delivery later," Spyder teased.

"I know, but since I wasn't that far away, it was just as easy to get take out."

Spyder took the food into the kitchen while Adam settled down in the living room to wait.

Spyder poured two glasses of Beam and carried them into the living room.

"Ok, Adam, now what exactly can't you wait to tell me? You have my undivided attention," he said, handing over one drink.

Then he made himself comfortable on the couch across from Adam.

Adam reached for the Sunday paper lying on the table.

He quickly noticed the plastic wrap had not been remove so he now knew that Spyder had not had a chance to read the paper. He was pleased for this meant that he would be the first to deliver the news.

Adam immediately found the Arts and Entertainment section of the paper. He made a great show as he rifled through the paper until he found the page that he was looking for. Once he found it, he folded the other pages back. Completing this presentation drama, Adam then folded the paper in half and ceremoniously handed it to Spyder.

Spyder took the folded page that Adam handed him without looking at the page, and let out a sigh.

"Okay, when did you become interested in the A&E section of the paper? What new show is in town that you're going to try to con me into going to with you? What am I supposed to see?" Spyder questioned.

"Will you stop rambling? Just look at the fucking page!" Adam insisted impatiently.

"Oh, all right! You don't have to get so testy."

Spyder finally looked at the page. There was the picture of Brian and Justin together followed by the article about their legalized partnership.

Spyder just smiled as he silently took his time reading the article. Adam was getting impatient. "Well?"

"Don't disturb me, can't you see that I'm reading?" Spyder replied, looking up just long enough to make his point and then immediately returning to reading the article.

"You don't seem to be particularly surprised by this?" Adam complained.

"Why should I be? You'd have to see Brian and Justin together to understand."

"I've known Brian Kinney for years. This is so out of character for him."

"The article indicates that they registered their union here in New York as well as Pennsylvania. I guess that answers one of your questions, doesn't it?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. That means that Kinnetik is going to try to take on New York. This isn't simply about him visiting his partner from time to time, is it?"

"Adam, the announcement of their union was in the Arts & Entertainment Section of the Times, not the business section. Why do you seem so concerned?"

"Spyder, if I'm going to have to do battle for accounts against Brian Kinney, I need to know. He isn't someone who can be trifled with. He's a fierce competitor and he's good. He's won several awards."

"So he's going to give you competition both here in the city and internationally, what's the problem?"

"Not internationally? You forget that no matter how good he is...he's only has a tiny Pittsburgh agency."

"With connections to Rudolpho Silvestri..." Spyder reminded him.

"Rudolpho Silvestri, who just so happens to know everyone in town. Silvestri Holdings is a major international firm. Fuck!" Adam complained.

"What's the problem? This is New York. You've had competition before."

"Kinney will hit this town like a whirlwind. And with his partner and their recent union...the couple is going to be like rock stars. It's going to be a media circus for a while. I can see it all now."

"Come on, Adam, Taylor is a serious artist."

"Justin Taylor, who just so happens to be the darling of the art critics, has got a show coming up at The Thornton, which everyone was already scrambling for tickets to attend. Now the well-connected and the curious will blend together for the sake of art," Adam pointed out.

"Already? My...my! I wonder if Taylor knows about all this," Spyder said with a laugh as he considered the possibilities.

"How can you be so nonchalant?" Adam protested.

"You forget that Taylor is my business partner."

"Oh sure, meaning you have nothing to lose...unless Kinney decides that he doesn't want his partner working for a letch like you."

"Contrary to popular opinion, Taylor handles Brian Kinney very well. For the moment, my partnership is safe," Spyder added confidently.

"But what about me?" Adam asked hesitantly.

"It might mean you'll have to earn your accounts again. From what I've heard, you've been coasting for a while now. I guess now your free ride may be over, but I have every confidence that you'll be just fine," Spyder remarked, walking over to gently pat Adam on the back.

Afterwards, Spyder backed up a little before he did a slow spin and struck a pose. He continued these motions until Adam interrupted, "What do you think you're doing?"

"I was just practicing. I guess I'd better dust off my tux," he added joyously. "I think I'm going to need it."

"Why?"

"With this announcement in the paper, I think that the New York social season is about to begin. I need to get ready to show off my partner and his new partner. Oh, I'm so looking forward to this."

"You know this will thrust you into the limelight?" Adam cautioned. "I bet the press is going to follow them everywhere!"

"Maybe it's time for me to come out of the shadows," Spyder quipped.

"Just think, while you're out partying, I'll be slaving away at the office," Adam couldn't resist, still looking for a modicum of sympathy where none could be found.

"Such a pity," Spyder responded with a smile. "Can I get you another drink?"

"I see that you're enjoying my agony," Adam complained. "I came here for sympathy."

"And I've given you all that I have. Now, what can I do to cheer you up?"

"I guess food would help. Unless you were planning to ask me to accompany you to those upcoming parties."

"Are you thinking of going to work for Kinnetik?"

"Not a chance. But I think that Kip and I can quickly send Kinney packing back to Pittsburgh, where he belongs. Let's see if he's really ready to play with the big boys," Adam proclaimed, trying to sound confident.

"Now that's the ruthless bastard that I know and love," Spyder teased, as he got up to get the food. Adam followed him into the kitchen.

"You're just going to sit back and enjoy whatever is about to happen, aren't you?"

"How did you guess?" Spyder asked with another laugh, leaving Adam shaking his head in disbelief.

Spyder put the food on plates and handed one to Adam. "Here, you'd better eat this. If you're going to take on Brian Kinney, you're going to need all the sustenance you can get."

Then Spyder and Adam looked at each other and shared a good laugh together.

Adam tried to conceal his growing concerns, and Spyder tried to hide his amusement at it all...both of them, secretly curious to see how this will all play out...

Complete.

**And So Moving Forward**

**Chapter 1 – And So It Begins**

Monday Morning... (Day 50)

The morning light through the bedroom window seemed to awaken Brian before the alarm clock went off. His first instinct was to roll over and shut off the alarm to prevent its later jarring sound. But, instead he lay there, enjoying the weight of Justin's arm and leg casually across him.

Brian found the rhythmic sounds that Justin made as he slept to have this calming effect on him.

The quiet of the morning was a big contrast to the disruptive dinner of the evening before. The dinner at Debbie's was an important moment in Brian's life. For here, he finally understood the place that he held in the lives of his friends, and he didn't like it.

There was a part of Brian that would be very glad to get out of Pittsburgh and back to New York City with Justin by his side.

Brian lay there peacefully snuggled partially under Justin, and he didn't want to be the first to stir.

Within a few moments, Brian felt a pair of lips, making their way, ever so slowly, down his body. He smiled and tried to pretend that he was still sleep. He knew that wasn't going to work for long, because Justin knew that Brian always woke up first and waited patiently for Justin to join him.

"Good morning," Justin said as he rolled over completely on top of Brian.

"I see that you decided to wake up," Brian said with a smirk. "Does that mean that you're heading down to your studio?"

"I told you, I had other things to do first," Justin stated emphatically.

"Oh, I see. And, you've now pinned me to the bed because?" Brian innocently asked.

"I wanted to make sure that you didn't get up before I had those things done."

"I see. So, you're telling me that I'm essential for these things that you have to do first?"

"I would say so." Justin acknowledged, as he reached up to give Brian a gentle kiss.

"Well, I'm not planning on going anywhere," Brian admitted, once the kiss was broken.

Justin rolled off Brian, and wrapped his arms around him. Justin was, once again, using Brian's chest for a pillow. He nipped and kissed his way down Brian's chest.

Brian simply enjoyed the attention, allowing Justin to have his way with him.

After a several blowjobs and a few rounds of loving making, not to mention all their usual activities in the shower, Brian and Justin seemed ready to start their day.

Wrapped in robes, Brian and Justin headed down to the kitchen for a quick breakfast. Brian poured two bowls of cereal, as Justin grabbed the milk from the refrigerator. The coffee maker had just finished brewing the morning coffee blend, so Brian poured two cups.

"I would take you out to breakfast, but then you'd never get any painting done," Brian commented.

"That's okay. This will tide me over for a few hours. I do need to get into the studio though," Justin agreed.

"And, please turn your cell phone on..." Brian insisted. "I might want to call you later, but with any luck, we should get out of here by tomorrow. I'll have Cynthia make our reservations. You also need to screen your calls. I don't want you talking to anyone, especially..."

"I know... I understand."

"If you ever bothered to pay attention to your cell phone, you would know that it has all these state of the art features for screening calls. This is the perfect time for you to put them to use."

"Brian, will you stop worrying. I'm going to be fine."

"It's not too late for you to change your mind and fly back to New York this morning, you know?"

"I'm going to wait for you. We'll leave together. Now, stop worrying. You have a long drive into town, and this is going to be a busy day for you. I know that you have a lot to do, so, please stop worrying about me, I really can take care of myself, you know?"

"I know you can. That's why I'm worried."

"Brian, I'm going to be in my studio. How much trouble can I get into with just some canvas and paints?" Justin innocently asked.

Brian so wanted to answer that question and remind Justin how much chaos he can cause with just canvas and paints, but he really didn't want to go there...and mention Santa Barbara...not this morning. Instead, he simply raised one eyebrow and let his expression speak volumes.

"I heard that," Justin pointed out, as if he was reading Brian's mind. "Everything is going to be okay. Now, will you just go to work?"

"Okay! I'm probably leaving early enough that I'll miss most of the traffic. We'd better get dressed, or I'll have to take you back to bed." Brian suggested.

"I know you'll be late, but at least there's tonight," Justin said, slightly unwrapping his robe for Brian to see that he had nothing underneath it. He then flashed Brian one of his full wattage smiles.

Brian decided that being a little late for work really wouldn't matter....

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And, Meanwhile At Kinnetik...

Cynthia had arrived at the office earlier than usual, since she knew that Brian was in town. She wondered how things had gone over the weekend. After all, there had been a lot of people visiting Brian and Justin all at once...with the appearance of Paul, Jason, and Nicky, along with the usual monthly visit of Melanie, Lindsay, Gus, and Jenny, and the usual cast of characters already in town. Cynthia could just imagine the chaos. She smiled to herself as she pictured it all.

Then Cynthia remembered that Brian and Justin had major news to share with everyone, too. Their new status as legal life partners was definitely going to be a shock for everyone. She remembered that as a consequence of their legal actions, she had acquired an additional boss at the office.

Beginning of Flashback.

"Justin," Cynthia said, coming around the desk to give him a hug. "I understand congratulations are in order. Do I have to call you Boss now?"

"Not if you want to keep your job?" Justin teased, "I see Brian told you."

"Yes, it's great news."

"Thanks. I guess he told Ted too, huh?"

"Yes, he told both of us together during our meeting this morning, and we both couldn't be happier."

End of Flashback.

Try as she might, Cynthia couldn't be upset at the prospect of having Justin around the office more...even as her new boss. She also knew that having Justin around was going to make Brian a lot easier to deal with.

Of course, Cynthia had seen the picture of Brian and Justin in the Arts & Entertainment section of yesterday's paper, so she already knew that Kinnetik was going to be buzzing, as everyone talked to one another and tried to figure out what all this news was really going to mean.

That's why she was at her desk a little earlier than usual on this particular Monday morning, so that she could field all the phone calls that were bound to come into the office and also helped to quiet some of the employees' anxiety.

While she was pondered these thoughts, the phone rang.

Cynthia answered and was surprised to find Jennifer Taylor on the line.

"This is a bit early for you, isn't it?" Cynthia teased, after finding out who was calling. "If you're looking for Brian, it's a little too early for him to be in the office," she added. "You should probably try his cell phone."

"No. I'm not looking for Brian. I actually called to talk to you," Jennifer pointed out. "I was out at the mansion over the weekend, and I gave Brian a packet of information about possible New York locations for him to consider when he had time. I've been thinking that I should have sent the information over to you and Ted, as well, since we both know how busy Brian is. Anyway, I just emailed the file to you. I was hoping that you would take a look, so that we can get things moving. You know, better than anyone, what Brian's timelines are usually like," Jennifer reminded her. "Something tells me that this isn't going to be any different."

"You don't have to remind me," Cynthia protested, knowing that Jennifer was right. "I'll take a look at the file and get with Ted. We'll get back to you as soon as we go over it," she agreed.

"That will be great."

"By the way Jennifer, now that you've had a few days to adjust...what's it like to have Brian Kinney for a son-in-law?"

Jennifer immediately laughed. "You have no idea!" she quipped. "But I think that, I'll leave things to your imagination. I have to go now," she added with that special tone of voice. "I talk to you later."

When the conversation between the two women ended, Cynthia smiled as she turned around to her computer to preview the file.

It was as she was looking over the pictures and listings of various buildings available throughout the New York City area, that Brian arrived at the office.

"Good morning, Cynthia," Brian began joyfully. "I hope you had a great weekend because we have a lot of work to do."

"Of course," Cynthia responded, "Starting with fielding all the phone calls about the change in your legal status. I don't know why you expected to get any work done today with all the excitement that the announcement in the paper is causing!" she added with a grin. "This shows a definite lack of planning on your part."

"I take it that you're done now?" Brian asked with his usual smirk. "I must admit that I thought they used a particularly good picture of us in the paper. It created quite a stir at the family dinner. But, I fail to see why my clients should care about my legal status with Justin one way or the other. After all, this was a rather personal matter."

"Right!" Cynthia said sarcastically. "Nothing that you and Justin do is ever personal," she felt the need to point out the obvious. Brian responded with the usual raising of one eyebrow. Cynthia noticed the look, but didn't let it stop her, she had been dealing with Brian Kinney for a long time, and she would not be intimidated. So, she continued. "You see this stack of messages?" she asked, waving the stack at him for emphasis. "Well, it seems that your personal matter was noticed by our clients worldwide. You have calls from Leo Brown, Andrew David, Mark at Liberty Air, Remsen, both Susan and Kellie from Eyeconics, and did I fail to mention the Silvestris, from Rudolpho to your favorite, Cristina."

"Isn't that interesting? I guess I should call them eventually to see what's on their minds," Brian smirked.

"I should also warn you that Murph and George are looking for you too," Cynthia relayed with some pleasure.

"My Art Department is in this early? Well, I can see that this is going to be an interesting day," Brian added with a smirk.

Cynthia smiled at the comment and uttered her usual, "I love my job."

"Before you get too busy, I want a status report on all Kinnetik projects including our staffing issues. I need you to review my calendar for this coming week. I want to make sure that all important things happen before the end of the day tomorrow. Otherwise, those meeting will have to be scheduled for New York. I will also need you to make reservations for Justin to go back to city tomorrow with me."

Cynthia simply nodded.

"Since I'm going to be incredibly busy, that means I want no extraneous interruptions. Hold all my calls except those from Justin. That means that I'm not taking calls from Michael and Lindsay. Do I make myself clear? Furthermore, they're not to be given entrance here, so hire additional security if you need to."

Cynthia nodded agreement, but didn't say anything.

There was nothing unusual about Brian not taking Michael's calls. If he took every call from Michael, Brian would never get any work done. But, Cynthia noticed a distinct change. Brian was willing to bear the costs of additional security to keep his two best friends away from him at the office. This was a definite change, and Cynthia took notice.

"And I'd like to see you and Theodore in my office in 30 minutes," Brian concluded, and proceeded to his office with no further comment.

Cynthia reached for the phone to immediately call Ted.

"What's going on?" Ted asked as he hurried up to Cynthia's desk.

"I'm not sure. I thought Brian would be in town for awhile before he left to go back to New York again, but that doesn't seem to be the case. He wants all his appointments handled by end of tomorrow," Cynthia relayed.

"If I were you, I would be sure that my bags were packed and everything is in order too, Brian is going to want this move to New York to happen sooner rather than later," Ted relayed.

"How was the weekend with all the out of town guests?" Cynthia asked cheerfully, hoping that Ted would simply tell her what she wanted to know, without her having to beg him for information.

"I worked most of the weekend, but from what I heard, just about everyone descended on the mansion this weekend. People stayed for lunch and dinner to visit with Jason and Paul. Gus and Nicky had a great time on their playdate with Justin," Ted teased.

"Wait a minute, Gus and Nicky were supposed to have a play date with each other," Cynthia corrected him with a laugh, "Not with Justin."

"Yeah...well Gus and Nicky seemed to have other plans," Ted relayed with a laugh. "Paul and Jason had a great time. They even got Brian and Justin out to Babylon for an evening of dancing. So, all in all, things were great until..." he paused in the middle of what he was saying.

"Well don't stop now...until what?" Cynthia pressed.

"Michael isn't taking the news very well about Brian's new legal status, and Lindsay is having problems too. Michael thinks that he should be owed some apology for a breach of some 20 year old childhood promise, and Lindsay's back on her soapbox that Justin needs to be ALONE in New York to paint. It was a big mess at dinner yesterday," Ted relayed sadly. "Brian is thoroughly pissed."

"That explains the instructions that I was given. Michael and Lindsay are not to be given access to Brian should they come here, and we're to add extra security if we have to, to make sure they don't get in," Cynthia relayed.

"That lets you know that he's serious about this."

"I see that nothing has changed. Even though both Lindsay and Michael have built their own lives...both of them must still want to hold on to Brian," Cynthia reflected. "Still, it must be hard when your two best friends just can't seem to want you to be happy."

"Brian seems to be handling it pretty well. He and Justin are together. Gus couldn't be happier," Ted relayed with a laugh. "In the greater scheme of things, I wouldn't be overly concerned. I just think that Brian has reached a point, where he's just tired of dealing with them."

"Is that why you think that he's going back to New York so soon?"

"Justin has a submission due to Milan by the end of week," Ted volunteered. "Brian's going to do whatever's necessary to make sure that nothing interferes with that. I don't know what else is going on."

"Then, do you think we should go into our meeting?" Cynthia couldn't resist teasing.

"What meeting?" Ted asked, suddenly distracted by this piece of news.

"Brian wants to see us in his office."

Ted simply smiled. "Well, we'd better get in there. Brian probably has very little in the way of patience at this moment. I'd sure prefer not to tempt fate because he'll threaten to fire me again. So, let's get in there and get everything started."

Cynthia managed to laugh a little as she and Ted gathered their notes and proceeded to Brian's office.

Ted and Cynthia gently knocked to announce their presence and then entered Brian's office and made themselves comfortable.

Brian was ready for them. They didn't have long to wait for the meeting to begin.

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Meanwhile, In New York City...

Adam Lyons was at his desk earlier than usual. He was already researching the trades to see if there was anything there about Kinnetik's potential move to New York. For some reason, yesterday had been an upsetting day. The picture of Brian and Justin in the Arts & Entertainment section of the Sunday Times was truly disturbing for a lot of reasons.

Adam couldn't get the picture out of his mind. Brian and his partner looked so happy together. Brian looked so relaxed. But, Adam knew that was probably just a façade, for everyone in the industry knew that Brian was driven by some internal demons that allowed him to produce the most spectacular campaigns, often for the most mundane of products...Dandy Lube was a prime example. Who ever heard of creating edgy campaigns with sexual innuendos for the simple product that made your car engine run better? And, let us not forget his slogan for those Steak Houses. "Eat the Meat!" Adam said to himself.

Pivoting around in his chair to stare at the blank wall, Adam became furious with himself. The "Eat the Meat" campaign had been played out in several stages over that year. The slogan was on everyone's mind. Now, here it was several years later, and even Adam couldn't get the catchy slogan out of his mind. At this moment, a part of him resented Brian Kinney for creating that slogan and the campaign that went with it.

But Adam also remembered that there was another Brian Kinney...the one who was always ready for a hard, fast fuck. The rumors had said that Brian didn't do repeats, but Adam had thought that if he and Brian were working at the same company that all sorts of things might have been possible. However, Kennedy & Collins had ruined his plans by hiring some young hot shot from within company for that open position several years ago. Brian had decided to stay in Pittsburgh, and now he had a legal partner. And the combination of Brian and his new legal partner were going to make them media darlings like this city has never seen.

Adam also missed Lars, his former partner. Lars had accepted a promotion to the European Office. Both Adam and Lars were ambitious, and they both had decided to pursue the next step in their careers. Once Lars had moved to Europe, they both seemed to let their relationship drift.

Once again, Adam stopped to reconsider the picture in yesterday's paper. Spyder had said that Justin had been in New York for over a year, with Brian making frequent trips into the city, and no one seemed to pay any attention to his comings and goings. Adam realized that for over a year, Brian and Justin must have worked to hold onto their relationship...in spite of the distance between them, in spite of the travel, in spite of the work involved.

And it had obviously paid off, for the look on both their faces in yesterday's picture announcing their legal union had shown a Brian that was happier than Adam had ever remembered seeing him. Once again, Adam resented Brian Kinney, this time for building and successfully holding on to a relationship, while he, Adam, was all alone.

Then Adam stopped his recriminations and thought about what he had. He had a condo in Soho and a few other investment properties in the city. He had a bulging portfolio and a career with limitless possibilities. He thought about what Spyder had said to him yesterday and realized that Spyder had been right...Adam had gotten comfortable.

'Well, that's okay. Kinnetik is still a small boutique agency that really can't compete with the sophisticated agencies here in New York,' Adam tried to tell himself.

And, as for the connection with Silvestri Holdings...well Adam wasn't going to get overly concerned about that either. Everyone knew that Signor Silvestri changed ad agencies the way that most people changed their outfits. True Rudolpho Silvestri was powerful, but if the rumors were to be believed, he was impossible to please. Adam figured that he'd simply wait for the Silvestri temper to flare, and Brian would suddenly miss a critical source of income. Kinnetik would return to Pittsburgh, in defeat, where they belonged.

Adam decided that he had allowed himself enough time to dwell on Brian Kinney and Kinnetik. Adam knew that he had always been one of the best advertising men in New York. That meant that he was practically the best in the world. Adam refused to be intimidated by the presence of Brian Kinney in New York. Adam had important work to do, and he was going to get to it. This was New York, and Adam intended to stay on top of his game.

Chapter 2 – The Day Continues

Later Monday Morning...(Day 50)

"I'm glad you could join me," Brian smirked. "Cynthia, I'm sure that by now, Theodore has filled you in on the events of this weekend, so I don't have to waste valuable time, do I?"

"He already told me."

"Good. So you understand?" Brian asked.

Cynthia simply nodded yes.

"I want you and Ted to do what's necessary to be in New York by the end of the week. That means that you need to contact Jennifer. Here are the listings that she gave me."

"Jennifer is very thorough," Ted commented.

"I already talked to Jennifer this morning. She already emailed us a copy of the file," Cynthia added.

"I want you two to take a look at some of these places, and let me know what you think. I really need to get set up in New York; things are moving very fast," Brian added. "And the Pittsburgh office still needs to function."

"Not a problem. I've been training people here to cover for me," Cynthia indicated. "And we're already interviewing new ad execs."

"I also have a new assistant," Ted answered. "He's bright, but useless at the moment, but in time he'll learn the ropes. At least for the moment, he can't do any damage."

"I see..." Brian said with a smirk.

"What's going on?" Cynthia asked.

"My original plan was to open a small satellite office in New York, but leave the bulk of my operations here. With the clients that we already have in NY, and the potential projects we have on the board, I'm going to need a full working staff in New York as soon as possible. This can't wait," Brian said. "Theodore, I know that you have been working overtime to get everything in place for our move. I know that I keep accelerating the relocation. I'm sure that you're used to it by this time...so I won't bore you with any more apologies..."

"I'm on it Bri," Ted said with a smile. "I reworked all the numbers over the weekend. So, we're good to go whenever you're ready."

"Additionally, except for the staff, on a need to know basis, I still want this to be kept relatively quiet. That means, except for Jennifer, this is not to be discussed with the family! Do I make myself clear?" Brian asked.

"Perfectly!" Ted answered.

"Now, I need to see everything we have for the Collezione Fiero showcase," Brian demanded.

"Would the conference room in 20 minutes, work for you?" Cynthia slyly asked.

"I think that could be arranged," Brian answered. "So what else is going on?"

"I still have that stack of messages for you. No one would say why they were calling except that they wanted to offer their congratulations. However, you'd better give them a call," Cynthia insisted, waving a stack of messages.

Brian let out a deep sigh as he took the stack of messages from her. He then looked at Ted and Cynthia, wondering why they were still in his office.

Ted and Cynthia correctly read the look, but Cynthia reminded him that everything would be ready in the conference room in 20 minutes.

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Twenty Minutes Later in the Kinnetik Conference Room...

"We knew you were going to be on a tight schedule, so everything is laid out for you," Cynthia began. "All the teams are ready to present."

"Good!" Brian responded with a smile. "I think that I'm ready to be wowed by my staff."

The first group to present was the team for the Silvestri Showcase. The streaming multimedia show that Spyder had worked on had been set to music. The pictures, the voice overs, the music all worked together. The images of the product were spectacular. There were multi-language versions in English, French, and Italian.

Brian was pleased. "I guess we'd better call Eyeconics and the Silvestris and make sure that have left room in their calendars to meet with me in New York on Wednesday morning," he suggested. "And, be sure to let Spyder know, as well."

"No problem," Cynthia confirmed.

"I'll need reservations for Justin and me out of here tomorrow, and I'm going to need the Limo service, as usual." Brian smiled to himself as he realized that a mocha latte and a limousine ride where such easy inducements to garner Spyder's cooperation. "I must say the limos are proving to be very useful," he added with a smile. "You have to admit it makes getting around the city so efficient."

"What about hotel reservations?" Cynthia wondered aloud.

Brian pondered for a moment. Thinking how nice it would be enjoy a larger shower and greater conveniences, but he also thought about the idea of how much he liked being trapped in the tight confines of a loft apartment with Justin. "No, not yet...but soon...but be sure to get a suite, when everyone meets there at the end of the week," he decided.

"I'll take care of it," Cynthia said.

"Bri, don't forget to talk to Justin about his apartment. I'm not sure when the lease is up. It's in a popular area, so a sublease might be the best solution. Once you've decided where you 're moving to, I don't want his apartment to be an obstacle," Ted reminded him.

"Justin is working on his submission for Milan, which he'll probably send by courier before the weekend. With that out of the way, he can breathe a little for a moment and think about these things. Until then, I want his mind to be free to paint," Brian insisted.

"I'll make a point of touching base with him about his loft when I'm in the City. Everything can wait until then," Ted agreed.

"Now, what's on my calendar for today? And Theodore, bring me up to date on what the teams accomplished over the weekend?"

Cynthia and Ted updated Brian on things that happened over the weekend. When their reports were complete, the trio headed into the projection room for Brian to see the finished products for the Collezione Fiero Account.

The initial cut of the infamous commercial was ready for him to see.

The commercial had originally been a vision in his mind. Valerie and her team had taken Brian's ideas and produced a script. Now, Brian was about to see how Tamihara Sugee and his team had made the script come to life.

Brian watched the commercial with interest. Valerie mentioned that the director had sent over an edited rough cut for Brian's approval. The director had worked with Brian on numerous commercials before, including the Jim Stockwell campaign ads, so he had some idea what Brian wanted. He also knew he could make points with Brian by trying an immediate edited version, even if it still needed lots of work.

To the director's credit, Brian got exactly what he wanted on the first shot. "Be sure to call Tam, and let him know... good job, as always."

Brian had video-conferenced Justin into the meeting, so that he could see all the final elements of the campaign and make any last minute suggestions. Surprisingly, Murph and George felt better knowing that Justin was there, at least electronically. The design teams had worked really hard to implement Brian and Justin's vision, and they needed to be sure that everything was just right.

Brian smiled as he watched how his staff interacted with Justin. He was also pleased with the finished products that Kinnetik had produced.

Now, more than ever, Brian felt that Kinnetik was ready to take on New York. Brian knew that he and Justin would do this together, and together, they were the strongest team possible.

Brian looked over at Cynthia and smiled. He understood why she liked her job....

When the presentations were done, the teams received kudos from Brian. He was truly impressed with what they had accomplished.

"Cynthia, be sure that I have disk copy of the multi-media presentation and both versions of the commercial. I'm taking them with me back to New York," Brian added. "Be sure to call Tam and thank him for coming in a day ahead of schedule. Suggest that he stay in contact with the actors...we may have to do this again integrating Pentland's Speedos and other products in with the Collezione Fiero commercial, but he bought us some time with his speed."

When the meeting was over, Brian went back to his office and immediately called Justin. "Okay, what did you really think?" he asked.

"Brian, I don't know why you wanted my opinion, but the graphics was just what we talked about. Spyder's multimedia piece turned out great! I loved the multi-lingual voice-overs. I think that Signor Silvestri will be pleased.

"Me too."

"Murph and George wanted you to take one more look at the website stuff for Collezione Fiero. Then we should be on track to get out of here."

"Together?"

"Together...just like I promised. That is, if you'll let me crash at your loft for a bit?" Brian said with a smirk, he could almost see Justin smile on the other end of the line.

"I know it's miserable for you, but I have to admit that I like having you close by," Justin managed to say with a smile on his face.

"It's going to be a hardship...but I think I can bear up," Brian said, pretending to sulk. "I'll talk to you later," he added cheerfully.

"Later." Justin said, still smiling as he closed his cell phone.

Chapter 3 – A Surprise Visitor

Early Afternoon... (Day 50)

"Brian, I know that you said no interruptions, but you have a visitor," Cynthia quietly relayed. "She said it was important."

"And what SHE would that be?" Brian demanded to know.

"It's your mother..." Cynthia said, holding her breath.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's your mother, Brian..." she repeated patiently. "She's waiting to see you."

Brian let out a deep sigh. "I guess then this is unavoidable," he finally said. "Give me a moment. Then send her in."

Cynthia could finally release the breath she'd been holding, for she clearly remembered the last time that Mrs. Joan Kinney had made an appearance at the office. It was about three years ago, and that particular visit had deteriorated into a shouting match that the entire office could hear. Cynthia never expected to see the woman again, yet here she was waiting patiently in the outer office to see her son.

Brian finally buzzed, and Cynthia ushered Joan Kinney into his office.

Joan looked around the office as she entered. Not too much had changed since her last visit, but she could tell that Brian was still very successful.

Brian motioned toward a seat for her, and Joan took it silently.

Cynthia observed the niceties and asked if anyone wanted coffee.

Joan shook her head no, and Cynthia returned to her desk, leaving mother and son alone.

There was a moment of silence between them.

"Hello, Mother," Brian said quietly, "To what do I owe this visit?"

"It's been a while since we've seen each other, Brian," Joan began. "I just wanted to find out how you're doing."

"I'm fine, Mother, as you can see...still gay...still a fag."

"I'm well aware of that, Brian."

"Oh...." Brian responded softly.

There was a long silence between them. Joan just sat there staring at Brian, as if it was the first time that she'd ever seen him.

"Is there something else?" he asked patiently.

"Father Tom and I saw your picture in the paper yesterday," Joan revealed matter-of-factly.

Brian took a moment for it to register what his mother was talking about.

It took even longer for it to register that his mother now read the Arts & Entertainment section of the newspaper. And, to process the new wrinkle that she read the Arts & Entertainment section of the newspaper ...WITH Father Tom.

This was quite a different turn of events and new information for Brian to process.

"Oh, and what did you think?" Brian asked, and he could hardly wait to hear what she had to say. He knew that somehow this was going to be enlightening.

Joan took a moment to choose her words carefully. "That appears to have been a big step that you took. Father Tom explained all about it to me."

"I see..." Brian said, although he wondered precisely what Father Tom had said, but he knew that he shouldn't ask.

"I just looked at the picture...the picture of the two of you...you and HIM."

Brian remained silent and prepared himself for his mother's usual religious proselytizing. He really wasn't up for this; he had a ton of things to do before this day ended. Brian mentally rattled off the list in his mind. And yet, he waited patiently for Joan to continue.

"I thought that you looked happy..." Joan practically said in a whisper. Then she continued. "Father Tom thought that you and ..."

"Justin...his name is Justin..."

"You and Justin must be in love...to still look so happy."

Brian didn't say anything.

"That's the same young man that I saw at your loft all those years ago, isn't it?" Joan asked.

"Yes..."

"All this time and you've been together?" Joan asked incredulously.

"Yes..."

"All this time and you're still happy?" Joan asked in complete disbelief.

"Yes..."

"All this time and you're still in love with each other?" Joan continued to ask.

In all her years of being with Jack Kinney, Joan was always far from happy. In all the years of her marriage, all she could remember was the pain and the sadness. In fact, Joan could never remember looking at Jack, the way that Brian and Justin looked at each other in the simple picture in the paper. As she remembered the picture, she realized that it must have been taken at some unguarded moment, and the camera just happened to be there to capture them.

"Is there a point here, Mother?" Brian finally asked. "I'm rather busy."

"It's just that it's been years," Joan finally commented with amazement. "I don't understand."

"What don't you understand?"

"It's been years...you and that young man..."

"I don't expect you to understand," Brian said calmly.

"The article said that he's an artist."

"That's right."

"So I guess there's not much chance that you'll repent, is there?"

"No, I would say it's highly unlikely."

"I see," Joan responded softly. "I'm going to continue to pray for you...and Justin," she added without malice.

Brian smiled. "If it makes you feel better..."

"Well, I guess I should go. It's good to see you again, Brian."

Brian was too confused to make any comment.

"I guess I should go," Joan said again, this time finally standing up. She slowly walked to the door. Just before she walked out the door, she turned back to face Brian again.

"You've changed...something about you has changed...you seem...at peace."

"I am," Brian admitted.

"Goodbye, Brian."

"Goodbye, Mother..."

And with that, Joan Kinney quietly walked out of Brian's office.

Joan stopped by to say thank you to Cynthia, and then she quietly exited Kinnetik.

Once Joan had left, Brian leaned back in his chair and replayed the conversation.

Brian realized that this was one of strangest conversations that he had ever had with his mother...none of the usual recriminations...none of the usual arguments...none of the usual threats of eternal damnation.

Brian thought for an instant that... if he didn't know any better...which he certainly did from all the years of experience in dealing with his mother...

If he didn't know better...it would have seemed as if Joan was trying to wish him well...but couldn't quite find the words...

And in that moment, Brian remembered the man he used to be...the man who didn't know how to express his feelings.

First, he quickly tried to dispel the thought.

Then he simply raised his eyes upward and uttered a silent prayer of thanks for Justin...who changed everything.

Chapter 4 – Meanwhile At Britin

Monday Afternoon...(Day 50)

Shortly after the video conferencing session with Kinnetik and the phone call from Brian, Justin was peacefully working in his studio when the phone rang.

"Justin, it's Catherine Mann," she said sharply. "You do remember me, your hard working agent?"

"Of course, I remember you Catherine. I just try not to annoy you unnecessarily," Justin reminded her.

"Justin, I saw your picture in the paper yesterday. In fact, all of New York saw your picture in the paper," she said, and then paused for effect. "By the way, your partner is quite handsome."

"Thank you, and did you notice that the article talked about the upcoming show in Cincinnati and also the one at the Thornton?"

"Justin, I realize that you're now legally partnered to an advertising genius, but please leave the details of your career to me," Catherine teased. "Now, why didn't you warn me about this when you were here last week?"

"This wasn't something that I'd planned in advance but just neglected to mention. Brian and I made the decision, and then, we saw no reason to wait. Catherine, this was a personal decision, I don't understand why you're so upset?" Justin innocently asked.

"You get all this extra press that I have to manage. You realize that anything that you do from now on, personally or professionally is going to have significant press coverage, so you can forget about quietly trying new things," Catherine couldn't resist saying mockingly. "Those days are clearly over. You just entered the big leagues. And, there are rumors circulating around town, that Brian is opening a New York office. Is that also true?"

"Brian's been in and out of New York for months, and no one seemed to pay any attention to him. Why are they so interested now?"

"Now, Brian is partnered to a rising young artist. Oh yes, and from what I hear, Brian snagged an international account that the top agencies here and abroad were after. Both of you are on everyone's radar. So behave yourselves. And, don't forget to keep your agent informed," Catherine insisted with a smile. "By the way, you've been invited to be part of the emerging artist exhibit in Chicago."

"I have? That's wonderful. Don't tell me that I've been invited to participate in the Chicago exhibit because someone saw my picture in the A&E section of the paper?"

"I doubt if the news has traveled that far. You've got to admit, your name was on everyone's lips before this major change in your legal status," Catherine tried to remind him.

"You're probably right," Justin finally agreed. "I guess you and I do need to go over my schedule too.

Remember that I'm going to Milan for the summer," he casually reminded her.

"You don't even know if your submission will be accepted in Milan. Aren't you being a bit premature with your summer plans?" Catherine challenged. She knew that Justin was an amazing artist, but competition was always stiff for the international shows. She didn't' want him to be disappointed.

"We decided to go to Milan for the international showcase, whether I'm accepted or not. So, if you can fit Chicago in between The Thornton and Milan, I think I can handle it. I've always wanted to do a showcase in Chicago."

"Just be sure that you have time to paint, now that you've become this media darling."

"I don't think that will be a problem."

"When will you be back in town? We need to talk about Chicago and several more galleries are interested in your work."

"I have to finish the painting for Milan and ship it out on Friday. Is it possible that we could wait until Friday afternoon or Monday morning to meet?"

"Sure, Monday will be fine. Do I get to see what you're submitting to Milan?"

"We'll see. I really don't like to show my work in advance, if you'll remember," Justin reminded her. "I'll talk to you when I get back in town."

"That's fine. And, congratulations Justin, that's a great picture, by the way."

"I must admit that I'm pretty happy. You'll probably notice it in my work," Justin added before saying goodbye.

Justin couldn't help smiling to himself as he hung up the phone after talking with Catherine. He couldn't help thinking that it must have been a slow news weekend in New York for the Art & Entertainment section to have utilized its precious page-space for an announcement about his new legal union with Brian.

Justin also realized that if Catherine Mann had seen the article, then Spyder probably had seen it too, so Justin took a moment to check his voice mails. He scrolled through all the voice mails from Debbie, Michael, and Lindsay. Justin did find the one voice mail from Spyder indicating that he'd returned from his trip and was now back in New York. There was nothing unusual in the message from Spyder except some cryptic comment that Justin and Brian needed to do a better job of scheduling the visits of their out-of-town houseguests. But, this was just Spyder being Spyder, nothing unusual there.

Still, something told Justin that calling Spyder was probably a good idea. They needed to talk about the graphics for Barrister, Wilkins & Evans anyway. So Justin called him.

"Well, it's about time you called," Spyder said, as his way of simply answering the phone.

"What happened to hello?" Justin had to ask, even though he knew it was pointless.

"Is there something that you would like to tell me, Taylor, which would justify a normal greeting?"

"I gather from your attitude that you saw the A & E section of yesterday's paper."

"It was brought to my attention as soon as I got back into town. I saw you and Brian before I left. You could have told me, your trusted business partner and loyal assistant, what you were planning."

"I wasn't planning anything. As long as Brian and I are together that's really all I care about, but we talked things over and decided to do this. I'm not sure that I'll ever be able to paint again, since my right hand may never recover from signing all those papers, but we're pretty happy about things."

"So, that means that you will stay put in New York now...where you belong, I might add?"

"Once I get back there, that will probably be the case. I have a lot of painting to do in a very short period of time. It will be embarrassing if I don't have any paintings to exhibit at all those shows."

"Ah yes. Well, we can't let that happen. That could truly be a problem. Might I ask where you are now?"

"I'm in Pittsburgh. Well, really I'm at the house in West Virginia. And before you ask, we should be back in the city sometime tomorrow, so we can have breakfast on Wednesday. How does that sound? I might even spring for a mocha latte."

"You're too late. I already have a better offer. I already have a breakfast date for Wednesday. Not only was I promised a mocha latte, but I was told that there was breakfast and a Limousine ride in it for me."

"I see that you've talked to Brian," Justin said with a laugh.

"Your partner does know how to push all the right buttons. I must say that I like the way he does business."

"How was your trip?"

"I'm considering the movie. It might be interesting. I couldn't care less if they make a movie of my book. I wrote it so long ago that I'd almost forgotten it."

"That's a good attitude. Did you see your family while you were out there?"

"Not see, but I did talk to them."

"That's a start."

"That's the end of that discussion."

"Okay. I won't press."

"Thank you," Spyder said. "Now, have you had a chance to look at the notes that I sent you on the website changes for Barrister, Wilkins & Evans?"

"Are you kidding? With the weekend that we had here...not a chance, but I will take a look, so we can talk about things when I see you. I do have to send off my submission to Milan by the end of the week, and I have to meet with my agent at the beginning of next week. But other than that I'm going to be painting, but I should have some time to do whatever it is that you need. I really can't afford to let my business partner down."

"At least I know that you'll be locked in your studio, so I can find you if I need you. This is going to be a decided improvement over your being trapped in these small towns that you're suddenly so partial to. This is really good news!"

"Are you done?"

"I think so. I'll see you on Wednesday. I'll watch for your arrival. You realize that you and Brian are now media darlings. I hope the paparazzi aren't waiting at the coffee shop with flash cameras and all."

"Spyder, I really think that the paparazzi have more important things to focus on than Brian and me. After all, there are lots of real stars in New York City."

"And the rest of those mere mortals had better enjoy things while they can, because with you and Brian staking your claim, you're obviously going to own the city," Spyder said with a laugh.

"I can see that I'm going to have to go on line and order those books that you wrote while you were living in Europe because it's obvious that your writer's persona is coming to the fore, and I can see that I need to be particularly ready."

"No...no...don't do that. I don't want you to know all the old things about me," Spyder protested. "I want you to take me at face value. After all, in addition to being your business partner...I'm also your new assistant. I don't want my reputation damaged by my misspent youth," he continued. "Plus, I just love the perks associated with my new job," he added.

Justin just shook his head at the last statement because he knew that arguing with Spyder was useless. He would simply leave Spyder to his delusions until they all had breakfast together.

"I'll see you on Wednesday," Justin reiterated.

"Sounds like a plan," Spyder quipped back, before they said their final goodbyes.

Once again, Justin resumed working on his painting. Even though he was smiling from the two phone conversations that he'd just had, Justin knew it was time to get back to work.

Chapter 5 – Returning Phone Calls

Pittsburgh, Monday Late Afternoon...(Day 50)

Brian decided that his day was going pretty well. The Collezione Fiero Showcase and Campaign were both right on schedule. The rough cut of the Collezione Fiero commercial was a bonus that Brian really didn't expect for several more days.

Brian knew he had a Wednesday breakfast date with the enigmatic Spyder, followed by an early morning meeting with Eyeconics and the Silvestris. He hoped that Justin would be available to at least put in an appearance, but he wasn't going to press. For some unknown reason, Rudolpho and Cristina were easier to deal with if Justin was there. Brian assumed it had to do with how the Silvestris felt that Justin understood how to deal with them. It could be as simple as that.

Cynthia had also found out that Andrew David of the Pentland Group was also going to be in New York, rather than London this week. Andrew had mentioned that he wanted to see the first cut of the Collezione Fiero commercial too. Brian had the signed non-disclosure statements and an agreement to use Speedos and other Pentland products in Collezione Fiero ads. In addition, Cynthia and the staff had worked up some other ideas that Brian wanted to discuss with him.

Brian also noticed that Cynthia had scheduled another meeting with Mitchell Evans of Barrister, Wilkins, & Evans for Thursday afternoon. Brian thought that this was probably to further discuss the future proposal for a campaign that the firm wanted to see. Of course, he knew that Kinnetik would be competing along with every other ad agency in New York for this account. In the meantime, Brian wanted to maintain good relations the firm, and he also realized that he had quite a bit of homework to do before his next meeting with them.

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There was a call from Leo Brown with his congratulations. Brian had to stop to consider if the Chicago papers would have picked up the announcement, or if Leo was reading the A&E section of the New York papers.

Then Brian remembered that Drew mentioned that he had heard the rumor, all the way in Dallas, about his legal union with Justin. This was the reason why Drew had appeared unexpectedly at Sunday's family dinner. So, Brian had to wonder what Leo Brown really wanted. Finally, he decided there was only one way to find out.

"Cynthia, can you get me Leo Brown, please?" Brian said nicely.

"Brian," Leo said, once he was on the phone. "That was a lovely picture of you and Justin. I must admit that although I don't necessarily understand the lifestyle, I do like it when you're happy and at your creative best. I understand that Justin is an artist," he continued.

"He is...but that isn't exactly new information," Brian carefully responded.

"I understand that he's been invited to exhibit here in Chicago. I'm really looking forward to seeing his work. I guess that means that you'll be visiting me soon? I guess it also means that you'll be spending more time in New York?"

"I usually try to make it to Justin's shows, wherever they are. And, planes still fly from New York to Chicago, just like they do from Pittsburgh to Chicago," Brian confirmed easily, "And by being in New York, I'm better able to assist in whatever you and the Pentland Group are attempting to put together. So, as I see it, being in New York could be a win-win for everyone."

"You do have a point. I knew that you were always thinking about me," Leo finally teased.

"Of course, Leo, don't I always?"

"Okay, Brian, I know that I have been a bit stubborn in the past, especially when I wouldn't listen to you and it cost me a fortune. "

"I can't believe it. Now, you're willing to admit the truth?" Brian teased.

"Okay, so I didn't handle Drew Boyd, admitting he was gay, very well. You warned me not to do anything drastic, but I wouldn't listen. You were right. It cost us a fortune to get him back. I've now accepted that you're the expert, and you give good advice. Maybe I should listen to you and not argue so much. I also know that you won't suggest that we come up with glow in the dark sportswear or anything as crazy as that," Leo said with a laugh.

"We agreed back in the beginning to leave the crazy stuff to your competitors, as we leave them in the dust. It's been working well so far," Brian reminded him.

Once again, Leo Brown just laughed. "Look Brian, I just wanted to say congratulations, and I'll be in touch."

"I'll probably see Andrew David this week, is there a message?"

"I do like the way that you stay on top of things," Leo said with a smile. "I'll probably cross paths with him myself this week, so I'll talk to you later."

Brian hung up the phone and thought that the conversation had been enlightening. He realized that something had changed in the air because of his legal union with Justin. Brian was still the best at what he did, and Justin was already receiving critical acclaim, but the fact that he and Justin were together seemed to be putting their simplest actions on everyone radar screen.

Leo Brown mentioned that Justin had been selected to exhibit in Chicago. Brian thought that it was odd that Justin hadn't mentioned it, but then he realized that he and Justin had been rather busy lately. Then again, maybe Justin's agent hadn't had a chance to let Justin know about this little development.

Brian smiled as he realized there was a lot going on. Things were about to get interesting when he and Justin returned to New York, and Brian couldn't wait.

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Brian had finished most of his pressing projects for the day, so he returned the other phone calls to Remsen, Mark at Liberty Air, and a few other clients. Everyone had seen the article in the Arts & Entertainments Section about his legal union with Justin. Everyone simply wanted to express their congratulations.

Finally, Brian placed a call to Rudolpho Silvestri.

"Brian, you have impeccable timing, as always," Rudolpho quickly began. "I was just having a little meeting with Susan and Kellie," Rudolpho said, as he answered the phone. "How are you doing? I understand that congratulations are in order?"

"Yes, I finally made a legal partner of Justin. I'm surprised that you would pick up on that little piece of news," Brian said with a smile.

"Brian, you know that Perin and I are particularly fond of you and Justin. It's a big step for you two, but I must admit that I'm pleased to see that you made it. It lets me know that my accounts will continue to be well-handled."

"Rudolpho, this doesn't mean that you can continue to appeal to Justin every time you have an argument with me," Brian reminded him with a laugh. He could just see the wheels turning in Rudolpho's mind.

"Of course, but Brian you have to admit that Justin has a better sense of these artistic matters. Perin and the girls were just trying to save you time," Rudolpho tried to offer. "But it worked out anyway," he added. "And, I understand we're getting together on Wednesday."

"My staff has been working very hard. I have some intriguing things to show you. I suspect that Collezione Fiero's presence will be the talk of the Paris showcase."

"I can hardly wait to see what you have for us. You know that patience is not one of my strongest traits," Rudolpho said, fully aware that he was stating the obvious, and hoping that Brian understood that he hoped that Justin came along to the meeting.

Brian smiled to himself as he immediately picked up what Rudolpho was trying to say.

The fondness that the Silvestri family seemed to have for Justin was interesting to watch. The Silvestris would concoct any scheme they could think of just to make sure that Justin had to get involved or at least would put in an appearance. He couldn't help wondering if this was ever going to change.

Brian just shook his head. He could easily deal with Rudolpho, but Maria, and especially Cristina, had this tendency to go into full drama queen mode, reminding Brian about their broken hearts because Justin had chosen him over one of them. The antics of Maria and Cristina had been going on for so long, that Brian was now already prepared.

But Brian also knew Rudolpho. As many had said, the mind of Rudolpho Silvestri never sleeps. The fact that Rudolpho was meeting with BOTH Susan and Kellie, meant that something was going on. True, once they got the Collezione Fiero campaign, the relations between Eyeconics and Rudolpho Silvestri had greatly improved...but first of all, the Silvestris usually sent Maria or Cristina to these meetings...yet they were not mentioned during the phone call. And secondly, Rudolpho was meeting with BOTH Susan and Kellie. True, the showcase was coming up, but even Brian had to admit that this was an odd grouping for a meeting.

A little voice told Brian to be prepared for anything when he got back to New York, and Brian always paid attention to this little voice.

Brian shook his head. He had just left New York on Thursday to come back to Pittsburgh. Today was only Monday. One would think that a weekend would be a quiet time, even for a place like New York. People should have been out of town. Rudolpho was supposedly on his way back to Switzerland. Why was he, once again, so quickly back in New York?

Brian just couldn't help wondering what was really going on.

Chapter 6 – Home Again

Monday Evening...(Day 50)

Brian arrived home earlier than expected, and he found Justin and Teres in the kitchen together.

"What are you doing out of your studio?" Brian asked with a smile, as he leaned down to give Justin a kiss.

"Teres and I were making a few plans. We thought that you would have to work late," Justin said.

"I have an excellent staff that is still slaving away. I came home early because I have something that I need to show you. But then, I guess by coming home early, I get to see how you actually spend your day...in conspiracy with Teres just as I always suspected. How are you, Teres?"

"I'm fine, Brian, although I don't know why you see a conspiracy in progress. Justin and I were just doing a little innocent meal planning."

"Will you leave Teres alone?" Justin insisted. "Now, what do you have to show me?"

"You'll see. Why don't I give you a chance to finish up with Teres? Meanwhile, I'm going to change into something more comfortable," Brian said, "Then, maybe I can persuade you to meet me in the media room?" he added, as he was leaving the kitchen.

Justin and Teres finished up with their plans.

Before Justin left the kitchen, Teres prepared a tray with a plate containing a few slices of turkey, cheese, and assorted fresh veggies. She placed the tray on the counter in front of him. "Here, these may stop you from starving to death," she teased.

"Thanks, Teres," Justin said, giving her a gentle kiss on the cheek.

Justin added two bottles of water from the refrigerator to the tray, and quickly proceeded to the media room where he placed the tray of snacks on the table between the two chairs. He then made himself comfortable in one of the chairs and started to sip on his water and munch on a few veggies and the cheese.

A few minutes later, Brian arrived dressed in his usual sweatpants and tank top. He was carrying a disk of some kind in his hands. "Thanks for the turkey and veggies," Brian said with a grin. "How did you know that I was hungry?" he asked, reaching for a cherry tomato and a slice of turkey.

"Just so you know, Teres made the snacks for us. I guess she figured if we were going to watch a movie or something, we would need snacks to munch on," Justin said easily. "Now, what do you have in your hand?"

"What I have here is what I wanted to show you," Brian explained, now reaching for the other bottle of water and taking a sip.

"Are you going to tell me what it is, because I know that you didn't rent a movie?"`

"This is better than a movie," Brian said, dragging out the suspense. "Tam sent it over this morning. He did a rough edit ahead of schedule, so that I could get an idea of things."

"I know how you feel about Tam's work. Okay, let me see this work of wonder."

With his usual fanfare, Brian loaded the disk and grabbed the remote control. He, then, nudged Justin over and made himself comfortable beside him in the same chair. They comfortably curled up together to watch.

"Are you ready?" Brian asked.

"I can hardly wait..."

Brian started the video. The music began, and within a few moments, the Collezione Fiero logo presented itself.

Brian could feel Justin immediately smile "Is this, what I think it is?" Justin eagerly asked.

"Just wait and see..."

The commercial started showing a crowded poolside with lots of beautiful people. Justin was intrigued.

Beginning of commercial.

A perfect day at a plush resort...the sun is shining...the air is clear. The foliage around the pool area is lush. As the camera moves closer, we see the cool, clear waters of the shimmering pool. There are people swimming in the pool. Off to the left of the pool are five men in Speedos sunbathing. Other people are also scattered around the pool engaged in various activities.

This placid scene is broken as a voluptuous dark haired beauty is seen in the water. With elegant grace, she rises out of the water in slow motion. All eyes are on the woman. Her body is tanned, and she is dressed provocatively. The water droplets cascade down her body as she rises. The woman happens to cast a seductive smile in the direction of the five male sunbathers.

The five men returned the smile, each was thinking of the promise of a long night and never-ending sex. Then, one by one each man leaned forward on his chaise.

The first four men are focused on the woman, who has emerged from the water.

The fifth man clearly has his attention focused only on the hard bodies of the four men beside him.

All five men are wearing Collezione Fiero sunglasses.

The final scene is simply the single pair of sunglasses spotlighted in the foreground, with bathing suits scattered behind them. You don't know whether you have one pair of Speedos and one bathing suit, or if you have multiple pairs of Speedos,

"Then, the screen showed the slogan...The Look That Says It All." And then everything faded to black.

End of commercial.

Justin took in the setting, the music, the entire commercial. He sat there for a moment in silence.

"Well, say something," Brian demanded as he reached for the remote control to turn off the screen.

"It's wonderful!" Justin said, letting his excitement show through. "I heard you pitch the original idea to Signor Silvestri, but seeing it really play out, with music and actors, is just so different. I remember this was just an idea. Now, it's a reality."

"It just goes to show you what a wonderful team we are," Brian somehow felt the need to emphasize this fact. "When we get back to New York, we'll have to let our clients see it."

"I don't know what Eyeconics will think. After all, you know them better than anyone, but I can tell you that Signor Silvestri is going to love it."

"I sure hope so. He's been constantly talking to other people about this commercial. I just hope that the live version will live up to his expectations."

"You've got to admit, the commercial definitely draws the attention to the Collezione Fiero sunglasses... and a lot more," Justin said with a laugh. "But, that commercial is certainly edgy...I can imagine that the European censors will have all of you arrested."

"Oh come on...it's not that bad!" Brian protested with a smirk. "Besides, if we all get arrested, think of all the free publicity. Rudolpho won't be able to make the sunglasses fast enough."

"What about for the U. S. market?"

"Now, here we may have to do some slight toning down, but I figure this will run in Europe first. If we play it right, the European buzz will cause it to be picked up by the American media. By the time the commercial is released here, the censor's opinions won't matter. Everyone will have seen it already," Brian revealed. "But, I think we just have to play this one by ear," he added, now, trying to sound so humble.

"I can't wait for Signor Silvestri to see this. He's going to love it. And I know the campaign is going to play out just the way you envisioned it," Justin said, as he rolled over on top of Brian.

"I will admit seeing it on our big screen is so much better than watching it on my laptop. I think I have to agree with you, it's a rather interesting commercial," Brian tried to humbly agree.

Justin leaned down and kissed Brian as he allowed his hands to slide under the tank top. Both of them enjoyed the contact of skin-to-skin. It had been a long day and these two had missed each other.

Eventually, Brian said, "As much as I would love to let you have your way with me, I'm sure that Teres will have ready dinner shortly. And, I really don't want to have your rumbling stomach be a distraction, like it usually is."

"Now, what makes you think that there'll be any stomach rumbling?"Justin protested, "That's why Teres gave us snacks," he pointed out.

Brian simply glared at his partner in response to that question, for few snacks would never quiet those rumblings. Then, he rolled Justin over so that he was on his back. "We should probably check on dinner, before we get too far," he suggested, giving Justin a kiss.

Eventually, the two of them made their way back to the kitchen.

"Back so soon?" Teres asked, sarcastically.

"I thought that you might need our help," Brian responded, as he wrapped his arms around Justin from behind.

"Justin and I seem to manage okay in the kitchen together," Teres said with a smile. Then, she began to shake her head. "I'm just not sure about you and me,Brian, especially, when I'm preparing a SIMPLE dinner."

"Are we going there again?" Brian asked, trying to make a point. He tried to intimidate Teres with his glare. She paid no attention to him.

"Absolutely not," Teres said with an innocent smile. "But, I'm sure that you and Justin can find something more useful to do than help me."

"Well, now that you mentioned it..." Brian said, leaning down to give Justin a kiss behind the ear.

With that much time available, Brian and Justin decided to head upstairs for their bedroom.

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By the time they came back downstairs about an hour later, Teres was gone.

Justin made the suggestion that Brian needed to choose a wine to go with dinner.

This time Brian knew where the wine cellar was, so he had to come up with a different excuse to get Justin to go with him. Not really being able to come up with anything reasonable, he just stood there and waited with this strange expression on his face.

Justin immediately read the signs. "Maybe, I should go with you. I don't want you getting lost down in the wine cellar. You will, also, probably need help selecting that bottle of wine," he added with a smile.

Brian smiled, relieved at how well Justin was on to him. He slid his arm around Justin as they headed to the wine cellar.

"We're probably going to have to restock soon," Brian casually mentioned once they arrived in the wine cellar, and he was searching for the perfect bottle of wine.

"I only had a few bottles delivered when we first moved in, but you were supposed to handle restocking," Justin reminded him. "So, are we completely out of everything?"

"Not really. We seem to be low on champagne and Gus' sparkling cider," Brian said with a laugh. "But, we have the Merlot to go with dinner," he added, leaning down to kiss Justin.

"I really like having this wine cellar," Justin added, as he wrapped his arms around Brian and kissed him.

Finally, they grabbed the bottle of Merlot and headed back to the kitchen.

Brian and Justin set the table together.

Brian wanted to surprise Justin, so he added lit candles to the table. Justin was totally surprised, but he didn't say anything. Brian merely smiled, for he knew how much Justin liked candles on the dinner table. Brian quietly thought to himself that he and Justin had been really busy ever since they became legal partners, but Brian wanted to be sure that Justin knew how much he loved him...even if he didn't say it often enough.

Dinner consisted of chicken and vegetables in a Mediterranean style sauce. There was also a large salad. Teres had made garlic bread for Justin, but Brian kept stealing morsels from Justin's plate. The choice of the Merlot was the perfect wine for dinner.

Brian and Justin thoroughly enjoyed dinner, and they talked easily with each other all through the meal. Brian talked about some of the calls of congratulations that he received from his clients, and Justin mentioned that he had talked with Spyder and his agent.

After dinner, Justin wanted to watch THEIR commercial one more time.

Brian was more than happy to oblige. They once again curled up together on the same chair to watch the commercial once again.

"I love it as much as I did when I first saw it," Justin said with a smile, after viewing the commercial for a second time.

"We, at Kinnetik, aim to please with edgy, but memorable ads," Brian said with a smirk.

"Well, this one is certainly going to be memorable."

Chapter 7 - A Relaxing Moment

Just after Dinner, Monday Evening...(Day 50)

Later That Evening, Brian and Justin managed to settle into one of their favorite spots.

"Explain to me again why we're in the hot tub," Justin asked as he made himself comfortable in his usual position, spooned against Brian's chest.

"I just wanted to spend time with you here. It looks like we're going to get out of here sometime tomorrow afternoon," Brian explained. "We're going to be back in your loft, and I just thought that we should enjoy our last chance in here before we leave."

"I can understand that. You'll be very happy to know that I packed up all the paintings that I've been working on here. They're ready to be shipped back to New York. I think they should arrive Wednesday afternoon."

"How's your submission to Milan coming?"

"I had started a painting when we were in New York that I was originally planning to submit," Justin explained. "But then I also have a painting that I've been working on in bits and pieces here at the house. It's something that I started, just for fun, but I still think that it's still some of my best work. It's a little different than the stuff that I usually paint, but this is the painting that I think I'll probably submit to Milan. I'm not sure how the committee will feel about it though."

"You know that you could show them to me, and I could give you my honest opinion before you submit any of them for consideration by the committee in Milan. After all, I am you partner."

"No...No....that's okay. I only want you to see this one in its proper setting."

"Justin, you always want me to see your work in its proper setting. Don't you understand that part of the benefit of being partners with an artist is that I get to peek at your masterpieces-in-progress from time-to-time before you show them to anyone." For some reason, Brian felt the need to point out the obvious to Justin.

"I already told you about the painting," Justin said with a smile. "Now, depending on how things go with Milan, will determine whether you EVER get to see the painting or not."

"Are you going to actually SELL this painting?" Brian teased, remembering Justin's tendency to show certain paintings, without allowing them to be sold.

"I'm not sure. I don't think this painting is something that anyone would want to buy. Although, I did start a totally different painting before, but I think that I like this idea better. I'm just thinking that the exhibit will be in the summer with all the tourists. I just this would be the perfect painting, but I'm trying not to be too obsessive about it. This just feels like the right painting.

"Either way, we're going to Milan for vacation."

"Thanks for taking the pressure off. I hope Gus gets to go with us."

"I don't know. I think that I'll put some distance between this weekend and when I ask the Munchers again. I want to give Lindsay and Melanie time to get themselves back on track, so then Gus won't have to suffer in the process."

"Whatever else is going on, Lindsay and Melanie really do care about Gus and Jenny."

"I know." Brian said softly. "Look, Justin, I know that you will paint your best. I just didn't want Jason or anyone else to continue to drive you crazy in the process."

"Jason and Paul will be back to visit in just a few weeks. Especially, since you arranged everything with Nicky," Justin added with a laugh. "You do realize that you drive them crazy every time that you and Nicky plan things together."

Brian laughed. "I do what I can! We can't let Jason have all the fun. And, Nicky is such a willing participant in my plans. I think that you and Gus have rubbed off on him."

"No, I think Nicky's already picking up Jason's bad habits. We really have to save him from that," Justin teased. "I guess we should find someplace to live before they come to visit us again, unless we're coming back here to Bri-tin?"

"I doubt if there'll be any reason to come back here," Brian said quickly. "And if we haven't found a place to live in New York, Paul and Jason really aren't that fussy. They'll have no problem visiting us in a hotel suite," Brian said, nonchalantly. "Gus loves hotel suites...especially if you're there. Nicky will be okay too as long as you and Gus are there."

"I'm surprised that you aren't making us move into a hotel as soon as we get back," Justin casually mentioned, snuggling in closer to Brian just for good measure.

Brian wrapped his arms more securely around Justin. "I know that there are a lot of things we don't have to think about at the hotel. But, I don't want to disrupt your life either. Leaving things as they are, for the moment, will give us time to look for a place to live, where we'll both be happy, but even more, it won't disrupt your painting schedule."

"I'm well aware how you really feel about staying at my loft."

"I will admit your loft is rather cramped, but it does have certain benefits that make it all worthwhile," Brian teased. "And I just wanted you to know that I'm willing to sacrifice a few creature comforts for your art."

"Meaning that we're going to be riding around New York in Limousines, and I'm not supposed to complain too much?"

"I said I was willing to sacrifice A FEW creature comforts, Sunshine, I said nothing about all of them," Brian was quick to point out with a shake of his head. "Anyway, Cynthia and Theodore will probably be in New York towards the end of the week. Maybe we can find space and just move right in."

"Of course, you realize that's unlikely? But I'm sure there must be a church or a factory for you to renovate somewhere in the city."

"Not this time. Kinnetik is the new kid in town. I'm just looking for a building that I can work in. Once our new building is filled with your paintings, I'm sure that I can happily work just about anywhere."

"That and you want an office that let's everyone know that Kinnetik has arrived. Something to make Kennedy & Collins, and all the other firms, quiver in their boots," Justin said intensely.

Once again, Brian couldn't resist laughing. "Now...now...Sunshine...my ruthless little mogul...where do you come up with these ideas? Obviously, you've spent too much time working in Gayopolis."

That last statement earned Brian a well-deserved swipe on the arm from Justin.

"I wish that we could take Teres and Thomas back to New York with us," Justin mumbled. "I'm going to miss her cooking, when we get back to the city and resume eating take out."

"You do realize that taking Thomas and Teres to New York with us would defeat the purpose of having them here to take care of the house and grounds?" Then, Brian paused for just a second. "And we're not going to ask them to travel back and forth either, so get that idea out of your head."

"I wasn't thinking about that," Justin weakly professed.

From the sound of Justin's voice, Brian knew that having Teres and Thomas traveling frequently was EXACTLY what Justin was thinking. Brian just smiled at how well he knew his partner, and for once, he could cut-off Justin in his scheming before things went too far.

"How about a compromise?" Brian suggested.

"A compromise? What did you have in mind?"

"Once we get settled, we'll hire any additional help that we need to make life go smoothly in New York. How does that sound?"

"I think that might work."

"Once we vacate your lovely loft apartment," Brian added sarcastically with a smirk, once again, earning another swipe on the arm from Justin that caused him to lose his train of thought. Brian paused for a moment. "I need to ask you something," he cautiously began.

"Sure...."

"When is your Chicago exhibit?"

"I'm not sure. Catherine casually mentioned it to me earlier today for the first time. I thought I would wait until I had some sort of real information before I mentioned it to you. Catherine and I agreed to talk about it next week. Why?"

"I don't know, Leo Brown mentioned that he'd heard that you may be exhibiting in Chicago. It just seemed odd that he would be so plugged into the Chicago art scene."

"I'll be able to tell you more next week, after I talk to Catherine. I told her that I would pass on Chicago, if it conflicted with Milan," he added.

"I just don't want you to wear yourself out, either. Now, that I've stopped interrupting you, you're actually getting some work done. But still, I want you to take care of yourself."

Justin listened but didn't say anything. He simply leaned back to give Brian a kiss, before once again, snuggling in closer to Brian's chest. Justin loved to snuggle in close to Brian, and Brian loved the way that Justin felt being this close to him.

"Something odd happened today," Brian said easily.

"It did?" Justin said, not wanting to press with his curiosity.

"My mother paid me a visit at the office," Brian said softly.

"Oh...."

"As strange as that might be, that wasn't the strangest part of all."

"What do mean? It's been years since she's paid you a visit. I hope that she didn't upset you."

"No...that's just it. That's what was so strange." Brian pointed out. "Now, Sunshine, with your artist's eye, I'm sure imagining this is going to be easy for you, but for the life of me I couldn't have pictured this scene," he added with a laugh.

"Brian, what are you talking about?"

"Can you picture my mother and Father Tom huddled over the Sunday paper? No wait, can you picture them randomly perusing the A&E section of the paper and stumbling upon the announcement of our legal union and the attending picture?"

"You're kidding?" Justin asked with a smile.

"Now, here's the good part, wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall to hear Father Tom explain US to my mother."

"Was she upset?"

"No, she remembers seeing you, long ago, at the loft. She couldn't believe that we were still together. I don't think that she ever thought that I would able to hold on to you. I think she thought that I would always be alone, so our picture in the paper just surprised her."

"Had she been drinking?"

"It was kind of hard to tell. She just seemed amazed by everything that she found out. It was like she was seeing me for the first time."

"I guess you and I are amazing," Justin said with a smile. Then, he paused and asked, "Will she be okay?"

"I have a feeling that Father Tom will see that she is. My mother and Father Tom reading the A&E section of the paper together, who knew?"

"Life does seem to be full of surprises," Justin said, once again, snuggling in close to Brian.

There was a moment of silence between them that they simply savored.

Eventually, Justin ran his hand through the water. "I don't know how to tell you this, but the wrinkles are starting," he said, holding up one of his hands, so that Brian could see the truth in his statement.

Brian reached for Justin's hand and held it his own. "We're getting out of here. We'll move our discussion back to our bedroom."

"We never talk in the bedroom," Justin reminded him. "But I supposed that we can save our conversation until the plane ride. We can use our time in the bedroom much more productively."

"Why, Mr. Taylor, what an excellent suggestion!" Brian teased.

Brian and Justin dried each other and wrapped themselves in heated robes as they made their way back to the comfort of their bedroom.

As they made their way towards the bed, Brian flipped the switch for the fireplace.

"You always have such wonderful ideas," Justin said as he pulled Brian onto the bed.

"I'm glad that you finally noticed," Brian said, as he rolled over on top of him.

Chapter 8 – A New Day Begins

Tuesday Morning...(Day 51)

Brian repacked his bags with the essentials that he was going to need once he was back in New York. As he was going through this exercise, he realized that he was going to have to eventually arrange for his clothes to be shipped to New York.

As Brian went to the closet to pull out his own clothes, he saw the hangers bearing the most recent clothing purchases for Justin. He clearly remembered making these particular purchases. He and Gus were shopping without Justin. Gus complained, as he was getting his own new outfits, that Justin didn't seem to have any nice clothes. So, Brian and Gus went shopping for outfits...just for Justin. Brian brought the purchases home and simply hung them in the closet. It took Justin a while to realize that these particular outfits were the wrong size to be for Brian, but just so happened to be his size. Justin had asked a lot of questions. Brian knew that an argument was about to ensue, so he quickly mentioned that Gus had picked out the outfits for him while they were shopping.

Justin simply smiled and decided to wear one of the new outfits for one of his visits to Kinnetik. Brian remembered mentioning something about Justin dressing the part...if he was going to boss the Kinnetik Art Department around. But, Brian was very clear that the reason Justin wore the outfit was because Gus had selected it. This memory made Brian smile.

Since Justin was downstairs starting breakfast, and had not the slightest idea of Brian's thoughts, Brian simply added Justin's outfits to his suitcase. He smiled a victorious smile, as he realized that with their move to New York, Brian was going to have to make sure that Justin was dressed properly. That meant that Brian was going to have to insist that Justin go shopping with him.

Then, Brian had to sigh again. Justin immensely disliked shopping with Brian for days on end. So, their basic rules required Brian to spend one day in the museums with Justin for every day that they spent shopping. Brian knew his planned shopping trip with Justin was going to cost him...unless...unless he could wait for Gus to visit. With Gus there, Justin would go shopping willingly with no later requisite museum visit.

Brian smiled a wicked smile to himself, as he realized that this would be too sneaky even for him...to consider using his son like that. After all, what type of father would he be?

Then, he told himself that these were desperate times, and Justin could be so difficult. With that thought in mind, Brian realized that he wouldn't want things with Justin any other way.

With a smile, Brian closed his suitcase and headed downstairs to look for Justin.

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After breakfast, Brian checked his calendar again. He had a meeting with this new potential client. Additionally, he needed to interview several potential job candidates in the early afternoon. Ted and Cynthia had liked these candidates for the ad executive positions, but Brian still wanted to talk to them.

Cynthia had arranged for a Limo to pick up Justin at the mansion and then to meet Brian at the office and finally drive them both to the airport for their flight to New York. The schedule called for them to land in New York just in time to beat the excessive rush hour traffic congestion on the drive to Justin's loft.

"I packed a few bags," Brian admitted. "You'd better get Thomas to help you with the luggage when the Limo arrives," he added as he joined Justin for breakfast.

"I'll take care of it," Justin assured him.

"And, I'll see if I can get Theodore to pick up lemon bars at lunchtime. It will be quite a while before you get them again, unless Jennifer plans to send you periodic care packages," Brian pointed out.

"If not, I'm sure we can find a few dessert cafés in the city," Justin said with a smile. "Lindy's quickly comes to mind."

"Somehow, I knew that you would have worked out a solution to this problem," Brian said with a smirk.

"I've learned that it pays to be resourceful!"

Brian and Justin quickly finished breakfast and loaded the dishwasher.

Brian kissed Justin goodbye, as Justin headed into his studio, and Brian headed for the Corvette for the drive into the office.

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Brian arrived in his office and after exchanging the normal greetings with Cynthia, he settled down to begin reading some of the material about Barrister, Wilkins & Evans. Since Cynthia was going to be in the New York office, Brian thought that it was important for them to go over the material together like they usually did for any new account.

"Cynthia, we need to have a meeting," Brian began without any fanfare. "How about bringing your file notes on Barrister, Wilkins & Evan with you? We'll go in the conference room where we can spread out," he suggested.

"Sure Brian, can you give me like 10 minutes. I need to see that a few things are covered," Cynthia agreed. She immediately took note of the account that they were going to work on. This was the international architectural firm about which, Brian had requested information a few days ago. She wanted to make sure that she could locate the file that she'd sent to Brian in New York, and she wanted to locate the new information that she and Ted had gathered subsequently. If she was going to meet with Brian, she wanted to make sure that she was prepared.

After arranging for coverage, Cynthia gathered her materials together and met Brian in the conference room. When she entered, Brian already had quite a bit of stuff spread out in neat stacks across the table.

"I realize that we'll probably be interrupted, but I want to get more deeply into this material," Brian began. "Since, you've made it clear that you want to move to New York with me, rather than stay here in Pittsburgh," he added with a smile, "I guess that I should make sure that you're on top of things too."

"Especially, since you and Justin could be moving to Milan at some point," Cynthia teased.

Brian just glared at her. "I don't know how you've managed to work with me for so long," Brian said, trying his best to be gruff. "Have you heard me mention anything about moving to Milan? Where do you get your ideas?"

"But Justin said...."

"You're beginning to sound like Gus and Nicky," Brian pointed out, "At ages six and four, they believe that Justin knows everything. I expected more from you!" he added sarcastically. Brian had worked with Cynthia for a long time, and he knew that she wasn't going to pay any attention to whatever he said. Still he had to try, at least, to remind her who was in-charge of things.

"Gus and Nicky may be smarter than you realize. I'm sure you've never heard them argue with Justin's ideas?"

"No that's true, only because they're usually right in the middle of whatever scheme Justin has concocted," Brian added with a laugh.

"Admit it, Brian, you've seen Justin and the Silvestris together. You've seen Justin masterfully handle Signor Silvestri. So, if Justin thinks that you'll eventually open an office in Milan, I'm just going to accept it as inevitable. My money is still on Justin."

"I'm not even going to dignify that comment with a response. Fortunately, Justin has to work on his submission for Milan, so I know that I have only this week without any of his schemes and entanglements. And, you're right, Justin does seem to know Rudolpho better than anyone, but everyone seems to overlook the fact that I'm CEO of Kinnetik," Brian pointed out. "And, to make my point, we need to go over the information on Barrister, Wilkins & Evans."

"Yes, Boss!" Cynthia quickly responded. "But I know I'm right."

"Cynthia!" Brian tried to complain.

Quickly changing the subject, Cynthia began, "I have the file that we sent you in New York, but Ted and I continued to do some additional research. We found some additional information on the three firms that they are in process of acquiring. Here's what we found," she added, sliding four little packets of information in Brian's direction.

Brian simply smiled, for as always, Cynthia and Ted were on top of things.

Cynthia began to walk Brian through the most recent information that she and Ted had uncovered. They were working diligently together until Ted knocked on the door.

"Brian, I just wanted to let you know that our client is here," Ted indicated.

"Why don't you show him to my office? I'll be right there," Brian responded. Once Ted left, Brian turned to Cynthia, "Let me go and meet with this new client. Then, you and I will get right back to this."

"I'm going to stay in here, unless you need me," Cynthia suggested, "I still have some organizing of this information that I want to do."

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Brian simply said. "But don't let me slow you down. You can always bring me up to speed on anything that I missed," he added with a smile.

Cynthia went back to refreshing her memory on all the notes and information that had been gathered, while Brian and Ted went into the meeting with their new client.

It felt good for Cynthia to be working closely with Brian again. She had missed him, while he'd been traveling with Justin and working remotely from New York. She was as eager as Brian was to begin working from New York.

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Brian and Ted met their new potential client. Once again, Brian was confronted by an unusual product. It seems that the days of playing computer games with a joy stick and a keyboard were over. Now, computer games are becoming very virtual reality. This company's line of games used brain waves as the input medium.

The client had been working with another ad agency that had taken the small company through their presentation at Comdex, but their showing at the computer products show garnered so much interest that their existing ad agency recommended that they select Kinnetik to carry them forward.

Brian and Ted were intrigued, but at the moment, Brian had no idea what type of campaign he could possibly create. The client was adamant that they liked and wanted to work with Kinnetik, and the client was confident that Kinnetik would eventually come up with an edgy campaign for them.

"Well, this should be an interesting account," Ted said, once the client had left. "I can't wait to see what kind of campaign that you come up with."

"You and me both," Brian couldn't resist adding. "Although it might be interesting to get a prototype, I can't wait to see what type of virtual reality your brain waves create, Theodore."

Ted knew better than to respond to a loaded statement like that, but secretly he was wondering the same thing about Brian.

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Later that day, Brian interviewed several potential candidates, who all seemed quite eager to work for Kinnetik. They all said that they had no trouble traveling back and forth between Pittsburgh and New York. The candidates seemed to feel that it was the best of both worlds. A few of the candidates, however, were most eager to take on the big agencies in New York City.

Brian returned to the conference room to be updated on new information by Cynthia.

Then, Ted joined in their conference room meeting to offer a few suggestions. Ted and Cynthia had reviewed the same information, but Ted had suggested a slightly different perspective to consider.

Brian always knew that hiring Ted had been one of smartest things that he'd done, and his friendship with Ted had grown too, in spite of Brian's constant threats to fire Ted. Brian knew that while he was in New York and Ted was still in Pittsburgh, he would find some reason to torment Ted at least once a day. For some reason, this idea caused Brian to smile wickedly.

"What is producing that wicked grin?" Ted asked as he watched Brian's every-changing facial expressions.

"Never mind," Brian said with a glare, raising one eyebrow for good measure.

Cynthia merely smiled as she watched the antics play out between Brian and Ted. She quickly got the meeting back on the issues at-hand.

Chapter 9 – The Departure

Tuesday afternoon...(Day 51)

Justin spent some time packing. In the middle of the process, he had to stop and consider a few things. He and Brian had clothes at the loft, clothes here at Bri-tin, and clothes in New York. At some point, they were going to have to decide what actually needed to be moved to New York, and what needed to remain here and in Pittsburgh.

Then, Justin had a moment of concern. He had only a rather small wardrobe, so moving from place-to-place usually required only a duffle bag. Brian, on the other hand, had enough clothes, just for each season, to warrant a room all to themselves. Justin realized that their time in his tiny New York loft was definitely temporary. And, what was probably going to force their move to larger quarters was going to be the fact that Brian's clothes needed more space.

When that thought finally sunk in, Justin fell across the bed laughing.

Fortunately, Justin didn't have to mention the 'Brian's clothes thing' to anyone...but he thought he might make mention of this in his next email to Daphne. Then, he also made a mental note to himself that as soon as, he got back to New York, before he resumed work on his painting for Milan, he'd better send an email to Daphne, letting her know about a few things that had changed in her absence. A few things like...he and Brian moving into Bri-tin, and most importantly, that he and Brian were now legal life partners.

After having that momentary diversion, Justin's mood became very serious.

Justin started to process the costs associated with Brian joining him in New York. As he considered it, he realized that their next living space in New York had to be rather large to accommodate his studio, Gus' bedroom, and a room for Brian's clothes. Oh, yes, they also needed a real bedroom for them and also a possible guest room.

Justin already has some idea what the cost of New York real estate was like...because he was constantly in search of better living space to rent and constantly looking for better studio space too. Now, that he and Brian were legal partners, Justin realized that he needed to work harder to get a few more commissions, as well as that solo show that he'd been striving for. It was still important to Justin to be able to take care of himself, just as he'd been doing in New York before he and Brian reunited. It was also important to Justin to contribute to their combined expenses.

Justin finished his packing and proceeded to get dressed. He checked the time and realized that he had a few moments before the Limo was to arrive and before Thomas would need to help him with the luggage.

So, Justin pulled out his cell phone to make one last important phone call.

"Mom," Justin began once Jennifer answered her phone. "I just wanted you to know that Brian and I will be leaving in a few hours. I'm just waiting for the driver now."

"Are you and Brian okay?" she asked with her usual motherly concern. It was a reasonable question, especially with all that happened at dinner at Debbie's on Sunday.

"Yes, Mom, we're fine. I'll just be glad when we get back to the city. Who knew that things would be so crazy here?" Justin explained, without needing to go into any further detail.

"I just wanted you to know that Molly was upset with both Michael and Lindsay."

"I'm sorry that she had to hear all that stuff at the table."

"Yes, she was ready to punch both their lights out. She was ready to take them on. It seems now that Brian is legally family, that gives her the right to go into full-protective mode too," Jennifer said with a laugh. "She doesn't take kindly to anyone being mean to Brian," she had to add.

"Of course, Brian...why am I not surprised?" Justin mumbled.

"I had to convince her that you could handle things. Then, your sister mumbled something about how much trouble you could be, so she began to relax. At that point, she even agreed to let you take care of things," Jennifer couldn't resist, adding with a smile.

"Be sure you tell Mollusk that Brian and I will be just fine," Justin said with a smile. He knew it was necessary to say it again, so that Jennifer would be able to reassure Molly.

"I know, Dear."

"Well, I just wanted to call and let you know that we're leaving."

"Look, just because you're now going to be in New York with Brian, that doesn't mean that you're relieved of your phone calls to your mother," Jennifer said, even though she knew that she was laying it on rather thick.

"Mom!" Justin tried to say in protest.

"It will help me to remember what you look like, if I hear your voice occasionally," Jennifer continued to pile it on.

Justin rolled his eyes before he finally sighed. "All right, Mom. I've got the message." He knew that every conversation of parting with his mother went like this. Why he would call and subject himself to these dramatics every time that they talked, was a real mystery to him. But he loved his mother and Molly, and this was a small price to pay.

"Good! Have a good trip, Dear..." Jennifer finally said lovingly. "And just remember that we all love you," she added. They finally said goodbye, and Justin closed his cell phone.

Justin made one more visual sweep of the bedroom, and then he headed downstairs to look for Thomas. The Limo and driver should be arriving shortly.

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The Limo arrived, and Thomas helped to load the luggage into the car.

Teres came out to say goodbye to Justin, and to reassure him that she and Thomas would look after things until he and Brian returned.

Then, Justin was on his way into Pittsburgh to pick up Brian at the office. It was a short ride into town, since it was early afternoon and the traffic was light.

Upon arriving at Kinnetik, Justin went inside. Not finding Cynthia at her desk, Justin checked and was told that she and Brian were working in the conference room.

Justin knocked on the conference room door and entered. "Hi Cynthia," he immediately said, as he entered.

"So, you're here to take me away from all this," Brian said with a smile and a sweep of his hand.

"What is all this?" Justin asked.

"Research! Cynthia and I were going over our notes on a potential client," Brian pointed out.

"Oh. I just wanted you to know that the car was here. We do need to get to the airport," Justin gently reminded him.

"Just give me a minute to put some of this away. Then, I'm all yours."

Justin nodded. "I'm just going to say goodbye to Ted while you're getting ready," he said, as he was leaving.

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A few minutes later, Justin arrived at Ted's office.

"So, I understand that you and Brian are off. Have a good trip and I'll see you in a couple of days," Ted said. Then he reached for a small package. "Here, these are for you."

"What's this?" Justin asked.

"Lemon Bars. I didn't want to leave them with Brian since we both know what a sweet tooth he has. At least this way, I know that you'll actually get to enjoy these. Debbie also sends her love."

"Thanks," Justin said, as he accepted the package from Ted. Then he paused for a moment before he asked, "I know that you finished the reconciliation of my accounts, but do you have the final figures?"

"I have them right here," Ted said with a smile, as he reached for a file in his desk drawer. He opened the file and handed a sheet of paper to Justin.

Justin took a look at it and smiled. "Thanks."

"At the moment, you are almost as rich as Brian, but we'll keep that our little secret," Ted suggested.

"Yes, at the moment," Justin laughed. "But, money has a funny way of disappearing faster than you expect it to in New York."

"Not the way you manage it!" Ted pointed out. "Just keep doing what you've been doing."

"It's just that a new place to live is going to be expensive..."

"Fortunately, I saw the file from your mother with some suggested properties, so I know what you mean. But, I had figured that all in when I did the projections. I promise, I'll let you know if there is something to worry about," Ted reassured him.

"It's just..."

"Justin, when you left a year ago, the numbers didn't work. Fortunately, Remsen realized his mistake early, so he's came back on board quickly. Brian worked really hard, and we signed a lot of new business during the year. And now with the new accounts for Collezione Fiero and Pentland Group, we can afford to add the New York offices without straining our resources," Ted explained. "Trust me, I know. Remember, I keep crunching the numbers."

"I guess Brian has kept you busy, huh?"

"Let's just say that you and Brian together constantly keep me on my toes," Ted said with a laugh. "It's good for me...keeps me off the streets at night."

"Except for overseeing Babylon..." Justin reminded him with a laugh.

"Of course, I'll keep an eye on Babylon...it's a tough job, but someone has to do it," Ted reminded him. "Just remember that we have a lot of help there."

Just then, Ted's phone rang. It was Brian saying that he was finally ready. Ted agreed to relay the message to Justin.

"Well, I guess you heard?" Ted asked, as he was hanging up the phone.

"I'm on my way. But, can I take this page with me?"

"Sure, it was the copy that I intended to send to you anyway," Ted explained. "This way you saved me a stamp," he teased.

Justin carefully folded the single page and placed it in his pocket. He picked up the package of lemon bars, quickly said goodbye to Ted, and hurried back to Brian's office where he found that Brian was now ready and waiting for him.

Both Brian and Justin said goodbye to Cynthia and got in the Limo for the ride to the Pittsburgh airport.

Chapter 10 – The Return to New York

Tuesday Afternoon...(Day 52)

Upon their arrival at the Pittsburgh Airport, the bags were quickly checked. Brian and Justin proceeded to the VIP Lounge for Liberty Air to wait for their flight.

"So how was your meeting with that potential new client?" Justin asked Brian.

"This could be an interesting account," Brian responded with a smile. "It seems that the company makes a unique type of virtual reality game. It appears to be some new cutting edge technology."

"Something new for you to make sexy...for you to make edgy," Justin teased. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Sex still sells," Brian confirmed, with a slight shrug of his shoulder.

"That's what you always say."

"Then it must be true..." Brian said with a smirk. Then he hesitated. "Although we've been approached by a children's toy company, somehow I don't think that sex is quite the proper focus for their campaign."

"Probably not...but I'm sure that you'll find that special, interesting angle for their products."

"Maybe...I must admit that I'm looking forward to getting back to the city, and Cynthia and Theodore will be here in a few days. I do suspect that I'll have to tell you about their visit, since you'll be locked away in your studio," Brian couldn't resist pointing this out to Justin with an evil grin.

"That's just so you can steal all my closet space," Justin fired back. "You thought that I wouldn't notice that you're returning to New York with more luggage than you originally left with. Thomas was exhausted from helping with all the bags."

"I realized that I was probably going to need a few more things to tide me over," Brian suggested, "But don't worry, I've already figured out the perfect place to put everything. Of course, I have no idea where we'll put your things," he added with a laugh, earning a justifiable swipe on the arm from Justin.

Before Justin could say anything, their flight was called, and they quickly made their way to their gate.

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Once they were settled on the plane, Brian reached over and held Justin's hand. It was a quiet gesture without much fanfare. Justin intertwined his fingers with Brian's and tried to relax.

Justin eventually leaned his head against Brian's shoulder.

This quiet moment was interrupted during the flight by the couple sitting across for them. The man kept looking at Brian, as if he looked familiar. Brian simply tried to smile pleasantly, hoping the man would become bored with this current activity.

Then Brian noticed that the man whispered something to his female traveling companion. And now, the woman was staring at him also. Brian sighed deeply, for he was used to both males and female strangers flirting with him all the time. But, that didn't seem like what was really going on, as much as Brian liked to pride himself on his irresistibility.

Finally, the couple across the aisle spent a few minutes talking with the flight attendant, who eventually came over to see Brian and Justin.

"I'm sorry to disturb you Mr. Kinney," the flight attendant began. "But it seems that you and Mr. Taylor have been spotted and identified."

"I beg your pardon," Brian whispered, not wanting to disturb Justin.

"The couple across the aisle thinks they saw your picture in the Sunday Times. They really have no desire to intrude on your privacy, but they wanted to send you their congratulations."

Brian had no desire to make a scene. He sent his regards and thanks back to the couple via the flight attendant. Then, Brian smiled back to the couple again.

Afterwards, things seemed to settle down on the short flight to New York. Brian had to smile at the idea that he and Justin had been recognized. It was just a passing moment on a short flight.

"So, are you going to your studio, once we get back?" Brian quietly asked Justin.

"I was thinking about it," Justin said hesitantly. "I hate to leave you at the loft alone, but I would like to check out my studio? I also have to make room for all the paintings that will be arriving tomorrow."

"Would you like some company?" Brian offered.

"I love having you around, but I know that you're preparing for several big meetings. I'll be okay. I'll even turn on my cell phone when I leave the loft."

"That's a good start," Brian couldn't resist agreeing. "Don't worry, I'll find some way to amuse myself at your place."

"Meaning that you're taking over all available closet space," Justin said. "Don't forget I noticed that you left Bri-tin with more luggage than you arrived with on Thursday."

"You mentioned that earlier, is there a point, Sunshine?"

"Nope. Just wanted you to know that I'm still on to you," Justin reminded him.

Brian didn't say anything, he simply smiled.

A few moments the later, the captain was announcing their arrival into the La Guardia Airport.

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As Brian and Justin exited the plane, the couple that had been sitting across from them simply waved. Brian returned their wave.

Then Brian and Justin quickly located their Limo driver and gathered their luggage. The drive from the airport to Justin's loft was as uneventful as ever. The driver helped them transfer the luggage into the loft.

Justin decided it would be too painful to watch Brian re-arrange the loft to accommodate all of his stuff, so he decided that he was going immediately to his studio. Brian insisted that Justin allow the Limo to take him there.

Justin decided that it was easier to take the limo than to argue with Brian. However, before Justin could leave, Brian checked his cell phone to be sure that it was turned on. Once he was sure that everything was under control, Justin was allowed to leave.

Justin just shook his head, as he realized how Gus must feel whenever Brian checked him over.

A few minutes later, Justin arrived at his studio.

Nothing had changed within his studio since he'd left it on Thursday, but everything had changed in Justin's life. Justin realized that he and Brian were now living together...waking up each morning together...going to bed together at night. Justin had waited a long time for this. Now it was real. To his surprise, Justin felt like painting.

Justin knew that Brian would be entertained for several hours, while he tried to make all his stuff fit in Justin's small space. He knew that this process was going to be interesting, because not only was the space small, but Brian also couldn't stand clutter. Justin wanted to be sure that he allowed Brian all the time he needed for his unpacking miracle.

Justin just shook his head, as he changed into his clothes for painting. He looked at the array of paintings in his studio. He considered which ones needed a few additional touches, and he started to mix his paints.

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Meanwhile, back at the Justin's loft, Brian had successfully reorganized the drawer space to accommodate his socks and things. He was well aware that Justin really liked most of his clothes folded rather than hanging, so Brian wanted to be sure that all of Justin's things fit easily.

Then Brian re-organized the closet and surprisingly, all his clothes managed to fit.

As Brian was standing back admiring his work, there was a knock on the door.

Brian figured that Justin might have forgotten his keys in his haste to escape him and get to his studio.

Imagine Brian's surprise, when he opened the door and found Spyder standing at the door.

"Spyder," Brian said with a smirk.

"Brian," Spyder said in return, daring to let a smile show through. "How long have you been back?"

"Not too long. I just finished unpacking. If you're looking for Justin, he's in his studio. Can I offer you water or a beer?"

"Water sounds good. How did you get Taylor into his studio so quickly? I thought you two would now be inseparable."

"Inseparable...so, then you know?" Brian said with a smile, returning with the water and then making himself comfortable in one of the chairs, while Spyder made himself comfortable on the futon.

"Everybody knows. It was in the papers here on Sunday," Spyder relayed with a certain perverse pleasure.

"You wouldn't think that they would have had any slow news days here in New York," Brian said with a smile.

"They don't. But there you two were in the A & E section, smiling back at me when I returned from the coast."

"How was your trip?" Brian asked. "Are you going to be a movie mogul?"

"I agreed to allow a script to be written. As I told Taylor, I could care less if they make a movie."

"Yes, making a movie would definitely interfere with that anonymity, which you worked so hard to craft. How do you plan to manage it?"

"I figure that you'll keep me busy enough that I may be able to hide out in the Limos," Spyder teased.

"And we're getting together for breakfast tomorrow..."Brian reminded him.

"Now, you know that I wouldn't miss THAT."

"Now that I think about it," Brian said pensively. "I'm glad that you're here. I have a few things to show you."

"You do?"

"I could easily wait until our meeting, but I thought you might like a preview of what you created. You'll have to use your imagination, because you're going to have to watch things on my laptop."

"I've spent time working with Taylor...I have a very vivid imagination."

Brian loaded the multimedia show for the Collezione Fiero Showcase onto his laptop, and showed the presentation to Spyder.

Spyder watched in silence letting it play through all three languages. "It's wonderful!" he finally said. "The images didn't change, but I love the music that your team selected. It all came together," he added with a certain measure of pride.

"I was thinking the same thing," Brian said softly, letting Spyder enjoy his moment. "So, are you already to meet with the Silvestri family again?"

"Brian, I can't believe that you think that they would dare to ignore you again. Maria and Cristina have to have seen Sunday's paper. They should have had adequate time to adjust to the news," Spyder tried to suggest.

"I think Justin will join us for the meeting. Hopefully, the meeting won't deteriorate into Italian. But I'll feel better knowing that you're there with me."

"I'm just dying to know what Signor Silvestri and his wife think about your new status."

"Rudolpho said that he and Perin were pleased. They are, after all, crazy about Justin, and I am Justin's chosen life partner."

"Of course," Spyder agreed with a smile. "You have considered that now they will, once again, be looking for reasons to get Taylor involved in stuff. Especially, now that he's legally your partner. I think I see how this works."

"What are you mumbling about?"

"Oh, I have to continue to do good work, so I can continue to be Taylor's assistant. I wouldn't want to miss the bird's eye view of things to come."

"You know Spyder, my evening was going quite well until you decide to arrive and stir up trouble."

"Now...now, Brian, don't take it personally. I'm just reminding you of the facts."

At that moment, the sound of a key in door caused Spyder and Brian to turn towards the door.

"I leave you for just a few hours, and this is what I come back to, you and Spyder in conspiracy together," Justin said with a smirk as he walked I and kissed Brian.

"Now Taylor, I came here just to welcome you two back, but Brian and I got to talking..."

"Ah huh?" Justin said sarcastically. "And did he give you a preview of the things for the Collezione Fiero showcase?"

"Yes, he did. I really can't wait to see how the Silvestris react to everything."

"Me either..." Justin added.

"How were things in your studio?" Brian asked.

"Pretty much the way that I left them," Justin answered. "I moved things around a bit to make room for the new paintings that are coming tomorrow. I'm going to be busy for the new few days."

"See Spyder, he's in the studio without us standing guard," Brian teased, earning a swipe from Justin.

"Look, I just wanted to welcome you two back here...where you belong! Now that I've done that, I should be getting home. I have to get ready for our meeting tomorrow morning. And Brian, I just want you know that I'll be there for you," Spyder said sympathetically.

"That's good to know," Brian said with a smirk. "And Spyder, try to stay out of trouble until we get together in the morning."

"It will be extremely difficult, but I'll try to manage it just because you asked," Spyder reassured him, before he stood up to say goodbye.

Chapter 11 – Breakfast with Spyder

Wednesday...(Day 52)

The morning began like any other. Brian and Justin tried to linger in bed, but their breakfast date with Spyder loomed over things. A couple of rounds of enjoying each other before they finally got up, followed by the usual complaints from Brian as they struggled to shower together in a very tiny shower, were all pretty standard.

Eventually, Brian and Justin managed to get dried and dressed and out to their waiting Limo.

"You know, Brian, we could have had the Limo just pick us up at the coffee shop," Justin said, already starting to complain.

"As I told you the last time we had this discussion, I was riding to the coffee shop in the Limo. But, I wanted you to know that I'm still the same wonderful partner I was before our legal union...so you can walk to the coffee shop and meet me there if you like," Brian pointed out sarcastically. "The choice is yours..."

Justin huffed and grumbled something inaudible, but as the driver opened the door, BOTH Brian and Justin got in the car.

"Now, was that so hard?" Brian asked in an annoying tone. Then, after giving Justin a few more minutes to sulk, he continued, "Well, it seems that Kinnetik promised Spyder breakfast and a Limousine ride. Now, let's see how well I can deliver on those promises," he added joyfully.

"When I called Spyder to invite him to breakfast, so we could go over the graphics he wanted for our client, he let me know, in no uncertain terms, that he already had a better offer," Justin pointed out.

"There, you see, the early bird catches the worm! Of course, we do have that meeting with Eyeconics and The Silvestris right after breakfast. I don't suppose that you would like to attend the meeting to reassure Rudolpho that there will be no need for his usual histrionics."

"I thought that Rudolpho was in Switzerland. That's what he said after our last meeting."

"So, I did hear him correctly. Something brought him back to New York. I wonder what he's up to," Brian had to ask.

"Meaning that you don't think this is a just a coincidence?"

"Sunshine, there is no such thing as a coincidence where Rudolpho Silvestri is concerned."

Before Justin could comment further, the Limo arrived at the coffee shop.

The driver opened the car door. Brian and Justin exited the car.

As they walked inside, the coffee shop was crowded as usual, but Justin quickly spotted Spyder, pretending to read his morning newspaper while keeping an eye on everything that was happening all around him. Justin knew that Spyder clearly saw the Limo arrive.

Brian and Justin walked back and stood at Spyder's table, waiting to be acknowledged.

Finally Justin said, "You can stop acting as if we don't exist? I know that you saw our Limo drive up. Now, will you move over so that we can sit down?"

Spyder sighed deeply, showing his mock annoyance, but he quickly readjusted his position. "Honestly Taylor. I was simply pretending to ignore your Limo to give the New York paparazzi their chance for pictures. But, I see that the two of you arrived none the worse for wear. How are you, Brian?" he quickly said. "Our mocha lattes should be arriving shortly," he added.

"What did you do? Tell them that as soon as the Limo arrived, that they should deliver our lattes?" Justin asked.

"Now Taylor, let's not pursue this line of questioning. I, like Brian, have to have my trade secrets," Spyder said with a smirk. "And after what you two did and the amount of press that you got, I'm just honored that you still want to be seen with me," Spyder added, never missing an opportunity to lay things on thickly.

At that moment, the waitress arrived. She smiled at all three people at the table, as she served their mocha lattes. She also handed everyone menus and promised to return shortly for their orders.

"The Times gave you and Taylor a full page in the A&E section. I would have expected the Business Section, but I guess they're waiting to see what Brian's really up to," Spyder enjoyed pointing out.

"See, they must know that I'm just one more ad exec, trying to get established in New York City," Brian said humbly. "It's so nice to be legally partnered to a true celebrity though," he added sarcastically.

Once again, Justin rolled his eyes and sighed in frustration. He really hated it when Brian got like this, and Spyder wasn't helping things at all...not that Justin thought for a minute that he would.

"Are you going to tell me all about your trip to the west coast?" Justin finally asked, hoping to change the subject and the overall atmosphere. "I'm not talking about the visit with your attorney...I'm talking about the call to your family."

"I'll bet there's an untold epic in that," Brian said with amusement. "But I'm patient. I can wait for the movie," he added.

"Not me," Justin protested. "I'm going online to locate his writings on Amazon.com. I need all the help I can get to deal with him."

At this point, the waitress returned to take their orders.

Brian ordered 3 scrambled egg whites with dry toast. Then, he patiently looked at Justin to see what he was going to order.

"Oh no, you don't!" Justin protested in advance. "I've seen that look before. I practically starved all weekend thanks to you and Gus. I'm going to enjoy MY breakfast this morning," he added.

"You could always let me order for you?" Brian suggested with a smirk. "I always like to be helpful."

"Brian, will you talk to Spyder, while I try to figure out what I want for breakfast?" Justin insisted.

"As long as you order bacon..." Brian couldn't resist suggesting.

Spyder and the waitress watched the interchange with amusement, for Brian and Justin were arguing like an old married couple, but you could just hear the affection underlying their dialogue.

Justin ordered scrambled eggs with extra bacon, pancakes and fruit...a choice which made Brian quite happy.

"I'll make things easier for you," Spyder said with a smile to the waitress. "I'll have what he's having," he added, motioning toward Justin.

"I'll put a rush on your orders, so that they'll come right up," the waitress said, as she smiled at Spyder. Then, she quickly turned and left.

"Look Spyder, I saw the graphics that you wanted. I do have that painting due to Milan by the end of the week, and a meeting with my agent on Monday morning. I should have everything done in the early part of next week. Does that work for you? And since I'll be in town, we can talk about things when you have the time," Justin suggested.

"I do like that I'll be in town part," Spyder commented with a laugh. "Now, all that I have to do is avoid the paparazzi that will be stalking you."

"I can't get over that my partner is a true celebrity," Brian said, winding up again for this conversation. He then looked over at Justin and noticed the glare. Brian couldn't resist smiling.

"Okay, Brian, since you're springing for breakfast, what do you have for me?" Spyder asked.

"The Silvestris have accepted that you're Justin's assistant, and since you did so much of the work, I thought that you would like to attend at least part of the meeting with them," Brian added. "Of course, we know that once they see Justin, you and I won't matter too much. You saw them last time. Now, with our picture in the paper, things are just going to be worse. At least with you there, it won't be so bad being ignored for long periods of time."

At this point, neither Spyder nor Justin had anything to say, they both just shook their heads at Brian's comments.

The waitress returned carrying their breakfast orders. She quickly served everyone, once again, smiling at Spyder, before she left.

"How big a tip did you promise her for all the extra service?" Brian asked.

"I simply said, that there was a sizeable tip in it for her," Spyder pointed out. "I knew that you would know the right amount. I'm sure once the Limo drove up, she immediately saw extra dollar signs," he added.

"See, I told you that we should have just had the Limo meet us here," Justin responded back.

Brian simply looked at Justin and raised one eye brow. Every now and then, Brian was fascinated by the things that Justin would make an issue about. The Limo wasn't something that Brian was going to change his mind about for a while, and Justin knew that. But, Justin just had to be a drama queen about things. Brian decided that he would just let Justin continue to complain, for he knew that in a day or so things would settle down.

Eventually, the three of them continued to talk easily over their breakfast.

Once they were finished, Brian settled the check and left an extra special tip for the waitress. As he was doing this, he thought about Debbie. So, Just before Brian left he did find out that their waitress's name was Monica.

Monica guessed from the inquiry that these three men would probably be having breakfast here frequently. She made a mental note to be sure that she had this shift on her schedule.

A few moments later, Brian, Justin, and Spyder settled down in the Limo for the short ride to the Belluss Occhiali Offices in New York.

Chapter 12 – Collezione Fiero Meeting

Wednesday...(Day 52)

Brian walked up to the front desk at the New York office of Belluss Occhiali with Justin and Spyder standing beside him. This time, he was recognized before he even gave his name. Brian thought to himself that this was a decided change. Maybe things were improving for him.

A few minutes later, Cristina and Maria came out to greet them.

"If you two are still here, who's running Belluss Occhiali?" Brian asked with a smirk.

Cristina and Maria, as usual, ignored his question. They instead immediately focused on Justin. They each wrapped one of their arms around one of Justin's arms and led him forward. The threesome was smiling and talking quietly, as they walked away, leaving Brian and Spyder standing at the desk.

Brian and Spyder just looked at one another before following after them to the conference room.

Brian realized that no matter how things may have appeared a few moments ago, in truth, nothing had changed. Maria and Cristina just couldn't wait to get their hands on Justin.

Brian and Spyder smiled knowingly at each other.

Maria and Cristina led Justin over to Rudolpho and Perin, and as expected, there were hugs all around, especially between Justin and the Silvestris.

Both Kellie and Susan came over to say hello to Brian and Spyder.

"I warned you years ago to keep an eye on Justin," Kellie teased. "I told you he'd eventually have your job. I just never expected that you'd give up so easily," she added with a laugh.

"You've seen Justin in action. You know that I had no choice. I was just an innocent bystander, caught in his web of intrigue," Brian tried to say, knowing full well that no one was buying his act. "He's the celebrity in this relationship."

"I did notice that the announcement was in the A&E section, allowing you to still move about New York quietly for the moment," Susan added with a smirk. "Of course, with the Silvestris, Justin is still their favorite. Everything about them becomes softer and easier to deal with when he's around. It's an amazing transformation to watch."

"But, I thought that things between you and Rudolpho were better..." Brian mentioned.

"Definitely better...." Susan agreed. "But maybe, we should borrow Justin from time to time, just to be sure things stay that way," she added.

"How are you Spyder?" Kellie finally asked. "We didn't mean to ignore you."

"No problem. I'm just fine," Spyder wanted to make clear that he didn't feel the least bit slighted. "It is interesting to watch, isn't it?" he asked, looking over in the direction of Justin and the Silvestris.

"So you noticed?" Susan couldn't resist adding.

Spyder, Susan, Kellie, and Brian continued talking easily for a few minutes.

Finally, Rudolpho walked over to Brian and hugged him, expressing his congratulations, once again.

Brian just smiled and said, "Thank you."

Spyder couldn't help watching the two scenes, playing out in the room with amusement...Rudolpho and Brian....Justin and the rest of the Silvestris.

Eventually, Rudolpho said a quick hello to Spyder, before going back to re-join the rest of his family with Justin.

Spyder leaned over to Brian. "Cristina and Maria used to at least acknowledge you. Now, it's like you don't even exist."

"I see you noticed that too," Brian commented with a deep sigh. "This could be a very long meeting."

"How are you, Brian?" Perin finally said from the other side of the table, "And congratulations. We saw your picture in the paper. We're very happy for you and Justin," she added.

"Thanks, Perin," Brian said.

Everyone started to take their seats.

While everyone was getting comfortable, Brian decided to mention, "I'm not sure if your teams are still here, but I have something that they might find interesting too," he began. "Your teams worked closely with Spyder last week, and I have the finished products to show you."

"What do you mean?" Susan asked with some confusion.

"You mean you got everything done?" Kellie asked. "But you only had a few days...and with your legal union...how did you do it?"

"This is really good news!" Perin said with a smile

"You know that Brian wouldn't let you down," Justin reminded them all. "He knows how important this is to you."

"See, I told you we did the right thing to get Justin involved," Cristina pointed out.

Brian just rolled his eyes, before he looked over at Justin and smiled, shaking his head

Rudolpho picked up the phone and placed a call. When he hung up, he announced, "The Teams are on their way."

"And if Cristina and Maria will give me my partner back, we have a few things to show you," Brian said.

"Of course, we're most interested. But Perin and I have something to take care of first," Rudolpho said. "It shouldn't take too long."

"What's that?" Brian had to ask with some hesitation. The little hairs on his neck were bristling.

Rudolpho stood, "We have a present for you?" he said with a smile while holding a small box, wrapped with multicolored ribbon.

"That really isn't necessary," Brian tried to argue.

"We're family. You can't refuse a gift from your family," Rudolpho said with this wicked grin. Brian just shook his head, so Rudolpho continued. "I know that you'll be in Milan for the exhibit this summer."

"And, how could you know that?" Brian challenged.

"I'm Rudolpho Silvestri, it's my business to know," Rudolpho responded with a certain satisfaction. He was not going to be intimidated by Brian.

Justin immediately became concerned when Rudolpho said that. "Wait a minute! Signor Silvestri, promise me that you're not using your influence with Pinacoteca Ambrosiana to get my work accepted!" he protested.

"Contrary to popular opinion, Justin, I'm really not all that powerful," Rudolpho tried to whisper. "Your application to the gallery will be judged on its own merit if you decide to apply," he promised. "I have no influence with the artistic committee in spite of my friendship with Pietro Marani. Pietro offered you the chance to apply...the rest is really up to you and your talent."

"I can assure you of that, Justin," Perin confirmed as she touched Justin softly. "I'm keeping an eye on him," she added with a smile.

Justin accepted their reassurance.

"As I was saying," Rudolpho continued after the interruption "When you come to Milan, we want you and Brian to stay at our villa on the lake," he insisted. "You will have time to relax and maybe paint by the lake while you're on vacation. You don't have to give me your answer right away. Just promise me that you will consider this?"

"Thank you," Brian said. "But we'll be traveling with friends and don't want to impose."

"How could you possibly impose?" Perin challenged. "You're family..."

"When Perin and I acquired the villa, we expected to have lot of children and lots of grandchildren, so there's plenty of room. Of course, Brian, you snatched up Justin, so it may take a while for our grandchildren to materialize," he said with a smile. "The villa has a staff, so you and your friends will be well taken care of. Here are the keys and the directions," Rudolpho insisted, handing a small box to Justin. "I want you to use the villa whenever you like."

"You could also use the villa if you decide that you missed Maria and me," Cristina pointed out with some amusement. "Or, if you just want to escape from Brian."

"Somehow, I knew that you would try to find some way to make me disappear," Brian added.

"Unfortunately, you're family now, so I guess that I'm going to have to put up with another annoying person around that I can't seem to get rid of. I suppose that I'll have to get used to you, too," Cristina complained with a sigh.

"I guess that you're referring to me," Maria interrupted with a laugh. "Cristina, how many times do I have to tell you that you were never meant to be an only child? You are the youngest!" For some reason, Maria has always taken a perverse pleasure in reminding Cristina of the obvious. "Don't pay any attention to her, Brian. She really is quite happy for you and Justin, but she's an artist, and we have to indulge her while she sulks," she added.

At his point, a group of people arrived at the conference room. They all greeted Spyder before taking their seats. Brian assumed these were the teams from Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali that had worked on the Showcase materials with Spyder.

"Now, if Justin and I promise to take your gift under consideration, can we down to business?" Brian finally asked.

"Yes!" Rudolpho quickly said.

"Alright, we'll consider this...if we should happen to be in the Milan area," Brian added.

"And, we'll have a wonderful party to welcome you to Milan," Perin added. "That should help my daughters' hearts to mend faster," she couldn't resist adding with a smile.

Kellie and Susan and Spyder were watching the interactions between the Silvestris and Brian and Justin with constant amusement. They clearly understood that as far as Perin and Rudolpho were concerned, Brian and Justin were family. The rest of the people in the room would just have to be patient while the family dynamics played out. Once that was done, then everyone would get down to business.

After a few more hugs between Justin and the Silvestris, then everyone seemed to settle down. However, Justin found himself still trapped on the other side of the room between Rudolpho and Perin.

"The first thing that I want to show you is the multimedia production that should run on your monitors during the showcase. I want you the see the final results that happened when we all worked together. We added the music and the voice overs in French, English, and Italian." Brian plugged his laptop computer into the big screen monitor in the room, and the multi-media show began to play. "Here is the final product," he added.

The multimedia show began to play with the Collezione Fiero logo and the upbeat music. The images of the Sunglasses and all the graphics that had been included moved across the screen. Then, the images continued to change on the screen as English, French, and Italian voiceovers helped to focus the viewer's attention to various features of the products.

Everyone was spellbound.

When the showing was over, everyone clapped.

Maria and Susan talked about how much they loved the multi-lingual voiceovers.

Brian and Justin just looked at each other and smiled.

Then, Brian showed them the final versions of the brochures and other information to be available in their booth.

Finally, Brian showed everyone the design for what their unique space at the Showcase was going to look like, for Brian had a mockup of what the Collezione Fiero booth design was going to be.

"Everything is exactly as you suggested," Rudolpho commented. "We love it."

"This is wonderful, Brian," Kellie added. "Eyeconics didn't get lost in everything. We're very pleased."

"And yet you can see elements unique to Belluss Occhiali too," Maria commented.

"Well, I'm really glad that you're all happy," Brian said. "We at Kinnetik aim to please," he added. "Now, I should also tell you that Justin has the Collezione Fiero upgrade ready for your website. Justin and I thought that you might like to add your multimedia show to your website after the Showcase is over." Brian suggested.

"That's a wonderful idea," Rudolpho agreed.

"Our website will get lots of hits, especially from the people, who attended the showcase," Susan added.

"I like that." Perin agreed. "Everything seems to be coming together quite nicely."

"I'm glad that you're pleased," Brian added, thinking that so far things were going smoothly.

"I knew that we made the right decision when we got you involved," Susan remarked with some satisfaction.

"And now that you're family...." Rudolpho reminded them.

"And a shareholder...." Brian said with a smirk.

Rudolpho and Perin looked at him with surprise. "What do you mean?" Perin asked.

"You remember the stock certificates that you gave Justin when he was an intern at Vanguard?" Brian asked with a wicked smile.

"Justin was entitled to a big bonus for all his hard work back then. I thought that he would have sold those sold those shares by now. Belluss Occhiali has grown considerably since those early days." Rudolpho pointed out.

"Justin has held on to the shares. For some reason, he's always had a sentimental attachment to them. He apparently is still attached to them." Brian revealed. "Since, he won't consider selling them even now. I just thought that you should know."

"Well, more good news," Rudolpho said. "I see that you're full of surprises."

"I'm happy about this. I still like the idea of our shares being held by family," Perin added with a smile, as she, once again, hugged Justin.

Once everyone settled down again, Brian could continue, "Okay, Spyder may need to reformat things to run on your monitors," he said, looking over at Spyder for agreement.

Spyder quickly nodded and let them know that it should only take an hour for the conversion.

"Well, that's everything we have to show you regarding the showcase. With your showcase coming up in just a few days, I know that it has been uppermost in your mind," Brian said.

"With everything that you've given us here, we seem to be ready to go," Maria confirmed.

"All the materials printed materials will be shipped to you directly in Paris," Brian added. "And Kinnetik's construction team has your booth already to be assembled on site."

"That's wonderful, Brian. You took care of everything," Kellie said with a smile.

"I know that you and Justin have your hands full, so we thought that we would ask if Spyder could go to Paris with us," Rudolpho innocently asked.

"What? You want ME to go Paris?" Spyder asked, completely taken by surprise. "Signor Silvestri, I was only coordinating things..."

"Exactly!" Rudolpho insisted. "And in Paris, you will continue to do just that."

"Spyder in Paris," Brian said with a wicked grin. "That would solve a lot of problems. He has the language skills. He's familiar your materials. And, he could reach Justin or me if there were any problems."

"What do I know about sunglasses?" Spyder thought that he should point out the obvious.

"Between Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali, they're plenty of people used to handling their showcases. You're just to be there to keep things from getting out of control." Brian enjoyed reminding him. "I assume that you have a passport?"

"Of course, I have a passport. If you'll remember, I use to live in Paris," Spyder said sarcastically.

"See, it just gets better and better," Brian said with a grin.

"But..." Spyder tried to protest again.

"It does sound like the perfect solution," Justin interrupted. His remark got him the usual glare from Spyder, which he chose to ignore. "Think about it Spyder, Limos in Paris...."

Spyder immediately smiled. "Well, now that you put it that way..." he couldn't resist saying.

"So, that's all settled," Perin said happily. "I knew that Justin would find the solution."

After the presentation of the materials for the Showcase, the teams excused themselves after saying goodbye to Spyder, leaving The Silvestris, Kelly and Susan, Brian, Justin and Spyder in the room.

"I have one more thing to show you," Brian said with a wicked grin.

"Another...surprise?" Rudolpho asked with renewed curiosity. "I must admit that I'm beginning to like your surprises."

"Rudolpho, you remember the commercial that I described to you during the initial presentation for Collezione Fiero?"

"How could I forget? I've been talking about the commercial to a few close friends," Rudolpho said with a smile.

"So, how many people have you told?" Kellie asked.

"Only the important ones," Rudolpho insisted. "And they signed the usual nondisclosure agreements before I told them anything," he added.

"There's a rumor that you carry nondisclosure agreements with you at all times," Brian teased. "Is that true?"

"Never mind..." Rudolpho insisted. "I like to save time when I do business," he innocently added.

Susan and Kellie had to smile at each other upon hearing Rudolpho's last statement. They immediately thought of a few things that they wanted to say, but they decided that they would take it up later with Rudolpho privately. They realized that they were out of the loop with respect to all the people that Rudolpho had been talking and exactly what he had negotiated on their behalf. Although things were better with the Silvestris, Kelly and Susan realized that they still had to keep an eye on Rudolpho.

"I know that you promised Andrew David that he could see the first cut of the commercial too. So, we need to schedule a time with him this week, but I wanted to give you a preview of the commercial first. It will make imagining things a lot easier when you have music, actors, and sets to help you to see what we envisioned."

"By all means, Brian, let's see it," Cristina insisted. "Don't keep us waiting any longer."

Brian's laptop was still plugged into the big screen in the room, so he simply loaded the disc with the Collezione commercial. The music started to play and the logo appeared and the commercial beginned to play for everyone.

When the commercial ended, once again, there was clapping.

"Brian, I love it!" Susan said immediately.

"This one is even edgier than your usual stuff," Kellie pointed out.

"Now, you don't see commercials like that every day!" Maria remarked.

"Nice job, Brian," Cristina added.

Rudolpho and Perin just looked at each other. Brian started to get nervous. He was glad that Justin was sitting over there with Perin and Rudolpho. Neither of them said anything, but Justin was still smiling, so Brian didn't quite know what to think.

"Brian, can you play the commercial again?" Perin asked.

"Sure," Brian said, as he replayed the commercial.

This time, both Rudolpho and Perin were clapping.

"I missed the original presentation," Perin began as a way of explanation, "And Rudolpho has been trying to describe this commercial to me ever since. The first time you played the commercial it went by so fast. There is so much that is subtle. I just needed to see it again for myself. It's wonderful, Brian. I love it. When do we roll it out?"

"We have to make a few minor adjustments. We need to add the latest Pentland products. We might want to make a few casting changes. This was just to give you a visual to consider," Brian suggested.

"Well, Brian, as soon as this meeting is over, I'm going to schedule that meeting with Andrew. I know that he's going to want to see this right away," Rudolpho said.

In the middle of all this discussion, Justin finally stood up. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to leave you," he said. "I have a few paintings being delivered, and I should be there to receive them."

"Take the Limo," Brian suggested. "It will save you some time. The driver can come back here to pick up Spyder and me. Rudolpho and I still have a few more things to tie up. I don't want him worrying about anything once he's FINALLY in Switzerland," he said, already wondering if Rudolpho was really ever going back to Switzerland, or if he was going to continually be around New York for awhile. Neither of those options would surprise Brian at this point.

Brian decided that everyone needed a break, so he walked Justin out to the Limo. After checking that Justin's cell phone was turned on, Brian and Justin gave each other a quick kiss goodbye.

Once Justin was on his way to his studio, Brian returned to his meeting about Collezione Fiero.

Brian realized that Justin's presence had set a successful tone for this meeting. Rudolpho was behaving himself. So, Brian felt that he could settle these final loose ends with only Spyder's assistance, and everyone would be cooperative.

Afterwards Rudolpho and Brian had a conversation with Andrew David of the Pentland Group, it was decided that Brian would show him the Collezione Fiero commercial to him during their scheduled meeting tomorrow.

Rudolpho and Andrew agreed to talk further later.

Brian and Spyder hung around to clear up a few other things, and then the meeting ended.

Once the meeting was over, Brian and Spyder said goodbye to everyone, and headed for the Limo.

"I can't believe that I'm going to Paris," Spyder mumbled once they were settled in their seats in the Limo.

"It's fairly obvious that the Silvestris liked your work. It was their request, Justin and I had nothing to do with this. I know that you have a lot of projects going on here in the city though, are you going to be okay in Paris for a couple of days?" Brian asked out of consideration for Spyder.

"The Silvestris only liked me because I'm Taylor's assistant," Spyder reminded him. "But I think I can handle this. After all, I don't have to do anything, but ride around in Limos...my favorite thing," he added with a grin.

"Yes, Justin does seem to know what buttons to push to make the deal," Brian said. "I'm going to have to keep a closer eye on my partner," he said with a laugh.

"You probably taught him well," Spyder said, hoping to make Brian feel better. "If that commercial was any indication...oh, I've seen commercials like that in Europe, but your commercial is both subtle and edgy. I can't wait to see how the public reacts to it."

"I must say that I'm pleased with the way the commercial materialized," Brian said. "After all, Justin and I came up with that one together."

"You're kidding!"

"As you spend more time with Justin, you'll learn that he is very much his own person...with his own devious ways. Don't let the blond hair, blue eyes, and boyish innocence fool you. I made that mistake once, and you see where I ended up. Remember that!" Brian said with a laugh.

"I've seen you two in action, so I know that you're pretty evenly matched...but just to make you happy, I'll make a note to remember what you just told me," Spyder couldn't resist adding. "Now, if you will drop me at home, I appear to have some packing to do...it seems that I'm going to Paris."

Chapter 13 – The Studio

Wednesday Afternoon...(Day 52)

On Tuesday before Justin left Bri-tin, he and Thomas had sent a group of paintings to New York that Justin had been working on at various times while he'd been at the mansion. Then upon his return to New York, Justin had carefully pre-arranged his studio to accommodate these anticipated paintings. Justin knew that he had a lot of work to do, and he didn't want to waste any valuable time.

Now as Justin was finally waiting for his shipment of paintings to be delivered, he made himself comfortable on the futon to ponder a few things.

Justin mentally considered the paintings that he'd worked on here in New York and the various paintings that he'd started while he was at Bri-tin. He realized too, that he'd made several sketches when he was in Cincinnati. Gus and Nicky had been such willing models during one particular afternoon...except that they kept falling asleep in the middle of posing for him. But, he had managed to produce quite a few sketches anyway. The thought of that sketching session caused Justin to smile.

Then, over this past weekend, Gus and Nicky had insisted on painting in the studio with Justin for most of the morning. While Gus and Nicky were painting, dressed in the Armani shirts relinquished by their fathers, Justin had made a few more sketches. At the time he couldn't resist the urge to turn one of those sketches into a painting. Justin really hadn't given it a lot of thought; he just sort of picked up a paint brush and started to paint.

After all, Brian was determined that Justin should stay imprisoned in his studio, and Gus and Nicky were determined to stay in the studio with him...even if Justin had no idea what he planned to paint. Somehow, mindlessly beginning a fun painting of Gus and Nicky had just seemed like a good idea.

Over the next few days, he continued to add elements to the painting. Now, as Justin thought about it, he was convinced that this painting was probably going to be one of his favorites.

Justin's thoughts were interrupted by a knock on his studio door. He opened the door to find that his shipment of paintings had now arrived. Using his tools, he opened the crates and removed the paintings. Always his harshest critic, Justin carefully re-examined his paintings.

The paintings from when he first moved into Bri-tin were special for a lot of reasons. As Justin's thoughts reflected on that time, it felt like he and Brian had moved into Bri-tin so long ago because it clearly felt like home now. Yet when he stopped to think about it, he and Brian had only been living at Bri-tin for a little over a month...of course, with frequent visits from Gus.

Justin looked at the other paintings in the package and realized that it in spite of everything going on, he had begun quite a few ideas over the most recent weekend.

Justin considered these newly arrived paintings along with the ones that he'd already started in his studio here in New York. He realized that he had worked on several ideas for the series of paintings for the opening of the new wing of the Cincinnati Art Gallery. He knew that he wanted to make families the theme of his Cincinnati Collection. Justin had already assembled a large collection of photographs from his trip to the Toronto Zoo with Brian and Gus as part of his primary inspiration. Another part of his inspiration was the trip to the Cincinnati Aquarium with Brian, Gus, and Nicky. Both events had been so much fun, Justin wanted to incorporate them into his theme of families.

The show at the Thornton Galleries, here in New York, would be a completely different story. Here, Justin knew that his more sophisticated abstracts would be just perfect. Justin had sketched out several ideas last week that he wanted to pursue. He thought these ideas would reflect a completely different mood.

No matter how he looked at it, Justin realized that he had quite a lot of painting to do in a very short period of time. He hoped that with Brian working with new clients here in New York and Spyder being in Paris, he would be able to spend extra hours in his studio to make up for all the time he'd spent traveling with Brian.

Justin carefully placed the Gus and Nicky painting on his easel. The other paintings he carefully stored.

First, he wanted to spend some time becoming reacquainted with this painting.

Making himself comfortable on the futon, Justin spent some time, just looking at the painting.

Justin clearly felt that the painting needed something more, but he wasn't quite sure what. He didn't want to overdo the additional elements, but he wanted to be sure that they were just right. So, he pulled out his laptop, so that he could experiment with several ideas.

After all, Justin definitely didn't want to over-analyze things. He clearly wanted to preserve the organic feel of his original vision, but he wanted the painting to have just enough structure, so that a person viewing it, wouldn't get lost in the painting.

Justin smiled to himself, as he considered all the possibilities. Finally, he reached for a bottle of water from his small refrigerator, and while sipping his water, Justin knew exactly want he wanted to do.

Justin quickly changed into his clothes for painting, including the Armani shirt that had once belonged to Brian. As he put on Brian's Armani shirt, Justin began to feel a certain feeling of warmth...like Brian was in the studio with him as he began to work.

Justin did take a minute to wonder how Brian's meeting with Eyeconics and the Silvestris was going. He couldn't help smiling as he thought about the chaos of the morning meeting. In spite of it all, he knew that Brian and Spyder had done amazing work, and everyone in the room was pleased...even if Maria and Cristina enjoyed bantering with Brian. Hopefully, Brian would regain his usual control of the meeting now that Justin was no longer there.

As Justin was mixing paint, his cell phone rang. It was Brian.

"So, is your meeting over?" Justin asked, after the usual greetings.

"Pretty much," Brian said. "I still have a few things to go over with Spyder, since he's going to be riding in Limos in Paris. How much does his going to Paris interfere with your work schedule? I know that you two have made commitments about your own projects."

"Not Really. Spyder worked on his part over the weekend. I just have some art work to do. But, I'll be sure to touch base with him over the next few days...before we lose him completely to Paris," Justin teased.

"How's the painting going? Did all the paintings arrive safely?" Brian asked.

"Yes and I managed to fit everything in here. I'm working on my painting for Milan now."

"Well that's good. I guess you're still not going to give me even a hint about what you're submitting, are you?"

"Probably not...."

"You know that I'm still available to pose if you require any of my body parts," Brian suggested with a smirk. "Just let me know, and I'll come right over," he couldn't resist adding.

"I'll keep that in mind," Justin said with a laugh.

Brian let out a deep sigh. "Okay, I'll let you get back to work. I'll try to call you later. And Justin, remember to eat some lunch."

"Brian, are you really going to be this much trouble now that you're here in New York?"

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a comment," Brian said, and Justin could hear him smiling through the phone.

"Later," Justin said, as he closed the phone.

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Brian looked at his watch and decided that he had just enough time to call the office. He wanted to be sure that his staff knew how happy Eyeconics and the Silvestris were with results of all their hard work.

And, it had also been almost twenty-four hours since Brian had found a legitimate excuse to torture Ted.

"Theodore," Brian said happily when Ted finally answered his phone. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"No, No, Bri," Ted quickly said. "Cynthia and I have been working very hard since you left. But, of course, I have time to talk to you."

"That's good," Brian said with a smile. "So what have you done to my company since I left?"

"Brian, it's only been twenty-four hours. I've just been holding things together. Since you left with all your production materials, the staff finally has a chance to breathe."

"So, I'm gone one day, and you gave everyone a day off?" Brian bellowed. "Maybe I should send you that pink slip that I was working on."

Brian could hear Ted getting tense through the phone. Brian's day was now complete.

"Now, Bri, let's not do anything rash. I think you need me if you expect to pull off this move smoothly," Ted suggested, hoping that Brian would rethink his actions.

Brian finally decided to let Ted off the hot seat. "Well, now that you put it that way, maybe I'll keep you around for another day or so."

"Thanks, Bri," Ted finally whispered. "Now, did you have a reason for calling besides tormenting me?"

"I always have a reason for doing things. Tormenting you is just a plus," Brian informed him.

Ted let out a sigh. "And that reason would be?" he asked defiantly.

Brian smiled at the change in attitude. "I wanted you and Cynthia to know that the Collezione Fiero presentation was a hit. Please let Murph and George and the teams know that their work was excellent and that the client was pleased. The meeting happened this morning, but this was the first chance that I had to call. Please be sure that all the teams are aware of the campaign's success."

"I'll be sure that everyone knows," Ted said with some enthusiasm. "How is Justin taking the news?"

"He's as thrilled as I am. But fortunately, you can't talk to him because he's working really hard on his submission for Milan," Brian enjoyed pointing out.

Ted knew that even if Justin was sitting beside Brian at this moment, that he had very little chance of talking to him. Brian was in over-protective mode, and no one stood a chance of getting anywhere near Justin when Brian was like this. Ted smiled as he thought about Brian in his new role. "I figured that. I just wanted to be sure that he was finding time to paint," he added.

"Once I could get him away from Murph and George, it's amazing how much time to paint he has," Brian teased, totally ignoring his own role in the painting delays for Justin.

Ted knew not to press the point. Instead he simply agreed to relay Brian's congratulations to the staff.

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When Brian finished his call with Ted, he immediately called Cynthia and relayed similar information to her. But there were a few other things that Cynthia and Brian needed to discuss.

"Brian, I'm glad that the presentation went well and that Justin is painting away in his studio," Cynthia said.

"We seem to have another minor problem," Brian suggested and then he paused.

"Oh?"

"Justin's assistant is going to Paris," Brian said, and then he sat back and waited for Cynthia to react.

"Paris? How did that happen?"

"Rudolpho...."

Cynthia immediately cut him off with a laugh. Brian tried to ignore her reaction and begin again.

"Rudolpho Silvestri requested it," Brian finally said with some exasperation. "So, Spyder is going to need all the usual things: credit card, travel advance, and authorization for limo service."

"Excuse me?" Cynthia asked incredulously.

"What's causing the problem, the Limo service?" Brian asked with a smile.

"You have to admit that it's a little out of the ordinary. After all, he's only Justin's assistant," Cynthia quickly pointed out.

"Cynthia, you know how much trouble Justin can be. Did you really expect that things would be any different with his assistant?" Brian had to ask.

Once again, Cynthia couldn't resist laughing. "I'll take care of things. I'll call Spyder when we're done, and I'll see that he has everything he needs by courier in the morning."

"Thanks, I knew that you would handle things," Brian finally said as he started to relax. "I'm looking forward to having you and Theodore here at week's end. We have a lot to do and only a limited amount of time to do it."

"Ted and I and are looking forward to coming to New York too," Cynthia added enthusiastically. "We'll both see you on Friday," she added.

At this point, Brian and Cynthia said their goodbyes.

Brian decided to head back to Justin's loft.

After quickly changing into jeans and a tank top, Brian grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator. Then he settled down to go over his research on several new prospects that he wanted to contact for future courtesy calls.

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Several hours later...

Justin had definitely lost track of time by this point since he had been continuously inspired to paint pretty much nonstop since his earlier phone call with Brian. The painting had been going really well, so he didn't want to stop for lunch, and instead he had eagerly continued working on his masterpiece. He thought that he might work uninterrupted into the night.

Evidently, the fates had other plans in store for Justin, for he was interrupted by a knock at his studio door. He put down his paintbrush and covered the painting on his easel before checking to see who was there.

Justin was surprised to find Brian standing there, carrying several bags of food, and at that point, he realized that it was actually evening.

"What are you doing here?" Justin asked, as he leaned up to give Brian a kiss.

"I was hungry," Brian tried to say convincingly. "But, I didn't want to eat alone, so I came here to see if I could distract you from your work."

Brian gently waved the bag of food under Justin's nose, and then he couldn't hide the smile, as he heard Justin's stomach rumble in response. At which point, Justin tried to reach for the bag of food, but Brian chose that precise moment to raise the bags just out his reach. Brian smiled a self-satisfied smile.

"Well, since you're here," Justin said with a mock sigh of resignation, "You might as well come in and make yourself comfortable. Just give me a minute to clean up a bit."

Brian waited patiently on the futon, while Justin did just that. "You know, I have to admit that you made a good choice in this futon," he commented as he mindlessly tested the futon, a habit he was developing every time he visited Justin in his studio.

Justin came back in the room and casually slid on top of Brian, pinning him to the futon, "I'm glad that you feel that way," Justin added with a wicked grin.

"You know, lately...I've observed that you... seem to have some confusion...about who's the top...in this relationship," Brian tried to point out. He was having some difficulty speaking because Justin was kissing him. "Since our legal union...you seem to be spending...a lot of time on top of me. Doesn't that seem a little odd to you?"

"Not particularly," Justin said, leaning down to give Brian one more kiss. "Now that we're equal partners, I have to seize any opportunity to have my way with you."

"I thought you would behave yourself, so I wore my jeans. If I had been aware of these new rules between us, I would have dressed more provocatively. I would have worn my sweatpants here."

"As much as I like your sweats, you still look hot in jeans," Justin added. "They were such a turn on that I guess it must explain your present predicament." Justin added, once again, leaning down to give Brian a kiss, and running his hands through Brian's hair. Brian surrendered to the kiss, and it became passionate.

Both Brian and Justin immediately started reaching for skin to skin contact, and in the tight confines of the futon, they managed to shift positions, so that Justin was on the bottom, where Brian thought he belonged.

"Well, that was unexpected," Justin said as they lay there together.

"This should teach you to always be prepared," Brian said with a smirk.

At that moment, Justin's stomach rumbled again. "Okay, I'm going to let you up so that we can eat. I have to admit that you, as usual, have to ruin the moment."

"Brian, I can't help it if I'm hungry," Justin said in his own defense.

"Probably not," Brian acknowledged softly. "I should probably let you eat. But, remember where we were...for later," he added as he leaned down to kiss Justin once more.

"So, what's for dinner?" Justin asked.

"I knew that you were tired of Thai, so I brought Chinese," Brian commented as he began to arrange the take out cartons on the nearby table.

Conversation was easy between them over dinner. Once dinner was over, they cleaned up.

Justin revealed. "I think I've finally settled on my painting to submit to Milan. Now I just have to finish it."

"Is that it?" Brian asked, looking over at the covered easel.

"Yes..."

Brian so wanted to go over and lift the cover and sneak a peek at the painting, but he was determined to be patient and wait until Justin was ready for him to see this masterpiece. And a masterpiece was exactly what Brian was sure it was...even if Justin may have still had some doubts.

"I know that you only have a few more days to get everything done, so I'll let you get back to work," Brian said softly. "Even if flipping you back on the futon is a very enticing idea."

""Hold that thought," Justin suggested. "I shouldn't be too much longer. We have unfinished positions to deal with."

Brian smiled as he realized that at least Justin remembered.

Brian and Justin said goodbye to each other, but not before Brian made sure that Justin had his phone on and that Justin promised to take a cab back to the loft.

Justin complained as usual, but he did finally agree.

Brian said that he had some work to do, so he would probably still be up if Justin wasn't too late returning back to the loft.

Justin heard in that statement, the fact that Brian missed him.

Chapter 14 - Meetings

Thursday Morning...(Day 53)

Brian gently tried to nudge Justin out of bed.

"What are you doing?" Justin protested.

"You have demonstrated a total disregard for any instructions that I give you. So, I'm going to make sure that you at least start off the day with a good breakfast. So, if you hurry and get dress, we can have mocha lattes before I drop you at your studio," Brian said with a confident smirk.

"Who said I was hungry?" Justin tried to argue, but his stomach chose that precise moment to rumble.

"I do so love it when you body cooperates with me, even when you don't," Brian added. "Now get up, you know how I hate to shower alone."

Justin refused to let Brian see his smile, so he let out an exasperated sigh before he joined Brian in the shower.

Justin knew that in spite of the cramped quarters and Brian's continual complaints, showering together still had certain benefits. This fact was clearly brought home as Justin's ass kept brushing against Brian's cock. And although this particular morning required an extra long shower to start their day, neither Brian nor Justin seemed to really mind too much.

However, as Brian continued to comment about the tight quarters, he did suggest that they spend the weekend in a hotel suite since Ted and Cynthia would be arriving tomorrow.

Brian mentioned something about room service, hoping this would be a further inducement to secure Justin's cooperation.

The offer of room service really wasn't necessary. Justin was already agreeable to the idea of staying at the hotel. Of course, he envisioned the extra hours of painting time he would have while Brian was kept busy with Ted and Cynthia over the weekend.

After their usual morning shower with its associated activities, Brian and Justin quickly got dressed and climbed into their waiting Limo. Brian made careful note that he was spared the usual threats from Justin about walking to the coffee shop. This obviously meant that they were finally starting to settle into their new routine.

Brian and Justin arrived at the coffee shop to find Spyder already comfortably settled in THEIR usual booth.

"Spyder, what are you doing here?" Brian asked as he forced Spyder to scoot over.

"I might ask you the same question," Spyder said with attitude. "Am I going to have to share my booth with both of you EVERY morning now that you live here?" he complained.

"No, because we're sending you to Paris to ride in Limos," Justin pointed out with a snippy attitude.

"Oh yes, there is that," Spyder responded with a smile as he pondered his situation. "Just so that you know, I eat here most mornings. I don't have food in my apartment."

"Well, I have two meetings today, one of which is with your buddy, Mitchell Evans. I wasn't sure when I would get lunch, so I thought that I'd better start the day with breakfast. And the Little Celebrity, here, has a problem remembering to eat when he's working, so it seems this way, I know that he's not becoming a starving artist. You know, I've become rather attached to being legally partnered to a true celebrity. I want to keep it that way," Brian pointed out in a determined tone.

"So, my fame is the only attribute that you're interested in?" Justin asked incredulously.

"Well, not the only attribute. You have quite a few other assets, but there's no need to mention those and get Spyder all hot and bothered this early in the morning." Brian added.

Spyder couldn't resist laughing while Justin just rolled his eyes and glared at Brian. "I can't believe that you said that," Justin added. "You're unbelievable."

"It's true. I am," Brian said softly.

"Good morning," Monica said, arriving at their table bearing a tray with three cups, "I assumed that you three wanted your mocha lattes for starters. I'll be back in a few minutes to get the rest of your order," she said with a smile as she left them menus to consider.

"How much did you tip her last time, Brian?" Spyder asked.

"Never mind," Brian said with a smirk. "And, you're paying for breakfast this morning," he pointed out to Spyder.

"That seems fair," Spyder said with a sigh. "But, you'll spring for my mocha latte since I did reserve our table."

"I might be persuaded," Brian said cautiously. "I'll have to think about it."

"I don't know what you two are going to do while I'm in Paris," Spyder mumbled. "Who'll reserve your table for you then, huh?"

Justin felt the need to step in here. "You forget that for the last year, I have managed to live here in New York quite well. I promise you, I will take care of Brian...like always," he said with a smirk.

"I bet you will," Spyder commented. "That obviously means that you'll have to stay here in the city...none of this scampering off to the back woods like you usually do...remember the sharks are circling," Spyder added.

"Hello, I'm right here," Brian thought he should remind them. "And, in case you two have forgotten, I really can take care of myself. But, I want you to know Sunshine, that I'm touched that you will be looking out for me," Brian said, as he quickly leaned over and kissed Justin.

"It's too early in the morning for this," Spyder said, shaking his head, as he observed his breakfast companions.

At that point Monica returned with a big smile on her face. She had just witnessed the kiss between Brian and Justin, and she was surprised by their openness, but she liked it. Now, she was ready to take their orders.

Once their orders were given, Spyder raised the question of the press during the Collezione Fiero Showcase. Brian explained that both Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali had people to handle the press. However, if Spyder was suddenly thrust into the spotlight, then he should just pretend that he was on one his glitzy book selling tours.

Of course, after that comment Brian and Justin couldn't contain their laughter, and Spyder glared at both of them in response. The last thing that Spyder wanted to be reminded of, was those books that he wrote when he was in Paris.

Eventually they settled down to an easy conversation over breakfast. When the meal was over, Brian paid for everyone's breakfast and left the usual generous tip for Monica.

Spyder decided to have another mocha latte since his first appointment was just a block away, and he was willing to forgo the Limo ride to walk that short distance.

Brian dropped Justin off at his studio...after the usual checks to make sure that Justin's cell phone was turned on. Justin grumbled and complained, but Brian paid no attention to him, choosing to silence his complaints with a kiss. This time Brian didn't waste his time reminding Justin to eat lunch. He simply kissed Justin again, and then he got back into the Limo and headed for his meeting with Andrew David of the Pentland Group.

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A Short Time Later...

"Brian, it's good to see you," Andrew David said in greeting, once the proper announcements had been made by the receptionist.

"I was expecting Millicent to greet me," Brian said with a smile, as they walked back in the direction of Andrew's office.

"After talking with you and Rudolpho yesterday, we didn't want to waste any time. So, I'm walking you personally to the conference room," Andrew commented.

"At a rather brisk pace, I might add. This should significantly reduce my required treadmill time," Brian teased.

Andrew stopped for a moment. "I'm sorry, Brian" he said. "Catch your breath for a second..."

"No, that isn't necessary. I'm fine," Brian assured him with a smile.

A few seconds later they approached the door of the conference room. When it was opened, there were four people in the room waiting for them. One of those people was Leo Brown.

"Leo, what are you doing here?" Brian asked as he quickly entered and shook hands with his client.

"There're rumors circulating that something special was going to be unveiled that shouldn't be missed, so I flew in from Chicago. You know how much I appreciate your presentations," Leo said with a smirk. "And don't worry, we all talked to Rudolpho Silvestri, and you'll find our signatures on the customary, required set of non-disclosure agreements," he added. "By the way, Rudolpho said to send his regards, he's really sorry that he couldn't join us. He said to tell you that he's off to Switzerland again."

Brian didn't believe that for one moment.

"Brian, I would like you to meet some friends of mine," Andrew said. "They usually spent most of their time in Europe, so it's pure coincidence that we all happen to be in New York at the same time. I would like you to meet Eric Chambraux and Kevin Andrin. Eric is here from Paris, but his vineyards produce some of the best French Champagne.

"And we have expanded our interests to include Escargot and Brie," Eric added.

"Absolutely," Andrew agreed. "And Kevin is here from Switzerland..."

"Which is where, I understand, Rudolpho is on his way to at this moment," Brian commented with a smile.

"And being Swiss, the prevailing wisdom is that I'm either into cheese or chocolates, when really the truth is that Rudolpho and I have a few mutual business interests," Kevin added with a slight laugh.

"I guess I should tell you, Eric and Kevin and Rudolpho are old friends," Andrew continued.

"Why am I not surprised?" Brian said.

"I would also like you to meet Peter Eisler," Andrew continued. "Peter is actually from Pennsylvania, but we went to school together. You see, Peter's family are one of the largest distributors of specialty mushrooms. I should warn you that he's often in Europe where his family also cultivates truffles.

Brian was definitely impressed with the people gathered in the room, and he was very glad to meet them. He just couldn't figure out why there were uninvited guests to his meeting with Andrew. "I'm pleased to meet you all," Brian said with some confusion. "Andrew, what's going on here?" he now had to ask.

"Eric, Kevin, and Peter need a joint marketing campaign for their unique products. They want to roll out their unique campaign worldwide just in time for the holidays. Each of them tried to broach the subject, hypothetically, of course, with their existing ad agency. They were most unhappy with the result. Then, they happened to mention their problem to Rudolpho. The result was Rudolpho called me late last night and begged me to help as a personal favor to him, so here they are, crashing our meeting," Andrew added, throwing up his hands. "Leo and I were scheduled to meet later this afternoon. His appearance, at this time, is as much a surprise to me as it is to you, but it seems that once again Rudolpho is behind this too."

"Rudolpho seems to have been very busy since I met with him yesterday morning. I have to wonder when he has time to sleep," Brian said with a smile.

"I'm not sure that he ever sleeps," Leo echoed. "That's why he always has so much going on."

"Rudolpho indicated that after talking with Susan and Kellie, they all thought that you might be prevailed upon to let us all see the commercial that he has been talking about," Andrew continued.

"I'm flattered that all of you are here, but this isn't really an unveiling," Brian tried to point out. "I only made a quick cut of the commercial, so that Andrew and Rudolpho could begin to see visuals, rather than listen to my constant stream of verbal descriptions. This isn't even close to the final version," he continued to protest.

"We understand. Can we please all see the commercial?" Eric pleaded. "We all completed the necessary paperwork that Rudolpho said that you would require, and we promise to keep everything completely confidential."

Brian checked the non-disclosure agreements for signatures. Everything was in order. Brian simply sighed. This was definitely not how he expected his day to begin.

Brian plugged his laptop into the big screen in the conference room. Everyone in the room settled in place. Brian loaded the disk with the commercial, and the music began. Then very short Collezione Fiero commercial played.

When the commercial finished, the reaction here was the same laughter and clapping that had occurred in the showing for the Collezione Fiero Group. Brian was surprised that the ultra-conservative Leo Brown was the first to ask to see the commercial again. Brian obliged and replayed the commercial.

"Andrew, you understand that we may have to make a few changes in product placement," Brian said, trying his best for this meeting to have some semblance of his planned structure. "We may need to do some casting changes; you know the usual, before this commercial will be in its final form." Andrew was quick to nod his agreement, so Brian continued, "And of course, everyone in this room understands the importance of secrecy if this commercial is to have any impact at all when it's ultimately released."

Kevin Andrin had to comment here. "Although we're all sworn to secrecy, I just want you to know that we could tell the world about this commercial, and no one would believe us. And when this commercial was finally released, the world would still see the humor and tongue-in-cheek edginess that might be just subtle enough to keep you from getting arrested," he added with a laugh.

"I'm sure getting arrested wouldn't hurt Rudolpho's and Andrew's sales one bit. Are you seriously planning on releasing that commercial here in the states?" Peter Eisler asked with a laugh.

"Well, you have to admit, the commercial is only suggestive," Brian pointed out. "But no, we'd plan to run the commercial in Europe first. Hopefully, the foreign buzz will drift back to the states, and their products will have all that free publicity...if we play this just right."

"I must admit that I love the new Sunglasses," Andrew said almost as an after-thought, "Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali really produced an interesting new line. And there was just enough focus on their product to be memorable, while properly showcasing our line at the same time. Great job, Brian!"

"See, if Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali could combine their design teams and produce such memorable sunglasses, surely The Pentland Group and Brown Athletics can do the same. And now that we've seen that Brian will definitely make memorable commercials for us, our products will shine in the marketplace," Leo Brown pointed out. "I really see no reason to keep dragging our feet on this, Andrew."

"I can see your point. I'm sure Brian's campaigns would make our potential new designs...the innovative market leaders," Andrew added.

Brian couldn't resist teasing here. "Well, let's not rush into anything. I have to make sure that you two aren't thinking about those glow-in-the-dark underwear, we were discussing."

"You always come back to that," Leo said with a laugh. "No...no...our design teams won't be that avant-garde."

"Heavens ...no!" Andrew confirmed as he too shuddered at the thought.

Finally, Brian looked over at the other three gentlemen in the room that were now huddled, deep in conversation. All that Brian could hear were whispers. Then after a few minutes, the huddled conversation stopped.

"Brian," Eric Chambraux said, now acting as spokesperson for the group. "We'd like you to create a special commercial for us. Obviously, not the same as the one we just saw...but with the same edginess...that would run as a series of vignettes over an extended period of time. We want the commercials to tell a story and constantly remind the public of our unique products."

"You three realize that you can achieve your objectives with proper product placement in any number of forthcoming movies?" Brian pointed out. "I would be glad to put you in touch with the respective producers."

"That works, but the movies just aren't classy enough for what we had in mind. We can tell just by meeting you and from what we've heard from Leo and Rudolpho that you have the creative vision that we seek. So, will you consider it?" Kevin Andrin asked.

"You realize that the simple commercial, even the extended version that you're asking for, isn't going to accomplish everything that you want it to all by itself. You need a memorable campaign wrapped around these long-running commercials to reinforce the message?" Brian added.

"And we assume that you would handle that for us when the time was right," Kevin Andrin added. "The other New York agencies are impossible to deal with."

"But what about your international agencies, most of you have offices abroad and existing relationships with several well-known firms?" Brian tried to suggest.

There was the simultaneous rolling of the eyes at that particular question by Eric, Kevin, and Peter. Brian carefully took notice.

"They are all totally against what we want to do. They don't really understand the intricacies of cross-marketing, in spite of what they may lead the public to believe. We have all wasted a lot of time trying to pursue our vision with them," Kevin added. "From what we have seen of your new commercial, we think you're just what we need."

"Obviously, we would like to discuss our ideas further with you...preferably, when we're not interrupting your meeting with Andrew," Eric Chambraux commented with a smile. "Our calendars seem to indicate that we'll all be back in New York in 2 weeks. And we'd really like to meet with you again. Oh don't worry, in the intervening two weeks we'll each be chatting with you by phone and email, if you don't mind, so that you will really see our common vision?"

"And, we prepared the necessary preliminary consulting agreements where you will be properly compensated for the inordinate amount of time you will need to spend interacting with each of us on this project, with the prospect of a more formal agreements to follow if you should be interested in continuing to work with us," Kevin Andrin added. "Rudolpho said that this was what you were going to require."

"Rudolpho said so, did he?" Brian said with a smile. He quickly looked over these additional documents that had already been prepared. Brian was surprised to see that the retainer amount and associated consulting fees were significantly higher than his usual rates. "Yes, that will be quite adequate to get us started," he added.

"The retainers mentioned in the agreements will be wired to your account in Pittsburgh within the next 24 hours," Peter Eisler indicated.

"Welcome to New York, Brian," Andrew said with a smirk. "It looks like you're going to be very busy."

Brian simply smiled.

"You know, Andrew, we were actually supposed to have a meeting? I really did have other issues to discuss with you besides showing you the rough cut of the commercial."

"You're really on top of things, Brian. I've heard that you don't like to waste a lot of time. Leo and the others have plans for tonight, so I can finally get them out of my hair. You and I have could have a dinner meeting tonight at my club...where I promise you no one will crash our meeting," he said glaring specifically at Leo Brown and the others. "Or, we could meet here sometime tomorrow if you prefer?"

Brian scrolled through his calendar. He had an afternoon meeting scheduled today with Mitchell Evans. Tomorrow Ted and Cynthia should hopefully be arriving. Also tomorrow, Justin was due to ship his painting off to Milan. Brian guessed that Justin would appreciate the extra time tonight to spend in his studio, painting, in peace, without Brian hovering over him.

After careful consideration, Brian agreed to the dinner meeting tonight with Andrew at his club.

Brian and Andrew agreed to meet for dinner at the Harvard Club at 6:30pm, and the others made their plans to get together at this quiet little restaurant that Eric Chambraux suggested. So, by the time the meeting was over, everyone in the room was quite pleased.

"I told you that talking to Rudolpho Silvestri would produce the solution that we needed," Eric Chambraux said, as the meeting was ending. "Brian...Andrew, thanks for all your help."

As Brian was on his way back to his Limo, he knew that even though Kinnetik was a boutique agency, doors seemed to be opening for it all over New York. Brian felt energized and knew he was ready.

It seemed that Brian was getting some sort of new reputation for handling unusual joint ventures and the cross merchandising of companies, thanks to Rudolpho Silvestri.

With Eyeconics and Belluss Occhiali and The Pentland Group, it was companies in diverse industries. These new potential clients had products that you wouldn't necessarily think to market together, at first glance, but whose products were totally complimentary upon further consideration. The challenge was going to be to make the campaign and the commercial that would properly showcase all the products involved and still leave a lasting impression on the target audience.

Brian smiled to himself...this was definitely not a niche for amateurs. He couldn't wait to talk to Justin.

As he settled into the Limo, Brian became painfully aware that he REALLY needed an office.

Chapter 15 – Reaching For His Telephone

Thursday...(Day 53)

Brian so wanted to call Justin, but he knew that he had another matter to deal with first. Reaching for his telephone, Brian first placed a phone call to Rudolpho Silvestri. It seemed they had a few things to discuss.

"Brian," Rudolpho said, answering on the second ring as if he was expecting this call. "I'm surprised to hear from you so soon. How was your meeting with Andrew?" he innocently asked. "How did he like our commercial?"

"My meeting just ended with Andrew... and all your other friends," Brian said with a smile.

"Ah, so you met Eric, Kevin, and Peter? Hopefully, you were able to solve their little dilemma?"

"Since you sent them to the meeting armed with appropriate, signed documentation, I was able to make a few suggestions," Brian admitted.

"I somehow knew that you would," Rudolpho said confidently. "You're so good at handling these things."

"Although, I'm extremely flattered that you like my work, Rudolpho, you can't..."

"Say no more, Brian. Justin already has taken me to task about interfering in his art, and I promised that I won't interfere with you either....but my friends were desperate!" Rudolpho added with a well-practiced tone of desperation in his voice. "They came to me for help...what did you expect me to do? When I called Andrew last night, he agreed to assist me," he explained.

"Of course, you could have just called me directly? Did that ever occur to you? I might have listened to your pleas," Brian pointed out.

"I did consider it?" Rudolpho explained, and he then paused for a moment. "But you have a tendency to sometimes be initially unreasonable about these matters," he added. "And I promised not to keep appealing to Justin. So..."

"So, you just decided to what...go around me?" Brian complained.

"It was an emergency, Brian," Rudolpho quickly insisted. "I really needed your help. And, it was for your own good too."

"And who decided that?"

"You're family now, Brian...."Rudolpho asserted as if that should explain it all. "Perin agreed that you and Justin were the perfect solution."

"Rudolpho...." Brian protested.

"Is there a problem, Brian?" Rudolpho innocently asked.

"Rudolpho..." Brian protested again. "You know, Rudolpho, I could have sworn that when I talked to you weeks ago, you promised me that you had changed. What happened?" he asked with a smile.

"Okay, Brian. I promise, going forward, to behave myself," Rudolpho insisted.

Brian, for some reason, didn't believe him. "And do you have your fingers crossed?" Brian immediately asked, as if he were talking to Gus.

"I beg your pardon?" Rudolpho asked, feigning innocence, when in truth he was very familiar with the childhood custom, he actually believed that he'd practically invented.

"Never mind..." Brian said. "As long as I have your promise..."

"Of course."

"I'm glad that we finally have this new understanding," Brian said.

"Me too," Rudolpho agreed with a smile. "Let me go. Thanks for taking care of my friends," he added.

"You're welcome," Brian added before saying goodbye.

When the conversation with Rudolpho ended, Brian just shook his head and immediately called Justin. He was definitely looking for a little oasis of sanity.

"How's your painting going?" Brian gently asked Justin.

"It's going well...I think. There is always one more thing to do to make the painting better. But I think I'm running out of things to do," Justin explained with a slight laugh.

"I'm still available to pose, if necessary," Brian volunteered. "All my body parts are still here."

Justin laughed. "I'll keep that in mind. I might need you to pose later tonight if I get stuck."

"Well, that may be a bit of a problem," Brian said hesitantly. "You see, I have this hot dinner date tonight."

"What? With whom?" Justin asked with a smile.

"Andrew David...." Brian said with a smile and then paused.

"How did that happen?"

"Actually your friend Rudolpho Silvestri is responsible..."

"Dare I ask for details? What has Signor Silvestri done now?"

"Let me tell you a story..." Brian began.

"Do I want to even hear this?" Justin challenged with a laugh.

Brian continued. "I innocently showed up for my meeting with Andrew David this morning. I was ready to show him the rough cut of the Collezione Fiero commercial and to discuss the few items on my agenda."

"Yeah..."

"Imagine my surprise when I found Leo Brown and three friends of Rudolpho's there, all waiting with signed documents to see the commercial."

"What? How did they all find out about your meeting?"

"How do you think? It seems that these friends are forming a joint venture that their current ad agencies didn't quite know how to handle, so they called Rudolpho, who immediately solved their problem with appropriate documentation, and got Andrew to allow them to crash his meeting with me. The result is that Kinnetik has three new potential clients."

Justin couldn't suppress his laughter. "Congratulations," he finally said.

"Maybe...I'm not sure yet."

"They wouldn't have signed if they weren't impressed with you. Do you know what kind of campaign you're going to create?"

"I have no idea. I was hoping that you would take pity on me and agree to work with me on this project. After all, we're partners now, and it seems to help when I have your sketches to go with my vision as I try to create the campaign."

"Really?" Justin said, allowing a certain excitement to show in his voice. "Nothing would make me happier than to create another campaign with you," he admitted. "I promise this time, there won't be any international incidents."

Brian stopped for a moment to consider. He wanted to ask Justin if he had his fingers crossed too, but something told him that wasn't a good idea. Then he had to ask himself, what else Justin could possibly be considering, as an alternative to creating an international incident. Brian sensed that in working with Justin, his life was about to get interesting, so he simply smiled.

"I thought that you might like an evening to paint in peace," Brian finally suggested. "So, I agreed to the dinner meeting with Andrew David at his club. In view of the cast of characters at the meeting this morning, very little productive work was accomplished, and I really want things to stay on schedule."

"As always..."

"Why don't I call you when the meeting is over?" Brian suggested.

"Maybe, I'll have something to show you by then?"

"Really?" Brian said, allowing the sound of excitement to enter into his voice.

"Don't get excited, Brian. You're as bad as Gus. After all, all I said was maybe ."

"Maybe is so much better than No," Brian pointed out. "I'll take whatever I can get."

"C'mon Brian, I'm not that bad," Justin argued.

"I'm not going to even dignify that with a comment."

Justin simply smiled. "I love you."

"Me too. Later."

Brian smiled as he finally closed his phone and gave his driver the new destination. He had a scheduled meeting with Mitchell Evans of Barrister, Wilkins & Evans. So far, Brian's day had been very interesting. He couldn't help wondering what else New York had in store for him.

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Meanwhile, at Barrister, Wilkins & Evans, Mitchell Evans was settling down to another meeting that somehow wasn't on his calendar.

"So Adam, how's my proposal progressing?" Mitchell asked, once Adam Lyons was settled in his office.

"Obviously, we're pouring over all the information you've sent us. Kennedy & Collins is definitely looking forward to doing business with your firm," Adam added with some confidence. "And with an agency the size of Kennedy & Collins, we're sure that we can offer you the best array of services to meet your needs now and in the future."

"That's always good to hear," Mitchell commented. "Although you realize that it wasn't necessary for you to make a special trip to our offices. We would have sent the required information about our new international acquisitions over to your office by courier. Toni has a packet all ready for you."

"It wasn't a problem," Adam explained. "I had another appointment close by, so it was no problem to personally pick up the new information that you have for me. Besides, it gives me another chance to stay in touch with you."

"I can't complain about the personal touch," Mitchell suggested with a smile. "Do you have any general ideas for our campaign? I realize that it's pretty early in the process, but I was hoping that you would give me a hint of what you're considering."

"You realize that this is all preliminary, as we, at our firm, are just starting to consider the unique position of your firm. We are still gathering information, but we feel it is most important that your advertising stress to the clients of these acquired firms that they will clearly be doing business with Barrister, Wilkins & Evans. We want to be sure that your campaigns reflect this point. After all, these firms agreed to be acquired by you because of your reputation for excellence. We want to be sure to emphasize that fact. When all is said and done, all these smaller firms will be part of one big, superior firm led by the New York flagship," Adam explained.

"I see...that's a very interesting approach," Mitchell commented. "I can't wait to see the campaign that your firm ultimately develops."

"It going to be a pleasure," Adam added.

Mitchell and Adam discussed a few other points.

When all matters had been handled, and Toni had brought in the packet of material that the firm had originally intended to send to Adam by courier, Mitchell finally agreed to walk Adam up to the reception area.

As Adam and Mitchell were shaking hands to say goodbye, Brian casually walked into the reception area of Barrister, Wilkins & Evans.

Chapter 16 – A Few More Meetings

Thursday... (Day 53)

As Mitchell Evans was escorting Adam Lyons through the reception area of his office, he was distracted by a question from Adrienne at the front desk.

And as Adam Lyons turned to leave, he found himself face-to-face with Brian Kinney.

"Hello Adam," Brian said casually as he extended his hand for a handshake.

"Brian, what on earth are you doing here?" Adam responded, trying to contain his surprise. Of course, he was well aware that Brian was in town, but the offices of Barrister, Wilkins & Evans was the last place that he expected to run into him.

"How long has it been?" Brian continued. "Three, maybe four years?"

"Something like that..." Adam answered. "You're looking well and continuing to collect awards, as usual."

"That's the way our game is played," Brian said with a smirk. "Life's good. I have no complains."

At this point, Mitchell noticed the two men talking together. He smiled to himself, before walking over to join them. "That's what I like to see," Mitchell began. "Friendly competitors," he added.

"In a city this size, is there any other choice?" Brian commented. "How are you, Mitchell?"

"I'm fine, Brian," Mitchell said warmly. "I see that you and Adam are well-acquainted, so you two probably can anticipate the campaign that the other will propose?" he added with a smile.

"Maybe, but I'm sure we're not the only competitors," Brian pointed out.

"No, that's very true, and I'm eagerly awaiting all the submissions...since I don't have to get involved in the final campaign selection process," Mitchell insisted. "I just get to enjoy the presentations."

At that moment, Adam Lyons realized that Brian wasn't there to simply pay a courtesy call on the firm. Instead, Mitchell and Brian seemed to be rather well-acquainted...on a first name basis. Adam soon realized that he and Brian were direct competitors for the firm's account.

Adam managed to keep his mask in place. This was a turn of events that he never expected, but his first task was to make an escape from this uncomfortable situation and return to the comfort of familiar territory...like his own office, so that he could figure out how this could have possibly have happened.

Finally, Adam looked at the time. "Let me get to my next appointment," he said. "Brian, it's been good to see you. Let's get together sometime."

"Let's," Brian said easily, as he finally said goodbye to Adam.

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Once Adam was gone, Mitchell turned his full attention to Brian.

Mitchell had definitely been waiting for this meeting and this particular moment.

Mitchell walked Brian back toward his office.

"Well Brian, It seems that I severely underestimated you," Mitchell said with a smile, as he offered Brian a seat.

"Of course, Kinnetik is a small regional firm and is highly honored to be given a chance to compete for your account," Brian responded, "But I gather from your amused tone that you have something specific in mind."

"Where should I begin?" Mitchell asked, pretending to be thinking. "First let me congratulate you on your legal union with Justin. I'm sure that you know by now that I was trying to get Justin and Spyder to come back to work here at the firm. I rather liked having both of them around."

"I can understand that. I have to agree that they are both easy to work with," Brian said with a smile.

"Of course, I don't know how I was supposed to accomplish that if you're going to continually entice Spyder with Limo rides...his definite weakness, I might add. How did you manage to do all this...when from what I can tell, you don't even have an office yet? I can just imagine how much mischief you're going to create once you're fully here and settled," Mitchell said with a laugh.

"Mitchell, I don't know where you get your information. And, just for the record, Spyder is on his way to Paris because Rudolpho Silvestri requested it. And you and I both know how difficult saying no to him can be."

"Yes, we do," Mitchell said with a laugh. "I just think that it's an interesting turn of events, and I'm thoroughly intrigued by it. I must admit that I'm enjoying my front row seat to watch all the action. Spyder always manages to stay in the thick of things. And only a select few of the movers and shakers in town know that you're really here. Rumors are circulating like a tidal wave, of course, especially since your picture appeared in the paper with Justin's. New York is really a small town, and we thrive on gossip."

"That fact had been pointed out to me before," Brian said with a smile. "But Mitchell, I'm just a new advertising firm in town, trying to find my way in the big city."

"And Brian, you're providing us all with such interesting gossip and speculation."

"I'm so glad that you're amused."

"I just wanted to have a little fun with you," Mitchell finally said.

"I can see that you're rather enjoying yourself."

"On a more serious note, I gather that you know a little more about the three architectural firms we're acquiring."

"Yes, my staff and I had a chance to look at some of their advertising. I take it that you would like your new campaign to integrate touches of each of those firms where possible. The firms that you're acquiring are tops in their own fields. I'm sure that you don't want to lose sight of THAT fact as we create the future campaigns for the combined company."

"Is that possible? We want to remind everyone who we've been...but also the new entity that we will be becoming."

"Even though you're technically acquiring these firms, I would imagine that you want the impression in the marketplace to stress the blending of your twin expertise and design cultures. You don't want those three firms, which you carefully selected, to completely disappear. These firms have excellent reputations in their own rights, in their respective markets, which I assume was why you acquired them in the first place."

"Say no more...I can see that you're already on an interesting path."

"I only wanted you to stop by, so that I could properly congratulate you. Also Toni has some information about the three acquisition firms that we thought you might find interesting. I would have sent the information to you by courier, but I decided it was just as easy to ask you to come in and pick it up personally. I'm going to just enjoy my front row seat as I watch this town wake up to the fact you're here. I'm also going to enjoy watching you in action," Mitchell said with a smile.

Brian didn't want to respond to Mitchell's continued amusement, so he simply said, "I'll be sure to share your congratulations with Justin."

Mitchell and Brian said their goodbyes and waited until Toni returned with the additional material. Toni then offered to escort Brian back to the reception area.

As Brian was walking with Toni, they were chatting easily, and Brian happened to mention that Cynthia might be arriving soon. Toni commented that Brian's life would probably run much smoother once she was here.

Toni also suggested that Cynthia give her a call once she's arrived, sometimes it's very helpful to have someone to help you get settled. Then Toni indicated that this was a purely personal offer and had nothing to do with their two firms. Brian hardily agreed as he thanked Toni for her consideration.

After his meeting with Barrister, Wilkins & Evans, Brian returned once again to the comfort of his Limo. Today had been a most interesting day to say the least. There had been several events today that he never predicted, including the fact that he found that he was having a dinner meeting with Andrew David.

Brian took a moment to wonder how Justin's painting was going. He wanted to call, but he knew that Justin was probably quite busy as he tried to finish his painting for Milan. Brian still secretly hoped that Justin would let him take a peek at the masterpiece before it was shipped off to the committee for its consideration. He kept wondering which of his body parts, Justin had decided to use after all.

Finally, Brian allowed himself one more smile as he reached for his telephone.

Chapter 17 – And It Continues

Thursday Afternoon...(Day 53)

"Spyder, it's Adam. We haven't talked in almost a week, so I just thought that I should check and see what you have going on. I was hoping we could get together for dinner," Adam tried to mask all his new concerns as he talked to Spyder. "I'm buying..."

"You know, Adam. I would love to get together, but I just found out that I'm going to Paris, and I have quite a lot of loose ends to handle before I go. Can I get a rain check?" Spyder asked. "Why don't I call you when I get back next week?"

"Sure. But why are you going to Paris? I thought that you had enough of Europe."

"I never said that I had enough of Europe! What I said was that I decided to live here in New York. This is just a short trip as a favor to a client. I do like to keep my clients happy."

"That's why your clients keep coming back," Adam reminded him.

"That...and I have a hot business partner that they can't resist," Spyder couldn't help adding.

"So, is the Artist going with you?" Adam asked

"Not this trip. Taylor is locked away in his studio. He has several shows coming up."

"I did notice that his Cincinnati and New York shows were mentioned in the A&E article."

"Gee, Adam, I see that you did pay close attention to that article on Sunday," Spyder couldn't resist teasing.

"I always pay attention to my competition," Adam pointed out sarcastically.

"I don't see why," Spyder innocently responded. "Taylor isn't your competition."

"Yes, but I figure that he and Brian aren't going to be very far apart for very long. So, I'm now going to become a more avid reader of the A&E section."

"Wouldn't you think that Kinnetik would merit a write up in the business section to make your job easier?" Spyder suggested with a smirk.

"Don't worry, I'm monitoring that section of the paper as well," Adam stated. "I'm definitely keeping an eye on both of them."

"But Adam, let me warn you that Brian and Taylor are constantly on the move. Keeping an eye on them isn't going to leave you much time to get any real work done. Did you ever consider that?" Spyder was quick to point out.

"It's my business to know what my competition is up to," Adam quickly clarified.

"Where have I heard that before?" Spyder mumbled to himself. "Well, I'd love to continue this repartee with you, but I really do have things to take care of before I leave."

"No problem, just call me when you get back. You know how I enjoy, keeping you company as you unpack?" Adam teased, remembering the last occasion that this occurred.

"I'll make a mental note of that."

"Do you know when you'll be back?"

"I would like to say within a few days, but with this client, I can never quite tell. It could be as long a week or so."

"It doesn't matter. Just call me when you get back," Adam insisted.

"I'll do that. And Adam, try to stay out of trouble," Spyder said, causing Adam to laugh.

Adam and Spyder said goodbye to each other.

Spyder gathered a few notes and headed out the door.

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About a half-hour later, Spyder arrived at Justin's studio and knocked on the door.

"What are you doing here?" Justin asked as he opened the door. "Don't tell me, Brian sent you here to check on me?"

"I will admit that your partner is ever vigilant where you're concerned, but I wasn't sent here on guard-duty this time," Spyder said with a laugh. "I just came by to make sure that everything is clear about the graphics that you need to work on next week. We thought that we would have this time to work on things together, but your Signor Silvestri, for some unknown reason, had other plans for me," he added.

"Just be careful that Signor Silvestri doesn't marry you off to one of his daughters while you're in Paris," Justin teased.

"Aside from the fact that Maria and Cristina only tolerate me because I'm your assistant, it's still clear to anyone who cares to look that the entire family has given their heart to you. They will just wait for you and Brian to have kids, and then they will appropriate your kids as their grandkids," Spyder enjoyed pointing out. "Don't you know anything about Italian customs?"

Justin put his hands on his hips to show his obvious annoyance with the route that Spyder had chosen to take in this conversation. Then he glared just for good measure.

Spyder could feel the annoyance, radiating from Justin and quickly decided to bring the topic back to the graphics.

"Did you get a chance to look at my notes?" he finally asked.

"I looked at them as soon as I got back," Justin explained. "I think I understand what you want. Your sketches were pretty clear...even if they weren't fine art."

"Are we back to those trucks again?" Spyder protested with a smirk. "I would say that you made good use of my trucks."

"I would have to agree that Nicky was very happy with your trucks...and no, I wasn't making fun of your drawings," Justin said with a laugh. "Seriously, we did the original website design for the firm. These really are just minor modifications. As you said, our replacements should have been able to do this stuff themselves. I'll have everything ready for you when you return."

"You know, you can always email me stuff? I'll have my laptop. I'll need something to do while I'm riding around Paris in those Limos."

"Won't you be seeing friends? I mean, when you're not refereeing things between Eyeconics and the Silvestris?"

"Taylor, my objective here is to ride in Limos, coordinate, and get out of Paris without anyone knowing that I was even there," Spyder said resolutely. "I want to leave my past behind me."

Justin quickly pointed out, "I really do have to order those books on Amazon," he insisted. "My French is horrible, but this would be worth curling up with a French dictionary and losing several nights' sleep to figure things out. Especially, since Brian's going to be tied up this weekend with business stuff."

Spyder immediately started to argue. "Will you leave things alone? You just like to stir up trouble. Fortunately, if you should manage to get your hands on anything that I wrote, you'll have to remember that I wrote it a long time ago, AND that what I wrote is FIC-TION."

"But, everybody knows that all good fiction is based in fact. I just have to be able to sort out your facts," Justin said with some determination. "This could take some extensive research."

"Brian warned me that you're always up for intrigue. I would think that with all the painting that you have to do, that should keep you busy. Obviously, I was wrong. Who did you say your agent was? I definitely need to see if I can get her to do something about eliminating all this free time you seem to be developing. Oh yes, I can see that you will be much easier to control now that you're actually here in town," Spyder rattled on.

"I would be nicer to me, if I were you," Justin said, with his hands, once again, on his hips. Spyder just innocently glared at him. "Or, the next thing you know... Signor Silvestri will have you in Switzerland with him," Justin said with a wicked smile.

"Under normal circumstances, I would be trembling," Spyder said with a mock shudder. "But right now, Signor Silvestri has two new family members to bring into the fold, and I suspect he's beginning to find out how much trouble you and Brian can really be. He may be going to Paris, but trust me, he'll be back here in New York next week. So, you're going to have to think up a new threat," he added with a bold laugh. "And stay away from my books...you have more important things to do!" Spyder insisted, once again, for good measure.

Justin laughed. "Only if you promise to tell me all about Paris when you return!" he challenged.

Spyder sighed deeply. "Okay, but you realize that there won't be anything to tell. I'll take pictures from the Limo, so you can see Paris. How does that sound? That's probably all I'll be doing, except for hanging around at the Showcase."

"We'll see about that..."

"I'm flying out with the Silvestris tomorrow, so I probably won't talk to you again before I leave," Spyder said softly. "I understand from Brian that you have a painting to finish by tomorrow. How's it coming?"

"I'm beginning to understand that a painting is never really finished. Some artists work on one painting for a lifetime. I haven't been working on this one that long," Justin said with a laugh, pointing to his easel. "We'll just have to send it to Milan and see what the artistic panel thinks."

"The painting will be another Justin Taylor masterpiece," Spyder reassured him. "Everyone knows that. You're just having the artistic version of butterflies. It's perfectly natural. Everything is going to be okay. Just think, If Milan doesn't like the painting, you'll sell it here in the states for a lot of money, which should keep us in mocha lattes until we get another client," he teased.

"Leave it to you to reduce the world to mocha lattes," Justin said with a laugh that released a lot of tension.

"And let's not forget about the Limos..." Spyder added with a corresponding laugh.

Justin just shook his head. "Have a great trip. I'll take care of things here with our clients while you're gone," he said, as he and Spyder hugged each other and said their final goodbyes.

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Adam sat in his office, facing his usual blank wall for contemplation. He had returned from Barrister, Wilkins & Evans and his unexpected encounter with Brian. He had tried to talk to Spyder. So, all the rumors were true. Brian was really in town, Adam had seen him with his own eyes. The competition was now on.

At that moment, Adam resented Brian Kinney again.

Adam knew that it probably didn't make sense. But he was sure that when Brian looked up at a blank wall to try to create a campaign...there was probably a magnificent Justin Taylor Original hanging there for inspiration.

For just a moment, Adam envisioned Brian creating his amazing campaigns surrounded by art on-par-with the Sistine Chapel, calling forth Divine inspiration and award-winning slogans.

Then Adam laughed as he realized that he'd allowed his over-active imagination to run away with him, once again.

After all, Brian wasn't the only one that had won awards. Why did the presence of Brian Kinney in New York suddenly make Adam forget what a good advertising man that he himself was? After all, he hadn't wasted his time in Pittsburgh...no he had won his stripes in the big time...New York City.

As Adam was patting himself on the back, he couldn't help wondering how Brian was managing to get all these prime accounts. Eyeconics/Belluss Occhiali Joint Venture, Liberty Air Account had followed him from Vanguard, as had several other major accounts. He had recently been rumored to have penned an agreement with The Pentland Group, before any other agency even knew that the firm was even looking for a new agency. And now, even though Kinnetik didn't even have an office in New York yet, they were competing with Kennedy & Collins and the other big firms for the Barrister, Wilkins & Evans account. How could this happen?

A knock on his office door interrupted this private musings. It was now time for Adam to get back to his real work. His team was now ready. He had other campaigns to create.

Chapter 18 – The Dinner Meeting

Late Thursday Afternoon...(Day 53)

"I take it that you and Theodore should be arriving tomorrow," Brian said confidently.

"Brian, there has been a lot going on here," Cynthia cautiously pointed out.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that," Brian said sternly.

"There was a mix up with the magazine placement of the new Dandy Lube ads. Ted and I have been on the phone most of the afternoon, trying to get everything resolved."

"Is there anything that I can do," Brian asked, feeling slightly guilty that he had left his staff to handle these matters while he focused on the next stage of Kinnetik's growth.

"Ted and I didn't want you to worry. Believe me, everything is under control. Otherwise, we would have been on the phone to you right away. Ted and I took care of everything. Crisis averted! Except that we both think we need to stay in town, rather than make the trip to New York at this moment," Cynthia said, as she held her breath for Brian's reaction.

"I was hoping that you and Theodore would be able to get away to look at several possible locations, but I can see that what you're doing is far more important. You and Theodore just continue doing what you've been doing. I will find a way to manage things here."

"Thanks for understanding," Cynthia said with some relief. Then she paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. "So, how have things been going there?"

Brian relayed the events of his ambush meeting with Leo Brown and the trio of Eric Chambraux, Kevin Andrin, and Peter Eisler. Brian explained that he had signed consulting agreements, which he would send to the office later tonight.

Cynthia found the events quite funny, especially when Brian relayed Rudolpho Silvestri's part in everything. She so wanted to remind Brian of Justin's words of caution when he decided to get involved with the Silvestri Family, but she knew better. So, she just smiled to herself, as she realized that once again Justin had been right. She couldn't wait until she was finally there in New York and working more closely with Brian, so she could watch everything continue to play out, and she knew that she was definitely going to continue to "love her job."

"So, we have three potential new clients," Cynthia said instead. "Our New York base is really growing."

"Yes it is, and we're going to have a lot of work to do," Brian reminded her.

"With you and Justin at the helm...we're ready," Cynthia reminded him. "How's Justin's painting coming?"

"He's been sequestered in his studio ever since we got back to the city, so I think he'll have everything finished in time. I have a dinner meeting tonight with Andrew David, so he should have a little extra time to paint in peace."

"Give him a hug for me," Cynthia said with a smile, and then she waited for Brian's predictable reaction.

"I'll relay the message of the hug to him," Brian said solemnly.

And Cynthia could hear that his remark was predictably punctuated with one raised eyebrow, and all that she could do was try not to laugh.

Cynthia and Brian said their goodbyes, and now Cynthia finally had a chance to enjoy her laugh and once again, echo, "I love my job!"

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It took Brian a moment to reflect on the change of his plans for tomorrow. Cynthia and Ted would not be coming to New York. Brian first decided that this would give him some time to work on his many projects. But as he reconsidered his options, he realized that this would also give him a chance to personally look over some locations that Jennifer had suggested. Then he decided to let the scheduled appointment stand for tomorrow morning with the New York realtor that Jennifer suggested.

Brian looked at the time and decided he still had time to make a few more calls.

"Theodore!" Brian said gleefully. "I just talked to Cynthia. What have you done to my company?" he grumbled.

Ted tried to pay no attention to Brian's grumble. "We're just trying to hold down the fort," he admitted. "The magazine screwed up, but Cynthia and I managed to get everything straightened out. How are things going in New York?" Ted quickly asked, making sure to quickly change the subject.

Brian relayed the events of his unusual meeting from this morning. He also mentioned that he was on his way to an evening meeting with Andrew David.

Ted could hear that Brian, as expected, was unusually busy. Ted hoped that this wouldn't leave any time for Brian to antagonize him further.

"Once I get back to the loft tonight," Brian began, "I'll fax you a series of agreements. We appear to have three new clients. According to the agreements they signed, their retainers should be wired into our account. I just thought I should let you know, so that you won't be surprised by any unexplained deposits."

"I really appreciate that, Bri. It always helps to know precisely what's going on."

"I try to do my best," Brian said with a smirk. "Well, let me get to my meeting. I'll send you all the documents we talked about."

Brian and Ted said their goodbyes.

Brian made a few courtesy calls to a few leads that he wanted to pursue in the coming weeks.

Then, he looked at his watch and discovered that it was now time to go to his meeting with Andrew David.

Brian's day had been so busy that he had missed lunch, and now he was well aware that he was hungry. He preferred having his dinners with Justin, but even he couldn't be terribly upset about a chance for dinner at the Harvard Club.

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Brian's Limo pulled up in front of the Harvard Club. The brownstone façade of the stately building set a proper business tone to the meeting that was about to occur. He had real hopes that this meeting with Andrew would be a decided improvement over his morning meeting.

Brian entered the lobby and proceeded to identify himself and indicated who he was waiting for.

As directed, Brian made himself comfortable in one of the over-stuffed mahogany chairs to wait.

While Brian was there he had the opportunity to take in the rich, old world décor of the club. There was nothing modern about the Harvard Club. All the furniture was dark and classy. The chair that he was sitting in reminded him of the oversized chairs at Bri-tin, and Brian started to miss the mansion just a little.

The walls were covered in mahogany paneling, with touches of Harvard Red periodically interrupting the all dark interior. As Brian was waiting, he so wished that Justin was here with him.

A few minutes later, Andrew David appeared. "Brian, I'm so glad that you're here. I promise you this evening's meeting will be much more relaxed than what happened this morning," he said with a slight laugh.

"I'm rather glad to hear that," Brian said with a smile. "I do have several important things to discuss with you."

"I must say that I'm looking forward to this," Andrew said with a smile. "I thought that we would enjoy the evening buffet here," he added. "But I also thought that you might enjoy some privacy, so I reserved one of the private rooms, so we should be able to eat and work without interruption."

Andrew and Brian stopped to freshen up a bit before they sequestered themselves in the private room.

As they entered their private room, they found that the club had arrayed their food on a table at one end of the room. There was an array of interesting soups, salads, and entrees. Brian chose the Caesar Salad with shaved Parmesan and crotons. For an entrée he chose the saffron seared bass with fennel, tomato, and olives served with roasted vegetables. Brian smiled as he prepared his plate and realized that he had avoided the dreaded carbs even if it was before 7 pm.

Andrew David joined Brian in the Caesar Salad, but instead of the fish, he opted for the truffle crusted French cut chicken breast. "You know, Brian, we're going to have to meet here more often for dinner. The Harvard Club is noted for its nontraditional use of truffles. Just in case you need additional inspiration to develop those commercials that Eric, Kevin, and Peter were hinting about," he added with a smile.

"You just had to bring up the meeting from this morning," Brian said with a smirk.

"I'm sorry, Brian," Andrew said less than apologetically, "You have to admit that sort of meeting doesn't happen every day. I just have to wonder what else Rudolpho has in store for you. I don't know how to tell you this, but Rudolpho is extremely fond of you. But I seem to be benefiting too. After all, he even managed to get Leo out of Chicago to come here to New York to discuss moving forward with our deal. I can't wait to see what Rudolpho does next," he added.

"Rudolpho has a showcase in Paris, I think we have about one week before he creates additional mischief," Brian said with a smile.

Over dinner, Andrew and Brian talked easily.

"In all the excitement this morning, I didn't get a chance to congratulate you on your legal union with your partner," Andrew said easily. "Obviously, I saw your picture in the A&E section like the rest of New York. I must admit that the two of you make a great couple."

"Thank you," Brian said with a smile. "We're pretty happy about things."

"But I noticed that the article didn't say anything about you setting up an office here in New York. Doesn't that bother you?"

"As you're aware, I've been in and out of the city for over a year. No one pays any attention to me. Justin is the celebrity in this relationship, and I think I'm just going to leave it that way," Brian said with a smile.

"I understand that your partner is an artist. I know that he has an upcoming show at the Thornton Gallery. That's very a prestigious gallery. He must be very talented."

"Of course, I think so," Brian said with smile.

"But, you still have Rudolpho to contend with. I must admit that you're handling his interference rather well. He did mention something about you now being family, so that gives him a little additional leeway," Andrew added with a slight laugh. "If the mind of Rudolpho Silvestri never sleeps, you do have to wonder what he'll be up to next."

"I'm going to pretend that I don't have to think about it," Brian said with a shake of his head.

"Sometimes, that is the best strategy," Andrew had to agree, but he knew that things with Rudolpho were far from over.

"Now let me show you some ideas that my staff came up with," Brian began. He now had Andrew David's undivided attention as he made his presentation.

When Brian finished his presentation, Andrew had a lot to think about.

Andrew especially noted the suggestions about the websites. Once Brian pointed out that they needed significant work and showed him the underlying reasons, he wanted to take the suggestions back to his office in London for further consideration.

Andrew already knew that some of the inadequacies that Brian pointed out about some of their existing campaigns were absolutely correct. He was just amazed that Brian and Kinnetik could zero in on their key problems so quickly. He was very glad that he listened to Rudolpho Silvestri and Leo Brown when they recommended Kinnetik to him. The Pentland Group had worked with a lot of agencies. Many seemed to flounder before they could assess the problem. Kinnetik was on the mark right out of the gate. Andrew really liked that.

Andrew agreed that even though he was returning to London, he would definitely stay in touch with Brian over the coming weeks.

Andrew casually mentioned that there was a new product that he and Leo wanted to develop together. He mentioned that everything was in the early stages, but they were both excited about the concept. Andrew explained that if they pulled it off, it would revolutionize competitive water sports. Brian couldn't wait to hear more about their future development efforts.

When the meeting was over, Andrew talked Brian into joining him for a dessert and brandy. Since Justin wasn't here for Brian to blame for his intake of high caloric desserts, Brian settled on the fresh fruit sorbet. Andrew had the same. The two men enjoyed their dessert and brandy together, as the evening ended.

Finally, Andrew said goodbye as he walked Brian out to his Limo. Both men had thoroughly enjoyed their evening.

Brian got in the Limo and finally had a moment to take a breath, and the first thing he did was reach for his phone.

Chapter 19 – The Plaza

Thursday Night...(Day 53)

"Hey," Justin said when he finally answered his phone. "How was your hot date?"

"My dinner meeting with the client was pretty successful, at least compared to the meeting we had this morning," Brian pointed out.

"So, you got a lot accomplished?"

"I think so. How about you?"

"I'm not sure," Justin said softly.

"I can't say that I like the way that sounds."

"I'm having trouble with this painting. I just hope that I didn't take things too far," Justin said sadly, and Brian could hear the tension in his voice.

"Did you eat?" Brian innocently asked.

"Brian..." Justin immediately started to argue.

"It was just a question, Sunshine. Don't go getting defensive." Brian challenged. Justin didn't say anything. "Look, I'm going to the loft to change. Then, I'm going to pick up something for you. I'm on my way to your studio. But Justin, you just may be over-thinking things."

"Maybe...." Justin finally said quietly.

Brian guessed that was probably the case. After all, there was nothing that Justin liked better than over-thinking any problem.

"I'll see you shortly," Brian said. "Later..."

Brian closed his phone and redirected his driver to go back to the loft. He quickly changed his clothes, dressing in designer jeans and a sweater. Next, he spent a few minutes packing a small bag and made a few phone calls. Once everything had been taken care of, Brian quickly returned to the Limo.

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Within the hour Brian knocked at Justin's studio.

When Justin answered the door, Brian swept Justin into his arms and kissed him passionately.

"I've missed you," Brian finally said when he came up for air.

"I've missed you too," Justin said, kissing him again. "But you have to be careful, you're going to get paint all over you," he began to complain.

"I don't care..." Brian whispered, and he really didn't care, for holding Justin felt very good. "I've got the perfect idea."

"What?" Justin asked, already wondering what his partner was up to now.

"I've come to kidnap you," Brian said suggestively, adding eyebrow movements to punctuate the idea.

"Kidnap me? Why? Where?"

"I have a hotel suite at The Plaza. I've decided to fuck you into the mattress. Then, if you're still able to walk, you can come back here and work on your painting. I'll even keep you company while you paint," Brian suggested.

"You'll do anything to try to get a look at my painting, won't you?" Justin said with a laugh.

"How can you say that?" Brian protested with a smirk. "I just offered to give up a night's sleep for your art," he pointed out, gently touching his hand to his heart. "And if you still need any of my body parts, I'll be very close at hand and can easily model for you. See...I've thought of everything?"

Justin so wanted to protest, but Brian was kissing him, which meant that any opposition was now impossible.

Once Brian finally released him, Justin finished cleaning up the studio, and then he went to change into the clothes that Brian had brought. Brian meanwhile had made himself comfortable on the futon to patiently wait.

Once Justin had changed, Brian smiled and said, "That's better!"

"I'm glad that you think so," Justin said with a sigh.

Brian pulled Justin onto his lap and started nibbling on his ear. "After all, it's time for me to have my way with you," Brian said lustfully.

Justin smiled and finally stood up, pulling Brian with him.

Brian slid his arm around Justin's waist.

Brian carefully noted that Justin was no longer protesting, as they made their way to the waiting Limousine.

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Since Brian had handled all the paperwork earlier, he simply nodded to the desk clerk at the Plaza Hotel as he walked by with Justin. They entered the elevator along with a few other guests, and simply smiled at each other as the elevator ascended to their floor.

They quickly located their suite, and Brian reached into his pocket for the required card key.

When Brian opened the door, Justin realized that their luggage had already been delivered to the suite.

Justin flopped down on the sofa and looked up at Brian with sad eyes.

"Now, do you want to talk about the problem with your painting?" Brian asked. "Or, do you want to eat first?"

"What makes you think that I'm hungry?" Justin protested.

"You wouldn't be having this much trouble with your painting if you had eaten," Brian insisted. "No problem...room service should be here soon."

"But you don't know what I want," Justin argued, not really intending to be so much trouble but unable to stop his drama queen moment.

"I guessed," Brian said patiently. "Hopefully, some little morsel will be on the cart that you'll want to eat. Otherwise, you can call down and order something that you prefer."

Justin continued to sulk, hugging himself in the process.

At that precise moment, there was a knock on the door.

"See... food?" Brian said with a smile.

Justin just glared at him, for Brian could be so annoying sometimes.

Brian opened the door. The attendant wheeled in the room service cart and quickly disappeared.

Brian nudged Justin up to a sitting position, so that Brian could sit beside him.

Brian lifted the covers from the various items on the cart. The food aroma sailed past Justin's nose, and his stomach chose that moment to rumble.

Justin suddenly realized that maybe he WAS hungry. "I'm sorry," he said, realizing that he'd been a beast to deal with.

"And no dessert until you've eaten your dinner," Brian insisted with a smirk.

"So, will you share my dessert with me if I'm good and eat all my dinner," Justin asked, sounding more like Gus than he intended.

"Justin, I ordered the Chocolate Death dessert for you. It's after 7pm. Surely..."

While Brian was arguing, Justin reached for a spoonful of the dessert and managed to spoon it into Brian's mouth, cutting off all conversation. Brian became silent as he savored the unexpected dessert.

Justin couldn't help but laugh. He was starting to feel much better now.

Brian was glad to see Justin smile although he saw no reason to encourage Justin any further in his pursuit of mischief.

Justin was now ready to stop being so much trouble and give in to his hunger.

Brian had carefully chosen a small side salad with dressing. He chose the chopped sirloin steak as the entree. He had also chosen the au gratin potatoes with asparagus as the side dishes. Obviously, he had chosen the Chocolate Death dessert. He ordered a soda for Justin, but also a glass of his favorite Merlot.

Justin quickly attacked the meal that Brian had ordered for him.

Brian could finally smile.

When Justin finished eating, he and Brian shared the dessert together.

"Now that you've been fed, I don't have to worry about hearing your stomach rumble as I having my way with you," Brian said, definitely focused on the next task at hand.

"Will you really go back to my studio with me tonight while I try to fix the painting?" Justin sheepishly asked.

"After I've had my way with you...of course," Brian agreed.

In that moment, Justin realized how much Brian loved him.

Now that Justin had eaten, he was rejuvenated and ready to pay attention to Brian. He straddled Brian's lap and began kissing him.

"Justin, what do you think you're doing?" Brian struggled to ask in between kisses.

Justin gently nudged Brian over so he was now lying flat on his back on the sofa, and Justin easily climbed on top of him.

Brian seemed to always be surprised when he found himself in this position. And, as he remembered, he'd found himself in this position quite a lot lately.

"You know, I rather like this position..." Justin decided to boldly announce.

"Sunshine, I could have sworn that we talked about this earlier, and we agreed that you would stop doing this," Brian tried to feebly insist, when the truth was that he rather enjoyed having Justin take the lead.

Justin stopped his hand from sliding under Brian's sweater just long enough to challenge with his innocent question, "What?"

"What good does it do for us to make rules if you're not going to pay any attention to them?" Brian tried to argue his way around the new array of kisses. "You were kidnapped, don't you remember?" he tried to point out. "Kidnapped...so that I could have my way with you! You got 1500s on you SATs, I'm sure that you see that something is wrong with our current situation," Brian felt the need to point out the obvious.

"I see nothing wrong with this situation," Justin innocently said. "We just had a slight change of plans," he added.

"See, that's precisely why WE leave planning to ME. Whenever you get involved in planning, things get off kilter...just like now," Brian added as he learned up to kiss Justin with a smile. "Of course, if you would get off of me, we could actually check out our bedroom." he innocently mentioned.

"There really is no end to what you will come up with to try to get out of your current predicament, is there?" Justin challenged, as he once again found his way under Brian's sweater.

Justin nipped and licked his way down Brian's chest, while Brian continued to complain until he felt Justin swallow his cock.

"Oh..." Brian remarked, completely surprised by Justin's move.

Brian found himself threading his fingers in Justin's hair as his own body began to thrust forward. He experienced a mixture of emotions all caused by Justin's expert touch. Then everything happened so quickly, as he found himself being pushed over the edge and shooting down the back of Justin's throat. And, now that he thought about it, maybe he shouldn't complain so much.

Once Justin had licked him clean, Brian pulled Justin back on top of him and started to kiss him. Justin surrendered to the kiss as their tongues began to battle for dominance. Brian then began to slide his own hands under Justin's shirt. Brian allowed himself to savor the additional skin-to-skin contact.

"Maybe we should move this to the bedroom," Brian was finally able to say.

"Good idea," Justin said breathlessly.

Once again, Justin struggled to get off of Brian, and then he reluctantly helped Brian get up from his position on the sofa.

Once Brian could finally stand up, Justin wrapped his arms around him and kissed him again.

"Now what was that for?" Brian innocently asked.

"Thanks for kidnapping me," Justin said quietly.

"My pleasure, Sunshine...." Brian said, pulling Justin along with him into the bedroom.

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The bedroom of the suite had lots of room in which to maneuver, and Brian and Justin enjoyed each other for several hours, using every available inch of space.

Brian and Justin finally fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms, for it had truly been a very long day and both of them could use a little rest.

A few hours later, Brian woke up first, as usual, and enjoyed having Justin wrapped around him.

Justin tried to move, but found himself trapped in Brian's arms.

"And, where do you think you're going?" Brian asked, already knowing the answer.

"Nowhere, it appears," Justin said with a smile. "But, we need to take a shower," he added. "I don't suppose that I can get you to carry me into the shower?" he asked.

"Not a chance, Sunshine," Brian said with a laugh. "But I think if we work together, we can make it there."

"Now, there's a thought...working together," Justin mumbled. "I like the sound of that."

"So, once we get our shower, what did you have in mind?" Brian innocently asked.

"There's a futon in my studio just waiting for you," Justin reminded him. "I, on the other hand, have just a little bit of work left to do on my painting," he reminded Brian.

"Ah yes, the painting..." Brian said, "So, you're ready to have another go at it?"

"I must admit that after being kidnapped," Justin leaned over and kissed Brian gently. "I think I'm ready."

Brian made his way to the shower to adjust the water temperature for Justin. Then, he returned to finally nudge Justin out of bed.

The water of the shower was rejuvenating. And, since the size of the shower would easily accommodate both of them, they easily found other things to do besides simply soaping each other, as Justin handed Brian a condom.

"You're ready to go again?" Brian asked with a laugh as he took the condom out of Justin's hand.

"There's no such thing as enough," Justin reminded him with appropriate eyebrow movements for emphasis.

Even though The Plaza had an unlimited supply of hot water, Brian and Justin had to end their water activities as Brian noticed that Justin's skin was starting to wrinkle.

It was now time to get dressed and travel in the night back to Justin's studio, for he had a very important painting to finish.

They quickly got dressed, and since Brian had previously made arrangements with the hotel for late night limo service, he simply called down to the concierge desk as they were leaving the suite. They also asked that housekeeping tidy up the suite while they were gone.

The Limo was waiting for them at the front of the hotel, and they quickly got inside and made themselves comfortable for the short ride to Justin's studio.

Chapter 20 – Back At the Studio

Late Thursday Night...(Day 53)

Once inside the studio, Brian made himself comfortable on the futon while Justin changed into his painting clothes again.

"You know, I can't remember if we've properly initiated your new futon," Brian said with an evil grin.

"Oh no, you don't!" Justin quickly protested. "I have a painting to finish, and you have to get ready for Cynthia and Ted's visit tomorrow."

"Cynthia and Ted are swamped, handling things at the Pittsburgh office. So, they won't be coming tomorrow, but Jennifer gave us the name of realtor here, so I think that I will look at a few places tomorrow. I know that you'll be painting away here in your studio."

"I could go with you, if you want..." Justin volunteered.

Brian knew that Justin would accompany him if he asked, but this time he wasn't going to ask. "No, I just need to get a feel for the pulse of this city. You have more important things to do," he added with a smile.

Justin finally went over to his easel and repositioned it so that Brian couldn't see what he was working on. He knew from experience that Brian could be pretty sneaky, when it came to trying to peek at a painting that he had in progress.

Brian finally made himself comfortable on the futon, and appeared to be behaving himself...this time.

Brian was working on his laptop, while Justin painted. Justin really liked having Brian there with him. True, Brian didn't read aloud to him like Gus did or talk to him like Nicky liked to do, but it just felt good having Brian there.

Within a few hours, Justin took a step back and looked at the painting.

Justin was satisfied with what he saw, so at last Justin could finally smile. He was now ready to sign and title his painting. The signature part was easy...JTaylor, but the title was more difficult.

Finally, he closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, there was only one title that would do, "Armani-Clad Picassos In-Training".

And with that, Justin knew that this was going to be one of his favorite paintings.

Justin started to clean up, and he took another look at the painting.

Justin couldn't resist a smile. "Okay Brian, it's done."

"Really?" Brian asked with some excitement. He held his breath. To be so close to the painting and not be able to at least peek at Justin's masterpiece was driving him crazy. He'd kept hoping that Justin would take pity on him. 'After all he and Justin were legal partners now,' he tried to remind himself.

"Yes..." Justin simply replied.

"And how do you feel about it?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"I think that I actually like this painting."

"That's good," Brian said, still holding his breath.

Justin walked over to Brian and straddled his lap. He leaned down and gave Brian a gentle kiss. "Would you like to see it?" he quietly asked.

"You're really going to let me see it?" Brian asked in disbelief.

"I want to know what you think..." Justin said, as he started to stand up, pulling Brian along with him over to the easel.

Justin lifted slowly lifted the cover.

Brian could finally see the painting. He took a few minutes to take in all that he was seeing. "Sunshine, it's magical," he finally said with a sigh. "And you were so right...this is clearly some of your best work. It's wonderful," he gushed.

Justin smiled as Brian reached over and wrapped his arms around him and kissed him.

"You used my body parts," Brian commented with a laugh.

"Yes, the painting just wasn't complete without them," Justin said with a smile.

"Justin, it's a beautiful painting," Brian said with a sigh. "I can't believe that you decided to capture this on canvas."

"It just seemed fitting somehow," Justin said with a smile. "Do you really like it?"

"What's not to like?" Brian said with a deep sigh. "Just wait until Gus and Nicky see it."

"Hopefully, they will get to see it during the exhibition while we're on vacation."

"Why not just skip the exhibit, and let me buy the painting now?" Brian suggested.

"No! Then what would I submit to the Committee?"

"Surely, you have another painting lying around that you could submit?" Brian teased.

Justin took a step back. "Brian! See, this is why I didn't want to show it to you in the first place. I knew that I should have made you wait to see it in its proper setting, hopefully while we were on vacation," Justin complained. "But you looked so sad sitting over there, that I felt sorry for you."

Brian walked up behind Justin and wrapped his arms around him from behind. He gently kissed Justin on the cheek. "I love your painting, and I'm glad that you let me see it. I can't help it if I'm partial to your art," he said in his own defense. "I love you," he said quietly.

"I love you too," Justin replied as he gently touched Brian's cheek.

"So, shall we initiate your futon, or are you ready to go back to the hotel?"

"Let's go back to the hotel. I have plans for you," Justin said with a smile. "The painting needs time to finish drying. I'll come back in the morning and pack it up for shipment to Milan."

Brian called for Limo service, and when it arrived, both of them got into the Limo and headed back to The Plaza. At last, Justin could finally relax. This painting was done, and he and Brian were simply together.

And, all alone in Justin's New York studio, on the easel, was the painting, "Armani-Clad Picassos in-Training by JTaylor".

The magnificent painting sat alone on the easel in the studio to finish drying during the night.

In the morning this painting would be packed and shipped and sent by courier to Milan, where the Artistic Panel of Pinacoteca Ambrosiana would get a chance to critically review the painting and decide if one JTaylor was to be included in this summer's Esposizione Internazionale Artisti Emergenti (Translation: The Exhibition of International Emerging Artists).

Chapter 21 – A Full Agenda

Friday Morning...(Day 54)

Brian awakened first, and it took him a few moments to remember why he was in this luxurious, spacious room, for he clearly knew that they were no longer in Justin's loft. Of course, as long as Justin was beside him, Brian really didn't care where he was. And Justin was clearly beside him and partially on top of him. Brian smiled as he realized that this was becoming the way the mornings were going to be. And for Brian it felt very good to wake up each morning with Justin and to go to bed every night with Justin...in the same bed. Brian smiled.

"What are you smiling about?" Justin immediately asked, as if Brian's smile had been what had awakened him.

"I'm surprised that you're awake so early. We both had a rather late night," Brian pointed out.

"Right...the painting....I have to pack it up and ship it off to Milan today," Justin reminded himself.

"Yes, you do. The art world is waiting for a new glimpse of my body parts," Brian professed with satisfied smile.

"With all the elements in the painting, I can't believe that YOUR body parts are all that you remember. You really are narcissistic..." Justin complained.

"And persistent," Brian added. "And now you remember the secrets to my success," he added.

"Oh!" Justin groaned. "It's too early for this discussion," he added, now rolling completely on top of Brian.

"So, now that you have me trapped here, what exactly do you plan to do with me?"

Justin leaned down and gave Brian a gentle kiss. "I haven't decided yet, but by being on top, I've given myself a little time to work that out."

"I see..." Brian answered. "Well, while you're thinking about it..." he added as he rolled Justin onto his back, and now Brian was on top. "I must say that I like this extra room to maneuver. Maybe we should have stayed at The Plaza in the first place."

"Oh no!" Justin complained as he looked up at Brian. "After the weekend is over, we're moving back to cramped quarters. You're just too frisky when you have all this room."

Brian simply smiled and began to kiss his way down Justin's chest.

"What are you doing?" Justin innocently asked.

"Been that long, has it? Pay attention...it will come back to you," Brian said, as he resumed kissing his way down Justin's chest.

Justin was about to protest, but he felt Brian administering to his balls. Then he felt Brian swallow his cock. He enjoyed all the sensations he was feeling until he eventually shot down the back of Brian's throat.

Afterwards, Justin smiled as Brian slid on top of him again and kissed him.

"I see that things are coming back to you," Brian said with a smile.

"I think so..."

Later, after Justin returned the blowjob and their usual escapades in the shower, Brian and Justin finally got dressed.

Justin then decided that he would order breakfast for both of them from room service. "I'm sure that Monica is going to miss us this morning," he teased when he had finish placing the order using the keyboard.

"I'm sure she will," Brian said with a laugh. "Wait a minute....you and I didn't discuss what you were going to order for breakfast," he pointed out with some concern.

Justin just smiled a wicked smile.

"Okay, Sunshine what did you order?" Brian had to ask. He could just imagine the fat and calories that could possibly be on the cart. After all, Brian was well aware of what type of foods came on the room service cart when Gus and Justin took the liberty of ordering breakfast.

Brian immediately knew that he was going to have to join a gym for workouts really soon. After all, he was still Brian Kinney, and he still had an image to maintain. He also had an extensive wardrobe of Armani that he wanted to continue to fit properly.

A few moments later, there was a knock on the door. Brian decided to answer it, as he glared at Justin, who once again simply smiled a wicked smile.

The room service attendant wheeled in the cart and quickly disappeared.

Brian lifted all the covers to inspect what Justin had ordered. He found his boring omelet and dry toast among the entrees. Of course, before Brian settled down to enjoy his breakfast, he swiped a blueberry pancake and a slice of bacon from Justin's plate. He then smiled back at Justin with a self-satisfied grin.

"So, this is how it's going to be every morning?" Justin pretended to complain as he poured the coffee from the carafe.

Brian merely sat down across from Justin and accepted his cup of coffee. As he started to dig into his breakfast he said, "I have to keep up my strength..." he said, taking a forkful of the blueberry pancake.

Justin knew not to waste his time commenting any further. "Since Cynthia and Ted aren't here, what's on your agenda for today?" Justin asked with interest.

"I'm meeting the realtor that Jennifer recommended. Today, I'm just going to see what New York has to offer!" Brian pointed out.

"And when I drop you at your studio this morning, I'm going to take one more peek at my body parts before the painting begins its world travels."

"World travels? Brian, the painting is just being shipped to the Artistic Committee in Milan," Justin corrected him. "It's not going on a traveling exhibition or anything."

"Not yet... but that will come later," Brian mumbled.

"Brian...." Justin tried to complain, hoping to return his partner to reality.

After Brian and Justin finished breakfast, Brian called for their Limo, and both of them finally left the room to start their day.

The first stop was Justin's studio, where Brian eagerly followed Justin inside.

Brian immediately stood in front of the painting and smiled. He focused on the images of the two children covered with paint, and Brian knew that when the Gus and Nicky saw themselves in the painting, they were going to be so excited. As far as Brian was concerned, he knew this was another one of Justin's masterpieces...no question about it.

Having seen the painting again, Brian was now ready to start his day, so he kissed Justin and made the usual assurances that Justin's cell phone was turned on and finally said his goodbyes.

Once Brian was gone, Justin, too, had to take one more look at the painting. He confirmed for himself that he had chosen a proper title the painting...Armani-Clad Picassos In-Training. And, even though it was a whimsical painting, Justin still believed that it represented some of his best work.

Justin hoped that his painting met the approval of the Artistic Committee. True, he was still young and still had artistic skills that were developing, but he hoped that the painting would be accepted. Justin understood that his encounter with Pietro Marani was an unexpected opportunity...and as he looked at the painting again, he realized he had done all that he could to seize that opportunity.

Justin began to gather together the things that he would need to package the painting for shipment.

As Justin was bustling about his studio, there was a knock at his studio door.

Justin was totally surprised by this visitor. "Catherine," he said, as he opened the door, "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Since my celebrity clients have a hard time remembering to call their agent, I thought I would take a chance and drop by their studio," Catherine Man explained.

"I didn't think, you even knew where my studio was?" Justin said with a smile as he walked back into the studio.

"With you as a client, I found that I have to be more resourceful than usual," Catherine explained. "I heard that a painting was being shipped today. I was hoping to get a look before it began its world travels," she added.

"What is with you and Brian, the painting isn't going on a worldwide exhibition, it's being sent to the Artistic Committee at Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan," Justin clarified, shaking his head.

"Whatever..." Catherine said. "Can I please see the painting?" she pleaded.

"Catherine, we've had this discussion before," Justin complained. "I really don't like to show my work in advance. I think my paintings should be seen in their proper setting, you know that."

"Of course, I know that, but I checked your website this morning, and your website hadn't been updated for this new painting. You have to understand, Justin, that as your agent I need to stay on top of things. How else can I represent you properly?" Catherine pointed out, hoping that Justin would fall for this line bullshit that she was proposing.

Justin knew that Catherine was laying things on a bit thick, but he simply smiled. "Oh, all right," he finally agreed.

Catherine could hardly wait for the unveiling as she followed him over the easel.

Catherine looked at the painting and sighed deeply. "Justin, the painting is wonderful. Once again, you were trying something new. This is more whimsical than what you usually paint. But, I love it." She then clutched both hands under her chin, as she continued to study the painting. "Those kids look like their having the time of their life," she added with another sigh. "And I love the shirts! They must be Armani."

"I'm afraid so," Justin said with a laugh.

"I love it! I can hardly wait. This painting is going to be the talk of the exhibition," Catherine added.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Justin warned. "It still has to be accepted by the Artistic Committee, and you yourself cautioned that getting accepted was difficult for the international exhibitions...the competition will be fierce. Let's just send this off and wait and see what the Committee decides."

"I understand your caution. I guess I got carried away," Catherine admitted. "Of course, we'll just be patient and wait and see what the Committee says," she quietly agreed. "But, Justin I just want you to know that I love the painting," she quickly added.

"Thanks," Justin finally said with a smile.

"Well, I've taken up enough of your time. I'll let you get back to work. We're getting together on Monday morning to talk about Chicago and a few other things, right?"

"Sure...." Justin agreed.

Catherine simply smiled. "Okay, I'll see you then," she said as she left the studio.

Justin was now ready to package his painting.

As Justin was about to slide the painting in its crate, he took one more look at the painting...and smiled. Then, he packaged the painting securely and called the courier to confirm his International package pick up.

Within the hour the courier arrived and picked up the package containing the painting.

Justin sent an email to Pietro Marani in Milan to let him know that his application and painting to participate in the International Exhibition this summer was on its way.

And now that the painting was shipped, Justin sat down at his computer to begin to write a long overdue email to Daphne.

Quite of lot of things had happened in the last month, and It seemed that Justin had a lot to share with best friend. He knew that Daphne was in some outlying area...somewhere in the world. He only hoped that she would eventually receive all his news, for he definitely had a lot to tell her.

Chapter 22 - Pulse Of The City

Friday Morning...(Day 54)

Brian entered the realtor's office in Midtown and met with Patrick Santori, the realtor that Jennifer had suggested.

During the meeting, Brian handed Patrick his copy of the listing that he had received from Jennifer.

Patrick smiled, "That really won't be necessary. I have the updated listing here," he said.

"Of course you do," Brian said when he stopped to reconsider things.

"Jennifer mentioned that you had been coming into the city on a regular basis over the last year, so I guess that you've had time to explore the city. Is there an area of the city that you would like to focus on for your offices?" Patrick asked.

"When I was traveling to the city, my explorations were completely personal...shopping and art galleries. An office location is an entirely different matter. I just want to be sure that I get my money's worth," Brian mentioned.

"I can understand that. New York Real Estate tends to be rather pricey, but then you don't have to really be in New York City. You could locate your office in one of the adjoining boroughs or even New Jersey, which will give you more square footage for each dollar invested, and still leave you close enough to the action to effectively conduct business," Patrick suggested.

"I see," Brian said, pensively.

"At the moment, parts of Brooklyn or several locations in New Jersey would be very good areas. I understand from Jennifer that you not only have to locate office space, but living space as well. So if you decide to locate your office in New York City proper, you might consider one of the areas beyond the city for general living."

Brian patiently listened to Patrick's suggestions. He knew that he was absolutely correct. Ted had basically told him the same thing during their planning sessions, but somehow it didn't feel quite right to him from a business perspective. Brian had waited for a long time to move to New York, and he pretty much wanted Kinnetik's office in New York City proper, but he would try to keep an open mind.

Likewise, Brian had no desire to live in the suburbs of New York City anymore than he really desired to live in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. Brian was totally clear that he and Justin lived at the mansion in West Virginia because it was the mansion of Justin's dreams...not because either he or Justin wanted to experience suburban living. Brian was really clear that he and Justin were not Ben and Michael or Eli and Monte for that matter...and there was really very little chance that they would suddenly morph into Stepford Fags focused on home and garden.

As for the office location, Justin was already insisting that the Kinnetik-New York office be such that the other ad agencies in the city would sit up and take notice...they would know that Kinnetik had arrived. Brian couldn't suppress a smile as he remembered that particular conversation with Justin, his own personal little advertising mogul.

"Another thing you might consider," Patrick continued, "Is having a small office presence in New York City, but to set up the remainder of your back office operations in convenient locations outside of the city proper. This has become one of the evolving trends as corporations consider the impact of 911 and as companies want to make their business locations more accessible to where their staff actually live...this has proven to be a cost effective alternative for the companies involved," Patrick explained.

Once again, Brian tried to consider this scenario. He envisioned himself riding in Limos to visit his far flung empire. Although Brian, like Spyder, loved riding around in Limos, he also knew that now that he and Justin were legal partners, Justin would only let him get away with Limos for only so long. Justin had been living in New York for over a year and had a tendency to be extremely cost conscious. Justin had also learned to stretch a dollar during his time in the city alone...even more so than when he lived in Pittsburgh.

As Brian reconsidered this option, he really couldn't imagine, wasting all of his time running between office locations. And he really didn't want to think about doing that amount of traveling without the comfort of Limousines. He also thought about clients visiting the Kinnetik offices, he wanted to continue to remain agile and respond to the clients' needs quickly. It was going to be enough that he had offices in Pittsburgh and New York. Having offices in New Jersey or Brooklyn, too, just didn't make sense.

Brian was looking at a map of the various districts of the city. He wondered if Justin had any real preference for where they should live. Brian realized that he and Justin were going to have to talk about this at some point. Now that the painting for Milan had been completed, Brian felt that he could finally broach the subject with Justin.

Patrick watched the expressions play out across Brian's face. He began to sense that Brian was going to be a client that was going to be discerning. Jennifer had mentioned that Brian had successfully converted a bathhouse into his Pittsburgh corporate offices...so he knew that he was dealing with a visionary. Patrick only hoped that he could direct Brian to a property that would appeal to his unique creative sensibilities.

"So where would you like to start?" Patrick finally asked.

"Maybe, we could first drive around and visit the various areas of the city. I just want to feel the business pulse of the different districts," Brian suggested. "Then maybe we could visit some of those outlying areas you suggested. I was hoping that with your guidance, I could assess what's available to meet my needs."

"That's an excellent idea, if you have the time."

"I not only have the time, but I have a very comfortable Limo for us to ride around in. My driver is very familiar with the city. So, all we would need would be your expert direction."

"And I can point out a few general buildings as we traverse the city...we can always do a more localized search afterward," Patrick suggested.

"I think that should work. Hopefully, you have tomorrow available as well. I have my digital camera with me, so if any place looks interesting and warrants further investigation, we can arrange to examine it later. I would imagine visiting locations during non-business hours would be better."

"I must admit, Brian, I like the way that you think," Patrick finally said, "Shall we get started?"

At this point, Patrick gathered his laptop and a few notes. He made sure that both he and Brian had their own personal copies of maps of the city. Then Brian and Patrick made themselves comfortable in the Limo, and they were off on their adventure to discover the business pulse of the city.

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Brian and Patrick spent the day touring the various districts of New York City, beginning in the northern parts of the city.

They drove through the redevelopment areas of Harlem. Brian could easily find buildings the size that he wanted to house the combined use of Justin's studio, Kinnetik, and living space that Brian envisioned, but he felt that this was too far off the beaten path to conduct business.

The drive through Morningside Heights and the Upper West Side seemed to indicate that these areas had been taken over by students due to the proximity of Columbia University. Brian thought that this might be an interesting place to live...but not to work. However, there were several buildings in this area that were near Central Park that looked interesting. Brian considered that even though several television stations and media outlets were in this district, it still didn't call to Brian that Kinnetik should necessarily be located here.

The drive though the Upper East Side, with its more expensive properties, made Brian feel like this was an area that would be interesting to live in. He guessed that the movers and shakers in the city would probably also live here. It was evident that the Upper East Side probably had the best access to La Guardia Airport. Brian also looked at his map and remembered that most of Justin's favorite museums and galleries were in this district. He would have to keep that in mind.

But the drive through Midtown, confirmed for Brian that this was definitely the heart of the city. The preponderance of skyscrapers indicated there was a lot of business being conducted in a just few square blocks.

After a long morning of just driving around and looking at areas of the city, Brian suggested that they stop for lunch before tackling the areas south of Midtown.

Brian and Patrick stopped for a classic corned beef sandwich at one of Patrick's favorite Delicatessens. Brian actually enjoyed this sandwich, even if it wasn't turkey. During lunch, Patrick and Brian talked easily about Brian's observations to their morning adventure.

After lunch was over, Brian and Patrick got back in the Limo to begin their tour of the southern districts of the city...those districts that were located between Midtown and the Financial District.

Brian noticed that these southern districts had a distinctly different feeling than the northern areas he had traversed during the morning.

The Chelsea Area had a significant number of rehabilitated warehouses that had been converted to both commercial and residential units. Some of the small shops reminded Brian of Liberty Avenue, which made sense since this was one of the gay areas of Manhattan. Additionally, this area had a preponderance of art galleries. Brian was sure Justin would probably like this area.

Patrick and Brian continued their drive through Greenwich Village, Tribeca, and Soho. Brian definitely liked the feel of these western districts. The districts were a mixture of businesses and residences, which for some reason Brian seemed to like. The main campus of NYU was also in the district...a fact that Brian found interesting as he considered his future needs for interns. As they explored these areas, Patrick indicated that this section of the city was also once a warehouse district that was subsequently redeveloped into lofts. Brian considered that a building consisting of lofts would be the easiest to renovate due to the lack of interior walls. Brian found several buildings in this area that had a certain appeal, and the building size seemed appropriate to the combined use that he planned.

On their way back to Midtown, Brian and Patrick traveled through the Lower East Side and the East Village. These eastern districts had a very different feel from their western counterparts. The residential areas were alive, but Brian didn't receive the business vibe here...in spite of the preponderance of vacant buildings.

Patrick mentioned that Battery Park, just at the southern tip of the city, was the new area for artists' studios. He indicated that the size of the studios was considerably larger than in other areas of the city, and the artists in this area worked together to form cooperatives.

As Brian returned to drop off Patrick as his office in Midtown, he felt that his day had been very instructive, and now he knew that he had a lot to discuss with Justin. Brian smiled as he remembered once telling Michael that Stockwell was his one way ticket out of Pittsburgh, and he was looking forward to his offices on the 99th floor overlooking New York City, for then, Pittsburgh would just become a distant memory.

Of course back then, Brian once thought that Stockwell and his supporters were his only ticket out of Pittsburgh. Little did he know that what would propel him out of Pittsburgh was a pair of blue eyes that belonged to a certain blond artist, who just wouldn't accept that 'It's Only Time.'

And Brian knew in that moment that it didn't matter how much trouble it took to finally resolve the office problem, it was all going to be worth it.

Chapter 23 – Plan Within Plans

Friday Evening...(Day 54)

Brian knocked on the door and patiently waited to be admitted.

Justin opened the door and was surprised by his visitor. "Brian, what are you doing here?"

"Kidnapping you worked so well last night, that I thought that I might try it again," Brian suggested.

"No more kidnapping until we move back into my loft," Justin insisted. "Giving you all the additional room of the hotel suite has made you frisky," he added.

"I see. So that's how it's going to be," Brian mumbled, as he walked over and wrapped his arms around Justin from behind.

"Pretty much..." Justin tried to assert. It was a pretty weak assertion because Brian was already nibbling on his ear. "And stop that before you get paint on you..."

Brian reluctantly released Justin and simply sat down on the futon. "I was just thinking that you always liked to go to Babylon. You said that it made you paint longer and better. I always thought that was an excuse...but I may be willing to allow for additional research. I do have this list of clubs that I thought that we should check out. Obviously, we're going to have to find somewhere other than Babylon to hang out...and I really might feel like dancing. Besides, we need to celebrate the shipment of my body parts to Milan," he added with a smile.

"Brian, will you try to remember that there were other elements in the painting besides your body parts?" Justin said, shaking his head. "What am I going to do with you? Now, you want to go out to a club?"

"And just to show you that you're not a cheap date...I thought I might buy you dinner."

"Really?" Justin asked with renewed interest. "I'm sure that can be arranged."

"I can't believe that you're so easy...."

"I can't help it if I'm hungry," Justin said, coming over to kiss him and dropping out of his paint covered Armani shirt. He paused for a moment. "How did things go today with the realtor?"

"We drove all over the city from Harlem to Battery Park. I saw some buildings that would be perfect for the combined use we talked about...with your studio and a loft and the business. I'm just not sure."

"I think that maybe we should look at a few properties together," Justin suggested.

"But, what about your painting?"

"You and I could look at a few places to see if there's anything that we like. I can take a break from my painting."

"That might work. I'd planned a meeting with the realtor tomorrow. We were going to have another go at checking out a few places."

"Just remember that wherever we live has to have an appropriate size hot tub?" Justin pointed out.

"I would think that you would consider the oversized shower more important?" Brian reminded him with a laugh.

"Both of these elements are important. Otherwise, we're going to be spending a lot of time at the house in West Virginia, which will practically negate any reason for us to be living in New York in the first place," Justin suggested as he kissed Brian.

"So you want to go looking at places with me?" Brian said with a smile. "Then I can find out what you really like."

"Well, I like my loft here," Justin mumbled. "Don't you think you could be happy there?" he couldn't resist teasing. "You have to admit that it's close to everything."

"And with the addition of limousine service, it's temporarily bearable," Brian added, leaning down to nibble on Justin's ear. "But I thought that you might want to live on the Upper East Side...something about being closer to the galleries...although Patrick was also talking about Brooklyn Heights."

"It might be fun to actually live and work in the same building for a change. You know that it won't last. Kinnetik will grow so fast now that you're finally here in New York that we'd outgrow the space in no time, but it would be fun for awhile," Justin suggested. "Then I could interrupt you in your office whenever I needed a break from painting."

"I see that you have this all worked out. How come you never shared your daily plans before? You could have saved me untold hours," Brian asked with a smirk.

"Besides, your clothes alone will need several rooms...at least," Justin added. "If everything is in one building, Gus and I may actually have a little living space," he continued to tease.

"So, you've worked this all out, I see?"

"Well it never hurts to speculate. Especially, when I know that Ted has already laid everything out for you, and we know that he is very thorough. But it might be fun to just speculate for a weekend...just you and me. I must admit that this could be even more fun than checking out the clubs."

"You think so, do you?"

"And it will be good practice for us for when we have to do this together later in Milan..."

"Justin, what makes you think that we're going to have to do this in Milan?"

"See, I knew it. You don't pay any attention to me. I told you what was going to happen once you got involved with Signor Silvestri. Don't you remember?"

"Justin..."

"Have you figured out how you're going to handle Silvestri Holdings and Belluss Occhiali in addition to all your New York and Pittsburgh accounts?"

"Justin..."

"And look at all the joint ventures?"

"Justin. You know having you for partner does seem to keep life interesting, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. We've only been working in the New York market for a week or so. We haven't even found office space yet. Don't you think that you're being a bit premature? I see that I have to keep you busy painting in your studio, otherwise that very fertile artist's imagination that you have will easily run away with you," Brian said with a laugh.

"I'm sorry. Maybe, I got just a little bit carried away," Justin said, trying to hide his smile by nuzzling Brian's neck.

"Well, as long as you're back to reality...shall we go check out a few places tomorrow?"

"Absolutely!" Justin said enthusiastically.

"But for right now...why don't you get cleaned up and let me take you out to dinner?"

"Sounds like a plan..."

Chapter 24 – And In Paris

Late Morning on Saturday...(Day 55)

Spyder was giving last minute instructions in Paris to the team putting together the Collezione Fiero booth. He chuckled to himself as he realized that he had spoken more French in the last four hours, than he had in the last year. They say that it's like riding a bike...you never forget. Spyder couldn't help smiling as he realized it must be true.

The Paris Convention Center was a hub of activity as everyone was eagerly constructing their booths and setting up for the showcase that was scheduled to begin tomorrow. The booth which Kinnetik had constructed was designed to set up quickly, with snap together and fold out features. As the booth was taking shape before his eyes, even Spyder had to admit there was a certain elegance to the design. He couldn't help wondering if Justin had anything to do with the booth.

Spyder had managed to stroll through the convention center during the morning and watched as the other participants in the showcase were setting up their areas. This cursory tour told him that Collezione Fiero had the most interesting booth by far. The little hairs on the back of his neck started to bristle, as he realized that the members of the European press were going to be all over the Collezione Fiero area during the next three days.

"If anyone sticks a microphone in your face, just pretend that you're on one of your book tours," Brian had said when Spyder has asked what he should do. This random thought caused him to smile.

"Now what is causing that smile?" Signor Silvestri had to ask.

"I'm just admiring the Collezione Fiero booth," Spyder answered. "You realize that it's going to be the most interesting booth in the showcase. The European press is going to be all over you here," he added.

"Exactly what we hoped for and what Brian had promised us," Rudolpho couldn't resist adding.

"Brian is really the best at what he does," Spyder had to acknowledge.

"Just between you and me, yes he is, and my daughters love working with him."

"That is obviously one of the best kept secrets of the universe," Spyder said with a laugh. "It's obvious that they adore Justin, but Brian..."

"Cristina wouldn't work so hard to make his life miserable if she didn't think of him as family, and you have to admit that Brian is such a perfect foil," Rudolpho added with amusement.

"Although I will admit that Brian and Maria seem to get along well."

"See, it's exactly as I told you," Rudolpho emphasized. "Family!"

Spyder just smiled his agreement.

Rudolpho was distracted by someone approaching to talk with him. Spyder turned away to give them some privacy, but he felt Rudolpho reach out and touch his arm. Spyder halted in place to see what he wanted.

When the distracting person left, Rudolpho smiled. "Spyder, I think that I'm hungry, and I hate to eat alone. Why don't you have lunch with me?" he suggested.

"Me?"

"Of course, you..."

Spyder thought it over for a moment and finally said, "Sure...."

Rudolpho and Spyder proceeded to a nearby café. They were escorted to a secluded table. Spyder started to wonder what was on Rudolpho's mind. Instinct told him this was in no way a casual lunch, for he understood that Rudolpho rarely did anything casually.

The two men shared a leisurely lunch with easy conversation between them. Most of the conversation centered on the sights of Paris and the Showcase and the Collezione Fiero sunglasses.

Towards the end of their meal, Rudolpho's mood turned serious. "Spyder, I'm glad that we have this moment. Something has been bothering me."

"Really?" Spyder now answered nonchalantly, but he thought to himself, 'Here it comes...'

"Yes," Rudolpho insisted, as he laid a small package on the table.

"Signor Silvestri, it really wasn't necessary to buy me a present," Spyder felt the need to comment.

"Please...." Rudolpho said, pushing the small box toward Spyder.

Spyder slowly lifted the lid on the small box. Inside was a paperback book. In fact, it was one of the books that he had written. He simply smiled. "So you know?" he simply said.

"Maria thought that you looked familiar when we first met. Then she found your book. You really shouldn't have included your photograph on the back cover. I will admit that it's a very good likeness."

"So it seems," Spyder said with a sigh. "It's a very old picture, taken a long time ago."

"I understand that you and Justin are up for a Bronze Quill Award, so I guess congratulations are in order. You really are a person of many talents," Rudolpho said with a smile. "Of course, you would have to be or Brian and Justin wouldn't have you working on our account."

"Probably not...."

"I see...and does Brian know about all this?" Rudolpho asked, pointing to the book.

"Brian knows everything about me, since he had me thoroughly investigated before we even met. Brian tends to be overprotective where Justin is concerned, and Justin and I have been working together for some time."

"Then, I guess he found out the same things that I did. I always knew that Brian was very thorough."

"You had me investigated too?" Spyder asked with amazement. "What is with you people?"

"Come on Spyder. I'm Rudolpho Silvestri...."

Spyder interrupted, "Well, now that you know...what do you intend to do with your knowledge?"

"Nothing...if Brian isn't concerned, than neither am I," Rudolpho said with a smile. "I'm just curious how you expected to be in Paris and remain unrecognized."

"If you'll remember, I tried to wiggle out of coming to Paris. But, Taylor knows my weak spot, so here I am," Spyder said. "Besides, riding in Limos does wonders for my anonymity," he added with a laugh.

"You've been in New York too long," Rudolpho added with a smile. "Here in Europe, a Limo attracts the paparazzi. Have you forgotten? Do we need to get you a disguise? I'm sure our Collezione Fiero sunglasses will be of great help."

Spyder contained his amusement. "Signor Silvestri, you've been reading too many spy novels..."

"I must admit that I've grown rather fond of your work, although parts of it are a little too risqué for an old man."

"You've actually read my books, when on earth do you find the time?"

"They've given me quite a few ideas for future company takeovers."

"Signor Silvestri, I don't know how to tell you this, but I write FIC-TION."

"Ah, but the best fiction is based in fact..."

"Now where have I heard that before? You really need to stop hanging around with Taylor."

Both Spyder and Rudolpho shared a laugh at that last comment.

Then Rudolpho's mood turned serious. "I just don't want Brian and Justin caught in any of your webs of intrigue. Do I make myself clear?"

"It was a long time ago. I did research and wrote a little book. Can I help it if I got really close to the truth? It was purely coincidental. Besides, no one cares anymore," Spyder pointed out.

"I remember the case," Rudolpho said thoughtfully. "The Paris gendarme and Scotland Yard thought that you must have had evidence that they needed. After all, how could you write your book otherwise?"

"As I told the court, I have a gift for languages and a rather vivid imagination. The police made their files available for research purposes. The rest was purely a writer's imagination."

"Yes, but you solved the case. Your book told how the international plot was carried out. Oh, you cloaked it in a wonderful story, but you solved the case. Then according to the newspapers, you just disappeared."

"I didn't disappear. I have been living in plain sight in New York City," Spyder reminded him.

"But you must have fans here in Paris? After all, your books were all best sellers."

"Signor Silvestri, most fans read my books. Very few readers care what I look like. I'm surprised that Maria noticed my picture at all."

"Maria was younger when she read your book. She may have had a bit of a crush, but we won't tell her that I suggested that," Rudolpho teased.

"Taylor mentioned that I should be careful that you don't marry me off to Cristina or Maria while I'm here in Paris," Spyder teased back.

Rudolpho laughed. "After Justin, I promised no more matchmaking for my daughters. Of course, if Justin should suddenly become available, both Cristina and Maria both have plans to marry him and move to a polygamist country...so they can both share him."

"I see that the family has this worked this out," Spyder said with a laugh. "In the meantime, Maria and Cristina will just find ways to drive Brian crazy."

"Pretty much...."

"I think that I get the picture."

"And how is your family taking your notoriety?"

"Can we leave my father out of this?"

"Spyder, your father is an international investment banker. His path and mine tend to cross from time-to-time. I just want to help."

"My father lives in the California. I live in New York. We have stayed out of each other's way for some time now. Let's just leave it at that."

"But...."

"This isn't a topic for discussion," Spyder said sternly. "If you wish, I'll be glad to call Brian, and advise him that you have found my services unsatisfactory. I'm sure he can find someone else to referee for you during this showcase."

"No...No...that won't be necessary. I promise to respect your privacy."

"Thank you. Now, I think that we should get back to the Conference Center to see how everything is going."

"I agree," Rudolpho said firmly. "But I'm glad that we had lunch together," he added with a smile.

"Me too," Spyder agreed. "But I do hope that we understand each other."

"Of course..."

Chapter 25 – The Challenge Of It All

Saturday...(Day 55)

"Brian will you stop pacing," Justin insisted, once they were comfortably settled back at Justin's loft. "Things aren't that bad."

"Okay, Sunshine, I think I get the picture," Brian said in frustration, after spending the first day looking at living spaces with Justin. "You want a heated terrace that hidden from view and a sky light, but you don't care what the loft looks like."

"Brian, we're not paying $20 million for a loft, so that you can have enough room for each season of your clothes, and they can have their own special temperature-controlled rooms," Justin responded with a laugh.

"So, I guess this means that we'll be in this loft for a little while longer?" Brian suggested with a sweep of his arms, "With appropriate limousine service, of course!"

"I guess so..." Justin said resolutely.

Then they both couldn't resist laughing, as Brian flopped in the chair and elevated his bare feet on the table.

"Maybe, you should just let me pick out where we live. I've done a good job so far, haven't I? You liked my loft. You liked the house. Don't you think that I can do it again?" Brian asked, as he raised one eyebrow for emphasis.

"Or, you could let me pick the next place...I've shown good taste and the ability to stretch money here in the city," Justin pointed out with a wrinkled brow to make a point, "And we ARE partners now."

"Or, I could pick a place, and then you could renovate it into something that we both want," Brian continued to suggest with a wicked grin.

"Oh, no! I'm still trying to figure out renovations at the mansion," Justin enjoyed reminding Brian.

"Okay, Sunshine" Brian said, with a shake of his head. "I think I'm content to wait until after ALL your shows are over. Then, we can really focus on just looking for a place together, when we won't drive each other crazy. Fortunately, you have a long lease on this place."

"But, what are you going to do about office space in the meantime?" Justin asked with some concern.

"I'll just keep looking. I'll eventually find what I have in mind," Brian assured him.

"Just remember that your office space has to make all the other ad agencies in New York sit up and take notice. We want them to know that Kinnetik has arrived," Justin reminded him with a determined look.

"I do remember hearing something about that from a previous discussion," Brian said with a laugh

"But once you used to talk about offices on the 99th floor...do you still want that?" Justin asked.

"I did until you presented me with the image of your planned daily interruptions of my day if your studio and my office were in the same building," Brian said with a grin. "Who could resist that kind of daily enticement?" he teased.

"You're not being practical, you know?" Justin said as he moved over to straddle Brian's lap.

"It was so much easier when I opened Kinnetik in the beginning. Mother Taylor knew exactly what I wanted, and she found the perfect place. Oh sure, we had to do some renovations ...but you have to admit the location has been perfect."

"Only you would turn a bath house into the worldwide headquarters for Kinnetik," Justin said as he remembered.

Brian just shrugged. "We're Kinnetik, we don't live in a box...we don't think in a box," Brian uttered.

"And that's not going to change just because you're here in New York City," Justin reminded him.

"No, it's not!"

"So, will you talk to my mother?"

"Obviously, I'm going to have to do that. Patrick is good...but Jennifer has vision. She seems to understand me. She seems to understand better what I need. I know that renovations will be in order, but at least I'll have a good starting point," Brian said with a sigh, "I'll just have to approach this carefully. I'll just have to talk to Mother Taylor," Brian finally admitted.

"And, just because our first home search adventure wasn't successful doesn't mean that we should give up," Justin said, as he leaned over to begin kissing Brian.

"We shouldn't, huh?" Brian responded, trying to resist the fact that Justin was working his way slowly down his chest.

"No," Justin mumbled. "We'll get the paper early in the morning. We'll check out some of those interesting developments just outside the city. And, we'll see what we can find" he added as he started to kiss his way below Brian's waist.

Brian felt the zipper open on his jeans, and as Justin continued his ministrations, Brian no longer cared if they ever found a place to live as long as Justin kept doing these things to him.

Chapter 26 - Chance Encounters

Saturday Night...(Day 54)

Adam Lyons walked into the Prometheus Club. He decided that after the week that he'd had, he needed the thumpa thumpa and a quick, anonymous fuck to help him lose himself. He scanned the dance floor to see if anyone looked interesting.

Realizing that it was early, he simply headed toward the bar. He could really use a drink. Only one drink to take the edge off...he could start to relax and then be content to let the night's events begin.

It had been awhile since Adam had been to the club.

When he and Lars had been together, they traveled in different circles. They got invited to the private parties, so Adam didn't have to hang out in clubs. Now, it was like starting out all over again. Here, he was back on the prowl, hitting the clubs, seeking the comfort of the night...more like looking for the comfort of the moment.

Adam sauntered to the bar and ordered his first glass of Beam.

He leaned his back and elbows against the bar, and watched the dancers.

There were quite a few dancers, showing an array of unique moves on the dance floor. Adam took a moment to enjoy the show.

There in the crowd, Adam noticed a shirtless wonder, attracting quite a bit of attention. Adam watched with interest and guessed this crowd pleaser probably had too much to drink for such an early hour.

"Not a good sign," Adam mumbled quietly to himself, "This can only lead to trouble."

"I wouldn't worry," the voice beside him said, "He's in here a lot. The bouncers even look out for him."

"Oh...."

"They'll even see that he gets safely home," the voice added and then paused. "Now, that we know that he's taken care of," the speaker paused again and turned more toward Adam, "What about you?"

"What about me?" Adam asked with a smile. "I don't think the bouncers need to worry about me."

"And, why not?"

"I'm pretty sure that I will make it home safely."

"Now, that's what I like to hear...a man...who can take care of himself. Would you like to dance?"

"I don't dance with strangers."

"I'm not a stranger. We've been talking for...what...about five minutes? We've even shared common concerns. However, if you really need a name, try Philip."

"I can work with that, mine's Adam."

"So, since we aren't strangers anymore...how about that dance?" Philip asked, extending his hand to Adam.

The two strangers, who now, at least, knew each other's name, headed for a turn on the dance floor.

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Since Philip and Adam had finished their drinks, the bartender cleared away their glasses. Their places at the bar were, eventually, taken by a group of four friends, who came in while Adam and Philip were dancing. The bartender noted that the four of them seemed to hang out together often, for there was easiness between them. They had been in the club before.

"It's the same old, same old. Why on earth did you want to pick this place again?" Channing asked.

"You have to admit, this place has interesting eye candy," Phoenix commented.

"There's lots of eye candy in this town, but it won't get you through the night," Keith pointed out.

"Thank goodness for the websites," Channing reminded them.

"We can't dance with the websites," Phoenix pointed out.

"Whose turn is it to buy the first round of drinks?" Keith innocently asked.

"Probably yours or you would remember whose turn it was..." Kip Thomas pointed out, causing everyone to smile.

Keith sighed and proceeded to order drinks for everyone.

Conversation passed easily among the friends as they enjoyed their drinks.

"Well, shall we hit the dance floor?" Phoenix suggested. "That is why we came here."

"Wait a minute...so he doesn't work...all the time," Kip noted.

"What are you mumbling about?" Phoenix asked.

"Those two guys..." Kip said, pointing in the direction of Adam and Philip dancing.

Phoenix followed Kip's line of sight. "I recognize one of them. I think he's a regular. I've never seen the other guy before. He may be new. Why are you so interested?" he asked.

"I work with one of them? I've been trying to..." Kip struggled to say before he was interrupted.

"Both of them are out of your league."

"I'm in New York now. It's time, I joined their league," Kip pointed out.

"It's not about being in New York. It's not even about the job you have. It's about class and finesse, and, you still have a lot to learn."

"I'm tired of learning...."

"Just remember, there are still cracks in your veneer, so don't get too cocky. Take your time and learn what the situation...all the situations...have to offer. "

"I don't see why I should continue to have to wait."

"Of course, you don't. That's the mistake that you've always made in the past. You've always been in such a hurry. Slow down!"

"Live long and prosper! Is that what you're going to say?" Kip argued.

"They don't call me Phoenix for nothing,"

"When am I going to get a chance to have it all?" Kip asked, as the others left to hit the dance floor, ignoring this philosophical discussion that always seemed to go on and on, preferring instead the thumpa thumpa and hot bodies.

"The problem with you, Kip, is you keep reaching for the ring. You keep looking for the short-cut. You never take the time to see if the ring is really gold or simply gold-plated. There is a big difference," Phoenix pointed out. "You're here in the big time. You got a second chance. No one dug too deeply into your past when they hired you at Kennedy & Collins. You're good at what you do. You got an Ivy League education. Now, just be patient and give yourself a few years, and you too will be successful. You too will have it all."

Kip heard the speech, but he really wasn't listening, for he'd heard all this before. And, Phoenix knew it. Phoenix and Kip had grown up together. They were as close as brothers.

Phoenix accepted the reality of the situation with a shake of his head, and they headed for the dance floor.

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And, in another part of town...

"Will you get in the Limo?" Brian insisted.

Justin complied, but not without being difficult, as usual, as far as Brian was concerned. "Explain to me again, why I am being dragged out of the comfort of our hotel suite," Justin tried to complain, knowing full well where they were going since they were dressed in their hottest outfits for clubbing.

Brian mockingly responded, "Dancing will help me study longer...harder...it's the endorphins!" causing Justin to burst out laughing. "This is to improve the prospect of our loft hunting adventure in the morning," Brian added quietly.

"What?" Justin asked.

"That's what you always say...I'm merely repeating it," Brian pointed out. "I want you to know that I do listen to you when we talk," he added sarcastically, earning a swipe from Justin.

"Okay, I agree that UNTIL you own the best gay club in New York City, like you do in Pittsburgh, we're going to have to find somewhere to dance. As you said, we can't keep going back to Babylon every time we want to dance. That would definitely defeat our purpose for living in New York in the first place," Justin pointed out with a wicked smile...now he knew that Brian had heard every word that he just said.

"Do YOU ever pay any attention to the discussions that we have, Sunshine?" Brian argued. "When have you ever...ever...heard me mention that I intended to own a club in New York City? What am I going to do with you?"

"Brian, you have a LIST of clubs that you thought, we should check out in your urge to dance..." Justin innocently said, as he leaned over to start to nibble on Brian's ear.

"Stop doing that!" Brian weakly protested. "You know that I can't think when you do that," he added as he started to recline in the back seat of the limo as Justin slid on top of him.

"Now, why would you have a list of clubs, if we are only going to ONE of them to dance?" Justin continued to question as he slid his hands inside Brian's shirt, producing skin-to-skin contact.

"And why are you on top of me again? Sunshine, we talked about this!" Brian tried to weakly protest.

Just then, their driver announced, with a smile, through the intercom that they had reached their destination. For all the eccentricities of this couple, he really enjoyed driving them around.

Justin reluctantly slid off Brian, giving him another kiss to silence any additional protests that Brian might have in mind.

"And just so you know, I'm not buying a club in this city!" Brian confirmed again to make his point.

Then, Brian remembered that he never really had any advanced-plans to buy Babylon before it happened either. It just sort of happened. He was in the right place at the right time. He had the opportunity, and the time was right. But, Brian had no intention of giving Justin the satisfaction of being right and winning this argument, so he continued to be Brian and complained.

Their driver gave his passengers a few minutes before he finally opened the door.

Brian was still complaining when he got out of the Limo and slid his arm around Justin's waist, "I said nothing about buying a club in New York City. After all we just got here."

At this point, Justin just smiled one of those all-knowing smiles that Brian hated.

Then Brian looked at the line of waiting people. It had been an awfully long time, since he'd waited in line to get into a club. Maybe I should reconsider this purchasing a club thing, he thought to himself.

Fortunately, the doorman at the club saw them exit their Limo and motioned them forward. Brian tipped the doorman generously. Brian and the doorman would obviously remember each other in the future.

Brian and Justin smiled at each other as they entered the Prometheus Club.

Chapter 27 – Amazing How Things Work Out

Saturday Night...(Day 54)

"There it is! That thumpa thumpa!" Justin said as he started to sashay inside the club to the beat of the music.

"I do wish that you wouldn't do that until we're at least on the dance floor," Brian complained, feeling the stares that Justin was receiving, especially to the swish of his bubble butt. Brian smiled to himself as he also noticed the tightening of his own jeans to that particular action. He caught up with Justin and wrapped him in his arms and started dancing with him. "Why do I even bother?" he mumbled.

"You said that you felt like dancing..." Justin reminded him with a teasing full-wattage smile, and Brian became lost in Justin and the music.

The song that they were dancing to, at the moment, had just the right beat to let Brian and Justin continue to create heat for each other.

For Brian, the song and the beat reminded him of dancing with Justin just after the fiddler had been disposed of, and he and Justin had reunited for the first time on the dance floor. A treasured moment....

For Justin, the song reminded him that dancing with Brian had always been hot and wonderful ever since their first dance so long ago when Brian reclaimed him as his own. A special time....

Brian and Justin danced several numbers under the watchful eyes of the people there in the club.

Oh, the people there didn't overtly stare the way they did at Babylon...after all, this was New York City. But, people were watching never-the-less.

Some people were simply fascinated by a new couple on the dance floor.

While others noticed that the entire time Brian and Justin danced, they never stopped touching each other.

Others just couldn't miss what a hot couple they were.

Then, there were always those on the sidelines that were trying to figure out if cutting in was allowed and how to pull it off.

While Brian and Justin were dancing, they continued to flirt with each other...with a look here...a touch there.

"You know you're pretty hot," Brian finally said softly to Justin, as if they were meeting for the first time.

"Someone once told me that before," Justin responded coyly, responding with a look.

Brian simply smiled. "I wonder if this place has a backroom."

"Well, I don't know...I'm rather new here," Justin added with lowered eyes.

"Me too...I guess we need to find out..."

"I guess we should have checked..." Justin commented.

Although the couple next to them couple had been enjoying their own dance, they had clearly been paying close attention to Brian and Justin's every move on the dance floor with interest, so they were quite prepared for the inquiry about the backroom. "They have a backroom," one of the dancing persons said with a smile, gesturing off to the left.

"Thanks," Brian said, pulling Justin in that direction.

Some things never change.

This other couple's only dilemma was whether or not to follow to see how things continued to progress.

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A few couples tried to inconspicuously follow Brian and Justin into the dimmed lighting of the backroom and linger along the adjacent walls to watch the action. Little did they know that these were two men who enjoyed the prospect of public displays in public places, and those who dared to follow were guaranteed a show.

Most of the patrons of the club decided to wait in the main area to see if the couple would return to the dance floor. One could only hope that they were blessed with an abundance of patience for this was still Brian and Justin in their element. And, it had been a long time since they'd played.

The bartender smiled as he noticed the increased number of drinks being sold, during the break in this mystery couple's dancing floor show. He too wondered if this was simply an intermission, or if a very interesting floor show had ended much too soon.

Eventually, Brian and Justin made their way to the bar and ordered their usual Beams. By the time they arrived, most of the patrons had drifted back to the dance floor.

"I haven't seen you two here before," the bartender commented with a smile as he delivered their drinks.

"Probably not," Brian commented softly, as he took his first sip.

"There's a nice crowd here tonight," Justin mentioned. "Is it always like this?"

"Friday and Saturday are usually busy, but the week nights are usually quieter," the bartender remarked.

Brian glared at Justin, who simply smiled innocently back at him.

Brian knew exactly what Justin was thinking, and he wasn't sure whether or not he liked the way his little mogul's mind was working, but at least, for a change, he knew what Justin was up to.

Brian refused to give in to Justin's manipulations. He simply allowed the two of them to enjoy their drinks and then maneuvered Justin back on to the dance floor.

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Brian and Justin's actions in the club had not gone unnoticed by Adam Lyons.

Adam and Philip had been otherwise engaged, in the backroom, when Brian and Justin first entered. Adam found it noteworthy that he and Philip were done, yet Brian and Justin were still quite actively engaged and clearly seemed undeterred by the other people in the room watching them.

Adam, of course, knew that Brian would be at home in any backroom, anywhere in the world. What surprised Adam was that Justin seemed equally at home and relaxed there too. And then, Adam watched something that he was sure that no one had ever witnessed before...Brian giving someone a blowjob. That one act alone told Adam more about Brian and Justin's relationship than anything else. And, the sight of it was enough to cause Adam to freeze in his tracks. Philip gently helped Adam to move along...completely unaware of his reaction.

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But for another patron of the club, Brian and Justin's appearance in the backroom was the least of his concern.

Kip Thomas had witnessed the performance on the dance floor of Brian and Justin. That was enough.

Kip was dancing with Phoenix in a corner of the dance floor. And, even at that distance, Kip was captivated by the hotness of the dance between Brian and Justin like everyone else, but Kip was stunned by so much more.

He recognized the blond as a partner of a friend of Adam's, who he'd met some weeks ago. Kip's mind was still struggling to put the pieces together. It was all starting to come back to him. Kip had seen the blond at the offices of Barrister, Wilkins & Evans. He was supposed to be the partner of some friend of Adam's, yet here he was with another man.

And Kip knew who that other man was... Brian Kinney.

Brian Kinney was in New York.

'Easy,' Kip thought to himself, 'It's a Saturday night. Kinney could be just visiting the city. The blond could be just a friend. Kinney will probably have to be back in Pittsburgh on Monday,' he continued to think to himself. 'You'll probably never see him again. Let's not start creating monsters where only shadows exist.'

Phoenix noticed his friend's silence and asked the inevitable question "Is something wrong?"

Kip merely shook his head.

"Then you will focus on dancing with me," Phoenix said with a smile. "You're not helping for my image!"

Even Kip had to laugh at that remark.

Phoenix didn't believe for a minute that nothing was wrong, but he knew that he'd eventually get to the bottom of things. It was just a matter of time.

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And, on the dance floor...

"One more dance," Brian said, wrapping his arms around Justin, "And then I think that we should head back to the hotel. We want to get an early start in the morning."

"A successful...early morning start...remember the endorphins!" Justin reminded him with a wicked grin.

Brian simply shook his head before, sweeping Justin into another turn.

Brian couldn't resist a smile, as he realized, at that moment, how much he loved this annoying man in his arms.

Chapter 28 – Bribery Among Friends (Sidebar)

Late Saturday Night...(Day 54)

Once Brian and Justin had left the Prometheus Club, things seemed to quiet down. The patrons of the club enjoyed their drinks, hoping that this new couple would return, but the lateness of the hour seemed to indicate otherwise.

People started to drift towards the door, including the foursome of Phoenix, Channing, Keith, and Kip.

"Well, you have to admit this has been an interesting evening," Kip suggested.

"You have to admit it was far more interesting than the websites," Keith said, looking directly at Channing.

"I sure can't argue with that," Channing agreed.

"Now, where are we going?" Kip asked.

"I, for one, have worked up quite an appetite. There should be a deli nearby where we can get sandwiches and relax before we turn in for the night," Phoenix suggested.

"I can't believe that you had a good idea," Keith quipped.

"Okay, so good ideas are usually Kip's department, but I've been known to have one or two," Phoenix teased.

"Especially, when it involved food," Channing chimed in.

"Should we take a cab?" Kip asked.

"That's the fastest way, even though we could probably walk," Phoenix suggested.

As the four friends were heading out to the street, Kip saw Adam and Philip approaching. To Kip's credit, he tried to play it cool by merely gently waving. Kip waited and let Adam approach him.

"Hello, Kip," Adam said pleasantly. "I didn't realize that you were here."

"Not usually," Kip admitted. "I stopped in tonight with my friends," he added. Kip was about to make introductions, believing it was the proper thing to do.

But, Adam didn't want to linger any longer. He reached for Philip's hand and said, "Well, we have to be going. I'll see you later."

And, with that, Adam Lyons and Philip walked away.

"Well, they were rather eager to get to wherever they're going?" Channing commented.

"As they should, the guy that your friend was with isn't known for his long-standing relationships, so we'll have to see how this one goes," Phoenix commented.

"That's okay, Adam and I work together, so I'll be there to help him mend his broken heart if that becomes necessary," Kip casually mentioned. "Can we go eat? Now that the suggestion has been made, I think I'm starved."

There was the chorus and echo of "me too" from the remaining friends.

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Once they reached O'Halligans, the four friends quickly placed their orders and paid. They grabbed the numbers set out for them by the cashier indicating their orders and settled into one of the booths.

"This has truly been an interesting evening," Kip said.

"I've got to admit that couple on the dance floor was sending out quite a lot of heat...not to mention attracting quite a lot of attention," Channing said. "I'm going to have memories..." he added with a smile.

"You have to admit they did seem to be rather into each other," Phoenix said.

"You should have seen them in the backroom," Keith commented.

"Oh come on, it's not like you to gawk at the goings on in the backroom," Phoenix pointed out.

"Well, you would have gawked too, if you were dancing with someone other than twinkle-toes here," Channing said with a laugh.

"That's the point...I was dancing with twinkle-toes...ah, Kip...and it would have been highly inappropriate to go to the backroom with my best friend," Phoenix pointed out.

"I, on the other hand, had no such restriction," Channing revealed, clutching his hand to his chest.

"Why were you so interested?" Keith asked.

"I've seen them before," Channing said nonchalantly.

"What? Tell me more..." Kip inquired.

"You really have to broaden your reading materials and get out more," Channing commented.

At just about this moment a large tray bearing their orders was delivered to their booth.

The sorting process of telling the various sandwiches apart and sorting out the various salads and the drinks took a little time and distracted everyone from their conversation.

Then for a few minutes afterwards, the most important things were those first bites of their delicious sandwiches and those first sips of beverage. Then everyone would lean back and savor the moment before any conversation resumed.

"Now, where were we?" Kip asked.

"These are great sandwiches. Whose idea was it to stop for a bite to eat?" Phoenix asked, not really caring for an answer.

"I may even spring for a dessert," Keith commented.

"Oh...oh, your sweet tooth is raging again. That can only mean trouble," Channing had to comment.

"Will you stop worrying about my sweet tooth and get back to the issue at hand?" Keith insisted.

"What are you babbling about?" Channing wondered.

"You said something about broadening our reading materials and getting out more..." Keith reminded everyone.

"I did? What were we talking about?" Channing mindlessly responded.

"I can't believe that you and I are friends," Keith proclaimed.

"Why is that?" Channing innocently asked, as he continued to eat his sandwich.

"You are the most exasperating person that I know?" Keith wanted to make it absolutely clear. "In fact, I have no idea how you do your job, for you have demonstrated that you have no idea how to focus on the really important things in life."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Kip asked trying to follow the conversation between his two friends, who were sitting across the table from him.

"Okay, we just came from a night of dancing and hanging out, and now you want to have a deep intellectual discussion. You want to pump me for all the information that you think that I know when I'm in a weakened state," Channing mumbled.

"Phoenix, do something here," Keith insisted.

"Me?" Phoenix said, taking as sip from his beer. "Can't you two have a simple conversation over sandwiches without it deteriorating into an argument?"

Keith and Channing glared at each other, while Kip couldn't stop laughing.

"Since, I wasn't paying attention will someone bring me up to speed on things?" Phoenix suggested with a wicked grin. He knew this was going to be good. Keith was definitely upset about something, and Channing was being uncooperative. This didn't bode well, and if they wanted to linger here in the deli, for a while enjoying their late night snack, the tenor of things had to change.

Keith stepped right up. "He knows something about that hot couple that was dancing at the Prometheus," Keith pointed out as he glared at Channing.

"We saw them as they were leaving," Kip added. "I work with Adam at the firm, and Phoenix already identified the other guy as a regular. What's the problem? Adam even spoke to us. I was going to introduce you...you remember?"

"Not that couple, you asshole," Keith argued, "The new couple on the dance floor...the one that you couldn't follow into the backroom."

"Yeah?" Kip mumbled.

"Channing knows something about them," Keith pointed.

"Channing, is there something that you would like to tell us?" Phoenix asked. Then he paused and looked at Channing's plate. "I notice that you seemed to have finished your salad. Let us get you another one to go with your sandwich...while you fill us in," he added sweetly. "And is there anything else, you would like?"

"I could really use another pickle," Channing added.

"No problem," Keith said as he willingly went to grab the additional items.

Everyone at the table was silent as they waited for Keith to return with the bribe of the salad and the pickle for Channing.

"Now is there anything else that you require?" Phoenix asked sweetly, but you could hear the threatening undertones to the request...this time.

"No, I'm fine. Thanks." Channing replied innocently.

"So, Talk!" Keith insisted, and Kip couldn't resist a laugh.

"Thanks for the extra stuff. I was hungrier than I thought. Okay...If you'll remember, my job is research at the Times," Channing began.

"And having that photographic memory means that you tend not to forget details," Keith pointed out, "That's why you've had so many promotions," he added, hoping that paying a compliment would loosen Channing's tongue.

Channing chose to ignore the compliment and continued on with what he had to say, "The blond seems to have been in the city for a while; he's an artist favored in emerging art circles. His picture was in the paper not too long ago because he entered into that new legal domestic partnership with that guy he was dancing with, who's some kind of advertising executive."

"That can't be right," Kip challenged. "I was at a meeting a few weeks ago, and the blond was there with a friend of Adam's named Spyder something or other. He introduced the blond as HIS partner."

"Did you say Spyder?" Phoenix asked with renewed interest.

"Yes...Spyder...why?" Kip wondered.

"My, my...we are traveling in lofty circles," Phoenix confirmed.

"I would have to agree with you there," Channing agreed. "There is no one in this city who seems to know everyone there is to know, and is in to everything there is to be into more than Spyder. He and the blond are quasi-business partners. They work on projects together from time to time. An unusual pairing, I know."

"Okay so what about the dancing partner of the blond?" Kip now had to ask, knowing full-well who that dancing partner happened to be.

"You mean, Brian Kinney?" Channing said easily, and Kip immediately fell silent. "He's some of award-winning, hot shot advertising executive from Pittsburgh. Rumor has it that his firm recently snagged several big international accounts. Brian has been seen all over New York lately riding in Limos, so rumor has it that he must be opening an office here in the city, but no one can confirm that rumor."

"Brian Kinney...that name is familiar...I don't know why," Phoenix said, slowly searching his own memory banks.

"Go on, Mr. Walking Encyclopedia," Keith insisted. "Because, I know that you must have dug deeper."

"Brian and Justin have been together for like six or seven years. Brian used to be the Stud of Liberty Avenue in Pittsburgh. Their story is the stuff of legend. They even toppled a politician. Justin is now an artist here in the city. Justin also draws the comic Rage. Brian owns the largest ad agency in Pittsburgh. Brian also owns the largest gay club in Pittsburgh too. "

"Babylon?" Kip said mindlessly.

"Yes, Babylon..." Channing confirmed, wondering how Kip knew the name.

"Then, what the fuck is he doing here?" Kip wondered aloud.

"I guess Justin must be getting ready for his show," Channing pointed out.

"So what...Brian can just afford to hang out and play the supportive partner?" Kip asked.

"Things must be going pretty well for them. Remember I said that Brian rides around New York in Limos, not cabs. They were dressed in labels, even while dancing in the club..." Keith noted.

"Okay, I think that I get the picture," Kip commented.

"So what did we miss in the back room?" Phoenix had to ask with his curiosity now getting the best of him.

"They say that Brian Kinney was the Stud of Liberty Avenue. They say that Justin is his equal. That must be true or they wouldn't be together. It has been said that Brian and Justin together are some super couple. They have no problem with public displays, and they are still hot together," Keith revealed.

"I'd have to agree with that," Channing agreed, now fanning himself. "I will be able to use those images to get me through many a night. My photographic memory does have its benefits."

"You're pathetic," Kip said with a laugh.

"Life's rough...you do what you have to do to get by," Channing admitted, "But I'm definitely going to become more familiar with the art scene in this city."

"Will you eat your sandwich, your brain is crying for nourishment?" Phoenix said, shaking his head.

Kip continued to eat his sandwich in silence looking at Phoenix from time-to-time. Almost six years ago, Kip had told Phoenix the whole story about Brian Kinney and what really happened at the Ryder Agency.

And now, an almost forgotten name from the past was resurfacing...and Kip was now going to have to deal with it here in the present, and Phoenix was going to have to help him because that's what best friends were for when life just got complicated.

Chapter 29 – Just Desserts

Sunday Evening NYC...(Day 56)

Brian and Justin were settling down into their hotel suite at The Plaza.

Both of them were in an extremely good mood.

"I think that I may even take you out for dinner tonight," Brian said. "Maybe I'll even spring for a special dessert from Lindy's," he added.

"Wow, a dessert from Lindy's? What brought that on?" Justin asked as he started to straddle Brian's lap.

"You know, you behaved yourself most of the day, which earned you the dessert. Then we come home and you start right in climbing on top of me," Brian tried say in mock protest.

"I have to climb on top of you, so that I can hear all the wonderful things that I did to earn the dessert," Justin tried to explain. "You seem to be in such a state of shock that you're whispering," Justin pointed out. "Of course, this would all work out better, it we just moved this discussion to the bedroom."

"Sunshine, will you pay attention. If we move to the bedroom, we won't talk. That's why we're sitting in here," Brian explained.

"Oh..." Justin answered. "Go ahead. You obviously have something important that you want to say. Then, we can get down to the special things like me fucking you into the mattress," he added, as he started, nibbling on Brian's ear.

"Stop that! We were...more successful looking at properties today than we were yesterday. We found several lofts just outside the city that we both liked and several floor plans that weren't horrible. Obviously, the lofts outside the city were larger, which made me happy, and less expensive, which made you happy....so I should be able to keep my Limo service without driving Theodore crazy," Brian pointed out. "See what happens when we all work together?"

"Of course..." Justin said sarcastically, "It's those endorphins we discussed."

"Now, I'm not suggesting that we buy one of those properties that we saw today. I just think it's nice that we could agree on something. We also noticed a significant amount of new construction going on within the city in places that we liked too, like SoHo, for example, so we might actually find a loft and have some say in the floor plan and still live within the city...which is what we both want. I just think that the fact that we could agree on anything...is a pretty good sign. So, I was planning to take you out to dinner to celebrate."

"Really? Well, I'm never one to turn down a free dinner...but we have things to take care of first."

"Like what?"

"Me fucking you into the mattress..." Justin innocently reminded him, but wondering why Brian was having problems with his memory.

"I like the concept...but as usual....you keep getting our positions all mixed up. What is it with you, Sunshine? Are you now planning on one those large paintings again, where you have to paint upside down? Is that what's screwing up your perspective all of a sudden?" Brian asked sarcastically.

"What are you talking about?" Justin now asked, leaning back and looking at Brian in the process.

"I remember watching this movie about when Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel...he had to do it while lying on his back. So he was upside down for all practical purposes. Is that the next type of painting that you are getting ready for?" Brian once again asked sarcastically.

Justin couldn't resist rolling his eyes, as he remembered just how annoying his partner could be without really trying.

"Do you remember all the papers we signed when we became legal partners?" Justin asked, with his hands on his hips again, even though he was still straddling Brian's lap.

"Yeah...I remember."

"I'm sure there were documents in that stack from Max Caulfield that provided for our equality in ALL things," Justin reminded him with a wicked smile.

"Probably...but not in bed...and surely not as often as you seem to think those equality rules apply," Brian felt the need to point out. "What is it with you anyway? You were never this much trouble before...what happened to you?"

"I guess my whole attitude just changed with our legal union," Justin said with a shrug of his shoulder, as he leaned down to kiss Brian.

"Well, if that's the case, you obviously need an attitude adjustment, so change it back!" Brian demanded.

"I think it's a little too late for that," Justin pointed out with a laugh.

"You do, huh?" Brian struggled to say. Then he, once again, noticed that Justin was kissing his way down his chest.

Brian so loved to have this same discussion with Justin, and he was so afraid that one day Justin was going to catch on. Brian knew that he would never win this argument on logic with Justin...a fact that he was very pleased about. Because by always losing this argument, Brian was always the recipient of one of Justin's extended blowjobs. Brian figured that he was the big winner simply by losing...and if it cost him eventually giving in to all the blowjobs and the fucking that came afterwards, it really seemed like a small price to pay.

And, Brian wanted to be sure to take Justin out for that expensive dinner AND the dessert at Lindy's...afterwards...to once again, remind Justin of his victory.

For, Brian still liked to reward accomplishment.

Chapter 30 – Meetings

Monday Morning...(Day 57)

After a relaxing weekend with Brian, Monday morning rolled around, and Justin had a scheduled meeting with Catherine Mann, his agent.

"It seems that The Artist remembers that he has an agent," Catherine Mann said, in greeting, as Justin walked into her office.

Justin rolled his eyes. It was always like this when the two of them saw or talked to each other. He was starting to get used to dealing with Catherine, and it was obvious that they liked each other.

"Catherine, why is it that you have selective amnesia? We had an appointment. You wanted to talk about the galleries and the Chicago Emerging Artist Show."

"And, Sydney Bloom called me too."

"He did?"

"Sydney felt that since you were his discovery, it would be highly unethical for you to have your first solo show anywhere else."

"He did?"

"I pointed out to Sydney that if you follow your usual trend of selling out all your paintings at your shows like you usually do, with your show at the Thornton coming up, they are going to want to be the first to give you your solo show...after all you ARE a New York artist...especially after you come back from Europe."

"Catherine, I just sent the painting off to Milan. We have no idea if it's even been accepted. I could just be going to Europe for a nice vacation with Brian. Although we've been given the use of a villa on Lake Como, so I might get a chance to get some unusual paintings done while we relax and do some sightseeing."

"Ah, unusual paintings...as long as they're Justin Taylor Originals, I have galleries...three galleries here in New York and several all over the country clamoring to sell them. My job is to decide who gets what paintings. I suddenly feel this awesome sense of power," Catherine couldn't resist teasing, "Of course, there still is this little problem of trying to keep track of where you are and what you're up to."

"So even with all the gallery interest, no one will tell me what to paint...or how often to paint?" Justin wanted to make sure that his biggest concern was addressed.

"Oh, if only someone could! No, the galleries will take whatever you have to offer them. Obviously, your exhibits come first. Anything else that you want to sell, just direct it to me, and I'll offer it to the galleries in sequence. Let's face it your work isn't going to suddenly end up at Art Mart...if that's what you're worried about."

"Well...." Justin mumbled, letting Catherine know that was precisely what he was concerned about.

Catherine at this point couldn't contain her laughter.

"Oh yeah, I can see it all now. A truckload sale of Justin Taylor Originals....there would be a stampede!" She just had to laugh again. "Do me a favor and stop watching the pledge drives on Public Television where you must be hearing about starving artists who lead tragic lives...please go back to watching cartoons with those adorable kids...you know, the Armani-Clad-Picassos'-In-Training!" she added with a another laugh as she leaned back in her chair.

Justin had to laugh at her suggestion.

"Okay, pull out your calendar, here's the schedule. You have Cincinnati...then the next week the Thornton....then you'll received the Bronze Quill Award...then Chicago is two weeks later...and then the opening of the Milan exhibit is two weeks later. Of course, who knows when exactly you'll leave for Europe, with all the mischief that you get into! So, does this all work for you?" She asked as she gave Justin a questioning look.

Justin observed that Catherine was enjoying rattling off the dates. He wondered why he never noticed this sadistic streak in his agent before.

"Catherine, do the words time to paint or rest and relaxation mean anything to you?" Justin thought that he should ask even if he knew it was pointless.

"Not when you have an adoring public clamoring for your work?"

"I see?"

"So the idea that I may stay in Europe and study...say, glass blowing or sculpture, never crossed your mind. I am an artist, you know. I have to have time to develop my craft," Justin tried to point out... although he got the feeling these words were falling on deaf ears.

"I know this is going to be an alien concept for you, but just keep me posted as to what you're up to. I'm sure we can manage to work something out with all the deviant behaviors that you're planning."

"Gee thanks...."

Then both Catherine and Justin had to smile, for of all her clients, Catherine really found Justin the most interesting.

True she was his agent, which allowed Justin to spend more time in his studio, and Justin seemed to use that time wisely to create interesting paintings that both critics and buyers couldn't wait to see, but for Catherine, Justin also seemed to have this streak that always seemed to keep him in some kind of mischief, so that you never knew what he was going to do next, which also made him just simply an interesting client. And over the last few months, Justin seemed happier than she had seen him before and that showed in his work as well. Catherine could only attribute that to Brian and Justin being together.

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Justin left Catherine's office and headed to his studio.

Justin changed from his slacks and sweater into his usual cargo pants and tee shirt, and he wrapped himself in one of Brian's Armani shirts. It always felt good to put on the Armani shirt, for then Brian didn't feel so far away. Even now that he and Brian were in the same city, it still made Brian feel even closer.

Thinking of Brian made Justin remember that he needed to turn on his phone. Justin smiled as he remembered that Brian's lectures seemed to be paying off.

Justin knew that Brian had a meeting this morning, so he was surprised to find that he had voicemail.

When Justin listened to the voicemail, he was surprised to find that it was from Hunter.

When Justin returned the call to Hunter, Justin found out that Hunter needed him to talk to Brian, so that Brian would get in touch with Michael. For Michael had just found conclusive evidence that John Michael Novotny, the man in the picture on the mantel at Debbie's...the war hero, who Michael had believed all his life was his father...could not possibly be Michael's father.

Justin tried to digest this news as gets changed to have lunch with Brian.

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Justin walked into their favorite Café.

"I can't believe it...you're relatively paint-free for a change," Brian teased as Justin joined him at the table.

"I needed the paint for the canvas I was working on," Justin teased in response.

As Justin quickly settled down in the booth, the two ordered lunch.

During lunch, Justin casually mentioned that there were several paintings still at his studio in West Virginia mansion that he thought that he might need to work on while he was here in New York. Then, he waited for Brian response.

"Ah huh?" Brian innocently said, trying to look as bored as possible.

Brian was immediately suspicious that Justin was up to something; for Brian knew that Justin had already routed to his New York studio, any paintings that he MIGHT potentially want to work on ever. It wasn't possible that Justin could have overlooked anything.

At first, Brian didn't want to get into this, but he wasn't buying Justin's explanation either. The innocent expression that his partner was trying to maintain was the first tip off that something was going on.

Brian tried to be patient, in the hope that Justin would just simply tell him everything that he was thinking.

Finally, Brian just gave up and easily said, "Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

Justin let out a deep sigh. Brian prepared himself for whatever was to come.

"Michael and Ben separated a week ago," Justin revealed, trying to set the stage for the bombshell that was to come.

"Tragic though it may be," Brian interrupted, "That has nothing to do with me," he added for emphasis.

"And...." Justin added, stopping mid-sentence.

"And?" Brian asked with renewed interest in whatever was to follow.

"And...Michael just found out that John Michael Novotny couldn't possibly be his father," Justin practically blurted out.

"I see," Brian responded quietly, waiting to see if there was anything else his partner wanted to add. As expected, he was not disappointed.

Justin continued, "Hunter called and wanted me to persuade you to talk to Michael. According to Hunter, Michael's pretty upset about the news."

Brian listened carefully and then calmly smiled and finally responded, matter-of-factly, "Everything is fine. There's no need for me to talk to Michael."

"Why not? I know that you're upset with him, but he's still your oldest friend," Justin reminded him.

"It has nothing to do with that," Brian quickly set the record straight. "There's just no need for me to talk to Michael about THIS...because Michael already knew this...or at least he suspected. In fact, Michael's known about this for years," he finally revealed. "So there's no need for you to be concerned, and it's unnecessary for me to do anything."

Brian now considered this matter closed, but something told him that Justin hadn't reached the same conclusion.

"How could he suspect years ago?" Justin challenged. "Hunter said that he just found out the truth yesterday? It seems as if something just happened that made him aware of everything," he continued to argue. "Hunter also said there's proof."

"Look, I don't know what's going on with Hunter, but I know that Michael already knew the truth about his father. Do you remember years ago when Ted was working on that benefit and he wanted Divina Devore to appear?"

"Yeah, during my days as a go-go boy, what about it?"

"Back then, Michael began to doubt that John Novotny was his father."

"That can't be true. If Michael already believed that years ago, why is this coming up now?"

"Something must have happened to confirm what he already knew. Something must have brought this issue back up again...because this topic has been dormant for all these years."

"I wonder what happened?" Justin asked, trying to figure out what was going on. Then something dawned on him. "Wait a minute...for all these years, Debbie has still maintained that shrine on the mantel in the living room. Does she know what Michael suspects or that he knows?"

"Of course...yes...they even had several arguments about this, years ago. So trust me, you can stop worrying."

"So you're telling me this is old news," Justin said with some disappointment.

"Pretty much. Now do you really need something from the mansion...because we can call Thomas and have him send whatever it is that you THINK you need?"

"No...no...that's okay."

"Good. So now that everything is settled, let me get back to work," Brian said with a smile, gently squeezing Justin's hand under the table. "I'll pick you up at the studio when I'm done. In fact, why don't you let me give you a ride back there now?"

Justin thought for a minute and then finally agreed.

Brian and Justin settled into the Limo for the short ride to his studio. As they were almost there, Justin had to ask, "Brian, if John Novotny isn't Michael's father...who is?"

"I'm going to tell you because we don't keep secrets from each other, but I want you to promise not to tell anyone."

"I promise."

"Michael has reason to believe that his father is Divina Devore, otherwise known as Danny Devore. It seems that Danny and Debbie dated in high school."

"Oh no! And Michael's known or suspected that, all this time?"

"Yes," Brian said emphatically.

"Well, aren't you curious?" Justin asked.

"Am I curious about what?" Brian foolishly asked.

"What's going on."

Brian shook his head and tried to remember that this should have been expected. After all, he was dealing with Justin, and Justin tended to over-think everything. Inwardly, Brian just smiled. Outwardly, he simply answered quietly, "No."

"So, I guess we aren't going back to Pittsburgh then, huh?" Justin persisted.

"Why, do you have a craving for lemon bars?" Brian asked with a smile and one raised eyebrow as if he already knew the answer to this question.

Author's Comments: So, Brian and Justin are now on their way back to Pittsburgh. And this phone call and the events that follow are played out in detail in the sidebar/sequel "The Return Of Divina Devore", where you can tell from the title, the reason for Hunter's phone call.

**The Return Of Divina Devore**

**(A Sequel to Between Now And Then)**

Chapter 1 – Surprises All Around

Wednesday Afternoon...(Day 52)

Ben had moved out three days ago, taking a few suitcases and Hunter with him. Michael was left alone in the house, waiting and secretly hoping that Ben would come to his senses and return.

Michael hoped that they had reached a point where all that had happened over the weekend, relating to the legal union of Brian and Justin, would be forgotten, and their lives would continue without interruptions. But it had been three days!

Since Ben was not returning his phone calls, Michael opted to visit Ben in his office at Carnegie Mellon. He tried to pick a day when Ben had office hours with no scheduled classes immediately afterwards.

Michael waited outside for Ben's office hours to be over. When the last student finally left, Michael entered the office.

"Hello, Ben," he said quietly.

"Michael," Ben said with some surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you."

"I don't feel that we have anything to talk about," Ben pointed out. "But since you're here, at least make yourself comfortable. Can I get you coffee or a soda?"

"No, I'm fine. I just needed to talk to you," Michael said, as he seated himself across from Ben.

"As I said before, I'm not sure that we have anything to talk about," Ben stressed again.

"Obviously, you feel that way. On Sunday, you said what you wanted to say...packed your bags...and moved out. You didn't give me a chance to say anything."

"I'm sorry about that, Michael," Ben said with a sigh. "But you have to admit you and I had been talking for several days. I was tired of talking about things. You and I were never going to come to agreeable terms, so I thought the best course of action was to leave."

"I think that what you did...was a shitty thing to do!" Michael strongly pointed out.

"How is that, Michael?"

"You have known about my feelings for Brian since the beginning of our relationship. You have always said that you understood. You have always said that Brian and I had a history. Since you've known all these things for years, I can't understand what happened with us."

"You're right," Ben said with a sigh. "I did know about your feelings for Brian since the beginning. I understand how you felt about Brian. Your feelings for Brian never interfered with our relationship before."

"Then why did you leave?"

"I left because I was tired, Michael" Ben reiterated. "I was tired of watching you stamp your foot and demand that Brian come back to you. I just couldn't watch that any more."

Michael became silent as he was shocked by what he'd just heard from Ben. It took a moment for it to all sink in. Michael had never wanted Brian to come back...he wanted him to be there in the future. He understood the difference...he couldn't understand why Ben didn't.

"I just couldn't stay with someone who is already planning their after-life...that time in the future when I'm no longer going to be there. I couldn't stay with someone looking forward to that future with so much anticipation...that the present and the people here now, are so unimportant."

"How can you say that?"

"For those last days you have been so focused on fighting for Brian that you have been unable to be present for Hunter, for JR, or for me. All your personal resources were so focused on fighting for the future of two old queens living in Palm Springs , that the present no longer mattered to you."

"But I told you I needed some time. You told me you understood, and you'd agreed to give it to me. What happened?"

"I agreed to give you time to heal. I didn't agree to give you time to continue to fight for your future with Brian. Once I realized that that was what you needed to do. Then I realized that I needed to give you the space in which to fight your battle. So I moved out."

"What about me? That leaves me alone. You know that I don't want to be alone."

"This was a battle I couldn't help you fight. So I did the only thing I knew to do, and that was leave, so you could focus all your energies on this pursuit."

"You could have helped me. You know that I love you, and my place is with you. We're married for fuck sake. I would have thought that your commitment to me would have been stronger than this. I only asked you to put up with a few days of me coming to terms with things. I've put up with far worse from you in the course of this relationship. We've always been able to work things through. I can't believe that you just walked out on me because I was upset for two fucking days," Michael protested.

"I did what I had to do," Ben professed. "You really left me no choice. I told you that I wouldn't play second fiddle to anyone. Two days was all that I could stand. I'm sure when you finally think about things, you'll finally understand. I only hope that getting a chance to talk this out with me will make things easier for you to see the problem."

"So what are we going to do, Ben?"

"We're going to live apart," Ben declared.

"Isn't that something that we should have worked out together?" You seem to have made this decision alone."

"I did what I needed to do to survive, Michael. Your focus is somewhere in the future. Your focus is making sure that the path to your dreams is maintained. I don't really fit into that scheme. That wasn't a joint decision either. So as I see it, you were emotionally unavailable to make plans for us, so I couldn't plan things out with you. I also had to make things okay for Hunter, so I had to live in the present and act."

"What about Hunter?"

"Michael, whatever issues going on between you and me have nothing to do with Hunter. He may live with me, but he is free to see you whenever he wants to. I don't want him to have to choose sides between us. I don't want the family to have to choose sides either. But, you and I...we just can't be together right now."

"I thought that you loved me!" Michael stated to shout.

"I do love you, Michael. That's what makes this all so hard. I'll even grant that you probably love me. In the circumstances that you and I live, loving each other just isn't enough. I don't have the energy to fight for us and fight my HIV at the same time. I'm focused very much in the here and now because that's all that I have to work with. But with or without you, I'm planning to be around for a very long time."

"I want you to be around for a very long time too, and I want us to be together."

"I just can't live with you right now, Michael. I can't bend far enough to stand-by while you fight YOUR battle for the future, while I try to fight mine...I have battles of my own to fight."

"It sounds like you're telling me that your battles are more important than mine. What about me?"

"You have to be on your own for a while."

"For how long is a while?"

"I don't know."

"Does this mean that you're coming back?"

"I don't think so."

"So what are we going to do?"

"In time you and I need to make some plans, but we don't have to do that today."

Michael was silent again.

Then Ben's tone softened. "Are you doing all right? Do you need anything?"

"All I really need is you..." Michael answered

"I'm sorry, Michael," Ben said softly, and he genuinely meant it.

Both Michael and Ben knew that his meeting was now over. So Michael stood there for a moment and looked at the Ben...looked at the man he loved...the man he married. And then he slowly exited Ben's office.

Ben waited until Michael had gone before he let his own sadness about the situation take over.

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And in another part of town...

There was a knock on Jennifer Taylor's office door, and Amy, her office assistant, entered.

"Jennifer, there's a Daniel Devore to see you. He called earlier and made an appointment for 2 o'clock. He appears to have arrived a little early."

"No problem, Amy. I can see him now," Jennifer said easily. She took a moment to clear her desk of the papers that she'd been working on. She nodded her head and indicated that she was now ready.

When her client walked into her office, she immediately felt as if she had seen him somewhere before, but she couldn't place where. He just looked very familiar. Jennifer didn't say anything, but she did make note of her impressions.

Daniel was about 5'8"and average build. He had black hair and piercing dark eyes. Even casually dressed in slacks and a sport jacket, one could see that everything was impeccably tailored; yet Daniel moved with a certain economy of motion. This was someone who was very comfortable in his own skin. In some ways, Daniel's manner reminded her of Brian...even though the two men were totally different physically.

Amy made the introductions, and then Jennifer and Daniel relaxed and settled down to using a first name basis. Then Amy returned to her desk, closing Jennifer's office door behind her.

"So Daniel, what can I do for you?" Jennifer asked, once they were alone.

"I'm interested in buying a place to live here in Pittsburgh. I've been traveling most of my life. Now it's time for me to settle down in one place. You see, I've spent most of my professional life performing on stage."

"Oh, I see. Well, after the glare of the stage lights of New York and California, I'm sure that Pittsburgh is going to seem quite tame. What made you decide to settle here?"

"I grew up here. I have family here that I've been estranged from because of my work. I've decided that it's time to mend fences. After all, family is very important! I'm even pondering the prospect of a farewell tour. Once that's over, I want here to be the place I ultimately return to."

"I think that's an excellent idea. Are you married? Are there children?"

"No Jennifer ...I'm gay."

"I see. Well then, is there a partner or will you be living alone? I only ask, so that I can figure out what size house or condo you're going to need."

"I think I've been married to my work for all these years. I never really took the time to form that lasting relationship, but I'm fortunate that I have friends. And my friends like to just drop in...no matter where I am. So I'm obviously going to need plenty of room."

"I see...that must keep life interesting."

"It does, believe me. My friends and I formed our own little family over the years. When you're constantly traveling as much as we are...it can make all the difference," Daniel pointed out.

"I can understand that. I have a group of people that I'm close to in much the same way. We've formed our own little dysfunctional family unit too. We always get together for holidays and special occasions. We really look out for each other. Sometimes, we just get together for dinner...just dinner...nothing special. But I'm sure you can understand what I mean," Jennifer said with a laugh.

"Absolutely, we're pretty much the same way."

"Is there a particular area of the city that you're interested in?" Jennifer asked.

"I've given it some thought. At first I was thinking about something out in the suburbs. But then I realized that I'm not planning to raise any children, so that didn't really make to much sense. Then I considered a loft or a condo, but I think I would find that too confining. So I was thinking about a house within easy access of Liberty Avenue."

"I'm sure that you'll make lots of friends here. And, the Liberty Avenue area is still a great place to live," Jennifer pointed out. "Are you looking for a newly constructed house or something previously owned? There are quite a few properties available in both categories."

"I really haven't thought things through that far," Daniel admitted sadly.

"Well, if you'll give me some idea about the price range that you're interested in, I'll make a few selections. We can do a few private viewings and this weekend, if you like, we can scout a few open houses that are listed. How does that sound?'

"I was hoping that we could spend most of our time looking during the weekdays. You see, I seem to still have commitments for the weekends," Daniel pointed out. "But, I must say it does feel good to be back in Pittsburgh again."

"I know, isn't it funny how sometimes you spend so much time running away from a place, and then one day you stop running, and you wonder why you left in the first place," Jennifer suggested with a smile.

"That's true. I came back to Pittsburgh about four years ago for a benefit performance. I wanted to stay here back then, but I had commitments to honor so that was impossible. Now though, it's a much different story. I have a little more time on my hands to figure things out."

Jennifer and Daniel spent some time looking at few properties on the web, so that Daniel could get a feel for the range of housing prices in the Pittsburgh area. After taking the cyber-tour on a few sites, they settled on an initial target price range.

"It's been good to meet you, Daniel," Jennifer said, "I'll put together a list of properties for us to see this week, so you can gauge what you're looking for. They will give us a true starting point for future selections. So give me a day or so to pull everything together."

Now that things were in motion, Daniel said goodbye to Jennifer and agreed to wait for her call. Daniel made sure to give Jennifer his phone numbers before he shook hands and said goodbye.

Once he had gone, Jennifer began her search for possible properties for Daniel to consider.

Chapter 2 – Look What I Found

Saturday Afternoon... (Day 55)

It was a Saturday afternoon like any other. Hunter and Michael were working together at Red Cape Comics.

"When I was a kid, I hated Saturdays," Michael explained to Hunter.

"Why?"

"On Saturdays, most kids got to do things with their dads. Since I didn't have a father, I was alone. I didn't have anyone to do anything with," Michael added sadly.

"So that's why you still prefer to work on Saturdays?"

"Maybe..."

"Ma tried to take up the slack; so did Uncle Vic until he moved to New York. But I was pretty much alone until I was about 14, and that's when I met Brian. Those were good times; me and Brian did everything together. We were always there for each other; we looked out for each other."

"Like Zephyr looks out for Rage?" Hunter asked with a smile.

"Exactly!"

"But Rage is in love with JT not Zephyr," Hunter reminded him, trying to help Michael come to terms with certain truths. "There was even a marriage issue."

"I know that!" Michael asserted, a part of him annoyed that Hunter would remind of him of the thing that he was trying not to think about.

"And life imitated art..." Hunter reiterated him, still driving home his point.

"So to speak...except, you know, that Brian and Justin aren't married?" Michael quickly pointed out.

"Not technically maybe, but in every other way that matters, they are."

"I know," Michael said resolutely with a sigh. "I remember when I married Ben. You were there. That was an eventful couple of days, wasn't it? Ma got engaged to Carl. There was the bike ride. Ben and I got married. Brian celebrated with us and got me...us a cake and champagne. Then Brian got injured during the ride. And, Melanie gave birth to JR."

"We were all so happy then," Hunter reminded him. "But it didn't last."

"No, it didn't. But I still have the memories," Michael said wistfully. "Are you doing okay?" he asked, stopping to consider the feelings of someone other than himself.

"I'm doing okay, I guess. School is going okay, but I miss living with you."

"You know, you can visit me or stay over whenever you want. I'm sure Ben told you the same thing. No matter what's going on between Ben and me, we both love you."

"I know. I just wish that things had turned out differently. I just wish we were all still together."

"I know...me too."

Hunter and Michael quietly worked restocking the comic book inventory and waiting on customers.

Towards the end of the day, Hunter asked an unusual question, "Michael, what was it like growing up with Debbie?"

Michael had to laugh at the question. "For me, she's always been just Ma. But for most other people, Ma takes some getting used to. But once you get to know her, you have to love her."

"Has she always been like that?"

"You mean loud and over the top? Yeah...the kids at school used to be really jealous, because she was my mom. I got to do my homework at the Diner. Ma has always smothered everyone with a lot of love...especially me and Brian. That's why everybody loves her. And you've got to remember that she's calmed down a lot over the years, especially since she and Carl got together," Michael had to laugh again. "But let's face it...she has always been the talk of this town. Everybody knows her. Early on, she became a fixture here on Liberty Avenue. Yes, I would say that she is famous...infamous even. Oh, there have been those fleeting moments, when I wished that she were quieter and more reserved...maybe even like Jennifer. But then she wouldn't be Ma."

"No, she wouldn't," Hunter agreed.

"And I wouldn't be me," Michael acknowledged softly.

"Have you ever wondered what life would have been like if you had grown up with a father? Do you think you would have been different if your dad hadn't died in Viet Nam?" Hunter asked.

Hunter noticed that Michael got this far off look in his eyes.

He wasn't sure what was going on...but he didn't want to press, so he just allowed the silence to linger between them.

Then Michael simply said, "It might have been interesting growing up with two parents. Ma wouldn't have had to work so hard to take care of me."

"And you would have had someone to spend Saturdays with," Hunter pointed out with a laugh.

Michael thought about this for a moment before he said, "Then again, who knows? Maybe things would have been worse. Look at Brian. He had two parents, and they made his life a living hell."

"I guess you're right. My birth parents did the same thing to me. They tried to ruin my life. If you and Ben hadn't taken me in and later adopted me, I don't know what would have happened to me. Now, I'm lucky to have two parents that love me...no matter what."

"That's why I don't understand Brian. He's always been content to be a drop in dad to Gus. Oh, he and Gus seem to love each other and all. But he gave up his parental rights. I couldn't do that. I've always wanted to be a real father to JR. Sometimes that's very hard with Lindsay and Melanie living in Toronto."

"JR loves you. She knows that you're her dad. She knows that you love her. And JR is still quite young," Hunter suggested.

"She is still my little honeybunch!" Michael gushed.

"She is that!" Hunter added.

"She's really growing so fast. I just don't want to miss any more of her life than I already have."

"At least you get to see her almost very month. Melanie and Lindsay are very good about that."

"Yes, I know. Once upon a time I'd hope that Mel and Linds would return to Pittsburgh to live, so that we could all be together again. Then I'd hoped that Ben and I would move to Toronto to help Mel and Linds raise JR. Ben had his reasons for not wanting to do that, but now that we aren't together anymore, maybe I should think about it again."

"I don't know, Michael, have you talked to Melanie and Lindsay about this?" Hunter cautiously asked, already starting to think about what he knew about Melanie and Lindsay, and he didn't think that they would react well to this idea.

Hunter started to mentally prepare himself for more trouble that he felt would be brewing on the horizon.

"In fact, I think I might bring it up as a possibility to Mel and Linds on their next visit," Michael proposed.

"Give yourself some time Michael. You and Ben just broke up. And I'm sure things, at the moment, are probably a little rocky for them too," Hunter cautioned, remembering all the things that were said at the dinner table less than a week ago.

"But it would be nice to be more involved with my daughter's life on a daily basis," Michael insisted.

"Have you talked to Debbie about this? She may not agree."

Michael became angry. "Fuck Hunter! I'm a grown man. I don't need my mother's permission! I really don't care what my mother thinks!"

"Sorry..."

"Besides, my mother isn't always right, you know? When Ben and I first met, she didn't think that I should have gotten involved with him. But now, she and Ben are crazy about each other. At least they were until...."

"I didn't mean to bring it up."

Michael and Hunter went back to their inventory duties. Their momentary disagreement was quickly forgotten.

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Later, Hunter was entering some information on the computer when suddenly he became very animated. "Wow! Michael, did you see this?" he asked.

"Did I see what?" Michael casually asked.

"Look at this!" Hunter insisted. "This is great!"

"What on earth has got you so excited?"

Michael finally stopped what he was doing and walked over to see what Hunter was looking at. He made himself comfortable on the stool beside the computer and tried to see what had Hunter so excited.

Now that Hunter had Michael's full attention, he could continue. "According to the web, the National Archives has released military records going back to 1607. Can you imagine! That's like going back to the founding of America...the Jamestown Settlement, the Civil War, even the War for Independence. They even have the more recent wars too...World War II, Korea, Viet Nam, Iraq. "

"When did you become so interested in history?" Michael challenged.

Hunter was surprised by the question, since he and Ben talked about history all the time. But then he realized that Michael might not have paid much attention to those discussions, so he just let the question pass.

"Can you believe that this is going to be available on the web? Think about all the people researching their family. This is going to make family histories come alive. Isn't that amazing?"

"What's so amazing about it?"

"According to the Internet, we can log onto ancestry.com, and be able to see actual documents prepared by people in the past. You'll be able to see clips of newsreels shown in movie theaters at the time too. It's all on the Internet, and it's completely free at the moment. I think this is amazing."

"I guess..."

"Michael, do you know what his means?"

"No, but I'm sure you're about to tell me."

"We can see the actual military records for your dad. You'll be able to see pictures. You'll be able to know his entire military history."

"Ma has always told me about my dad, so I'm sure there isn't too much new information to know."

"But you know Michael, reading the entire military experience of your dad may make you closer to him. To see copies of documents that he actually prepared with his own hands, wouldn't that be amazing?"

"Since you seem to be so excited about it, maybe..."

"I thought that this was something we may be able to do together. We could also look at the military history of other members of our family. What do you think?"

"Well, it's an idea. Since, as you say, it's so readily available...it might be interesting to see. You're right, there may be things...little things about my dad...that Ma never mentioned."

"Ah ha...at last I've piqued your interest," Hunter teased.

"I didn't say that," Michael said with a laugh. "But I agree it might be interesting to see what we can find out. Maybe there will be something that Justin and I can use for the comic. I think we should take a look at this!"

"But not tonight...it's getting late," Hunter reminded him.

Michael looked at the clock, "Where does the time go? You're right...it's getting late. You've worked very hard today," he added.

"So did you..." Hunter added.

Michael walked over to the cash register and removed several bills. He handed the money to Hunter. "Here...this is for you...you've earned it."

"Thanks, but you know you didn't have to do this?"

"Contrary to your popular opinion, I don't keep you around just for slave labor," Michael teased, "Even though that may have been what you once thought back in the beginning."

They both laughed as they each remembered a moment in time long ago.

Beginning of flashback.

"As long as you're here, it wouldn't kill you to help out. You know, straighten the racks...dust," Michael suggested, coming out of the back room of the store.

"Is that why you took me in...slave labor?" Hunter pointed out. "Hey!" he added in protest as Michael threw a feather duster at him. "I'm allergic to feathers," he quickly pointed out.

"Yeah! More like allergic to work."

"Can't you see I'm reading?"

"What ...XMen, Spiderman?" Michael asked with renewed interest. Hunter responded by simply holding up the latest copy of Rage. "So how do you like it?"

"It eats shit!"

"Excuse me?"

"Who ever heard of gay crusaders? All fags care about is getting their dicks sucked."

"Yeah, well for you information, I wrote that."

"Well, then you ought to know. Besides a hot, hunky superhero like Rage would never exist. Not in a million years."

Hunter was silenced as Brian entered the comic book store...a superhero come to life!

End of flashback.

Yes, things had changed for everyone.

Michael and Hunter had finished their work for today...it was now time for both of them to get going. Hunter seemed eager to go home and see Ben, so he hugged Michael and said his goodbyes.

Michael wasn't quite ready to go home and be alone, so he headed for Woody's to join the gang for a drink and maybe a game of pool before heading for Babylon...after all, it was a Saturday night in Pittsburgh.

Chapter 3 – Impromptu Data Gathering

Saturday Evening ...(Day 55)

On his way home, Hunter stopped in to see Debbie and Carl. It had been a week since he had visited. Because of the way things were now between Michael and Ben, he had avoided family dinners. Originally that seemed like the right thing to do.

But after talking with Michael today, Hunter had a new perspective on family. He had truly missed seeing Debbie, so he rationalized that by just dropping in, on a Saturday night, was something neutral, and no one could accuse him of choosing sides. He knew that Michael would go first to Woody's and then to Babylon, leaving the coast clear to see Debbie without any intrusions.

Hunter climbed the steps to the porch and rang the doorbell. Carl answered the door and was pleasantly surprised to see him standing there. Carl reached out and hugged him and then, quickly ushered him into the house.

Debbie too, came over as he entered and gave him one of her bone crushing hugs. In spite of the difficulty that Hunter had breathing, it was comforting to know that he was still loved.

After the pleasantries were exchanged, Debbie returned to her latest creation in the kitchen, leaving Hunter to spend a few moments in the living room talking with Carl.

Carl wanted to know how he was doing, and how Ben was. Hunter easily indicated that they both were doing okay. They talked about Hunter's working at the store with Michael. Hunter talked a bit about school, and the two chatted easily for a while.

Then Hunter asked Carl if he had ever served in the military.

"I did a short stint in the Army. I even have a son, Carl Jr., who's in the Air Force now. He decided long ago to make a career of it." Carl informed him. "What made you ask?"

Hunter told Carl all about ancestry.com and the release of military records going back to 1607. Carl found this an interesting tidbit of information, but like Michael, he didn't actually share Hunter's enthusiasm about the news. However, Carl gave Hunter all the information he had about the military experience for himself and his son. Carl also gave Hunter their dates of birth to facilitate his search.

The two continue to chat for a little while longer about nothing in particular. Then Hunter decided it was time to go see Debbie in the kitchen.

As Hunter stood up, he walked past the mantle. He'd looked at the small shrine on display there. It contained the Purple Heart awarded posthumously to Lt. John Michael Novotny for his service in Viet Nam.

It was hard for Hunter to think that this was his grandfather, so to speak.

Hunter looked at the picture without saying anything. He was thinking this man in the picture bore no physical resemblance to Michael at all. He'd always thought that fact was odd since most kids tend to look like their parents...Justin looked like Jennifer...Gus definitely looked like Brian... JR looked like both Michael and Melanie.

"What are you doing?" Debbie innocently asked, as she walked over to him.

"Nothing, Debbie, I'm just looking at the picture of Michael's father," he answered.

"Oh yeah, that..." Debbie said, coming over to the mantel. She lovingly ran her fingers over the picture and looked at the Purple Heart. She readjusted the rosary draped across the picture frame.

"Michael and I were talking about his father today," Hunter casually mentioned.

"You were? What did Michael say?"

"Nothing really...he was just telling me how much he missed having a dad. I think that's part of the reason that he wants to be a more of father to JR. I think it's because he missed, getting to know his own father."

"I see," Debbie said quietly, now deeply in her own thoughts. "Michael probably did miss not having a father. I tried to do everything for him, but I guess there's only so much a mother can do," she said sadly.

"He's always talked about how important all the things you did to raise him were. I think that he just missed something that other kids had. We were just talking," Hunter reiterated. "He was also telling me what it was like to grow up with Brian too."

"Yes, they were practically inseparable from the time they were 14. I know Michael had hopes and dreams," she said, letting her voice trail off. "It's too bad that those hopes and dreams cost him Ben."

"I know," Hunter said softly.

"Now, why don't you let me fix you a snack before you continue that long trek home," she teased.

"But Debbie, it's only a few blocks," Hunter pointed out, feeling it was definitely necessary to remind her, so that she wouldn't try to overfeed him. Needless to say, she paid no attention to his reminder, and from experience he knew that further arguments were going be futile.

Hunter settled down to enjoy the inevitably oversized snack that Debbie had prepared.

As he was doing so, he thought about Brian. Hunter knew that Brian and Michael had been like brothers for over 20 years, but that wasn't what he was thinking about at the moment. No...Hunter thought about Brian's trim body and smiled.

He wondered how Brian managed to keep his body so trim and in shape, after eating a lifetime of meals like this with Debbie. Then Hunter smiled to himself...as he realized over those years, Brian had other activities to help maintain his weight. He continued to smile as he took his bite of food.

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After Hunter finished eating, he said his goodbyes and headed home to Ben.

This left Debbie alone with her thoughts as she continued to bustle in the kitchen.

Something was troubling Debbie. She walked over the mantle and once again looked at the picture and the Purple Heart in the shrine that she'd lovingly created. Running her fingers over it all once again, she couldn't avoid feelings of sadness. Talking to Hunter had definitely opened old wounds.

She remembered some of the things Hunter had said. Debbie realized that Michael was 35 years old, and yet to this day, there was still a gaping hole in his heart for the father that he never knew.

The sound of Carl's voice, brought Debbie out of her thoughts when he simply asked, "Debbie honey, are you okay? You seem a little quiet."

"No Carl, I'm fine. I just have a lot on my mind."

"I know...you're still worried about Michael, aren't you?"

"With good reason," she said quietly.

"Give it some time, Debbie," Carl suggested. "Ben and Michael really love each other. I know this has to be hard on both of them. But this is what Ben needed to do for now. Time is a wonderful healer. But no matter what, Ben and Hunter are both still part of this family."

"Yes they are. I just keep wishing...if only..." Debbie said wistfully.

"Don't do that. If you keep thinking like that, things will never get better. If only is past...now we're dealing with what is."

"I know you're right," she agreed with a sigh.

Debbie settled down on the sofa next to him, and Carl lovingly pulled her into a bear hug that would rival one of her own.

"Carl, I can't breathe," she mumbled with a laugh.

"I learned from the best," Carl teased as he gently released her, and then leaned in for a kiss.

Chapter 4 – Anyone For Pool

Saturday Evening...(Day 55)

When Michael entered Woody's, Emmett called out to him, quickly motioning for him to come over to join the rest of the gang at the pool table.

"Hi Em, who's winning?" Michael quickly asked, as he approached.

"I'm not sure. I'm going to get a Cosmo, then I'll try to figure it out," Emmett said with a laugh. "Can I get you anything?"

"I think I'll have a Cosmo, too," Michael said with a sigh. "It's been quite a day."

Michael greeted everyone: Ted, Blake, Drew, Calvin, and Trace. Then, everyone quickly returned their attention back to the game at hand.

Trace was getting ready to take a shot. Of course, Calvin and Drew, being the true jocks in the group, were both trying to help Trace improve his technique...on the spot. They were both being real pains.

Finally, Trace decided that he had accepted as much help as he could bear, so he quickly sent both Drew and Calvin to the other side of the table, so he could take his shot in peace.

Michael couldn't resist smiling at their antics. It reminded him of all the times that he played pool with Brian and Ben.

Beginning of flashback.

Justin stands at the pocket of the pool table, leaning slightly forward and rocking from side to side.

"Will you move your dick? I can't concentrate," Brian said as he's trying to take a shot, obviously distracted by Justin's movements.

Justin remains at the pocket, but merely turned around, now swishing his ass.

"You shouldn't have any trouble sinking into that hole," Emmett teased.

Brian takes the shot and the ball goes right in the pocket.

"Oh, yeah," Justin gushes. "Good shot!"

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"How about giving me something to aim at?" Ben suggested to Michael.

Michael positions himself at the same pocket with his mouth open wide..

Ben takes the shot and misses...as both he and Michael slightly groan. Everyone else, though, manages a laugh.

End of flashback.

Emmett returned with the drinks and handed one to Michael. He noticed the far away look in Michael's eye.

"How are you doing, Sweetie?" Emmett asked with some concern.

"I guess I'm okay. Of course, I miss Ben...but there isn't anything that I can do about that," Michael pointed out with a touch of anger.

"Are things are getting better with Hunter?" Ted asked.

"Yeah, he was helping me in the store today, so we had a chance to talk," Michael explained.

"So things are better...but, are you sure that you're okay?" Emmett persisted, noticing the persistent far away look in Michael's eyes.

"I'm fine. It's just that today Hunter and I were talking about fathers," Michael revealed.

"Fathers? Now, that's an explosive topic," Drew commented. "Unfortunately, we all have one of those," he teased.

"Mine reminded me at eighteen that I had been an embarrassment to the family long enough, so it was time for me to leave Hazlehurst," Emmett revealed. "So I moved up north...here into Yankee territory."

"Don't worry, Emmett, the South shall rise again!" Calvin teased, causing everyone to laugh...including Em.

"Let's not go there," Ted cautioned before the group tried to fight the Civil War all over again.

"All that I know is that my father was okay about my athletic stuff. He hardly ever missed a game. But when I finally came out to him and told him that I was gay, he became this raving lunatic," Calvin pointed out. "My mother has been instrumental in getting him to calm down over the years. We're both still working on our relationship."

"I was lucky, my father was totally accepting of my being gay. He just told me that he wanted me to be happy. It was really great. It surprised me too. Then, I guess I'm one of the lucky ones," Trace added. "Sort of like you Michael, Debbie has to be the greatest mom. She seems so accepting and loving no matter what you do? She even shows up in gay bars."

"Brian used to say that not everyone can have a mother that's as comfortable at gay bars as she is in the kitchen," Michael pointed out.

"That's true, he used to say that often. I heard him say it whenever we were all out together, and Debbie would simply show up at Woody's for a late night drink with Vic," Ted said with a laugh.

"Yeah Ma, you got to love her! She's definitely one of kind." Michael pointed out. "She raised me almost single handedly. Sure Uncle Vic was there too, but it was Ma, who did everything."

"What happened to your dad?" Trace innocently asked.

"My dad was a war hero. He died in Viet Nam two weeks after I was born."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." Trace said apologetically.

"No problem," Michael said, shaking his head. Then he looked over at the table and noticed the lull. "Okay, so tell me whose turn is it?"

Emmett and Drew immediately started arguing about whose turn it was, and the prior conversation was temporarily forgotten.

Michael found a comfortable vantage point from which to watch the game and sip his drink. He thought about how much time he and Brian had spent a Woody's over the years, just hanging out. Next he remembered how each evening would end...with Brian eyeing some hot guy and disappearing. But that had been a long time ago, for it had been quite a while since Brian had been to Woody's.

Then he remembered all the times that he'd been here with Ben. Right now, Michael really missed them both.

Michael wished there was something he could do to make things better with Ben, but he had no ideas about how to proceed. Usually, he could rely on Brian to come up with a way to fix things. But since Sunday dinner at Debbie's a week ago, Brian had not been returning his calls, so Michael felt totally lost.

"That was a terrible shot!" Ted teased Blake. "Where did you say that you learned to shoot pool?"

"If you must know, my dad taught me!" Blake responded proudly. "We even had a pool table in the basement and everything. My dad not only taught me how to play, but he taught all my friends as well."

"I see, well let's just keep that our little secret, shall we?" Ted insisted.

"Oh come on Ted, just because Blake missed the shot, is no reason to pick on him. After all, it's very easy to be judgmental when you don't have a pool cue in your hand," Trace teased.

"Is that a challenge?" Ted asked. "Is there a wager attached?"

"I don't see why not," Calvin added. "We can take them can't we Trace?"

"Absolutely! I think I'm finish with my practice rounds." Trace said with bravado.

While Ted, Blake, Calvin and Trace tried to reach an accord for payment by the loser, Drew walked over to the table and proceeded to rack up the balls.

Emmett went over to stand again by Michael. He started talking to Blake again.

"So your dad taught you to play pool, huh Blake?" he asked.

"Yeah," Blake said with a smile.

"My mom taught me," Michael said sadly. "She taught Brian too."

"It figures!" Ted added. "I heard that you and Brian used to do everything together."

"That's because Brian's dad used to beat him all the time, so he would escape to my house," Michael reminded them.

"I remember that I'd heard that. Something about his father not really wanting Brian to be born," Emmett said sadly. "It must have been a miserable existence growing up like that."

"Brian's father was a very bitter, old man," Michael said.

"But fortunately Brian is a better father to Gus than his father was to him," Drew commented. "I have to admit that Gus is great kid."

"I think that you have to credit Melanie and Lindsay for that. Brian has been just a drop-in dad. Every kid needs more than that." Michael challenged.

"Brian may be a drop-in dad, but Gus is crazy about him.... and Justin too," Drew added.

"I just don't know how Brian could give up his parental rights," Michael criticized.

"You know why Brian did it. He did it so Melanie and Lindsay and Gus could be a family," Emmett reminded him.

"And just because Brian gave up his parental rights doesn't mean that he stopped being a parent. Brian still supports Gus in every way." Ted immediately said in Brian's defense.

"I guess..."

"Besides, Brian was only supposed to be the sperm donor, remember?" Emmett pointed out. "He never knew he'd fall in love with Gus."

"You know any man can be a father and can contribute sperm to make a baby, but it takes a special kind of man to be a dad," Drew suggested quietly.

"What do you mean?" Michael asked with renewed curiosity.

With that question, everyone turned to glare at Michael in disbelief. Then they all just shook their heads as they remembered that some times he just didn't get it.

"Michael, the role of a dad is pretty important. As a dad, you're the person that you kid looks up to, to help him formulate his own ideas about what it is to be a man. You're the protector, who keeps your family safe. You're the provider. But as a dad, you need to be there emotionally as well," Drew said patiently.

"Yeah, your dad teaches you to love differently than what you learn from your mother," Calvin added.

"Mothers tend to sort of love unconditionally. I think that why we're all closer to our moms. But it's usually your dad, who gives you the courage to be all that you can be. He's your cheering section when you succeed. He's the one who teaches you how to fail without giving up. He's the one to show you how to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back in the game. That's a very valuable lesson to learn," Trace commented. "Mothers are just different than fathers."

"I would say that Gus is very lucky to have Brian and Justin in his life, on what ever level." Ted added.

"Just think, in spite of how our dads may feel about us now, they were instrumental in teaching us how to deal in the world of men. That has got to be a lesson that we all learned very well," Blake said with a laugh.

"My dad taught me about being successful," Ted added.

"Teddy, I would say that's a lesson that you've learned very well too." Emmett pointed out. "We would agree that you are very successful."

"Thank you, Em," Ted said, lifting his bottle of water in a mock salute.

"But some dads are driven. They push their kids too hard. They're really tough disciplinarians. Some kids don't know if their parents even love them at all," Blake added. "That can scar a kid for life."

"Yes but it's also your dad that shows you how to problem solve. He shows you how to push harder...to never give up." A stranger's voice added, as he was passing by.

Everyone looked up at the sound of the strange voice. At that point, the gang realized that, by now, quite a few people in Woody's were listening in on their conversation.

"Well, that's definitely more than showing up for birthdays and the occasional walk in the park," Michael commented. "You know...The Brian Kinney idea of fatherhood!"

"Michael, Brian may have said those things in the past, but you have to admit he's spent a lot of time with Gus. He and Gus have a good relationship. You have got to cut Brian some slack." Emmett insisted. "You have got to see the truth."

"Brian probably isn't honoring his obligation to Gus any better than he's honoring the one he made to me," Michael protested.

"Not now, Michael!" Ted cautioned, not wanting to get into a discussion about all the perceived weaknesses that Michael found in Brian. Ted just wasn't ready to listen to Michael whine. "That's enough!"

Blake pulled Ted aside so the conversation could get back on track.

"Yeah, when you're a part time dad, you have to feel guilty most of the time. I guess you want to make up for not being around all the time, so you spoil you kid by giving him all these gifts," the stranger added.

Once again, everyone was still surprised how this guy was still part of their conversation.

"The experts say that fathers do this because you're trying to make up for the fact that you aren't the one to actually pay for things AT THE TIME the kid gets them. Oh you may pay child support, but you aren't on the scene when someone actually buys the things the kid needs. Somehow it's supposed to be different," Blake explained, providing his professional expertise to the discussion.

"I didn't know that," Michael said sadly, thinking about a recent conversation that he had with Ben about how they needed to contribute financially to JR's support.

Beginning of flashback.

"I notice that you got up extra early this morning," Michael said as he reached in the refrigerator for the milk.

"I wanted to look at our budget and our finances. I'm trying to see what we might be able to do to help Melanie and Lindsay with JR. I considered what we spend monthly for our visits to Toronto or for them to fly here. I also considered what Hunter is going to need. But I think with just a little belt tightening, we can at least contribute to JR's college fund. That's what you do when it's your daughter," Ben patiently explained.

"I never thought about it. Mel and Linds were so clear that I wouldn't have any financial responsibilities for my daughter, that I never gave it a second thought. But now that you've pointed this out, I see that it's the right thing to do," Michael revealed.

"I'm glad to hear that," Ben said with a measure of satisfaction that Michael was beginning to understand about responsibility.

"But it doesn't change the fact that I think they should move back here to live," Michael continued to state, lest Ben misunderstand his intention.

"I know that. I understand how you feel. You just shouldn't say anything about your feelings to Melanie and Lindsay," Ben reminded him one more time.

"I know you're right," Michael said with a sigh.

Ben was still hopeful that Michael wouldn't disturb the delicate balance that existed between the family and Lindsay and Melanie.

End of flashback.

Michael was pulled from his reminiscences, as he realized that Blake was taking to him.

"Don't worry about it, Michael, you get to be the kind of dad to your daughter that you would have wanted your father to be for you. You get a chance to do it right." Blake reminded him.

"And look at how you are with Hunter. You're a great dad to him. He really loves you. He loves you enough to come all the way back to town just because you were hurt," Emmett reminded him.

"And he stayed after you were well again," Ted reminded him.

"So don't be sad, Michael, you still have so much." Trace said as a way of support.

Michael took a deep breath and let out a long sigh. He was starting to understand all the things that he had missed in his life because he didn't have a father.

For the first time in his life, Michael was angry with his dad for not being there. His life could have been different if only his dad had been around all those years.

As if reading his thoughts, Emmett had one more bit to add, "You know it wasn't only our dads that taught us all those things. We all got to share Vic with you for a time. And Vic was an amazing man. He definitely showed us all how to be a proud gay men. I know Vic made a big difference in my life."

"Mime too," Michael finally acknowledged.

Drew decided it was time to change the subject. "Okay, the balls are racked up, are you four going to play pool or what?"

"Yes, because I, for one, would like to get to Babylon before it closes," Ted teased. "I have a very demanding boss, who would never understand that I didn't get there because of a protracted negotiation her at Woody's, pertaining to a pick up game," he added.

"Yes, and we don't want to give Brian any other reasons to fire you.... like he needs one," Blake teased.

"You could just tell Brian that you needed a night to yourself, "Michael suggested.

Ted put his hands on his hips. "We obviously aren't talking about the same Brian Kinney. The one I work for believes that allowing time for breathing is a luxury...he expects his impossible deadlines met," Ted teased. "Of course, I will admit that Brian is a lot easier to deal with now that Justin is around."

"I have to agree that Justin does make Brian seem a lot more human," Drew added.

"Maybe..." Michael finally added. "Look, I don't suppose that I could convince you to skip that game until next time. I was thinking that we could check out Babylon early."

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Trace said, finally returning his cue stick to the rack.

"Okay, Michael," Calvin said, retrieving the cue stick from Ted and putting both sticks away. "Why don't we see if we can get Ted to work?" he added with a laugh.

"Another time," Blake said as he wrapped his arms around Ted.

"Another time," Trace said with a laugh, wrapping his arms around Calvin.

Everyone gathered up their things...it was time to go to Babylon.

Chapter 5 – Rumors At Babylon

Late Saturday Night ... (Day 55)

Michael was in one of the bathroom stalls at Babylon when he overheard a conversation among a group of strangers.

"Did you read the Liberty Blog?" one of them asked.

"No, I've been busy. What did it say?" another one responded.

"It's been rumored that the legend herself, Divina Devore, may be settling down in Pittsburgh. You know that she's originally from here?"

Michael now focused in on the conversation but didn't say a word.

"Wouldn't that be great to have a real legend living in our midst?"

"It would be interesting...that's for sure."

"With the money and fame that she has achieved over the years, I bet he could live anywhere in the world."

"He's probably broke and will probably be coming here to look for a job."

"Why would you think that?"

"That seems to be what happens to the great sports stars and some of the movie stars, you know?"

"Some maybe, but not always...."

"That true."

"I think she must have had agents or someone managing her money."

"They definitely didn't run off with the loot...or else it would have been all over the press. No, I think it's safe to assume the he's not destitute."

"Then why would she settle here in Pittsburgh?"

"Who knows? But then, it's only a rumor."

"Of course," the stranger continued, "Once she takes off the makeup, no one would recognize him, so she can have the best of both worlds living here. She can work when she wants to and yet live a completely anonymous, normal life off stage."

"I guess...it doesn't get any better than that."

"No, probably not."

The group left the bathroom, and Michael finally emerged from his stall.

As Michael was washing his hand, he replayed in his mind the conversation that he had just overheard. Divina Devore here in Pittsburgh.

Divina Devore (aka Danny Devore), who had gone to high school with both Debbie and Vic. Michael and Ben had found an old yearbook.

Beginning of flashback...

"I wanted to check out my mom's old stuff," Michael said to Ben as he started to rummage through a box of memorabilia that probably belonged to Debbie.

"That's kind of personal, isn't it?" Ben reminded him.

"She never really told me much," Michael sadly pointed out. "You know, when I would ask about back then, she would say, "I did my home work and listened to my folks...and you should do the same," he added as he continued to rummage among the contents of the box.

"She must have been a cheerleader," Ben suggested, playing with a set of colorful pom-poms.

"Maybe those were Vic's." Michael responded with a smile. Then he finally located the yearbook and started to mindlessly flip through the pages. "Check out the girls hair dos!"

"Kind of straight?" Ben responded to the long, straight hairstyles of the period.

"Where's your mom?"

Michael flipped through several pages until he found the name he was looking for.

"Here she is, Deborah Jean Grassi," Michael said, pointing to the old picture of Debbie as a teenager with flowing blonde locks.

"She was kind of cute," Ben commented after looking at the picture. "I wonder what HE looked like."

Michael searched through the yearbook and found the picture. "Here he is, Danny Devore

"He's kind of cute," Ben commented.

"If you've got a thing for dweebs," Michael responded, looking at the picture in the yearbook.

The face in the yearbook picture looked unmistakably like Michael's.

End of flashback

Once upon a time, Michael had used the fact that Danny Devore had gone to high school with Vic and Debbie as leverage to get the reluctant diva to perform at a benefit. Michael got much more than he bargained for.

Michael had learned that Debbie had once wanted to be a nurse...a fact he never knew growing up. And as he listened to Divina talk about what Debbie was like in high school, Michael heard a tone of genuine fondness for his mother.

When Michael had noticed the physical resemblance between himself and the young Danny Devore, prompting him to wonder if maybe this could be his father, Debbie still continued to claim that Lt. John Michael Novotny was his father.

So Michael had posed the question to Divina Devore, herself. Her answer had been vague and as enigmatic as the diva herself.

Beginning of flashback...

"Are you my father?" Michael had pointedly asked.

"This is a fine time to ask...as you're helping me out of my gown," Divina responded, with a note of humor in her voice.

"You were seeing my mother back then. The timing is exactly right for you to have..."

"...Knocked her up," Divina completed the thought for him. "First I would have had to have gotten it up. Look at me! Do I look like the kind of guy, who would go around banging babes?" he pointedly asked with appropriate gestures. " Your mother was hardly my type," he added dismissively.

"Well, you said she was beautiful back then, and you said that then you used to bat for the other team," Michael continued to argue.

"Drag queens are notorious liars. Everyone knows that. So, what does you mother say?" Divina asked, continuing to remove her makeup.

"She says my father is this big war hero," Michael answered.

"So why don't you believe THAT?"

"Because the story keeps changing, and there's only one picture, and the guy doesn't even look like me... Look, I'm not making any demands. I'm not even asking that we stay in touch. I just want to know the TRUTH."

"Michael, may I tell you the one truth that I've learned in all my years," Danny began as he came out of the dressing room, having removed his Divina Devore persona. " The truth...is what...you choose to believe. When I'm on stage, people believe that I am Divina Devore. Not because I'm a great female impersonator, but because they want to."

"What does that have to do with whether you're my father, or whether my mother lied to me?" Michael asked in desperation.

"Your mother gave you something to believe in...a father you could be proud of...because she loves you...that's the truth...whether you choose to believe it or not, is up to you."

End of flashback

Michael had chosen to accept "Your mother gave you something to believe in...a father you could be proud of...because she loves you...that's the truth...whether you choose to believe it or not is up to you."

But now, all the talk about fathers was forcing him to rethink everything...from the role of fathers...to everything in his very own life. Michael had a lot to think about as he exited the bathroom and rejoined the gang at the bar.

Michael managed to dance a few dances with Emmett. But contrary to everything that he had learned from Ben, some problems couldn't be made to disappear by the ancient ritual of dancing. And after turning down several offers to dance from strangers, Michael realized that unlike Brian, being here at Babylon could do nothing to relieve his pain or to ease his mind.

Finally in the end, Michael said his goodbyes to everyone as he headed for home, making it an early evening.

Chapter 6 – Revelations From The Web

Sunday Afternoon...(Day 56)

Michael was waiting on a customer at Red Cape Comics, making suggestions about comics that a customer should purchase as an investment, when the bell sounded over the door.

As he looked up, he was surprised to see Hunter enter. "What are you doing here?" he asked, breaking into a big smile.

"Well, hello to you too!" Hunter said with mock annoyance.

"I didn't know that you were coming here today. I thought you were spending the day with Ben."

"I was, but Ben needed to prepare some stuff for a class, so I thought I would come here for a while. Plus, I thought this would be a good time to research that stuff we talked about."

"What stuff?"

Hunter just rolled his eyes. "Michael, the military records stuff on ancestry.com, don't you remember?"

"Oh that...yes, I remember," Michael said quietly.

"So shall we get started?" Hunter asked enthusiastically as he headed for the computer.

Michael looked around at the few customers still in the store. "Hold it second. Let me take care of the customers, then I'm all yours," he suggested.

Hunter considered for a second. "Why don't I give you a hand with the customers? That way, you'll be able to take a break quicker, and we can get to OUR research, " he emphasized, quickly moving away from the computer and heading in the direction of some customers.

"You're awfully eager to do this!" Michael observed with a laugh.

"This is family history we're talking about. I don't want us to lose this moment," Hunter told him with his usual attitude as he sauntered away.

"Now that's poetic," Michael teased with a smile.

"So Ben has rubbed off on me," Hunter said with his characteristic shrug.

There was a steady trickle of customers, so Hunter spent the next few hours helping in the store with Michael.

Michael was very impressed with Hunter's growing knowledge about superheroes and comics, and how the customers responded to him.

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Eventually, there was a lull in the customer traffic within the store, and Hunter was able to log onto the ancestry.com website.

The site was a little slow coming up, which served to heighten the tension of what was about to happen. Hunter felt as though they were about to touch the life of a long dead family member.

Once the site was active, Hunter started his search for military records on the ancestry.com website. He thought that he would start with something easy, so he began to search with Carl Horvath, entering his name and his date of birth.

Carl's military records appeared.

There were copies of his draft card, enlistment dates, and the dates of military service. There were signed copies of evaluations and military commendations. It was all there.

Hunter was very excited by what he found.

He searched the personal information on the site and learned that Carl had enlisted in the Army as an officer after college graduation. He appeared to have gotten married to his first wife, Vicky, while on active duty...just before his enlistment in the military ended. These were amazing details; more than Hunter had never expected to find.

Hunter was definitely excited.

Then he searched the records for Carl's son...Carl Jr. He learned that Carl Jr. had evidently followed the family tradition and entered the military after college graduation, as well.

Hunter learned that Carl Jr. was an Air Force major. He had been stationed at several locations around the world. He had received many commendations for his military service. There were records of his multiple re-enlistments. The military records showed that Carl Jr. had gotten married while he was stationed in Germany and now had three kids. His change of marital status was noted in the military records. There were pictures of his wife and kids, evidently taken for some sort of military access badges.

Being completely lost in the information he found, Hunter failed to immediately notice that Michael was now standing beside him at the computer.

"Hunter..." Michael said quietly to get his attention.

Hunter finally looked up from the computer with a grin. "Here, let me show you what I've found so far. Look at all this!" he said, showing Michael all the tidbits of information that he'd found so far on Carl and Carl Jr.

Michael was completely fascinated that so much detail was available.

With that out of the way, Hunter was ready for the most important search of all.

With Michael's help, Hunter entered the full name and date of birth for John Michael Novotny.

After a slight delay, the records started to materialize. There was a copy of his draft card, which showed that he had been drafted into military service. There was a list of his successful campaigns, and then a description of the final hostile action that got him killed.

Michael noticed that the description of his father's final campaign matched verbatim the account that he had heard from Debbie over the years. Michael was intrigued.

Michael and Hunter continued their online search. They found insurance records and emergency contact information. Michael was surprised that there were no references to Debbie anywhere in the military records.

Hunter and Michael went back to once again review the various campaigns of John Novotny. They lingered over the campaigns and their description.

They also looked at the dates. It seemed that John Michael Novotny had been on active duty in Viet Nam for at least a year prior to his death.

Hunter immediately knew something was wrong, but he didn't want to say anything.

Michael also noticed that something wasn't quite right as he slowly started to do the math.

Michael and Hunter each checked the site looking for some evidence that Lt. Novotny had been on leave sometime during this period. There were no records of any leave since the soldier had been deployed in Viet Nam.

Hunter realized that if the records were true, then there was no way that John Michael Novotny could really be Michael's father. Again he said nothing.

And as they searched the personal information for Lt. Novotny, there was no indication that he was married or had a child. In fact, there was no mention of Debbie or Michael anywhere in the records.

Michael became more and more upset with every piece of military information that was uncovered.

Finally, Hunter found the burial records. They indicated that the remains of John Michael Novotny were interred at Arlington National Cemetery.

Michael was surprised by this additional information, for Debbie had never said where his father was buried. Michael assumed his father's remains were still in Viet Nam.

That had been the reason that Debbie had given for the shrine that had been lovingly built on the mantel in the living room.

"Maybe there's been some mistake!" Michael began to argue.

"Michael, this information came directly from government military records. There can be no mistake. You must have misunderstood what Debbie has said to you over the years."

"Ma constantly told me the same facts...the same stories over and over again all my life. How could things be so different?" Michael demanded to know, getting very excited in the process.

"Michael, will you calm down. There must be an explanation for all this," Hunter tried to reassure him.

"You mean other than the fact that my mother has lied to me all these years?" Michael protested.

"You don't know that," Hunter challenged. "Why don't you talk to her?"

"Talk to her...for what...so she can tell me even more lies?" Michael said in anger. "How could she do this to me?"

Then, Michael got really quiet, and Hunter tried to allow the silence to linger between them without interruption, but he was very worried.

Michael finally found his voice again. "I think that I would like to be alone now. Why don't you go ahead home? I'll give you a call later."

"Michael, are you sure? You seem upset!" Hunter protested. "I don't mind staying and keep you company."

"No, I'm going to lock up the store. I need to think about what this all means. Don't worry. I'm going to be okay. I just need some time to myself."

Hunter made sure that the store was empty. He flipped the sign in the window to "Closed". Then he gave Michael one last hug before he said goodbye. Then he quietly walked out the door of the comic book store, making sure the door was locked behind him.

Now that Michael was alone, he once again sat...at his computer...in his store...among all his superheroes...the same ones that had been his friends for a lifetime. Michael let out a long sigh.

He now realized that he knew the truth. It was no longer speculation on his part. It was no longer a matter of what he wanted to believe. The facts were now indisputable!

Michael sat there and replayed a memory....

Beginning of flashback.

Michael is subjecting Vic to the grand inquisition about his mother and Danny Devore.

"How long did they go out?" Michael asked, crumbling the magazine Vic was patiently trying to read.

"I...I can't remember..." Vic stammered as he answered.

"Was it serious?"

"How should I know?"

"Did she love him?"

"She didn't say..."

"She didn't say...there is nothing Mom doesn't say."

"Look Michael, it was a long time ago...why don't you ask her?"

"Ask me what?" Debbie asked as she walked in on the two of them.

"About Danny Devore?" Michael said boldly.

"Christ, I haven't heard his name mentioned in 30 years, and now, all of a sudden, it's all I hear," Debbie said with some exasperation.

"I saw his picture in your year book," Michael explained.

"Who the hell told you that you could be looking at my year book?"

"You never said that I couldn't! It's just that this picture of him...it looks a lot like me."

"It doesn't look the least bit like you," Debbie said, without looking at the picture.

"You don't even have your reading glasses on," Michael retorted.

"Fine! Make me feel older that I already do," Debbie said, reaching for the glasses. "There! I still don't see it! Vic, do you see it?"

"I can't say that I do!" Vic answered.

"Aw come on! We have the same eyes...the same nose...the same mouth...tell me that's not my chin!" Michael protested.

"Not even close...and trust me I know chins...I have several of them," Debbie fired back.

"Ma, I just want you to tell me..." Michael whined.

"Tell you what?"

"Why Danny Devore and I look so much alike?"

"I think I'll go put the clothes in the dryer," Vic said, looking for an escape from the drama, playing out in the living room.

"Stay right there!" Debbie insisted, forcing Vic to retake his seat. "What are you getting at?" she then asked Michael.

"He said that you went out the summer after graduation. That was 1969. I was born March 1970."

"Ha!" Debbie squealed. "I don't believe what I'm hearing. Are you asking me if some old drag queen, I once knew in high school, is your father? You know who your father is. This is your father, John Michael Novotny," Debbie said, reaching for the picture on the mantel. "Lieutenant in the U.S army...

"Died in Viet Nam on April 10th, 1970...two weeks after I/you were born." Debbie and Michael said in unison.

"I know," Michael interrupts. "You've told me a million times, that this guy...in this picture...who doesn't look like me... is my dad...but that's all you've told me..."

"Well, what else would you like to know?"

"Who are my grandparents?"

"They're dead!"

"Aunts and Uncles?"

"There weren't any!"

"So he was just a war hero?"

"Just!" Debbie protested. "They awarded him The Purple Heart. He was on a rescue mission, carving his way through the jungle when a land mind exploded"

"You said it was a jeep accident!"

"He was carving his way in a jeep when it ran over a land mind that exploded!"

"You can't even keep the god damn story straight!"

"Stop confusing me!" Debbie shouted.

"Look, it was a long time ago," Vic interrupted, hoping to be the voice of reason in the argument between mother and son.

"I just want to know the truth!" Michael shouted

"Are you calling me a liar? Your own mother! I told you who your father was, and I expect you to believe me!" Debbie said as she walked out of the room, ending all discussion.

End of flashback

Michael now knew that he had been right all along...John Michael Novotny couldn't possibly be his father.

Danny Devore was probably his father...just as he had once suspected...and Debbie had been lying to him for a lifetime.

Chapter 7 – Requests

Early Sunday Evening...(Day 56)

"Well, there you are!" Ben said, as Hunter entered their apartment. "Where did you disappear to?"

"Oh, I thought since you were going to be busy, that I would go down to the Red Cape and give Michael a hand."

"That's nice," Ben said, showing no emotion in his voice. "How is Michael?" he quietly asked.

"You know Michael...whenever he's in the comic book store, his world seems perfect," Hunter said cautiously.

"Yes, I remember. Comics and superheroes are things that Michael has always been passionate about," Ben said softly, remembering the first time that he'd walked into the comic book store. It was just after Michael had bought the store from Buzzy, and Ben was there looking for comics to read to gather background material for his lectures. Ben remembered that he and Michael were instantly attracted to one another...but it took a while for every thing to work out between them.

Hunter noticed that Ben was deep in thought, and he didn't want to intrude. Deep down he secretly hoped that Ben would remember how much he loved Michael. He hoped that in that remembrance, Ben and Michael would find their way back to each other. Hunter hoped these things, but he knew that it would be a long time before Ben would be able to, once again, cope with Michael's feelings towards Brian.

Finally, Hunter said, "I think I'll go in and lie down for a while."

"Lie down? Are you feeling okay?" Ben asked with some concern.

"No. I'm fine. The store was a little busier than usual. I just need to stretch out for a minute."

"Sure...take all the time you need. I'll go start dinner. I was thinking about preparing my bean curd casserole and a salad. What do you think?"

"Would it do any good to tell you I was hoping for a cheeseburger?"

"Not really," Ben said with a laugh.

"I didn't think so," Hunter said with a smile as he turned towards his room. "But it never hurts to ask," he added sarcastically.

Ben couldn't help smiling too.

Hunter managed to keep it together and hide his feelings while he was talking to Ben, but as he lay there, pondering what he and Michael had found on the Internet, his level of concern grew. He was definitely worried about Michael's ability to cope with this new information about his father.

Finding out that the man Michael had always believed to be your father...couldn't possibly be his biological father...would be enough to shake the foundations of anyone's life. Things were made worse, at the moment, because Michael was now alone with no one to turn to.

In spite of Hunter's relief that Ben could finally find a respite from the constant reminder of Michael's obsession with Brian, he never intended for Michael to be so totally and completely alone.

Then Hunter remembered all the times that Michael had been there for him. He remembered their time on the run together when his mother had come to town to claim him through his problems at school. Michael, along with Ben, had always been there for him.

And as Hunter tossed and turned, he knew he had to figure out something to try to help.

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The Next Day, Monday Morning...(Day 57)

The next morning, Hunter showed up bright and early to the Diner. He really wanted a chance to talk to Debbie about what he and Michael had learned from the Internet.

But now that he was actually IN the Diner, things looked a little different. He still didn't want to betray any confidences, but he knew that he needed some help.

Hunter wanted to do whatever he could to keep the remaining elements of his family intact...and Debbie and Michael were both still family.

While he was still on the horns of this dilemma, he heard a familiar voice ring out.

"Hunter, what are you doing here so early?" Debbie asked, when she noticed him sitting in one of the booths.

"I wanted a decent breakfast so I snuck in here before Ben had a chance to feed me nuts and weeds," Hunter professed.

"I see," Debbie said with a laugh, fully understanding his plight. "What can I get for you?"

"How about pancakes with sausage...that should keep me going for a bit," Hunter teased.

Debbie laughed. "Coming right up," she said. Then she added, "How about some orange juice with that?"

"Oh no, not you too?" Hunter protested.

"Grandmother's rights," she reminded him as she smiled and turned to leave.

When she returned with the orange juice, Hunter asked her to join him.

Debbie was surprised by this request. But the Diner wasn't crowded, so she announced that she was taking a break.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and re-joined Hunter in the booth.

"Now what's on your mind, kiddo," she gently asked.

"Michael has always been there for me. I feel that I've let him down. I don't know what to do."

"What do you mean? Michael knows that you love him," Debbie quickly reassured him.

"Yeah, but I chose to live with Ben. I'm sure that has got to hurt."

"Look honey, Michael understands that you and Ben have always been close."

"But maybe I didn't understand how much Michael might really need me...after all, before he always had Brian to lean on."

"Yes, Brian...." Debbie grumbled.

"Now he's all alone. Where will he turn?"

"Hunter, my son is a grown man. I'm sure he can take care of himself. Do you understand?"

"Yes..." Hunter answered quietly, although from experience, he knew better.

At that moment the bell sounded, meaning that Hunter's breakfast was now up, so Debbie slid out of the booth to go get his order.

Hunter ate in silence, trying to decide what his next move should be.

Finally, he made a decision. He just couldn't talk to Debbie about this. There had to be another alternative to his dilemma.

As he continued to consider things over breakfast, he had another idea. Then, he pulled out his cell phone and made a call.

The call, as expected, rolled over into voice mail, so he left a message requesting a call back.

With that task out of the way, Hunter could now enjoy what was left of his breakfast. The he would be ready to start his day...confident that everything was going to be okay.

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Later that day, Hunter's cell phone rang. "Hello," he answered.

"Hunter, it's Justin. You called...is everyone all right?" he immediately asked with some concern, since this was not someone he was used to chatting with by phone very often.

"Everyone's fine, honest. I just need a favor."

"A favor? You must be desperate if you're asking me! What kind of a favor? And no, I won't leave Brian so you can have him," Justin teased.

"Somehow, I figured that was pretty much out of the question," Hunter responded with a laugh, "But it never hurts to try. You never know, I might get lucky," he teased back. It felt good for him to be able to laugh and joke with Justin.

Over the years, Hunter had long since gotten over his crush on Brian, but he still liked to tease both Brian and Justin about it every chance he got. It had become a running joke between them.

Then Hunter's tone turned serious again. "You know I still need that favor."

Justin patiently sighed. "Okay, what is it?" he finally asked.

"I need you to get Brian to get in touch Michael," Hunter said rapidly, without taking a breath. There he'd managed to get all out in one breath.

A protracted silence followed on the other end of the phone.

"And why on earth would I do that?" Justin asked, already dropping into protective mode where Brian was concerned.

"Something is going on with Michael...he really needs his best friend," Hunter explained.

Justin asked the obvious question, "Can't Ben handle things?"

"I guess you don't know...Ben and Michael aren't together anymore. Ben moved out, and I'm living with him now in an apartment. Michael is all alone at the house now."

"What? When did that happen?" Justin wanted to know, but then he realized that he shouldn't be really surprised, for he knew that Ben had finally had enough.

"It's been about a week now. Ben left right after dinner was over," Hunter revealed quietly, now he didn't want to talk about this part anymore, so he shifted back to the issue at hand. "So will you do it? Will you talk to Brian?" he pleaded.

"Why didn't you call Brian yourself?" Justin asked quietly once all the facts had sunk in.

"Because I was afraid that Brian wouldn't pay any attention to me. I knew you would at least listen, before you completely blew me off."

"I see. So, what is it that I'm supposed to listen to?" Justin felt compelled to ask.

"Through a series of completely innocent and unexpected events, Michael found out yesterday that John Michael Novotny couldn't possibly be his real father. Either there has been some big mistake, or Debbie's been lying to Michael all this time."

"Come on, Hunter, everybody knows the story of Michael's father and his dying a war hero. Are you letting your imagination run away with you again?"

"Not this time, Justin. Michael has solid evidence this time that John Novotny couldn't possibly be his father. I know. I saw the evidence!" Hunter strongly proclaimed.

"Oh shit..." Justin responded. "How did you find out?"

"I was with him when he figured everything out. Look, it's a long story. Will you talk to Brian? Maybe he can do something before the explosion happens within the family," Hunter cautioned.

"I'll see what I can do, but don't expect too much."

"Thanks, Justin."

Justin closed his cell phone. He looked at the time. He was due to meet Brian for lunch.

Justin quickly cleaned up a few things at his studio, changed his clothes, and left to meet Brian at the nearby coffee shop.

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"I can't believe it...you're relatively paint-free for a change," Brian teased as Justin joined him at the table.

"I needed the paint for the canvas I was working on," Justin teased in response. He quickly settled down, and the two ordered lunch.

During lunch, Justin casually mentioned that there were several paintings still at the West Virginia mansion that he thought that he might need to work on while he was here in New York. Then he waited for Brian response.

"Ah huh?" Brian innocently said, trying to look as bored as possible.

Brian was immediately suspicious that Justin was up to something, for Brian knew that Justin had already routed to his New York studio, any potential paintings that he MIGHT want to work on. It wasn't possible that Justin could have overlooked anything.

At first, Brian didn't want to get into this, but he wasn't buying Justin's explanation either. The innocent expression that his partner was trying to maintain was the first tip off.

Finally, he just gave up and easily said, "Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

Justin let out a sigh.

Brian prepared himself for whatever was to come.

"Michael and Ben separated a week ago," Justin revealed, trying to set the stage for the bombshell that was to come.

"Tragic though it may be," Brian interrupted, "That has nothing to do with me," he added for emphasis.

"And...." Justin added, stopping mid-sentence.

"And?" Brian asked with renewed interest in whatever was to follow.

"And...Michael just found out that John Michael Novotny couldn't possible be his father," Justin practically blurted out.

"I see," Brian responded quietly, waiting to see if there was anything else his partner wanted to add. As expected, he was not disappointed.

Justin continued, "Hunter called and wanted me to persuade you to talk to Michael. According to Hunter, Michael's pretty upset about the news."

Brian listened carefully and then calmly smiled and finally responded, matter-of-factly, "Everything is fine. There's no need for me to talk to Michael."

"Why not? I know that you're upset with him, but he's still your oldest friend," Justin reminded him.

"It has nothing to do with that," Brian quickly set the matter straight. "There's just no need for me to talk to Michael about THIS...because Michael already knew this...or at least he suspected. In fact, Michael's known about this for years," he finally added. "So there's no need for you to be concerned and it's unnecessary for me to do anything."

"How could he suspect years ago?" Justin challenged. "Hunter said that he just found out the truth yesterday? It seems as if something just happened that made him aware of everything," Justin argued. "Hunter also said there's proof."

"Look, I don't know what's going on with Hunter, but I know that Michael already knew the truth about his father. Do you remember years ago when Ted was working on some benefit and he wanted Divina Devore to appear?"

"Yeah, during my days as a go go boy. What about it?"

"Back then, Michael began to doubt that John Novotny was his father."

"That can't be true. If Michael already believed that years ago, why is this coming up now?"

"Something must have happened to confirm what he already knew. Something must have brought this issue back up again... because this topic has been dormant for all these years."

"I wonder what happened?" Justin asked, trying to figure out what was going on. Then something dawned on him. "Wait a minute...for all these years, Debbie has still maintained that shrine on the mantel in the living room. Does she know what Michael suspects or that he knows?"

"Of course...yes...they even had several arguments about this years ago. So trust me, you can stop worrying."

"So you're telling me this is old news," Justin said with some disappointment.

"Pretty much. Now do you really need something from the mansion...because we can call Thomas and have him send whatever it is that you THINK you need?"

"No...no...that's okay."

"Good. So now that that's settled, let me get back to work," Brian said with a smile, gently squeezing Justin's hand under the table. "I'll pick you up at the studio when I'm done. In fact, why don't you let me give you a ride back there now?"

Justin thought for a minute and then finally agreed.

As they were almost back to his studio, Justin had to ask, "Brian, if John Novotny isn't Michael's father...who is?"

"I'm going to tell you because we don't keep secrets from each other, but I want you to promise not to tell anyone."

"I promise."

"Michael has reason to believe that his father is Divina Devore, otherwise known as Danny Devore. It seem that Danny and Debbie dated in high school."

"Oh no! And Michael's known or suspected that, all this time?"

"Yes," Brian said emphatically.

"Well, aren't you curious?" Justin asked.

"Am I curious about what?" Brian foolishly asked.

"What's going on..."

Brian shook his head and tried to remember that this should have been expected. After all, he was dealing with Justin, and Justin tended to over-think everything. Inwardly, Brian just smiled. Outwardly, he simply answered quietly, "No."

"So I guess we aren't going back to Pittsburgh then, huh?" Justin persisted.

"Why, do you have a craving for lemon bars?" Brian asked with a smile and one raised eyebrow as if he already knew the answer to this question.

Justin simply leaned over and kissed Brian as the only reply.

Chapter 8 - Spread The News

Tuesday Afternoon...(Day 58)

Emmett and Ted were having lunch at the Diner.

"Did you see the paper?" Ted casually asked.

"Not yet..." Emmett replied.

"Maybe you'd better take a look!" Ted suggested, already pointing to page.

"Why, Teddy?" Emmett asked with some mild curiosity.

Ted repeated his question. This time slower so that his lunch companion would pay attention to his every word, "Will...you...take...a...look...at...the...paper?" he asked again.

"Ok Teddy, if it's that important to you...what's in the paper?"

Ted laid the paper open on the table and simply pointed to the full-page spread:

Beginning of article.

"This weekend only...

Back by popular demand...

After a four year absence...

The long-awaited return engagement of...

Divina Devore...

At the Kit Kat Club..."

End of article.

"Oh my goodness," Emmett finally said. "I remember the last time that Divina Devore was here in town. She created quite a stir!"

"Yes, she did, and she made the fundraiser for Angels Over Pittsburgh a big success." Ted reminded him.

"Is this the first time that she's been back in town since then?" Emmett had to wonder.

"It does appear that this is her first appearance in Pittsburgh in a very long time," Ted answered. "From what I've read, she's been traveling the world. There are rumors circulating in the gay press that Divina Devore may be getting ready to make her farewell tour."

"Retire? Teddy, drag queens, the stature of Divina Devore, never retire," Emmett reminded him. "What on earth would she do with her time?"

"Like you said before, drag queens...the stature of Divina Devore...surely she must have made appropriate investments over the years to insure her golden years. And with proper management, I'm sure that she'll be quite comfortable in her retirement," Ted commented, assuring his best friend of what should be obvious.

"Oh...Oh!" Emmett exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" Ted asked.

"That means the rumors I've heard around town are probably true too!"

"What rumors? Tell me!" Ted demanded, realizing that he loved to keep abreast of gossip as much as anyone else. He realized that Emmett must have rubbed off on him over the years, but he would never tell that to anyone.

Emmett huddled down with Ted, as if he was about to whisper the secret of the ages, "Well! It seems that Divina Devore might be permanently settling down here in Pittsburgh," he revealed and waited for Ted's response.

"You're kidding?" Ted commented, returning to his normal upright, seated positions.

"It's only a rumor, Teddy." Emmett reminded him. "Do you think that Michael has seen this yet?"

"It was because of Michael that she performed last time. It was Divina's connection to Vic and Debbie that turned the tide."

"Do you think Debbie knows about this yet? She wasn't too happy the last time the drag queen made an appearance in town?"

"Why should they care?" Ted asked, "Especially after all this time."

"Wait until they find out." Emmett gushed, already picturing the magic moment of discovery. He was clearly trying to figure out how to be around when Debbie and Michael discovered this big news.

"Wait until who finds out?" Brian asked, as he and Justin joined Emmett and Ted in the booth. Brian sat next to Ted and pushed him unceremoniously into the corner.

"What are you two doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in Rome, Paris, Milan, or New York?" Emmett couldn't resist asking, as he willingly slid over to make room for Justin.

"Can I help it if Justin had to have lemon bars, so I thought that we would just pop into town? Besides, I have things to do at my office to make sure that Theodore hasn't scared away all my clients." Brian quipped.

"You'll be glad to know that all your clients are still here, no matter what you may have heard, so you see this trip to town was totally unnecessary," Ted responded back.

"Why thank you, Theodore. I still have time to see for myself ...I can always fire you later," Brian took great pleasure in reminding him.

"Brian, will you stop torturing Ted?" Justin interrupted. "I'm still trying to find out what Em and Ted were talking about," he said sternly. "Once I have all the juicy details, then you can go back to tormenting him."

Brian pretended to sulk.

"This," Ted said, laying down the paper for Brian and Justin to see the full-page, showing the return of Divina Devore.

"Why are you focused on some old drag queen?" Brian asked, already bored with the conversation.

"Look again," Emmett insisted. "This isn't just some old drag queen. This is THE LEGEND. This drag queen has performed before kings and presidents..."

Brian was about to utter some witty response, but Emmett cut him off before he had a chance to say anything. "Look, I'm not in the mood for any of your witty repartee. This is serious," Emmett continued, giving Brian a knowing glance.

"What could be serious about the return engagement of an old drag queen?" Brian asked with a laugh. At this point he didn't really care about the answer, he just wanted to put an end to the inane chatter between Emmett and Ted.

"Look more closely," Emmett insisted.

Justin took a closer look at the article. "Divina Devore...I think I remember her, but it's been a long time. What's so interesting about her?" Justin feigned innocence.

"Sweetie, you were just too young to remember...maybe." Emmett gushed, wrapping his arms around Justin. "Let me see, where should I begin?" he added with a sigh, with his arms still in place.

As expected, Brian quickly removed the offending arms, giving Emmett his usual glare.

"Obviously, Justin isn't going to be able to enjoy his lemon bars in peace unless we hear the whole story," Brian said, now totally bored with the discussion and eager to get it over with. "So go ahead...give me all the details...so we can move on."

"Think Brian. Divina Devore. You have to remember," Emmett continued to press.

At that point, Brian realized that Michael must have talked to Em about his suspicions, and an expression of recognition passed across Brian's face as he looked again at the article.

"Well, she's coming back to town for a return engagement," Ted pointed out, unaware of all the unspoken dialogue going on around him.

"Oh Fuck!" Brian said. "This is going to cause trouble," he said, quickly closing the offending newspaper.

"There's more, Bri," Ted eagerly interrupted. "Rumor has it that Divina may be permanently settling down in Pittsburgh."

"Fuck!" was Brian's only remark.

A distracted Debbie suddenly appeared by their table with order pad in hand, "Ok boys, what'll it be?" she asked, without looking up.

"They said the lemon bars here are to die for," Brian smirked, "But I don't know..."

Debbie immediately recognized the voice, not to mention the smart remark.

She smiled at Brian, but she reached over and wrapped Justin in one of her infamous hugs. "Sunshine," she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Wait a minute! Don't I even get a hello?" Brian complained. "What's going on here?"

"Eventually, maybe," Debbie mocked. Then she finally released Justin and reached for Brian. "Come here, you asshole, and give me a hug," she insisted.

Brian let out mock sigh, but he gave her a gentle kiss on her cheek. "I've missed you, Debbie," he finally said.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming home? Last I heard you two were in New York on business," Debbie remarked, letting everyone know that she kept up with the news. "So what brings you back here?"

"Your lemon bars, " Justin quickly answered with a smile.

"Plus, I have to check out how much damage Theodore has done to my once thriving business. I need to salvage what I can...you know how it is?" Brian explained with a shrug.

"Well, I would say that's definitely my queue to leave," Ted answered quickly, nudging Brian out of his way.

"Oh my, look at the time," Emmett echoed, gently sliding Justin out of the booth.

Emmett made sure the paper was now over in front of Brian.

As much as Ted and Emmett wanted to stay, they somehow knew that now was the perfect time to make their exit, leaving Brian to break the news to Debbie.

Once again, Emmett and Brian exchanged knowing glances at each other. Then Brian glared at Emmett.

Emmett merely smiled and threw his arm over the shoulders of an unsuspecting Ted and led him out of the diner.

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Brian placed his order for his usual sandwich, while Justin ordered a cheeseburger, fries, and a milkshake to go along with his lemon bars. Brian just shook his head, for he never ceased to be amazed by how much Justin could eat.

Debbie left with a smile to put in the orders.

"Well, it looks like we got back just in time," Justin whispered.

"And, it looks like I'll have to fill you in on what happened when I see you later tonight." Brian said casually.

"Why?" Justin asked with obvious curiosity.

"Because as soon as you're finish eating, you're obviously going home to paint." Brian said, and Justin knew from his tone that it wasn't a question.

"I am?" Justin mindlessly asked. "I mean I am!"

"That's better."

Debbie quickly returned with their orders. Justin picked up the paper to move it out of the way, making room for his food.

That's when it happened...the paper fell open.

It fell open to the full-page ad announcing the return engagement of Divina Devore.

Immediately, Debbie reached for the paper without saying a word.

Brian and Justin just looked at each other.

Debbie read the ad and took the paper with her as she silently walked away from the table.

Brian realized, at this point, nothing further needed to be said.

Chapter 9 – Aftermath

Tuesday Afternoon...(Day 58)

Debbie was obviously upset. She took the paper and went into the back room of the Diner to try to digest the events swirling around her. Here she was, already worried about Michael and Ben, and now this.

In the four years that had lapsed since the last appearance of Divina Devore, Michael had asked no more questions. Debbie figured that her son had contented himself with the fact that John Michael Novotny was his father.

She figured that her son had come to terms with things.

Coming to terms was easier to do if the object of your questions was no longer in town.

At this moment, Debbie so wished that Vic were still alive, he would be the voice of calm reason and tell her what she should do.

But Vic had died several years ago, and right now, Debbie felt totally alone.

How could she deal with all this again? What would she say to Michael?

There were no answers, but the questions kept coming. What could she say to Carl?

Debbie sat there lost in thought.

A few minutes later, Debbie could feel that she was no longer sitting alone in the backroom of the Diner. She knew that she wasn't alone anymore.

She looked up into a supportive pair of blue eyes. Justin had joined her.

"Debbie, are you okay?" he quietly asked.

She instinctively leaned in, touching her forehead to Justin's without saying a word at first. Debbie lingered there for just a moment before breaking the contact.

"I'm fine, Sunshine," she said quietly. "You don't have to worry about me."

Justin knew better, but he didn't press the issue. "I just wanted to check on you. I just wanted to see if there was anything that I could do."

"Not this time, Sunshine," she said, again looking into Justin's eyes. And there she saw it...the hint of recognition.

Debbie realized that Justin knew something. Then she started to wonder if that was why he and Brian were back in town so suddenly? Now she had even more questions.

Instead of asking any of those questions, she merely accepted the warm embrace from her Sunshine, and tried to remain calm.

When Justin left her alone, Debbie picked up the phone and called Betty to come in and relieve her.

Debbie knew that she was going home. She suddenly felt very tired.

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Debbie arrived home, just as Carl was leaving to go to his shift at the station.

"What brings you home this time of day?" Carl innocently asked, leaning over to give her a hug.

"I was feeling a little tired, so I called Betty to take over my shift. I decided to come home and lie down."

"Do you think that you're coming down with something? I could easily take you to the doctor's office before I go to work, or I could stay home and keep you company."

"No Carl, that won't be necessary. I just need some time to myself," she persisted.

Carl didn't like the sound of this, but he decided not to press. He poured Debbie a glass of juice and kept her company while she drank it.

Then, at her insistence, he reluctantly left for work.

Once Carl was gone, Debbie once again pulled from her purse the offending newspaper, announcing the return engagement of Divina Devore.

She carried the paper with her as she walked into the living room.

She walked over to the shrine she lovingly created all those years ago for John Novotny, and she thought about the lies she'd told to give Michael a father he could be proud of.

And it had worked. Michael had internalized the heroic story of John Novotny into his own life.

In fact, Debbie always believed that Michael's fixation with superheroes stemmed from his belief that these were things his father could do if he were still alive. It all made sense when she thought about it.

Michael knew that his father was a hero. He would have gone on believing this forever...except for that strange twist of fate that brought Danny Devore back into town after 31 years...and Michael had started to put the pieces together.

Debbie realized that the one big problem with her fantasy-father scenario...was that even to this day...her son had difficulty, telling the difference between fantasy and reality. And in some way, this inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality had cost him both Brian and Ben and so much more.

Her mood shifted as Debbie began to wonder what Michael was going to do when he found out that Danny was back in town.

She walked over to the phone about to call and tell him herself to get it over with, but then her strong sense of reason prevented her from lifting the receiver.

No...events were going to play out however they were supposed to. There was no longer anything that she could do.

But the truth was...no matter how noble her motives...Debbie had lied to Michael ...and she had perpetuated those lies for his entire life.

She had even continued with the lie, in spite of his persistent requests to know the truth...a truth that Debbie always felt Michael's little mind really couldn't handle.

So her justification was always that she was still protecting her little baby.

But Debbie also realized that Michael was still angry with her, and that anger manifested itself in strange ways, at unexpected times.

Beginning of flashback.

It was after Jenny Rebecca was born. Melanie and Lindsay had separated. Michael and Ben had decided to press for custody, as they were moving into their new home.

"All I care about is that kid," Debbie admitted, referring to her granddaughter.

"So do I! That's why I want her in a loving home with two parents. Why is that so hard to comprehend?"

"What's hard to comprehend is how angry you've been at me all these years for being a single mom. When here I thought we made it through just fine...you and me...the two musketeers. Apparently not! Look, I'm sorry I couldn't give you everything you wanted, but I gave you everything I could."

End of flashback.

Now Debbie understood all those months of anger, regarding the custody arrangements for such a tiny JR that Michael wasn't really angry with Melanie or Lindsay. The truth was that Michael was still angry with her.

Michael was angry with HER, for depriving him of a father for all the years...not the father who died a war hero...but the living breathing father, who could have been a part of his life all that time.

Four years ago, Michael must have truly figured everything out. But, he couldn't talk about it then, but now he carried this rage...that seething anger inside. She realized that he carried this anger for his entire life. And that anger vented itself during the custody battle for Jenny Rebecca.

"Oh, this is so much worse than I could have imagined," Debbie said aloud to herself. "What the fuck am I going to do?"

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock at her door.

Debbie went to answer it and found Jennifer, standing on her doorstep.

Chapter 10 – The Talk

Tuesday Afternoon...(Day 58)

"Jennifer, what are you doing here at this hour?" Debbie had to ask, greeting her guest with a kiss on the cheek.

"Carl called. He said you weren't feeling well. So I thought that I come over and have a late lunch with you. Have you eaten? I brought us some soup and a salad," Jennifer answered, as she made her way into the kitchen.

"You realize that this wasn't necessary," Debbie tried to mildly protest, when in truth, she was glad for the company.

Without saying a word, Jennifer merely smiled victoriously.

Debbie and Jennifer transferred lunch from the takeout containers to appropriate plates and bowls, and then, they settled down to enjoy a late lunch.

"So are you going to tell me what's going on with you?" Jennifer asked, never really one to mince words when she was on a mission.

"Have you ever looked at your past and wished that you could have done things differently?" Debbie asked.

"Who hasn't?" Jennifer assured her. "You do things, and they make such great sense at the time, but events happen that cause you to re-evaluate, and you see that you could have made other choices. It's all a part of living. We learn from our mistakes."

"That's easy for you to say...what have you ever done?"

Jennifer pretended to look for answers on the ceiling. "Let me see, I failed to protect my son from the wrath of his father. I stood by and did nothing when I should have stood up for Justin. But I didn't. I almost lost my son because of that. I allowed Craig to force him out of the only home he'd ever known. What have I done, you ask? You obviously have a very short memory."

"But you and Justin worked things out. The two of you have a great relationship. And now you have Brian Kinney to deal with for a lifetime!" Debbie said with a laugh.

"But things could have worked out so much worse," Jennifer said softly.

"Justin is a very special young man. For whatever you say about growing up with you and Craig, he turned into a kid any mother would be proud to call her own."

"I've always been proud of him. I'm just glad that he's happy. And I'm glad that he and Brian are now together."

"They are quite a pair, aren't they?" Debbie said with a laugh. "I saw them earlier. According to Brian, they're back in town because Sunshine had a craving for lemon bars," she announced, shaking her head. "But I don't know."

"Brian and Justin are in town..." Jennifer was surprised at this news.

Debbie merely affirmed this with a nod.

Then Jennifer continued. "But you think there's some other reason?" she asked with increased curiosity. "Don't you?"

"It's just odd. Brian and Justin left town over a week ago. They haven't talked to anyone as far as I know. Michael has been calling, but Brian, as usual, wouldn't return his phone calls. Then today out of the blue...here they are. I'm not even sure that they even know that Ben and Michael have separated. Yet here they are! They know something..."

"And you don't believe it's a coincidence?"

"No I don't..."

Jennifer got up to pour herself a glass of ice tea. She noticed the newspaper on the counter and brought it back to the table with her.

"Debbie, how come you have the newspaper opened to this page?"

"Ah, Divina Devore, alias Danny Devore. Vic and I went to high school with him. Now, why did that grab your attention?" Debbie couldn't resist teasing. "After all, I've never known you to be interested drag queens...unless there's something you haven't told me all these years?"

Jennifer laughed at the implication. "No need to worry. It's just that I have a client with a similar name. It's just an odd coincidence."

"I see," Debbie said, wondering what was happening. "Tell me about your client?"

"Nothing in particular, it's just that the last names were the same. He talked about being estranged from his family that 's all." Jennifer relayed. She didn't want to reveal anything more for fear of betraying the privacy of her client.

Debbie merely shrugged.

Then Jennifer mindlessly asked, "I wonder what he looks like under all her makeup?"

Debbie laughed at Jennifer's innocent reactions. "Let me tell you that he's very handsome," she gushed. "I had a thing for him back in high school."

"You did? Tell me more!" Jennifer demanded with renewed interest. It had been quite a while since the two of them had shared any long ago-secrets.

"Not much to tell. We were together for a while. Then he left town to seek his fame and fortune. End of story."

"So are you finally over him?" Jennifer asked with a smile, obviously looking for intrigue. She always gained such insight into Debbie during moments like this.

"It was so long time ago. You know, I saw him about four years ago though. It was good to see him," Debbie admitted, "But let's face it, Carl Horvath is one for me!"

"I was just checking," Jennifer teased.

Debbie and Jennifer talked for a bit about old flames and others bits of irrelevancy, as they cleared away the dishes.

Jennifer hugged Debbie and said that she should get going. It was getting to be time for Molly to return home from school.

Something made Debbie extend her arm to stop Jennifer where she was. "Jennifer, I need to talk to you about something," she said with a serious tone.

Jennifer sat back down. "Sure...anything...you know that. We've been through a lot together, you and me," Jennifer reminded her.

Debbie knew that she needed to talk to someone, so she too sat back down. Then she began, "I want to tell you a story. I hope when I'm done that you'll still feel the same way about me. I just have to talk to someone. With you being a mother...I think you'll understand. With you being a mother...you can help me figure out what to do."

Jennifer looked at her, and she could tell this was serious.

"Sounds serious...what ever it is...just tell me...we'll get through this together," Jennifer reassured her with a hug.

Debbie let out a small sigh of relief.

"When I was 17, I dated Divina Devore. Only he was Danny Devore back then, and he wasn't sure that he was gay. I thought we were in love. Then after graduation, he decided to leave town to pursue his future. He wanted to be a star." Debbie began.

Jennifer smiled. "Not everyone is as insightful as Justin, to know that success, without someone to share it with, can be quite hollow. He and Brian held onto each other, and they beat the odds."

"Danny and I weren't so lucky. He left town, and I never saw him again for almost 31 years."

"That's terrible."

"Not really, because when we saw each other again, the years sort of fell away, and it was like old times. Danny built an international reputation for himself as a female impersonator."

"So you both fulfilled your dreams...he evidently found stardom, and you went on and had the family you always wanted. Although you've never said very much about Michael's father, I'm sure the loss must have been tragic for you."

"Yes, it was," Debbie said softly. "I wanted to give Michael a father that he could be proud of."

"You managed to achieve that. I heard that Michael's father was a war hero."

"Yes, he died in Vietnam, just after Michael was born."

"That's too bad. It must be hard for a boy to grow up without a father. Sometimes I look back at Craig and Justin...fortunately Craig only became an asshole when he found out Justin was gay...up until that time he and Justin had a good relationship. That's part of what made things with Craig so sad for Justin," Jennifer added thoughtfully.

"The only trouble was that John Novotny wasn't Michael's father. I found his name in the newspaper among the list of the dead from the war. I located the picture that you see on the mantle, and I bought The Purple Heart. You see...Michael has no father?"

"What?"

"I created a father that Michael could be proud of. I created a father where none previously existed. I even legally changed my own name to perfect the charade."

"Michael has a father, Debbie," Jennifer challenged. "After all, we're not talking about medical improbabilities here!" she teased.

Debbie looked at her incredulously. "Of course, he has a father! We're not talking about the Immaculate Conception here! Danny Devore is Michael's father. And until a chance meeting four years ago, neither of them knew about the other. Danny immediately figured out Michael as his son, because they look so much alike. Michael looked at an old yearbook photo and started asking a lot of questions."

"Then what happened?"

"I'm not sure. I know that Michael asked Danny if he was his father. I don't know what Danny told him, but Michael decided to drop the whole thing."

"And now?"

"Now Danny going to make another appearance back in town. The questions are going to start all over again for Michael. Four years ago, he chose to accept the lie. Now? I don't know if he can do that again. So much has happened since then, losing Ben...losing Vic...losing JR...now Hunter...the mess with Brian..."

"What are you afraid of? Michael has always wanted a father."

"But I don't know if Danny wants a son. In four years, no one has heard a word from him. Then out of the blue...he comes back."

"And the problem is?"

"I wanted Michael to have a father he could be proud of. Kids formulate their idea of who they are from their fathers. I wanted Michael to have a positive image. So I gave him a fallen hero as a father. I can't go back and change that now. I can't go back and tell him that his father is some old drag queen."

"You did what you needed to do when Michael was a kid. But Debbie, Michael's a grown man now...he isn't a kid anymore. He no longer needs the fantasy to grow into the man he is to become. He's already there. So, what's the problem with telling him the truth?"

"First of all, he would know that I lied to him his whole life. He'd never trust me again. And I couldn't blame him."

"Debbie, when you weigh this lie you told, against a lifetime of loving Michael...I think the scales will tip in your favor. Oh he may be angry at first, but he'll come to respect you for finally telling him the truth."

"Once he knows the truth...what's he going to think? I still think the image of fallen hero for a father is better than the truth about the drag queen father who really exists."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing! Debbie, you have spent all your time in Pflag, stressing the importance of being broad minded. You have stressed the importance of tolerance. Don't you think that your attitude is a bit hypocritical? Aren't you going against everything that you've ever believed in, holding on to that belief? You're telling me that you believe a dead father is better than a living breathing one. You're telling me that you think Michael would be ashamed of this father, because of his chosen profession. Didn't you tell me that Divina Devore is a WORLD RENOWN female impersonator? You don't get much more famous than that!" Jennifer reminded her.

"What will his friends think?"

"Let me see if I have this straight...you don't want to tell Michael the truth because you think that he will be embarrassed and shunned by his friends?" Jennifer asked incredulously, wondering if Debbie's wig was a little too tight today.

"That's what I'm telling you. Michael has had to live with a lifetime of living with me. I know that I'm loud. I know that I'm outrageous. I've been enough of a burden for him to bear. How can I ask him to accept the added burden of a father who's a drag queen?"

"This is the same Michael, who has grown up on Liberty Avenue. Who has spent his life among transvestites, fags, and queens...the same Michael, who essentially grew up at the Diner and matured in the halls of Babylon. Michael understands gay life in ways that you don't. And, I think that you're not being honest with yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"For thirty five years, you've had him all to yourself. You've had all of Michael's love. You haven't had to share that love with anyone but Vic...and that was different. Even Ben was different...because Michael had carved out a place for you. Is it possible what you're really afraid of...is that you'll have to share Michael and his love with another parent?"

"How can you ask me that?" Debbie argued.

"Because every parent goes through this...usually when their kid is baby. There's a little bit of jealousy that the kid will love the other parent more. Then you realize that love isn't finite, and you get over it. But see, you never had that chance to work it all though... because you...were all that Michael had. You had no competition. You had Michael all to yourself. You have to admit that you and Michael are EXTREMELY close."

"Maybe. What would I do without Michael in my life? I almost died when he was hurt in the bombing. He was spared then. I don't want to lose him now."

"But Michael may be at a point where he needs something more in his life...something you can't give him. Maybe that's why he reacted the way he did to Brian and Justin's news. He will always love you, but you can't be everything to him. You have to give him a chance to find his way in the world. I had to do it when Justin was only 17. Oh, I admit that I tried to protect him from Brian. When, as you so often pointed out to me, Brian turns out to be exactly what he needed."

"Yeah, but Brian isn't Sunshine's father."

Jennifer couldn't resist laughing. "No...he isn't. And I can assure you that Justin definitely doesn't see Brian that way. But as things turned out, each was exactly what the other needed, and today they're stronger together because of that."

"So what you're saying is that by continuing to keep the secret, I may be depriving Michael of something he needs, more than a fallen hero father that he can look up to?"

"That's what I'm saying," Jennifer agreed softly.

"I don't know?"

"Yes, you do...but it may take you a while to admit it," Jennifer said with a smile.

Debbie looked up at Jennifer incredulously.

Jennifer smiled and then innocently looked over at the clock again.

"Look, Deb, I really have to go. We'll talk in a day or so, after you've had time to think things over."

"Thanks Jennifer," Debbie said, giving her a hug. "You've given me a lot to think about. I'll talk to you later. Give Molly a hug for me."

"I will," Jennifer said, as she walked towards the door, leaving Debbie alone with her thoughts

Chapter 11 – It's Been A Long Time

Wednesday Afternoon...(Day 59)

It had been four years since Debbie had set foot in the Kit Kat Club, and it had been just as long since she'd found it necessary to open that window into her long ago past. Now here she was again, hoping to talk to an old friend during a break in rehearsals.

Upon her arrival at the club, she had sent a note to Divina Devore, asking to see her. Now that she was here, she wasn't completely sure that this was such a good idea. Debbie couldn't believe that she had let Jennifer talk her in to this.

It had been four years since she'd confirmed the truth to Danny/Divina; maybe it was just best to let sleeping dogs lie. But somehow, she knew that probably wasn't possible.

Her thoughts were interrupted, as she noticed the woman, standing by her side; Debbie also noticed that the room was now quiet. Rehearsals were now over.

The young woman introduced herself and indicated that Divina was ready to see her now. Debbie followed her guide to a dressing room, one equipped with a star on the door.

For the first time since her arrival, Debbie couldn't resist a smile.

Her guide gently knocked on the door, and then an oh so familiar voice said, "Enter."

Debbie entered and made herself comfortable in the only uncluttered chair. A voice from the dressing room said, "I wondered if you were going to come and see me."

Debbie had to laugh, "Sure, like you were just to going to breeze into town, and I was going to miss the chance to get all your style tips," she teased.

Her comments were greeted with a very broad laugh from Divina in response.

"So are you going to come out here so I can give you a hug, or have you fucking gotten shy in your old age," Debbie continued to tease.

" Well, the last time I saw you, I was still in my make up," Divina said with a laugh. "This time I thought I would let you see the real me," she added.

"Well, I'm waiting!"

"Oh, very well!"

Danny Devore emerged, dressed casually in slacks and sweater. He looked very handsome, and Debbie understood why she fell in love with him all those years ago. He walked over and wrapped her in a hug to rival her own, and Debbie remembered where she had learned to hug like that.

When the hug ended, Danny took a few steps back and said, "Let me take a look at you, my Divina," he said, with a slight dip at the end with his arms crossed at his chest; it was a familiar gesture between them.

Debbie blushed as she too, took a step back, "I remember that you use to call me that...but it was such a long time ago."

"Nonsense, you haven't changed a bit!" Danny said, taking a good look at his her.

"You still look as handsome as ever...you still have all your hair!" Debbie teased.

"Yeah, it's all there...for which I'm eternally grateful to my parents for sharing their genes with me," he added, running his fingers through his hair. "It's really good to see you."

"You too..."

"There's a restaurant just around the corner. Will you let me buy you a cup of coffee and a pastry?"

"Sounds like a plan. So you still remember all my weaknesses?" she teased as she reached for her purse.

"Some things are worth remembering," he responded, walking towards the door and opening it for her, "For old times sake," he teased once more.

"Now if this isn't a fucking Hallmark moment," she said, as she walked through the opened door. Then both of them started laughing. They were still laughing as they exited the club.

They walked the short distance to the restaurant.

Debbie immediately noticed that this was an upscale restaurant, very different from the club...very different from the Diner. The restaurant wasn't crowded, so they settled into one of the booths. They both ordered coffee, and Danny gently coaxed Debbie to join him in a very fattening dessert.

"Sunshine should be here," she said with a smile. "Just wait until I tell him about this."

"Sunshine?"

"Someone who's like a son to me. I've watched out for him since he was 17. He has the greatest metabolism. He eats stuff like this all the time without gaining weight," she said with a laugh, "But he's got the cutest bubble butt."

"Why Debbie...I didn't know that you still noticed such things," Danny teased.

"Now don't you start ..."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't resist! So quickly, tell me all the news! I heard that Vic died."

"Yes, and I miss him terribly."

"I see by the ring on your finger that there's someone special. I'm really glad for you."

"Yes, he's a cop."

"A cop? Now how does he deal with crazies on Liberty Avenue?"

"It's taken a while, but now he takes it all in stride. But most of all he loves me, big mouth and all."

"That's great."

"How about you? Anyone special?"

"I've been married to my work, you know that. It doesn't make it easy for anything else. But over the years I've made great friends. We love and care about each other like family. Now that my traveling days are just about over, I feel that everything is about to change."

"What do you mean?"

"It's time for me to settle down. It's time to see what else there is to life beside the smell of greasepaint and the roar of the crowd."

"Don't tell me you're thinking of retiring?"

"Would that be so surprising?"

"You're going to retire...and do what?"

"I'm thinking of settling here in Pittsburgh. After all, it is my home."

"Danny, you could settle anywhere in the world...why here? Why in a place that you were so eager to get away from?"

"It's time. I have family ties here that need to be mended."

"But, you've been gone a lifetime! Why now!"

"The timing works for me now."

There was a long silence between them. Finally Danny had to ask, "How's Michael?"

Debbie responded with a long sigh. Danny immediately noticed the change in her demeanor.

"Is that why you're back?" Debbie asked haltingly. "Because of Michael?"

"Why would you think that?"

"I just wondered..."

"Why? Because four years ago, I found out that I had a grown son that I never knew existed?"

"It would make sense."

Danny chose to gently change the subject rather than answer her question directly.

"How are things between you and Michael? The last time we talked, you were worried that he would never speak to you again," Danny reminded her.

"Fortunately that didn't happen. I don't know what you told him, but there haven't been any further questions about you since you left town back then."

"I'm glad. I never wanted to do anything to change things between you and him."

"What exactly did you tell Michael? I know he must have asked, if you were his father. What did you say?"

"It was a long time ago, Debbie. Let's leave it at that. Anyway, it no longer matters now that things between the two of you are okay. I never wanted my reappearance to interfere, you know that?"

"I know," Debbie said softly.

"You haven't told me how Michael is?" Danny reminded her.

"He's basically fine. A lot of things have been happening for him in the last few weeks that he isn't dealing with any of it particularly well. I always hope that things will work out, but this time I'm not so sure."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Danny said with genuine concern. "I simply remember that he was a fine young man. Like I told you before, you did a wonderful job raising him. You should be very proud of what you accomplished."

"I am. He's the best thing that I've ever done. We're very close...at least we were. Right now, he's not very happy with me."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Time has a way of healing some things," Debbie said wistfully. "But not all..."

"You don't believe that!" Danny challenged.

"At this moment, I'm not sure what I believe."

"That doesn't sound like you. You've always been so sure of yourself. So optimistic..."

"This time...well..."

"Talk to me. You know, I'm still a good listener."

"Another time, maybe. Are you planning to see Michael?"

"No, I'm not sure we have anything to say to each other. He wasn't exactly happy with me when we parted four years ago."

"This is still a small town. Your paths are bound to cross. Then what are you going to do? How do you plan on handling that?"

"I kept your secret. Michael still has a father that he can be proud of...just as you've always wanted. My presence here, or lack there of, isn't going to matter one way or another. I'm not here to cause any trouble."

"But your being in town is going to raise the issues all over again," Debbie challenged, hoping to get Danny to change his plans.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Danny said softly. "But what do you want me to do about it? I'm going to be living here. You and Michael are both just going to have to come to terms with it."

"Are you prepared to deal with the questions again?"

"Debbie, you're asking the wrong person. I'm prepared to deal with whatever. The question is, are you ready to deal with things coming up again?" Danny asked, but then he smiled, "But then, I imagine that you can deal with anything."

Debbie took a deep breath. "My son is in trouble. His life isn't going quite the way he hoped. There is this big hole in his soul for the father he never knew."

"That's to be expected since he never knew his father. He's believed all these years that his father died in the War. That has to create a certain sadness for him."

"Danny, we both know that Michael's father didn't die in the war! We both know that Michael's father is sitting across the table from me! I gave him a dead father he could be proud of...when he could have had a living, breathing father to love him. I have a fucking lot to answer for," Debbie challenged, with the full recognition hitting her of what she'd done.

Danny sensed her distress. "You did what you thought was best because of who I am. You made choices for both of us without consulting me. I wish that you had told me, but you did what you thought was best. But we're all bound to eventually have to deal with the consequences of your actions. I'll do what I can to help..." he said lovingly, trying to calm her fears.

Debbie quickly pulled herself together. "That's what I needed to hear," she said finally.

"What do you mean?"

"That you're willing to help."

"What did you expect?"

"I wasn't sure...now I know."

"What do you want me to do?"

Debbie simply smiled. "That's a discussion for another time, maybe," she said mysteriously. "But for now, it's time for me to go. How can I reach you?" she asked instead.

"Reach me? What are you talking about?"

"You said that you're going to be here in town. How do I reach you?" Debbie insisted, asking the obvious and wondering why Danny was suddenly so dense to get it. There was something familiar in that moment, and then she understood. She felt like she was making a point to Michael...and he just didn't get it. Then she simply smiled.

Danny took out a card and wrote on the back. "Here are my phone numbers. I've been shopping for a house. Evidently, I'm very picky. I haven't found anything yet that quite suits my needs. It doesn't matter, I still have time."

"You're looking for a house? Do you have an agent? I know a really good one. Her name is Jennifer Taylor. Let me give you her number," Debbie insisted without taking a breath and immediately fumbling in her purse.

Danny broke into a laugh. "Debbie, that really isn't necessary. Jennifer and I already met a few weeks ago, and you're right, she's a very good realtor."

"Oh, I see..."

"Yes. As you said, this is really a small town, isn't it?"

"Yes it is. Well, I have to go. It's almost time for my shift at the Diner to begin. I guess I'll see you around then."

"So it seems," Danny said with a smile. "You take care."

Debbie said goodbye, leaving Danny at the restaurant.

Chapter 12 – A Necessary Meeting

Wednesday Evening...(Day 59)

Michael was sitting at the computer in the comic book store when the bell sounded over the door. He looked up and broke into a big smile when he saw Brian standing by the door.

Michael started to quickly leave his seat, wanting to rush over to him. Brian stopped him with a look. Like a penitent child, Michael returned to his seat to wait for Brian to come over and kiss him, as usual.

Brian slowly walked into the store; then he closed and locked the door. He turned the sign on the front door to "Closed". Then he walked over to the counter and sat down on one of the available stools, a good distance from Michael.

"I've been calling you for weeks now. You haven't been returning my calls," Michael started to whine immediately.

Brian pinched his nose and shook his head, trying to drown out the sound.

"I've been really busy, Mikey. You know that. I'm sure they told you that when you called the Kinnetik office; I was out of town on business," Brian tried to calmly explain.

"Business...sure? Wasn't Justin with you?" Michael asked with an accusatory tone to his question.

Brian ran his hands through his hair and sighed. He realized that Michael would never understand that he and Justin were now business partners, as well as legal life partners. He realized all that Michael saw when he thought of Justin, was someone who simply illustrated his comic book. Michael could so easily forget that Justin was an accomplished artist in his own right, and now also Brian's working partner as well. A lot of things changed almost two weeks ago.

Realizing that Michael was waiting for answer, Brian finally easily admitted nonchalantly, "Yeah," he said with a shrug. The added shrug said so much.

Michael's disappointment was unmistakable. "So then what are you doing here?" he finally asked.

"I heard about you and Ben. I just came to see how you were doing. I'm sorry that things didn't work out between you two."

"Well you should be!" Michael quickly accused with some anger in his voice. "It's all your fault! If you and Boy Wonder hadn't legalized things, none of this would have happened!" he began to rant.

Brian realized immediately that everything Michael was saying was so absurd that it didn't even require a response. Once again, someone was blaming him for the problems in their life, and he didn't like it one bit.

But this was Michael, and they had a history together, so he tried to let it slide. "Are you going to tell me what happened between you and Ben?" Brian asked instead.

Michael had clearly been waiting for this opportunity.

"He left me, Brian," he said sadly, letting the tears finally flow down his cheeks. "Ben left me because he said that I was so focused on trying to have a future with you that I lost sight of everything in the present with him. How could he do this to me? We made a commitment! We got married," he continued, professing through his tears.

"And is he right?" Brian quietly asked, without moving from his seat. He definitely did not want to deal with Michael's histrionics at this point.

"I guess," Michael finally admitted with a series of sniffles, as he started to wipe away his tears with the back of his hand. "I promised that I would always be there for him. And I have been! I did what I needed to do to be there for him all the time. I love Ben. You know that, but I guess I just needed something to hold onto."

"And what you chose to hold onto was the lie a future with me?"

"I believed in time..." Michael tried to argue as a means to justify his actions.

"But what did I tell you?" Brian sternly insisted, trying with all his might to control his anger. He still couldn't believe that Michael was holding onto the past and using him in this way.

"You told me that we would NEVER be a couple, but I thought that one day you would change your mind."

"Why on earth would you think that? You know that I mean what I say!"

"Once Gus and Justin came along you seemed to change everything. So I figured in time you would change your mind about a future with me too."

Brian now understood that for Michael, there was only ONE kind of love. Michael didn't understand that there were things that he would do for Gus and Justin that he would never consider doing for anyone else. Brian understood about different feelings for different people...he had learned that there are different kinds of love.

And Brian understood that somehow through the years no one had shown Michael that there were different kinds of love in the world. He realized that it often takes someone special to show you that difference. Justin and Gus had been his guides to this realization. Ben had obviously failed to help Michael understand this difference.

"You do understand now that that's never going to happen. We'll always be friends. I'll always love you. But we...you and me...we're never going to be a couple! I thought that you understood that a long time ago! Michael, you've got to let the childhood fantasy go!" Brian said sternly, for he was exhausted from having to repeat this lifetime mantra, one more time. This time he hoped that he was clearly heard.

"You've made that abundantly clear."

"Have I Mikey? We can't keep doing this!"

"We won't...I got it this time," Michael professed. "Really!"

"Good! I'm glad that's settled," Brian said with a smile.

"Since we're never going to be a couple, are you here to help me get Ben back?" Michael asked hopefully, sure that with Brian's help, everything was going to quickly get back to normal.

"Excuse me?" Brian asked in disbelief.

"You've got to help me get Ben back!" Michael insisted again.

"I can't help you with that, Mikey! What on earth made you think that I could?"

Michael couldn't believe his ears. Brian had always taken care of these things before. He had fixed things when there had been problems with David. He had helped him find the courage to originally fight for Ben. Why did anything have to change now, when Michael needed him the most to fix this mess?

And when he did finally understand what Brian was saying to him, Michael fired back.

"Then, what am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to get him back? I don't want to be alone! You have Boy Wonder! What about me?" he immediately shouted.

"If you want Ben back, you'll have to find some way to work things out with him. In the meantime, you have to move forward...you just have to get through one day at a time."

"I'm not as cold and heartless a bastard as you are...I can't do that!" Michael fired back in anger.

Brian simply remained calm. "Then I don't know what to tell you. I'm sorry that you're so unhappy."

Michael accepted Brian's tone of concern, even though the usual hugging and kissing and other signs of affection didn't follow it. Then once again, Michael's anger flared again.

"Then why are you here?" Michael practically spat. "If you didn't come to help me get Ben back, then what do you want?" he added with resentment.

At this point, Brian was simply tempted to walk out of the store. His days of taking shit from everyone for things that he had nothing to do with were over. But Brian had a reason for this annoying visit with Michael, and he had no intentions of leaving until his appointed rounds were completed.

"I came to show you this," Brian said, showing Michael the paper and the article about the return of Divina Devore to the Kit Kat Club.

"Where did you get this?"

"It's a newspaper, Mikey," Brian said, stating the obvious. "They're all over town. Ted and Emmett showed it to me during lunch yesterday. I simply thought that you should know about this."

"Why should I care about some old drag queen?" Michael lied.

"Indeed. It's just that this old drag queen is someone you once thought was your father," Brian quietly reminded him.

"That was a long time ago," Michael tried, in vain, to challenge.

"It's just that you've often said that you were half Italian and half drag queen, so I thought..."

"You thought that I believed that this old drag queen could possibly be my father," Michael protested with a laugh. "That would mean that my mother had been lying to me all my life. You know who my father is, he's John Michael Novotny, Lieutenant in the US Army..."

"Please don't repeat that litany to me!" Brian said, holding up his hands to block out the words. "I've heard that story so much for the last 20 years...even I know the words by heart," he added.

"Sorry."

"I just wanted to be sure that you were okay with things. Hunter seemed to think that you were upset."

"Upset! Why the fuck should I be upset?" Michael began to rant again.

"Something about you finding out some new information..."Brian relayed calmly.

"What new information could I possibly find?" Michael said with anger in his voice.

Brian didn't say anything. He just sat there and silently counted, '5...4...3...2...1...'

"You mean like that John Michael Novotny had been stationed in Viet Nam for more than a year before he was killed in action? You mean like the fact that if he was over there, then there is no way that he could be my father? You mean like that my mother has been lying to me all these years? You mean like the fact that Hunter and I found proof on the Internet? Is that the kind of information you're asking about?" Michael volunteered right on cue.

"Well, as long as you aren't upset?" Brian said sarcastically.

"I don't know what to do with everything that I found out. My mother and I haven't been talking since the last family dinner when she told me I was being an asshole about you and Justin."

"Well?"

"She's my mother, Brian; she's supposed to take my side in things. And now this...."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"Mikey, you're going to have to talk to Debbie if you ever want to know the truth. She's the only one who has the answers that you're looking for."

"I'm not sure that my mother knows what the word TRUTH actually means at this point."

"That's a bit harsh. Debbie has always put a lot of stock in the truth. She's just been a bit overprotective where you're concerned. You've got to admit that she's always been there for you...fuck, for us all. But you were always her little man, so if she lied to you, I'm sure she felt she had good reasons," Brian tried to explain.

"Maybe."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I want to get Ben back. That's all I care about. But he won't answer my calls...he won't even talk to me."

"Give him some time, Mikey. He's got a lot to deal with."

"What does he have to deal with? He's not alone...Hunter is living with him."

"But things are okay between you and the littlest hustler, aren't they?"

"Yes, I saw Ben, and we agreed that Hunter shouldn't be forced to choose sides. I'm just afraid that he already has...after all, he's chosen to live with Ben."

"Ben and Hunter have always been extremely close. Don't overreact, or you could lose both of them."

"Maybe... It's just that nothing is working out for me. Everyone seems to have gone on with their lives, and I'm still stuck back at square one. I thought that I had everything. Now I feel like I have nothing."

"This isn't a race, Michael. You just have to find your own way to move forward again. That's what life is all about."

"And how do I do that?"

"Talk to Debbie for starters."

"What good will that do?"

"You'll never know until you talk to her."

"It's just that I can't believe ..." Michael said sadly.

"I'm hearing self pity," Brian reminded him. "You know that makes my dick soft. And we can't have that now, can we?" he added with a smile.

Michael managed a little smile back at the familiarity of the moment. Then he managed a deep sigh.

Brian finally stood up. "Look I have to go. I've got a long drive home...Justin's waiting, and I'm already late. Think about what I've said!"

Michael just stared at his friend in silence, waiting once again for Brian to come over and give him his usual hug and kiss. Once again this didn't happen, and Michael could feel the sense of loss.

And with that Brian turned and started to leave the store.

As he was about to leave, Brian turned back around. He walked over to Michael and gave him a hug. "Think about what I've said," Brian repeated.

And then Brian quickly left, leaving Michael alone with his thoughts.

Chapter 13 – Breakfast Treats

Thursday Morning...(Day 60)

"Can I get you an extra homemade Cinnamon Roll?" Debbie coyly asked. "Or maybe you would like that extra piece of bacon?"

"No...No, I'm fine. Just more coffee," Carl tried to insist, holding up his cup for additional emphasis.

"Are you sure, Carl? It's no trouble? I have a fresh pan coming out of the oven," Debbie pointed out.

"No, really, I'm fine. Now will you stop fussing with everything? Come on...sit down and keep me company!" he said, patting the seat of the empty chair beside him.

"What do you mean?" Debbie innocently asked.

"Debbie honey, you keep forgetting that I'm a very good detective. Just because I don't look like the supermodels that solve the cases on television in 30 minutes, I assure you that I'm very good at what I do..."

"Is there a point here, Carl?" Debbie asked, now with hands on her hips.

"Oh, I would say so..." Carl added with a laugh. "Do I need to haul you into an interrogation room at the station and add a strong light for my round of questioning, or are you going to tell me what's bothering you?"

Debbie removed the rolls from the oven; then she rejoined Carl back at the table.

Meanwhile, Carl was patiently waiting for events to unfold. After all he and Debbie had been together for a long time, and he had finally learned how to deal with her. So he just waited.

"It's just..." Debbie began and then changed her mind. "What makes you think that something is bothering me?"

"Well...the extra treats at breakfast were a dead give away. Add to that, the fact that you tossed and turned all night," he pointed out. "I wanted to give you some time...needless to say, your time's now up," Carl reminded her with a smile.

There was a moment of silence while Debbie thought things over...one more time. Carl tried to again wait patiently.

Finally, he reminded her, "I'm waiting!" he said sternly.

"Okay...Okay...just give me a fucking minute..."

Carl lifted his left wrist to look at his watch. "I'm keeping track of the time...just so you know. You have 57 seconds..."

Debbie went into the living room and removed the picture and The Purple Heart from the mantel. She brought them both back to the kitchen table and placed them down in front of Carl without saying a word.

Carl was surprised by the gesture, but he said nothing. Again he continued looking at his watch, tapping it gently with his finger to remind Debbie that her time was running out.

She refilled both of their cups with coffee and then flopped back down in her seat.

"I have a story to tell you," she finally said when she could stall no longer.

"That's good because your time is up!" Carl interrupted with a smile, "A story, huh? I love a good story. Emmett and I are a lot alike in that regard. I think he's rubbed off on me...but let's not tell him that, okay?" he added with a smile.

Debbie took a deep breath and reached out to hold Carl's hand, for additional strength. She knew what she had to do...now she thought that she was ready.

She then relayed the story of young 17-year-old girl, who had a high school romance. She revealed that the object of her affection left her to seek his fame and fortune in the big wide world. Debbie talked about finding out that she was pregnant after he was gone, and the decisions she made to have the child on her own.

She detailed for Horvath the lies she constructed to give Michael a father that he could be proud of, including finding John Michael Novotny's name among the dead and changing her name to make the charade complete. She unburdened herself of it all.

Debbie also recounted the events that happened four years ago when Divina Devore came back into town. She talked about being confronted by Divina's alter ego, Danny, about Michael being his son.

She talked about Michael finding the yearbook picture and putting the pieces together too because he looked so much like Danny. Then she mentioned that she and Michael had not discussed the topic of his father again for almost four years.

Finally, Debbie told Carl about Divina, now being back in town for a return engagement, but that even more, that Danny had decided to permanently make his home back in Pittsburgh. Debbie relayed her concerns that this was going to stir everything up again.

Carl listened quietly, giving Debbie every opportunity to get it all out.

Then Debbie added that she had talked to Jennifer about this, and Jennifer's advice was it was time to tell Michael and Danny the truth...and then let the chips fall where they may.

"That sounds like wise advice," Carl finally said, wrapping his arms lovingly around her.

"But Carl, Michael will know that I've lied to him all these years. Things are already strained between us because of the Brian and Sunshine thing. He's pretty much all alone now since he and Ben have separated. I don't know if he can handle anything more! I don't know if anything can be done to fix the problems between Ben and Michael at this point. If I admit that I've lied to him his entire life, what will he have to hold on to?"

"Debbie honey, the entire family is still here for Michael. He and Hunter are still close. The rest of the family will help him get through this. Didn't you tell me that Brian and Justin are back in town? Surely you don't think that they're being here is just a coincidence?"

"I wondered about that myself," Debbie commented, leaning more into Carl.

"So this may be the perfect time to reveal the truth," Carl suggested, "Don't you think?"

"Maybe?"

"I'll tell you what...why don't you invite Danny to dinner?" Carl suggested.

"What? Here?"

"Of course, here..."

"I don't know, Carl, that doesn't sound like a really good idea," Debbie tried to point out, hoping that he would hear her distress and drop things.

"Why not? You mean you're going to deprive me the opportunity to meet a female impersonator of international renown? You know how I gushed over meeting Drew Boyd? Can I help it if I'm star struck?" Carl teased. "Besides, I want to get to know this man."

"You're not going to interrogate him, are you?" Debbie immediately asked back.

Carl answered, "No, I'll be off duty, but I can still get to know him. After all, this is someone that you were once fond of. I assume that you two are still friends...in spite of the awkwardness of things at the moment. And if he's going to be moving back here, and if you tell Michael the truth, he's going to be around a lot. So I think...I...make that we...should all get acquainted. Some people change over time. I just want to check him out."

Debbie initially tried to resist. Carl was not about to be deterred, but he didn't want to press either. This was clearly Debbie's decision. He only wanted to be firm and help her decide wisely.

"Why don't you think it over?" Carl gently suggested. "Let me know what you decide. Just remember that the sooner you get everything out in the open...the sooner everyone can get used to the idea. Secrets have a way of coming out...they never stay buried forever."

Debbie finally sighed in agreement and nodded her head.

"Are you going to be all right?" Carl asked. "Would you like me to stay home with you today and keep you company?"

"No...No...I'll be fine. In fact, I feel better now that I've talked to you about this."

"That's what I'm here for," Carl said, leaning down to give Debbie a kiss. "Look, I'll see you this evening. You realize, of course, that I'm stuffed after that breakfast you fed me," he mockingly protested. "Let's hope I don't have to chase any criminals today," he continued to tease.

"I'm Italian...to us food says love," Debbie teased.

"I know..." Carl said with a satisfied smirk. "I'll see you later."

And with that Carl left Debbie alone with her thoughts.

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Later that day Debbie called Danny Devore and invited him for a casual dinner that night at 7:30 pm at her house. She stressed that Carl was eager to meet him.

When Danny asked if Michael would be there, Debbie explained that things were still strained between her and Michael, and they hadn't talked in over a week. However, in spite of those problems, Debbie stressed that she and Carl wanted Danny to come over for dinner.

With an invitation like this, Danny realized that he couldn't refuse the gesture of friendship from an old friend. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he was looking forward to spending an evening with Debbie and meeting Carl.

Debbie next picked up the phone and called Jennifer to see if she was free for dinner tonight, as well.

Debbie explained who the guest of honor was going to be. Jennifer was thrilled with the news that Debbie was taking her advice.

Jennifer said to give her some time to make a few arrangements, and that she would call Debbie back.

After making alternate arrangements for Molly, Jennifer called Debbie back and promised to be there for dinner.

And now, major events were about to unfold.

Chapter 14 – A Cozy Dinner

Thursday Evening...(Day 60)

"Debbie honey, I'm home," Carl called out as he entered the house. "My, something smells really good."

Debbie came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. "I made something extra special," she said coyly.

"What's the occasion?" Carl asked nonchalantly.

"We're having guests for dinner," Debbie said, leaning in to give Carl a kiss.

"Guests for dinner, huh? But it isn't Sunday," he teased.

"I'm very well aware what day of the fucking week it is. This isn't Sunday dinner...this is just dinner for a few friends."

"Oh, that's different. Who's coming?"

"I invited Jennifer..." Debbie said, allowing a pregnant pause to lapse.

"That's nice."

"And... I invited Danny Devore. Although I can't tell you whether Danny will show up or whether Divina will appear."

"Well, I guess we'll soon find out, won't we? What made you bring Jennifer into the mix?"

"She knows the whole story...plus she and Danny have known each other for a couple of weeks. She's helping him find a place to live," Debbie confidently relayed.

Carl couldn't resist. "You better not let Justin find out that you've set up a date for his mother," he teased with a laugh. "You remember how he reacted about the whole Tucker affair?" he reminded her with a smile.

"This isn't a date...this is a fucking friendly dinner," Debbie immediately protested. "I thought it would relieve some of the tension if she were here, you little shit. Plus I could use the additional moral support, if you must know," she firmly added.

"Just teasing! It's a very nice gesture," Carl said, leaning in to give her another kiss.

"That's better."

"I'm going up to grab a quick shower and change for dinner."

"Okay," Debbie said with a smile as she returned to the kitchen.

As Carl was heading up the stairs, he suddenly wondered aloud, "Debbie, where's Em?"

"Em is having dinner with Drew. He'll probably spend the night over there. They haven't had too much time together lately. So it looks like it'll be just you and me here later tonight."

"You and me...those are magical words," Carl said, continuing to climb the stairs. "I'll be down shortly."

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Jennifer was the first to arrive.

She and Carl chatted easily in the living room about nothing important.

Of course, Carl couldn't resist teasing Jennifer about her "date" for the evening.

Jennifer merely rolled her eyes, and used his comment as the perfect excuse to leave him alone in the living room.

Carl couldn't help smiling as he watched Jennifer walk away to join Debbie.

Debbie was still a bit nervous about what was going to happen this evening, so she was very glad to have Jennifer in the kitchen with her...to keep her distracted.

Jennifer mentioned that she'd finally talked to Justin. Debbie laughed and just waited to hear Jennifer's take on things.

"Well!" Jennifer began, "According to Justin, he had a craving for lemon bars, so Brian decided they should make a trip back to Pittsburgh so he could get them," she relayed.

Then both Debbie and Jennifer had to laugh at the image of mighty Brian Kinney, dropping everything in his business world in New York to come all the way back to Pittsburgh just to fulfill Justin's craving for lemon bars.

After the two of them finished laughing, both of them confirmed that they weren't buying Justin's explanation one bit.

They both agreed that it couldn't possibly be a coincidence that the happy couple suddenly decided to grace Pittsburgh with their presence...no, they didn't believe in coincidences...something was definitely up.

Before they could pursue this line of reasoning any further, there was a knock at the door.

The air was filled with anticipation, so they all went to greet whoever was there. Would it be the handsome Daniel or the flamboyant Divina?

As Jennifer expected, an impeccably dressed Daniel Devore stood at the door with a bottle of wine in one hand and dessert in the other.

Carl reached for the wine and Debbie reached for the dessert. Then Carl managed to shake Daniel's hand and introduce himself.

Daniel noticed Jennifer standing nearby and greeted her with a smile. "Jennifer, I'm glad to see you. I didn't find out until yesterday that you and Debbie knew each other."

"Yes, Debbie and I are like family," Jennifer pointed out with a smile, as she walked over and put her arm around Debbie.

"Jennifer is Sunshine's mom," Debbie pointed out to help Daniel begin to connect the relationship dots within their little family.

"Ah yes, with the hearty appetite and the bubble butt," Daniel teased.

"I wouldn't let him hear you reference either of those things...even if they're true," Jennifer quipped in her son's defense. "Not unless you want to make an enemy right from the start," she added with a laugh.

Debbie and Carl laughed too, indicating that she was so right.

"And how are you doing, my Divina," Daniel teased as he gave Debbie a chaste kiss on the cheek.

"Danny use to call me that in high school," Debbie said coyly, blushing slightly.

"And you used her nickname in your act?" Carl asked curiously.

"It seemed to fit somehow. When my agent asked me for a stage name, it was the first name that popped out of my mouth. Every time I heard an announcer announce me over the years, I could hear Debbie's laugh in the back of my mind," Daniel explained.

"You're full of shit, Danny. You always were," Debbie said with a broad laugh.

"Now, there's that laugh!" Daniel teased.

"I have to agree with you there," Carl added. "Big mouth...big laugh...I like that."

"You're a lucky man, Carl."

"So how's the house hunting going?" Carl asked.

"Jennifer is an excellent realtor. She's shown me a lot of houses. I told her that I have lots of friends, who tend to drop in so I need something bigger than a little cottage or a loft or a condo. I'm still looking...I want to take my time," Daniel explained.

"I've heard that Brian and Justin live in a mansion...maybe that's more of what Danny has in mind," Debbie teased.

"Don't get started on the mansion, Debbie. You know that Justin will have you out there as soon as he has a chance. You know how he feels about you," Jennifer reminded her.

"If the little asshole doesn't invite me out there soon, I'm going to do what Lindsay did. I'm going to call and invite myself out. Then, I'll have his fucking balls!" Debbie began to rant.

Jennifer couldn't resist a laugh as she pictured the imagery. "You do that Debbie," she said with a smile. "But I really don't think that it'll be necessary."

Everyone else laughed too.

"I see that you haven't changed," Daniel commented.

"Not much chance of that," Carl added with a laugh.

"Daniel, I didn't know that you're a world famous female impersonator," Jennifer commented. "I saw the ad in the paper about your appearance this weekend. When you were in my office, you looked so different then when you're in ....you know..."

"Drag," Debbie filled in the correct word for her.

"Thank you..." Jennifer replied. "Yes, drag."

Then Debbie decided to have a little fun. "You know Danny, when Jennifer saw the picture of you as Divina in the paper, she couldn't help wondering what you might look like out of makeup," she teased.

"Debbie!" Jennifer protested. "I was trying to see if Daniel and Divina might be related."

"Oh, I would say they're related," Carl teased, eliciting a swipe from Debbie.

"Don't feel bad, Jennifer. Quite a few people wonder. Fortunately, Divina and I look so different these days that once I take off my make up, I'm almost anonymous. I'm beginning to like that. As much as I love Divina, it's tiring being her all the time. I must admit that there are times that I enjoy being simply Daniel," Daniel explained.

"Daniel?" Debbie questioned.

"Well, it is my given name," Daniel pointed out.

"But you hated it back in high school. You were always Danny Devore. You even used Danny in the yearbook, as I remember," Debbie reminded him.

"I grew up, I guess. Somewhere along the line, I decided that I wanted to use my given name, Daniel. I decided that it suited me better as I became 53 years old. Of course, I have no problems with old friends calling me Danny."

"You had to bring up the age thing," Debbie teased. "I'd forgotten how old I was."

"Debbie, you haven't aged a day since high school. The only change I see is the difference in hair color. I miss the long flowing blond locks. But I have to admit the new hair style and color are definitely you," Daniel teased.

"I would definitely have to agree with that," Carl said with a laugh.

Carl and Daniel settled down in the living room to talk a bit, while Jennifer gave Debbie a hand with the last minute things relating to dinner.

Within a few minutes, they all gathered around the dinner table to enjoy the meal that Debbie had lovingly prepared. It was one of Daniel's favorites. He was very pleased.

"Traveling as much as I have, I rarely get a great meal like this. Thank you," Daniel commented.

Over dinner, Daniel regaled them all with stories of his exploits over the years. He talked about his travels and his time spent in New York.

"You probably didn't know it, but I've appeared in several off Broadway productions from time to time. Of course, Divina Devore is always in demand, but quite a few directors simply wanted me as a character actor," Daniel revealed.

"How do you do that?" Jennifer asked. "From the picture that I saw Divina was pretty flamboyant."

"Divina is merely another role now," Daniel revealed. "I attended college over the years to learn the craft of acting. I'm quite capable of acting in other roles."

Everyone was surprised by this news.

"So that's why Divina has had such a long career. You were more than just a pretty face," Carl teased.

"Thank you, Carl," Daniel said with a laugh. "But Divina hasn't been a pretty face in ages. I think it's that she just has great fans."

"So...you see...she can't go into retirement?" Debbie teased.

"Eventually, she'll have to retire. But I hope that I can keep on acting for quite a long time," Daniel revealed.

In the course of the dinnertime conversation, Daniel reminded everyone that Debbie wanted to be a nurse when she was in high school.

"Well, she didn't have to do that," Jennifer said happily, "But she's managed to take care of all of us ever since I've known her. My son thinks of her as a second mother."

"And how does Michael deal with having a little brother," Daniel wondered aloud.

Jennifer and Debbie looked at each other and laughed.

Daniel immediately asked, "Did I say something funny?"

Carl being the voice of reason thought that he should explain. "Justin and Michael have this love/hate relationship. Justin and Michael created this comic book together called Rage. They are business partners."

"Of course, Justin has a knack for annoying Michael...as only a little brother can," Debbie elaborated with a smile. "Michael's been trying to make Sunshine disappear since the day he arrived on the scene. Add to that, the fact that he's now legally life-partnered to Michael's best friend, and I think you start to get the picture."

"Do I detect a note of jealousy? But I thought you said something about Michael's partner's name was Ben," Daniel asked with some confusion.

"At the moment, Ben and Michael have recently separated. I don't know what's going to happen there," Debbie said sadly. "But that's a long story for another time," she added.

"Everyone in our little family is trying to be there to help Michael through these trying times," Carl added.

"Well, I don't want to add to his troubles," Daniel said softly.

"Danny, I've had a lot of time to think since we talked yesterday. I've even had a chance to talk things out with Carl and Jennifer, and they helped me to see that now is the time to tell Michael the truth," Debbie began.

"What truth?" Daniel asked.

"The WHOLE truth! Starting with you and me back in high school, right on up to the present," Debbie revealed. "Everything..."

"Why would you do that?" Daniel challenged. "Michael believes that he already has a father. I'm content to merely be a family friend."

"There have been enough lies in this family," Carl interrupted. "It's time to lift the veil, as they say on stage. It's time for the truth. I can't tell you what will happen when everything is revealed, but I agree with Debbie that now is the time for everything to happen."

"Danny, our son lives in a fantasy world of superheroes. I think part of the reason is because he has a fantasy-father, and that fantasy-father was made into a larger than life hero," Debbie began.

"Oh, I don't know about that..." Daniel questioned. "You gave him a father he could be proud of, so it makes sense that he would idolize his father."

"The problem is, THAT fantasy-father never existed...in spite of the fact that his shrine rests on the mantle in the living room," Debbie quietly confessed. "THAT father never existed, but Michael's father has always been very much alive, and never given the chance to be a father to him...because of me," Debbie added softly.

"But what about your fears?" Daniel reminded her.

"Last weekend, I had to sit by and watch my son's fantasies cost him everything that he treasured in this world. I had to watch him fight and argue to protect a fantasy that dated back to his childhood. And as I watched, I had to accept most of the blame for his predicament," Debbie said with emotion, for this was a hard admission for her to make.

"I'm afraid that I don't understand," Daniel said softly.

"Danny, since Michael was 14, he and Brian Kinney have been best friends. A 14-year-old Brian said that they would probably be two old queens living in Palm Springs. For Brian it was an off handed remark...for Michael it was a promise of a future together. So Michael feels betrayed when 20 plus years later, his best friend made a legal, life commitment to Justin," Debbie explained. "He's been virtually sulking for almost two weeks."

"I don't understand why he would hold onto a childhood promise so tenaciously," Daniel said, almost as if talking to himself.

"You see his partner, Ben, is HIV positive. Although Ben isn't sick, and we all hope that he will be around for a very long time, the childhood promise seemed to have been Michael's way of coping with the unthinkable," Carl explained.

"Now I see. I can sort of understand that, I too have lost many friends to AIDS. I think I'm beginning to better understand things," Daniel acknowledged softly. "It's a way to give himself a future."

"There's more...." Debbie added softly.

"What more could there be?" Daniel asked pointedly.

"I think Michael has this big hole in his heart because he didn't grow up with a father," Debbie admitted. "I should have found a way to tell both of you about one another over the years."

"Why didn't you?" Daniel finally asked, without any malice in his tone. He asked the question that was on everyone's lips. "I understand why you may not have told him in the beginning since I had left town. I'll even buy into the fact that you needed to give Michael a father he could be proud of, so you didn't tell him while he was growing up. But Michael's been a grown man for some time now...did he really need the fantasy to continue?" he candidly asked.

"Michael is still my baby. We've been so close...the two musketeers...he and I. We're pretty much all that each other has had," Debbie admitted.

Then she cast a look over at Jennifer.

As the two exchanged looks, Debbie's demeanor changed before she continued. "That's not completely true," she admitted. "I've had Michael's love all to myself...for all these years. Let's face it, I was a selfish bitch, and I didn't want to share him...with anyone," she added sadly.

"That's what a mother does," Jennifer said, trying to make things better for Debbie. "You look out for your kids."

"But I can see that over-protected him. I believed that Michael could do no wrong. So, in his entire life, he never had to take responsibility for anything that he ever did. I could always find someone to blame," Debbie admitted.

"You mean like Brian," Jennifer asked pointedly.

"For a long time, he was such an asshole and the perfect villain," Debbie replied. "Then blaming him just became habit," she added softly with some remorse. "What I did wasn't right. I can see that now. It wasn't right for Michael...it wasn't fair to Brian either."

"But I don't understand..." Daniel interjected.

"Michael never had a father to teach him right from wrong. He never learned to accept responsibility. He doesn't understand so much about life. Michael doesn't understand the things that only a father can teach," Debbie continued to point out. "I deprived of him of the opportunity to learn many important life lessons...and so much more."

"Debbie honey..." Carl tried to interrupt.

"No Carl, let me be honest here! I know that Michael has to deal with a lot having a mother who's as loud and as outrageous as me. That's why it was so important that he had a father he could be proud of," Debbie argued.

"And I could never be that," Daniel agreed softly

"Hold it you two," Carl interrupted. "You're both wrong! Kids don't know anything about parents and shame. All a kid knows is love. Michael isn't ashamed of you Debbie...he genuinely loves you. And I bet if he'd known that Daniel was his father, he would have loved and been proud of him too. A famous drag queen for a father, how cool is that!" he couldn't resist gushing. "But even more than that, he might have had a father who loved him...even if that father wasn't around all the time."

"But...." Daniel tried to interrupt, but Carl wasn't finished.

"We already know that doesn't matter! Look at Brian and Gus...for god sake! Brian isn't around all the time, but he is very much there for Gus...and Gus is crazy about Brian...you know that. So if that was the reason that you've kept the secret all these years, I think you were gravely mistaken," Carl pointed out.

Jennifer thought it was time for her to intervene here. "Debbie, don't be so hard on yourself. No parent is perfect. Every parent makes mistakes. Every parent does only the best that they can...then hopes that their kid is still speaking to them when they grow up," she said. "No one knows that better than me. If you hadn't been there when Justin needed you, I don't know what would have happened to him."

"Sunshine was easy," Debbie admitted. "He was also smart and strong and stubborn and determined. He showed us all what a little twink can do with tenacity and intelligence on his side...maybe because he had a father when it mattered...even if he and Craig had problems later on in his life. I want that for my son. I want him to have a chance...even at this late date in his life," Debbie argued. "I want Michael to get to know his father."

"Debbie, you realize that even if everything goes perfectly, there is no guarantee that anything will change for Michael. Now he's a grown man. He is who he is," Daniel suggested.

"I know that. And I realize that I may lose my son in the process. Michael will find out that I've lied to him his whole life. That's going to be a hard thing for him to forgive. But I'm willing to make this sacrifice, so that he has a chance at some kind of future," Debbie continued. "Things have to change for him, or he will be miserable for the rest of his life."

"And what do you expect me to do?" Daniel asked.

"I have no expectations. You have known for four years that Michael was your son. I asked you not to jeopardize my relationship with him, and you honored my wishes. Now you're free to acknowledge your son, and to form a relationship with him...if you want to and if he'll let you. This won't be easy. Michael is stubborn. You and I have both lied to him...each in our own ways. All we can do now is tell him the truth, and then wait and see what comes next," Debbie confirmed.

"Daniel, we're here to do whatever we can to help. We want to be here for both you and Michael. My question is, are you up for all this?" Carl asked.

"Part of the reason that I came back to live in Pittsburgh was because of Michael. We liked each other when we met years ago. I figured if he already had a father...albeit a deceased one...he didn't need another. So I moved back here in hopes that I could merely be his friend. I had no reason to hope for anything more. It would have been enough," Daniel explained.

"You said when we first met that you were estranged from your family, and you hoped to come back and mend fences," Jennifer reminded him. "You were talking about Michael, weren't you?"

"You said that?" Debbie interrupted before Daniel could answer Jennifer's question.

"Yes, I was talking about Michael. But I never expected the truth would come out. I'm ready to take the next step with him...whatever that happens to be...no matter how difficult a task it turns out to be...or how long it takes. I only hope that in the end, Michael and I can at least be friends," Daniel admitted.

"You've got a good attitude," Jennifer commented.

"How do you plan on breaking the truth to him?" Daniel asked.

"I have no fucking idea!" Debbie admitted with a laugh. "But I've made the decision to tell him as soon as possible. That's all I can promise. Fate will have to handle things from there."

"Fate!" Daniel said. "My constant companion and oldest friend..."

"I definitely understand what you mean," Carl added. "I admit...she's my constant companion as well."

"Now that that's all resolved, how about dessert?" Debbie asked. "That box looked very familiar...did you bring cannoli from Castore's?"

Daniel couldn't resist one of his laughs. "Of course, I couldn't resist. I remembered that it used to be your favorite," he teased.

"It still is," Carl confirmed. "But she won't allow me to bring it in the house. Something about her girlish figure," he teased.

"She has nothing to worry about," Daniel confirmed with a smile.

Jennifer and Carl smiled as they remembered how hard Debbie had worked over the years to gain her svelte appearance.

Debbie served dessert and as everyone took their first taste, Jennifer and Carl understood why this dessert was one of Debbie's secret passions.

"Okay, Jennifer, since it's obvious that you don't get to see drag queens, in performance very often," Daniel now teased. "Why don't you come to see one my shows over the weekend...as my guest of course," Daniel offered. "This is your chance to see Divina up close," he teased.

Jennifer blushed, "Me?" she asked with some surprise.

"Of course, you..." Daniel responded.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," Debbie agreed. "I'll admit dealing with Brian Kinney all these years, I'm sure that isn't much that you haven't seen," she added with a laugh.

"But I'm sure seeing a female impersonator of Divina's stature, would be a unique experience," Carl teased. "I'll admit that I wouldn't mind seeing that myself."

"Then why don't all three of you would come to see my show? You'll be my special guests. After all, there's no telling if Divina will ever get to perform in town again," Daniel suggested with a laugh.

"What do you think?" Debbie asked, looking from Carl to Jennifer.

"I think we could all use a night out," Carl suggested, leaning back in his chair. "Wait until Em hears about this. He's going to be so jealous. I have to wait for just the right moment to let it slip," he gushed. "Oh I'm going to enjoy this."

"Carl!" Debbie and Jennifer said in unison and then couldn't resist laughing. Debbie knew that Carl had a wicked sense of humor, but Jennifer was completely surprised that Carl would plan to tease Emmett this way.

Daniel smiled as he watched the thoughts of his dinner companions play our across their faces. "I'll leave your names at the door," he added.

He was already anticipating the moment that looked out and saw these friends at the audience. He also thought about actually hearing Debbie's laugh during a performance, instead of simply imagining it all in his mind. Yes, he was definitely looking forward this.

Jennifer and Carl and Debbie discussed the idea of going to show a little more. Then they agreed that attending Saturday's performance was best. The more they talked, the more excited they became. They were all looking forward to the weekend now.

After dessert, Jennifer decided to make it an early evening, so she said her goodnights leaving the three friends, still talking late into the evening.

Eventually, Daniel joined Carl and Debbie for one final glass of wine...and then he too was ready to call it a night. He said his goodbyes on the front porch and promised that the three of them would stay in touch.

When his cab arrived, Daniel finally left with one final wave goodbye.

As the cab drove away into the night, a lone figure had watched this parting scene at his mother's house.

Chapter 15 –An Unexpected Visitor

Late Thursday Night...(Day 60)

"That was a great dinner. I'm really quite stuffed. And I must say that I find that I really do like Daniel," Carl commented once they'd returned inside, after saying goodbye to Danny Devore.

"I'm glad. I must admit after seeing him here, I can't believe what I've done for all these years," Debbie commented with some distress. "I really am just a selfish bitch."

"Debbie honey, don't go there. Nothing is going to be gained by rehashing the past. You need to gather your strength to be able to tell Michael the truth. You can't go back and unmake the decisions of the past. All you can do is move forward from here," Carl suggested, lovingly wrapping his arms around her.

"I know that you're right. It's just that Michael is my baby. It's just that, all these years, it's just been him and me. Now, that's all about to change," she whispered. "No matter, what happens between Danny and Michael, my relationship with my son will be changed forever."

"Somehow, we'll get through this...together," Carl reassured her. "I'm standing right beside you."

"You know Carl, Michael's been so angry at Brian because of the supposed betrayal against their childhood promise. Everyone has tried to tell him that he wasn't being fair. It's as if losing Brian was like losing his father all over again. My son has been trying to avoid losing anyone else that he loves by going into this fantasy world, and he's slipping further and further away from all of us. He's so overcome by anger and grief that he threw away his relationship with Ben in the process."

"As you said, honey, Michael hasn't been himself for a very long time. The news about Brian and Justin was just the last straw."

"Yes, but in this whole fucking messed up family of ours, the news about Brian and Justin is the one shining spot. Then Michael and Lindsay had to try to spoil everything for them. But I must admit that I'm fucking proud of the way Brian has handled things," Debbie pointed out.

Carl couldn't resist teasing, "You mean with him and Justin coming back into town at just this moment?"

"So you don't believe it's a coincidence either, do you?"

"No one has seen or been able to talk to Brian and Justin since dinner two weeks ago. Yet suddenly, here they are, back in town. Of course, you know that Justin can't resist your lemon bars?" Carl added with a smile. "It's all so clear!"

"Ah huh!" Debbie said sarcastically.

"Well?" Carl innocently asked.

"Sunshine knows something. I could see it in his eyes when he looked at me at the Diner. He never could hide anything from me."

"No, I guess not," Carl finally agreed. "But, it's time for us to turn in," he added.

As they were starting up the steps, the phone rang. Carl went back downstairs to answer it. "Hello," he said.

"Carl, it's Linds," the voice on the other end of the line said. "I hope I didn't wake you...I remembered that you and Debbie like to stay up late."

"No Lindsay, we haven't gone to bed yet. You caught us just in time," Carl said with a smile. "I guess you want to talk to Debbie?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind, but it's been good talking to you," Lindsay added.

Carl nodded to Debbie that he was going upstairs. Then, he handed her the phone, so that she could talk to Lindsay.

"Hi Lindsay," Debbie said, taking the phone and settling down on the sofa. "How's my granddaughter?"

"Your granddaughter, as usual, is just fine. She's asleep at the moment, but I know she misses you."

"I miss her too," Debbie said wistfully. "Now tell me, what's on your mind at this late hour?" she asked.

"Melanie and I have to come to Pittsburgh tomorrow. I know that this is short notice, but I was wondering if we could stay with you this weekend?"

"No problem, kiddo, you know that you're always welcome. You know that you didn't even have to ask."

"Thanks Debbie, that makes everything so much easier."

"I think that Brian and Sunshine will be in town too...well, at the mansion anyway. Did you know that?"

"No, they were going to be my next call, but I thought that Brian was in New York on business, and I guess, I just assumed that Justin was there with him."

"No, the story is that Brian had to check in on Kinnetik, and Sunshine had a craving for lemon bars..."

"Well, Debbie, you know how much Justin loves your lemon bars?" Lindsay added with a laugh.

"Ah huh..."

"Let me let you get some rest...Melanie and I will see you sometime tomorrow night. We're not exactly sure about the time that we'll arrive, but we'll call you."

"I'll see you then. Bye," Debbie said as she hung up the phone.

"Carl!" Debbie called out. "Lindsay and Melanie are coming for the weekend."

"That's great honey. That means that we'll have a full house for dinner on Sunday."

"After the last Sunday dinner, I'm not sure that I'm ready for another full house," Debbie mumbled.

Carl now headed back downstairs, "Since when are you not ready to have everyone here for dinner...no matter what happens?" he asked as he settled down on the sofa next to her.

Debbie just shrugged.

"Now will you come up to bed?" Carl insisted, giving her a gentle push to make his point.

"It's been quite a day. I do think that I'm ready for bed."

"And promise me...you're not going to toss and turn all night?"

"Oh sure, like I know what I'll do in my fucking sleep!"

They both laughed at her remark as they headed up the steps again with Debbie in the lead, and Carl following behind her.

There was an unexpected knock on the door. Carl turned to see who was there. As he was walking towards the door, it opened. Carl quickly walked back downstairs to see what was going on and turned on a light.

"Michael?" Carl exclaimed, "What are you doing here at this hour?"

"I came to talk to my mother!" Michael said sternly.

Carl could see that Michael was upset, but under no circumstances was he about to let mother and son talk tonight.

Since at the moment he was in control of events, Carl had every intention for things to stay that way. "It's late, Michael, can't this wait until morning?" he asked.

"Wait until morning! That's easy for you to say. You seemed to have spent a cozy evening here tonight, while I was all alone!" Michael protested.

"Michael, why you don't you stay the night with us? That way, you won't have to be alone tonight, and then you and Debbie can talk in the morning. Why don't you plan on staying for breakfast? It's late, we've all had a really long day," Carl insisted, not giving Michael a chance to argue. "C'mon" you can borrow a pair of my pajamas for the night," he added with a smile.

"But...." Michael tried to protest...but to no avail.

Carl, in the meantime, made sure the front door was locked. Then he put his arm around Michael and led him upstairs.

Debbie was nowhere to be seen.

Carl settled Michael into the guest room and gave him the aforementioned pair of pajamas.

"Can I get you anything else, before I say goodnight?" Carl asked, once again, not giving Michael much of an alternative.

"No Carl, thanks, I'll see you in the morning," Michael said quietly, in defeat.

"Sleep well," Carl added, as he closed the guest room door. He knew that everyone needed a good night's sleep, for tomorrow was going to be an upsetting day.

This wasn't the ending to the night that Michael had planned; he had come there ready to take his mother to task for her years of lying, but instead, he simply prepared for bed.

Michael realized that, at least for tonight, he would not be alone.

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Meanwhile at Kinnetik, Brian had talked to Justin a little earlier and found out that he was deeply engrossed in a painting, so Brian had used the time to finish up a few things at the office.

While Brian was working, his cell phone rang. He checked the caller id and saw that it was Lindsay, so he answered.

"Lindsay? Is everything okay?" he immediately asked, without saying hello.

"Ah...Hi Brian," Lindsay began. She immediately put his mind to rest, "No need to worry, everyone is just fine." Brian let out a sigh of relief.

"Then what's the reason for the call at this late hour. I thought you crazy lesbians went to bed early. Don't tell me you're sleeping alone," he quipped.

"As a matter of fact, I am," Lindsay admitted sadly. "Not that it's any of your business," she added.

"There's no reason to get so testy. Is there trouble in paradise? What else is new?" Brian asked sarcastically.

"Brian, I'm not up for one of your I told you so lectures ," she said pointedly. "I have more important things to discuss with you."

"What now?" Brian asked, already trying to figure out how much this phone call was going to cost him.

"Melanie and I have to come to Pittsburgh tomorrow for counseling. I thought that you were in New York so you'd miss seeing Gus, but Debbie said that you're in town. I was just letting you know that we were coming."

"I see. Isn't it a bit soon for another counseling session. You and Melanie were just here less than two weeks ago?"

"Melanie and I have been having some problems...if you must know..." Lindsay finally admitted.

"So that's why you're sleeping alone? I'm beginning to get the picture."

"Stay out of it, Brian. I just wanted to see if you and Justin had some time to spend with Gus. I know that you're busy, and I know this is short notice, but I was hoping...." Lindsay almost pleaded.

"Call me when you get in. I'll probably be at the office. I'll wait in town for Gus. How are you traveling?"

"This trip was such short notice that we didn't have a chance to get a flight, so I think that we'll be driving this time."

"Do you need me to have Cynthia make last minute reservations for you?"

"Normally, I would take you up on your offer, but I think this time...driving is best. Thanks away. I'll call you as we get close to town."

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow."

Brian closed his phone and pondered the conversation. He looked at his calendar schedule, trying to figure out how he and Gus and Justin could all spend some time together this weekend.

In spite of the fact that they were in Pittsburgh/West Virginia, Justin was still under a really tight painting schedule...a schedule that would probably disappear if Justin and Gus were left alone together...even in Justin's studio.

Brian smiled as he thought of the many scenes he had witnessed between his partner and son together in Justin's studio. Gus liked to read to Justin while he painted. Still Brian was determined that nothing would interfere with Justin on this trip.

Brian rechecked his calendar again and realized that he too had a really busy weekend scheduled. Then, he smiled to himself as he realized that it was unavoidable...this weekend, he was going to have a six-year-old assistant.

And as Brian made the last key strokes on his computer and gathered up his things, he had to smile. He was on his way home to Justin, and Gus was coming for a visit.

Chapter 16 – Tempers Flare

Friday Morning...(Day 61)

It had been a long time since Michael had spent the night in this house. He was now a grown man with a home and children of his own. He really didn't think that he needed his mother. Yet, there had been something comforting about sleeping back in here last night. In a lot of ways, this house still felt like home.

Michael lay there listening to the sounds of the house. Things seemed relatively quiet, so he guessed that everyone was already downstairs. He slowly rolled out of bed to take a shower.

Standing under the steady stream of the water, Michael reflected on his life. He was definitely at a place that he didn't want to be. So much in his life just wasn't working out. The biggest problem was that he was alone, and he missed Ben.

Michael had hoped that Brian would fix things with Ben, so that he and Ben could get back together. Now...he just didn't know what to do.

As Michael stepped out of the shower, he realized that he had other matters to take care of before he could think about what he could do about Ben. He first had to deal with his mother and her lifetime of lies.

It had been quite a while since Michael had seen Debbie. He'd been angry with her for being so happy and supportive of Brian and Justin's new legal status, at a time when he felt so betrayed. But after talking with Brian, it was obvious that if he wanted any answers to the questions that were plaguing him about his own history, he was going to have to end his silent treatment of Debbie and finally talk to her.

Michael finally managed to get dressed. He took a deep breath and headed downstairs. His day was about to begin.

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Carl and Debbie were already at the breakfast table when Michael finally came down to join them.

"Michael!" Debbie gushed on seeing her son. Carl told me that you spent the night. How did you sleep?" she casually asked.

At that moment she had such mixed feelings. She was glad to finally see her son after two weeks, after all he was still "her baby", and no mother wanted to think of her child in pain. And yet, Debbie knew that events had already been set in motion that were bound to make matters worse before they got better...if they ever did.

"I guess that I was really tired. I haven't been sleeping very well," Michael mindlessly answered.

"It's good to have you here," Debbie whispered quietly as she poured him a glass of juice and handed it to him.

Michael simply said, "Thanks."

"I heard that Carl shared his pajamas with you," Debbie teased, hoping to keep the conversation light, at least until everyone had coffee and the caffeine had a chance to kick in.

"Yes he did. Flannel...Carl?" Michael teased with a laugh. "I can't believe it!"

"You thought I was Brian, and you were going to get designer silk pajamas to sleep in? Think again!" Carl teased back

Everyone shared a laugh. It relieved a little bit of tension.

"What would you like for breakfast?" Debbie cautiously asked. "Carl and I are eating heated Cinnamon rolls. I was also going to scramble some eggs, would you like some?"

"Sure," Michael finally agreed.

Debbie turned around and started preparing the food. "Lindsay called last night. It seems that she and Mel are coming in tonight," she added, as she was breaking the eggs.

"It seems like they were just here. But at least I'll get to spend time with my little Honeybunch," Michael gushed. "There was so much going on the last time that they visited here. I hardly got a chance to see my daughter all," he complained.

Debbie was about to ask him whose fault that was, but she held her tongue and merely continued preparing breakfast. She removed the heated Cinnamon rolls from the oven.

When the eggs were done, she added them to everyone's plate. Next she made sure that everyone had everything they needed, including a full cup of coffee. Then she was able to sit down and joined Carl and Michael at the breakfast table.

Everyone began to eat in silence.

Carl knew that Michael had something pressing on his mind; after all he had arrived completely unannounced last night. And from the look on his face then, Carl knew that Michael was on a mission, and he knew that patience was not one of Michael's strong suits.

Debbie also wondered what was on Michael's mind. They didn't have to wait very long to find out.

"Ma, I guess Carl told you that I came here to talk to you last night," Michael began.

Debbie looked at her son, thinking it was pretty obvious that he arrived last night for some reason. She started to wonder what her son was thinking, but once again, she held her tongue.

Instead she innocently answered, "Yes, he did. He said it was quite late."

"I would have come earlier, but it appears that you had company for the evening," Michael accused.

"Yes," Carl answered, "Jennifer came over for dinner."

"Jennifer! Why in the world was she here?" Michael challenged. He immediately thought of Justin and wondered would he EVER be able to escape the reminders of Brian and Justin as a legal couple.

"She...was...invited," Debbie insisted, desperately trying to figure out where this conversation was going. "She told me that Brian and Justin were in town, more or less, but then I already knew that. Sunshine can't resist my lemon squares," she gushed.

"There seem to be a lot of things that Justin can't resist," Michael shot back.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Debbie asked, glaring at him.

"Never mind," Michael responded. "It's not important."

"I wish you would remember that Sunshine is your business partner. You wouldn't have the comic book without him," Debbie reminded Michael.

"How could I ever forget?" Michael answered sarcastically.

"What's your problem, Michael? Something appears to have crawled up your ass and is gnawing away. Why don't you tell me what's bothering you?" Debbie asked.

"How can you ask me something like that?" Michael challenged, dropping his fork with a thud onto his plate. He then looked directly at Debbie, making it clear that he wanted answers even if the questions were unasked at this point.

Then Michael realized that Carl was still in the room, and he hesitated. "I'm sorry, Carl. This is between Ma and me, so I guess this can wait until you leave for work," he added.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not going anywhere, Michael. I'm planning on staying right here to find out, with Debbie, what's bothering you. That's what you do when you're family."

"Family...sure!" Michael quipped.

"Okay Michael! Out with it! It's obvious that no one will get to enjoy breakfast until you tell us what's on your mind. So, you little asshole, start talking!" Debbie demanded.

"Ma, I know that John Michael Novotny isn't my father," Michael immediately proclaimed.

Debbie and Carl both froze at this proclamation. Then Debbie quickly recovered.

"Where in the world did that come from?" she asked with total surprise. "What do you mean that he isn't your father?"

"The government released military records going back to before the Revolutionary War or something. Anyway, they're now loaded on the Internet at the Ancestry.com. Hunter and I checked out at the website." Michael revealed.

"So?" Debbie said, not getting Michael's point and wondering where this conversation was going.

Before Michael could explain, Carl interrupted with a smile.

"So that's why Hunter was asking about my military service and about Carl, Jr.'s service too. He never said anything about what he found," Carl commented with a smile. "What did he see?"

"He found your records and your son's too. But we also found the records for John Michael Novotny, my father."

"Oh?" she asked.

"You were right, Ma, he was a bona fide war hero. There was an account of his being awarded the Purple Heart. It matched practically word for word with what you've told me all my life," Michael said harshly.

"Then, what's the problem?" Debbie asked.

"The problem, Ma, is that there's nothing in the military records of John Michael Novotny to show that he was married or had any children!" Michael shouted. "Now!" he pouted, "What do you have to say to that?"

"C'mon Michael, sometimes in a time of war, records don't always get updated," Carl pointed out. "You know that!"

"I took that possibility into account," Michael acknowledged. "But the records also said that he had been serving in Vietnam for more than a year before I was born. There were no records of him being on leave or anything," he added, looking to Debbie for answers.

"I see," Debbie said, taking a sip of her juice to steady herself, for she knew this was about to get ugly.

"Yes, Mother. So if he served in Vietnam for that amount of time without leave... he couldn't possibly be my father. But I'm sure that you have an explanation!" he shouted.

"Michael...." Debbie said softly, a rare tone for her to use.

"What happened, Mother, was it too hard to wait for your husband to return from the war. Did you get lonely at night? Couldn't you wait for your husband to simply die in the war?" Michael asked accusatorily.

"Michael, that's enough!" Carl insisted, but Michael wasn't finished.

"So what did you do, pass me off has as your husband's son when really I was the bastard son of your midnight lover?" Michael continued to accuse.

"Michael, I'm not going to tell you again!" Carl insisted even more strongly, standing this time to make his point.

"And why was he in the war in the first place. Why wasn't he home with you instead of in some jungle battlefield? From the stories that I've heard, getting married was enough to give you a draft deferment back in those days. So why was he fighting in the first place. Why didn't he come home once he found out he had a son?" Michael continued to challenge.

"Michael, you're young...you just don't know a lot about war," Carl pointed out. "War isn't the way it's described in the comic books that you read."

"I know that, Carl!" Michael responded to Carl and then immediately returned his attention back to his mother. "What happened, Mother? Did John Novotny re-enlist in the war to get away from you?" he practically spat out the accusation.

Carl had heard enough. No matter what Debbie had done, she didn't deserve to be talked to in this manner by her son.

So in one swift motion, Carl stood up again and reached over and grabbed Michael. He shook him a bit to get his attention. "Michael, you're talking to your mother! Let's not forget that! I understand that you're upset, but I'm not going to put up with much more from you...do I make myself clear?" he said sternly, before finally releasing Michael.

"I'm sorry, Carl." Michael finally said. "I guess I'm just angry. Ma, you had to know that the man, whose picture is on our mantel, was not my father. You've lied to me all these years!" he continued to accuse. "What happened, Mother? Don't you know who my father really is?"

Debbie stood up and walked over to the sink, putting distance between her and Michael. At this point she too was ready to slap him too.

Instead, she turned to face him. "Listen to me, you ungrateful, little shit, I know exactly who your father is. Of course, I know!" she answered.

But Michael wasn't finished yet. "How did you square a lover with your husband?" Michael accused, never letting up in his anger.

"It was war, Michael..." Carl said, trying to lower the temper flares in the room.

Carl's comment had little effect on Michael.

Debbie finally took a deep breath.

She decided the charade had gone on long enough, so she finally said, "You know Michael, all that I wanted to do was give you a father that you could be proud of, a war hero who died in Vietnam. John Michael Novotny served as your father for the last 35 years. You lived all this time, knowing that your father loved you! Did you think about that?" she mindlessly added, trying to add calm reasoning to an explosive situation.

"I'm surprised that you even bothered to tell him about me...you know with the war and all," Michael fired back.

"Your whole life you've believed that your father loved you," she tried to add.

"Loved me? What did you tell him? I'm not even sure, he knew that I existed!" Michael challenged with re-ignited anger.

"He didn't," Debbie finally said softly. "John Michael Novotny never knew that you existed. Fuck, he never knew that I existed either, for that matter. As you once so accurately put it...he was simply a war hero,who happened to die in Vietnam, two weeks after you were born."

"What are you saying?" Michael was now shouting.

"I never knew John Michael Novotny. I selected his name from the newspaper, from the list of the war dead. I found his picture. I purchased The Purple Heart at a pawnshop. I erected the shrine for a fallen hero on the mantel in the living room. I legally changed my name to Novotny. I added that name to your birth certificate." Debbie said, almost as if by rote.

"What! How can this be? You've told me this...this story all these years!" Michael tried to challenge.

"It doesn't matter what I've said in the past. I, just now, told you the absolute truth. Now, you know the secrets that I've carried for all these years," Debbie quietly admitted.

"How could you have kept a secret like that?" Michael shouted. "You, who have always put so much stock in the truth?" he challenged.

"In the beginning, I had a small baby to protect. I had a son, who I dearly loved, and who I wanted more than anything in this world...I had a son to raise. I was 17 years old, Michael, and I was scared. Sometimes when you're scared, you do things you wouldn't do otherwise...consider that!" Debbie explained.

"How could you keep the secret so long? Why did you never tell me the truth?" Michael demanded to know. "You're my mother. I never expected you to lie to me," he added with tears, now streaming down his face. "You were the one person I thought I could trust!" he shouted.

Carl felt the need to step in here, "Michael, listen to me. When you're young, you sometimes do foolish things. As you get older, you come to realize what you've done, but sometimes there is never a way to go back and correct things. Sometimes...you can't just take it back," he patiently explained.

"You knew about all this, didn't you?" Michael asked, looking directly at Carl.

"Your mother told me everything," Carl confidently admitted.

"And you're still here?" Michael challenged, starting to stand up and walk around. "How could you? How could you accept this?"

"Of course, I'm still here! Don't be ridiculous! For me, this changes nothing!" Carl pointed out to him. "Your mother and I are committed to each other!"

"You're a fool, Carl. No one honors commitments anymore. Look at Ben and me!" Michael exclaimed.

Carl quickly responded, "Your mother and I are committed to each other. I'm not going anywhere," he reconfirmed in case Michael didn't' hear him the first time. "And, no matter what happened between you and Ben, commitment is a lesson that you still need to understand," he added. "Now sit down and get yourself together! I know that you're upset, but I'm only going to put up with so much from you! Your mother has loved you and taken care of you...since even before you were born. She has made sacrifices for you. I'm sure that once you have a chance to think things over, you'll realize that. But in the meantime, pull yourself together and listen to her!" he demanded. "I'm not going to tell you this again!"

Michael had just been reprimanded.

He knew that he could push and demand with his mother, but Carl was an entirely different matter. So once again, he took his seat like a penitent child and waited for whatever was to happen next.

Chapter 17 – Listen, There's More

A Few Moments Later...(Day 61)

"Exactly what am I supposed to listen to?" Michael asked with some hostility in his voice, after being reprimanded by Carl for his behavior.

"You want to know about your father?" Debbie asked. "Do you really want to know about him?"

"Do you know who he is?" Michael quietly asked, now with renewed interest.

"Yes..." Debbie said in a whisper.

"Tell me!" Michael insisted.

Debbie let out a deep sigh and then began, "When I was in high school, I fell in love with this wonderful person with this wicked sense of humor. We dated for a while. You were the result. Then he thought that he might be gay...as it turned out, he was right," she quietly revealed.

"He was gay...so that's why you've always been so understanding of Lindsay's feelings for Brian?" Michael said upon reflection.

"What? No...what I understand is that there comes a time when you have to move on...I'm not sure that Lindsay ever has," Debbie quietly responded.

"Then you must have understood why she chose Brian to be Gus' father. You always seemed to be so understanding," Michael pointed out. "You must know what she must be going through. You must know how she feels about Brian," he rambled. "You must understand why, just like me, she too feels betrayed by this thing that Brian did with Justin."

"Are you talking about Brian legalized partnership with Justin?" Debbie asked incredulously. She couldn't believe that this topic came up again in the middle of this discussion that they were having, for she couldn't see any similarity between her life and the unresolved feelings that Michael and Lindsay have for Brian.

"Of course, you must understand why Lindsay and I feel so betrayed!" Michael pointed out. He felt that with what had been said between them, Debbie now understood how he felt.

"What I know is that you and Lindsay both need to stop trying to hold on Brian! It's time for both of you to move on with your lives," Debbie argued in response. "I'm sure Brian would have told you the same thing...if you'd bothered to ask."

"Okay you two...let's not lose focus here!" Carl suggested, interrupting what was clearly about to become an argument.

Both Michael and Debbie looked over at Carl. Then they both nodded their agreement. Once again, Michael took up the discussion getting back to the pressing issue of his father.

"So why didn't you ever go to my father. Was he married?" Michael asked, obviously forgetting what Debbie had just told him moments before.

"No, he wasn't married. He was gay, Michael." Debbie said softly. "And shortly after we were together, he left town..."

"What kind of man, gay or straight, leaves a woman when she's pregnant?" Michael challenged what he was just being told, once again allowing anger to enter his voice.

"A man with a mission...a man with his life all planned. He left town to seek his destiny. He never knew about you. I never had a chance to tell him," Debbie finally admitted. "Then, he was no longer necessary, for I had constructed the lie of the war hero father for you," she added. "Life just went on."

"What do you mean that he was no longer necessary? What about me?" Michael complained again. "He was sure necessary as far as I was concerned!" he continued. Then he took a deep breath. "So you're telling me that somewhere out in the world is a man, who is really my father! And he's been out there all this time. You're telling me that I could have had a father all this time, and you wouldn't let it happen because of some lie you put together when I was a baby. Over the years, you knew how much I wanted a father. You knew how important it was to me growing up. Yet you never once said a word. How could you do that? How could you let me suffer like that?" he shouted. "How could you do this to me?"

"He was gone, Michael. He was never going to be around," Debbie reminded him.

"You don't know that! He might have been. You didn't even give him a choice! He might not have been a real father like I am to JR, but he might have at least been a drop in dad like Brian is to Gus," Michael shouted.

Debbie didn't like the comparison, but she knew that now was not the time to challenge her son's biased perceptions about parenting. She realized that he was too upset to think straight or to listen to reason.

"I did what I thought was best at the time. I gave you a father that you could be proud of. And in that pride for your father, you found pride in yourself. You already had a mother that is outrageous, so I chose to give you a father that you didn't have to make excuses for," Debbie said quietly in her own defense. The tears were now starting to slide down her cheeks.

"And who are you to make that kind of choice for me?" Michael shouted.

"I did what I thought was best!" Debbie argued.

"Best for whom, Mother?" Michael argued.

"I thought...." Debbie began in her own defense.

"Never mind, I think we know the answer to that! So what happened to my father? Is he still alive? Does he know about me?" Michael now demanded to know.

"He didn't know about you at first. Like I said, by the time I found out I was pregnant, he had already left town. He went in search of his date with destiny," Debbie revealed.

"And did he find it?" Michael asked quietly.

"He found fame and fortune. He's had a magnificent career on the stage," Debbie continued. "He's...."

Michael mindlessly interrupted, "He's an internationally known drag queen, isn't he?"

"What?" she reacted with total shock.

"Divina Devore is my father, isn't she?"

"What?" Debbie asked.

"Divina Devore is my father, isn't she?" Michael repeated.

"Yes," Debbie finally whispered.

"Why didn't you ever tell me?" Michael asked.

"Funny, your father said those exact same words to me four years ago, when he figured things out about you. He simply asked, Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"So he never knew about me before then?"

"Four years ago, when Divina came to town. Danny took one look at you during your visits with him, and he immediately knew the truth. He said that it was like looking in a mirror many years ago. He recognized immediately that you looked alike," Debbie revealed. "That was the first time I had seen Danny Devore since high school. It had been 31 years."

"So that's why you acted so weird back then," Michael remembered, "But I asked him point blank if he was my father?"

"And what did he tell you?" she asked.

"He said that when he's on stage people believe that he's Divina Devore, not because he's a great female impersonator, but because they want to believe," Michael relayed, "I didn't know what to believe at the time."

"I see...." Debbie said softly, understanding so clearly what must have happened, and why the subject was so quickly dropped between her and Michael years ago. In his confusion, Michael had just chosen to deny the whole episode ever happened.

Michael continued mindless speaking, "But I've had time to think in the last four years. Somewhere along the line, I must have realized that I was half Italian and half drag queen. I said it to Brian and Em, on occasion, over the years. I guess somewhere along the way I must have figured it out," he calmly revealed.

"Then let me now confirm it for you. Let me finally put your mind to rest. Danny Devore (alias Divina Devore) is your father. I didn't tell you before because I wanted you to have a father you could be proud of," Debbie acknowledged.

"I don't understand you!" Michael challenged. "I've spent my entire life among drag queens and trannies. You always taught me that differences didn't matter. Was this another life lesson that was a lie, Mother? Just like when you told me that if you fall in love with someone who's HIV positive, it really didn't matter. At least you told me that until I fell in love with Ben," he continued to argue. "You were my primary teacher. You taught me everything I know. I can't believe that it's all been a lie. All these years...a lie! I could have had a father! I could have had a father...when I really needed one!"

"It's not too late!" Debbie pleaded.

"What are you talking about?" Michael asked.

"Danny is moving back here to Pittsburgh. Jennifer is trying to help him find a house. He moved back here hoping to build some kind of relationship with you. He'd already made this decision before we even talked last night. He knows that you're a grown man...not a little child. He just liked you, and he wants to get to know you," she revealed.

"He had that opportunity four years ago! He could have claimed me THEN as his son, but he didn't. He left me instead with a lot of questions," Michael pointed out, once again letting his hostilities flare.

Debbie got quiet for a moment. "He did that for me. Back then, I asked him not to confirm it," she revealed. "But last night when he came to dinner, we all agreed that it was time that you knew the whole truth," she added.

"So that's why I saw him getting into a cab in front of the house, last night?" Michael reflected on what he saw.

"Why now?" Michael asked "Why at this point?"

"It's time for the truth to come out," Debbie revealed. "You and your father deserve a chance to get to know each other."

Carl finally decided that it was time for him to step in. "Yes, I had a chance to get to talk to him, to get to know him. I can honestly say that I liked him. We have a female impersonator in the family....a world famous one at that! But even more, Michael, your father is a very interesting man...even when the Divina persona is removed. I can honestly say that I liked Daniel Devore."

"So you checked him out, huh, Carl? Once a cop always a cop," Michael teased. "This is just like the Justice League.

"The who?" Carl asked.

"Never mind." Michael responded, shaking his head. Then Michael looked right at Debbie. "Mother, how could you lie to me all those years? How could you do it? I thought that I knew you as I knew no one else on earth," Michael professed. "As it turns out that I never knew you at all!"

Michael finally stood up again and started walking away from the table. He immediately felt the need to put distance between himself and Debbie.

"Michael wait!" Debbie called out.

Michael finally stopped walking and turned to face his mother, without saying a word. He just looked at her. Finally, he could let his anger and disappointment subside long enough to respond.

"Mother, I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive you for what you've done to me," Michael began. "You've robbed me of everything that was important. My life could have been so different," he added. "I know you thought that what you did was right. Let me tell you now...it wasn't! You took everything from me! You made my whole life into a lie!"

And with that, Michael started walking for the front door. "I have to go, it's time to open the store," he added. "Thank you again, Carl, for the use of your pajamas."

"Anytime," Carl responded with a smile.

"Goodbye!" Michael said, as he was going out of the door, slamming the door shut behind him in anger.

When Michael left, Carl wrapped Debbie in his arms. At that moment Debbie accepted that she and Michael may never be close again. She had been wrestling with this knowledge for several days now, and finally the truth had now been revealed.

Debbie started to cry with the 36 years of pain she had hidden for so long. There were so many emotions for her to deal with all coming at the same time.

From Debbie's perspective, Michael had a chance a different life then the one he'd been living. Debbie also decided to give herself some time to grieve the loss of her son. She knew that she had to just keep busy and get through life...one day at a time.

Carl tried to imagine what Debbie was going through, but at this moment. He was clearly there for her, but he understood that he could do nothing to help...except hold her while she cried.

Chapter 18 – Let's Have Lunch

Early Friday Afternoon...(Day 61)

"Michael, aren't you going to join Teddy and me for lunch?" Emmett asked as he swirled into the comic book store.

"Afraid not, Em, I've got a lot to do today," Michael responded, trying to focus on the papers in front of him and failing miserably. "I've got a lot on my mind," he added softly.

"What's going on, Sweetie? You don't look too good."

"How could SHE do it, Em? How could she lie to me?" Michael finally asked, without offering any background information or any other explanation.

"Michael, what are you talking about? Who lied to you?" Emmett cautiously asked.

"Haven't you talked to my mother?"

"No, I've been at Drew's. I just dropped him off at the airport. Now are you going to tell me what's going on?" Emmett demanded.

Michael took a deep breath and relayed everything to Emmett. Michael confirmed that Divina Devore, world famous drag queen, was his father. Then Michael continued to rant about the fact that Debbie had lied to him his whole life.

Emmett was the calm voice of reason. "Michael I heard everything that you just told me. You've got to admit that there's nothing here that you didn't know or at least suspected four years ago. The only difference is that now you know the truth. You really are 'half Italian and half drag queen' just as you always suspected," Em reminded him with a smile.

Michael let out a deep sigh. He knew that Emmett was right. "Then why do I feel so betrayed?"

"What do you mean?"

"Everybody has betrayed me. Brian broke his lifelong promise. Ben ignored his commitment to me and left. My mother was always supposed to be there for me. And now she betrayed me too, with a lifetime of lies."

"Honey, I know that you have had a lot of changes to deal with these last few weeks. But there are certain realities that you're just going to have to find some way to come to terms with. Brian and Justin are legally a couple forever. That's not going to change, so whatever promises you THINK that Brian once made...they don't matter anymore. You've got to move on," Emmett suggested. "I'm sure that Brian will tell you the same thing."

"He did...." Michael quietly revealed. "He stopped by a few days ago, and we had a chance to talk. And you're right, he did tell me that."

"So then you know that none of that matters anymore?" Emmett continued to push, hoping that Michael would see his point.

Michael refused to let go and just moved on to his next issue.

"And Ben's gone...now I'm all alone. He didn't even stop to remember his commitment to me when he packed up and left. How can he so easily forget that we're married?"

"Michael, Ben just got tired. You had complained and whined about Brian and Justin for two days. We all know that Ben is a patient man, but Sweetie he obviously has his limits. And what you did was really extreme. You demanded that Brian leave Justin and be there for you. Ben just reached a point where he couldn't take it any more."

"I want Ben back, Em. I asked Brian to help, but he said that there was nothing he could do. So what am I supposed to do now?"

"Give Ben some time. But Michael, you've got to change how you think about Ben and his illness. You made it seem like you couldn't wait for him to die so that you could be with Brian. I'm sure Ben saw all that as the ultimate betrayal. It's going to take a long time for him to get over this."

"But I've been there for him. He knows that I love him. He knows that I want him and Hunter and me to be a real family with JR. He has to know."

"I'm sure he does. But when you're dealing with all the things that Ben is...sometimes love isn't enough. Sometimes actions just get to be too much. That's what I think happened," Emmett suggested. "For the moment, there is nothing that you can do about Ben either. I don't know if it's possible to get him back. But either way, you have to find a way to go on living...just like you did after your breakup with David. I know that things seem hard for you right now, but you're going to survive this too. You just have to give yourself some time," he reiterated.

Once again, Michael just moved on to his next gripe.

"How am I going to survive all this when now I know that my mother has been lying to me all these years?" Michael argued.

"Michael, parents aren't perfect. Think of everything that Debbie has done for you. Weigh that against her lie. Then, you're going to have to find a way to forgive Debbie. From what you've told me, she didn't keep the truth from you to hurt you. She told you a lie back when you were a baby because she thought it was the right thing to do. She was only 17. Think back to when you were 17. Think of some of the things from back then that you regret now. Think about the fact that you had Brian. She had no one to guide her. She was alone with a baby to care for. She believed that what she did was right," Emmett argued.

"I'm NEVER going to forgive her! First she sides with Brian and Justin instead of me. Then I find out she's lied to me my entire life. What's the point?"

"The point is that no matter what happened in the past, you've found out that you have a living, breathing father. This is something that you've always dreamed about. You're going to have to focus on that. You would have never had a chance for that unless Debbie finally told you the truth." Emmett argued. "You know that Debbie could have simply let the lie continue. Give yourself some time to adjust to everything!"

Michael finally sighed. He really wanted to believe what Emmett was telling him. It was just that at this moment, he was consumed with so much anger and hurt that he just couldn't grasp anything more.

"I know that you're probably right," Michael finally said with a deep sigh, even if he didn't truly believe things yet. "The only good news I've had lately is that Mel and Linds are coming here tonight, so I'll get to spend time with my little Honeybunch," he gushed.

"See, as my Aunt Lula used to say, every dark cloud has a silver lining," Emmett said with a smile.

"Your Aunt Lula huh?" Michael asked with a smile. "She seems to have something to say about everything," he teased.

"Yes, if it hadn't been for her and her sayings, I don't think that I would have survived in Hazlehurst."

"Hazlehurst is a long way away. You're here now. How are things with Drew?" Michael finally decided to focus on something other than his problems of the moment.

"He had to go out of town again, but we got to spend some time together. And he'll be back in a few days."

"That's good."

Emmett noticed the change in Michael's tone, so he decided once again to try to coax him to get something to eat.

"So are you going to join Teddy and me for lunch?" Emmett finally asked.

"No, I don't think so. Why don't you go ahead? I'll just grab something to eat a little later. I'm just not ready to run into Ma at the Diner yet."

"You do realize that you can't avoid Debbie!" Emmett said as he turned to leave.

Michael merely sighed and nodded as he tried to accept the inevitable.

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Emmett joined Ted at the Diner in their usual booth.

"Em, what took you so long? I thought that you might have forgotten that we're having lunch together. Where's Michael?" Ted immediately asked.

"I just saw him before I came here. He's really upset, Teddy. He still hasn't gotten over Brian and Justin yet. Then with Ben leaving too. Well.... you know."

"Yes, I do. But it's been almost two weeks. I'm not sure that he's even trying to deal with the new reality of things...you know, he's still trying to change things back to some long forgotten memory that never really existed. I'm sure you know what I mean...you've talked to him," Ted pointed out.

"But Teddy, this is more than just about Brian and Justin or even about Ben," Emmett revealed. He figured that now was the time to bring Ted up to date on things happening.

"Michael just found out that Debbie has been lying to him his whole life when she told him that his father died in the war. It turns out his father is very much alive. It also turns out that Divina Devore is his father," he calmly relayed as he reached for a menu. "Now, let me see, what am I in the mood for? What will I have for lunch?"

Ted reached over and placed his hands on the menu, forcing Emmett to lower it and look at him. Ted now had Emmett's undivided attention.

"You're not going to drop a bombshell like that and then calmly order lunch...start talking, Em!" Ted insisted.

Emmett tried to weasel out of telling Ted anything.

Then he finally relented and told Ted everything that he knew...starting with four years ago up to this moment... the whole story.

Ted listened attentively to all the details that Emmett revealed. As the story unfolded, he could only imagine what Michael must be feeling. It was a lot for someone to have to have to deal with...even if he had brought a lot of this on himself. But the revelations about Divina Devore being his father was something that Ted never expected, and it was just one more thing for Michael to cope with.

"We all need to be there for him...especially now," Ted finally said.

"Mel and Linds and the kids are coming into town, so Michael will be distracted by JR for a while. But no matter what, he's going to have to eventually find a way to deal with Debbie," Emmett whispered.

"And he's not ready to go there yet, is he?"

"Not by a long shot. And I guess since Betty took our order, instead of Debbie, things aren't great back at the house either. You've got to remember that no matter what she's done, Michael has always been the center of her world," Emmett pointed out. "I'm sure that she must be as upset as Michael is," he added.

"I guess that you haven't seen Debbie yet?"

"No, but I think after lunch I will. I know that she must be really upset. I bet Carl is beside himself trying to handle everything." Emmett continued. "I just don't know what's going to happen?"

"Call me when you find out anything! I'll be at the office. We're already working overtime, but with Brian in town any chance for things to slow down are completely out of the question. All bets are off...especially with Justin working in his studio."

"Oh my goodness, if Brian has you working like this...and Mel and Linds are bringing Gus here. What's Brian going to do? You know how much Gus adores Justin."

"I have no idea," Ted volunteered with a laugh.

"Of course you have no idea," a voice said. "Why should today be any different?"

While Ted and Emmett had been engrossed in conversation, Brian had approached their booth and waited for the just the right moment to make his presence known. He had carefully chosen this moment to pick on Ted, his favorite target.

"Brian, what are you doing here?" Emmett asked with glee.

"Even though I'm in Pittsburgh, I still have to eat! Move over, Theodore," Brian said as he unceremoniously pushed Ted further into the booth. "So Emmy Lou, what's the latest gossip?"

Before Emmett could answer, Betty returned with their order. She served Emmett and Ted. Then turned to Brian and asked, "What can I get you?"

"Turkey on whole grain...hold the mayo," Ted and Emmett said in unison.

Brian looked over at Ted and Emmett incredulously. They innocently looked back at him and smiled. Brian finally smiled. "So I'm that predictable, am I?" he nodded at Betty, confirming the order.

She left to put in the order while Brian turned his attention back to annoying his lunch companions. "So how's your tuna sandwich, Theodore?" Brian asked to make a point, since Ted frequently ordered the same lunch too. He wanted to make sure that point wasn't lost on Ted and Emmett.

"Brian, will you leave Teddy alone?" Emmett insisted.

"Why should I? Justin's not here to interfere, so I obviously have free range," Brian smirked. "Tormenting Theodore is rather high on my To Do List today."

"What have you done with Justin, by the way? I haven't seen him for a few days," Emmett complained.

"And you won't! He's locked away, painting in his studio," Brian confidently suggested. "I've promised to feed him lemon bars if he stays put. So far, that seems to be working."

Ted and Emmett tried to hide their smiles

Betty returned with Brian's sandwich, and for a moment, the table was silent. When she left, the conversation continued once again.

"So what were you two plotting when I came in?" Brian asked, before taking a bite of his sandwich.

"We were talking about Michael," Emmett revealed. "Have you talked to him?"

"Not for a few days. What's going on with Mikey?"

Emmett and Ted, in tag team fashion, brought Brian up date on the story of Michael and the truth about Divina Devore being his father. Emmett admitted that Debbie had confirmed everything to Michael earlier today.

Ted and Emmett noticed that Brian seem to casually continue eating his sandwich. He didn't seem surprised by any of this.

"You knew about this didn't you?" Emmett accused.

"Yeah," Brian easily admitted. "So what's the problem?"

"And do you remember what happened the last time there was trouble like this between Michael and Debbie?" Ted reminded him. "Surely, you remember our cozy night in the slammer?"

"That was just because Michael was involved with Ben, and Debbie was seeing Horvath. It all blew over rather quickly. They all eventually settled down to be one happy family," Brian reminded them.

"But now Michael's so upset that he wouldn't even have lunch with us because he didn't want to run into Debbie," Emmett pointed out.

"Mikey's had four years to deal with this. Oh, I'm sure that he'll rant and rave about things. He'll have his drama queen moment, and then things will get back to normal. He'll eventually figure out how he's going to deal with everything," Brian said confidently.

"Well, at least he'll be busy with JR for a few days, and..." Emmett stopped mid- sentence, continuing to stare forward.

"What's wrong?" Ted asked, noticing the interrupted conversation.

Emmett merely nodded and everyone turned to follow his line of sight.

They all saw Ben standing at the counter. Emmett finally waved, and Ben walked over to say hello to everyone.

"Hi Ben." Emmett said. "How's it going?"

"One day at a time," Ben said quietly. Then Ben noticed that Brian was at the table.

Ben was surprised to see him since no one had mentioned that he was in town. They warmly greeted each other, like always. And in that moment, Ben confirmed to himself that his problems with Michael were merely between him and Michael and didn't extend to any one else...including Brian. He found this very enlightening somehow.

"You know how it is, Ben. I can't stay away too long, or Theodore here will run amuck with my company," Brian smirked.

"And Justin?" Ben asked.

"He's at the house, painting. Immortalizing more of my body parts on canvas for posterity," Brian boasted, while Ted and Emmett couldn't resist, rolling their eyes at the comment.

"I don't know," Ted interrupted, finding the perfect chance to annoy Brian, "Gus will be in town. You might have tough competition as Justin's favorite model."

"Melanie and Lindsay are coming into town tonight," Emmett whispered as an aside to Ben, realizing that he might not have been told about their visit yet.

"Oh...." Ben quietly said, carefully noting the news.

"Competition...not a problem...I've taken care of everything," Brian said with a satisfied smile. You see...Gus will be assisting me at Kinnetik this weekend. That should nip this alternate model thing in the bud," he continued to gloat.

Even Ben had to smile at Brian's reaction. "I see that you have your strategy all worked out," Ben teased. "Although, I don't think that you have too much to worry about. Justin has always seemed to be able to paint your parts from memory, so he doesn't really need you to model at all."

"Exactly," Brian affirmed with a satisfied smile.

Just then, Betty motioned to Ben that his order was ready.

"My order is ready...I have to go," Ben said with a smile. "Bye..."

"Good seeing you, Ben," Brian added.

And in that moment, Ben understood that he was still a member of the family.

"Look at the time," Emmett said. "I have to go. I want to check in on Debbie, and I still have a million things to do today."

"But Em, didn't you see her this morning?" Brian asked.

"I was at Drew's last night when everything must have happened. Let me go! I'll talk to you later, Teddy," Emmett said, scooting out of the booth, leaving Ted and Brian alone.

"Well, Theodore?" Brian said, looking at Ted with one eyebrow raised.

"Okay, I know it's time to go back to the office," Ted nervously explained. "But can we at least check on Michael before we go back to work? He missed lunch. Maybe we should take him a sandwich or something."

"I think that can be arranged," Brian said with a smile, totally enjoying, watching Ted squirm.

Chapter 19 – The Unannounced Visitor

Friday Afternoon...(Day 61)

Michael was at Red Cape Comics sitting in his office at the back of the store, staring at a painting.

The painting was Superheroes, the recent gift from Justin...Superheroes, which showed Rage and Zephyr preparing to lead the team of comic book superheroes on an adventure to save Gayopolis.

Michael looked at the painting and wondered how Zephyr could lead anything, when his own life was such a mess at the moment, and this was something that Rage couldn't rush in and make everything okay.

Hunter was working in the store this afternoon. He had immediately noticed the change in Michael since they had last seen each other. Hunter figured that something was wrong, but he correctly guessed that Michael wasn't ready to reveal all the details just yet.

Michael was still grappling with what he now knew to be true...he had a living, breathing father. It was still all so new.

In his reflection, Michael wondered how do you walk up to someone that you hardly know, reintroduce yourself to that person, and then tell that person that you're his son.

Michael began to get a sense of how Superman must have felt every time he considered revealing his Clark Kent alter ego or how Bruce Wayne must have felt when he had to tell Vicky Vale that he was Batman. He now felt a new kinship with his comic book superheroes.

'Okay,' Michael thought to himself. 'Once you reveal that you're his son...where does the conversation go from there? How do you recapture 35 years of lost moments?" he continued to wonder.

While Michael was considering all this, Hunter came into the back to tell him that he had a visitor.

Hunter resumed waiting on customers, while Michael walked over to the counter to find out who was here to see him.

"Hello, Michael," the visitor said quietly.

Michael was too stunned to speak.

"It's been a while since we've seen each other. I've heard a lot about your comic book store. I wanted to come and see it for myself," the visitor continued. "Buzzy and I are old friends," he added.

Michael still didn't say anything, but he just continued to stand there, staring at his visitor.

"Excuse me, where are my manners? The last time we met, you saw me while I was in makeup, and you helped me out of my gown. I'm not even sure if you even recognize me..."

"How are you, Ms. Devore?" Michael interrupted, finally finding his voice.

"So you do recognize me," Daniel teased. "I'm flattered. You've only seen me for about five minutes looking like this. I wasn't sure if you'd remember me."

"You've got to admit, it's almost like looking in a mirror," Michael said with a smile. "I'm really not blind, you know."

Daniel smiled. "I see that your mother must have told you everything?" he said softly.

"She told me," Michael acknowledged softly, taking a moment to get a good look at his visitor, who just so happened to be his father.

There was a long moment before Michael could speak again. "Why don't you come with me? We can talk in here," he suggested, leading Daniel back into his office. Then Michael offered Daniel a seat.

From a distance, Hunter watched the two men go into Michael's office. Being particular observant, he immediately noticed the resemblance between them. His curiosity was now peaked. Still Hunter continued to handle customers and bide his time.

Meanwhile Michael and Daniel settled into the office. They tried to make themselves comfortable, but both of them were understandably nervous.

"She told me too, " Danny continued, picking up the conversation. "So I guess I should start by properly introducing myself. I'm Daniel Devore, and it appears that we...you and I...are related."

"If my mother is to be believed, you're the one...who really IS my father," Michael finally responded.

"Yes..."

"There doesn't seem to be any protocol for this sort of thing..."

"No, there doesn't. Believe me, I've spent a good deal of time looking," Daniel added with a laugh.

What do I call you?"

"Whatever you like, Danny or Daniel or even Divina, if you like...although I'll admit being HER is really exhausting!" Daniel teased with a sigh.

"I can imagine! Where did you ever get that name, Divina?" Michael asked with a laugh.

"I use to call your mother that when we were in high school. When they asked me what stage name I wanted to use, it just slipped out. The rest, as they say, is history. Maybe it was my way of keeping your mother close at hand. You've got to admit, your mother is not someone that can easily be forgotten."

Michael laughed, "I'll have to definitely agree with you there. She is definitely one of a kind," he added.

"Well, now you know..." Daniel said with a devilish smile.

Michael laughed again, "That's some story."

"I know that we drag queens are known to be liars...but every now and then, we slip in the truth. It seems to keep everybody guessing."

"Like me, four years ago..."

"I'm sorry about what happened back then," Daniel said sadly. "I wanted to protect your relationship with your mother...I felt I owed her at least that. I also had commitments that I had to honor, so there was no way that I could have stayed in town and tried to work things out with you. So I ..."

Michael interrupted, "So you moved on and never looked back," he challenged with resentment in his voice.

"No, Michael! I did what I had to do, but I never forgot you. I've spent the last four years putting things in order so that I could come back here to see you. I saw Jennifer weeks ago to start looking for a place to live here in town. I never expected Debbie to tell you the truth. I came back to try to simply forge a friendship with you. After all, I liked you from the moment I first met you," Daniel explained.

"I liked you too. Not just because we look alike. We just sort of clicked back then, didn't we? But...then you were gone," Michael complained.

"And that's why I came back. I know that we can't change the past. However, we're here now...in the present...and I wanted us to try to again. Maybe this time...now...we can actually get to know each other," Daniel pointed out. "I was hoping that you might take a chance on me."

"I've missed having a father all these years. You know that a picture on a mantel doesn't compare to a living, breathing dad. Then again, not every kid finds out that his father is an internationally renowned drag queen...not every kid finds out that he has a father after 35 years either."

"No. Thank god...they don't! And how do you feel about finding out those two things," Daniel asked hesitantly, holding his breath as he waited for the answer.

"It's nice to have a real father after all this time...everything else is going to take some getting use to."

"I can understand that. Look, I didn't mean to intrude. Here are my phone numbers, so we can stay in touch...that is, if you want to. I've been waiting a long time to get to know my son. I've been waiting for a chance to get to know you."

"I've been waiting too," Michael practically gushed.

"So are you going to teach me all about superheroes?" Daniel asked with a twinkle in his eye.

"Let me show you something," Michael said with a laugh, leading Daniel over to the painting. "Take a look," he said. "Here they all are: Rage and Zephyr and Superman and Captain Astro and all others... ready to save Gayopolis," he adding, pointing to each superhero as he named them.

"What a magnificent painting! I've never seen comic books characters shown as fine art before. This painting must have cost you a fortune! I hope that you have it properly insured. Where on earth did you get this?"

"The painting was a gift from Justin. He's an artist, and he painted this. He's also my business partner. We created the comic book, Rage, together. Rage is based on my best friend, Brian. He and Justin became legal partners a few weeks ago," Michael calmly relayed.

"Your business partner...that would be Sunshine," Daniel said with a knowing smile.

"So Ma couldn't resist telling you about him, huh?" Michael said softly. "Why am I not surprised?"

"His name came up in conversation, while we were all having dinner...your mother, and Jennifer might have mentioned him...once or twice."

"Ah yes, that would explain it. They both claim him as their own. But he's been this pesky little twink that I've never been able to get rid of," Michael explained with a laugh. "Ma took him in when he was 17. He took over my old room. He took over my friends. He just wormed his way into my life. Now he's everywhere."

"Ah, like a little brother, huh? I once had a little brother too. When we were kids, I spent years trying to figure out how to send him back. After years of plotting, I finally gave up and accepted the inevitable. By the time I left to seek my date with destiny, he and I were pretty close, but we haven't seen each other in years."

"Maybe now..."

"Maybe..." Daniel said softly, "We'll have to see," he added. "Let me get going. I have a show to get ready for. If you get a chance, why don't you come to the club and see it over the weekend. I'll leave your name at the door. Feel free to bring a guest, if you'd like."

"I think I'd like that," Michael said, "You've got to admit that Divina Devore is hard to resist," he teased.

"Hmmmmm...I thought you might feel that way," Daniel teased. "As usual, Divina gets all the attention," he continued with a broad laugh. "But what about me?" he added as an after-thought.

And in that moment, Michael heard himself echoed in his father's voice. He smiled a smile of recognition, for now he knew where it all came from.

"Well, at least you'll know where I'll be," Danny teased again.

"I'll talk to you later..." Michael assured him.

"I'm looking forward to that..." Daniel finally said. "Good bye, Michael."

"Good bye, Daniel," Michael said, reaching out to give him a hug.

The prying eyes of Hunter missed nothing.

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Once Daniel was gone, Hunter hurried into the office. "Who was that?" he asked.

"Who?" Michael asked, so lost in his own thoughts that he really didn't understand the question he was being asked.

"The man who just left...he looks a lot like you," Hunter commented, ever the perceptive one.

"Does he now? Imagine that?" Michael teased with a knowing smile.

"Is that all that you're going to say?" Hunter continued to press.

Michael pondered for a moment. He still wasn't sure that he was ready to talk about this, but Hunter had been so instrumental in everything. It was Hunter, who had helped him to find the initial evidence that started this cascade of truth.

So Michael took a deep breath and decided to share at least part of the story with him.

"I finally talked to my mother," Michael began. "I now know the truth. Hunter, the man who just left here was Daniel Devore, and he looks a lot like me...because he's my father...my real father."

"That's amazing! So you found out the truth!" Hunter said with some excitement. "Why didn't you introduce us?"

"There'll be plenty of time for that," Michael answered, still not quite ready to share a father that he just found himself. "He's going to be living here in Pittsburgh, so he's going to be around for a long time," he managed to add with another smile.

"You had so many unanswered questions after we found all that stuff on the Internet," Hunter reminded him. "It looks like you somehow found answers, but how?"

"Ma...she told me the truth...now I finally know everything."

"So that was your dad? He's quite handsome. That means that I have another grandfather, doesn't it?"

"Let's take this one step at a time. Daniel is just getting used to having a son. I don't want to scare him off by overwhelming him with you and entire family," Michael added with a laugh. Then he paused. "Oh, I forgot to tell you...Ma mentioned that Mel and Linds and the kids are coming in sometime tonight. You know that JR will be looking for you this weekend?"

"They're coming back so soon. It seems like they were just here."

"Well..."

"I'll make sure that I see JR, don't worry. And I'll be sure to tell Ben that they're coming into town."

"Thanks..."

"I have a very handsome grandfather!" Hunter quipped, reflecting again on what was important.

"And after all this time, I have a dad!" Michael said almost in a whisper.

Chapter 20 – Would You Believe?

Friday Evening...(Day 61)

Hunter had news to tell. He wanted to share it with someone. First, he went down the list of all the possibilities in his universe. Then he decided that Ben was definitely the right person for him to share this news with. Now all he had to do was figure out how to tell this story very slowly, so he could savor the telling.

"Ben? Ben? Are you here?" Hunter called out as he entered the apartment he shared with Ben.

"I'm right here, Buddy," Ben said, coming out of the bedroom. "How was your day?"

"Nothing unusual," Hunter lied, still trying to decide whether to say anything to Ben about the news that he'd just learned from Michael.

Ben immediately knew that something was up, but he didn't want to press, so he just played along. He wanted to allow Hunter to tell him...whatever...in his own time.

Hunter continued, "I helped out Michael at the store this afternoon," he added easily.

"That's a good son," Ben couldn't resist teasing. "How's Michael doing?"

"He seems to be doing okay."

"What do you mean seems to be doing okay?" Ben asked, allowing his concern to show through.

"There's just a lot going on for him right now. If what he told me is true, his world is about to be turned upside down!" Hunter couldn't resist gushing.

"What do you mean?" Ben asked with a serious tone.

"We just have to wait and see," Hunter said, not wanting to reveal anything more. "Oh yes, I forgot to tell you Melanie and Lindsay and the kids will be here this weekend. I guess they'll be arriving sometime tonight."

"That's great. I'll try to find a way to see them while they're here." Ben answered.

He was thinking to himself that Melanie and Lindsay must have found some way to work things out between them. Ben realized that he had no desire to do that. As far as he was concerned, his relationship with Michael was now over. But he also realized that he would have to eventually find some way to deal with Michael...especially for the sake of Hunter and JR.

"So tell me...why Michael's world is about to be turned upside down?" Ben asked with renewed interest. "Did you think that I wasn't paying attention to how quickly you changed the subject?" he pointed out with a slight smile.

"Can't get anything past you...can I Ben?" Hunter teased.

"I hope you always remember that," Ben quipped back with a smirk. "So okay, kiddo, tell me what's going on. Michael and I may not be together, but we're still family," he reluctantly admitted. And as he said the words he knew they were still true.

"It's good to hear you say that," Hunter finally admitted.

"Don't go getting any ideas. Let's stay focused here," Ben insisted, still trying to get the information he was after.

"Ben, this afternoon, I met a man, who looked an awful lot like Michael."

"You did? That's amazing. They say that somewhere in the world, everyone has a twin."

"I've never heard that before," Hunter responded in disbelief. "That's a scary thought! Are you serious?"

"I'll get you a book on the subject," Ben said with a smile. "Now tell me about the man that you met."

"His name was Daniel Devore," Hunter said and then paused for a moment.

Ben immediately fell silent as he recognized the name.

Eventually, he was able to speak. "You saw Danny Devore?" Ben asked. "Where?"

"He came into the store to see Michael."

"He did?"

"You know something, don't you?" Hunter challenged. "Tell me what you know about Daniel...I mean...Danny Devore?"

"So he was Michael's twin, huh?" Ben couldn't resist teasing. "Really!"

"Not twin exactly... They were the same height and build. They both had black hair. They had the same eyes. They had the same nose. They even had the same chin. Other than that they looked completely different." Hunter relayed with his continual sarcasm and a shrug for good measure. "And oh, by the way, Danny was older," he added as an after-thought.

"Have you ever heard the name Divina Devore?" Ben asked.

"Sure, she's a world famous drag queen. Everybody knows that. I saw her picture in the paper. She's appearing in town this weekend...not that I would ever get to see one of her shows," Hunter wisecracked.

"Hunter, Danny Devore and Divina Devore are the same person. Once Divina removes her makeup and changes out of her gown, she's Danny Devore."

"Wow, how do you know all this?" Hunter asked.

"Four years ago, Michael found out that Danny Devore and Debbie went to high school together. There was also some speculation that they might have dated, " Ben explained. "Back then, Michael also noticed that he and Danny looked a lot alike."

"There's a reason for that Ben," Hunter finally volunteered. He was now ready to share the most important part of the information that he knew. "It turns out that Daniel Devore is Michael's real father. I understand that Debbie even confirmed it."

"Oh! That's amazing! Four years ago, Michael had so many questions. Back then he thought maybe... But then he wasn't sure... Then, he just let the subject drop," Ben continued to mindlessly ramble on.

"Now he knows...now he's sure! Michael knows that the man in the picture on the mantel at Debbie's is not his father. Michael now knows who is father really is."

"Is he okay? How's he dealing with this news?"

"He's upset, of course, but he's trying to make the pieces fit. You have to admit, this is amazing news."

"I have to agree with you there. I wonder what happened to make the truth come out now?" Ben wondered aloud.

"You'll have to get the details from Michael," Hunter said slyly. "I've probably already said too much. "It was just exciting news, and I had to tell someone."

"I'm glad you decided to share it with me," Ben said softly, reaching out to give Hunter a hug. They were both trying to process all the new information.

Then Ben slowly walked over and stood by the window, staring out at the evening sky. He had to agree with Hunter that Michael's world was now about to be turned upside down.

Hunter continued to watch Ben for a few moments.

Ben was lost in this own thought and never even noticed.

Then Hunter quietly went into his room, leaving Ben alone with his thoughts.

A little while later, Ben called Hunter and asked him if he'd like to go out to dinner. Hunter was excited and dared to hope that a hamburger might be in his near future.

"That's okay, Ben, I'm getting used to the tofu casserole," Hunter admitted quietly, for he really didn't want to hurt Ben's feelings. He also understood the importance of the extra healthy diet to both their lives.

"Why don't I buy you a cheeseburger...just this once...we can save my tofu casserole until tomorrow," Ben said with a smile. "How does that sound?"

Hunter didn't say anything. He merely wrapped his arms around Ben.

Ben in turn wrapped his arms around Hunter. They both needed that moment of closeness.

When they finally broke apart, Ben simply said, "Let's go get that burger."

And Ben and Hunter quickly headed for the Diner.

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Later that night, a car with Canada license plates finally parked in front of Debbie's.

Melanie and Lindsay each stood outside of the car and tried to stretch their legs. It had been a long drive with a lot of silence between them. The tension in the car had made the trip seem much longer than it actually was.

Now, here they were...back in Pittsburgh...hoping...that with Elizabeth's help...they could, once again, get their lives back on track.

Melanie waited with the car and gently tried to awaken the sleeping kids while Lindsay rang the bell.

A few minutes later, Carl and Emmett came out to help with the kids and luggage.

"Where's Debbie?" Melanie asked, once everyone had settled down in the living room.

"She's had a hard day, so she went to bed extra early," Emmett explained. "But don't worry, she left late night snacks for you and the kids in the kitchen. It will be my pleasure to serve you when you're ready," he said with a bow.

Lindsay and Melanie each got this worried look on their faces. In all the time they had known Debbie, they had never known her to go bed this early. Something was definitely not right.

"I don't want you to worry about it," Carl reassured them. "I'm sure that she'll be fine tomorrow."

"Oh Carl, we don't want to be a burden. We didn't think. We can easily stay in a hotel. We don't mean to be any trouble," Melanie quickly volunteered.

"No. No...I won't hear of it," Carl said. "Look at my little angels," he gushed.

Gus and Jenny rushed into his arms, eager to receive their special ticklehugs.

Melanie and Lindsay just smiled and mindlessly reached for each other's hand, as they watched Carl with their children.

Then as quickly as the moment of tenderness came, it seemed to disappear. They each started to gather things to be taken upstairs.

When Melanie and Lindsay reached the guestroom they started to whisper to one another, remembering how voices travel through the walls of the house.

Melanie remembered all the things that she had accidentally learned through the walls.

"I've never known Debbie to go to bed early," Lindsay whispered.

"I'm really worried. I have to wonder what Emmett and Carl AREN'T telling us," Melanie considered.

"Don't go looking for trouble."

"Now would I do that?" Melanie protested. The answer to her rhetorical question was clearly evident in the expression on Lindsay's face.

Melanie let out a sigh of exasperation before she continued. "No...No, what I'm suggesting is that we come up with a plan."

"A plan?" Lindsay asked. "What kind of a plan?"

There was a pause as Melanie considered for a moment. "I know, we'll simply go back downstairs, and see what we can find out," she suggested.

"That's not a plan..." Lindsay challenged with a smile, thinking that her partner was probably not at her best because of the long drive. She realized that whatever happened, Melanie was going to need her help. So she simply said, "Count me in."

Lindsay and Melanie were now co-conspirators.

Melanie decided she would focus on interrogating Carl, while Lindsay felt she would be most effective with Emmett. These were now two women on a mission.

"Did you call Brian?" Emmett asked, once they had returned downstairs.

"Yes," Lindsay replied. "He's still at the office, so he'll be here shortly. I thought that Gus might fall back sleep until he arrived, but that obviously didn't work out," she added with a laugh, as she watched Carl giving Gus a glass of juice.

Melanie suddenly realized that no one asked if she had talked to Michael. Something was definitely going on, but try as she might she couldn't guess what that could be.

"So Em," Lindsay continued, "Dish! Tell me all the latest gossip that's happened since we were last here?" She gently nudged Emmett further into the kitchen so that she could get her snack.

"Let me see," Emmett began, as if searching his memory banks. "Brian has Justin once again imprisoned in the mansion. His explanation is that Justin is on a tight schedule to get paintings finished for his shows, so no one has seen him for days," he complained.

"That's to be expected. I know that Justin has quite a few shows coming up in the next few months. I'm glad that he's at least in a studio somewhere since he's not in New York," Lindsay mindlessly answered.

"Yeeesss...I should have known that you would feel that way!" Emmett said with an accusatory tone.

"Let's not fight, Em. I merely made a comment. Don't go reading anything into it," Lindsay asked.

Emmett thought it over and decided that she had just endured a long drive, so he was just going to let her remark slide...this time.

Emmett and Lindsay made sandwiches together while they managed to limit their mindless chatter to safe topics.

Meanwhile, Melanie and Carl were discussing their day in the living room. Carl mentioned that he'd taken today off, so that he and Debbie could spend some time together.

Once again, Melanie noticed that Michael's name wasn't mentioned.

Eventually, Melanie and Carl joined Emmett and Lindsay in the kitchen.

Before Melanie could begin to broaden her interrogation, to include Emmett as well as Carl, the front door opened. Brian walked in, as usual, without knocking.

"Hey," Brian called out as he entered.

At the sound of his voice, Gus immediately noticed. "Dad!" he called out, disengaging himself from Carl.

"Hey there, Sonny Boy," Brian said, picking up his son. Gus wrapped his arms around his father and allowed himself to be carried around any without protest.

"Where's Deb?" Brian asked. Melanie and Lindsay waited to hear the answer that would be given to him.

"She's resting. It's been a difficult day... you know," Carl reminded him.

"Of course," Brian said knowingly. "Well, be sure to tell her that I'll see her tomorrow," he added.

Carl simply nodded.

Melanie witnessed the look of perfect understanding as it passed first between Carl and Brian and then between Brian and Emmett. She was now certain that something was going on.

Lindsay noticed the looks too. She decided to make a stab at things. "Will you all stop walking around on eggshells?" Lindsay protested. "We talked to Michael. We know that he and Ben have separated. We, also, know that Hunter is living with Ben," she volunteered.

"And hopefully, we'll be able to see Ben before we leave," Melanie added.

"That's good," Brian said quietly, once again looking over at Carl.

Carl decided that with Brian there, things were under control, so he simply announced,

"I'm going to go up and check on Debbie."

Once Carl had gone upstairs, Melanie was ready to resume her questioning. This time Brian was her new target for information. She was almost going to enjoy this; after all, he was her favorite sparring partner. Then she realized that Brian had Gus in his arms, so she realized that she was going to have to tread lightly.

"Brian, what's going on?" Melanie quietly demanded to know.

"Can't explain Mel. Too many little ears around, but ask Em to fill you in once Jenny is tucked in."

Melanie simply nodded. Lindsay was still confused, but said nothing.

Then Brian looked down at Gus. "Well, shall we call Justin and let him know we're on our way home?" he asked, already punching the number on his cell phone.

A very excited six year old, took the cell phone and talked to His Justin with this big smile on his face. Brian looked at his son and understood how he felt.

It was a quick phone call. Gus merely told Justin that they were on their way home and closed the phone, never giving Brian a chance to talk to Justin.

Then nothing else seemed to matter. Brian grabbed Gus and his suitcase, and father and son said their goodbyes. They were now off to the mansion...and Justin.

A few minutes later, Carl came back downstairs, and there was an easy conversation going on now between everyone. The interrogation and the search for answers had now stopped.

A different agenda was not in play. Melanie and Lindsay were just biding their time until they could get Emmett alone.

Chapter 21 – We're Here!

Friday Night...(Day 61)

While Justin was waiting for Brian and Gus to arrive at Bri-tin, he started cleaning up his studio.

These chores were interrupted, first when he heard the sounds of his name being yelled by a six year old, causing him to smile.

Then, there was the gentle knock on his studio door.

When he opened the door, he was immediately engulfed in a little pair of arms.

Justin lifted Gus up and hugged him. Brian just smiled as he watched the two people he loved the most in the world, love each other.

"I missed you, Jus" Gus said quickly.

"I missed you too, Gus."

Gus held onto Justin while he looked around the studio.

Brian, at first, made himself comfortable on the futon to watch his two favorite people.

Then he decided that he wasn't needed here, so he went upstairs to change out of his suit.

"You've been painting," Gus immediately commented, as he noticed all the canvasses scattered about the studio.

"Well yes, Gus, I still have a few shows to get ready for," Justin explained with a smile.

Then, Gus looked over at his corner and noticed that all the paintings, which he and Nicky had done a few weeks ago, were still mounted on the studio wall. Gus was thrilled that they were still there. He didn't say anything, but he just hugged Justin again after seeing them.

While Gus and Justin were talking and checking things out in the studio, Brian returned wearing his comfortable sweatpants.

At this point, he managed to pry Gus and Justin apart, just enough so that he could lean down and kiss his partner. "Hey," he finally said, "Are you going to be able to take a break?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking that I was hungry. How about you two?" Justin asked, already knowing the answer.

"Do you want me to call for delivery?" Brian asked, mentally trying to think about what he should order that would work for everyone.

"That won't be necessary. You've forgotten that Teres is now in-charge," Justin said with a grin.

"Meaning?" Brian innocently asked.

"She already prepared something for us. She said to tell you that it was just something SIMPLE," Justin relayed with a laugh.

"I'm convinced that Teres has a wicked streak that we didn't know about before. I still can't believe that she challenged my planning abilities a few weeks ago...Paul and Jason's too," Brian reflected.

Beginning of flashback.

Moments later, Brian, Paul, and Jason were sitting in the kitchen crafting their menu and grocery list for lunch today when Teres quietly entered.

"Brian, what are you doing in the kitchen?" she teased, as if this was the beginning of the apocalypse.

"Contrary to popular opinion, Teres, I do know my way around a kitchen. Maybe not this kitchen yet, but I'm working on it," he teased. "We're having a few friends over for an impromptu lunch, so the three of us were trying to plan things," Brian tried to explain.

Teres tried to use all of the restraint at her disposal to contain the laughter that was about to erupt. "Please, may I join you," she calmly asked, taking a seat. "You know Brian, I thought we'd agreed that you and Justin would leave complex meals to me from now on," she gently reminded him.

"But this was so last minute..." Brian began as a way of explanation. "I couldn't ask you..."

"I'll take care of it. Just tell me how many people?" Teres said, shaking her head.

"Plan on seven adults and two kids," Brian said with a sigh. "Plus you never know who else will suddenly drop by."

"No problem," Teres said with a laugh. "But just for laughs, why don't you three show me what you were planning?"

Brian, Paul, and Jason filled Teres in on their plans so far. Paul and Brian were quick to remind her that they did this for a living, so she was supposed to be suitably impressed.

Teres reminded them that they did complex events. She was thinking more about a simple lunch...buffet-style...assorted selections.

"Teres, just so you know, Paul and I are taking you back to Cincinnati with us," Jason said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. "You're a genius."

"Ok, so we went a bit overboard," Brian finally acknowledged, "It probably comes from hanging around with Justin."

"That may be true. I've heard bits and pieces about Nicky's birthday party," Teres admitted.

"Well, I'll fill you in on all the gory details when we're alone," Jason teased.

"I'd like that," Teres said with a smile. "Now, why don't you just continue to visit? I have everything covered. I'll be back shortly."

Teres walked a few steps towards the door, then she stopped, "I take it that Justin and the little ones are busy in his studio?" she asked with a smile.

Brian nodded yes with a laugh, "We may never see them again," he teased.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure that they eat too," she calmly assured them.

End of Flashback.

"The woman just keeps forgetting that I'm the professional here," Brian boasted. Then he paused. "I can't believe it...I'm beginning to sound like Hunter."

Justin laughed. "I promise not to tell him. Come on Gus, let's get you cleaned up, so we can see what Teres left for us," he added, smiling at Brian.

In the kitchen, they found a chicken with vegetables combination for Brian, which he immediately recognized as his because of the absence of carbs. After all, it was clearly after 7 pm. Gus and Justin had a similar dish only with pasta added. In addition, there was a salad, which everyone enjoyed. There were also for Gus and Justin fresh baked rolls, which Brian kept stealing morsels of, from Justin's plate during dinner.

After dinner, everyone huddled together in the living room in front of the fire to talk.

The first thing that Gus noticed was that his painting...the one that Justin painted of Brian and Gus riding together...was now hanging on the wall above the mantel of the fireplace. He was excited that HIS painting was still there.

Brian lifted his son up to the level of the picture, so Gus could get a better view. Once again, both father and son enjoyed experiencing the painting together.

Later, Gus filled Brian and Justin in on everything that had happened to him during the last two weeks.

Gus retold them about everything that had happened at school, and as usual he complained that Jenny Rebecca was still knocking down the forts and towers that he built.

Gus casually mentioned that his mommies were sleeping in different rooms, and that they didn't kiss each other anymore. Justin read between the lines and realized that Melanie and Lindsay were, once again, having problems.

Brian told Gus a little bit about his business trip to New York. Justin had his sketchpad handy, as always, so he made quick drawings while Brian talked. The visuals helped Gus to better understand some of what his dad was describing. It didn't matter to Gus if he understood everything...he was just glad to be with his dad and HIS Justin.

Then Gus talked about how he could hardly wait to play with Nicky again.

That's when Brian had an idea, so he led Justin and Gus into his study. Brian pulled out a large calendar.

He pointed to the current date so that Gus could see it, and then he pointed to the weekend that Nicky was due to return.

Justin drew a small picture of two little boys playing together across the dates.

"This was a good idea," Brian said to Gus. "You know that Justin can always use the additional drawing practice," he teased.

Gus nodded his head in agreement, while Justin swiped Brian on the arm.

"Ouch!" Brian complained.

"Serves you right!" Justin quipped.

Gus found the entire interplay between the couple very funny.

Brian and Gus counted and marked off the days leading up to that special weekend...it was only two more weeks...exactly 14 days...before Nicky with Paul and Jason would return for a visit. Gus got very excited just thinking about it.

Then, Gus went into negotiation with his father about taking the calendar home with him so he could keep track of the days until then.

Brian finally agreed, but in the meantime, they left the calendar in the center of Brian's desk in his study. Gus was all smiles.

Brian said that until Gus left, they would mark off one day, just before Gus went to bed each night. That way Gus could keep track of how many days it was until he got to play with Nicky again. They would start with tonight...and they marked off the first day.

Then Gus went over and climbed into Justin's lap, wrapping his arms around his neck.

Brian and Justin knew Gus was after something...they just weren't sure what. They didn't have long to wait to find out what was on Gus' mind.

"Jus, will you fix Mickey Mouse Pancakes for breakfast tomorrow?" Gus asked, leaning up to give Justin a very wet kiss.

Brian tried to hide his smile as he looked over at Justin. Justin glared back at Brian, but he quickly gave in to Gus' request.

"I was thinking, Gus," Brian began, "After we have Mickey Mouse Pancakes for breakfast," he added for emphasis. "I was hoping that I could convince you to spend the day with me tomorrow. I have to go into the office, and I thought that you might like to join me. What do you think?" he finally asked.

Gus hesitated, while he thought things over.

This was not the reaction that Brian had hoped for, but he waited to see what would actually happen.

"I don't know, Dad," Gus said, still considering things.

"I was thinking that maybe we could take some blocks with us, so that you could work on building those forts and towers when Jenny wouldn't be able to knock them down," Brian offered as a suggestion. Then again he waited.

"But Dad, what about Justin?" Gus complained.

"What does Justin have to do with you going into the office with me?" Brian innocently asked.

"But Dad, I'm painting with Justin!" Gus pointed out.

"But wouldn't you like to go with me to the office instead?" Brian practically begged.

"I have to help Jus paint. He needs me!" Gus patiently explained to his father.

Justin wrapped his arms around Gus and kissed him. "Gus, I think it's sweet that you want to be with me while I paint. But I think I'll be okay here. After all, Thomas and Teres are here. Why don't you go to the office with your dad..." Justin suggested. "That is, if you want to. I promise that I'll be all right painting."

Brian patiently waited, while Gus thought things over...again.

Finally, Gus decided that he would like to spend the day with his Dad.

Brian was relieved and let out a sigh of relief. He didn't want to force Gus to come to the office with him, but he really wanted Justin to be able to paint without any interruptions, especially with the rapidly approaching dates for the shows.

Then Justin leaned over and kissed Brian ...for no apparent reason at all.

And after Gus finished covering his eyes during Brian and Justin's kiss, Gus leaned over and hugged his Dad. And at that moment, Brian never felt so loved.

Later, Brian and Justin helped Gus get settled in his room. Gus made a remark about missing his room and especially his oversized Teddy bear.

Then Brian and Justin remembered that the last time that Gus was here, he and Nicky had shared one of the other bedrooms, so that they could have a little more room. Now, they understood how Gus felt about THIS room.

After a shower and a bedtime story, Gus quickly settled down for the night and quickly fell asleep. He had truly had a long and interesting day.

Brian reset the monitor in the room, in case Gus needed them during the night.

Then Brian and Justin made their way to their own room and closed the door.

They had spent a long day without each other, and they were ready for some alone time together.

And after a series of kisses and nibbles, Brian convinced Justin to join him in their hot tub.

Chapter 22 – Things To Tell

Friday Night...(Day 61)

"I'm going to miss this when we get back to New York," Justin said, as Brian was helping him into the swirling waters of their upstairs hot tub.

"Me too," Brian agreed as he lowered himself into the water. "So how did the painting go today?" he asked, as Justin was making himself comfortable, spooned against his chest.

"I got quite a lot done. I'm just not sure if what I painted is any good."

"You always say that," Brian teased. "Of course, you're so untalented as an artist...what will you do?" That comment earned him a swipe on the arm from Justin. "Ouch!" Then he paused for a moment. "Are you going to be okay, painting tomorrow without Gus?" he continued to tease, "I know it was the supreme sacrifice that you both made for him to go to the office with me."

Justin merely leaned back and kissed him again.

"What was that for?"

"For trying to give me time alone to paint...like always. But you know, I'm so used to painting with Gus, it's not a problem."

"I know. I just thought ..."

Whatever Brian was about to say was once again interrupted by another of Justin's kisses. And by the time the kiss ended, whatever he was about to say no longer mattered, so Brian just smiled.

"I do need to talk to you about something," Brian casually began. "I saw Debbie this afternoon. She finally talked to Michael. She finally told him everything about his father."

"I know, I talked to my mom. Evidently, she had dinner at Debbie's last night. She told me that Debbie was going to talk to Michael. Mom also told me that she met Daniel Devore."

"Did Mother Taylor say anything else?"

"Not to much. She mentioned that she and Debbie are going to the Kit Kat Club to watch Divina's performance on Saturday."

"This is going to be a unique experience for Jennifer. Debbie has always been as at home in gay clubs..."

"You know that my mother and Debbie have been hanging out together for some time now. Debbie's already dragged Mom into the baths when they were trying to solve the Jason Kemp mystery," Justin said with a laugh. "So, I guess she's no longer an innocent."

"Not to mention all the times she used to drop in on me unannounced," Brian added with a laugh. "Yep, she'll be just fine. Anyway, I understand that Carl may be going with them."

"I guess that means that Mom will have a date too. Do you think that she'll take Tuck?" Justin asked with a pained expression on his face.

"Don't tell me that you're still having problems there?"

"That's not it. It just that she hasn't mentioned him in a while. Neither has Molly. But then she hasn't mentioned anyone else either, so it just makes me wonder..."

"My, my...Mr. Taylor...aren't we suspicious?"

"I'll eventually get to the bottom of things, just not this weekend. There's too much else going on right now," Justin added. "I don't have the time."

Brian couldn't resist smiling. He knew Justin was now on this mission, and he wouldn't let it go until he had whatever answers he was seeking. Brian knew he was just going to sit back and enjoy watching his partner in action with this.

"Anyway, by the end of the weekend everyone in the family should know about the relationship between Michael and Divina Devore. Business may call you and I back to New York, but everyone will still be able to support both Debbie and Michael," Brian pointed out.

"That's good... Do you think Debbie and Michael will be okay?"

"Eventually. Mikey can be really stubborn, but eventually he'll come to terms with things. He can't stay upset with Debbie for very long. It's just that right now he's living in such a fantasy world that's been turned upside down. He's just not reasonable. Just give him some time."

"But Lindsay and Melanie are here with Jenny, so that should help. Don't you think?"

"Maybe...it's too soon to tell..."

"Oh..."

"Listen, I'm thinking to letting the limo drive us back to the city," Brian causally mentioned. "What do you think?"

"You are? Why?"

"You've obviously got quite a few paintings to take back. This way we can take them back with us. I know we could ship them, but then you would lose a day of painting waiting for them to arrive. So I think, this makes more sense. Unless you think we should rent a van and maybe drive back?"

"If we take the paintings back in the limo, I guess I could have my way with you all the way back to New York," Justin suggested. "It would almost be like an orgy!"

"I somehow knew that you would find some advantage," Brian with a smile, picturing the images Justin just conjured.

"I don't know though," Justin mumbled, "It's so hard to think when my skin is wrinkling..."

"Already?"

"Afraid so...."

"Well, let's get you out of here quickly, Sunshine. You know how I feel about wrinkles. Especially when I have other plans for you."

"You do?" Justin teased. "Imagine that..."

"Yes...Imagine that..."

"I'm not sure that I can wait..."

"That's better...let's get you out of here..."

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Meanwhile back at Debbie's...Jenny Rebecca was now sleeping upstairs, and Carl had decided to turn in too, leaving Emmett, Lindsay, and Melanie alone in the kitchen.

"Okay, Emmett spill!" Melanie demanded.

"About what?" Emmett innocently asked.

"Look Em, I'm sure that Carl has a hot spot light somewhere, and Linds is masterful with straps. I think we have a leather set handy," Melanie threatened, looking over at Lindsay for confirmation. "So are you going to tell me what's going on, or are we going to have to play hardball?"

"Threatening dykes!" Emmett gushed, pretending to fan himself at the prospect. "Now that's hot!"

"Emmett!" Lindsay and Melanie complained in unison.

"Oh, all right! You two won't let me have any fun!" Emmett continued to complain.

"Start talking, Buster," Lindsay tried to threaten.

Melanie had to smile, realizing that Lindsay's threat was pretty weak. "Lindsay, step aside! Let me handle this!" Melanie demanded, taking over once again.

Lindsay recognized the tone and backed away.

Melanie went into action. Using her two fingers to poke at his chest, she forced Emmett to sit down. Then she began her interrogation. "Emmett, where is Michael?" she asked, with her fingers still pressing on his chest.

"What?" he asked, while trying to breathe. He was also caught off guard, for he was expecting some question or other, but this one was not one that he expected.

Since Melanie figured he was stalling, she increased the pressure on his chest again, so he had difficulty saying anything.

Melanie continued to make her point. "Usually when we come into town, Michael and Ben are almost the first ones here to greet us. But this time, no one. What's going on?"

As Emmett struggled a little bit, Melanie released a little of her finger pressure. But she remained where she was...hovering.

"Well, I'm sure that you know that Ben and Michael aren't together anymore," Emmett reminded them, hoping that this reminder would put the issue to rest.

"I know that, asshole," Melanie challenged. "That explains why Ben isn't here, but what about Michael?"

"Ah...what did...ah...he say when you called him?" Emmett asked pointedly, trying to side-step Melanie's question with this question. He also tried to wiggle out of her grasp.

"All he said was that he was busy, but that he would see us tomorrow," Lindsay explained.

"And why aren't you accepting that?" Emmett asked...now able to slowly sit up straight.

"Because, usually Michael can't wait to see his daughter. And now, he can casually postpone seeing her until tomorrow. Something is definitely up," Melanie reasoned aloud. "Start talking, Emmett!" she repeated, poking on his chest once again.

"Yes, start talking!" Lindsay echoed. "Unless you want me to get Brian on the phone!" she threatened.

"All right!" Emmett finally relented. He had agreed to do this, and he was going to follow through with it. He wasn't about to let Brian down. And, he definitely wasn't about to give Lindsay an excuse to disturb Brian and Justin tonight. "All right! You two dykes just back off you two! Gheez!"

Melanie and Lindsay finally gave Emmett breathing room, as they settled back down into their seats at the table.

Emmett took a deep breath and said in one breath, "You need to know that Michael just found out that his father is alive."

"But I thought his father died in Vietnam," Lindsay questioned.

"Yes, died when he was just a baby," Melanie added.

"That wasn't really Michael's father. That was just someone that Debbie made up to give him a father he could be proud of. The man in the picture on the mantel, is not Michael's father," Emmett began to reveal. Then he paused to let that information sink in.

"I can't believe it!" Melanie reacted. She was about to say more, but she looked over at Emmett, and she could tell from his expression that he still had more to tell them, so she simply nodded for him to continue.

Emmett began once again, "Neither Michael nor his real father ever suspected that the other existed...until about four years ago. Their paths crossed by accident, and they both started to suspect their possible relationship. However, back then, no one would confirm it, so the matter just seemed to be dropped."

Once again, he paused to make sure that Lindsay and Melanie were still with him before he continued any further.

They were hanging on his every word.

Then Emmett said, "From what I understand, Debbie just recently told both of them, father and son, the truth. Now, after all this time, Michael knows he has a living, breathing father, and his father knows that he has a 35 year-old son."

"That's amazing," Melanie said with this far off look in her eyes, as she tried to wrap her mind around this new information.

Lindsay just sat there quietly listening.

"Michael swears that he'll never forgive Debbie for her lifetime of lies. That's why he's not here," Emmett added.

"So that's why Debbie has taken to her bed?" Lindsay mumbled. Then she said with a sigh of understanding, "I know that Michael means everything to her."

"Today has just been a difficult day for her, I understand that she talked to Michael this morning." Emmett added, "But you know Debbie, by tomorrow she'll be back up on her feet...especially with JR here."

"I know how she feels about Jenny Rebecca," Lindsay whispered. "Still, I can see why this must all be upsetting for her," she added sympathetically.

"Why all the intrigue?" Melanie pointedly asked, getting the conversation back on target. "Emmett, do we know the man, who's supposed to really be Michael's father?" .

"Yes Em, do we know who Michael's father is?" Lindsay asked, refocusing now too.

Once again, Emmett took a deep breath. "Does the name Divina Devore mean anything to you?" he asked.

"Divina Devore...Divina Devore...you mean, the famous female impersonator?" Melanie asked, after repeating the name several time to jar her memory.

"What does Divina Devore have to do with anything?" Lindsay asked, not being able to immediately see the connection.

"It seems that Divina Devore is Michael's father...or rather the man inside the diva...Danny Devore is. It seems that he and Debbie dated when they were in high school together. It seems that Danny left town, without knowing that Debbie was pregnant. Rather than tell him, she decided instead to create this fictitious war-hero father to give Michael a father he could be proud of." Emmett revealed.

Lindsay and Melanie were silent for a moment. They were having a hard time taking it all in.

"That's not like Debbie. Why would she do that?" Melanie asked.

"Maybe she thought that having a drag queen for a father was going to be a hard thing for a little boy to deal with. Remember Debbie was only 17 at the time with a baby...who knows what she was thinking! And after all this time, it really doesn't matter, does it?" Emmett quickly reminded them of what NOT to pursue.

Both Lindsay and Melanie immediately understood.

"What made you tell us all this?" Melanie finally asked, somewhat troubled by what she'd just heard, but determined to understand the reasons for these revelations.

"Brian made the decision that he wanted you two told. He didn't want Debbie to be put through the pain of repeating this story over and over again. He knew there would be a lot of questions, and he didn't want Debbie to have to answer any of them until she was ready. Brian also wanted to make sure that the entire family was there to support both Debbie and Michael. Brian, Carl, Jennifer, Teddy, and Justin already know, so I agreed to tell you tonight." Emmett recounted. "And now you know too," he added in a whisper.

He started to leave the kitchen, but Lindsay held out her hand to stop him. "Thanks, Em, for telling us," she said quietly.

Emmett merely nodded. "Now that my job is done, I'm going to call it a night," he said.

"And you say that Michael now knows all the details," Lindsay asked.

"Yes, he knows. He's trying to deal with this truth, along with all the other things off kilter in his life," Emmett pointed out.

"I can imagine." Melanie added. She said the words, but obviously her mind was somewhere else.

"Well, Goodnight," Emmett finally said, leaving Lindsay and Melanie alone to talk.

Lindsay and Melanie said goodnight to Emmett, but they remained in the kitchen together. This was quite a bit of information to process. They were both no longer sleepy.

Chapter 23 – A Few Random Thoughts

Late Friday Night...(Day 61)

Once Emmett had left to go to bed, Lindsay and Melanie just sat there for a while, without saying anything to each other about what they had just heard from him.

They were just starting to realize, what a really big deal this was. It was all beginning to sink in. A 17 year-old Debbie had started it all with the lie. Now, 35 years later, it was ending with both Daniel Devore and Michael being confirmed as father and son.

And the Liberty Avenue family needed to be there for Debbie...as she has always been there for them, and as much as possible to be there for Michael too.

All of this came back to Lindsay and Melanie in their silence as they reached out to touch each other's hand for support.

Then finally, Lindsay was able to speak. "Can you imagine?" she said haltingly.

"It's pretty hard to believe," Melanie whispered, mindlessly squeezing Lindsay's hand. There was comfort in the familiarity of each other's touch.

"Do you think it's really true?" Lindsay asked, looking into Melanie eyes for answers.

Melanie nodded, "Brian wouldn't persuade Emmett to tell us, unless he was sure it was true. Em may love to share gossip, but Brian only deals with facts. He only deals with brutal honesty, whether you want to hear it or not. No, he must have felt that this was important for us to know. You know how he feels about Michael, and you know how he feels about Debbie! He doesn't want us asking any questions...and he clearly doesn't want us choosing sides."

"Yes, I...I know that," Lindsay confirmed. "I think he's asking a lot."

"Debbie told a lifetime of lies to give Michael a myth of father. You know, he's always felt that he missed out on so much not having a dad. I know that's part of the reason he wants to be so involved with Jenny," Melanie suggested, as she considered the implications of what she'd learned.

"I wonder what the whole story is about Debbie and Danny Devore. It must have been a great love story," Lindsay suggested, allowing her romantic sensibilities to take over.

"You mean like you and Brian?" Melanie teased, "That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

"No, even at six years old, there are no secrets between my son and me," Lindsay pointed out, completely missing the point that Melanie was trying to make.

"Except for the fact about you wanting a life with Brian...and your hopes that the three of you could someday be this little happy family," Melanie fired back. "I wonder if Debbie ever entertained those thoughts."

Lindsay brushed aside the obvious dig. "Probably not," she pointed out, "For if she had, she would at least have told Daniel the truth at the beginning to see what would happen. Judging by the fact that she didn't tell him about her pregnancy in the beginning, I would say that she never pictured any kind of chance for a future for them. I guess she must have accepted that he was really gay. That ended all hope."

"She was one of the smarter ones, wasn't she Lindsay?" Melanie pointed out.

"Debbie never saw a chance for them to be a family. So I guess in her mind once Daniel said goodbye, she accepted that he would never return to Pittsburgh."

"She was almost right. He didn't return for 31 years. No wonder, she felt it was safe to make up whatever story she wanted to. No wonder, she believed that the truth would never come out. It does seem that if you tell a lie often enough, you really do start to believe the lie instead of the truth," Melanie reminded her.

"Let it go, Mel. You and I are trying to get past all that," Lindsay quietly reminded her.

Melanie looked at Lindsay as she made the last remark. She had not intended any dig at her partner...she was merely stating general observations. The fact that Lindsay chose to personalize her statements revealed some measure of her partner's guilt. Melanie didn't want to go there right now.

Melanie continued, "Still this whole thing must be very hard for her. Debbie has always put a lot of stock in the truth. I guess it goes to show that no matter how long it takes, the truth will eventually come back to haunt you."

"Debbie was just a teenager when she perpetrated the lie. It must have taken a lot for her to sustain it all these years...just as it must have taken a lot for her to finally tell the truth."

"I'm sure it did."

"You know that Debbie's decisions...a lifetime ago didn't just impact Michael...it impacted all of us," Lindsay suggested.

"How so?" Melanie asked.

"It's true that has Michael now knows that he has a father that he never knew he had, but there's more. Now Hunter and Jenny have another grandparent...someone new for them to get to know. A grandparent that's a drag queen...and a world famous one, at that." Lindsay remarked. "How does a kid deal with all this? Jenny's just a little baby, but Hunter is old enough to cope with the true reality."

"That's just it...they don't have to deal with this. They'll just meet Danny someday and get to know him and somehow magically interweave him into their lives. The only judgments that Jenny and Hunter will make, will be based on how Divina or Danny treats them...not how the world feels about his lifestyle." Melanie explained.

"You're probably right..."

"I just wish that I had known about this sooner," Melanie remarked pensively.

"Why?"

"Then I might have made other choices."

"You mean, if you had known that Michael's father was a drag queen, that you might not have chosen him to father Jenny? You mean that you would have chosen Brian instead?" Lindsay asked with a laugh.

"There was no fucking way I would have chosen Brian." Melanie teased, "But I might have chosen Ted or even Emmett. You never know!" she added with a laugh.

"I do feel that we possibly, might have had...just a few misconceptions...when we originally chose Michael to be Jenny's father," Lindsay innocently remarked

"A few!" Melanie said with a laugh, "A lot of what we originally believed when we chose him has just sort of gone by the fucking wayside," she added throwing up her hand in mock frustration. "This new revelation about his father is just one more thing. We'll get used to it. There's no use fighting it. And, I must admit that I'm looking forward to meeting Danny Devore."

"I wonder if we'll be able to see the resemblance," Lindsay asked.

"I wonder what Danny Devore looks like. I've seen lots of picture of Divina. I don't think I've ever seen any pictures of Danny Devore. I wonder, once the makeup is removed, does he look like Michael? Hell, I wonder how much he and Jenny will look alike."

"I wonder if we'll we ever get to meet him," Lindsay asked. "Especially, if it's true that Michael has sworn that he'll never speak to Debbie again.

"Then too, we don't know if Danny has forgiven Debbie either. He may feel the same way that Michael does. Things could really be a mess, at least for a while."

"I'm sure that Brian won't let that happen," Lindsay whispered.

"I know that you have a lot of faith in Brian ...you always have...but, I'm just not sure about this time..."

"Let's not be the voice of doom and gloom, just yet," Lindsay suggested. "We'll have to wait and see, won't we?"

"Yes, we will. Hopefully, we'll get to see Debbie tomorrow. I also want to try to see Ben and Hunter. I hope I can figure out some way for them to see Jenny. You know how much she adores them."

"And I want to try to talk to Michael. I'm really worried about how he's dealing with all this."

"I know." Melanie agreed. Then she shook her head as if it was too much to consider. "I think that it's late. I really need some sleep. This has been some night!"

"You're right. It's really going to be hard to sleep tonight. I can hardly wait for tomorrow. "And, we also have that appointment... with Elizabeth."

"I know," Melanie said softly. "Let's get some rest."

And as they head upstairs, a moment of tenderness passed between them.

Chapter 24 – Return to Normal

Saturday Morning...(Day 62)

The aroma of coffee and bacon awakened Melanie and Lindsay. When they were able to finally roll out of bed, they immediately went to check on Jenny Rebecca, but they found that she wasn't in her crib.

They also noticed that as they passed the bedroom door to Carl and Debbie's room that it was still closed.

Thinking that Carl was busy moving around in the kitchen alone, Lindsay and Melanie quickly showered and dressed and made their way downstairs to see if they could help.

They were not surprised to find Jenny Rebecca in her high chair, being fed morsels of Cheerios by Carl. In between bites of cereal Carl and Jenny were engaged in some special conversation that only they understood.

The sounds of their laughter could be heard throughout the kitchen.

However, standing at the stove, cooking breakfast, as usual, was Debbie.

Melanie and Lindsay came into the room and quickly hugged her.

"So you're here," Debbie announced, "How was your trip? I understand that you drove this time, how did it go?" she asked in rapid succession as she poured them each a cup of coffee.

"It was the usual drive. Fortunately, the motion of the car put both kids right to sleep. We missed most of the traffic too," Melanie revealed nonchalantly.

In spite of how calm Debbie looked, Melanie could hardly believe that she seemed to be back to normal. This was not what she was expecting, after hearing Emmett's news last night. Both Melanie and Lindsay had prepared themselves to be loving and supportive to Debbie. Obviously, these extra gestures were going to be unnecessary.

As if reading their thoughts, Debbie simply smiled. "I think that it's sweet that you two are here for me. I'm going to be okay. I was just tired last night when you arrived."

Lindsay and Melanie just looked at each other, trying to hide their momentary disbelief.

Then Debbie continued, "I heard that Brian had Emmett fill you in. I know that you're surprised," she pointed out with a smile. "Now you...like my son...know everything," she finally whispered.

"It's an amazing story," Lindsay said.

Debbie merely shrugged. "It happened," she said nonchalantly with a shrug.

"Now we know where Michael gets his gift for storytelling," Melanie added with a smile.

"You little shit!" Debbie answered with a laugh. "Now what can I get you for breakfast?" she immediately asked, clearly changing the subject.

Melanie and Lindsay nodded to each other, before requesting eggs and bacon and toast to go with their coffee. Debbie smiled and continued her breakfast preparations.

A light chatter between everyone began about nothing in particular.

"So did Carl tell you about our upcoming date for the evening?" Debbie teased, while stirring the eggs.

"Date?" Melanie asked with some renewed curiosity.

"You two are still dating after all this time?" Lindsay teased.

"Not dating exactly..." Carl began to clarify.

"Oh?" Melanie continued, now with renewed interest.

"Well, let's just say that is all so that Jennifer gets a new experience..." Carl started to explain before Debbie cut him off.

"And Carl gets to gush at an international star," Debbie said with a laugh.

"Okay, so living with Emmett does rub off on you. Some people pick up his tips on how to dress. I picked up his fascination with stars...like Drew Boyd."

"Why Carl? Is there something that you haven't told us?" Lindsay teased.

"Yes, does Emmett know he has competition?" Melanie teased.

"And does Drew know that he has another admirer," Lindsay continued.

"Will you two just rein in your imaginations? I can't believe we're even having this discussion at MY breakfast table!" Carl said in mock protest. "Debbie honey, help me out here!"

"You've got to admit, Carl, you do tend to be a bit start-struck. I think it's fucking adorable," Debbie added.

Carl sighed deeply in exasperation; then he turned his conversation back to Jenny, "Why do I even try to hold a conversation with them, when it's so clear that you're the only one who understands me?" he asked, handing Jenny another handful of Cheerios.

Jenny took the additional cereal and started to smile and babble.

"Okay, you've had your fun! Now, Carl and I have a date with Jennifer tonight. We're going to the Kit Kat Club." Debbie finally said.

Lindsay and Melanie originally thought that it was an odd place for Debbie to be going. Then, they remembered that Brian used to say that Debbie was a person, as much at home in a gay club as she was in the kitchen. So it all started to make perfect sense except for one thing.

"And you're taking Jennifer along," Lindsay asked with a laugh. "Okay, you I understand, but Jennifer?" she added.

"It's time for me to see that Jennifer has few new experiences," Debbie said with a laugh.

"Oh, that's for sure!" Melanie added.

"Are you finished? I was only letting you know in case you had plans for tonight yourself. I was just letting you know that I won't be able to baby-sit for my adorable granddaughter," she quipped, tickling Jenny under her chin. "In fact, I would say that we should be getting home quite late," she added with a devious smile at Carl.

"Yes, I would definitely have to agree with that," Carl added mischievously with a twinkle in his eye.

"So what IS on your agenda for today," Debbie finally asked.

"We have a few errands to run and some business to take care of," Melanie explained.

"Then I was hoping to see Michael," Lindsay added.

"And I was hoping to see Ben," Melanie confirmed.

"That sounds like a perfect plan," Debbie confirmed with a smile. "And sometime this weekend, maybe we can talk too?" she innocently suggested.

"Hmmm...talk?" Melanie asked. "About what?"

Debbie said quietly, "You might as well tell me the real reason for all these trips to Pittsburgh?"

"What do you mean?" Lindsay tried to innocently ask. "You mean...you don't want us here?

"Did I say that? You know that you're always welcome. You're family for fuck's sake! I just want you to know that I'm not fucking blind. And the pieces don't add up. I just want you to know that you're not fooling anyone," Debbie pointed out. "I just think we should talk about it," she quietly suggested.

Before anyone could say anything more, Emmett breezed into the kitchen, as only Emmett could.

Everyone was immediately distracted.

"Em, you're already dressed. Isn't it a bit early for you to be up and out this morning?" Carl teased when Emmett joined him at the table.

"I just got this last minute call from one of my special customers, asking for a last minute lunch. So it seems that I have to get up and go! I already called Darrin, and he's agreed to help. Thank goodness he was available on such short notice," Emmett continued to ramble. "Oh well, I see that everyone is up and ready to start their day," he finally acknowledged, saying a quick hello to Melanie and Lindsay and tickling Jenny.

"So what can I get for you," Debbie asked with a smile.

"Just coffee, thanks. I think that's all I'll have time for." Emmett took a gulp of his coffee and appeared to be ready to stand up to leave. Then he said, "I guess I'll see you all later."

"Don't bet on it, Em! It seems that Carl and Debbie have this hot date at the Kit Kat Club tonight. They're even taking Jennifer with them to this den of inequity. Maybe one of us should call Justin to make him aware of what's going on while Brian has him sequestered at the mansion painting with Gus," Lindsay teased.

"Well, I'm not sure what Justin is aware of," Emmett volunteered with an abrupt change in attitude, sensing that Lindsay was trying to cause trouble, "But he isn't painting with Gus today."

"Of course, they're painting together. They always paint together. Gus looks forward to it every time he visits," Lindsay confirmed, as if stating the obvious.

"Well that may usually be the case, but I have it on good authority that Gus is with Brian at Kinnetik today," Emmett reported with a satisfied smile. He was taking more pleasure than usual, relating this earthshaking news. "Brian mentioned something about having a six year old assistant for the day. Oh, I would say that he was pretty excited about it."

"You must have misunderstood, Em," Melanie tried to correct him, "I thought that Brian said that he was swamped with work. That was why he was here in Pittsburgh in the first place. How on earth is he going to spend time with Gus?" she wondered.

"Still don't get it, do you?" Emmett asked, showing his disappointment.

"Get what?" Lindsay asked.

Before Emmett could answer, Debbie interrupted, "If I remember, the last time we made cookies together, Gus couldn't stop talking about how he had stayed up late at the loft with Brian while he worked. It was the highlight of one of his visits," Debbie added.

"And Gus just likes to sort of hang out with Brian and Justin...no matter what they're doing. They don't have to do something special just because Gus visits," Emmett reminded them. "I would have thought you two would have figured that out by now."

"So Em, how did you know that Gus was going to be at work with Brian?" Lindsay asked out of curiosity.

"Oh, Brian mentioned it at lunch yesterday," Emmett answered nonchalantly.

"See, Brian's probably had it planned since yesterday. I guess Gus is going to have another interesting adventure," Debbie said with a laugh. "Wait until he calls you to tell you all about it," she added.

"That's what worries me," Melanie commented with a laugh.

"I'm sure you'll get over it," Emmett quipped with a laugh. "Well, I have to go," he said, gulping down the last of his coffee. "I'll see you later."

And with that Emmett was gone.

"Emmett may not be concerned, but I'm still not sure about you taking Jennifer to the Kit Kat Club," Lindsay began again. "I wonder if we should call Justin."

"You leave Sunshine alone. Brian already knows, so I'm sure that he's filled Sunshine in on everything by now," Debbie said with a laugh.

"I must say that I'm really looking forward to tonight," Carl added, leaning over to kiss Debbie on the cheek.

"Well JR, have you finished your breakfast?" Carl asked. "How about I take you to spend the day with your daddy?" he continued.

Jenny Rebecca immediately reached out her arms to be picked up. Carl quickly obliged with a laugh.

Debbie helped Carl and Jenny get ready to go. First, they kissed Debbie goodbye; then they waved goodbye to Lindsay and Melanie.

A few minutes later, Melanie looked at her watch and realized that it was time for her and Lindsay to go as well, so they kissed Debbie goodbye, and they were off.

Debbie sat in her kitchen sipping a final cup of coffee before she began to clean up the kitchen.

She was going into the Diner. It was time for her to resume her life. Her shift would be starting soon, and she didn't want to be late.

Things were starting to return to normal.

Chapter 25 – The Assistant

Saturday Morning...(Day 62)

"Good Morning, Cynthia," Brian said cheerfully, as he entered his office.

"Good Morning, Boss..." she tried to reply but a little voice interrupted her.

"Good Morning, Cynthia," a six year voice finally echoed.

At that moment, Cynthia looked down into the miniature face of Brian. "Good morning, Gus," she quickly said with a smile, opening her arms for a hug. Gus immediate hugged her. "I heard a rumor that you might me joining us today," she added with a smile in Brian's direction.

"Now Cynthia, if you will release my new assistant from your death-grip, we might actually get some work done today," Brian complained, shaking his head. He was trying to hide a smile.

Cynthia also tried to hide her smile, but she knew that today was going to be really interesting. She was going to make it a point to stick as close to Brian and Gus as possible. She didn't want to miss anything.

"You're in early," she pointed out. "Ted's in, of course. Murph and George want to see you, if you have a moment. Can I get either of you a cup of coffee or a Danish?" she asked with a smirk.

"No thanks," Brian answered, "We had breakfast this morning."

"Mickey Mouse Pancakes!" Gus quickly volunteered. Brian rolled his eyes.

"Really? How?" she asked, looking at Brian for answers.

"Jus made them just for me," Gus continued to explain, "But Dad had them too," he added to Cynthia's continued amusement.

Brian was now glaring. "Don't you have work to do?" he finally asked her.

Cynthia turned around to go to her desk, laughing. Finally Brian could hear strains of "I love my job" echo forth as he and Gus walked away from her into Brian's office.

With Cynthia finally out of the way, Gus quickly agreed that with Brian that they needed to examine his calendar for today.

Brian observed that he had several important meetings with his staff, but not before he and Gus made sure that they had everything necessary for building the perfect fort.

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A little later, Brian decided to show Gus the Art Department, so hand in hand they visited Murph and George together for a brief meeting.

Gus felt extremely important because he got to join them at the table during the meeting. He sat quietly at the meeting watching everything that happened.

Gus got to look at the boards that they were talking about.

And he rested his chin on his hand during the meeting just as Brian was doing to show that he was listening to everything that was being said.

When the meeting was over, somehow the discussion turned to forts. Murph and George were quick to a few quick sketches of forts before Brian and Gus returned to Brian's office.

Gus immediately started working on his building projects, carefully testing out these new design ideas for his forts.

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Creativity was flowing at Kinnetik. Gus was continuing to work on the design and construction of his newest fort, and Brian was working on his newest campaign. Both of them were lost in the creative process.

In the midst of this creative process, Ted entered Brian's office. He stood there at the doorway for a moment and just observed father and son in action. Then he smiled at what he saw, before breezing into to disturb things. He had a meeting scheduled with Brian.

"Hey Gus," Ted quickly said in greeting, as he confidently took a seat next to Brian's desk.

"Uncle Ted," Gus said back, quickly pulling a chair over to join the meeting at the desk.

Brian was couldn't resist a smile.

"Theodore, I'd like you to meet my assistant," Brian said, motioning toward Gus.

"Assistant?" Ted asked with some surprise.

"Theodore, did you not wash your ears this morning? Assistant!" Brian reemphasized.

"I see..." Ted whispered and then waited to see what else Brian had to add.

"So I would be on my best behavior today if I were you, or my assistant might fire you and save me the trouble," Brian smirked for good measure.

Ted just sighed...for obviously, Brian had found a new way to torture him.

Cynthia entered the office and smiled at Gus. She too pulled up a chair to Brian's desk to join the group.

"So now that everyone is present," Brian said, looking first at Ted and then at Cynthia and finally at Gus, "Let's go over those figures for the new office," he requested.

Ted cast an eye in Gus' direction, realizing the absurdity of this situation. He was about to discuss financial plans and projections in the presence of a six year old. Ted thought to himself, 'Wait until I tell Em!' Then he simply smiled and made his report to Brian as usual.

Brian asked his usual probing questions during the meeting, which Ted answered quickly.

When Ted was finished, Brian leaned over and whispered something to Gus.

A few moments later, Gus turned to Ted and said, "Good job!"

Since strokes rarely happened in the office, Ted accepted the compliment with a smile, even if the source was Gus. He promptly made sure to thank Gus for the vote of confidence. He glared at Brian, who now had his mask in place, which told Ted nothing.

"I'll be in my office if either of you need me," Ted finally said with a smile as he was leaving.

After the meeting, Cynthia stood up to leave. Then she suggested, "Gus, I was wondering if you would like to keep me company at my desk for a while?"

Gus thought it over for a bit and decided that he liked Cynthia so that wouldn't be so bad.

So, he waved goodbye to his dad.

"You're leaving me?" Brian asked.

"Just for a little while. Cynthia needs me," Gus explained. "I'll be back," he added.

Brian smiled as he watched them leave his office; then he quickly went back to working on the computer.

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Gus and Cynthia were sitting at her desk discussing Gus' favorite topic...painting with Justin...when Vincent, one of the new ad exec in the office came up to her desk.

"Cynthia, I need to see Mr. Kinney," Vincent explained.

"He's tied up on a call at the moment, but you're welcome to wait. What do you need?" she asked.

"He wanted to see these boards," he explained, showing her the stack he had in his arms.

"Do you mind if Mr. Kinney's assistant takes a look at these first?" she asked, reaching for the stack of boards.

"No, go ahead...I could probably use a second opinion,"

"Well, in that case," Cynthia said with a twinkle in her eye, "what do you think, Gus?" she asked, showing him each board...one at a time...and noting his reactions.

Gus and Cynthia looked at each board carefully. Gus really liked some of them, and he let Cynthia know. For some reason two of the boards Gus just didn't like. No reason he just didn't like them.

Cynthia just smiled. She knew that she was about to enjoy what was about to happen. "Well Vincent, I think you have your answer," she innocently said, handing the boards back to the ad exec with a smile.

"When did four year olds become judges of art," Vincent protested as he took back his work.

Gus stood up and put his hands on his hips and announced, "I'm six years old!"

"I'm sorry," Vincent apologized. "I didn't know. Excuse me!"

"And Gus IS Mr. Kinney's Assistant. You don't want to forget that," Cynthia teased.

"Right...." Vincent said, now completely dejected, wondering what the world was coming to when children were passing judgment on his professional work.

"My Justin does stuff for my dad all the time," Gus added confidently, as if he knew things that others didn't.

"What?" Vincent asked, in total confusion.

"I have two mommies and a dad and a Justin," Gus announced, as if it were the most normal revelation in the world.

"Gus has two mommies and two daddies," Cynthia clarified.

"Oh, I see," Vincent said with a laugh. "I only have one mommy and one daddy," he commented in reply. He now laid the boards down on Cynthia's desk to talk further with Gus, lowering him self down to Gus's level.

"Too bad!" Gus answered. Cynthia tried to hide her smile.

"So you think your Justin could do a better job on my boards, huh?" Vincent said with a laugh.

"My dad ... well, Jus knows what he likes," Gus added confidently.

Vincent stood up at this point, shaking his head.

Cynthia smiled. Then she tried to put on a straight face as she handed the stack of boards back to him. "Maybe you should make another stab at the boards. Or, maybe you would like to have Murph or George take another look at them with you before you show them to Mr. Kinney," she suggested with a smile.

"You're kidding?" Vincent challenged.

"What can it hurt?" Cynthia suggested, gesturing toward Gus.

Vincent took the stack of boards, and then he tried to scowl at Gus.

Gus refused to be intimidated. Instead, he merely raised an eyebrow in a gesture so reminiscent of Brian, that Cynthia was having a hard time not laughing.

She finally reached over to give Gus a hug to hide her laughter.

A few moments later in Murph's Office, Vincent entered, shaking his head.

"What wrong, Vincent? Bad day?" Murph innocently asked.

"I was just told by a six year old that two of my boards are bad. He muttered something about Jus does stuff for his dad all the time," Vincent said mockingly, making himself comfortable on one of the stools. "What the hell is he talking about?"

Murph laughed, "I see that you've met Gus."

"Yes, with two mommies and two daddies," Vincent confirmed.

"Yes, well one of those daddies happens to be the artist, Justin Taylor."

"The darling of the New York Critics? Fuck!"

"I see that you read the Arts & Entertainment Section of the papers. I'm impressed," Murph teased. "Sometimes Justin can be coaxed to work on projects for the company," he added.

"And my boards are supposed to compete with his fine art? You've got to be kidding!" Vincent protested. He began to wonder would his humiliation ever end.

"That's right you're new, you haven't worked with Brian...Mr. Kinney...yet either, have you?"

"No...I have a meeting in a few minutes."

"Think about it!" Murph suggested. "Brian lives surrounded by the fine art of one Justin Taylor. Do you really think we can get away with just anything here? At Kinnetik, we'll redo boards until Brian is happy. You're new here, but you'll get used to it. Maybe you should be a little nicer to Gus," he teased. "By the way, I forgot to mention that one of his mothers is an art critic."

Vincent sunk lower on his stool. His Saturday was not going quite the way he had hoped...and now this.

"You're kidding, right?" Vincent tried to complain. "Now you want me to listen to a six year old critic. I thought that this was one of the premier agencies in the country."

"Remember, Gus may be only six...but he's Brian Kinney's kid. Obviously, he already has clear ideas of what he likes."

"So! What's your point?"

"I'm not saying that Gus is right. And he may not be able to tell you what's wrong...but he can feel that something isn't quite right. Gus knows what he likes."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Nothing. Gus just gave you a warning. Don't worry. Brian will definitely set you straight," Murph gently said with a smile.

At that moment, Murph's phone rang. It was Cynthia asking Vincent to return because Brian was ready to see him now.

Vincent returned to Brian's office with his boards in hand. Murph decided to go along; he couldn't resist seeing how this mini-drama played out.

Arriving back at Cynthia desk, she immediately told them to go right in to see Brian.

Vincent immediately noticed that Gus was no longer not at her desk. He started to wonder why.

As Vincent entered Brian's office, he quickly found his answer.

Brian and Gus were sitting at the table waiting for him.

"Hi, Gus," Vincent said, upon entering. "Mr. Kinney..."

"Hi," Gus said with a smile.

Brian smiled, "I see that you've met my assistant," he added.

Murph too greeted Gus and Brian and made himself comfortable at the table. He didn't want to miss a minute of this meeting.

"Oh yes, we've met," Vincent responded, "I'm just surprised to see him at OUR meeting," he added hesitantly.

"Where else would you expect my assistant to be?" Brian innocently asked with one raised eyebrow.

Vincent immediately recognized the gesture...the same challenge that he had seen earlier from Gus. At that moment, he knew this was going to be a very long meeting.

"Now, give Gus and I a chance to get settled, and then you can dazzle us with your preliminary ideas," Brian finally said, handing Gus a bottle of water and getting one for himself. He nodded to Murph and Vincent offering them water as well, but they shook their heads no.

With that out of the way, Brian made himself comfortable again and checked on Gus. Then motioned for Vincent to begin.

Although he was terribly nervous, Vincent made his presentation to Brian and Gus and Murph.

They all listened intensely, but no one said anything.

When Vincent was done, he handed the stack of boards to Brian and waited for his comments.

Brian looked at the boards and then made a big deal of showing each board to Gus.

Gus showed that he liked most of the boards. Vincent felt some relief.

Brian noticed that Gus still didn't like two of the boards. Vincent knew he was in trouble. Murph simply waited to see what would happen next.

"My assistant seems to be have liked your presentation," Brian began with a hint of a smile. "The fact that he's still awake is definitely a point in your favor," he teased. "And he even seems to like most of your boards," he continued. Then he paused. "But for some reason, my assistant seems to have problems with these two boards," Brian said with a smile. "Do you have any idea why?"

Vincent took a deep breath. He realized that now he was into the surreal.

"Obviously, something is wrong with those boards. I haven't had time to re-evaluate since Gus pointed out the problem earlier," he said after a gulp.

Murph couldn't resist a silent smile.

"Might I suggest that you rethink the color and size of the font? At the moment, I think that your copy and your artwork are fighting, rather than complementing, each other," Brian added with a patient tone.

Vincent felt totally dejected.

"Vincent, don't take it personally," Brian said with am understanding smile. "Ever since Gus was a baby, he has been hanging out with Justin while he paints," he pointed out. "I'm just lucky that he agreed to be my assistant today," he added.

"Lucky indeed," Vincent said with a smile. "Well Gus, I'm going to see if I can fix these two boards. Maybe when I'm done, you'll have another look?" he asked.

Gus smiled and nodded yes. Murph couldn't believe what he just witnessed. He couldn't wait to tell George and Ted all about this.

"Vincent," Brian finally said, "I really liked your campaign idea. Good job. Once those boards are fixed. I think your campaign idea might be what the client had in mind."

"Thanks, Mr. Kinney," Vincent finally said. "Bye Gus. I'll talk to you later."

Gus was now beaming as Murph and Vincent left the office.

"Well Gus, look at the time. We've had quite morning, haven't we? How about I treat you to lunch from the Diner, that way we can keep on working?" Brian suggested. "We'll have Theodore go pick lunch up for us."

"And we have to get lemon bars for Jus!" Gus insisted.

"Of course..."

Brian picked up the phone to call Ted, who quickly announced that he would be delighted to go to the Diner to pick up lunch for Gus.

Ted said he would stop by Brian's office shortly to get everyone's lunch order.

Ted hung up the phone and was finally able to get a laughing Murph out of his office.

Then Ted stopped by Brian's office to get everyone orders. The entire time he was there he had a hard time keeping a straight face while talking to Brian and Gus after the story that he just heard from Murph.

Ted couldn't wait to tell Cynthia what he'd heard. In that moment, he once again understood why Emmett loved to share gossip so much.

And Cynthia heard strains of "I love my job" as Ted had walked by her desk.

She couldn't wait to hear the details.

Chapter 26 – Comics & Conversations

Saturday...(Day 62)

"Michael!" Carl called out as he entered the comic book store. "Michael, are you here?"

Michael came out of the backroom. "Sure Carl, I'm right here," he answered as he immediately reached for Jenny, and she reached out her arms to him in response.

"I was going to tell you that I had a special delivery for you, but obviously you two have already found each other," Carl added with a laugh, "It's easy to see that I'm not needed here, so I guess I'll be on my way," he added.

"Thanks for dropping JR off. This way, at least, I can avoid an unpleasant scene with my mother," Michael suggested.

"Listen Michael, I know that you're upset. You probably have every right to be angry. And I really don't even know what to say to help because I can only begin to understand how you must feel about what happened."

"Thanks for that, Carl," Michael responded.

"But Debbie is still your mother, and we both know that she loves you very much," Carl pointed out. He didn't want to take sides in this conflict between mother and son. Debbie had told Michael the whole truth about his father. Carl had to wonder how long Michael would carry a grudge about the past.

"The good news is that Daniel stopped by yesterday," Michael quickly revealed. "So he and I had our first chance to talk."

"That's great. How did it go?" Carl asked with renewed curiosity. "I must say that I really like Daniel. I too am looking forward to getting to know him better," he added.

"He's going to be around, so I'll all get a chance to know him better," Michael relayed with a smile. "He and I are going to take it slow. We'll start off at 'Daniel' and work our way to 'dad'," he added. Then he looked at Jenny and kissed her. "At least my daughter won't have to go through this. At least JR knows who I am."

Michael hugged his daughter and she giggled.

"Yes, she does, and she loves you very much," Carl added. "Just look at that smile."

Carl took a minute to take in the scene of father and daughter; then he said, "I have to go. Duty calls! You'll be at dinner tomorrow, won't you?"

"I...I don't know. The way things are between me and Ma. I'm not sure it's a good idea."

"I know that things may not be perfect...but Brian and the girls are in town too. You can't cut yourself off from everyone. You need your family around you too," Carl quietly suggested. "Just ask JR, I'm sure that she'll agree with me. In fact, we were discussing this over Cheerios this morning," he added with a laugh.

"You and JR were discussing me and the family dinner over Cheerios?" Michael asked with some hesitation and disbelief. Somehow the image made him smile.

"See what you missed?" Carl teased. "You have no idea the things that JR and I discuss," he continued. "Well, I have to go. I'll talk to you later. Bye, Michael."

"I'll see you later, Carl," Michael said, shaking his head as he thought about what Carl had just said.

And with that Carl was gone, leaving Michael and Jenny alone in the store together.

Jenny merely waved goodbye to Carl, and then she focused totally on her father.

"Okay, JR," Michael said, making her comfortable on a quilt near the register. "You're getting quite big. I think it's time that you had your first lesson in the superheroes," he explained, joining her on the floor.

Michael reached behind him for a comic and began his first lesson about superheroes for a two-year-old, making sure that Jenny enjoyed the brightly colored pictures.

The two of them were absorbed in a comic when Hunter entered the store. All he saw was Michael reading a comic to Jenny, and he immediately thought of his own first experience reading a comic in the store.

"Oh no! Michael, what are you doing?" he immediately protested, now rushing into the store.

"I'm fulfilling my fatherly duties and giving my daughter her first superheroes' lesson. Why do you ask?" Michael explained, wondering what on earth had set off Hunter.

"What, Justice League, Superman? The kid is going to have nightmares! Melanie and Lindsay are going to kill you! You aren't reading the latest copy of Rage to her, are you?" Hunter continued to protest, becoming more protective of JR as the conversation progressed.

"Oh sure, Justin's sexually explicit drawings are just what my two-year-old daughter needs," Michael answered sarcastically. "No, I was thinking more in line with Owly, wasn't I JR?" he pointed out, waving the comic at Hunter.

"That's a relief," Hunter finally said as the racy images vanished from his mind. "Wait a minute! How can you be reading Owly? Owly has no words!" he quickly pointed out as he finally settled down on one of the stools by the counter.

"Yeah, like JR can read!" Michael felt it necessary to point out. "I can fucking tell my daughter a story! You know that Ben isn't the only storyteller in this family. Have you forgotten that I do actually write a comic?"

"Sorry, I guess I overreacted," Hunter apologized.

"You thought I was reading her Rage?" Michael said with a laugh. "I really can tell the difference between my kids, you know," he added sarcastically.

"Sorry, Michael..."

"No, I was making up a story to go with the pictures since this is JR's first lesson in superheroes."

"I'm still not sure Melanie's going to be too happy. She'll worry that JR will turn into...well you. So if Gus and JR get interested in comics...this obviously means that you and Justin are going to have to create a new comic for little kids like them," Hunter said with a laugh. "Illustrating it should keep the bleached-blond occupied," he added. "And I'm sure I can find some way of keeping Brian entertained."

"When are you going to get over your thing for Brian?" Michael asked with a laugh.

"I guess that I could ask you the same question," Hunter said quietly but clearly with usual attitude. "Brian's weakening...can't you tell? I think he likes me... I know that in time he'll eventually give in. I'm young...I can wait," Hunter teased. "It's only a matter of time..."

Michael smiled, "You may be young...but even you don't have that much time," he quipped. "It's pointless! Take it from one who knows..." Michael whispered.

"I'll bear that in mind," Hunter said quietly. "It's good to see that you're coming around," he added.

Michael simply smiled, but he didn't say anything.

Hunter watched Michael and JR for a few moments; then he announced, "I think I'll go grab something at the Diner. Can I get you anything?"

"No, I'm fine, and JR already has snacks for later."

"I also have a few errands to run...but I may be back, later," Hunter announced.

"No problem," Michael said, returning his attention back to his daughter.

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Later in the day, Michael had a visitor at the store that he didn't expect. ""Hello, Michael," the visitor said quietly.

"Ben?" Michael said with some surprise. "What are you doing here? How are you?"

"I'm fine, Michael. But according to Hunter, a lot has been going on for you."

"I see that, as usual, our son has a big mouth," Michael said with a laugh.

"He didn't mean to betray your confidences," Ben tried to explain in Hunter's defense. "He was just so excited, and he wanted someone to share the news with. He chose me."

"So then you know..."

"Yes..."

"Just as we suspected several years ago...it turns out that Divina...Danny Devore is my father. Ma finally confirmed it. Now, the whole truth is out...and it seems that I have a father after all these years."

"I'm happy for you, Michael. I know this is something that you've wanted for a very long time. How does it feel?"

Michael sighed deeply, "It's all so new. It's a bit late. My whole life has been a lie. I've wasted a lot of time.... There's been so much lying. Everything about my life has been based on a lie," Michael said sadly. "Maybe, if I'd known the truth, my life might have turned out so differently," he added sadly.

"That's easy to say, Michael. But you don't know that for sure. At least now, you have a chance to build a relationship with your father. Be grateful that you have that chance. Stay focused on the present. Anything else would be pure speculation. You don't know what would have happened if you had known all along. Take my advice and don't torture yourself. Just try to live with what is."

"Teachings from a Zen Master?" Michael asked and then waited patiently for a response from Ben.

"Life experiences, Michael. Nothing more." Ben admitted softly, allowing his affection to show through. "Hunter said that Danny stopped by too. How did that go?"

"Danny prefers to be called Daniel now. He's a lot like I remembered from a few years ago when I met him. He and Ma both have this sense of humor and this loud laugh. I can understand why they were drawn to each other when they were just kids."

"Sort of like you and Brian, huh?" Ben added cautiously.

"Yeah. For a very long time, Brian was all that I had. We shared everything. We protected each other. But let's face it, Brian and I aren't anything alike."

"I know. Somewhere along the line you grew up. I still remember the time when you stood up to Brian...I remember...when you didn't want Justin to be all alone," Ben reminded him.

"That seems like a long time ago."

"Not to me..." Ben whispered. "Look, I just wanted to stop by to congratulate you on finding out the truth about your father. I'm sure that I don't know all the details, but try not to be too hard on Debbie. We all do stupid things when we're 17, and remember that she didn't have Brian to bail her out," he added with a smile.

"But Ben, she could have told me four years ago. The evidence was staring her in the face. Yet, both she and Daniel continued with the lie until now. Daniel said that he had commitments back then, so he couldn't stay in town to work things out with me. He also felt he owed something to Ma, so he didn't push for the truth either. But Ma was here. She could have just told me the truth then. I can almost understand the lie when I was a baby. I was too young to know. But four years ago, I was a mature adult. She could have told me the truth then. That's the part that's so hard to forgive. This time the lie was so deliberate."

The sadness that Michael felt hung in the air. Ben felt compelled to respond and be the voice of reason.

"Michael, you've got to admit she must have been scared. You are now...and have always been...the most important thing in her life. She was probably afraid of losing you."

"And yet that is precisely what she's done. Somehow, the fact that she finally told me the truth doesn't change the fact of the lie. I don't know if I can ever trust her again. I just don't know if I can ever forgive her."

"Give it some time, Michael. But clearly this is your decision. But you have to decide what the cost is for YOU to hold on to all that anger. Debbie is going to go on with her life. You have to decide what you're going to do."

"That's fine. She can go on with her life and let me lead mine. I have to find a way to live with the fact that the one person that I trusted in the world, lied to me my entire life. With that to deal with, all the rest about love and all, doesn't matter because it's all built on lies. I can never trust her again."

"So what are you going to do?" Ben challenged.

"I'm not sure. I'm going to take some time to figure things out. At this moment, my life belongs only to me," Michael professed with an amount of arrogance.

"You're kidding yourself, Michael. Nobody's life belongs only to them! There are too many other people involved...just because they love you," Ben persisted. "Hunter and JR are involved too. Everyone's life is interconnected, whether we want it to be or not," he pointed out.

Michael still wasn't ready to hear this argument.

"Well, thanks for stopping by," Michael said with a smile, closing down any further discussion. "Maybe I'll see you around," he added.

Ben simply waved goodbye and started to leave, when he heard approaching tiny footsteps. He turned just in time to catch a running Jenny approaching him.

"Oh, it seems that someone has been waiting for you," Michael said with laugh.

"So JR, how has life been treating you?" Ben asked.

Jenny responded by insisting that she be picked up and then nestling her head in Ben's neck. Her giggles could be heard throughout the store.

"Why don't you spend some time with her in the office? I was reading Owly to her earlier. I'm sure that you can tell her a much better story," Michael suggested, as he watched the pair.

"So JR...Michael thinks that I should tell you a story...of course, you'll be asleep like always...you and my publisher seem to share the same opinion of my stories," Ben teased, "But let's see what I can manage?" he said to her. Then he looked at Michael and said, "Are you sure that don't mind..."

"No problem, Ben. She also has some snacks in the office, in case she gets hungry, in the middle of your story," Michael suggested.

So Ben and JR moved into the office, and Michael got to watch his daughter and Ben playing together before they settled down for their moment of storytelling.

For a while, Jenny was engrossed in the story that Ben was telling.

Really what she enjoyed most was curling up in Ben's arms and leaning against his strong chest. For Jenny, no one was as tall or as strong as Ben, and she had missed him over the weeks of their separation.

As expected, Jenny found Ben's story just what she needed to put her to sleep. It always happened every time Ben tried to tell her a story.

Ben always thought that it was the plots to his stories. Hunter said it was simply the gentle quality to his voice. Whatever it was, Jenny was now asleep in his arms.

Ben gently laid her down and covered her with a quilt. He then kissed her goodbye.

Ben waved goodbye to Michael, as he was leaving the store, and he told Michael that he would talk to him later.

For once, Michael didn't push for anything more. He was simply glad that Ben had come to see him.

Chapter 27 – Why Don't You Join Me

Saturday Afternoon... (Day 62)

"Melanie?" Ben said, walking over to her booth at the Diner to greet her.

"Ben..." Melanie whispered, in return, with some surprise.

"Are you alone? Where's Lindsay?" Ben asked as he started to lean against the side of the booth.

"She had some things that she wanted to do. I've agreed to meet up with her later," Melanie responded with a smile. "So, if you've got some time, why don't you join me?"

Ben nodded as he slid into the booth across from her.

"Hunter told me that you were all in town," Ben whispered, "But I wasn't sure if I'd get a chance to see you...with everything being the way it is and all," he added sadly, "But, I did see JR earlier when I stopped in to see Michael."

"So...you stopped into to see HIM, that's...."

"Don't read anything into it!" Ben protested, holding up his hands to block her thoughts. Melanie noticed the gesture and simply smiled.

All conversation was momentarily interrupted as Kiki came over to take their order. Afterwards, the friends resumed talking.

"So how have you been?" Ben easily asked, once they were alone again.

"If you're asking how things are between me and Lindsay, let me stop you right there!" Melanie challenged in response.

"It was only a simple question." Ben responded with a slight smile. "You don't have to be quite so touchy, you know?"

There was a protracted silence now between them until Ben began to try again.

"Right...so what did you have in mind? Are we both just going to sit here, in silence, and try not to talk about what's going on with both of us? Because if we're going to dance around each other like this, I can easily change my order to to-go. I do have a home where there's peace and quiet, you know?"

"I'm sorry, Ben. I know that we're family and all. It's just that this is all very hard. It's not anything that I didn't already know; it isn't even something that I didn't come to terms with a long time ago; it's just that every time I have to deal with it....it makes me crazy," Melanie tried to explain softly, allowing her sadness and vulnerability to show. It's true, she had accepted the bond between Lindsay and Brian, a long time ago. But as she was reminded over these last weeks... accepting the reality of the situation and living with its consequences were two entirely different things. Melanie looked at Ben and tried to smile as she understood that they were partners-in-pain.

"Of course, you don't have to explain it to me. Forget the fact that I watched my partner demand that his best friend leave his new life partner to be there... waiting for him sometime in the future. It wasn't even about the lifelong bond between Brian and Michael....it was the fact that I had been so discounted in the process. That had never happened before. It was as if I really didn't matter...like I was already dead," Ben quietly admitted. "I intend to be around for a very long time. I now understand...I now realize... that my partner...had different plans in mind."

"I know that it might seem that way, but you have to know how much Michael loves you."

Once again, conversation was interrupted as this time Kiki delivered their orders.

"That's not what this is about..." Ben confirmed, once they were alone again.

"But..." Melanie challenged even though she secretly understood what Ben was saying.

"Look Melanie, do you remember when Justin left Brian for Ethan?" Ben asked.

"You mean when Brian was being an asshole and wouldn't simply tell Justin how much he cared about him? Yeah..." she answered. Melanie looked at Ben, trying to figure out where he was going with this obvious non-sequitur.

"I want you to think back...remember, Justin didn't leave because he didn't love Brian anymore."

"No, I guess not," she quietly had to admit. "Justin has loved Brian since the first moment he first met him."

"Right...Justin left because he needed something...something he obviously felt he couldn't live without any longer."

"Ben, I love this trip down memory lane, but Brian and Justin are just fine...more than fine, I would say."

Ben quickly cut her off. "There were things that Brian was unable or unwilling to give Justin at the time."

"Look, we both know that Brian can be an asshole. But..."

"Yet, whenever the two of them were in the same room together, you could always see how much they loved and cared for each other."

"So what's your point?"

"As much as Justin loved Brian, it didn't stop him from leaving."

"But Justin and Brian got back together."

"Only after they figured out that they really wanted to be together. After they both learned what it took to be together," Ben said quietly. "Then they were each willing to fight for it. They were even willing to sacrifice to preserve it." Then Ben paused for a moment before continuing. "That's why Brian is now working from Kinnetik-New York instead of Kinnetik-Pittsburgh," Ben pointed out with a smile.

"How did you know about that?" Melanie asked in shock.

Ben simply shrugged. "Haven't you seen it? Think about it? In the last few months, when was the last time you've seen them apart from each other for any length of time? Then their legal union happened!" Then Ben simply smiled again. "Brian's opening a New York office is the only thing that makes sense. Justin still needs to be in there. Brian clearly wants to be with Justin. For some reason, he obviously doesn't want the family to know about it yet."

"Have you said anything to anyone about your suspicions?" Melanie practically whispered.

"Only to you..."

"And this has what to do with you and Michael?"

"Michael and I are apart because we haven't figured out how to be together. We love each other. We're married. But that doesn't change the fact that we each need things that one can't give the other."

"But, I've seen you and Michael together...."

"That changes nothing...." Ben pointed out.

"Now you see why I've always felt the way that I do about Brian," Melanie said with a sigh.

"But don't you see. This has nothing to do with Brian. All Brian's been doing is trying to live his life. He made changes over the years so that he and Justin could be together. Brian likes who he is. I'm not even sure that Michael, and maybe even Lindsay, truly see the man that he has become. They are still fighting to hold onto the person that they once knew....a person that he stopped being years ago."

"I know. I always thought that Brian was the problem...that he was the one holding on to Lindsay. I now know differently."

"This isn't about Brian. This is about my partner that is so locked into a past childhood promise that he can't see anything in the real world of the present. Unfortunately, I'm very much here in the present."

"And I'm really glad that you are." Melanie added lovingly, reaching out to gently touch his arm. "Just promise me that you won't do anything rash. This will work itself out in time between you and Michael... just like it did for Brian and Justin," she assured him.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Right now, Lindsay can't bear to see Brian planning and living his life either, without consulting her at every turn. She always wanted to hold onto him. It's as if she thinks that she'll suddenly lose him completely."

"They've always been very close."

"Our relationship maybe falling apart, but all she can see is that Brian has somehow slipped away. He seems to have been growing away from her. Now that he has, she doesn't know what to do with all her feelings...or anything else. But I do know that Lindsay is trying to figure things out. I wouldn't still be here otherwise."

"That's very understanding of you," Ben said sarcastically. "At least the two of you are trying to work things out."

"We love each other Ben. We're committed to each other. We have to at least try...because every time that we've separated in the past, we always fight so hard to get back together. So if we're going to separate, once again, it can't be a revolving door. It really does have to be the end. In some ways we're no different than Brian and Justin...except without all that fucking...of course."

"Of course..." Ben added with a smile

"But enough about all this...how was Michael when you saw him?"

"He was very excited that JR is visiting. But, of course, you know that!"

"That's not what I mean and you know it," Melanie mock protested, with a knowing smile. "He's always happy to see his daughter."

"Look Melanie, things have been really awkward between Michael and me. Today was the first time that we've had anything to say to each other in weeks."

"I know that it's hard Ben, but give it some more time. Don't close any doors."

"I don't have to close the doors. Michael already did that... weeks ago."

"C'mon you know how he is. You know how Michael has always thought of Brian as his own personal property. He and Lindsay are a lot alike in that regard."

"You don't seem to understand do you," Ben quietly suggested. "This isn't about Michael's feelings for Brian. This is about Michael's actions. He demanded that Brian leave Justin so that his own future would be assured. Forget that was the ultimate act of selfishness! I have a husband that really cannot deal with my HIV status. I have a husband that is looking forward to his future after my demise. I can't live with that. So this isn't about loving each other...this is about life choices. I want more for myself than this."

"So you don't see any hope for things to change?"

"Michael and I have to find a way to co-exist for the sake of Hunter and JR and everyone else. Beyond that, I just don't see it. And when you think about it, it really isn't fair to either of us to continue to live this fantasy life. It's not real."

The sadness of the moment was evident between them. Melanie was still hoping that things would return to some semblance of normalcy between her and Lindsay, while Ben was clear about the prospects for his future.

Now that they had reached this level of understanding, Melanie endeavored to change the subject. "Em told us that Michael now knows that Divina Devore is his father. How is he really taking the news?"

"It's a shock. You definitely have to admit that. He's really excited about the prospect of having a dad, but at the same time, as you can imagine, right now, he's angry with Debbie for keeping the secret for so long."

"We can't judge Debbie's actions; after all, she was only seventeen."

"Four years ago would have been the perfect time for her to come clean, when Michael first began to suspect the truth. He begged everyone for the truth. I think he might have forgiven her back then. But Debbie had her own reasons for continuing this lie. Now, even I'm not sure about the outcome."

"Give it time, Ben..."

"Hunter is pretty excited about the prospect though. He's already had a chance to see Divina out of drag. According to his description, Divina...I'm sorry...Daniel as he prefers to be called...really looks a lot like Michael. I understand that now that the truth is out in the open, this is going to be such an adventure for Hunter as well as Daniel and Michael."

"This is going to be an adventure for us all."

"Let's wait and see how this plays out. I know that Michael has waited a lifetime for this moment. This is like another childhood fantasy come-true. We'll have to wait and see how this goes. Thirty five years is a long time to dream."

"What are you really worried about?"

"Michael may retreat so far into the past...into his childhood. He may never escape this time. There won't be a Debbie there to steer him through treacherous waters. There won't even be a Brian there to catch him when he falls. Michael has such high hopes for his relationship with his dad. No matter how things are between him and me, I don't want to see him hurt or disappointed."

"Ben, we're all going to be there for Michael. Brian isn't going anywhere. Look, the fact that he is in town now is proof that he hasn't turned his back on us. Brian and Justin and everyone else will still be there for Michael," Melanie added.

Ben just nodded.

"Besides, Michael has never been able to stay mad at Debbie for very long...no matter what she's done over the years. He'll eventually come to terms with this too. In the meantime, we're all here for him," she added.

"I should know that, shouldn't I?" Ben asked with a smile.

"We're all still here for you too," Melanie added, reaching across the table to once again squeeze his hand. Ben simply smiled.

Then Melanie happened to look up at the clock. "It's time for me to go. I have to meet Lindsay," she said hurriedly.

"Sure, you go ahead," Ben said quietly.

"Will I see you at dinner tomorrow?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I don't want to..." Ben stumbled through his response.

"Cut the bullshit, Ben! You'd better not let Debbie hear you vacillating like this," Melanie said with a laugh. "You know she'll have your balls!" she added with another laugh.

"I don't want to make Michael uncomfortable."

"Even if Michael shows up, there will be enough people there who'll want to see you. Remember, Brian and Justin are in town. Besides Debbie's going to need you."

"I don't know...."

"Think about it," she said with a smile. Then she leaned down to give him a gentle kiss on the cheek before she left.

Chapter 28 – A Special Lunch

Saturday Afternoon...(Day 62)

Michael looked at his sleeping daughter and couldn't suppress a smile. Jenny Rebecca looked like a little angel. He began to wonder if he had ever looked like that...peaceful, without a care in the world.

Sitting on a nearby stool, he stopped to ponder his life. His father was alive. After a lifetime of growing up with only Debbie and Brian in his life, he now had a chance to form a new relationship with Daniel. Now at thirty-five years old, Michael was going to find out how it felt to spend time with his dad. He only hoped that it wasn't too late.

Michael looked at the innocence of Jenny Rebecca and realized that it may already be too late for the other important relationships in this life. Brian was with Justin, and now they were legally bound. Deep down Michael really knew that everything really started to shift when HE came along...Justin. And Brian started to change little by little. He just didn't want to admit it.

Oh, Michael knew that Justin was going to cause Brian a great deal of pain in the coming years...after all, Justin was still just a kid. But after he and Brian had a chance to talk, Michael understood that Brian felt it was all worth it. Otherwise, the radical step of legalizing his relationship with the Boy Wonder would never have happened.

A deep sigh escaped him as he realized that his lifelong dream, of growing old as part of a couple with Brian, after Ben was gone was just that....a childish fantasy that would never come true. So Michael tried to content himself with the fact that he still had Brian in his life...and he always would. They would always be there for each other. That's what best friends did.

And then, there was Ben. Michael knew that he and Ben still loved each other, and more than anything, he wanted his relationship back on track with Ben. He wanted his family back together...especially now that he had the father that he always wanted.

At least today, Ben had actually visited him at the store. After three weeks of protracted silence between them, Ben had made a little first step. They could now at least be civil to one another whenever they saw each other. In spite of this, Michael was very clear that their being civil to one another was okay as a first step, but he definitely wanted so much more. The question was what to do, when for once he had gotten himself into a mess that even the great Brian Kinney could not fix. Who could he turn to?

Finally, there was Debbie. How do you love and trust someone who has lied to you for a lifetime?

Before Michael could go any further with his silent musings, the bell over the door of the comic book store sounded. He found that he had an unexpected visitor.

"Lindsay?" he called out as he moved toward the counter. "What are you doing here? Where's Mel?"

Michael walked around the counter to give Lindsay a hug.

"Melanie had a few errands to run, but I wanted to see you. And, since it's lunchtime, I picked up a couple of sandwiches for us. I was hoping that we could have a late lunch together while we talked. How are you, Michael?" Lindsay asked.

Lindsay waited for a moment for a reaction to her lunch suggestion. It took only a second for Michael to break into a big smile.

"You got lunch for me?" he asked with some surprise.

She responded by simply holding up the bag containing the food. Lindsay allowed him to see the name on the bag.

Michael immediately noticed that lunch came from one of the upscale Deli's in town, so this was not a simple lunch from the Diner. Lindsay had made an effort to do something nice for him.

"Thanks Linds. I haven't been eating very much lately," he quietly admitted.

"I can understand that," Lindsay acknowledged sympathetically.

Michael went to change the sign on the door to "Closed", so that they could enjoy lunch uninterrupted.

"Where's Jenny?" Lindsay asked, looking around the store.

"Our daughter is asleep in back. She's had a rather busy morning. She convinced Hunter to play with her. I gave her, her first lesson in Superheroes....make that an encounter with Owly rather than Rage," he teased, not wanting her to get the wrong idea. "And then Ben came by here and spent some time with her. He even read her a story until she fell asleep, in the middle of it, like always."

"So, I guess that means that we will be alone?"

"For a while...."

Lindsay started to unpack the sandwiches on the counter. Then she pulled up a stool and made herself comfortable on it.

"We missed you last night when we arrived," she began. "I'm so used to you and Ben stopping by just after we arrive at Debbie's. I missed it. Things just seemed different."

"A lot of things are different now. Ben and Hunter live in an apartment in town. I'm in the house alone. I'm still upset about how things are, but at the moment, I just don't know what else to do."

"Give it some time, Michael," Lindsay suggested as she took a bite from her sandwich.

"That's easy for you to say. You and Melanie are still together. Your relationship didn't fall apart because of what Brian did. But me...I lost everything. I lost Brian, and I lost Ben."

Lindsay really didn't have the patience to rehash history, but she clearly felt the need to restate the obvious. "All you had to do, Michael, was wish Brian and Justin well. That's what we talked about...you and me. I'm sure that if you'd done that simple act, Ben would have given you time to get used to all the other changes. He would have given you time to work through all the rest."

"Is that what Melanie is doing? Is she giving you time to work through all the stuff...time to adjust?"

"I don't have anything to adjust to," Lindsay protested. She knew when she said it that it was a lie, but she couldn't allow herself to wallow in self-pity. She had too much at stake.

"Of course, you don't," Michael said sarcastically. Then he smiled. "So things are okay with you and Mel?"

"Of course, Mel and I love each other. You know that," Lindsay continued to professed.

Michael got quiet before he said with a sigh, "So did me and Ben, but look where we are now. Brian and Justin are the only ones that are really okay."

"But you have to admit that Brian and Justin have been together for a long time. Their union wasn't really anything new. I only wanted to be sure that Justin didn't have any later regrets about the artistic career that he could have had but let slip away."

"How could he have regrets? He's always wanted Brian. I would say that he managed to get exactly what he wanted. It was like everything else....it was just handed to him on a silver platter. Everything always came so easily for the Boy Wonder. Now, he truly has Brian. But just look at me...I've lost everything."

"Not everything," Lindsay quickly responded, "I heard that you now have a dad," she added.

"Who told you that? I can't believe that Ma's now telling the whole town! This is a personal matter. First, she keeps the secret for thirty-five years. Now, she has to tell everyone. How am I supposed to show my face in this town if everyone knows?"

"Will you calm down? Debbie didn't tell us! Brian got Em to tell us last night. We're family, Michael. We're here for each other. Have you forgotten?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that I'm sure that my dad is just getting used to the idea. I just don't want him to have to deal with everyone. Dealing with everyone may be just enough to make him disappear for another thirty-five years. Then where will I be?"

Lindsay started to laugh as she tried to picture Divina Devore as shy and unsuspecting...the same Divina Devore, who was used to performing before nightly crowds. Yes, she could picture the diva cowering at the prospect of his newly acquired family while being smothered by the death-grip hug from Debbie. Michael's dad was obviously in real danger here. Lindsay had a bit a trouble containing her final smile.

"It's not funny, Linds!" Michael whined.

"I'm sorry, Michael! Let's just say that I have a very different image," Lindsay added as she continued to laugh. She now tried to compose herself for Michael's sake. "So have you had a chance to talk to him yet...your dad?"

"Just for a few minutes. He dropped by the store yesterday. He came here just to see me. He wants us to have a relationship...just as much as I do. But, we both agreed that we were going to take it slow. I'm going to call him Daniel. I'll have to work my way up to Dad. After all, I'm not Gus or JR. I'm a grown man. I'm not sure that I really need a daddy at this point."

Lindsay interrupted. "I don't know. I'm a grown woman with a partner and two children. I can tell you, it would still mean a lot to me if my parents...either of my parents...would show a little love and acceptance of me and my kids. But I've tried to come to terms with the fact that some things just aren't going to happen. But you...you have a chance to have it all. You, at least know that your Dad won't reject you because of your lifestyle. That's such a different relationship! Your Dad will accept you for who you are. That's huge!"

"So does my daughter!" Michael was quick to point out. "JR has a chance at new relationship. She has another living, breathing grandfather to love her. And this grandfather is quite famous."

"I don't know," Lindsay teased. "She seems to be pretty smitten with Carl. They seem to have built this special relationship. It seems pretty unbreakable to me...with their private language and all."

"One relationship doesn't have to replace the other. Just like my relationship with Ben didn't replace my relationship with Brian. There's room enough ..."

"Of course, there is. I was only teasing," Lindsay explained. "I'm sure that Jenny is going to love, getting to know her new grandfather. And you're right...there is enough love to go around."

Michael simply nodded his agreement.

"Speaking of Brian, have you talked to him?" Lindsay continued.

"Yeah, we had a long talk. I understand that he and I will never be a couple. But Brian and I will always be best friends."

"I'm glad that you finally see that."

"You know, when we had our talk, I realized that Boy Wonder must have discovered some secret key to Brian Kinney that you and I must have missed over the years."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because...right now...Brian is so different. He's always believed in no apologies and no regrets...that part is the same...but now he doesn't care what anybody thinks about what he does. And he doesn't need drugs or tricks to do it."

"That IS so different, Michael. As long as you and I have known Brian, he has been fighting his demons. He fought this battle almost every day. No matter how successful he was, those demons wouldn't let him enjoy his success. Now it seems that with Justin, the demons may be still there...they just don't matter any more."

"We used to try and make the demons go away. We were the Justice League rushing in to protect him. Then he needed us to take care of him," Michael reminded her.

"Not anymore," Lindsay whispered. "I'm just worried about Justin. After all, he's so young. Being in a relationship with Brian has got to be lot for him to deal with sometimes."

Michael laughed. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about Boy Wonder. Somehow he's managed to worm his way in. One minute he was just tagging along with us....the next minute he and Brian are a committed couple. He just did it so easily. And Brian just seemed to wake up one day and gave him everything."

"I know it's hard to believe, isn't it? Of course, we both know how hard Justin had to work to finally get Brian to give in. I just don't want Justin to look back and wish he had made other choices. He has a chance to have a wonderful career for himself, if he ever gets around to focusing on it...instead of focusing all his attention on Brian."

"Well, if you notice, Brian's been spending a lot of time in New York lately. I have to wonder if Justin has anything to do with that," Michael innocently suggested.

"Brian must be just traveling on business. I'm sure it's purely coincidental that Brian and Justin happened to be in New York at the same time. I'm sure if he were thinking of actually relocating to there...he would have at least discussed such a monumental move to us," Lindsay relayed confidently.

She may have said it confidently, but inside she too, was beginning to wonder the same thing. She was beginning to wonder if Brian would make the move to New York to be with Justin...without discussing it first with her.

Before Lindsay could say anything more, their conversation was interrupted by the sounds of Jenny Rebecca coming from the back room. JR was now awake, so Michael went to gather up his daughter.

Michael and Lindsay attended to JR. The two of them spent some time with her and made sure that she was fed, before placing her in her play area with some toys.

Once JR was settled, they were about to resume their conversation in the front of the store...when Lindsay looked at her watch and realized that it was now time for her to go and meet Melanie.

"I've enjoyed having lunch with you, Michael, but I really do have to go," Lindsay said.

Michael smiled and thanked Lindsay for the lunch. He did understand that she was trying to do something nice for him...something to let him know that he was still special.

"So, I'll see you tomorrow at dinner?" she added.

"I don't know, Linds. Things are still not good between me and Ma right now. I think the best thing that I can do is to stay away for a while. After all, I have the books for the store to do and everything."

Lindsay wasn't going to let him get away with that. "You have to come to dinner. I'm sure that Brian will be there. You don't want to miss a chance to hang out with him, do you?"

"I still don't think it's a good idea. It's just too soon."

"Promise me that you will at least think about it?"

"Alright, I'll think about it. But just don't expect..."

"That's all I ask," she said with a smile. Lindsay walked over to hug him goodbye. "I have to go. I'll see you later."

"Sure."

"Carl and Debbie have a date this evening, so you can safely stop by to hang out with Melanie and me. Em will probably be there too."

"Maybe..." Michael said as a final goodbye, closing the door. He turned the sign on the door again to say, "Open".

Red Cape Comics was now back in business.

Chapter 29 – More Surprises

Saturday Afternoon...(Day 62)

"Debbie!" Ben acknowledged. She was standing beside his booth, just about ready to finally leave the Diner. "I didn't see you when I came in."

"That's because I had Kiki take part of my shift. I had some special shopping to do. I have a fucking hot date tonight with someone very handsome."

"So, Carl is taking you out for an evening on the town...it's been a while since you two have done that. What's the occasion?"

"We're taking Jennifer to see Divina Devore at the Kit Kat Club. She's never seen a drag queen show before," she added with a broad laugh. "This should be a fucking blast to watch!"

"Did I hear you say you're going to see Divina Devore? You mean Michael's father?"

"So I see that you know about that too," Debbie said with a smile. "Leave it to Brian to make sure that fucking everybody knows. This is probably the biggest news since the little bombshell that he and Justin dropped a few weeks ago," she added with a slight laugh.

"I think it's wonderful. This is something Michael has wanted for a very long time. For him it's like a dream come true. But, how are you handling things?" Ben had to ask, for even though he was concerned about Michael, he was still very fond of Debbie as well.

"Aside from the fact that my son hates me, you mean? You mean, aside from the fact that Michael now knows that I've lied to him his whole life? You mean, aside from the fact that he'll never trust me again? You mean, aside from all that?"

"I'm sorry, I guess I shouldn't have brought it up," Ben said apologetically.

"Well, at least the whole truth is out in the open...now we can all begin to pick up the pieces before it's too late."

"Honesty is usually the best policy. Although Debbie, believe me, I can understand why you might have done what you did long ago."

"Thank you for that, Ben. I don't expect anyone to really understand. It seemed so right at the time. Now 35 year later...well...you know. Anyway, Danny invited us to see his show tonight, and I for one, am fucking looking forward to seeing it. I've never seen him perform before in drag, so this is as much a treat for Carl and me...as it is for Jennifer."

Ben couldn't resist a smile. "I can only imagine."

"Well, let me get going. I have a lot to do before this evening. But, of course, I'll see you and Hunter for dinner tomorrow," she said emphatically.

Ben immediately knew that it wasn't a question, so he simply nodded.

"Good!" Debbie commented as she turned to leave, giving him a slight swipe on the back of the head to punctuate her meaning.

Ben smiled as he realized that some things never change.

Once Debbie left, Ben remained seated in the booth a little longer pondering the events of his day so far. He had successfully talked to Michael, spent time with Jenny Rebecca, had a chance to talk to Melanie, and had received the usual swipe from Debbie. Ben realized that his world was slowly returning to normal.

The events of the day had not finished unfolding, when a smiling Ted Schmidt joined him in the booth.

"Ted, what on earth are you doing here this time of day?" Ben immediately asked.

"Kinnetik is operating at top speed today. Of course, Brian's in town cracking the whip, as usual. Only now, he has this new assistant that seems to have everyone really on their toes."

"Brian has a new assistant?" Ben asked with some surprise. "What ever happened to Cynthia?"

"Oh, Cynthia's still there. But today, Gus is Brian's assistant too."

"I see," Ben said with a laugh. "Dare I guess how interesting things really are at the company?"

"Gus has already been attending meetings. Fortunately, he told me I was doing a good job. That means that Brian has to think long and hard about firing me. But I heard that Gus gave one of the artists a lot of grief about his boards. "So you see things are really hopping," Ted added with a laugh.

"So Gus is keeping everyone on their toes?"

"From what I've heard, there isn't much difference for the staff dealing with Gus and dealing with Brian. Of course, they were surprised by that turn of events. You and I, on the other hand, have already seen the six-year-old Gus in action, so we know what he's capable of," Ted reminded Ben with a smirk.

"I see that you're thinking about a certain hunger strike?" Ben said with a smile, as he remembered his last visit to Toronto. "Michael and I were there when Gus gave Lindsay and Melanie the silent treatment for the whole afternoon. The hunger strike was just the last straw. Yes, he's definitely very strong willed."

"He's got Brian's attitude with Justin's determination. Thank goodness, he's only six. We still have time for Lindsay and Melanie to mellow him out a bit...if that's even possible. I hate to think about the day when he is actually running Kinnetik."

"You know it won't be long. Time has a way of flying past."

"Well, let me pick up lunch and get back to the office quickly. I'm surprised that my cell phone hasn't rung with someone asking where I am," Ted tried to say breathlessly. "I'd better hurry back. Right now, Gus likes my work. If I leave him and Brian alone for too long, I'm sure that Brian might encourage Gus to prepare my pink slip."

"I see your point," Ben said with a laugh. "It sounds like a good idea that you get back there quickly."

"I'll talk to you later, Ben. Will I see you at dinner tomorrow?"

"Debbie and I were just discussing that."

"So she issued her royal command, did she?"

"And I would like to bypass another swipe on the back of the head, so I'm thinking..."

Ted cut off Ben's remarks in his haste to leave, "Smart move! Just remember that you and Hunter are still a part of us...no matter what's going on with you and Michael."

"I got that..." Ben quietly agreed.

"Well, I have to go.... " Ted said, leaving to pick up his take out order.

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"Theodore," Brian said sarcastically, when Ted finally arrived back at Kinnetik. "It was good of you to finally rejoin us. Fortunately, while you were gone, my assistant and I had a meeting..."

Brian let the last part linger in the air, as he enjoyed watching Ted squirm.

Gus was sitting near by, carefully watching his dad. Gus then looked at Ted and slightly raised an eyebrow.

Ted recognized the look and knew it didn't bode well. He continued to hold his breath, reminding himself that in spite of how things appeared...he was only gone for a brief time...and Gus was only six years old.

"Gus would like to examine the array of products from our newest account, Snookums Inc. We were thinking that you and Valerie may be able to guide him in his product review," Brian said in all seriousness.

"The Snookums Inc. products...right!" Ted said in agreement, letting out the breath that he had been holding. "I'm sure that Gus' input will be invaluable. So Gus, shall we call Valerie and ask her to join us in the conference room after lunch...say in about 30 minutes?" he asked with a smile.

Gus was now looking forward to his next meeting.

In the meantime, Brian helped to spread out lunch so that Gus could easily manage it. Ted was even invited to pull up a chair and join Brian and Gus for lunch.

After lunch, Gus and Ted called Valerie, and they all had a chance to review the products for Snookums, Inc, which makes a new line of brightly colored, soft and fluffy, stuffed animals. Needless to say, Gus had a lot to contribute to the product review as Valerie made careful notes.

When the meeting was over, Gus couldn't wait to run into Brian's office to tell him about what he had seen.

Brian patiently listened to all that a very excited Gus had to relay.

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Debbie arrived back at the house and was thinking about her date for the evening. The more she thought about it...the more she was looking forward to having both Carl and Jennifer with her as she enjoyed her first performance of Divina Devore.

It was true, that a few days ago, Debbie had seen glimpses of Divina's performance during rehearsals. But then she had too much on her mind...as she contemplated telling her son about all her lies. Back then, she had been too distracted by her own thoughts to really notice what was going on during the rehearsals at the Club.

A knock on the door interrupted her musings.

"Sunshine!" Debbie squealed, when she saw who was standing there. "What are you doing here? How did you escape?" she teased.

"Brian left early this morning with Gus. So, since I had some sketches to drop off to Michael, I thought that I would stop to see you first. How are you?" Justin quietly asked, kissing her gently on the cheek.

"I'm sure that Brian filled you in on everything..."

"There really isn't much that we keep from each other," Justin admitted.

"Somehow, I figured that," Debbie quietly admitted. "So now you know that I've lived a lifetime of lies."

"One lie lived over a lifetime is not the same as a lifetime of lies," Justin reassured her. He really could understand the difference. "You did what you thought you had to do."

"You know, Sunshine, with 20:20 hindsight, I really do see that I could have handled things differently. I was so obsessed with giving Michael a father that he could be proud of...that the truth was lost in the shuffle."

"Well you succeeded! Michael has had a lifetime of being proud of his war-hero father. Now that he knows the truth. I'm sure finding out that Divina Devore is his father is going to make him equally proud."

"You know, I never wanted him to know that some old drag queen was his father. I wanted more for him that. But, I don't guess you would understand."

"Of course, I understand. I'm sure it's natural for parents to want a lot for their kids. Craig and I once had a great relationship until he learned the truth about me. Then everything in our relationship suddenly fell apart. Michael, at least knows, that he'll never have to deal with that. Michael and Divina Devore have a chance to be really close...given some time."

"Somehow, I knew that you would understand."

"And now that I know that you're okay, I'll let you get back to whatever. I'm going to go and drop off those sketches. Then I'm going to see if I can pry Gus away from all his fun at Kinnetik."

"So Gus opted to go to the office with Brian, huh?"

"I'm sure that Brian's been busy all day with Gus, especially since I know that he knew I had a lot of painting to get done. I've been very productive today, so I just thought that I would see if Gus wants to go riding with me."

"I know how much Gus loves to hang out with Brian, but I have the feeling that he'll love riding with you better," Debbie said with a laugh.

"I don't know. Gus loves to ride, but he loves to ride with Brian. I hope that between Gus and me, we can convince Brian to take a break from work and join us."

Debbie couldn't resist smiling at Justin's efforts. She was always touched by the way that Justin always managed to get around Brian's walls. She knew even back in the beginning, when he was only 17, that Brian really didn't stand a chance. Smiling to herself, Debbie was always glad that Justin had slid under the wire and circum-navigated Brian's walls of resistance. Once again, she looked at his Sunshine smile and knew that Brian's workday was probably over.

"I don't know," she teased. "I bet that Brian and Gus have probably been working hard all day. But, you know, I have this feeling that the two of them may have had so much fucking fun together..."

"You may have a point," Justin said with a slight hint of defeat in his tone. "But since I'm in town, it never hurts to check. Anyway, let me go see Michael and then get to Kinnetik. I'll let you know how things work out."

"And I'll be able to tell you what the Divina Devore Review at the Kit Kat Club is really like," Debbie teased.

"What?"

"Danny invited us to see the show. We're taking your mother too. This is going to be quite an evening."

"Did my mother happen to mention who will be her date for the performance?" Justin subtly asked.

"She hasn't said anything to me. What? Are you worried that Jennifer is seeing someone secretly? C'mon Sunshine, you and Jennifer have a great relationship. I'm sure if there was someone new, she would have told you."

"I wouldn't be too sure...."

"Well she hasn't said anything to me," Debbie finally admitted. "But she's been really supportive as I've tried to figure how to handle things with Michael and Danny. What are you really worried about, kiddo?" she finally asked.

"Worry is exactly the right word. I just wonder if she's seeing Tucker again. Neither she nor Molly has mentioned him in a while. I know that she liked him a year ago, but lately he seems to have just disappeared. I know that I've been in New York and everything, but still I have to wonder."

"I'm sure that your mother has just been busy, and you've got to admit you and Brian have kept all of us pretty busy, adjusting to your latest surprise." she added with a laugh. "There probably hasn't been time yet for her to meet someone new."

Justin had to laugh about the "latest surprise" comment. "You're probably right...like you've said before, everything will be revealed in time."

"I'll let you know what happens this evening," Debbie promised. "I want you to rest easy when you go back to New York."

"Don't worry, Debbie, either way I'm going to rest easy. I'm just curious that's all," Justin assured her.

"Ah...huh!"

"Sure..."

Justin walked over to give Debbie a kiss as he said his goodbyes.

Debbie watched him walk away. She couldn't resist chuckling to herself as she realized that sons really don't give their mothers' a break. Now she knew that the situation was universal. Once again, she smiled as she realized the evening might be even more interesting than she originally imagined. She could hardly wait.

Chapter 30 – An Interesting Twist

Saturday Afternoon...(Day 62)

"Michael..." Justin called out as he entered Red Cape Comics.

Jenny Rebecca recognized his voice, and little feet immediately headed in his direction. He lowered himself quickly to capture the running little person and swung her around in the air.

Michael quickly appeared, in pursuit of his running daughter...only to find his giggling daughter up in the air.

"My goodness Jenny, you have really grown since the last time that I saw you," Justin teased, as he finally lowered her to back to the floor. Then he finally had a chance to greet Michael.

"Hey, Boy Wonder?" Michael said in greeting. "What are you doing in here? Brian said that you weren't to be disturbed...something about you trying to get some paintings done," he complained.

"Yeah, Brian and Gus left for the office bright and early this morning," Justin said with a smile. "So I've had a pretty busy day. But I wanted to give you the finished sketches that you asked for. Here they are," he said, handing over a stack of drawings. "They should be everything that we'd discussed. I just didn't see any reason to take this back to New York and then have to email them to you...especially since I was coming into town anyway."

"Thanks. These look great, as always," Michael confirmed, continuing to flip through the stack. He seemed to be distracted by the drawings.

Justin watched Michael for a while in silence while he continued to examine the drawings. "Well, I should leave now. I'm on my way to Kinnetik," he finally said.

"Before you leave," Michael began, taking a deep breath and letting out a deep sigh. "I really need to ask you something."

Justin couldn't help wondering what was on Michael's mind, so he merely shrugged. "Sure...I guess..." he said, taking a seat on one of the stools by the counter.

"I'm sure that you've heard what happened between me and Ben." Michael began. "I'm sure you know that we aren't together. Ben and Hunter are living in an apartment, and I'm in the house alone."

"Yeah, I knew there were problems. I just figured that they were temporary," Justin quietly answered.

"I sure hope so," Michael practically whispered. Then a tone of determination entered his voice. "I just have to figure out what I need to do to get Ben back. I realize that I really fucked up things up between me and Ben. Now I have to figure out how to fix things."

"I see..." Justin said quietly. "What does this have to do with me?"

"Brian always says that you're pretty smart. I've got to admit that you have to be...after all, you did manage to end up with Brian. So, I was just wondering if you had any ideas about how I can get Ben back," Michael asked as a final act of desperation.

"You're asking me to tell you how to get Ben back?" Justin asked, completely surprised by question. "You've got to be kidding!"

"Look, I know that you and I haven't been particularly close. In fact, I'm pretty sure that you can think of like a thousand reasons why you shouldn't even give me the time of day." Michael paused to give Justin a moment to nod in response to his last statement. However, Michael was desperate and somehow figured that Justin was his last hope, so he continued, "But I was hoping that you would put aside our differences and help me out here. I really don't know what to do."

Justin stopped and looked at Michael. The sadness that Michael felt was clearly visible for anyone to see. Justin thought it over for a moment and considered that in spite of everything that Michael had done...this was still Brian's best friend, so he took a deep breath and made his decision.

"Look Michael, I'm not sure that I know what to tell you. I know that you and Ben love each other. Believe me, that's a big start. I think the key that you have to remember is how you won Ben over in the first place. You might want to consider putting those same things in play to get him back. I'm not sure exactly what happened between you two...but I think you just have to remember why you got together in the first place. You have to go back to the beginning to get him back."

"That just seems like a daunting task."

"Anything worth having always is."

"I see your point."

"I'm always glad to help," Justin teased with a smile. "I have to go."

"I know....thanks for the advice...."

"I'm not sure how much help I was."

"You, at least, still think that there's some hope for us. Thank you for that."

"Over the last six years, Brian and I have had to fight our way back to each other. I learned that even when it seemed like everything was lost...there was always hope," Justin admitted.

"That's because you held on. And, just look at you now....legal partners!?"

"Yep..."

"So you're telling me that I should still hold on to the hope that Ben and I can work things out."

"That's what I'm telling you. It's not over until it's over. I'm not saying that it will be easy...anything worth having rarely is. But you managed to win Ben the first time, against his resistance. I don't see any reason that this time should be any different."

Michael let out sigh. "Thank you."

Justin simply smiled at Michael; then said his goodbyes to both Michael and Jenny. Then he turned and left the store.

As Justin left Red Cape Comics, he had to pause on the sidewalk outside for a moment because he couldn't believe what had just transpired between him and Michael.

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Meanwhile, back at Kinnetik, there was a deep discussion happening between father and son about something on the computer.

Their moment was later interrupted by a gentle knock on Brian's door.

Both Brian and Gus were pleased but surprised by the visitor who entered.

"Justin!" Gus screamed, running over to wrap his arms around him.

"Hey Gus!" Justin began. "So tell me how your day has been?"

Gus was all smiles as he was about to settle down and tell Justin all about his day.

"Okay, Sunshine, what are you doing in town in the middle of the day?" Brian finally asked after all the niceties were over.

Justin simply leaned over and kissed Brian gently. Gus couldn't stop laughing as he watched his father become quickly silenced.

Gus quickly covered his eyes with both hands, while he continued to giggle as Brian and Justin continued kissing.

Once the kissing had ended, Gus was all smiles as he resumed telling Justin about his day so far. All during the telling, Justin and Brian kept looking at each other and smiling.

"Well Gus, I can see that you've had quite a day," Justin teased. "I just came by to see if either of you would be interested in going riding. I talked to Chuck, and he said that our horses are waiting for us," Justin innocently mentioned with a smile. "But I can see that you're both really busy."

"And, you're supposed to be painting," Brian reminded him. "How can you possibly have time for a ride?" he asked while carefully noting the expression on Gus's face.

Brian knew, at that moment, that his workday was over.

Once again, Justin simply smiled, "It was just a suggestion. You know how things like riding and dancing at Babylon are good for the endorphins, so that I can paint longer and better," he continued to tease. "Oh well...maybe another time..."

"A suggestion, huh?" Brian tried to sound gruff, as Gus began crawling into his lap. "I know that you really do need to paint," he commented. Then Brian turned his attention to Gus. "What do you think, Gus?" he asked, looking down into hazel eyes that matched his own. "Do you think we should help Justin to paint better? Do you think that we can manage to stop working and go riding with him?"

The answer was obvious by Gus' smile.

"Well, Sunshine! It looks like this is your lucky day. Gus and I have decided to make the supreme sacrifice to help you paint," he teased, standing up and starting to gather his things. "Of course, you realize that I'll have to take work home," he added for good measure.

Gus reached out and gave Brian a hug. "I'll stay up tonight and help you," he added with a smile.

"That's an offer too good to pass up," Brian said with a smile. "Okay, let's get out of here."

Brian announced to Cynthia that he was leaving for the day. Cynthia simply smiled as she watched everyone start to leave.

As Brian, Justin, and Gus were getting ready to leave the office, they ran into Vincent breathlessly, heading their way with a stack of boards.

"Oh, Vincent," Brian said with a smile. "I see that you have those new boards already."

"Well, Gus was so upset with my last attempt that I wanted to try to fix them...so that I could get his reaction. I didn't realize that you were leaving," Vincent added.

"Don't worry about that. I think that it's very wise of you to seek expert advice," Brian admitted with a secret smile. Then he turned and said, "Vincent, I'm not sure if you've met my partner," he added, pointing in Justin's direction. "This is..."

"This is MY Justin," Gus said quickly before Brian could complete the introduction. He left no doubt in Vincent's mind as to who this blond person was.

"So, I heard," Vincent said with a laugh as he greeted Justin.

"Hi," Justin said with a smile.

Brian thought that some explanation was in order. "It seems that earlier today, Vincent produced several boards that Gus was unhappy with," he said with a smirk.

"Gus quickly pointed out to me that you, of course, would do a better job and would produce boards that would make Mr. Kinney happy," Vincent revealed with a smile.

Justin had to laugh, "Vincent, you have to remember that Gus is a little biased. After all, he's been keeping me company while I paint ever since he was in baby."

"So I've been told," Vincent relayed with a laugh. "I just wanted Gus to check and see if he's now okay with these boards."

Vincent handed the boards over to Gus, and Gus, Brian and Justin examined them together.

"I see that you implemented my suggestions," Brian pointed out. "What do you think Gus?"

Gus finally nodded his approval.

Vincent was relieved. "Well, that's a relief! I was really worried," he added breathlessly. "It's not everyday that you're told by a six year old critic that your work sucks!" he relayed. "Of course, it's not every day that my simple graphics get compared to fine art of Justin Taylor either. I must say that this day has really been quite an experience."

"I can imagine," Justin said with a smile. "Just don't take it too personally."

"Let's just say that Gus has raised the bar. I'm going to have to work really hard to succeed around here," Vincent teased. "It's been good to meet you, Justin."

"It was nice to meet you, Vincent," Justin added, "But we really need to get going."

"Sure," Vincent added. "And, Mr. Kinney, I'll be in tomorrow to finish up those last things you requested. That way, everything will be ready on schedule for the meeting on Monday afternoon."

"Thanks," Brian said quickly. "Keep up the good work."

"We're going to visit the horses," Gus quickly explained to Vincent.

Brian rolled his eyes at the comment. "We're going to see if we can get in a short ride before it gets too late," he explained.

"I hope you have a good time, Gus. And I look forward to seeing you soon. I really learned a lot today. And I promise to do a better job next time," Vincent said, as he shook Gus' hand.

Then Brian, Justin, and Gus left Kinnetik together.

Gus couldn't resist a smile, as he waved a final goodbye to Vincent.

Chapter 31 – The Evening Begins

Saturday Evening...(Day 62)

As everyone was driving away from the riding stables, Gus had his nose pressed against the window. He was longingly watching the horses fade out of view.

"I think I'm beginning to like this riding thing," Brian commented, as he continued driving. "Especially, since we actually got to ride outside this time."

"I like the trails too," Gus said, leaning over to give Justin a kiss. "Thanks, Jus..."

"Don't thank me. Chuck felt that you'd progressed enough in your lessons to be released to the open trails. I'm really proud of you both," Justin added.

"You know, when you first tricked me into riding the horses, I wasn't sure how I would feel about it. Now, I actually think I like it. We're going to have to find riding stables while we're in New York," Brian said with a smile.

"Or, maybe we could get horses?" Gus suggested.

"Get horses?" Brian smirked. "What on earth would we do with horses?" he innocently asked. A part of him figured that this day would come, but now that it was here, Brian had to find a way to blame Justin for everything. "See what you started?" he said softly, looking directly at his partner.

Justin just shook his head.

"Then we could go riding all the time," Gus continued, making his point.

Justin simply smiled as he watched the negotiation continue between father and son.

Gus was now on a mission.

"I see..." Brian responded.

Justin had to wonder how long it would be before Gus wore Brian down, and horses were added to the stables at Bri-tin.

"But I was thinking, that maybe I would move my studio into the stable area when we did the renovations. Doesn't that sound like a good idea, Gus?" Justin asked, while looking over at Brian.

"That would give you a lot more space than your current studio arrangement," Brian said, smiling at Justin. "I have to admit, that really IS an excellent idea."

"No Dad! I like Justin's studio where it is," Gus immediately pointed out. "Horses are better," he added for emphasis. Gus, once again, leaned over to put his arms around Justin's neck when he finished. "Right, Jus?"

Justin simply hugged Gus, but he couldn't help wondering, how he got involved in the horse-negotiation between father and son.

"So you think that we should leave Justin's studio where it is, huh?" Brian directed his question to Gus, while glancing only at Justin.

"It's perfect...I have my corner for my toys. I get to read to Jus...and everything," Gus paused to try to see if he could think of other reasons. He just knew there had to be something else that he hadn't mentioned yet, so he looked with sad eyes in the direction of Justin for help.

"Well, I guess, that I could probably manage with my studio where it is," Justin said with a slight shrug. "If I had to..."

Gus immediately smiled at hearing this. He knew that he could depend on Justin.

"Okay, Gus, I'll think about this," Brian finally said. "And, of course, I have to talk with Thomas before I do anything. He might not like the idea of horses being around all the time. We'll have to see," he added.

"Thomas had horses when he was a little boy," Gus was quick to victoriously point out.

"What?" Brian asked, quite surprised by this news. "And how would you know that?"

Justin had to quickly turn his head to hide his laughter at Brian's reaction.

"Thomas told Nicky and me all about it," Gus added confidently.

"He did huh? Well, let me think about this," Brian said with a tone of finality. "We'll see, Gus."

Gus sat back quietly at that statement. His six year old mind was now plotting how to convince Justin that horses were a good idea. Somehow he figured that should be his next tactic. Justin was always the key to everything.

"Do we need to pick up dinner while we're out?" Brian asked. "Or, should we just have it delivered?"

"I talked to Teres earlier, and she told me that she was fixing Gus' special riding meal. I'm sure everything will be ready by the time that we get home. Now that you mention it, I am rather hungry," Justin added.

"What a surprise?" Brian teased, earning a gentle swipe on the arm from Justin.

"I'm hungry too," Gus added from his position on the back seat. "But, Jus, maybe we can draw horses before dinner," he innocently commented.

"Maybe not before dinner," Justin suggested, "How about after dinner?"

The smile on Gus' face was all the answer that was needed.

Brian wasn't about to let this moment quietly slip by. "Well, I would say that you've had quite a busy day, haven't you, Sunshine? You managed to spend time in town with Debbie and Michael; you managed to stop Gus and me from our very busy day at the office to go riding with you; yet, you still had enough time to plan dinner with Teres. Tell me, Sunshine, when did you find all this time? And did you have time to get any painting at all done today?" Brian teased.

Justin decided that the best course of action was to simply smile at Brian, rather than try to answer his question.

Gus smiled as he watched the interaction between Brian and Justin. He always thought it was funny to watch his Dad trying to make sure that Justin was painting, and even funnier to watch Justin get around his Dad.

"I'm waiting for an answer, Sunshine," Brian continued for emphasis.

Justin found the perfect way to skirt the issue. "We're home!" he commented as the car pulled into the driveway at the house. In view of the fact that they were now home, he figured he could just ignore the question and simply smile at Brian instead.

"Well, let's get inside," Justin quickly suggested.

Brian and Justin waved to Thomas as they got out of the car. Gus, on the other hand, hurried into the kitchen to tell Teres all about his riding adventure on the open trails.

Brian and Justin followed Gus to say a quick "Hi" to Teres and to check on the status of dinner. They indicated that they were going upstairs.

Teres simply nodded, so she wouldn't interrupt the story that Gus was already in the midst of telling. Thomas had also joined them at this point and was also listening to Gus.

Brian and Justin realized this story was going to take quite awhile, plus they sensed that somehow Gus was going to try to convince Thomas that their stable needed horses. Oh yes, Gus was going to be busy for quite awhile.

Brian and Justin headed upstairs...leaving Gus chatting away with Thomas and Teres.

"C'mon...we'll go shower together, it'll be faster," Brian said, nudging Justin up the stairs.

"It never has been before," Justin teased in response.

"This time will be different," Brian teased as he wrapped his arms tighter around Justin.

When they finally reached the upper level, Brian leaned down and kissed Justin passionately. "C'mon, it's been a long day and I've missed you. If we hurry and shower, maybe there will be a blowjob in my future?" Brian suggested.

Justin smiled one of his full wattage smiles, and simply said, "Maybe...."

"I could definitely get into that," Brian said, now pushing Justin along toward the shower. "Let's not waste time."

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Later that evening, back at Debbie's house in Pittsburgh, Lindsay and Melanie were busy helping Debbie with her makeup.

"It's been awhile since we've done this," Debbie said quietly.

"Try not to move, Deb," Melanie suggested. "I want to get this mascara just right."

"I still don't know why you're making such a fuss. At this point, Carl has seen me everyday. Believe me...he's well aware of what I fucking look like."

"This isn't for Carl...this is for you. You should feel like a princess. You should feel beautiful," Melanie added.

"And you're going to get a chance to see an old flame...the old love of your life...it'll be good to have him suffer and realize what he's lost," Lindsay said with a wistful tone.

"Lindsay, honey, I know that you mean well. But, Danny Devore wasn't the love of my life. The love of my life is downstairs, and his name is Carl Horvath. Danny is simply someone I once cared about...who happens to be Michael's father. After all, it was a long time ago. Now, he's simply an old friend," Debbie explained.

"How can you be so calm about this?" Lindsay asked.

"I'm calm because when you get to be my age, you learn from your mistakes," Debbie revealed. "I couldn't hold on to Danny all those years ago, any more than you can hold on to Brian now. They both made other choices. They each seemed to have found what they needed to make their lives complete. Danny has the fame he originally wanted. And, now he'll get a chance to know his son...he may actually be ready to be a father now. I'm not sure that 35 years ago would have been the right time for all this to happen. Brian, on the other hand, clearly doesn't want to miss a moment in his son's life. One look at Gus, and he suddenly started making changes in his life to be a good father. He's chosen to share the experience of his son with Sunshine. We all make choices!"

"I see that," Lindsay reiterated as she looked over at Melanie.

"Good. It's just like you chose to move to Toronto with Melanie," Debbie suggested. "You two seem to have the life there that you've always wanted."

"Sometimes life gets a little off track," Lindsay said with a sigh.

"Everything is okay between the two of you, isn't it?" Debbie asked.

"We're fine," Lindsay lied.

"Ah huh..." Debbie challenged. "So, which one of you plans to tell me the real reason for all these visits back here to town?"

"There isn't much to tell," Melanie suggested, hoping to close down the subject quickly. "Besides the most important thing at the moment is getting your blush just right," she added, reaching for one of the brushes to add the finishing makeup touches.

"The fucking blush can wait. This is about family," Debbie insisted. "So tell me what's going on. You know I love you both, and I'm here for you."

Lindsay and Melanie looked at each other and sighed. They both realized that they couldn't hide the truth any longer.

"Of course, we've been coming into town once a month so that our kids could spend time with their Michael and Brian...but we're also seeing our old counselor, here in Pittsburgh," Lindsay finally admitted. "She's trying to help us to help make our relationship better,"

"Are things that bad? Are you going to separate again? I know that these last weeks have been difficult for you...there really have been a lot of changes for everyone," Debbie remarked.

"No, we're not separating," Melanie pointed out. Lindsay had to let out a sigh of relief when she heard Melanie actually say the words. "We're working on things while we're still together. We still love each other. We just have to figure out how to be with each other better."

"This is important to both of us," Lindsay quickly added.

"So that's why all the frequent trips back here?" Debbie noted quietly. "Okay, but you do know that you two can always move back here. There's no shame in admitting that you made a mistake, you know?"

"We know that you're here for us," Melanie said, giving Debbie a gentle hug.

Debbie tried to pretend to shake off the hug. "Easy now," she teased, "Let's not ruin my makeup."

The three women shared a moment of laughter.

"Please don't say anything to anyone. Our process is difficult enough. I really don't want everyone to get involved. It really is between just Linds and me. We're working on things...together," Melanie begged.

"I understand," Debbie said quietly. "Even though it'll be fucking difficult, I'll keep your secret. The two of you being together and happy is best thing for my granddaughter, and that's really all that I care about."

"Thanks Deb," Lindsay added, "Mel and I couldn't do this if we had to contend with Michael's interference. You know how he tends to over react to things."

"I do know how my son is. He still likes to be in control of things...after all, his daughter lives with both of you," Debbie reminded them.

"We know that Michael is still the father, but we are still the parents. We have to be given some latitude to have a life. He really can't completely control our lives," Melanie reminded her.

"We've made every effort to make sure that Jenny spends time here with everyone. But after the fiasco he created just after Jenny was born, we need to keep Michael out of our private lives. And since he's already dealing with his own breakup with Ben, and now the arrival of his father, I don't think Michael can handle anything else," Lindsay added, clearly supporting her partner.

"You're probably right," Debbie admitted quietly. "He's still trying to make his world okay after Brian moved forward with his life. You're right. He's already mad at us all because we're happy about Brian and Justin. He's having a hard enough time trying to let go of his childhood fantasies. You do what you have to do," she said with a sigh. "No one understands that better than me. On this one, I happen to think that you're right. But you'll let me know if you need anything."

"Yes...Debbie," Lindsay said. "Now let's be sure that you're ready...after all, you have a very special date ahead of you tonight."

Debbie smiled. "Yes, Jennifer and I get to hang out together...with Carl. It's a fucking chance of a lifetime."

"Do you know if Jennifer is seeing anyone?" Lindsay gushed, always the romantic and looking for tidbits of gossip.

"As I told Sunshine earlier today, she hasn't said anything to me one way or the other. She never even mentioned if she was bringing a date tonight. There's been too much going on for me to deal with, I guess, so the subject hasn't even come up."

"So... the night really will be interesting...in more ways than one," Melanie said with a laugh.

"That's for fucking sure," Debbie agreed. "And what do you two have planned for the evening?"

"We've had a rather busy day. I thought that we would have a date night too. I picked up a few videos while I was out. It will be nice to just be alone together," Lindsay said with a smile.

"That sounds like a plan. Have you heard from Gus?" Debbie asked.

"No, our son seems to have forgotten all about his mommies. Whatever is going on, he appears to be having too much fun with Brian and Justin to even think about us. Maybe we'll get a chance to talk to him before he goes to bed tonight," Melanie said hopefully.

"Boys will be boys," Debbie teased. "From what I've heard, Gus spent the day at the office with Brian. I'm sure that he'll have a lot to tell you when you see him tomorrow. At least you know that whatever is going on, he's having a ball. You know how much he loves spending time with his Brian and Sunshine."

"Probably so..." Lindsay said sadly.

"Sometimes, when I watch Gus with Brian, I do get a sense of what I may have deprived Michael of all these years," Debbie said with a touch of sadness in her voice. Then letting her voice return to normal, she added, "But what's done is fucking done..."

There was a moment of silence between everyone.

"There!" Lindsay said, "Now you look beautiful," she added, holding up a mirror so Debbie could see herself.

"I wonder if Carl will even remember that I once looked like a princess," Debbie said wistfully.

"This will surely remind him," Melanie insisted with a supportive smile. "You look pretty."

"He'll probably be too captivated by Divina Devore," Debbie teased with a laugh. "He'll probably forget to even look at me. Besides, from what I've heard, the club is pretty dark."

Melanie couldn't let that comment stand without challenge. "Debbie, the rumors that I've heard would indicate that Divina Devore is getting ready to retire. She's not the young, beautiful drag queen on the edge of stardom that she once was. I'm sure that she's simply an aging drag queen. Carl may be fascinated by her performance...but you're the one he wants to come home to. Besides, he has never shown the slightest interest in dick...unless there's something you've neglected to tell us," she added with a laugh.

"I would have to say that this is more of his fascination with a celebrity. You remember how crazy he was about Drew Boyd," Lindsay suggested with a laugh.

"He's still he crazy about my favorite stud-muffin...but I do get your point!" Debbie said with sigh.

There was a knock on the door. "Okay," Carl said as he entered. "My girl was already pretty enough. I'm sure that all this," he motioned around the room, "Was just so you ladies could chatter away behind closed doors...with no male-ears present," he teased.

"Look at her, Carl. Isn't she beautiful?" Lindsay asked.

"Do the words...like a princess still come to mind?" Debbie asked, leaning over to gently give him a kiss.

"Those work for me," Carl teased. "But Sweetheart, it's time for us to go. We still have to pick up Jennifer."

"I'm ready....let's go," Debbie said, taking Carl's arm.

Debbie and Carl quickly said their goodbyes, leaving a gushing Lindsay and Melanie behind.

Chapter 32 – An Evening At Bri-tin

Saturday Night...(Day 62)

After a leisurely dinner, Brian made a grand gesture of happily locking Justin away in his studio. Gus couldn't stop laughing as he watched his father.

A few moments later, Gus decided to join Justin in his studio, so that they could draw those promised horses. He even stayed with Justin in the studio for a while to read him a story about horses. Justin clearly understood that he'd now been lobbied in an effort to add horses to Bri-tin.

Gus was just about to start a second horse-story, when Brian interrupted, announcing it was time for Gus to get ready for bed.

Brian helped Gus to shower and dressed him in his pajamas.

Then Gus insisted that he was going to help Brian with the work that he brought home, so the pair settled in Brian's study as Brian began to assemble his work for the evening.

Gus had gathered several of his books and had made himself comfortable on the couch in the study, when Brian asked, "Gus, don't you think that you should call your mommies and tell them about your day?"

After thinking about it for a while, Gus protested at first, but decided to follow his Dad's suggestion. Brian punched Lindsay's number into his cell phone and then handed the phone to his son.

"Brian?" Lindsay said, recognizing the Caller ID on her cell phone.

"It's me Mommy," Gus quickly answered.

"How's it going Gus? Are you enjoying your visit with your Dad and Justin?" Lindsay asked with a smile.

Melanie heard the question and simply shook her head...for she knew that Gus was enjoying himself.

Gus told Lindsay about his day at Kinnetik, including all the meetings he attended and especially about Snookums Inc. He also went on to tell Lindsay about riding on the open trails with Brian and Justin. Lindsay could hear the excitement in his voice. She could hear that Gus was truly happy.

At the end of the conversation, he told both his mommies that he loved them, but he had to go because his Dad needed his help with some work that he'd brought home from the office.

Gus handed the cell phone back to his Dad.

Then Brian and Gus spent a few minutes updating the calendar on his desk. They marked off another day before Nicky would visit again. Then Brian moved the calendar aside so that he had room to work.

Once again, Brian settled down to work on his computer, while Gus curled up again on the couch with his book.

Brian figured that Gus had already had a rather long day, and he expected that Gus would fall asleep any minute.

Surprisingly, Gus made an effort to stay awake to keep Brian company. He continuously talked to Brian while he worked.

A little later, Brian noticed the silence and realized that Gus had fallen asleep. Looking at his watch, Brian smiled as he realized that it had been a surprising 30 minutes.

Brian reached for the quilt on the back of the couch and gently covered his now sleeping son.

In the midst of working, Brian leaned back in his chair and looked at the two paintings that Justin had given him..."Brian Among the Rumpled Sheets" and "Talisman of Time". He knew when he'd made the right decision to have Thomas hang them in here...that it made this room special.

Brian reached inside his desk drawer and pulled out a letter.

Brian,

Legends have told us that the Ancients would craft a Talisman, a sacred object forged at the astrologically auspicious time when all the forces of the universe converged, to consecrate the energy of the spirit within the object. For the Talisman could only be created at this one moment in time and space.

It was said that with the proper Talisman, time could be eluded.

Some have said that with the proper talisman, time would have no meaning...one could travel at will...back in time to the past... or forward in time into the future.

Still others have said that the talisman can be used only once...one time to change a moment of the past or one time to change an instant of the future.

How often have we wished to go back in time to change the outcome of a moment? How often have we asked "what if"? And how often have we desperately clung to some single moment hoping it would never end?

We have had our moments, you and I...moments when all the forces of the universe converge. We have known both moments of extreme joy and moments of utter despair. And through it all...through all the ups and downs...we come here to this moment in time...here in the present...when We are still US...when we are still together.

The shadow of the lovers' embrace is the ultimate Talisman of Time, for the love that is shared is transcendent.

We choose what we'll do with the time that has been given to us.

Can't we simply choose to find some way to share a love without sacrificing a life? Can't we find some compromise? Can't we find some way to be together?

'It's only time' isn't good enough, Brian.

This is the moment for which our Talisman of Time was forged. Now is the time!

Justin

He ran his finger gently over the letter as he once again looked at the painting.

Brian really liked his life as he looked over at his sleeping son.

Unexpectedly, a few moments later, Justin quietly entered the study. He smiled at the now sleeping Gus and gently kissed him.

Then without saying a word, he quietly walked over and straddled Brian's lap, leaning down to give him a kiss as well. Brian wrapped his arms tightly around Justin and returned the kiss with passion.

This is the moment for which our Talisman of Time was forged. Now is the time!

And at that moment, Brian understood the legend of the Talisman of Time, and he knew that his life was now perfect.

Chapter 33 – Let's Get It Started

Saturday Evening...(Day 62)

Carl and Debbie parked their car in front of Jennifer's condo.

"Shall we go in?" Carl asked hesitantly.

"I'm not sure what we'll find," Debbie whispered.

"We'll find Jennifer, of course. Now, what ELSE are you expecting?"

"Never mind...I'm sure that in a minute we'll find out all that there is to know," Debbie assured him.

They approached the door, and just as Debbie was about to ring the bell, she paused.

"You should have heard the bell at the house that Jennifer used to live in. The doorbell sounded nice," she reminisced. "It was like a set of wind chimes. I remember the first night Michael and I took Sunshine back there. That was the night that I first met Jennifer," she added wistfully with a sigh.

"That's nice," Carl answered, shaking his head. "Now are you going to ring THIS bell or shall I?"

Debbie pushed the doorbell, and within seconds, Jennifer answered, still in her robe. "Carl...Debbie, come on in," she said taking their coats and offering them seats. "I'm almost ready. I wasn't exactly sure what to wear. Debbie, I love your dress!" she added.

"Emmett bought this as a present for me. I rarely get a chance to wear it. I never thought that red was my color."

"It's beautiful..." Jennifer gushed.

"It was always one of my favorites," Carl said with a smile, remembering the last time he'd seen Debbie in that dress. It was at the Policeman's Ball, and it was the moment he became absolutely sure that Debbie was the only woman for him. Naturally, it took him a while to be able to admit it out loud, but inwardly he knew the truth.

"I'll only be a minute. Can I get you anything?" Jennifer offered.

"No, we're fine," Carl added, trying to understand the continued look of anticipation on Debbie's face.

"Do you need me to give you a hand?" Debbie finally asked.

"No, I think I'm fine. I'll be right down," Jennifer confirmed with a smile, before heading back up the stairs.

When Jennifer was gone, Carl looked at Debbie with a puzzled look. "Debbie Honey, you want to tell me what's going on with you?"

"Now, why would you think that something is going on?"

"Because, I'm a very good detective..." he quietly said with a laugh. "And you look like you're waiting for a ghost to jump out of woodwork."

"It's nothing. I'm just wondering if Jennifer is bringing a date along tonight," Debbie finally admitted.

"Well, why didn't you just ask her?" Carl whispered, realizing that he was stating the obvious. He should have known that there was an unbelievable explanation awaiting him. He wasn't disappointed.

"That's not the sort of thing you can ask. We'll just have to wait just a minute and see what happens."

A few moments later, Jennifer emerged, looking stunning in a long dress as well.

"Well, I'm sure that heads will turn at the Club, as I enter with the two of you. I'll be the envy of everyone there. Both of you are stunning," Carl couldn't refrain from adding as he helped everyone put on with their coat. "Shall we go?" he said, extending both arms so Jennifer and Debbie could each grab one.

Once they were settled in the car, with Debbie and Jennifer in back and Carl behind the wheel...they were off.

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"You know you could have brought a date," Carl innocently mumbled to Jennifer as they were driving along.

Debbie froze at the comment and then waited to see what would happen next.

"I thought about it. But, I wanted to be able to relax and enjoy the show with both of you. It would be different with a date along."

"So you DID think about bringing a date? Was it Tucker or someone new?" Debbie now plunged right in with all her questions since Carl had already given her an opening.

"Debbie, stop fishing..." Carl said, in a teasing tone.

"I have to ask," Debbie responded quickly, "Otherwise, I'd never find out anything," she finally said to Carl, before turning her attention back to her companion, "I'm waiting, Jennifer..."

"What's there to tell?" Jennifer answered with a slight laugh.

"You might as well tell ME, because let me tell you, Sunshine's already asking questions."

"He is? I thought he would be too busy to wonder about me," Jennifer said with a laugh. "I'll have to talk to Brian...he's, obviously, not keeping Justin busy enough."

"Jennifer!" Carl and Debbie both said in unison

Jennifer couldn't resist a laugh at their reactions; after all, she'd had a lot of years and a lot of experiences with Brian to risqué to mention. Teasing about Brian now felt natural to her now.

"You don't have to worry," Jennifer finally continued. "Tucker and I are still friends. We still see each other occasionally. But we've both been rather busy lately."

"I wondered about you and Tucker," Debbie finally admitted. "I hadn't seen him since the bombing. That has to be at least a year ago."

"The bombing...what a horrendous night that was..." Jennifer added with a sigh.

"You can say that again. But as a result, even the homophobes began to question themselves, and Prop 14 went down to defeat," Debbie pointed out.

"And, Brian reopened the club. I'm glad that he did that," Jennifer said softly.

"All of Liberty Avenue is glad that he did that too," Debbie added.

Jennifer decided it was time to change the subject. "I'm really excited about this evening. I'm really looking forward to seeing Daniel perform as Divina Devore."

"Me too...someone of the stature of Divina Devore, this has got to be good. Emmett talks about her all the time."

"I wonder if it will be like watching Shanda Leer perform," Jennifer asked.

"I'll have to admit that Darrin is pretty good as Shanda Leer.. We'll just have to wait and see how the two drag queens compare," Debbie added.

"After all, Divina Devore is a legend," Carl said, finally managing to get a word into the conversation.

"A legend," Debbie mumbled mindlessly, as her mind drifted back to a time long ago...when two teenagers, who used to hang out together, fell in love.

Both Carl and Jennifer allowed Debbie her moment of memories.

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Upon arriving at the Kit Kat Club, Carl handed his keys to the parking attendant for valet parking. Then he, once again, held out both arms and said "Ladies..." with a big smile, and Debbie and Jennifer each took one of the offered arms as Carl escorted them into Club.

Carl gave their names at the door and indicated that they were guests of Divina Devore.

The doorman instantly signaled to a special waiter, who appeared and personally escorted them to their reserved tables in the front row.

"Be sure to let me know if you need anything," the waiter said, "My name is Casey, and Ms Devore left specific instructions that I was to personally take care of you," he added with a smile directed primarily at Carl.

"Thanks, Casey," Carl said, returning the smile. "We'll be sure to let you know." And with that their waiter disappeared.

"I love the club," Jennifer commented. "It's so cozy and intimate. But, I must admit, this is certainly different from Babylon. The tables...."

"Yes, definitely different from Babylon," Debbie confirmed with a laugh. "It's classier than Babylon. There's no thumpa thumpa to be heard."

A few moments later, Casey reappeared carrying a bottle of champagne. "I've already let Ms Devore know that you're here, and she instructed me to bring this to your table. She hopes that you will enjoy the show. Would you like me to open it?" he asked.

Carl nodded yes, and Casey opened the champagne with flair and poured a class for everyone. Then he placed the bottle on ice at the table.

"Enjoy the show!" Casey said, as he was leaving.

The three friends chatted easily as they waited for the show to begin.

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Then the house lights were dimmed and a spot light appeared on stage. The unseen announcer made an introduction.

A stylishly dressed figure appeared on stage to a rousing applause.

This was the comedienne to warm up the audience. She told a series of jokes that were really more observations of life. Everyone seemed to identify with her stories of those 'Ah Ha' moments of life.

Even Carl got some to the punch lines. Debbie and Jennifer kept smiling at each other, from time to time, as the jokes and stories resonated for them too.

Once the comedienne left the stage, an array of various performers performed in cabaret style. There were singers and dancers performing several numbers, again to the enjoyment of the crowd.

Finally, the unseen announcer's voice came on once again, "Ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure that the Kit Kat Club presents the long-awaited return engagement of Pittsburgh's own Divina Devore."

And with those words, the whirlwind known as Divina Devore sashayed on stage and immediately broke into her signature song.

Everyone at this reserved table was enthralled and captivated by what they saw. Divina Devore was a wonder for them all.

Jennifer immediately noticed the difference, Divina was impeccably dressed...that part was the same...of course, the sequined gown was totally different and hard to miss. She had to admit that Divina definitely had her own sense of style.

Divina was clearly much more animated than the Daniel that she had met before, but Jennifer loved the difference and clapped often during the show.

Jennifer eagerly watched as Divina sauntered back and forth across the stage, singing peppered versions of recognizable show tunes.

Debbie, too, watched Divina with complete amazement. She knew that Danny was a good actor, even in high school, but this was beyond anything that she'd expected. The Danny that she remembered was quiet with a wicked sense of humor...whereas his alter ego of Divina could only best be described as a 'bawdy dame'. And, the wicked sense of humor transformed into almost flirting as Divina talked to the crowd throughout her performance.

Carl just sat there in complete wonderment as he thoroughly enjoyed the show. He thought that he was mentally prepared for Divina's performance...after all he spent a lot of time on Liberty Avenue, encountering all the drag queens there. But his was something totally different. This was truly special.

He could understand why Divina has been such a success...and has managed to have such a long career. She was wonderful.

Throughout the performance, Divina thoroughly captivated the audience, which constantly erupted with laughter, as she told raunchy jokes in between songs. And each song generated several rounds of applause, as her performance was amazing.

As Divina started to wind down her performance in preparation for her exit, stage left...the audience refused to let the performance end and kept urging her into additional songs with rounds of applause.

Divina was obliging and happy to perform repeated encores.

Finally, with a sweep of her hand, Divina announced that her performance was truly ending.

The crowd tried to moan and coax her back for more.

But she finally said, "Thank you, Pittsburgh. You've reminded me why I left, but now I think it's time for me to come home to you!" And with that Divina Devore exited stage left.

With that statement, the stage went dark, once again...while the audience erupted into cheers and applause again. There was a buzz in the audience about the closing announcement that Divina just made.

"So, the posts on the Blogs are true," Jennifer heard someone in the audience say.

"I'd heard the rumors, but I didn't think they were true," someone else added.

"I wonder why she coming back here. She could live anywhere in the world," someone added.

Evidently a few members of the press were attending this return engagement...because a few people rushed out immediately after the announcement...probably to file their story.

Debbie commented to Carl and Jennifer that the gay press would be full of stories about Divina over the weekend.

"This is big news..." Carl said with a laugh.

"I'm just surprised that she made the announcement," Debbie added.

Once again, the stage lights came up and the dancers reappeared on the smoky stage. As they were dancing, platforms started to arise out of the stage floor, elevating the dancers. The stage was now transformed.

But the dancers couldn't contain the rumblings in the audience. Divina's performance and her announcement were still on everyone's lips.

Eventually, the audience settled down and a few tables started to empty as some people in the audience started to leave.

Carl, Jennifer, and Debbie lingered behind to talk with each other a bit longer.

A little later, Carl enjoyed a cup of coffee, while Jennifer and Debbie continued to drool over the toned bodies of the male dancers now on stage.

Carl was particular amused by his companions.

Casey returned to table with a note, which he handed to Carl.

The note indicated that Divina was inviting them to join her back stage in her dressing room.

Carl, Debbie and Jennifer couldn't wait. They were thrilled to accept the invitation.

Chapter 34 – Remembrances And Promises

Saturday Night...(Day 62)

Things were quiet at Bri-tin.

After a dose of inspiration from Brian in the form of a blowjob, Justin was actually painting in his studio.

And since Justin was still up, Brian saw no reason to go to bed, so he was using the time to prepare some notes on the Barrister, Wilkins & Evans campaign.

Gus was sound asleep on the couch in the study, still keeping Brian company while he worked late, exactly as he promised. Both Brian and Justin had each tried to gently lift Gus to take him to bed, thinking he would be more comfortable there.

But Gus had made it clear he wouldn't go to bed as long as his dad was still working. A promise is a promise, so a pillow had been added to make Gus more comfortable while he slept.

Justin teased Brian that Gus only promised to keep him company while he worked...he'd never promised to stay awake while doing so.

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And at the Kit Kat Club, Casey knocked on the dressing room door marked with a star; "Ms Devore," he said quietly.

"Enter..." a husky voice responded from the other side of the door.

Carl, Debbie, and Jennifer followed Casey into the room.

Divina wasn't visible when they first entered, but she had made sure that the couch and chairs in the dressing room were cleared.

Casey made sure everyone was seated and comfortable before he quietly made his exit.

Just after Casey departed, Divina swept into the room. She was still in full makeup, but instead of her gown, she was now wearing a robe worthy of Emmett. Carl found himself looking behind Divina, as she walked past him, for he expected to see a boa being dramatically dragged behind her.

"The show was wonderful," Carl gushed as soon as Divina took a seat to join them.

"It was a lot longer than usual," Divina teased, "But for some reason, my adoring fans wouldn't let me leave the stage," she said with a smile.

"Can you blame them?" Jennifer asked with a twinkle in her eye. "Your performance was amazing."

"Danny, you were great!" Debbie gushed. "I knew that you were a talented back in high school, but nothing fucking prepared me for this."

"A gentleman has to keep some secrets," Divina quipped back quickly in response, followed by a slight dip. "Especially gentlemen, who are ladies," she added in jest.

That last comment caused everyone to laugh

"Some secrets, huh?" Debbie said with a laugh. "You should have invited me to your show sooner. Vic and I would have loved to travel out of town for this. He would have loved to have seen this."

"Do you think that he would get it? After all, Divina is so over the top. I've said it before, that being her can be tiring. Vic always struck me as more down to earth."

"He mellowed a little more due to his illness, but he never lost his sense of humor. I'm sure that Divina would have appealed even to his sense of drama," Debbie said quietly.

"Well, I hope he enjoyed the show...watching from where ever he is...and we know that he is never far away from you, Debbie," Divina quietly added. "Not the Vic that I remember."

"Thank you for that," Debbie said quietly, holding back tears. Even after all these years, she still missed Vic, but on an evening like this, it was nice to be able to talk about him with someone, who knew him long before the dreaded illness overshadowed his life.

"I remember his wisdom and zest for life. And let us not forget those divine desserts," Jennifer added. "I don't know how Justin, Michael, and Brian could resist."

"Vic and Justin would enjoy spending time in the kitchen together. That's where the Grand Marnier Waffles came from. Sunshine added a new twist to one of Vic's recipes," Debbie revealed. "And it looks like Gus and Nicky are following in the tradition," she added with a laugh, "If the story of French Toast Surprise is any indication."

"Debbie, don't get me started on the Nicky-Gus twosome. We don't want to bore Divina with the antics of those two, now do we?" Jennifer said, as her thoughts drifted back to when she and Molly were spending the weekend with the two of them.

"At four and six years old, they still manage to keep everyone on their toes," Carl explained.

"They sound like my kind of kids. I hope to get to meet them," Divina said quietly. For just a moment, Divina turned into the thoughtful, introspective Daniel, remembering some of things that he'd missed in his life. His success had come at a price. And he couldn't help wondering how his life would have been different, if Debbie had told him the truth about Michael back when they were teenagers.

There was a surprising moment of quiet in the dressing room. And then Daniel, not Divina, said, "Divina never really thought about kids one way or the other, but Daniel is another story," he added.

"As much as I like Daniel," Jennifer interrupted, "I must admit that Divina is hard to resist" she added with a laugh. "I guess now that you're moving back here, she'll be appearing locally more often? I bet that your fans are going to love that."

"Yes, it's been almost five years since you're last appearance," Debbie reminded her.

"I needed the time," Daniel said quietly. "Once upon a time, I could live as Divina full time. Now, she's a comfortable persona that I can put on or take off at will."

"So, that means that I shouldn't expect to see Divina sweep into the diner?" Debbie had to ask.

"I sure hope not," Carl interrupted. "I'm not sure that Em would like this much competition," he teased. "And if they were together the brightness in the room would be blinding," he added.

"Em?" Divina asked.

"Emmett is ...." Jennifer began.

"Indescribable..." Carl quickly pointed out.

"That pretty much sums it up," Debbie said with a laugh.

"You'll have to forgive my attire," Divina began, "I have a late show in a couple of hours. It takes so long to get into makeup that I didn't want to start from scratch."

"That's something we can identify with, can't we Debbie?" Jennifer suggested.

"Enough about me," Divina protested. "You two ladies are stunning. Except for me, you were the most beautiful dames in the audience." Once again, Daniel was pure Divina.

"Hey...what about me?" Carl teased.

"Well Carl, I did notice the way that Casey kept watching you all evening," Divina teased with a slight nod of her head. "I do think that you might have made a conquest

"Thanks, Divina...but he's really not my type," Carl quickly noted.

"I know. I just didn't have the heart to tell him that you're into over the top redheaded dames." Divina added with a laugh.

"And I'm very glad that he is," Debbie confirmed.

"I know it's been just a few days since we've talked, but how are things going?" Jennifer asked.

"Well, Michael and I have at least re-established contact. We're going to take things slow. I'm really looking forward to spending time with him. I have a son that I'm really looking forward to get to know better. We've lost so much time, but the future looks pretty bright," Daniel confirmed.

"So you're still ready for the challenge?"Debbie had to ask, " I wasn't sure if you changed your mind,"

"I'm afraid that changing my mind isn't really an option. I thought about nothing else for the last four years," Daniel answered. "All the plans..."

"You don't realize it, but you have an entire family here supporting you as you go through this," Carl added.

"I do? Family?" Daniel asked with some surprise.

"Absolutely," Jennifer chimed in, "And believe me, this family is like no other."

"You can fucking say that again," Debbie chimed in. "Oh, we'll drive you crazy...just like any other family...but underneath it all, we love and care for each other. And you're now a part of us."

"I am?"Daniel, once again, was surprised.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it," Jennifer whispered as an aside.

Carl looked over at Debbie. He could see the wheels turning in her mind, under that red wig. He secretly smiled to himself, as he pondered what was to come. Debbie didn't surprise him.

"So, as the newest member of this family, you're expected to attend Sunday dinner at my house," Debbie said.

"Me? Sunday dinner? Family?" Daniel mumbled in a total state of shock. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

Carl decided it was time for him to intervene here and explain to both Divina and Daniel about how the world worked. "Daniel, when Debbie suggests that you attend a family dinner, you'll learn, like the rest of us have, that it isn't a suggestion. It's a command performance. And as Divina, I'm sure would explain, command performances let no opposition," he explained.

"I see..." Daniel mumbled. "Well, when you put it that way...."

"Somehow, I knew that Divina would understand," Carl said with a laugh.

"That's perfect. You'll get to meet..." Jennifer began.

"You'll get to meet whoever happens to be there," Debbie suggested."Besides, if you come early, I can show the pictures. A lifetime of pictures...to make up for the lifetime that you missed," she added.

"By all means...come tomorrow. I'll be there, and I'm looking forward to seeing you there," Jennifer added.

There was a moment of silence, before Daniel finally agreed.

"Well, Divina has another performance, so we should allow both Daniel and Divina to get some rest," Carl suggested.

"Divina, thank you for the royal treatment this evening....and the show was wonderful... I wouldn't have missed it," Jennifer added.

"I'm glad that you all came. It was a kick knowing that the three of you were sitting out front," Divina commented with a sweeping gesture,

"So, we'll say our good night," Carl said quietly.

"And we'll see you tomorrow. Dinner is at two o'clock, but feel free to come early to see those pictures we talked about," Debbie said with a laugh.

They all said their goodbyes as Divina escorted them to the dressing room door.

While riding in the car a few moments later, everyone had their own vision of another Dinner at Debbie's.

Chapter 35 – Cinnamon Walnut Raisin Buns

Sunday Morning...(Day 63)

It was a typical Sunday morning at Debbie's. Something about last night made Debbie decide to make something special for breakfast this morning, so she eased out of bed and headed into the kitchen. She put on her apron and pulled out an old recipe book, which once belonged to Vic.

Somehow talking about Vic last night had been a warm memory, and Debbie wasn't willing to let it go just yet. So, she decided that making the Cinnamon Walnut Raisin Buns with Caramel Icing was her way of keeping Vic closer for just a little while longer.

She started the coffee to brew and then began to gather the necessary ingredients.

With the recipe and ingredients resting on the table, Debbie took one more minute to cast her eyes upward to silently commune with her brother before she started. These weren't lemon bars, which she could practically make in her sleep. These buns were a very special recipe.

With Vic as her inspiration, Debbie quickly got the first pan of buns into the oven.

Soon, the aroma of the buns permeated the entire house.

Lindsay and Melanie were the first to arrive downstairs. They quickly chatted with Debbie over a glass of juice and grabbed one of the first buns, without waiting for the icing. They planned to share it on the way to their appointment with Elizabeth.

Although they were in a bit of a hurry, they stopped long enough to explain to Debbie that they had an early morning appointment and then several errands to run. After hugs all around, Lindsay and Melanie left Debbie alone once again, after assuring her that they would be back in time for dinner.

A few minutes later, Debbie started to dribble the caramel icing. She was concentrating on creating a work of art, worthy of Justin, when a pair of loving arms engulfed her from behind.

"Carl!" she exclaimed, "I thought that you might be sleeping late this morning...especially since we had such an exciting night last night."

"Like that's fucking likely," he teased, trying to imitate Debbie. "With the smell of fresh baked goods filling the house, I don't think so. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Em showed up any minute too," he added.

"This is just the first batch. The girls even took one with them. It's been a long time since I've made this recipe. I hoped, if I blew the recipe too badly, I could somehow hide the evidence," she teased.

"Now when have you ever ruined a batch of anything?" Carl asked.

"This isn't exactly something that I can hide under marinara sauce, you know," she cautiously fired back, before she resumed her artistic endeavor of icing the buns.

Carl poured himself a cup of coffee and tried to steal the first bun that was iced. "So what's the occasion? The last time you made buns, you told me the story about Daniel and Michael. I must admit those buns were less elaborate than these. So I ask you, what's the occasion?"

"Something just told me it was time to make this recipe," Debbie quietly admitted with a smile. She then held her breath as she watched Carl take his first bite.

"These are wonderful!" Carl quickly professed, eliciting a smile and a thankful, upward glance from Debbie.

Carl quickly got up to grab a second bun and placed it on a plate for Debbie. He then gently nudged her to sit at the table with him as he poured her a cup of coffee.

They were enjoying breakfast and reading the Sunday paper, when Carl grabbed a second bun for himself.

"I know why you made these," Carl said in between mouthfuls. "You knew that I wouldn't be able to resist them, and you just wanted to make me fat," Carl said in mock protest.

"Carl! How can you say that?" Debbie challenged.

"It's obvious that you wanted to be sure that I stay fat and unappealing. But, Debbie Honey, this is devious even for you," he added. "Can I help it if Casey found me attractive last night?" he innocently asked.

"I knew that there was a lot of fucking eye action going on between the two of you. Even Divina noticed it. Danny didn't want to tell Casey the truth. I most certainly would have. You're not available, Carl...so get over it. And if I want to fatten you up with buns, it's my prerogative. Divina would expect no less," she added with a laugh.

"Divina is a very smart woman," Carl added with a laugh, leaning over to give Debbie a kiss on the cheek.

At that moment, Emmett chose to breeze into the room. "Who's a very smart woman?" he asked, after over-hearing only the last snippet of the conversation before his arrival.

"Emmett, you have perfect timing. I'm just about to take another pan of rolls from the oven. Can I get you some juice or coffee?" Debbie asked.

"Coffee would be great..."

Debbie handed Emmett the cup of coffee. "You missed a wonderful evening last night."

"Really? Okay, Dish!" Emmett demanded.

"If you'll excuse me, I think that I'll leave the two of you to gossip, I'll move to the living room to give you some privacy," Carl teased as he stood up.

"You stay right there, Carl Horvath, I may need you to fill in the details. There was so much going on last night; I'm afraid I can't remember everything," Debbie explained.

"And you know that I want to hear each and every detail?" Emmett reminded them.

"Very well," Carl agreed, seeing that he had no choice. "Let me at least get some juice?"

"Here, let me," Debbie insisted, taking the glass, filling it, and returning it to Carl.

Emmett began taking a first bite of his bun and a sip of coffee. "Debbie these buns are wonderful."

"Thanks, Em."

"So how was your evening?" Emmett proceeded to ask again.

"It was fucking great! You know that we went to see Divina Devore at the Kit Kat Club," Debbie reminded him.

"The Kit Kat Club," Emmett repeated. "I went there with Michael and Ted to try to convince the legend herself to appear at Teddy's fundraiser, but that was years ago. I'm sure her show is quite different now."

"Divina truly strutted her stuff last night. We were her guest, so we had the royal treatment," Carl explained.

"And we had a waiter that kept making eyes at Carl," Debbie couldn't resist adding.

"Why Carl!" Emmett teased, hitting him gently on the arm.

"Of course, the audience demanded encores from Divina," Carl recounted, quickly changing the subject.

"And then, she announced that she was returning to live in Pittsburgh," Debbie added.

"So, then it's official?" Emmett asked. "I'd heard the rumors...I've read the blogs..."

"Yes, we heard it with our own ears," Debbie confirmed.

"Of course, I noticed that her announcement warranted an article in the Sunday Supplement," Carl said, handing over the page to Emmett.

"Pittsburgh's own, Divina Devore, to settle in Pittsburgh. I will admit, that just about says it all," Emmett agreed.

"After the show, we were invited into her dressing room. We had a great time, didn't we, Carl?" Debbie continued.

"Divina was dressed in a robe that would have done you proud, Em," Carl said with a laugh. "And as we talked, I notice how easily she floated between Divina and Daniel. It was interesting to watch."

"The last time that I saw her, she was acting the true diva after her performance, but her act was wonderful. It's good to know that she still has it," Emmett said with a laugh. "Debbie, I can't get over how good these buns are. I just have to have another."

Debbie quickly obliged by placing another bun on Emmett's plate. Then she said, "Are you two only going to eat the buns? Wouldn't you like eggs or something to go with that?"

"We're good, Honey," Carl said.

"Me too... I'm fine. After all, we do have to save room for dinner," Emmett commented. "Just let me grab some juice."

Just there was a knock at the front door.

Carl got up to answer and was surprised to find Hunter and Jenny Rebecca standing there.

Jenny immediately lunged into Carl's arms.

"Well hello there, Jenny! Don't tell me that you missed me, while you were spending this time with your dad?" Carl asked, wrapping his arms around the little girl. Jenny merely giggled and wrapped her arms more tightly around Carl. "So, Hunter, what are you doing with Jenny, and why are you out and about at this hour of the morning?" he asked.

"Something smells good," Hunter quickly remarked as he headed toward the kitchen, practically ignoring Carl's question.

"Hunter...." Carl called after him, knowing full well that he was now being deliberately ignored.

"Hi Debbie," Hunter said, entering the kitchen and giving her a kiss. "Something really smells good. What are you making?"

"Cinnamon Walnut Raisin Buns...it's from Vic's recipe," Debbie said proudly. "Could I interest you in one?" she asked.

"I thought you'd never ask," Hunter quipped, locating the cooling buns and quickly placing one on a plate. Debbie offered him coffee and juice, but he settled for milk, which he got for himself.

Once Hunter had everything that he needed, he settled down at the table to join the conversation in progress. "So what did I miss?" he immediately asked, being as annoying as ever. "Go back to the beginning, so that I'll know everything," he insisted.

Carl and Emmett smiled at each other, both of them thinking, another convert .

"We were just talking about Divina Devore. It seems that they went to see her show last night," Emmett quickly revealed, as a way to update him.

"You went to see my grandfather perform? So how was it? Tell me everything?" Hunter demanded.

"Never mind about your grandfather, what are you doing with JR?" Debbie demanded to know.

Hunter let out a deep sigh. He was so hoping that this explanation was not going to be necessary.

Seeing that there was no way out of this if he wanted to get back to the topic of his grandfather, he sighed with resignation. Everyone waited for him to begin.

"Michael called me this morning and asked me to pick up JR and bring her over here," he finally began. There was some kind of drama during breakfast. When I arrived, JR was upset and crying. Michael was beside himself trying to calm her down," he said with a laugh. "Jenny immediately clung to me."

"What was wrong? Is JR okay?" Debbie asked, approaching her granddaughter to check her for damages.

"JR is fine. Michael tried to give her Cap'n Crunch cereal this morning. Jenny wasn't having any of it. Michael couldn't understand why his kid didn't like HIS favorite cereal," Hunter explained, shaking his head.

"Of course, you don't like that horrible stuff," Carl said to Jenny, tickling her under her chin. "You like Cheerios, don't you Sweetie?" he continued, reaching for the box of the preferred cereal on the shelf. "Here you go," he said, pouring a small stack on the table within her easy reach.

Jenny Rebecca immediately reached for her preferred cereal and happily started to enjoy the dry morsels. She continually smiled at Carl between bites.

"Okay," Hunter interrupted. "Now that the crisis has been averted, will someone tell me about my grandfather?"

"What about him?" Carl asked mindlessly, still playing with JR and her cereal.

Seeing that he wasn't' getting anywhere with Carl, Hunter redirected his question, "Emmett?"

"I wasn't there, Sweetie," Emmett said in his own defense. "Carl and Debbie went to see him perform last night. The report that I just received was that the show was spectacular. There were many encores. And the final note was Divina's announcement that she was returning to live Pittsburgh. That was such amazing news, that it even made the Sunday supplement."

"There now," Debbie interrupted, "You've heard it all in one fell swoop. It was fucking amazing."

"How is it that lately everything wonderful is happening when I'm not around? I'm missing everything! Without me, Molly spends the weekend at the mansion with Brian and Justin. Now, you and Carl go to see Divina without me. Hello, I'm a part of this family too," Hunter protested.

"You're too young to go to club, so get over yourself," Debbie insisted, with a swipe on the back of his head for good measure. "I'm sure you'll get to meet your grandfather in due time," she slyly added. "By the way, are you coming to dinner?"

"Sure, I'll be back in time. I have a few things to do. Rescuing JR wasn't part of my Sunday morning line up for today," he quickly added. "Of course, the extra bonus of breakfast buns was too good to pass up. Ben was whipping up some sort of tofu drink as I was leaving," Hunter elaborated.

"So what do you think of the buns?" Emmett asked. "Aren't they divine?"

"This was a real treat. Thank you, Debbie," Hunter finally said, giving her a kiss. "Don't worry...I won't mention to Michael or Ben what they missed."

"That's a good son," Debbie said sarcastically,

"So my grandfather's performance was great, huh?" Hunter mumbled again. "You know, I met him for a few moments when he came into the comic book store to see Michael. They talked, and then he left. He and Michael look so much alike....same height, same chin, same eyes. Do you think that he and Michael will eventually be as close as Brian and Gus?" he innocently asked.

"I have no idea," Debbie said quietly. "Everybody now knows the truth. The rest is up to Michael and Daniel. We can't push on this one. We need to let nature take its course. Give it some time."

"I will, but Michael has waited so long for this. He's going to be devastated if things don't work out," Hunter pointed out.

"Then you'll have to continue to think positive thoughts and hope for the best," Emmett suggested. "That's what my Aunt Lula always said, and I think that's good advice."

Hunter nodded his acceptance of this suggestion. "Well, let me get going. I'll see you at dinner. By the way, where are Melanie and Lindsay? I haven't seen them."

"They had something that they wanted to do this morning. Don't worry... they'll be back in time for dinner, so, you'll see you then, now won't you?" Debbie asked again, trying not to give anything away.

"Yeah, I'll be back. You've never known me to miss an opportunity for a real meal," Hunter added as he stood up and kissed Debbie goodbye. He also kissed Jenny Rebecca on her forehead and received a smile in return. Then, he was on his way.

The kitchen was pretty quiet after Hunter left...except for the private language between JR and Carl that consisted more of gestures and facial expressions and giggles, rather than any spoken sounds.

"I wonder what Lindsay and Melanie are doing to those kids up in Toronto?" Emmett asked wistfully.

"What do you mean?" Debbie immediately asked with some grandmotherly concern.

"Think about it....first, Gus stages a hunger strike to come here to Pittsburgh," Emmett began.

"Then Jenny stages a rebellion refusing to eat cereal to escape from Michael. I just have to wonder what protest techniques Mel is instilling in those kids?" he teased. Then he cast an eye over at Debbie. "Of course, JR's grandmother IS the president of PFLAG. I'm guessing that protesting is in her DNA. I can see that I'm going to have to keep a close watch on things," he said with a laugh. "If don't want to miss anything."

"Are you finished?" Debbie asked, with her hands now on her hips.

"Yes, that about does it," Emmett added with a laugh.

"That's good. Since you're finish with your morning commentary, I was wondering if you'll help me locate a few things in the attic. I'd ask Carl, but obviously he's got his hands full at the moment, and I, personally, don't want to be responsible for disrupting my granddaughter's love fest. So will you give me a hand?" she asked.

"I think that can be arranged," Emmett joyfully answered. "What are we looking for?"

"I'm looking for some old photo albums that I think I stored up there," Debbie explained.

"Lead the way," Emmett said, following behind her.

Chapter 36 – In The Attic

Sunday Morning...(Day 63)

"So, tell me again, why we're up here?" Emmett casually asked, as he and Debbie were rummaging through boxes in the attic.

"I'm looking for those old photograph albums that we stored up here, so they wouldn't be in the way," Debbie explained, without pausing in her search.

"Why are you pulling them down now?"

"I invited Danny over today to look at the pictures of Michael growing up. Just in case he shows up, I want to have something to show him," she explained. "I don't want it to look like I invited him over on false pretenses."

"Danny? As in Danny Devore?"

"Yes, of course."

"Why did you invite him over?"

"I've stolen a lot of time from him; he's missed out on a lot through no fault of his own. I wanted to try, in some small way, to make up for the past. Even though I can't make it up to him anymore than I can make it up to Michael, I still have to try. I can't just sit back and do nothing."

"Okay...so what exactly is it that you did?"

"I simply told him, last night, that he was a part of this family, and I invited him to dinner today to meet everyone."

"You did this even though things are strained between him and Michael....between you and Michael. You know that Michael is going to be upset with you for interfering."

"Michael has to build his own relationship with Danny. There's nothing more that I can do there. But no matter how things go with Michael, Danny is now a part of this family. I want him to understand that. Maybe in the process of understanding that, he'll figure out the rest."

"You do understand that you can't do anything to help here, either?"

"I know. I just want Danny to know that he's not alone either. He has a support system. We're here for both of them...Michael and Danny...if they need us."

"That's a nice gesture, as long as you realize that you can't undo a lifetime with just a few pictures."

"I know that! I'm fully aware of what I've done. I've tried to make things right. Danny and I were once very good friends....almost like Sunshine and Daphne. I want that friendship back. Carl and Danny like each other, so do Jennifer and Danny. I think at this stage of my life, I'm entitled to my own circle of friends. And, I really don't owe anyone an explanation for that. "

"You're absolutely right," Emmett finally agreed softly. But underneath it all, he had to wonder what Debbie was truly thinking. He had to wonder if something else was going on with her. Was this guilt or something else?

"Thanks," Debbie answered mindlessly, still rummaging through boxes. "Ah! Here they are," she said triumphantly, lifting out of a large box, containing a series of photo albums.

Debbie retrieved the first album to get a fresh look at some of the pictures inside...pictures of Michael as a baby...pictures of Michael as a young boy. There were also family pictures...pictures of Debbie and Vic as kids. There were also pictures of her once, large extended family.

Surprisingly, Debbie started to sniffle. "It's the dust," she quickly pointed out.

"Of course," Emmett confirmed with a smile, wrapping his arm around her shoulders...just in case she needed a hug.

Debbie quickly pulled herself together. "It looks like we have everything," she said, pointing to the stack of photo albums. Will you help me get all this stuff downstairs?"

"No problem. I may look like a big nelly bottom, but I do go to the gym," he quipped.

"Em, if Brian is to be believed, you don't go to the gym to be strong...you go there to look good," she teased. "So are you sure that you can lift these?"

"Brian goes to the gym to look good. I, on the other hand..." he said, pausing just long enough to make a muscle with his right arm to illustrate his unspoken point.

"Forgive me for doubting you," Debbie said with a laugh.

The two of them picked up the photo albums and headed back down stairs.

"So what's for dinner?" Emmett casually asked. "Usually, you're really busy the night before, but I guess since you were out last night..."

"Don't worry, I'm not about to let everyone starve. I was hoping that you would lend me a hand, or at least keep me company while I put dinner together."

"It would be my pleasure," Emmett said with bow. "You scared me for a minute. I thought that we were going to have to resort to take out. I thought that maybe after all these years, Brian had finally rubbed off on you," he teased.

"Listen, you little shit..." she immediately retorted, fully realizing that she was being teased. "I won't resort to take out...don't worry...I just need a little help...that's all."

"You've got it!" he agreed. "And if things are moving too slowly, I'm sure we can call Darrin to come over and give us a hand."

"I don't think that will be necessary. After all, I've been feeding this family for years," Debbie protested.

"Good point!"

"Now let me get dressed, in the meantime, how about grating some cheese?"

"I think I can manage that," Emmett agreed with a smile.

The photo albums were placed in a corner of the living room. Debbie headed to her room to get dressed, while Emmett proceeded to the kitchen to begin his assigned task.

Emmett returned to the kitchen just as Carl was about to hand Jenny Rebecca a Sippy cup with milk.

Jenny saw Emmett enter the room, and she immediately ran to him instead, wrapping her arms around his leg.

Carl watched as Emmett reached down to pick Jenny up and tickle her. "How quickly they forget..." he commented with a sigh of mock disappointment.

"Now, now Carl, I think we all know that you're her favorite grandfather. You're the only one who understands her cereal preferences. Look at the scene she made with Michael this morning just to come here and have breakfast with you," Emmett quickly reminded him.

"You do have a point. I wonder what she'll do when she meets Daniel," he wondered.

"I'm sure that Jenny will eventually love Daniel. She's going to be a very lucky little girl to now have two grandfathers to spoil her. But like everything else, I think we have to give it some time," Emmett reassured him. Then he handed Jenny back to Carl. "You'll have to excuse me Miss Jenny, but Debbie gave me work to do, so I'd better get started before she gets back."

"Good idea," Carl answered, once again handing Jenny her Sippy cup. This time the little girl contentedly started to drink. Seeing that Jenny was settled, Carl turned to Emmett and asked, "So, what can I do to help?"

"Ah Carl, you know how Debbie feels about her kitchen. I would suggest that you and Jenny head into the living room."

"Good point. By the way, where's Drew," Carl thought to ask.

"He's traveling, but he should be back sometime tonight."

"I miss him. With both him and Ben not here, watching the game isn't nearly as interesting as it usually is."

"I know that you miss Ben. You and he had a special relationship, just like you and Drewsie. Give it time, Carl. Things have a way of working out. As my Aunt Lula said, about patience..."

"Oh no, not another of your Aunt Lula truisms...," Carl teased. "I think I get the picture."

Carl looked at Jenny and thought for a moment. "You know, I think I'll skip the early games today. Maybe, I'll take Jenny over to the park. That way she can play on the slides and have a chance to get some fresh air."

"That would be good. Then you'll be spared the spectacle of Debbie and me working on dinner," Emmett teased.

Carl couldn't resist laughing, as he gathered up Jenny Rebecca to leave for their appointed adventure.

A few moments later, Debbie rejoined Emmett and immediately started to bustle in the kitchen.

Emmett quickly started to clean up from breakfast, while Debbie focused on gathering the ingredients necessary to prepare dinner. The two of them were a well-oiled team.

Soon the elements for dinner were all prepared and ready for the oven, so once again, Debbie and Emmett were chatting as they made the dinner salad.

"It's going to be okay, you know?" Emmett quietly said, seemingly out of the blue.

"You know, if I had known that things would turn out like this, I would have handled things differently, a long time ago. But I thought that I could control things, and the truth would never come out. Now, there's no turning back, is there?" she said wistfully.

"No, and this time we'll all get to know Danny Devore. You knew him when he was only a kid. Now he's much older. You'll get to know him again. And he'll get to meet the rest of us too. Remember, Brian and Justin are in town, so are Mel and Linds and the kids, and Hunter's coming back too. No matter what, I'm sure that today will be quite an experience for everyone," Emmett reminded her, trying to point out the positive things ahead. He could sense Debbie's nervousness, and he wanted to do what he could to ease it...just as she had done so many times for him.

"I hope you're right," Debbie said quietly.

"Trust me, Debbie, I know about these things. Remember, I was once a little gay boy in Hazlehurst, Mississippi. Compared to that experience...everything will be a breeze."

"I see your point," Debbie added with a laugh as she started to relax.

Chapter 37 – The Arrivals

Sunday Late Morning...(Day 63)

Somewhere close to noon, there was a knock on Debbie's door. A very nervous Daniel stood there dressed casually in slacks and a cardigan. After two evenings of being Divina, it felt good to just be Daniel again.

This morning had begun for him rather quietly. He'd had breakfast in his suite as usual. Then he scanned both the regular Sunday paper as well the gay press, and he'd found articles about himself in both places.

Fortunately, the days were long past when the press had shots of him, as himself. Divina got all the attention, and Daniel was able to continue to move about Pittsburgh incognito.

And now, things were moving forward. Debbie had invited him to see pictures of his son, whose lifetime he'd completely missed.

Now, here he stood, ready to take another step....the next step in getting to know his son...by getting to know the people who made up his son's world. A family, Jennifer had called it.

Daniel's musings were interrupted as Debbie opened the door. They both greeted each other with hugs, and he realized that Debbie was just as nervous as he was.

"Danny, C'mon in," Debbie eagerly insisted with a smile. "I've got so much to show you."

"Pictures?" Daniel asked enthusiastically.

"And more. I'm glad that you came early. This will give us time to look at Michael's childhood in pictures together before everyone else arrives."

"I really looking forward to this," Daniel admitted, taking the offered seat on the sofa. "Where's everyone?"

"Carl decided to take JR to the park. Hunter will be back later. Emmett is upstairs. Everyone else will start to arrive later. So for now, we can look at the pictures in peace."

Debbie and Daniel sat side by side on the sofa and began flipping through one of the albums. They saw themselves as teenagers in high school. There were the pictures of the two of them at various high school events. They even saw pictures of themselves at the prom.

"A Rite Of Passage," Debbie had once told Justin, "Something that you'll never forget," she had said to encourage him to attend his prom...that none of them would ever forget, but he still couldn't quite remember. But Debbie remembered hers, and Danny had been her date.

"Some things you'll never forget," Daniel whispered, and Debbie just smiled.

Daniel remembered a time that he thought he might be straight. He thought about the hopes and dreams of that young man, who once envisioned a very different life. He remembered the moment that he admitted to himself that he truly was gay and how that changed everything.

Pictures of Michael as a baby were the next thing that he saw. There was the classic shot of Michael on the bear skin rug with his bare bottom exposed for the entire world to see.

As Daniel looked at the pictures of the baby Michael with various family members, Daniel could tell that Michael was loved. It gave him a sense of peace to know that even if he wasn't there, his son had managed to have a good start in life.

Still, he couldn't help but wonder what choices he would have made if Debbie had contacted him, so long ago, and told him the truth. What exactly would he have done? Could he have been the husband and father that they both needed back then? Even now, as he's beginning to get to know his son, can he be the father that his adult son needs now?

Next were the pictures of Michael as a child with all his little friends.

Debbie chatted away explaining the events surrounding the pictures. There were pictures of Michael playing little league baseball, and Debbie was there too in some kind of uniform. Daniel looked closely at each of the pictures, and he thought that he could see a certain sadness in Michael's eyes. And he started to wonder, what effect not having a father really had on his son. True, Daniel was proud of the man that Michael had become, Debbie had done a great job raising him. Still Daniel had to wonder if he could have made a difference for his son.

Daniel had to stop for a moment to gather his thoughts together. Seeing pictures of Michael throughout his childhood, let Daniel see all the events of a lifetime that he'd missed. All those years he'd spent on the stages around the world. Yes, he'd had the fame, but he could have had a family. And there is no way that he can get that time back.

Only over the last four years did Daniel find out that he had a son in the world. That knowledge had caused him to make significant changes in his life to at least be ready to forge a friendship with his son. He had to wonder how Michael really dealt with his lifetime without a father.

There were pictures of the Grassi Family. Debbie and Vic were always shown with their arms around each other. Daniel had always been impressed by the closeness of Debbie's family.

Finally, there were the pages of pictures of the teenage Michael. And every picture showed him with his arms around the same boy. Daniel figured from all that he had heard, that those must be pictures of Michael and Brian.

Daniel looked closely at these pictures and noticed that the sadness had been lifted from Michael's eyes, replaced with a look of hero worship and love. He imagined that Michael must have had high hopes and great dreams for his future with Brian. But like Debbie, those hopes and dreams were not meant to be. Debbie had accepted reality long ago. Michael was just learning to accept this truth. Daniel wanted to help his son move forward.

He may have missed the first 35 years of Michael's life, but Daniel wanted to be there so that the next 35 years were different. It was the promise that he made to himself.

At that moment, Emmett came downstairs carrying a box. He quietly sat down in a nearby chair to join Debbie and Daniel.

"What's in the box, Em?" Debbie asked. Then she paused and realized that she needed to make an introduction. "Where are my fucking manners? Danny, this is the infamous Emmett Honeycutt. Emmett this is Daniel Devore."

"Otherwise, known as Divina Devore?" Emmett asked. "I've been looking forward to seeing you again. It's good to really meet you. I'm a big fan of Divina's, but I must say you're very handsome."

Daniel smiled, "Don't tell me you expected Divina to make an appearance? I have this feeling that the last time we met, you encountered her."

"Oh yes, well she is, after all, a legend. She can't help but be a diva...it's to be expected. But I've been looking forward to meeting you. Hunter was right; you and Michael do look a lot alike," Emmett added.

"So you know about that too, do you?" Daniel asked.

"Honey, try as we might, there really are no secrets in this family. Brian made sure that we all knew." Emmett pointed out.

"Brian...that would be Michael's best friend, I take it," Daniel just wanted to be sure that he was keeping the characters straight.

"Since they were 14, or so the story goes," Emmett confirmed.

"Well, based on the pictures that I just saw, I would say that it's a documented certainty," Daniel continued.

"Brian has protected Michael ever since they met," Debbie acknowledged. "Since Michael was such a skinny kid, everybody picked on him. Brian was a great soccer player in high school. He protected Michael. They were thankfully inseparable as kids."

"They still are, if Michael has any say in things," Emmett added.

"But kids grow up," Daniel interjected.

"Some later than others," Debbie quipped.

"Michael and Brian started to grow apart just about the time that Lindsay had Gus, and Brian met Justin. Believe me," Emmett continued. "None of our lives have been quite the same since that night."

"That night?"Daniel asked.

"Although he'd never admit it, Brian's world turned upside down from the moment he first met Justin, and then Gus was born, all on the same night. Then from that day forward, everywhere we happened to look, Justin was just there. Without any of us noticing what was happening, Justin just became a part of us."

"Justin...Sunshine...the little brother that Michael never knew he wanted," Daniel remembered aloud.

"Daniel, I wouldn't repeat that in Michael's presence, if I were you. Michael simply refers to that night as that's when HE came along. So I would suppress the little brother reference...no matter how true it is...especially since Justin once lived with Debbie, but that's a story for another time," Emmett suggested with a knowing glance.

"I see that I have so much to learn," Daniel said with a quiet laugh. "Hopefully, you'll be around to properly guide me," he teased.

"I can't believe that you want little ole me to be your guide," Emmett responded, fanning himself with his hand. "I do think that I have a touch of the vapors," he added with a laugh. "I'd be honored, kind sir," he added with a final bow.

"Oh please, Emmett, I've heard all about you too. Rumor has it that you could give Divina a run for her money, especially, when it comes to making the grand entrance. I was hoping that you would give me pointers. My sweeping seems to lack something these days," Daniel remarked.

"Now, I'll admit that no one sweeps into a room better than Lana Turner. She's been my idol for pure dramatics for years," Emmett revealed.

"Good choice. There's only one better. Of course, she never swept into rooms in the movies. But on television...oh that was something to see. She would wear these amazing, flowing designer gowns at the start of each show. And she would just sweep into a room. I remember that my parents used to watch her every Sunday night. She was amazing," Daniel reminisced.

"Oh, you mean Loretta Young? I remember her. My folks use to watch her too. You're right she truly did show the world how to sweep into a room. Now we have...," Debbie paused to think of a name. "Now, we have no one. Who's going to teach the next generation how to sweep into a room?"

"Good point," Emmett quickly responded, "I know, I can see it now, Divina's school for grand entrances, so the art form won't be lost."

"We'll even have to get Sunshine to capture the sweeping grand entrance on canvas for kids in the future to see," Debbie added. "Move by fucking move."

"Now before you two drift off too far away...come back! I need both of you to get me through dinner. In fact, Emmett, I'm relying on you to be my coach and my guide." Daniel said with a wicked smile.

At that moment, Debbie remembered the box that Emmett had carried into the room. "So Em, what's in your box?"

"I have something that I wanted to show Daniel. It's the proof, for me, that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," Emmett said, starting to slowly open the box.

"Emmett, what are you talking about?" Debbie asked with some confusion.

"These were pictures taken at Pride 2000. Michael wasn't out at his job, but he'd promised Debbie that he would walk with her in the parade. Then he found out that his co-workers were coming to the parade. Teddy and I found the perfect solution. Here, see for yourself..."

"Is that what I think it is?" Debbie asked. "If it is, believe me Danny, our son makes one fucking gorgeous woman."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Emmett added, handing Daniel the picture of Michael in drag. "Of course, none of us knew it then...but it was in his genes all along."

"Wow, you're right," Daniel agreed. "You mean to tell me, that's Michael? I can't believe it."

"Of course, I was the couture creator...." Emmett pointed out.

"Or Dr. Frankenstein," Debbie added with a laugh. "You can take your pick. Even I didn't recognize him when I first saw him in drag. But it felt good to have my son march with me that day in the parade."

"And now he marches every year...since he no longer works at the Big Q...but instead, fulfilled his dream of owning a comic book store. Now, he no longer needs to hide who he is," Emmett confirmed.

"Being out and proud is important," Daniel confirmed. "It took me awhile to get here too. But now I'm comfortable in my skin. It feels good." Then he paused for a moment. "You know, Buzzy still talks about how he sold his comic book store to the only person, who loved comics as much as he used to. Buzzy now plays with a band in Florida." Daniel revealed. "Our paths used to cross from time to time."

"Gee, I guess it really is a small, small world," Emmett added.

"Emmett, don't you dare break out in song," Debbie cautioned him with a stern look.

At this point, both Emmett and Daniel had to laugh... both at Debbie's facial expression, and at what she'd just said.

There was a knock on the door, so Emmett got up to answer. Debbie and Daniel continued to peruse the box of Emmett's pictures.

"Hunter!" Debbie said when she looked up to see who had just arrived.

"Hi Debbie," Hunter began. "I told you that I'd be back. I came to see if you needed any help setting up for dinner."

"Well, I'm not really sure who's coming. We can probably fit around the kitchen table. But now that you're here, why don't you come and sit down with me," Debbie suggested, patting the side of the sofa next to her.

Hunter initially thought this was an odd request, until he noticed who was sitting quietly on the other side of Debbie. At that instant, sitting beside her seemed to be very important.

"So you're Hunter?" Daniel said, once Hunter walked over into his general area. "I saw you when I stopped by the comic book store the other day."

"Hunter, this is Daniel Devore. This is...." Debbie started until she was interrupted.

"My grandfather," Hunter mindlessly mumbled. "I have a grandfather."

At the new title, Daniel immediately stood up and opened his arms. Hunter uncharacteristically, walked into his awaiting arms. Daniel and Hunter hugged each other.

"You mean you don't have something smart to say?" Emmett teased. "You're just going to hug Daniel and that's it. I'm so disappointed," he continued.

"Drop it Em! Can't you see, I'm busy," Hunter retorted. "How are you grandfather?" he asked, returning his attention back to Daniel.

"Now that's something that I never expected to hear today. You know... you know... it's really okay to simply call me Daniel if you want. It's entirely up to you," Daniel stammered.

"No, no. I think grandfather works for me. It feels right," Hunter continued to mumble.

"Then, grandfather it is," Daniel confirmed.

"I heard that Debbie and Carl went to see your show last night. Of course, it will be awhile before I'm allowed inside any place that you're performing. I'm still a lowly teenager."

"I see, but you're family. And rank has its privilege..." Daniel hinted.

"You mean I may someday see you perform...that would be great!" Hunter quickly replied.

"I won't say when...but we'll have to figure something out. I can't have my only grandson wondering about these things," Daniel said with a wicked smile. "He could be stunted for life," he added.

"Okay Hunter, you hold on to that thought. I've seen Divina perform. It's really quite a spectacle to see," Emmett reassured him.

Hunter was now beaming.

"Enough about me...tell me all about you," Daniel insisted.

"I had a miserable life until Michael and Ben took me in and adopted me. Now, I have two loving parents. With any luck I'll graduate from high school in a few months. I haven't decided what I'm going to do. I know I'm going to college, but I haven't settled on a major yet. I was once a dwarf at Disneyworld. I sort of liked it. I'm considering acting as a career, but we can't say anything about that to Michael."

"Why not?" Daniel asked.

"Ever since the bombing at Babylon, a year ago, and Michael's being in the hospital, he seems to think that I should be a doctor or a lawyer." Hunter admitted.

"I see, but you have other aspirations in mind?" Daniel asked.

"I'm just at the thinking stage. I have lots of time to make the final decision," Hunter said, side-stepping the issue to some degree.

"I'm going to tell you the same thing that I told Sunshine," Debbie interrupted. "You have to do what makes you happy. This is your life. It doesn't belong to your parents." Then she looked at Daniel and realized that she needed to explain. "When Justin was graduating from high school, he was expected to go to Dartmouth to continue his family's tradition. His father wanted him to study business. Now, my Sunshine is smart. He would have been successful at whatever he set his mind to, but Justin wanted to pursue art. He fought with himself for awhile, and then he realized who he truly was. So, he went to PIFA instead. And now he's on his way to being a great artist in New York."

"So you see, you have to follow your dreams..." Emmett added

"Where ever the fuck they may lead," Debbie found the need to finish Emmett's thought.

"You know I studied a little acting myself," Daniel admitted. "I've even had a few small roles without the ever-present Divina. Oh, nothing that you would have ever heard of, but it's work that I'm very proud of."

"See, I knew my desire to act was a family thing. We just won't say anything to Michael just yet," Hunter insisted.

"Besides," Emmett continued, "You have two parents who are published writers; Ben is constantly writing novels, and Michael writes the comic Rage with Justin. Somehow, I don't think your desire to be an actor would surprise either of your dads," he added. "And now a grandfather that's an actor...oh, I think your fate was probably sealed."

"But, I think I can keep this secret," Daniel assured him. "To give you time to work on your dads."

Hunter breathed a sigh of relief. "I really think I'm going to like this having a grandfather," he added.

Chapter 38 - More Arrivals

Early Sunday Afternoon...(Day 63)

The next to arrive at Debbie's were Ted and Blake. They slowly approached the sofa to greet Debbie.

As Ted was approaching, Daniel stood up. "Now, there's a face that I remember," he said quietly as if to himself.

"Excuse me," Ted responded with some confusion, "Have we met? I rarely forget a face."

Emmett thought that he'd better step-in here, "Teddy, meet Daniel Devore. I'm sure that you've heard of him."

Ted's face immediately changed to an expression of recognition, as he knew that this was Michael's father and the famous Divina Devore. "Ms. Devore, yes, we met several years ago when I was finally able to persuade you to appear for Angels Over Pittsburgh. Thank you, it was a great success. I heard that you were appearing in town. It's good to see you again," he rambled, all the while shaking Daniel's hand.

Emmett laughed for it had been a long time since he had seen Ted this flustered. Blake too was amused to see his usually controlled partner, stepping all over himself. Finally Debbie intervened.

"Blake, I'd like you to meet Daniel Devore. We went to high school together," Debbie elaborated.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Daniel. And I must apologize for my partner's unusual behavior," Blake added. "He's usually not like this."

"I know," Daniel said with a smile. "It's to be expected. It was several years ago that Ted and I met, and then, I was in drag. I'm sure he had no idea what I really looked like. Meeting Divina Devore's alter ego, does take some getting used to."

"You're Divina Devore," Blake said with some surprise, "Now, I understand Ted's behavior. I've seen her image all over town, but the real you looks nothing like her."

"Thank you. At least I know my anonymity is preserved," Daniel remarked. "And since Divina is soooooo tiring, can we simply make that Daniel?"

"Then Daniel it is," Ted agreed. "Okay, what were you talking about when we arrived? You know that Blake and I hate to be excluded from any gossip. Okay Em, dish!"

"Oh we were just looking at pictures from Pride 2000, see?" Emmet t said, holding up one of the pictures of Michael in drag.

"I remember that one," Ted said with a laugh. "We had to practically force that outfit onto Michael, but we all agreed, that he wore it well. Now, we know why."

"And I thought it was all because of me..." Emmett teased, striking a pose.

Ted took a moment to whisper to Blake about the events related to the picture that Emmett was holding up. As expected, Blake couldn't contain his laugh, as he tried to get a better look at the photo.

"That's Michael?" Blake finally asked, still a bit disbelieving.

"Michael was a natural talent. Now we have the living proof," Ted countered with a laugh.

"A lot you know," Emmett teased back, still trying to figure out how to take credit for everything.

"Look, yesterday I lived with Gus as Brian's new assistant. Believe me, I'm sure the staff realized very quickly that except for a few feet in height and a few years in age, there's very little difference between father and son, at least in the work environment...which is amazing when you remember that Gus is only six years old. But fortunately, Gus liked me and my work, so Brian couldn't find a reason to fire me, at least not yesterday," Ted reported.

"It's good to know that your job is safe for the moment," Blake teased.

"You see, Daniel, Brian owns Kinnetik, the biggest advertising agency here in Pittsburgh. Teddy works for him," Emmett said as a way of explanation. "He also owns Babylon; I'm sure you've heard of that club too."

"I see, of course, I know all about Babylon," Daniel quickly responded. "I couldn't believe it when I heard what happened to Sap, but I'm glad that Babylon is still around."

Ted and Emmett told Daniel about Proposition 14 and the bombing at Babylon. Everyone decided not to mention t the fact that Michael had been injured. There were some things that he was going to have to find out from Michael directly.

"We're all glad that Babylon is still around, aren't we, Em?" Ted asked with a smile. Emmett did a little victory dance in reply, and everyone laughed.

Daniel sat there looking a bit confused. "But I thought that Gus was Lindsay's son," Daniel commented.

"He is, but he's Brian's son too. When Lindsay wanted to have a child, they asked Brian to be the donor. Once Gus was born, Brian fell hopelessly in love with his son, so now Gus has two dads, Brian and Justin, as well as two mommies, Melanie and Lindsay," Emmett explained. Then he started to rummage again through his box. "Here's a picture of Brian and Gus at Pride. Oh and here's a picture of Brian and Justin from the same pride. See they're dancing."

"They make a handsome couple," Daniel remarked. "I'm really looking forward to meeting them," he added.

"And Daniel, when Melanie wanted to have a child, this time they asked Michael to be the father. That's how your granddaughter, Jenny Rebecca, came to be," Ted explained.

"So it appears that I have quite an extended family to get to know, don't I?" Daniel mumbled, almost to himself. He paused a moment to take it all in. After a lifetime of being alone, he now had an extended family.

Changing the subject, Debbie too started to mumble to herself, "I wonder if we'll hear about Gus' day at Kinnetik the way we heard about the camping adventure at the mansion."

"I'm not sure. Justin showed up later in the day and took Brian and Gus horseback riding, so it's hard to know what actually made the greatest impression on Gus," Ted answered.

"Well, I can tell you that there's a painting at the mansion, showing Brian and Gus riding together, so I guess Brian has a reputation to uphold too," Emmett suggested.

"Maybe... "Debbie answered. "But this is clearly Sunshine's handiwork. I just know it."

"Of course, it is. Who else could get Brian Kinney on horseback besides Justin? But let's keep that our little secret," Ted insisted. Everybody laughed.

"Well, let me go and put dinner in the oven. I wonder where everyone is," Debbie said to herself, while walking into the kitchen.

"Here, let me give you a hand," Emmett said, falling in step behind her.

Daniel continued to talk with Blake and Ted until the front door started to open. Someone obviously had a key, and Daniel had to wonder, who was entering now.

Lindsay and Melanie entered and looked at the unusual assortment of people clustered in the area of the sofa. They paused for just a moment to try to figure out what was going on.

They said a quick hello to everyone, and then, Melanie took over the questioning. "Blake, I'll talk to you since I'm not sure that I can trust Ted at this moment," she teased. "Okay, tell me what's going on?"

Blake smiled and stepped in to make the introductions. "Lindsay...Melanie, I'd like you to meet Daniel Devore. He and Debbie went to high school together. Daniel, this is Lindsay and Melanie. Lindsay is an artist. Melanie is a lawyer and likes to interrogate everyone," he added with a smile.

Melanie thought for a moment, then quickly recognized the name, "My goodness, you do look exactly like Michael," she quickly blurted out, without thinking. Then she smiled from embarrassment.

"You'll have to forgive my partner," Lindsay said, "Hi, I'm Lindsay, and these last few days, we've heard a lot about you. It's so good to finally meet you."

"Why, thank you Lindsay. It's good to meet you too," Daniel said, gently shaking her hand. "We were talking about you earlier. Let me see, you have a son named Gus."

"That's right," Lindsay answered. "We also have a daughter named Jenny Rebecca, who happens to be Michael's daughter, making her your granddaughter."

"Yes...and it's very good to meet you Daniel," Melanie finally said. "Please forgive my manners."

"No problem," Daniel responded smiling. "I understand that I take some getting used to." Then he paused for a moment and finally said, "So, you're the mother of my granddaughter."

"Yes," Melanie confirmed before she asked, "Is Jenny Rebecca taking a nap upstairs, or is she still at Michael's?"

"Can we please not mention JR and Michael in the same breath?" Hunter strongly requested.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Melanie asked. If this statement had been made by anyone other than Hunter, she would have been concerned. But knowing what a smart ass Hunter could be, she simply took the comment in stride. Of course, that didn't stop her from firing a question back at him, "By the way, what are you doing here anyway?"

"Don't ask me what I'm doing here," Hunter challenged back. "When the question should be, what are you teaching your kids in Toronto?" he asked with attitude.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Melanie asked, wondering where the conversation was leading.

Hunter couldn't wait to elaborate, using his fingers for emphasis. "First, Gus gives you the silent treatment and then refuses to eat his cereal in the six-year olds version of a protest hunger strike." He began.

Melanie and Lindsay both rolled their eyes, but Hunter was now on a roll. He'd had no intention of dropping this subject until he could make his point. He quickly moved on the next finger for emphasis and was clearly ready to continue, when Lindsay cut him off with a question.

"Is there a point here, Hunter?" Lindsay asked patiently, "Or, are you just being your normal annoying self?"

"Oh. there's a point!" Hunter insisted.

"Well, will you get to it?" Melanie chimed in, definitely egging him on.

"Look, I've had a hard day. Will you two let me finish?" he protested.

"Sorry..." Lindsay said with a smile.

"Now, this morning," Hunter continued, striking his finger as he spoke, "I was called in to rescue Michael from his daughter!"

"What?" Lindsay asked with complete surprise.

"It seems that Michael tried to feed Jenny some Cap'n Crunch cereal for breakfast. JR threw a tantrum. Michael couldn't calm her down, so I was called in to the rescue," he said, pausing for a moment, for effect, before continuing. "I eventually gathered up Jenny and brought her safely here where she happily enjoyed Cheerios with Carl, this morning, as if nothing had happened." Hunter finally took a breath and sighed, "I do think you have a true drama princess-in-training there...don't you agree Grandfather?"

Daniel was about to comment, but Melanie interrupted.

"I see...so it's you, Daniel, that I have to thank for these dramatic moments, courtesy of a two year old," Melanie teased. "Now I fully understand where your granddaughter gets it from. I thought that she got it from Michael or maybe Debbie, but now I know the truth. I'm sure she has a touch of Divina Devore buried somewhere inside."

"I'll bet the whining may be Michael, but somehow I think the drama is pure Divina," Ted added with a laugh.

Daniel just smiled and shook his head at the accusations. Then he started mumbling, "Come and meet the family, Debbie suggested. I should have known there was more to it than just a simple family dinner. She just wanted to be sure that each of you had a chance to take a shot at me," he protested. "But, can't you see that I'm quiet and shy? Divina is the culprit. She's the one that you obviously need to take these matters up with. Surely, you can see that I'm just an innocent bystander," Daniel tried to explain in his own defense and to everyone's amusement.

"And how do you suppose that we take these matters up with Divina?" Lindsay quipped, with her hands on her hips.

"I'm not sure. Based on what I'm experiencing here today on her behalf," Daniel answered, "I think Divina's retirement is truly imminent."

"Now Grandfather, don't do anything rash! Pay no attention to these two dykes," Hunter said, gesturing toward Lindsay and Melanie as he spoke. "Divina can't retire before I get to see her perform," he reminded him.

Daniel held his head in his hands with a mock gesture of exasperation. "Does it ever end?" he muttered.

When he looked up, everyone was trying to hide their laughter.

"So, is my little protester-in-training upstairs taking a nap?" Melanie finally asked.

"Emmett mentioned that Carl left earlier to take JR to the park. I would guess that they should be returning soon...since it's almost dinner time." Hunter reminded them. "You two have been gone a long time. How was your day?" he asked in singsong fashion.

"Not that it's any of your business," Melanie quipped, "We stopped by to see Lindsay's parents."

"How did that go?" Ted asked.

"Thankfully, it was a short visit," Melanie said.

"And they told us that Lynette is getting married again," Lindsay shared with everyone.

"That was quick, less than two years. She definitely keeps beating her old records," Ted pointed out. "This would be number four, am I right?"

"Yes, and this time I was told that my presence at this wedding would not be required." Lindsay added sadly.

"Well, after what happened last time..." Ted said, remembering the reactions of the reception attendees to Lindsay's toast to her sister and her public marriage proposal to Melanie. "Well, Em and I tried to tell you that we weren't sure about the groom..." he reminded her.

"Well, it appears that you were right. He was caught with one of the servants. I understand that it's a family scandal," Melanie suggested. "Of course, it still doesn't change their attitude about Lindsay and me," she added quietly.

"How long have you two been together?" Daniel asked.

"Almost twelve years and still counting," Lindsay answered.

"And your sister's been married 3 times in the same period?" Daniel continued his questioning.

"That's amazing. It just goes to prove that it takes a lot of work to make a relationship last," Daniel pointed out. "I know that the storybooks tell you about happily ever after, but they never mention how hard you have to work at it...all the time."

"Spoken by someone who knows?" Melanie asked quietly.

"No, but I've had the advantage of watching friends make their relationships work. I was just an observer. You two are to be congratulated." Daniel added.

"You're right it's never easy. We find that we have to work at it every day," Lindsay confirmed.

"And still after all this time, it still doesn't take much to pull everything off track," Melanie added.

At that moment, Debbie strolled into the living room. "Where is Carl? He knows what time dinner is. Now, where do you suppose he is?"

"Emmett said the park, but I agree that JR couldn't play this long. So I'm sure that he'll be here shortly, probably carrying a sleeping JR in his arms," Hunter teased.

Debbie found a picture of JR and handed it to Daniel, "Our granddaughter is perfect, see here's a picture of her and her dad."

"I see that she looks so much like Michael," Daniel commented.

"Just the way that Michael looks so much like you," Hunter commented with uncharacteristic sentimentality.

Just then the front door opened once again.

In came a skipping Jenny Rebecca. She was immediately followed by Carl, who was trying to hold on to her hand. And directly behind Carl was someone very recognizable...Ben.

Everyone fell silent, for they were pleasantly surprised to see Ben. He'd been skipping family dinners for the last few weeks. They all silently felt it was good that he was back.

Jenny ran over to Melanie and received a hug in return.

Debbie stepped in. "Hi, Ben," she said, wrapping him in one of her usual bear hugs. Then she immediately turned her attention to Carl, "Well, it's about time that you got back. I was just about to call the station to have an APB put out for you," she teased.

Carl walked over and kissed Debbie, "I do love it when you talk cop to me! It's such a turn on," he added.

"Carl!" Debbie squealed her complaint, as everyone else tried to hide their laughter.

Emmett heard the laughter, so he came back in to the living room to see what was going on.

"You might want to hide back in the kitchen, Em; Carl and Debbie are having verbal foreplay," Lindsay teased.

"You seem to forget that I live here; there's nothing new there," Emmett quipped. "Hi Ben, it's good to see you."

"Thanks Em, I've missed you too." Ben responded.

"Carl, will you stop nibbling on my ear. I have an important introduction to make," Debbie insisted, trying to move out of Carl's grasp. "Ben, I'd like you to meet Michael's father, Daniel Devore. Daniel this is Ben Bruckner, Michael's husband. They got married in Canada a few years ago."

"We're estranged at the moment," Ben was quick to point out. "But I'm very glad to meet you, Daniel. You have no idea how excited Michael is that you're going to get to know each other at last. "

"It won't happen overnight, but I must admit that I'm looking forward to it too," Daniel confirmed.

"So Carl, did you run into Ben at the park?" Emmett asked, changing the subject.

"No, Jenny and I went to the park and played for a while. She likes the slides and the swings. Then, we stopped by to see Ben. She curled up in Ben's lap and was asleep in no time. Then, Ben and I watched part of the game together. You know, it's no fun watching sports all alone. Finally, when Jenny's nap was over, I convinced him to come with me to dinner, and here we are," Carl explained.

"Good work, Carl," Debbie said. "Ben was coming to dinner anyway, weren't you Ben?"

"Absolutely! After all, I was summoned," Ben reminded her.

"I see that you took the summons to heart," Daniel remarked.

"Oh, yeah!" Ben quickly agreed. "I'd be afraid not to."

"I think I get the full picture now," Daniel added.

"See, it really doesn't take long," Hunter added.

Melanie lifted Jenny Rebecca from her lap, and she and Lindsay brought her over to officially meet Daniel.

Usually Jenny doesn't like strangers, but something about Daniel made her hold out her arms to him.

Daniel gingerly took her on his lap to hold her. "Well hello there Jenny," he said softly. "I've heard a lot about you. I've really been waiting to meet you," he added, getting a grin from Jenny in return.

As he was holding his granddaughter, he tried to imagine holding Michael when he was that age. Once again Daniel, realized that he had missed a lot.

After a few minutes, Jenny was ready to be let go, so Lindsay and Melanie took her back to their seat. But Jenny kept carefully watching Daniel's every move from across the room.

"She's adorable," Daniel finally added, watching his granddaughter in return.

Debbie and Carl both couldn't hide their smiles watching the two of them, eyeing each other.

"Now, all we have to do is wait for, you know who, to make his grand entrance, and then we can sit down and enjoy dinner." Debbie pointed out. "I was hoping that Michael would show up, but I guess that was too much to hope for," she added quietly.

"Give it some time, Debbie. Michael has a lot going on," Lindsay added as if she knew more than she was telling.

Daniel leaned over to Hunter and asked, "Who are we waiting for?"

"Brian!" everyone said in unison, very glad to change the subject off of Michael.

"You have to understand, Grandfather, Brian always has to make a grand entrance," Hunter explained.

"Brian's always fashionably late," Lindsay confirmed.

Just then the front door opened again. "I take it you were talking about me?" Brian said as he walked through the door. "Of course, you were. What else is there to talk about?"

Brian finally walked into the room followed by Gus and Justin as expected, but to everyone's surprise Jennifer and Molly were with them too.

"Well, okay I'm here now. Let's eat." Brian bristled.

"Not so fast, asshole, let me have a chance to say hello to Jennifer," Debbie insisted. "And can't you see that we have a guest."

"There are no guests at family dinners, only family," Brian clarified with a shake of his head. "I take it you're the Danny Devore that I've heard so much about. It's good to finally meet you. I'm Brian Kinney."

"I'm glad to meet you, Brian. I understand that I have you to thank for not having to explain a lot of things today," Daniel replied.

"I don't believe in a lot of drama or bullshit," Brian quickly said, "So I thought that it would save everyone a lot of time. Welcome to the family," Brian responded. "This is my partner, Justin..."

"Oh yes, you're the artist. I loved the painting that you did for Michael. It's truly amazing to see cartoon characters depicted as fine art," Daniel explained.

"Thanks," Justin said quietly. "So, Michael showed you the painting. I'm glad that you liked it."

Not wanting to be left out of things, Gus walked up to Daniel and extended his little hand. "Hi, I'm Gus," he simply said. Brian and Justin smiled knowingly at each other.

Daniel lowered himself down to Gus' eye level. "I'm pleased to meet you, Gus, my name is Daniel."

"Daniel," Gus muttered to himself.

Once again, Brian resumed the introductions, "I know that you already know Mother Taylor..."

Jennifer stepped in to complete the introductions, "And, this is my daughter, Molly."

"It's nice to meet you, Daniel," Molly said politely.

"I'm glad to meet you too, Molly," Daniel finally said. Then he looked from Molly to Justin. "Your kids look just like you!" He quickly observed. Both Molly and Justin rolled their eyes at the comment. "How are you, Jennifer?"

"I'm great," Jennifer answered. "I've been telling Brian and Justin all about what they missed last night. And..."

"Look Jennifer, you can continue this later," Debbie interrupted. "Now that we're all here... let's eat!" she said, wrapping her arms around Gus and Jenny and starting to turn in the direction of the table.

"Yes, mother," Brian answered in sing song fashion, leaning down to give Debbie a kiss.

Everyone quickly scattered in different directions to wash their hands for dinner.

Chapter 39 – Dinner Is Served

Sunday Afternoon...(Day 63)

The additional leaf was quickly added to the table, and extra chairs were brought downstairs. Things were quickly rearranged in the room to accommodate everyone at one table.

"Why Hunter, it's so nice to have both you and Molly at the same table with us for a change," Ben teased them. They both glared back at him, for it was an established fact that both Molly and Hunter preferred to sit at a separate table during dinner, so that they could watch everything going on without missing any little detail.

"Hopefully, this will curtail their usual mischief of starting things during dinner," Ted suggested.

"Us? " Molly and Hunter asked in unison.

"We never start anything. We're just watchers," Hunter reminded them. "So much always happens simultaneously at the main table," he added. "Now, we just have to make sure that we don't miss anything."

"I'll fill you in on anything you miss," Daniel said with a devilish grin from the other end of the table.

"Thank you, Grandfather," Hunter said with a smile.

"And I see that you're sitting with Jenny, not planning any more grand rescues?" Daniel teased.

"Well, Lindsay and Melanie are here, but JR pays no attention to them at family dinners," Hunter pointed out. "And JR IS sitting next to Ben, he always seems to have a calming effect on her. No, I don't anticipate any more problems," he said, leaning over to tickle a happy JR under her chin.

"Gus, I see that you have staked-out your usual spot by Justin," Emmett teased.

"I believe that Gus is just waiting to see what interesting morsels will appear on Justin's plate," Lindsay pointed out. "Gee, Justin, I hope you're not too hungry. After all, you've got both Brian and Gus to deal with. Maybe you'd like to come down here with Mel and me," she added.

"Will you leave him alone?" Emmett challenged, sensing that Lindsay was just trying to start trouble.

"Don't worry, I have extra food for you take with you, Sunshine, just in case..." Debbie teased. "We can't have any starving artists here."

"Thanks, Deb, but I think I'll be okay," Justin answered hesitantly. "I'm heading back to the city late tonight anyway," Justin informed her.

"That's good to hear. So, how's the painting going?" Lindsay asked. "I'm sure with all those shows in a few weeks, you must really be busy. How did you manage to get time away from your New York studio?"

"Gus made sure that I got some painting done here at the house," Justin pointed out, tickling Gus for good measure.

"But how is that possible? I thought Gus went to work with Brian," Melanie countered.

"Oh he did," Brian said with a proud smile. "He was a wonderful assistant. Right, Theodore?"

"Well, he told me I did a good job," Ted tried to point out.

"Don't get too comfortable," Brian teased as he watched Ted, starting to squirm. "He still has a few things to learn," he added with a measure of self-satisfaction.

"Maybe, but at least I fared better than Vincent..." Ted fired back.

"What happened to Vincent?" Emmett asked, looking directly at Gus.

"He can't make pictures that make Dad happy...like Justin can," Gus was quick to answer.

To which, everyone rolled their eyes and smiled; for everyone knew how Gus felt about Justin.

"Lindsay, our son is going to make a great art critic," Brian pointed out. "Of course, he DOES compare everyone's work to Justin's," he added with a laugh, "Which will probably make mere mortals feel a bit inadequate."

"No surprise there," Ben said with a laugh, and everyone nodded their agreement.

"You have to admit that very few artists are as talented as Justin..." Lindsay quickly pointed out, causing Melanie to do a double take at that remark. After all the weeks of listening to Lindsay profess that she wanted to study in Paris to take her own art to the next level, now here she was, once again, professing her limitations.

"Unfortunately, Gus has known that since he was a baby." Melanie said with a laugh. Then she turned to Daniel to explain. "When Gus was a baby, Justin was his favorite babysitter. Justin was going to PIFA and always had paintings or drawings to do for assignments. Gus always liked to be nearby whenever Justin was working. I guess art just rubbed off on him."

"Let's not forget that Lindsay is an artist too," Jennifer reminded everyone.

"Although, I've never been able to paint or do anything artistic when the kids are around. Justin seems to manage even with both Gus and Nicky underfoot. I don't know how he does it. Anyway, still after all this time, Gus likes being in the studio while Justin paints. It still seems to be a great adventure for him," Lindsay explained with a shrug.

"I like to read to Jus," Gus explained in his own defense.

"I see," Daniel said with a smile, as he tried to picture the tender scene.

"Of course, Justin did manage to escape from his studio long enough to take us riding yesterday," Brian revealed.

"We went riding on horses!" Gus explained to Daniel. "We rode outside."

"Outside?" Melanie asked, showing her confusion.

"We went riding on the open trails," Brian easily explained.

"Gus is no longer stuck inside in the corral. He's now riding out in the wide open spaces," Justin explained. "Brian, too."

"I'm really proud of both of you," Lindsay added. "Justin and I have been riding since we were kids," she said, quickly explaining things to Daniel. Gus and Brian are just started riding a few months ago.

"I see. Well, I heard that you must be quite a rider," Daniel said to the now beaming Gus. "I heard that Justin even captured it all in a painting."

"It's over the fireplace at our house," Gus confirmed.

"He means over the fireplace at the estate where Brian and Justin live in West Virginia," Lindsay clarified, so that Daniel wouldn't get the idea that the painting was at her house in Toronto.

"So how do you like living in West Virginia?" Daniel asked.

"It's quiet... it's peaceful...it's home," Brian revealed. "And it's only 30 minutes from Pittsburgh, when the traffic isn't too bad."

"The estate was a good investment, Brian," Jennifer reminded him.

"All my investments are good investments," Brian quipped, smiling directly at Justin.

"If I don't get gray hairs first," Ted fired back. "But, I'm not complaining!"

"So Molly, how are things going with you?" Lindsay asked.

"They had a big career day at school. I was tested and it seems that I might be good in business," Molly revealed.

"I'm sure your dad must be thrilled to hear that," Ted said with a smile. "So, are you thinking of taking over the family business in a few years?"

"Electronics isn't really that interesting. I hadn't considered it before, but now that I think about it, I might like business but I think I need something more creative," Molly explained.

"Like advertising?" Ted suggested with a wicked smile. "Right, Bri?"

"Now, that's an idea! So, can I hang out at Kinnetik with you," Molly asked enthusiastically, with a pleading expression on her face, and looking directly at Brian.

Brian cut a look over at Ted, knowing that he'd been had. "Talk to Cynthia..." was all that he said.

Ted smiled satisfactorily, without saying a word.

"Thanks, Brian. I knew that I could count on you," Molly said with a smile.

"Before you start hanging out with Brian and being totally corrupted, maybe you should consider the law?" Melanie suggested.

"The law...huh?" Molly responded, totally unconvinced. "Maybe..." she said politely.

"What about you, Hunter? Have you thought about what you might do, career wise?" Jennifer asked.

Hunter took a deep breath, thinking that this couldn't be happening to him. How on earth was he going to keep a secret with this group, and Ben was sitting right there at the table. "Michael thinks that I should be a doctor or maybe a lawyer," he finally said, thinking that he might skirt the issue.

"A lawyer, huh?" Melanie teased. "That has possibilities... if you do something about THAT ATTITUDE of yours," she added sarcastically.

"I don't know, the law must be pretty forgiving; after all, you've managed to carve out a career with that attitude that you have," Brian took great pleasure in reminding her. The sparring had now officially begun.

Hunter had a glimmer of hope that if Melanie and Brian squared off against each other, the actual topic of discussion would be quickly forgotten. He smiled to himself and settled in to watch the verbal action.

Unfortunately, Debbie intervened. "All right, both of you, behave yourselves!" she demanded, determined to have a peaceful dinner table.

"Go ahead, Hunter, you can continue now," Carl suggested, smiling at Debbie.

"However," Hunter said and then paused, for he now had to choose his words carefully. "I really liked being one of the dwarfs when I was at Disneyworld..."

"What?" Melanie said with total surprise.

"I still can't believe that you were a dwarf," Debbie interrupted. "Besides, aren't you a little tall to be a dwarf?"

"Evidently, Hunter must be a pretty good actor to make the crowds believe that he was a dwarf," Daniel decided to comment as a way of helping Hunter out.

"Danny, I think you and Hunter are both full of shit," Debbie quickly added with a laugh.

"Now....now, Deb, Daniel has point. I'm looking forward to seeing Hunter in his school production next month, so we can judge for ourselves," Brian suggested. "

Hunter could see that Brian was in rare form today and determined to cause trouble at every turn.

Ben decided it was time for him to step in here and see if he could help. "I think it's great that you want to be an actor. I once thought about acting myself," he added with a laugh. "But, I do know that Michael clearly had other ideas. So, how were you planning on telling HIM?"

"I wasn't planning on telling him. I trust that you won't mention anything to him either," Hunter suggested. "You know how he gets when ANY of HIS plans are tampered with. He doesn't take disappointment well. Telling him would not be pretty!"

"Yes, we do know that," Carl confirmed, glancing over at Brian. "But what were you planning on doing, receiving your Academy Award statuette and then casually mentioning in your acceptance speech that you had decided to forgo attending medical school?"

Everyone was silent for a moment as they tried to visualize that scene; then, they all started to laugh as the image came into clear focus for them.

"I'm thinking about the stage, not movies," Hunter corrected them. "But I still have some time, remember, I haven't graduated from high school yet."

"Don't worry," Ben said lovingly. "We'll talk about this. I'm sure that we'll find some way to bring Michael around," he said supportively.

"See, catastrophe averted. All you needed was a little help from your dad," Daniel added. "You already knew that I was on your side."

"So Justin, have you heard from Paul and Jason?" Blake asked.

"Speaking of troublemakers..." Ted commented.

"They should be visiting in about two weeks, right Gus?" Justin responded.

"Right...." Gus confirmed.

"Gus is already counting down the days until he and Nicky are having their next playdate." Brian explained."

"You mean until they have their next play date WITH JUSTIN," Molly corrected. "I'm sure that's how they see it, right Gus?"

Gus started laughing and covered his face with his hands to hide. Justin leaned over to wrap his arm around him.

"I think Nicky is really cute," Emmett gushed.

"Of course, you do," Ted commented. "You'll only admit that because Drew isn't here to hear you."

"Drew understands about me and Nicky," Emmett assured him with attitude.

"Sure he does?" Ted added with some doubt.

Carl started to explain to Daniel that Emmett was sort of dating Drew Boyd, the famous football star. Then Melanie took the opportunity to fill Daniel in on the rivalry for Emmett's affections between the famous football hero and a perky four year old with red curls and freckles, named Nicky. Finally, the romantic in Lindsay couldn't leave out the details about the love-at-first-sight-moment between Nicky and Emmett at the mansion.

Everyone was enjoying this story. Then they all paused as they thought that they heard the front door open.

Carl lingered only a moment, before standing up to investigate. Before he could move very far, the intruder was now standing at the doorway.

"Michael!" Debbie exclaimed with some surprise, as everyone else looked up too.

Michael simply stood there, completely silent.

"Why don't you pull up a chair?" Carl suggested.

"Are you hungry? Let me fix you a plate," Debbie said, standing up to return to the kitchen.

"That is isn't necessary. I'm not really hungry. I genuinely thought that dinner would be over by now. Isn't dinner a bit later than usual?" Michael complained.

"Carl and JR went to the park, and they were a little late getting back. Plus, Carl and I had a date last night, so everything is a bit off-schedule," Debbie revealed. "It doesn't matter..."

"Come on, Mikey, you have to keep your strength up," Brian argued, as everyone started to make room for him at the table next to Brian. Some things never changed.

Michael noticed the spot that was being made for him, and he couldn't resist the opportunity to sit next his best friend, so he decided to grab the suggested additional chair.

As he joined everyone at the table, Michael suddenly realized that he was very hungry. And when food was placed in front of him, he immediately began to mindlessly scoop food into his mouth.

His attention was primarily focused only on the food and the person sitting next to him. He was so used to these large gatherings that it never occurred to him to see who might actually be sitting at the table.

But after a couple of mouthfuls of food, Michael started to scan the faces at the table.

"No one was sure that you were coming to dinner," Lindsay commented. "We all hoped that you'd show up, especially since Mel and I haven't had a chance to visit with you," she continued, pretending that she hadn't stopped by the comic book store to have lunch with him, just the day before. "How are you doing, Michael?"

"I heard that Jenny Rebecca obviously didn't inherit your taste in breakfast cereals," Melanie said with a slight laugh. "Welcome to the world of breakfast with a two year old."

"She was just being stubborn," Michael commented. "I don't know where she gets it from," he added with all seriousness. "I really believe that she was just upset because Ben and Hunter weren't around."

"I saw her late this morning, and she was fine," Ben commented. Michael looked up at the unique sound of this voice, but was completely speechless.

Ben simply continued, "Of course she crawled into my lap and went to sleep. Nothing new there," he added with a laugh. "Some things never change," Hunter said nonchalantly. Michael was still in a state of shock at finding Ben here.

"Ben, what are you doing here?" Michael immediately challenged once he found his voice.

Hunter and Ben looked at each other with a look of understanding between them. "I knew this wasn't a good idea," Ben quietly commented.

"Ben is here because I invited him," Debbie said resolutely, making it absolutely clear that no arguments would be allowed about HER decision. "Ben and Hunter are STILL members of THIS family," she reminded him.

Michael immediately started to quietly sulk.

Hunter decided to step in here. "So, aren't you going to say hello to grandfather?" he innocently asked.

"I said hello to Carl when I came in," Michael confirmed in return.

"I'm not talking about Carl, I'm talking about Daniel," Hunter said with attitude.

"What?" Michael exclaimed with total surprise.

"Hello, Michael," Daniel said cautiously, "I'm glad that you're finally here, too," he said quietly. "We tried to wait for you," he added.

And for the first time, Michael noticed that his father was present at the table.

"Daniel," Michael said quietly. "I didn't see you when I came in."

"That's understandable. There really are quite a lot of people here," Daniel pointed out. "I can't believe that you all get together all the time for Sunday dinner," he added with a smile.

"Isn't it great that Daniel could make it to dinner with us," Lindsay commented, hoping to nudge Michael in the right direction.

Michael decided to ignore the question, choosing instead to continue to sulk.

Brian leaned over, and being Brian, couldn't resist making a comment, "If you keep looking like that, you're going to get jowls," he whispered.

Justin and Gus were the only ones to hear him, and they snickered quietly.

"Debbie and Daniel were looking at pictures of you earlier. Of course, no viewing of photographs would be complete without the picture of you taken at Pride 2000. Teddy and I were just commenting that you make one bitching drag queen," Emmett added with a laugh, hoping to ease Michael's mood.

"Fortunately no one recognized me that day because I was in drag," Michael pointed out, "So I didn't have to worry about showing up on the six o'clock news."

"Believe me, I do know that feeling. Of course, for some reason the camera's always follow Divina no matter where she goes. It's only as myself that I can travel unnoticed," Daniel revealed.

"Sometimes as me, no one seems to notice me either," Michael suggested, once again resuming his sulk.

"That sounds like self pity to me, and you know that makes my dick soft," Brian reminded him. "And we wouldn't want that, now would we?"

"Besides, now if you show up on the six o'clock news, think how many additional issues of Rage we'd sell," Justin reminded him wistfully.

"You've been with Brian too long. He's rubbing off on you," Michael teased.

"My little advertising genius!" Brian quipped, leaning over to give Justin a gentle kiss as Gus covered his eyes.

"Easy for you to say, your life hasn't been thrown up in the air," Michael reminded him.

"Obviously, you've never lived with Justin when he's preparing for two shows," Brian said sarcastically. "You have no idea how I'm suffering," he added. That remark got him a swipe on the arm from Justin. "Ouch!"

"What's going on Michael?" Ted had to ask. "You cut yourself off from all of us. You have to know that we're all here for you."

"Of course we are, Sweetie," Emmett concurred.

"How can all of you sit there and act as if nothing has happened? The world is a very different place for me now. I've been lied to and deceived by anyone that I've ever trusted," Michael complained, now starting to whine.

Everyone at the table rolled their eyes, for they'd been enjoying a peaceful dinner.

Now, they all knew that was over, and drama queen moments were about to begin.

Chapter 40 - And So It Begins

In the Middle of Sunday Dinner...(Day 63)

With Michael's drama queen moment about to begin, Justin started to push back his chair, already trying to figure out how he was going to get Gus and Jenny away from the table before tensions fully erupted in the room. As he was trying to figure this out, Molly quickly recognized his facial expression of concern, and she nodded to Hunter, who also immediately understood.

Molly said calmly, "Gus, it's going to be a while before Debbie has dessert for us. What do you think about you and me checking out the swings?" she suggested, while simultaneously getting up and moving over to take Gus' hand.

Gus looked up at Justin to make sure it was okay; then, he happily took Molly's hand and headed outside.

"I'm not sure it's a good idea to leave Molly and Gus alone," Hunter then suggested, so he leaned over and said to Jenny Rebecca. "So JR, how would you like to check out the swings too?"

Jenny quickly extended her arms upward to be picked up, so that she could be released from the prison of her high chair.

"I've still got IT!" Hunter beamed with attitude, giving JR a hug. Jenny merely giggled as she and Hunter followed Molly and Gus out the back door.

Brian slid over closer to Justin and casually leaned against him. Being in physical contact with Justin helped him to relax and gave him a better view of Michael.

"Okay, Mikey," Brian began, "You obviously have something on your mind; out with it!" he demanded from his relaxed postion.

"Why do you believe that I have something on my mind?" Michael stupidly asked.

"The jowls, Mikey..." was all that Brian needed to say. Everyone else braced themselves for what was to follow.

"Sure, Honey, tell me what's on your mind?" Debbie asked with some concern. "I know you thought that dinner was over, so I guess you came here to talk to me," she pointed out. "Well, here I am.

So, start talking!"

"That's easy for you to say. Your life is going along as if nothing has happened. My life, on the other hand, has been thrown into chaos. I'm suffering here! Now, you expect me to talk about our personal problems with everyone still in the room," Michael protested.

"No problem," Ted simply said, and then, as if on silent cue, everyone at the table started to stand up, preparing to give Michael and Debbie some privacy, so they could hash out their problems. They were all starting to relish being out of Michael's line of fire. Unfortunately, their anticipations just were a bit premature.

Debbie may have been calm on the outside, but on the inside, she had to steel herself. She and Carl had already been privy to one of Michael's tirades when he first found out the undisputed reality that Daniel was his father.

"All of you just sit the fuck down!" Debbie demanded, and everyone quickly sat back down in their seats. "We're family here. There are no more secrets between us. So whatever my son has to say to me, he can say it in front of everyone." Then she turned towards him and simply said, "Michael?"

Debbie secretly hoped that the presence of everyone at the table would modulate Michael's behavior, to some extent.

"You just can't leave things alone, can you, Ma?" Michael immediately began. "First you hold on to the secret for thirty five years. Then, you finally decide to tell the truth. Now, you just won't leave things alone and let everyone adjust to things in their own time."

"Michael, what are you talking about?" Carl asked.

Brian could see where this was leading. "Get over it, Mikey," he calmly suggested. "All your life, you've complained about not having a father. Now, you know that you have one, who's very much alive. Look on the bright side of things. You and Daniel have a chance to get to know each other and build a real relationship."

"You don't know that!" Michael challenged.

"In fact, I do," Brian corrected him. "Daniel is here, isn't he? He took on all of us, all at once. Now, why do you suppose that he did that?" he pointedly asked.

"I don't know," Michael mumbled, still unwilling to see any perspective other than his own.

"C'mon Mikey, really think about it," Brian reiterated. "I'd have to say that Daniel's actions speak volumes."

Michael looked as if he was still trying to figure things out. Rapid processing of information had never been his strong suit. Therefore, everyone else in the room, with their more agile minds, had to endure the deafening silence, as Michael tried to process the obvious reason for Daniel's appearance.

Finally, Daniel decided to step in and speak for himself. "I'm here because I was invited. Although, I must admit that I'm really glad to be here. I had the chance to meet all the people that are important to you," he continued. "You're very lucky to have friends...family even...who care so much about you. I'd hoped that by getting to know the various people, who know you best that I might make fewer mistakes, as we get to know one another."

Michael considered what Daniel just said and realized that since he'd never considered that possibility. Maybe, he'd been over-reacting just a bit. After all, Daniel was just making an effort for his benefit. So, he tried to calm himself down to listen to what everyone had to say.

However, Michael wanted to be sure that everyone in the room understood, how miserable he was. After all, he was the injured party here. He was the one that was directly impacted by everything new happening in his life. His was the life that had been totally disrupted by the people that he trusted and cared for most.

"I was hoping that we could get to know each other," Michael finally admitted, "Just you and me, by ourselves! I didn't want anyone else involved. I didn't even want them to know about you just yet."

"I had no idea that you wanted me to continue to be a family secret," Daniel spoke with some surprise.

"I made the decision that everyone in the family should be told," Brian interrupted. "I wanted everyone to be able to support all three of you, without a constant repetition of the facts. If you have a problem with my decision, that's most unfortunate, but what's done is done. So go ahead and move on from here," he added nonchalantly.

"I planned for me and Daniel to be really close before he had to get involved with all of you," Michael protested, with a sweeping motion to emphasize the dramatics of his statement. "Now that he's met everybody, I wouldn't be surprised if he decided to disappear again."

"I'm sorry," Daniel said apologetically. "I just didn't think that you'd had the time to make any plans."

The room fell silent as everyone else was also surprised that Michael had planned things out. In fact, they found it all a bit hard to believe. Any planning that had ever occurred in Michael's life had always been done by someone else...Debbie, Brian, David, or Ben. Michael had always been good at complaining. He had always just reacted to events as they unfolded, much like everyone was experiencing right now.

No one could ever remember a time that Michael had EVER done any planning, but, everyone, around the table, kept these thoughts to themselves.

Daniel then continued, "You should have called and told me your plan," he quickly pointed out. "Then, I would have known to refuse the invitation of an old friend. After all, Debbie simply insisted that I come over to look at pictures of you growing up and to stay for dinner. I had no idea when I accepted the invitation that so many people would be here. But even if I'd know, I wouldn't have seen any reason to turn down her invitation," he explained. "I've had a great time getting to know everyone," he added with a smile.

"In fact, your mother didn't give him much of a choice," Carl interjected. "His presence was DEMANDED. You know what that's like."

"He's now family, that seems reasonable," Brian commented with a slight laugh, stating the obvious, even though Michael didn't want to think about it.

Everybody knew what that was like; for at one time or another, each person in the room had been on the receiving end of one of Debbie's demand appearances. It was the demand appearances that reminded them that they were part of this family. Everyone thought to themselves that Daniel had taken everything in stride, which was pretty remarkable considering that he had little choice in things.

Michael was ready to argue with Brian, but Debbie took over the conversation, giving him no chance to say anything at all.

"You should have seen Divina perform last night," Debbie right jumped in. "It was really fucking amazing....the gowns, the music. The audience was clapping...there were encores and everything."

"And we had the royal treatment," Carl added.

"Somehow, I knew that you would remember Casey," Debbie said quickly, placing one hand on her hip. "Let me tell you," she teased, finding it necessary to bring everyone up to date on the events of the night before, "Carl has a secret admirer!"

All this talk of Casey caused Carl to blush.

"It's okay, Carl, I'm sure Casey will get over it eventually," Daniel quickly pointed out with a devilish grin, just for good measure.

Jennifer tried to help out by adding, "And Divina invited us backstage to her dressing room after the show," she continued. "It was wonderful. Now, we've seen both Daniel and Divina, up close and personal."

Michael was too surprised by what he was hearing to make any response. He realized several things all at once. First, Carl and Debbie had gone to see Divina at the Kit Kat Club, and second that Jennifer had gone with them. That was a grouping he'd never expected. And finally, he had the startling realization that Carl and Debbie and Jennifer and Daniel all seemed to really like each other.

Carl finally regained his composure and quickly pointed out that BOTH Daniel and Divina were welcome additions to the family.

"Thank you, Carl, from both of us," Daniel said with a big grin and a slight seated bow.

Even though his little brain was spinning, Michael, once again, found his voice. "See, it's started already. I'm not going to allow it! He's not going to be family!" Michael irrationally insisted. "He's MY dad. He belongs to ME. He doesn't belong to the rest of you!" he continued to protest. "You all can't have him! I've waited thirty five years to have my dad. And, I don't intend to share him with ANY of you!"

"Mikey, what are you talking about?" Brian had to ask. He could already see that Michael was starting to sulk again.

"I believe it's a little late for that, Michael," Melanie reluctantly pointed out. "He's already spent time with Hunter, and he's already met Jenny Rebecca.

"Hunter already calls him grandfather. JR is still trying to figure things out. I think she's trying to understand who this man is, who looks so much like you. I would say, you're all in for the exciting adventure of getting to know Daniel better," Ben calmly suggested.

"See, It's starting already!" Michael complained, now shaking his head for emphasis.

"I'm so sorry, Michael, I had no idea..." Daniel said, continuing to apologize even though he clearly felt that he had nothing to apologize for.

Still, Michael was becoming more upset as each new bit of information came to light. Daniel's only hope was that by all the unnecessary apologizing, Michael would be appeased and would calm down. Unfortunately, no one in the room had a chance to explain to Daniel that there was no underlying logic to Michael's behavior.

"I'm sorry too, Michael..." Debbie began and then paused.

Michael began to perk up, feeling as if someone now understood his position. He thought his mother was at last on his side, for it was clearly unusual for Debbie to apologize so quickly.

But to his surprise, Debbie wasn't finished, and her demeanor changed as she continued, "Because, no matter what happens, going forward between you and Danny... he IS now, and will always be, a member of this family!" Debbie told him sternly, in no uncertain terms.

With that statement, Michael flew into a rage. "You can't keep picking up strays and making them members of this family!" he accused.

"Excuse me?" Debbie asked incredulously.

"What?" even Ted had to ask, at this point. "We're all your friends, Michael. Have you forgotten?"

"I'm not talking about you and Em and Brian. You've always been my friends," Michael pointedly clarified. "I'm not even talking about Lindsay and Melanie. I'm also not talking about Blake or Drew."

"Then what are you talking about?" Brian asked, trying to quickly figure out who was left out of the friendship litany.

Before he could say anything more, Justin interrupted. "I see," he quickly concluded. "So, this is about me?"

Brian was about to step in and come to Justin's defense, when Jennifer casually interrupted.

"This is about Justin?" Jennifer asked with complete amazement. "I can't believe this! For your information, Justin isn't a stray anything!" she insisted in full mother-mode. "Debbie and I have mothered him together since he was 17."

Justin merely rolled his eyes at that comment. He couldn't believe that Michael would open this particular can of worms.

"Or, is that what the problem is, Michael?" Lindsay felt the need to ask. "We're all family, and Debbie is the glue that holds us together. You know that! Are you saying that you resent the fact that Debbie is there for all of us?" she asked.

"Don't tell me you're still upset about the fact that Justin used to live in your old bedroom," Ted pointedly asked. "Even you have to admit, that's ancient history. "

"So, I would say that you owe Justin a debt of gratitude," Melanie suggested. "Since Debbie's had Justin to mother, you've been left to live your own life."

"So tell me again what the problem is?" Emmett asked, totally confused by the turn of events.

The idea of being grateful to Justin about anything was enough to send Michael into a rage, again.

And Michael definitely wasn't finished yet. In pure reaction mode, without thinking anything through, he blurted out, "Ma just keeps on picking up strays and adding them to our family!" he shouted. "She never stops to consider the consequences," he continued, obviously on a roll and ignoring the cautionary looks that he was getting from everyone. "Things haven't been right in this family, since HE came along," he added, gesturing in the direction of Justin.

Brian was instantly on his feet.

Justin gently touched Brian on the arm to let him know that he would handle this. "Since the night that Brian first brought me home and fucked me, you've always wanted me gone. Debbie, on the other hand, has always liked having me around, and we both know that she can be pretty persuasive. Well, just remember at this point, Brian and I are a package deal," he calmly said with an added smile.

Lindsay started speaking before Brian could say anything.

"Please, Michael, don't go there!" Lindsay said, already seeing trouble brewing, for she knew that Brian wouldn't put up with this. Even if everyone else had forgotten, she clearly remembered the moment that Michael pushed Brian too far, and Brian had finally punched Michael. She wanted to prevent a recurrence of that event, for she understood now, as she never understood before, that Brian was in full-protective mode where Justin was concerned.

Lindsay looked pleadingly over at Melanie for help.

Melanie recognized her partner's anguish and stepped in to help. "Michael!" she called out to bring him back to reality. "Get a grip!"

Michael appeared to calm a little at the sound of Melanie's voice, but clearly he wasn't done. He was the injured party here, and he wanted to be sure that everyone knew it. "Me and Brian have been inseparable, since we were 14. Then, HE came along, and Brian started to change. Brian hasn't been able to get enough of Justin since the day they first met," he openly complained.

Hesitating to completely argue with the facts, Brian calmly said, instead, while retaking his seat, "Well, maybe not the first day." Then he once again leaned against Justin and smiled. "You've got to admit, he's pretty addicting. Never enough, Mikey" Brian mumbled as if in some trance.

Justin simply leaned over and kissed Brian gently. Brian held the kiss and allowed it to become passionate. At this point, the two partners were completely ignoring Michael and everyone else.

"Now, you've gone and done it, Michael!" Debbie complained with a laugh, throwing her hands in the air. "Brian and Justin had just about managed to get through one family dinner, without making out at the table," she suggested. "But you had to go and get them started. Look at them now! The next thing you know, they'll be fucking."

"And you know how much Brian likes fucking in public," Emmett quipped as a reminder to everyone. "So please tell me that there was a reason that you started all this?"

Michael ran his hands over his face in frustration. Once again, he'd totally lost control of events, and somehow watching Brian and Justin kissing was the last thing that he wanted to witness.

Brian and Justin finally pulled apart to breathe although they now both had these strange expressions on their faces.

Michael was still incensed and continued with his rant, "Ever since Boy Wonder joined our little family, he and Brian seem to need to spend EVERY spare minute they HAVE, together," Michael complained, and everyone was still confused by the seeming non-sequitur.

"Just as you used to spend all your spare time with Ben," Ted finally reminded him. "Is there a point here?"

"This has nothing to do with Ben!" Michael fired back quickly in anger.

"Nothing new there..." Ben fired back with a touch of disappointment.

Michael shook his head as he immediately realized his mistake. "No...No. That's not what I mean!" he said quickly. "Brian and I are best friends. It's just that he doesn't have any time for me, now that he has Justin. Some things aren't supposed to change."

"And some things are," Melanie felt the need to say. "Brian and Justin are a committed couple...more legally bound to each other than any of us. You know Brian better than anyone. What exactly did you suppose his actions would mean, Michael? He's a friend to all of us...but he belongs to Justin. Can't you see that? Stop trying to change what is. It's time to move forward." She insisted.

"How can you sit there and calmly defend him? I'm no different than Lindsay. We're both trying to find a way to keep him in our lives," Michael argued.

"I'm right here," Brian reminded everyone. "I haven't gone anywhere. Justin and I have attended most of the family dinners since his return. What's your point, Mikey?" he had to ask.

"Sure you've attended every family dinner with Justin, but none of us ever sees you alone," Michael pointed out. "Justin's always around. We don't hang out like we used to," he added.

"Mikey, we're not 14 anymore. We've both grown up. We each have partners and kids that take up our energies. I've been busy, Mikey. I have a lot going on. Have you forgotten that I have Kinnetik and Babylon to run?"

"But you're not too busy to be with Justin!" Michael complained.

"And I never will be," Brian said calmly. "So if that's what you're waiting for, you're about to be very disappointed. Grow up, Mikey. You have a life...live it."

"I can't! Justin took my life away from me. Now, I have nothing," Michael professed.

Brian was once again on his feet.

Blake felt the need to step in here to try to do something to calm things down. "Hold on a minute, all of you! Michael, tell us what's going on with you. Tell us what you really mean," he insisted, now dropping into counseling mode. "Everyone at this table loves and cares about you. I'm sure that you know that. So, take a minute and gather your thoughts, so that you can tell us what's really bothering you. There has to be a reason that you're risking everything with Brian to suddenly take pot shots at Justin."

Michael took a deep breath as he was instructed. Then he blurted it all out. "If Daniel's going to be a member of this family, then he's not going to have any time for ME. He'll be hanging out with all of you, all the time. He won't have any time left to build a relationship with ME. He's already Hunter and JR's grandfather. Where does that leave me? I'll be all alone again. No one has stopped to consider ME!"

With that last statement, everyone rolled their eyes. 'So that's what this was all about,' everybody silently thought to themselves. They were now starting to get the picture.

Daniel decided that this was his cue to take action, so he walked over to where Michael was seated at the table. He lowered himself, so that he could look directly into Michael's eyes. "Listen to me, Michael," he said calmly. "Are you listening?" he added, pausing to wait for an answer.

Michael simply nodded yes, as he started to sniffle. There was something familiar about the words that he just heard that made him sit up and pay attention.

Daniel continued, "Four years ago, when I found out that I had a son, I started to make plans too," he quietly revealed. "I knew then that you were someone that I wanted to get to know. It took me this long to put everything together, so that I could move back here. Jennifer and I still have to find someplace for me to live. But I'm here to stay. I'm here to build a relationship with you. But thirty-five years is a long time. And I realize that you've managed to grow up quite nicely without having a father around. It's going to take us a while to be as close as Brian and Gus..."

At the reference to Brian and Gus, Michael, once again, became enraged. "I don't want you to be a drop in dad like Brian. I want you to be a real father, like I am with JR," Michael insisted, interrupting whatever point that Daniel was trying to make.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Brian angrily answered.

"You had to lose a ball before you even noticed that Gus existed!" Michael challenged.

"Michael, Brian has always been a good father to Gus. He always placed Gus' needs above his own. You have no idea what goes on between Brian and Justin and Gus," Lindsay reminded him.

"Look Michael, we all know how I feel about the Asshole, but I don't have an issue about how Brian has been as a father to Gus," Melanie also corrected him. "You saw Gus earlier, and you heard him talk. He's very sure of who he is and where he fits with everyone in this family."

"I'm sorry," Michael finally said, seeing that he was alone in his position. "I guess it's all been too much for me lately. It's just that I've had so much to deal with," he admitted, with tears streaming down his face. "First, Brian breaks a promise that we made when we were kids. Then, Ben leaves me and takes Hunter with him. Then, I find out that my mother told me lies my whole life. Now, it feels like Ma and all of you are trying to take Daniel away from me too. When will it ever stop?" he whined, once again covering his face with his hands.

Daniel stepped in, again, to try to help here. "Debbie just wanted to help make the transition easier for both of us. Your friends have tried to welcome me because I was important to you. But, Michael, I'm here for you," he tried to reassure his son.

"What is it that you want, Michael? Do you now want Daniel exclusively all to yourself?" Carl wondered aloud. He already knew that Michael was selfish, but he never imagined him to be this egocentric.

"No....I just..." Michael began in response, until Daniel silenced him once again.

"Michael, you and I are father and son. You and I will hopefully build a close relationship. But Michael, even under the best of circumstances, we are NOT going to be the only relationship in each other's lives. Each of us loves and will love other people. That's life. But just because we love other people, doesn't mean that there isn't room for us to love each other as father and son," Daniel explained.

"Ben said almost the same thing when we first met..." Michael informed him.

"Yes, I probably did," Ben agreed quietly. "Little did I know..."

"But look at us now," Michael whined. "We're married, but clearly living separate lives," he argued. "Ben obviously didn't mean all those vows that he said when we got married. It was all hollow promises," he added, wanting to be sure to add allies, now that he even had Ben's full attention too.

Ben was about to respond, but Daniel knew that he had to stay in control. And he knew he had to remain the voice of reason. He wasn't about to let things get off track, for he could see that Michael was like a willful child on the verge of another tantrum...probably just like the tantrum that Jenny had staged earlier this morning over Cap'n Crunch cereal.

So Daniel continued, "I don't begin to know what happened between you and Ben," he calmly admitted. "If you want us to, we'll have plenty of time to talk about it. We're going to spend lots of time together, just you and me. But I must admit, I'm glad we have all these other people in our lives, too. I'm sure that they'll be there to help us as we go along," he added with a confident smile.

"But..." Michael started to argue again, but Daniel simply hugged him, silencing whatever he was about to say.

"Calm down, Michael." Daniel insisted. "One step at a time..."

Michael appeared to completely surrender to his father's embrace. It felt good to have some actually

hold him. His emotional tirade had cost him a lot of energy. Now, he was emotionally spent.

When Daniel and Michael pulled apart, everyone in the room could breathe a collective sigh of relief. Michael was now calm, and Daniel was smiling.

One crisis averted. One drama queen moment is now complete.

Chapter 41 – And Dinner Continues

In The Middle of Sunday Dinner...(Day 63)

After watching the tender moment between father and son, Debbie began to feel that the crisis had passed. Eventually, everything was going to be alright.

Her next thought was about the dessert that had been delayed as a result of Michael's latest tirade. "It's time for dessert." she announced. "I'm going to pop the pie in the oven.

"Let me give you a hand," Carl said, standing up to join her.

"I'm glad that we got that all settled. I'm going to rescue Gus and Jenny from Molly and Hunter," Brian announced. "Besides, I need some fresh air."

"Just don't be long," Debbie reminded him.

"Yes, Mother," Brian responded in a singsong fashion.

"Asshole!" Debbie simply said with a laugh. "I hope that everyone saved room for dessert," she added.

Everyone knew it wasn't a question.

"Dessert sounds wonderful, Debbie," Blake called back, as she was leaving the room.

"Wait Brian, I think I'll join you," Justin said with that certain smile reserved only for Brian. "Gus and Jenny together can be quite a handful."

Once the Brian and Justin were out of earshot, Lindsay had something to say and she wasted no time in getting to it.

"Well, I'm glad that everything's all settled for you, Michael," Lindsay began. "I'm glad that you and Daniel have worked things out, but I should warn you that you're in a lot of trouble."

"What do you mean?" Michael innocently asked, as if everything that had transpired all evening was quickly forgotten once Daniel had put his arms around him. After all, Michael's world was now okay, so he couldn't see any problems for anyone else.

"Brian and Justin may overlook the things that you've said, but I'm not about to be that forgiving. You've said some hurtful things here today, and I don't think they can simply let them pass. You and I have spent a lot of time talking about things. You always say that you understand everything, and then you turn around and do just the opposite," Lindsay protested.

Melanie silently thought that Michael and Lindsay had more in common than she realized, but she simply observed what was about to happen except to warn her partner. "Lindsay calm down. I see nothing to be gained by getting into this now, " she finally cautioned.

"Michael made some horrible accusations," Lindsay argued. "First, he accused Brian of being a drop-in dad. We both know that's not true. Brian loves and supports his kid, which is more than I can say about Michael. When was the last time that Michael decided to contribute anything more than a new toy to his daughter? She's not a doll, Michael, something that you play with. Sure, you fought to maintain your parental rights, but if it hadn't been for Brian, all of us wouldn't have made it this far, and he's the one who gave up his rights so that we could be a family."

"Why shouldn't Brian pay? He has the money. He can afford it! You know I don't have any money." Michael fired back. "And if things in Toronto are too hard for you, then you should move back here where you belong," he added self-righteously.

Ben decided to step in here, "Michael, stop it! You're not being fair!"

At the sound of Ben's voice, Michael froze in his tracks.

"Ben?" Michael said softly, as if in all the commotion he'd almost forgotten that Ben was even there.

"Melanie.." Ben interrupted, slowly calming his voice. "Michael and I have discussed giving you money each month for JR's support and maybe for her college fund. But during the last few weeks, everything has been so disrupted that we haven't had a chance to follow through to talk to you about it. Michael does understand the importance of contributing more than toys to his daughter, don't you Michael?" he asked sternly. Michael grumbled a response. "And Michael realizes that he was out of line when he accused Brian of being a drop-in dad. Everyone knows that Brian loves Gus and is a good father to him. Otherwise, Gus wouldn't be such a happy, well-adjusted little six year old," he added. "Right, Michael?"

Michael simply glared back at Ben.

Lindsay now understood that without Ben, Michael had no concept of right and wrong, so she continued with her arguments. "And you accused me of not being willing to let Brian go. You know that Brian and I are friends. We have been friends since college. But Brian and Justin ARE a couple. They may have their ups and downs, but Justin isn't going to disappear. He and Brian are going to ALWAYS be together. That's the way things are. It's time we all accepted this and moved on," she said with steely determination. "As a matter of fact, if you had simply wished Brian and Justin well, a few weeks ago, you and Ben would probably still be together now."

Being incensed that someone had figured out the fundamental reason why he and Ben weren't together, Michael tried to remind everyone that he was the victim here. Listening to Lindsay explain what he had failed to do weeks ago, once again, sent him into a rage. Now, in his anger, he wanted to retaliate by humiliating Lindsay in any way possible.

"You say that now, but we all know that you don't want to let Brian go. You're as unhappy as I am, that he's with Justin. Let's face it, not only my dreams died weeks ago when Brian legalized his partnership with Justin, but your dreams and fantasies died too." Michael shouted. "You thought you had a chance when you had Gus. You even thought you had a chance when you sent Justin off to New York, but somehow Brian and Justin managed to still be together. So, I wouldn't be so smug if I were you. You won't end up with Brian either," he accused.

"In case you haven't noticed, Michael, I'm very much in love with Melanie," Lindsay proclaimed. "We have a life together and a family. I'm precisely where I want to be. Brian is Gus' father, and I will admit that I'm very glad about that, but don't confuse my feelings for Brian with yours. I'm a lesbian, and he's gay. I've been clear about things between us a long time ago. He and I are simply close friends," she proclaimed with satisfaction, "Which is more than I can say for you, after some of the things that you've said here today. I wouldn't be so smug if I were you," she added. "And as far as Justin and New York is concerned, he has a wonderful future as an artist. It's an opportunity that I didn't want him to miss. Evidently, I was right. His career is already on a fast track to success," she boasted.

"And Brian and Justin ARE STILL TOGETHER," Jennifer reminded everyone, stepping in here to see if she could cut through some of the dramatics. "Is there a point here? Brian, Justin, and the children will be returning soon. So, the two of you need to quickly settle whatever your differences are. The rest of us are pretty tired of these petty arguments and everything else that Michael has put us through here today," she stated calmly.

Emmett, Ted, and Blake nodded their agreement with Jennifer, hoping that Michael would get a clue.

At the point, Michael and Lindsay, once again, glared fire at each other.

Daniel realized that he was dealing with a petulant fourteen year old, not the thirty plus year old son that he'd first met years ago. So, once again, he felt it was his duty to step in.

"Michael!" Daniel said sternly.

Michael immediately turned his attention back to his father.

"Why don't we take a walk? I think we could both use some air," Daniel insisted firmly.

Michael was about to protest, but even though he'd only known his dad for a short time, and even though Daniel had a quiet manner about him, something within Michael knew not to argue. Instinctively, he knew that like Carl, Daniel was not a person to be trifled with.

Finally, like a penitent child, Michael stood up quietly and led the way toward the front door.

"Let me tell Debbie about our walk," Daniel said quietly, as he paused and turned toward the kitchen.

"Debbie," Daniel said quietly. "Michael and I are going for a short walk. We'll be back in a few minutes." She looked at him with total surprise. Since there wasn't time to go into a lot of detail, Daniel simply said softly, "Our son is in a lot of trouble."

That was all he said before he was quickly gone to follow Michael out the front door.

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A few people stood up to stretch their legs. Others took the opportunity to chat amongst themselves while they waited for dessert.

A few moments later, Justin returned with Gus in hand, while Molly and Hunter were holding Jenny Rebecca's hands as she walked between them. They all made a quick stop into the bathroom to insure that all hands were clean before they came back to take their places at the table.

Gus quickly settled in beside Justin, but Hunter was having some problem putting Jenny back in her high chair. He could see a tantrum coming, so he just gave in and held her on his lap. Jenny was now perfectly content.

Molly and Hunter were so busy playing with Jenny that they didn't notice that Ben was no longer at the table. Surprisingly, Ben had decided to follow Brian outside.

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"Don't tell me that you've suddenly taken up smoking again, Professor?" Brian teased as Ben eventually caught up with him. "I was just getting used to thinking of you as Zen Ben again."

"No, not since the last time," Ben admitted. "You really are a bad influence!"

Ben laughed to himself as he remembered having this similar conversation with Brian immediately after the bombing of the club.

"So professor, what can I do for you?" Brian asked.

"You really don't waste time, do you? You just cut right to the chase."

"I've found that it saves a lot of time. Now, tell me, what's on your mind?"

"You know Michael better than anyone," Ben began.

"I did...when we were kids, maybe... now, I'm not so sure anymore," Brian said quietly. "Why?"

"You do know, don't you, that he didn't mean the things that he said in there?" Ben quietly asked.

"That's just it, Professor, he did."

"How can you say that?"

"This isn't about being my best friend or even protecting me, like he usually claims," Brian quietly revealed. "This is about Mikey's jealousy. He did the same thing when Debbie first started dating Horvath, you remember?"

"And, how do you think he's going to deal with this having a father thing? And, how long before things get back to normal between him and Debbie?" Ben asked, while silently trying to process the jealousy issue that Brian had brought to his attention.

"We both know that he suspected the truth four years ago, so he's had time to prepare himself to accept the probability that he had a living, breathing father. I know that he's looking forward to getting to know Daniel, so I guess they'll work out their relationship sooner or later. But I'm sure you knew that based on what just happened in there. "

"And what is that?" Ben felt the need to ask.

"Michael is sulking right now because he thinks that he's entitled to it. It's as if he thinks that he has some right to be angry." Brian confirmed. "Now that he's had his drama queen moment, we can all move forward," he added with a smile. "Now, what about you?" he boldly asked.

"If you're asking about things between Michael and me, that's none of your business," Ben answered, with a corresponding smile.

"Maybe," Brian quietly admitted. "But I want to remind you that you, too, know how Michael is. After all, you did decide to marry him. He may have childhood fantasies, but he clearly loves you. Look at all that he did to win you in the first place. I'll admit that he has his head up his ass at the moment. I just wanted to caution you not to let your pride stand in the way of your own happiness. I know how it feels to be without that someone...I didn't like it very much."

Ben paused for a moment and remembered the time that Justin walked out of Babylon with Ethan. Ben had always suspected that Brian was in a lot more pain, during that time, than he would ever admit. Ben also remembered, seeing Brian and Justin dancing together, once they were reunited. Brian may have survived the separation, but it was clearly not something he ever wanted to happen again. And each separation after that, Brian learned to fight in his own way for the relationship. He had learned to hold on.

After knowing Brian for so long and recognizing the simple fact that he was not known for sharing his feelings, Ben had to make note of what he'd just said, even if he didn't necessarily agree with it.

"So Brian, when are you planning on telling the family that you're moving to New York?" Ben finally said, clearly changing the subject, with a smile of satisfaction.

With his mask clearly in place, Brian simply asked, "Now, why would you get the idea that I'm moving anywhere?"

Ben was clearly ready for that question. "Well, since you brought Justin back, you two have been practically inseparable."

"I wasn't aware of that..." Brian innocently quipped.

"And for all Lindsay's meddling, Justin may actually be benefiting from being in New York. You sacrificed a lot by letting him go. But knowing you as I do, I'm clearly aware that you're tired of this separation. You wouldn't have legalized things with Justin otherwise. No, I think that you and Kinnetik are ready to take on New York, and that's clearly something that you would only want to do WITH Justin by your side," Ben added with a smile.

"So you think you have everything all figured out?" Brian asked with a grin.

"Not everything," Ben quipped. "But I'm glad that you've come to your senses."

"I see," Brian said, taking a drag on his cigarette.

"Don't worry... I have no plans to tell anyone," Ben told him. "It's your secret to tell."

"Thanks. I don't have time to deal with any more family drama right now," Brian admitted. "Things are moving too fast in New York. Justin and I are both heading back there tonight. We both have a ton of work waiting for us."

"I know..." Ben said quietly. "You and Justin only came into town to make sure things were okay for Debbie and Michael." Ben paused for a second before continuing. "I don't expect you to admit it. I just wanted you to know that I realize what's going on. And, if you need me to do anything to help, I'm here for you."

"Thanks, Professor," Brian said, crushing out the last of his cigarette.

"And I'll consider what you said too," Ben finally admitted as he turned to go back inside.

Brian simply smiled to himself.

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Brian decided to walk a bit in the back yard to stretch his legs and clear his mind.

A lot of things had been brought up at dinner today, and Brian was definitely pleased with the way he'd handled things. He was sure that being so close to Justin had kept him grounded.

Michael, in his anger, had gotten so much dead wrong, but Brian smiled to himself as he realized that Michael was right about one thing...he had changed.

Brian decided to light a second cigarette...one that he could enjoy in solitude.

That solitude was not to be.

After a few drags on the cigarette, he looked up at the back door and realized that, once again, he was not alone. Lindsay had come out to talk to him.

She walked up and took his cigarette to take a drag, before returning it back to him. "We haven't had a chance to talk," Lindsay reminded him.

"No, I guess we haven't," Brian said quietly. "How are things in Muncherland?" he asked.

"We hit a rough patch a couple of weeks ago, but you already know that. But we had a long talk last night, and two important counseling sessions with Elizabeth, so we're both holding on. It's going to take some work, but I think in the end that we'll be okay," Lindsay admitted. "I love Melanie, I really want us to work."

"I want you to be happy," Brian said quietly.

Lindsay heard him, but needed to quickly change the subject. "So it seems you and Gus had a fabulous time this weekend. In case I haven't told you lately, you're a great dad. Please don't pay any attention to Michael's ramblings."

"Thanks for that," Brian said with a touch of emotion. "You know Gus is a really great kid."

Lindsay couldn't resist a smile, for her faith in Brian had been proven, and Gus and Brian were really good for each other.

"You know, I'm actually looking forward to Justin's shows, both in Cincinnati and in New York. I can't believe that he's preparing for two shows so close together."

"Yeah, busy...busy!"

"I know that you miss him, but you're doing the right thing," Lindsay added.

At that moment there was so much that Brian wanted to say, but instead he simply took another drag on his cigarette and asked a more pressing question, "Have you and Melanie thought about Gus going on vacation with us?"

"We've both mentioned it to each other. But for weeks now, we haven't really been talking to each other, so we haven't had a chance to discuss it," she said sadly. "I do agree with you that it would be great for him. Has Justin received a decision on his application to exhibit for the summer showcase?"

"It's probably too soon to hear, but either way, we'll be in Milan on vacation. Paul and Jason have invited themselves along, so it would be great for Gus and Nicky to spend the time together."

"That would be an amazing vacation. I'll talk to Melanie."

"Thanks."

"So I hear that your riding is progressing," Lindsay commented. "Congratulations!"

Brian smiled. "And now Gus thinks that I should add horses to the stables at the house. He's already started to work on Justin and Thomas. He's already figured out that he was going to need allies on this one," Brian said with a laugh.

"Our son is very smart," Lindsay added with a smile. "So, when are you going to get the horses?"

"I haven't made a decision one way or the other. I keep hoping that he'll go back to Toronto with you and forget all about them," Brian added with a laugh.

"Nice try, Brian. He's your son. He's six years old. He imitates Justin every chance he gets. He's hung around Justin since he was a baby. I'm sure that Justin's determination has rubbed off on him, so I don't think there's much chance that Gus will forget about anything, but we'll see." Lindsay said with a laugh, gently touching his cheek.

"There's still time..." Brian mumbled to himself.

"Speaking of time, how long are you going to let things go on between Michael and Debbie, before you step in?"

"Who said that I'm going to step in?"

"You have to. You can't let this situation drag on?"

"They always eventually work things out, just as Daniel and Michael will work things out. Michael has to be allowed to have his drama queen moment. He also has to be allowed to try to work things out for himself. I have no intentions of interfering. And I'm getting a little tired of people telling me what I have to do."

"Sorry! It's just that you've always taken care of him."

"Lindsay, Michael is 35 years old. Have you forgotten?" Brian felt the need to remind her.

"Maybe chronologically, but emotionally he's still 14 and expecting you ..."

"Stop it, Lindsay! I'm not going to do anything! Michael has a father and mother and husband...all who love him. He didn't have all those things at 14. Michael has changed, and so have I," he said firmly. "Now, I'm going inside. You can do whatever the fuck you want." And with that, Brian turned and walked back inside.

He quickly located Justin chatting with Blake.

They were discussing art therapy.

Brian simply walked over and wrapped his arms around Justin from behind and leaned down and kissed Justin on the cheek. Instinctively, Justin simply reached back and ran his hand through Brian's hair. No words were exchanged between them, but with that touch, Brian could relax, so he released Justin and went over to talk to Jennifer on the sofa.

"Quite a gathering, wouldn't you say?" Jennifer suggested to Brian as he sat down beside her.

"I like Daniel," Brian admitted. "He's going to fit in so well," he added with a smile.

"I agree."

Then Jennifer was lost in thought for a moment.

"Speaking of Daniel, where did he disappear to?" Brian asked with mild curiosity.

"Michael and Lindsay were arguing like spoiled brats, so Daniel decided to take Michael for a walk to calm him down. This was really a good thing because I think Ted, Emmett, Blake, and I were all ready to strangle the little weasel," Jennifer reported.

"Now, now, Mother Taylor," Brian said with a laugh, fully understanding her feelings. "Mikey will eventually settle down," he added, giving her a kiss on the cheek. He knew that she was upset, but he didn't want to get into it with her now.

Jennifer wanted to change the subject, too, "How are things going in New York?"

"I've been really busy with clients. At the moment I'm managing to live at Justin's apartment, but you know that can't last," Brian said with a laugh.

Jennifer heartily agreed as she conjured an image of Justin's tiny apartment in New York, and then she thought about Brian's preferred tastes. She knew that his ability to endure Justin's apartment was a pure testament to his love for Justin. She also knew that Brian was right that it couldn't last.

Brian continued, "The office and living spaces are still a problem. I don't want Justin to take time away from his painting to help... he's already behind schedule. Eventually, I guess I'll set up the office in a hotel until this space thing is settled," he finally admitted sadly.

"No, you won't," Jennifer challenged. "Look, Molly's going to be with Craig this coming week. Why don't I work with the listings, maybe get with Cynthia? Maybe we can find some places with possibilities. Then you can make the final decision. How does that sound?"

"Like the perfect solution," Brian agreed, leaning over to kiss her again on the cheek. "Thanks."

"No thanks required. It's the least I can do for my favorite son-in-law," Jennifer teased.

"Well, Craig is probably never going to allow Molly to date, so I may be your only son-in-law."

It doesn't matter. You'll always be my favorite," she said with a laugh, as she watched him walk away.

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Carl and Debbie were talking in the kitchen while they were waiting to remove the dessert from the oven.

"Michael is in serious trouble isn't he?" Debbie finally asked. "He said horrible things about Brian and Lindsay. And did you hear the things he said about Sunshine, calling him a stray."

"He's obviously having a hard time adjusting to the legal union of Brian and Justin. Then, with Hunter and Ben's leaving too, I'm sure that he's in a lot of pain," Carl tried to say convincingly.

"You know how he is. He was like this when you and I first started dating, but eventually everything settles down, and now we're all okay," Debbie quietly revealed. Then she hesitated for a moment, as if she was remembering that time long ago. "But then, again, he was seeing Ben. And now...I just don't know..."

"You have to admit that Ben is entitled to more in his life than being the voice of reason for Michael," Carl suggested. "Michael has to be present in the relationship too. And right now, he's so focused on Brian that he can't even see the truth."

"I know, but now Michael has Danny. This is something that's he's wanted all his life...maybe even more than he wants Brian," Debbie mumbled to herself.

"But right now, he's as willful as JR can be," Carl said with a smile.

"And for the first time, I can't find any way to blame Brian for this," Debbie admitted sadly.

"That's part of the problem, I think," Carl said cautiously, for he knew that he had ventured into sensitive territory, and he needed to tread very carefully. "In the past, you've always looked for some way to blame Brian, so Michael's never had to assume any responsibility for the things that he's done. You or Brian would always cover for him. But this time, Michael made the mistake of verbally attacking Justin. I'd say, at this point, Michael is clearly on his own. We already know that Brian's really over-protective where Justin is concerned."

"Don't worry...my Sunshine can take care of himself. He's proven that," Debbie added.

"Brian knows that, too. But, Justin shouldn't have to deal with all this. Michael has to come to terms with things," Carl reminded her. "And he can't strike out at Justin every time he's unhappy. Nothing good will ever come of that. And I think Brian's tired of putting up with it."

Debbie just nodded.

"I just wonder what Danny and Michael are talking about," Debbie wondered aloud.

"Daniel merely said they were taking a short walk. He didn't mention anything about talking to Michael," Carl pointed out.

"I know Danny. I heard the shouting going on at the table. The next thing we know Danny and Michael are going for a walk. Danny may have this quiet demeanor, but remember that Divina lurks inside. Let's not underestimate that," she pointed out.

Debbie took a moment to check on the status of the dessert in the oven.

"After what I've seen, I'm not underestimating either Daniel or Divina," Carl responded with a genuine laugh, "I wonder how many people have made that mistake before and lived to regret it?"

Chapter 42 – A Walk To Remember

The Middle of Sunday Dinner...(Day 63)

Daniel and Michael walked in silence for the first block as Daniel tried to organize his thoughts.

He had to find some way to rise to the occasion of this new found role, as father to his fully grown son.

He had been deprived of the chance to contribute anything to Michael's formative years, but it was clearly going to be left to him now to see if he could help Michael pick up the pieces of his current life. And, dinner today had shown him that Michael's life was truly in trouble.

Debbie had obviously loved Michael unconditionally. This had been one of the staples of his life. Michael had successfully bonded with a group of friends over the years that were so close, they'd become family. Yet, in spite of all this, Michael couldn't seem to appreciate the things that he had; instead, he was continually grasping for things that would never be.

Daniel had to admit that the pairing of Ben and Michael was not intuitive, but it was clear that they had been fortunate to find each other. He hoped that eventually, Michael and Ben would find their way back to one another. After all, Hunter and Jenny Rebecca needed both their dads in their lives, and Ben was clearly a voice of reason for Michael.

And now, Daniel knew that he too was accepted into this multigenerational family, and this thought brought a smile to his face.

It was Michael's voice that interrupted Daniel's silent musings because he couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"What made you want to take a walk?" Michael finally asked.

"Things were getting a little tense back there," Daniel quietly suggested. "I just thought that everyone needed a chance to cool off. A nice walk seemed like the perfect solution."

"Did you hear that bitch Lindsay, trying to pretend like she was okay with things? Well, she can keep on lying to herself," Michael said with a self-righteous attitude. "But she can't lie to me."

"Yes, I guess you sure showed her, all right," Daniel said sarcastically. "So do you feel better now?"

Something about his father's sarcastic tone made Michael pause, when just the moment before, he was confident in his self-righteous indignation.

Daniel noticed the momentary hesitation, so he seized his opportunity. "Does it feel good to alienate a friend, who also happens to be one of the mothers of your daughter? Is that what you really wanted to do?"

Michael was quiet as he tried to process what Daniel was suggesting.

"And, then there's Brian..." Daniel added.

"Brian?" Michael interrupted with alarm. Daniel noticed that the mention of Lindsay only caused Michael to stop for a minute, whereas the mention of Brian produced true alarm. "What does Brian have to do with this?" Michael had to ask.

"Oh, I don't know..." Daniel responded. "I just noticed how upset he was when you said those harsh things to Justin. You have to remember that Justin is a member of this family too. In fact, at the table, there were quite a few people who really seem to love him."

"Oh well, you'd expect Jennifer to rush to Justin's defense; after all, she's his mommie," Michael gaffed mockingly.

"And apparently Debbie is too! She was equally upset by what you said. You have to see that attacking Justin that way, felt the same for Debbie, as if someone was attacking you."

"My mother has a tendency to pick up strays; she needs to remember that she HAS a son," Michael said harshly.

"That's just it, she does remember. She just has such a big heart. She loved mothering you so much, that she had no trouble opening her heart to mother your closest friends too," Daniel emphasized, even if it was all so obvious that he couldn't see how anyone could miss it.

"Well..." Michael started again to challenge.

"Just because she had room in her heart for all the others, doesn't mean that she loves you any less," Daniel quickly fired back. "Caring for people is second nature to her. It always was, even when we were kids. I think that's why she always wanted to become a nurse," he went on to explain.

"She may not have been a nurse," Michael said quietly. "But she took care of Uncle Vic when he was sick, and she's always been there to care for all of us. She especially took special care of Brian whenever his folks would beat the shit out of him as a kid. It was Ma who bandaged his wounds and took him to the hospital," he revealed.

"So now, you're starting to see it!

"Sort of..."

"Your mother wanted you very much. She had you on her own. She raised you on her own. She gave you a fantasy father because she wanted you to have something to believe in. She did all this because she loved you," Daniel recounted. "But after a while, all that didn't matter anymore, did it?" he asked. "Because from the time you were fourteen, you had Brian?"

"He was all that I ever wanted, but how did you know that?"

"I saw the pictures, remember?" Daniel suggested lovingly. "For over 20 years, you've just been waiting for the two of you...you and Brian, I mean...to be a couple. Brian loved you, but not enough to give up his lifestyle. I'm sure that Brian never thought that he'd ever want to settle down with just one person, so you thought that he would always belong to you...you thought that he would always be yours. He would fuck with all those other guys, but his heart would always belong to you."

"How do you know that?" Michael continued to ask.

"But then you and Ben happened to find each other."

"It was just after I bought the comic book store. He walked in one day, asking about comics with gay themes. I remember it as if it was yesterday."

"Was it love at first sight?"

"Yeah, for me it was," Michael admitted. "But it took us a bit to work things out."

"You found your one and only...someone to make you happy, didn't you? You eventually became a couple with Ben...you had the life that you wanted to live."

"Yes, I did," Michael said wistfully.

"Then, you experienced with Ben things that probably exceeded even your wildest dreams: You got married, fathered Jenny Rebecca, and adopted Hunter. And, you and Brian were still friends."

"I really had it all, didn't I?" Michael asked mournfully.

"Yet while you were achieving these things, you still expected Brian to remain the same and always be totally alone...somehow you always wanted him to be out there just waiting for YOU, forever...just as you had been waiting a lifetime for him," Daniel said quietly.

"How do you know all this? Did someone tell you?" Michael argued as he listened to his father reveal all his deepest thoughts and dreams.

"No one had to tell me anything, Michael. I saw the pictures of you growing up. This story is written in all the pictures of you and Brian together over the years. I know how to craft a story from the obvious," Daniel teased, "After all, I'm still Divina Devore, and let me tell you that I've seen this story play out many times. I can easily believe that Brian never expected to find that someone special...but then he met Justin, and the rest is history," he added hesitantly, wondering if Michael had followed what he said.

"You saw them at the dinner table, they were practically fucking," Michael complained. "They've never been able to keep their hands off each other since the day they met. Brian threw away all his rules for Justin."

"And why do you suppose he did that, Michael? What would make the great Brian Kinney give up everything to be with Justin? What would make him bind himself legally to Justin, huh? Why do you think that happened?"

"Okay, I get it. I get that Brian loves Justin!"

"Michael, one would have to be blind not to see that those two truly love each other. It's not that Brian loves you any less than he ever did...it's just that he feels something totally different for Justin. And now, Brian and Justin are legally bound," Daniel felt he had to keep reminding Michael of the truth.

"I guess I can understand that," Michael finally acknowledged, "Just like I feel something totally different for Ben, but even Ben and I are never as all over each other the way that Brian and Justin are. It's the reason that I thought that they were just 'fuck buddies'. I figured, even after six years, that's all that they could possibly be," he added, "That's why this legal union didn't make sense. I couldn't understand why Brian would give everything to a fuck buddy. But, I guess I had it totally wrong."

"See, you do get it!" Daniel said with a smile. "But it's like you still want to push Brian into a corner. You want him to choose between you and Justin. You figure if he's forced to make a choice...that somehow you'd win...surely he'd choose you over Justin after all your years together as friends," he added. "But Michael, that's a choice Brian doesn't want to have to make. He has room for BOTH you and Justin in his life, provided he doesn't have to be the perpetual referee. And even if you were to force him to choose, he will choose Justin every time! You have to accept that. Just as, in reality, you would choose Ben and Hunter and JR every time. But right now, you're confused, and you somehow you got your priorities all mixed up," Daniel explained softly.

"I guess I did," Michael softly agreed as the 'light bulb' went on, and he saw the truth in what Daniel was saying.

Michael covered his face with his hands as he once again remembered that he had this same discussion with Lindsay and also with Brian over the last few weeks, but for some reason, he just didn't get it before. It's as if before he'd only heard the words, but this time, it all made sense.

Now, Michael realized that he'd made a BIG mistake. He'd lost everything with Ben because he'd continued to chase after a 'someday' fantasy life with Brian that could really never be.

Michael groaned, "What have I done?" as the reality really hit home for him.

"At least you see it, Michael, that's a start."

Daniel felt that they had made progress.

Michael couldn't believe how much he needed his father to explain these facts of life to him.

They walked another block in silence, and Michael continued to silently think things over.

Finally, Daniel suggested, "I guess we should start back." Then, he laughed. "We don't want everyone to have eaten all the dessert. Debbie was baking a pie, and she's a wonderful cook!"

"You're right," Michael agreed. "We'd better head back. I wouldn't want you to miss dessert."

Daniel nodded his agreement, and the pair turned around and briskly walked back to Debbie's.

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By the time that Daniel and Michael walked in the door, Debbie was carrying a tray laden with pie and ice cream, while Carl walked behind her carrying a second tray of coffee.

Everyone quickly re-assembled in their places at the table. Once again, Michael scurried back to his place beside Brian.

"I hope that you've all had time to stretch and to make room for dessert," Debbie teased.

"Absolutely!" Emmett practically gushed.

As usual, Brian indicated that he couldn't possibly eat another bite, but he did ask for to a cup of coffee and two spoons. Then, he and Gus looked knowingly at each other, and patiently waited to see what Justin was going to do.

"Thanks, Debbie," Justin said eagerly. "Dessert sounds great. You always make such terrific desserts," he added, noticing the innocent looks that he received from Brian and Gus as he spoke.

Then of course, once Justin was served his pie and ice cream, both Brian and Gus each grabbed a spoon and subtly began sharing his dessert. Some things never change.

"Like father...like son," Emmett teased as he watched them.

Both Hunter and Ben decided to share a little of their dessert with Jenny Rebecca, who giggled with every spoonful that she tasted.

"You better watch out, Hunter, Justin used to do the same thing with Gus when he was that age, and you see how that turned out," Melanie said with a laugh, motioning in Justin's direction to make her point.

"Justin hasn't been able to enjoy a dessert, in peace, in the last four years," Lindsay said laughing.

"You know, if you two would actually feed your kids, they wouldn't have developed these bad habits," Hunter professed with his usual attitude.

Justin simply smiled. He was prevented from answering by a big hug from Gus.

"Somehow, I think you'll get used to it," Justin teased when he was finally released by Gus. "After all, Jenny already considers you her favorite rescuer, and she's only two years old. You'll have a long time to enjoy the role...that should slow you down a bit and hopefully distract you from your continued pursuit of Brian," he added with an evil grin.

Hunter, in an act of defiance, merely looked at Brian and winked, causing Brian to roll his eyes.

"All of you, behave yourself!" Ben insisted. "Hunter, stop flirting with Brian...at least while we're at dinner table," he suggested with a laugh. Ben rolled his eyes and mumbled under his breath, "That's all that this family needs!"

Brian leaned over and once again started kissing Justin. Gus immediately covered his eyes, and Jenny copied her brother's antics.

"No...no, don't do that! Some of us are still eating. Some of us..." Hunter protested. "I can't stand it!" he continued to mock protest. "Debbie, make them stop!"

Debbie decided to step in, "Okay, you two...that's enough!"

"Never enough...." Brian quipped when he came up for a breath of air.

"Besides, you're traumatizing my children," Melanie happily added.

Brian and Justin once again broke apart. They both looked at the laughing Gus and Jenny, hiding behind their hands over their eyes.

Brian and Justin then sandwiched the laughing Gus between them in a hug, until he giggled so hard that he started to squeal. Then they both agreed to release him.

Michael watched the interplay between Brian and Justin and Gus, and he could see how much they all loved each other. He wondered if he'd ever have that kind of relationship with his daughter.

And then it dawned on Michael, that if he hadn't been so eager to be seated next to Brian, who practically ignored him during most of the meal, he could be sitting on the other side of the table, enjoying sharing his dessert with the playful JR. Michael was beginning to see his mistakes.

When everyone had finished their desserts, Justin pronounced, "Thank you for a fascinating dinner, Debbie. I don't think that I could eat another bite," he added.

Strangely, Brian and Gus heartily agreed with him.

And Michael's world seemed to slowly come back into focus. Now, he had to figure out what to do to get things back on track. Somehow, Michael knew that it was going to take a lot of work.

Chapter 43 – It's Time To Say Goodbye

As Dinner Is Ending...(Day 63)

Everyone pushed back from the dinner table. Carl and Daniel shooed everyone out of the way, as they announced that they were clearing the table and loading the dishwasher.

Debbie's first reaction was to protest until Jennifer intervened.

"They're only loading the dishwasher," Jennifer explained, nudging Debbie out of the room, "How much damage can they actually do?" she added, wrapping her arm around Debbie, who finally gave up the struggle.

In pairs and clusters everyone else began to move about the house. The usual family dynamics were about to come into play as they chatted among themselves.

Lindsay and Melanie quickly disappeared upstairs to take care of some last minute packing.

Gus insisted that Brian and Justin join him in playing with Jenny Rebecca. Needless to say, Jenny enjoyed the attention from the three of them. Over the last few days, she had especially missed playing with Gus.

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Hunter and Molly were on a mission. They needed to find out what had happened at the dinner table while they had taken Gus and Jenny outside on the swings.

They tried to pump Ben for information. But he didn't want to indulge in gossip about Michael, no matter how much he liked to be on the receiving end of gossip, in general. Ben was also careful to be sure that Hunter's image of Michael didn't deteriorate any further than it already had. He felt that nothing could be gained by that, so he simply tried to sidestep the issue. Hunter pretended to accept things as he calmly walked away.

Undeterred, Hunter tried a little later to pump Ted and Emmett for information. Like Ben, they didn't think it was their place to divulge any information that was unflattering to Michael.

Of course, Molly and Hunter had attended enough family dinners to use their imaginations to guess what had occurred at the table. The fact that everyone was reluctant to talk just continued to fuel their imaginations. They felt that they still wanted to be filled in on the details of a family discussion. They both felt that they shouldn't be penalized for helping to get Gus and Jenny out of harm's way.

"We're going about this all wrong," Molly finally suggested. "I have a better idea."

"And what would that be?" Hunter asked sarcastically. Although, he did have to admit that Molly was pretty clever. After all, she had managed to get Brian to let her stay over a weekend at the mansion. As much as he hated to admit it to himself, even if she was younger, maybe Molly had skills and resources that he lacked.

"Just watch," Molly said resolutely. "And stay close to me so you can hear everything," she added just as she sauntered over to Blake.

A smile of recognition passed across Hunter's face as he realized that Molly was a genius. She was right to figure that Blake would be more inclined to tell them what happened in a logical and clinical matter, without all the dramatics and gossip-like qualities, of say, Emmett. Molly and Hunter only wanted the facts; their agile minds could easily fill in the details.

"Oh Blake," Molly began innocently. "You know that Hunter and I were so eager to get Gus and Jenny out of the room earlier that we missed everything going on at the table."

"That was really good that you got the kids out," Blake commented, trying to figure out what Molly was up to. "Quite a lot of tempers were flaring in the room. Nothing could have been gained by upsetting Gus and Jenny in the process," he added cautiously.

"I know that Mom will probably fill me in on what happened while we're driving home, but sometimes she can be so emotional," Molly suggested. "But I'm sure that you have a more logical take on things."

"That's probably true," Blake added cautiously. "I'm not as close to everyone as Jennifer is. And you're probably right; your mom might get a little upset again as she tries to fill you in."

"So will you tell us what happened?" Molly asked, with growing interest. "After all, this wouldn't be like gossip, Hunter and I are members of this family too."

"That's right, you are. And after all, you two aren't babies like Gus and Jenny," Blake agreed with a smile. "So I guess it won't hurt if I fill you in. But let's move away to a quiet corner, so we won't be disturbed, and no one will overhear us," he suggested.

They moved to a corner of the living room and pretended to be watching television and thus were ignored by everyone else in the room.

Blake went into clinical mode to summarize the conversations at the dinner table. He explained that having a father was a new experience for Michael. And after the events of the last few weeks, Michael was just unusually vulnerable and needy. He went on to explain that Michael was afraid that Daniel would become so involved with the rest of the family, especially his grandchildren, that Michael would never have a chance to know his own father. You have to remember that he's dreamed of having a father for a very long time.

Molly and Hunter understood that Michael probably had a drama queen moment, trying to clutch on to Daniel the way he's tried to hold onto Brian all these years. They could picture what must have happened, but they patiently listened to what else Blake might have to say.

Without being judgmental, Blake continued to relay the trouble that Lindsay and Michael both seem to be having with the fact that Brian has changed. Blake pointed out that tempers flared as they each went into denial, yet easily accused the other of not letting go. Blake went on to explain that Michael was unusually brutal in his accusations toward Lindsay, to such an extent that Daniel felt the need to take Michael for a walk, so everyone could calm down.

Blake made a comment that both Lindsay and Michael were trying to hold onto Brian, as if they both feared that he would suddenly disappear now that he and Justin were a legal couple. Molly and Hunter nodded their heads in understanding, for they'd seen this play out on many occasions.

Finally, Blake hesitated to relay the last part. But he considered that Hunter and Molly might overhear something, and he wanted them to be properly prepared. He also wanted to spare Jennifer and Ben the upset of having to explain the details of the situation to their respective kids.

So reluctantly, Blake said, "Michael, in his sadness and anger, referred to Justin as a stray," he said softly. "Needless to say, this didn't go over well with either Debbie or Jennifer. I must admit that Brian's eyes were shooting fire at this point too," he explained.

"I know that Brian and Michael go way back to a time when they were kids," Hunter said, "But this may actually be enough to split apart their friendship."

"I know that Brian is really protective where Justin is concerned, but as annoying as my brother can be, let me tell you that he can take care of himself. Besides, Justin isn't a stray anything. He's got both Mom and Debbie mothering him to death," Molly said with a laugh, "Of course, that's probably what Michael is really upset about," she added in a calm and matter of fact manner. Then she turned to Hunter and said, "I'm sorry, Hunter, I know that he's your dad..."

"Don't worry. I'm not blind to his faults. It's not only the relationship with Justin and Brian that's a problem for him, but the closeness of Debbie and Justin can just as easily push him over the edge too. It's as if Michael never got over the fact that Brian got Debbie to let Justin stay in his old room. No apology is necessary," Hunter added. "Maybe, if I'd known how this was all going to turn out, I probably wouldn't have asked Brian and Justin to come back."

"You asked Brian and Justin to come home?" Blake asked with amazement.

"Yeah, Michael and I were in the comic book store when he realized that the man in the picture on the mantel couldn't possibly be his father. I didn't know what to do, so I called Brian and Justin. I didn't want Debbie to have to deal with Michael without Brian being around as the voice of reason. Then when the whole truth came out and Grandfather actually appeared, I knew the family couldn't handle this all alone. I knew that Brian would know how to handle things," Hunter volunteered. "I just didn't expect all the collateral damage; now, I wonder if I did the right thing."

"Of course, you did," Molly quickly responded. "Everybody knows that Brian can handle anything," she added confidently.

Blake had to smile as he noticed the hero worship. The he pointed out, "Brian handled things just right. We all knew about Daniel, so there were no surprises and very few embarrassing questions," he pointed out. "So Hunter, it looks like you did the right thing, but let's keep that our little secret," he added with a smile.

Hunter rolled his eyes, while Molly couldn't resist smiling. She now knew that Hunter was a bigger softie than he would ever admit.

"Okay, so now you two are up to date," Blake finally said.

At this point, both Molly and Hunter thanked Blake for being honest with them and for treating them like adults. Blake couldn't resist a guilty smile, as he received hugs from both of them.

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Meanwhile, Jennifer and Debbie were discussing Michael too. Jennifer was already seething about the way that Michael had been treating Justin lately, and his calling Justin a stray was just about the last straw. "I know that Michael's your kid and in your eyes, he can do no wrong, but he can't verbally attack Justin every time something goes wrong in his life."

Debbie was upset too. "I agree that Michael can't keep attacking Sunshine. What has he ever done to Michael? You know that I love Justin as if he was my own, but even I have to agree that Michael has to stop this rivalry with Justin."

Jennifer reacted with surprise. "That's not like you. You usually rush to Michael's defense, or at least look for some way to blame Brian. What happened to you?"

"That may be how the old me handled things, but things are a lot different now. Michael now has Danny. I no longer have to be his sole protector. I realize that I can't do everything. I think Michael may want a relationship with Danny, even more that he wants to pursue his obsession with Brian," Debbie added with a laugh. "Michael may actually be starting to find his own way through this world, and I have to leave him alone to find it. Carl told me today that I never let Michael be responsible for the things that he does. He said that I've always seemed to find a way to blame Brian. I wasn't aware that I did that, but if he's right, that all needs to stop here."

"That's a major step for you," Jennifer acknowledged.

"It's going to be hard. After all, Michael is still my little baby," Debbie said wistfully.

"A thirty-five year old baby," Jennifer said with a laugh. "My goodness, he's the same age as Brian," she said without thinking.

"But he always seems so much younger than Sunshine," Debbie admitted. "You've got to admit that Sunshine can obviously take care of himself. After all, look at what he's done with his life. And he did manage to snag Brian...no easy feat. Brian tried to run, but Justin seems to understand him. And in truth, Brian and Sunshine are perfect for each other."

"I must admit, I do like having Brian for a son in law," Jennifer added. "And Molly is crazy about him."

"You even seem to put up with the Mother Taylor thing," Debbie teased.

Jennifer didn't have the chance to tell Debbie how much she liked it when Brian called her Mother Taylor, for their conversation was interrupted by squeals from an unsteady two year-old. Jenny was moving in their direction, trying to escape from Gus and Justin, who were chasing her.

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Carl and Daniel were working well together in the kitchen, and they couldn't resist, talking with each other while they worked.

"I don't know what you said to Michael on your walk, but he was certainly different when he returned for dessert," Carl revealed. "I love Michael like he was my own son, but I'm not blind to his faults. He can take a pleasant dinner and turn it into his private war. It's so unfair to everyone. Michael really needs you in his life."

"You do realize that I'm such a fraud," Daniel admitted quietly, "I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm operating on instincts here."

"Well your instincts are pretty good. After all, you have Divina to help you out if you get in a bind. That's quite a combination," Carl suggested with a laugh.

"There's a big world out there, once you get out of Pittsburgh," Daniel confessed. "It does give you a different perspective. I'm glad for my career and a chance to travel the world. I've learned a lot. But Michael is another matter." Daniel paused for a moment before continuing, "I'm not sure why, but Michael seems to have some strange ideas about things. I find that very troubling."

Carl couldn't agree more.

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Ted and Emmett were talking to each other when Michael came over to join them. Michael immediately tried to start the poor me routine with his friends, but they quickly started rolling their eyes. In the past, they would have been supportive, but they were still upset about his behavior at dinner.

"Michael, this has been a long afternoon. You said some terrible things at dinner today. You might have pushed Brian to his limits. He's put up with a lot of things from you over the years, but I think this time, you may have gone too far," Emmett pointed out.

"Brian's my best friend..." Michael counter argued. "He knows that I was just upset."

"Lindsay may get over the things that you said, but Brian may have had enough. Do you really think that he's going to sit back and let you continue to verbally assault Justin, just because you're unhappy?" Ted asked. "You want Justin to pay for the fact that he and Brian are a couple. Now that I think about it, you probably want Justin to pay for the fact that Em and I love him, too."

"We're not going to let you keep doing this, Sweetie. We have to protect you from yourself," Emmett added with a serious tone to his voice. "We love you, but we're not going to let you force us to choose between you and Justin."

When Michael took in what they said and their reactions, he realized that he wasn't fooling anyone. As he thought things over, he realized that if he wanted to keep his friends, then he was going to have to make major changes. The days of poor little, Mikey were obviously over!

Michael realized all this as he slowly walked away.

Eventually, Lindsay and Melanie came downstairs and started talking about cheery things with Emmett and Ted.

Eventually Melanie and Ted drifted off together to catch up.

Then Lindsay drifted away thinking that Jenny probably needed to be changed. However, Jenny was having so much fun with Justin and Debbie and Gus that she was resistant to being pulled away.

Jennifer easily wrapped Jenny in her arms and carried a laughing Jenny over to Lindsay. Then Jennifer and Lindsay disappeared to get Jenny changed.

Emmett chatted with Ben and reminded him that no matter what his problems were with Michael , the family was here for him and Hunter too. Ben smiled as he knew that Emmett was sincere.

After a quick change of diaper, Jenny was eager to escape Jennifer and Lindsay, so she hurried over to the safety of Ben's strong arms. She immediately started climbing up, once she reached safety. Ben eagerly reached down and lifted her up to sit on his knee. A very happy Jenny giggled at him.

Michael noticed the interaction between Jenny and Ben, so he came over to join them. Jenny was okay playing with Michael, provided she could keep one hand clutching the front of Ben's shirt.

"I think JR's been lifting weights while we weren't looking," Ben immediately teased. "Jenny, where did you get that death grip?" he continued to tease a giggling Jenny, who was now wrinkling his shirt.

Although Michael had wanted to cuddle his daughter, he contented himself to play with her while she held on to Ben.

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Later on, Michael seized his opportunity to pull Lindsay aside.

"Linds," Michael began and then paused. "I'm sorry for what I said earlier at dinner. I realize that I'm in no position to criticize you, especially since I've made such a mess of my own life."

"I see," Lindsay said hesitantly, but without committing herself.

"I know that you tried to help me. I was just too blind to see it," Michael added.

Lindsay once again nodded. "We are family, aren't we?" she commented.

Michael looked hopeful, thinking that he could now put the whole incident behind him and move on.

Lindsay on the other hand had other ideas. "But, this time it's not going to be that easy," she reminded him. "I'm going to keep an eye on you," she said. "I'm not sure how quickly I can forget all those horrible things that you said."

"You know, I didn't mean them. I was just upset," Michael protested.

"That excuse isn't going to work anymore, Michael. We're all getting tired of your lashing out at someone every time things don't go your way," she reminded him. "As much as we love you, this is all getting rather tedious. It's becoming harder to just forgive and forget," she stressed.

"What more do you want me to do. I said I was sorry..." Michael fired back.

"Sorry's bullshit...you know that," Lindsay reminded him.

"I really mean it Linds..." Michael reiterated.

"Well, we are family; I'm not sure that things will probably blow over so quickly this time," she added with a serious tone to her voice.

Michael realized that something had changed.

Then Michael and Lindsay managed to say a quiet goodbye as they walked away from one another.

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Melanie looked at her watch and announced that it was time to say goodbye. She wanted to get an early start so that the kids could get to bed early because tomorrow was a school day for Gus.

Justin mentioned that he needed to leave too, since he was heading back to New York tonight, and he still had some last minute packing to do. He and Brian exchanged knowing glances of understanding between them, without saying a word.

Everyone began to say their goodbyes.

Michael, Ben, and Hunter went through their goodbye ritual with Jenny Rebecca.

Then there were the love fests between Jenny and Carl, between Jenny and Debbie, and the new goodbyes between Jenny and Daniel.

Melanie and Lindsay also took the time to say a special goodbye to Daniel and to let him know that he was truly part of the family. They also reminded him that they would be returning to town in two weeks, and were looking forward to seeing him again. Daniel let them know that he could hardly wait for their next visit.

Since the family continues to grow these final exchanges are starting to take longer than they used to. Even the process of hugs all around could be considered daunting to an objective outside observer.

Finally, everyone helped Melanie and Lindsay to load their stuff into the car. Michael was still talking quietly to Jenny.

Brian and Justin were beginning to say their final goodbyes to Gus.

Brian reminded Gus that he would see him in two weeks, as Gus gave him a big hug goodbye.

Gus reached out to hug Justin and took this last chance to whisper a reminder to Justin about the horses. He also whispered that Thomas would be a lot happier, once there were horses in the stables.

Of course, six year olds have no idea how to properly whisper, so Brian overheard everything. However, he had the simply decency to just smile each time that Gus and Justin looked his way to see if he was listening.

While still pretending not to know what was going on, Brian continued to listen to the conspiring between his partner and his son, as he tried to imagine what new strategy Justin was going to use to intercede on Gus' behalf about the horses. Brian smiled as he thought about the possibilities.

Then Brian helped Gus get comfortably situated in the car.

Michael helped to place Jenny in her car seat and he kissed her goodbye, one last time.

Melanie lingered a little longer than usual over her goodbye with Justin. Everyone knew that in spite of how she felt about Brian, Melanie was genuinely fond of Justin. She whispered for him to be careful as she continued to show her concern about how Justin was going to deal with Michael and his newest attacks. Brian stepped in and wrapped his arms around Justin. In a rare moment of tenderness between Melanie and Brian, he told her not to worry.

Lindsay gently touched Justin's cheek, after hugging him goodbye. She reminded Brian and Justin that they would all be back in two weeks.

Michael said goodbye to Melanie and Lindsay. Melanie immediately let Michael know that she was disappointed with him for his treatment of Lindsay and Justin. Once again, Michael apologized, but it was becoming abundantly clear that he had truly fucked up big-time.

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As everyone watched the Toronto contingent of the family drive out of sight, Michael soon found his opportunity to talk to Brian.

"Can we talk?" Michael cautiously asked.

Justin moved away, chatting easily with Debbie and Jennifer.

Brian moved again towards the swings and pulled out another cigarette. "I can't see where we have anything to talk about," he said, taking a seat.

"Look Brian, I'm sorry for what I said earlier about Justin," Michael tried to say convincingly.

Brian simply looked at Michael, but said nothing. The silence between them was deafening.

"Say something!" Michael demanded.

"When are you going to learn that Debbie is mother to us all?" Brian began to point out. "That fact never seemed to bother you before. Why does it bother you so much now? And about Justin..." he began and then paused. "What you don't get is that they all love him...Ted and Emmett especially. But, most of all, Mikey, what did you hope to achieve by taking on Justin? You have to know that Justin can take care of himself," he added, taking a drag on his cigarette. Michael was silent, so Brian continued. "You know Mikey, I'm really alarmed about this new suicidal, death wish of yours."

"What do you mean?" a very confused Michael had to ask.

"You have got to have some sort of death wish to take on Justin with BOTH Debbie and Jennifer around. Because that's a fight you just can't win! Those two are the original mother hens, especially where Justin is concerned. Even I tread lightly when those two are around. I just can't believe that you would be that reckless."

"I said I was sorry!" Michael reiterated again. "I was just upset!" he started to whine.

"Sorry is bullshit, and you know it! You did exactly what you wanted to do, when you wanted to do it. You're upset. You're unhappy. That's too bad, Michael. You don't get to take it out on Justin every time that you feel that way. Justin's never done anything to you. I've put up with a lot from you, because I remember when we were kids, and you and Debbie were always there for me."

Michael grew silent as he reflected on past times with Brian, going all the way back to when they were 14.

When Michael didn't say anything, Brian continued, "I want you to listen to me. Are you listening?"

"Yes, I'm listening," Michael fired back.

"You have to understand that Justin belongs to me...and you know how I feel about what's mine," Brian said with cold calmness.

Michael could feel a chill run down his spine from the timbre of Brian's words.

"I'm miserable. I'm unhappy. What about me? After all, I'm your best friend."

"What about you?" Brian calmly asked.

The fact that Brian answered his question with a question did not go unnoticed by Michael. He understood that in the past Brian would have been quick to point out that he was a member of this family. Brian would have then kissed him and told him how important he was...but not this time.

"I just don't know what you expect me to do," Michael finally admitted with some despair.

"For starters, you might try apologizing to Justin," Brian quietly suggested. "But I don't want any of the usual words that you have said over the years. I want you to really mean it," he added. "You have to find a way to make this up with him."

"And, how am I supposed to do that?" Michael asked. "He probably won't have anything to do with me after the terrible things that I said."

"Now, that IS a problem..." Brian said quietly. "It's going to be up to you to solve it."

"Are you going to help me?" Michael asked with pleading eyes.

"Not this time, Michael," Brian finally said.

Michael noticed the use of his full name rather than the familiar 'Mikey', and he noticed that Brian was no longer rushing in to help him figure out how to fix things with Justin or how to fix anything in his life. These were things that Brian could always be counted on to help fix.

Michael found himself standing there, and Brian had not reached out to touch him in any way. There were no actions or words to let him know that everything was going to be okay between them. In that moment, Michael knew for certain that he had damaged his relationship with Brian.

Justin's words from dinner were now echoing in his ears, "Just remember, we're a package deal." Michael was beginning to understand what that meant.

Finally, Brian simply said, "I guess it's time for us to go too. I'd better go and find Justin," he added, as he turned to go back inside, leaving Michael standing there.

As Michael watched Brian walked away, he felt so totally alone, but then Michael realized that he had done this to himself. In spite of all the warnings from everyone, he had still charged ahead with reckless abandon. He had alienated just about everyone, and now found himself alone.

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After a few moments, Michael rejoined everyone back inside.

Blake and Ted were the next to say goodbye and were quickly joined by Emmett, who was on his way to Drew's to make sure everything was ready for his return later that night.

Emmett stopped to hug Justin goodbye, lingering a little too long with his arms wrapped around him. In a familiar move, Brian removed Emmett's arms from around Justin and replaced the offending arms with his own.

Everyone simply smiled...some things never changed.

Brian and Justin were saying their final goodbyes to Molly and Jennifer.

Brian and Justin, as well as Jennifer, had offered Daniel a ride back to his hotel, but he decided that a cab would be the easiest solution.

Ben and Hunter said their final goodbyes. Then, Hunter promised Daniel that he would call him during the coming week, so that they could have dinner one night. That way he could escape one of Ben's vegetarian-tofu surprises.

Finally, Brian and Justin said goodbye to Carl and Debbie. "You two take care," Debbie insisted. "And Sunshine, you two hurry back here for another visit. You know that I miss you already," she added, as Justin leaned in to give her a kiss. Then Debbie walked them to their car for one final goodbye.

As Brian and Justin drove off, Debbie rested her head on Carl's shoulder. "It has been quite a day, hasn't it?" she asked.

"Well, we made it through another family dinner," Carl remarked with a laugh.

"Just barely," Debbie responded.

"I'm sure the next one won't be like this," Carl tried to suggest with a smile.

Debbie simply gave him a disbelieving expression, "Ah huh..." she said.

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Brian and Justin had to make a quick stop at Kinnetik to pick up the boards that Brian needed for his morning meeting. Then they were off to Bri-tin to finish packing up the last of Justin's paintings.

After originally suggesting the limo to take them back to New York so that Justin wouldn't have any painting delays, waiting for his art to be shipped, Brian was beginning to grumble about the prospect of the long trip.

Justin leaned over and placed his head on Brian's shoulder. He casually slid his hand inside of Brian's shirt, enjoying the warmth of the skin to skin contact with his partner.

Having lulled Brian into a relaxed position, Justin casually said, "You know the ride back to New York is about six and half hours long." He then paused for just a moment to let that thought sink in. Then he continued, "And I plan to continually have my way with you all the way back to the city."

For some reason, Brian was smiling and suddenly looking forward to their limousine, road trip.

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Daniel had already said his goodbyes to everyone, so he walked out to the front porch. He had called a cab, and it would take a few minutes before it arrived, so he sat down on the upper step to catch his breath while he waited. He couldn't help thinking to himself that even Divina would need to take a moment to recover after a dinner like this one.

He smiled as he thought about his alter ego. Divina could easily command the stage and hold an audience, but being a father was going to be more of a challenge for both of them...especially when he realized that they were dealing with a thirty five year old child, who still had a lot to learn about living in the world. There wasn't any script to help, and Daniel realized that he was clearly in uncharted waters.

He also considered what a difficult job Debbie must have had over the years, trying to raise Michael all alone. She had obviously done the best that she could, giving him the unconditional love that he needed, but Michael was in need of something else...some other kind of guidance and direction.

For a long time, Michael had depended on Brian to provide these things. Now, Daniel knew it was time to give both Brian and Debbie a break. Daniel was ready to step into the role of being a guide to his son, even if he didn't have a clue what he was doing. Jennifer had told him to trust his instincts. Somehow he hoped that between Divina and himself, those instincts were going to be enough to carry him through.

Daniel's musings were interrupted as Michael came outside to join him.

"Are you feeling better?" Daniel quietly asked. "Are you going to be okay about things?"

"I think so," Michael responded quietly. All the fight from earlier this afternoon was now gone, and in its place was a sadder but wiser Michael. "Thanks to you," he quietly said.

"Me?" Daniel said, with a very broad, Divina-like laugh. "What did I do?"

"You were a dad," was all Michael said.

"I was a friend," Daniel challenged. "Remember, you said that you wanted to take things slow?"

"Maybe...but now, I need to ask you something."

"Sure, go ahead. I suppose that we know each other well enough," Daniel teased. "After all, you've even helped me out of my gown."

Michael smiled, "I remember, but that was years ago..."

"It seems like only yesterday..." Daniel added softly. "So what's on your mind?"

"I've been thinking," Michael repeated again. "I know that we agreed to take things slow..."

Daniel simply nodded.

Michael cautiously continued, "And I know that we agreed that I would call you < i>Daniel < / i> but I was wondering if you would mind if I call you i> Dad < / i> instead?"

"I think that can be arranged," Daniel said with a smile.

Michael smiled back. Things were beginning to look up.

Michael quietly sat down beside Daniel, on the step, to keep him company while he waited for his cab to arrive

In that moment, Michael felt the bond with his father.

And Daniel knew that both he and Divina Devore had finally returned...home.

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